

*Department of Anthropology
Introduction to Cultural Anthropology
Anthropology 101-010
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*Exercise 1
The Embarrassing Incident*

Some anthropologists think culture is a cognitive system composed of whatever one would need to know in order to operate in a manner acceptable to the culture's members. As such, culture is viewed as a set of rules that shape what we think and how we act. Since culture is shared we all "know" these rules as members of American culture, even though we might not be conscious of these rules. If culture includes shared understanding for how to behave, then anthropologists can learn a good deal about these rules from observing what embarrasses the cultures participants and from inferring which understanding about how to behave were broken. In short, we become embarrassed because we broke some rule.

In this exercise, you will collect two biographical anecdotes from your friends, classmates and/or family about an embarrassing incident and analyze these incidents for the cultural rules lying behind them.

Instructions

Identify two people (do not use actual names of participants) who are willing to participate in this exercise. Each person (anthropologically known as "an informant") gives you a short description of an embarrassing incident in which the informant was present, although not necessarily as the "perpetrator". Take notes on the form found below, which is a semi-structured interview protocol—a fancy name for a common anthropological research tool. Such an interview protocol guides the questioning and organizes the answers but doesn't constrain their wording. Reproduce the form typing your responses to each question. The exercise turned in should be in the format of the interview guide, typed with one inch margins all around. Use single or 1.5 spacing and use a font no larger than 12.

Your informant provides the answers to the first four questions, but you develop an answer to the fifth question: What was the cultural rule that appears to have been broken? Compare the two incidents you collected. What do they have in common? For example, is the same rule broken in both? Does the gender, age, or ethnic affiliation of the two informants influence what causes embarrassment? Answer these questions as well. Finish the exercise by answering the following questions: What did I learn about myself as a

result of doing this exercise? What did I learn about my culture as a result of doing this exercise?

The Embarrassing Incident

Interviewer Name

Incident 1

Describe the scene: who, where, when, what was happening?

Incident 2

Describe the scene: who, where, when, what was happening?

Incident 1
Identify the embarrassing event

Incident 2
Identify the embarrassing event

Incident 1

Describe the reactions of those others present at the embarrassing incident.

Incident 2

Describe the reactions of those others present at the embarrassing incident.

Incident 1

Describe the response of the “perpetrator”.

Incident 2

Describe the response of the “perpetrator”.

Incident 1

Explain the cultural rule that was broken.

Incident 2

Explain the cultural rule that was broken.

Comparison of two incidents:

What I learned about myself as a result of doing this exercise:

What I learned about my culture as a result of doing this exercise: