

Culture: Can You Take It Anywhere?

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Introductory note from the Editors

In the preceding chapter, Michael Agar notes that because communication is inseparable from culture, a hybrid term, “languaculture,” is more accurate. In this chapter, he describes the “rich points” that make cultural difference worth investigating. According to Agar, what makes a difference in understanding amount to a rich point? Can you think of examples from your experience of rich points and times when people simply misunderstand? Why is participant observation, an important component of ethnography, so useful for making sense of rich points? What does he suggest when he says that ethnography involves translation?

[...]

We used to assume that culture was a closed, coherent system of meaning and action in which an individual always and only participated. You were a Navajo or a Yoruba or a Trobriand Islander, period, and all of you were pretty much the same, as far as culture went. You lived in a place that was fairly small and isolated. With the exception of a market town and some nearby communities you were linked to by marriage, your world was pretty much contained in that confined geographical box. And the box was closed in time as well, because your culture was *traditional*. It stayed the same from one generation to the next. What people did could be described, explained, and generalized by their membership in that single, shared culture.

This is an oversimplification, if not a parody, but not by too much. ...

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How might we rethink culture? Let's get back to basics. What happens that makes us think that another culture is in play?

What happens is, people do something in a situation that we don't understand. For years I've called such moments *rich points*. Those moments of incomprehension and unmet expectations are the fuel that drives ethnographic research.

There are a lot of ways that an outsider might explain a rich point. The people might have made a mistake, an error. It might be something that is stupid or crazy. It might be that the people don't know any better. It might be that they're trying to pull a fast one. It might be some kind of -ism, a prejudice that *that* kind of person never makes any sense, so what would you expect?

These kinds of responses are all too typical. Sometimes they might be right, or some of them might be. But then again, what we don't understand might well have something to do with this culture concept that we're trying to make sense of. The odds, based on my lifelong record, recommend a bet that they will.

Of course a predilection for cultural interpretation can go too far into politically correct myopia. They did what? Whatever it was, it must be a *cultural* difference. Let us genuflect in respect.

A few years ago I helped an NGO director in Washington think through some problems she was having with a development program in China. She described in some detail the behavior of a local official and struggled desperately, with some guilt, over her lack of knowledge about that country. How, she wanted to know, could she learn to look at such cultural differences? I gave her some ideas, but first I told her, based on her description, that there was also a distinct possibility that the person was obnoxious, a universal pattern I've encountered in every *culture* I've ever worked in. She, of course, would have to check that evaluation with locals, but she shouldn't think that every difference *has* to be cultural.

At first, she was upset that I would even suggest such a thing. Then she thought of reactions to that same person on the part of Chinese acquaintances and friends. The diagnosis looked like a plausible one once she considered how several of her local colleagues viewed him and talked about him as well. The guy might well have been a universal human jerk.

Same pattern when I worked in Mexico City, helping Anglo-Americans and Mexicanos start up a new business, I often wondered the same thing – what was cultural and what wasn't? Sometimes differences between an American and Mexican partner looked pretty cultural. Sometimes they looked like two business guys working in the same framework, manipulating and negotiating in their own interests, sometimes using mutually understandable appeals to culture as part of the maneuvering. Where was the line? I wasn't always sure there was one.

So how can we tell if something we don't understand, a rich point, is cultural or not? The answer is, we can't, not on the basis of just one occurrence. *Einmal ist keinmal*, once is nothing, wrote Milan Kundera (1984). All we can know at first is that something we didn't understand caught our attention. It signaled a difference between us and what was going on at that moment. But then we need to compare and contrast across people and situations, *chase* the rich point, as I like to say.

Let's say you've chased a rich point enough to know it's not just characteristic of those particular persons in that one situation. And you've chased it enough to see that it *patterns* across certain kinds of persons and/or certain kinds of situations. That's the first clue that something cultural is in play. The rich point was neither universal nor unique nor random. It warrants a tentative conclusion that there is a culture of those persons in that situation, at least for you, given your languaculture. A translation between your languaculture and the one in play is called for to explain what that rich point meant.

So far, so good. Assume that it looks like a rich point is probably cultural. What does that mean for the culture concept? It means that something is going on that enables communication and action among certain kinds of persons in certain kinds of situations, and whatever that communication and action are about is *not* understandable to an outsider like you. By the way, this is why participant observation is celebrated among ethnographers. If you venture out into the situations where people live and work, rich points will surface in no time and keep on coming.

Culture, then, is first of all a *working assumption*, an assumption that a translation is both necessary and possible to make sense of rich points. The assumption is based on observations of recurrent patterns of rich points across some common person/situation categories. The assumption is, there are shared meanings/contexts unknown to you. You have to figure out what they are. *The classic ethnographic problem.* Whatever we do with culture, it has to anchor there. Culture names the solution that you assume you can find. Culture is what you eventually show the world to explain meaning problems in terms of contexts and. ...

Ethnography yields a product that is a *translation*. ... *Culture* names the *translation* that ethnographers build for their audience, based on the investigation of the languaculture of the people who produced the rich points that the ethnographer experienced. [...]

Ethnography is making sense out of human differences in terms of human similarities. Without the universal connections, the human similarities, translation would not be possible.

Reference

Kundera, M. 1984. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. M. H. Heim. London: Faber & Faber.