Learning Journal 1999 words

1. Tutorial Prompt Week 3

*Is there an essentially Western concept of the self and is it different from non-Western notions?*

Anthropologists have traditionally attributed specific characteristics to the prevailing concept of the self in the West and the predominant features of the self in non-Western cultures. The Western self is identified by “independence, autonomy and differentiation” (Marsella 1985, cited in Spiro 1993:115) and is considered to be “egocentric” (Shweder & Bowne 1984, cited in Spiro 1993:115). Conversely, the non-Western self is labelled “sociocentric” in the sense that this self is not defined by the individual but is judged by others, and is “context-dependent, concrete and socially defined” (Shweder & Bowne 1984, cited in Holland 1994:317). Sampson describes the Western self as being “self-contained individualism”, while the non-Western self is depicted as “ensemble individualism” (Sampson 1988, cited in Spiro 1993:116). Marcus and Kitayama use the term “independent” for the Western view of the self and the term “interdependent” for the non-Western view (Marcus & Kitayama 1991, cited in Spiro 1993:116).

Although many anthropologists, including Clifford Geertz, hold the view that a clear distinction can be made between these two different notions of the self, others are in disagreement. Melford Spiro gives numerous examples to demonstrate that although different cultures utilize different modes of perceiving and talking about the person, there are no systematic differences between Western and non-Western concepts of personhood.

Maurice Bloch essentially agrees with Spiro. He does not buy into the idea that “there is a great and absolute divide between the individualist West and the social relational rest” (Bloch www.*TheBlob*), although he says that there are specific and interesting distinctions between different cultures which do indeed exist. In *The Blob*, Bloch illustrates how anthropological debates sometimes become confused by which ‘level’ of the person is being discussed. Basically, the different levels of personhood consist of: the core self, the minimal self and the narrative self.

The core self refers to a sense of ownership and location of one’s body. This is the ability to feel a difference between ‘me’ and the ‘non-me’. The core self is a characteristic that is shared by all living beings and amounts to a sense that one is the author of one’s own actions. The minimal self consists of the core self together with a sense of continuity over time, while the narrative self also includes autobiographical memory and reflections on these memories. Although all human beings have a narrative self, we can divide human beings into two specific types: ‘*episodics*’ who do not consider autobiographical memory together with reflections on these memories as having a very high value, ‘and *diachronics*’ who reserve greater value to autobiographical memory. Fundamentally, the key issue in defining self is whether a person valorises the telling of the story in an autobiographical way.

Bloch, Maurice <http://www.TheBlob>

Holland, D. & Kipnis, A. (1994) ‘Metaphors for Embarrassment and Stories of Exposure:

The Not-So-Egocentric Self in American Culture.’ *Ethos,* 22(3) 316-342.

Spiro, Melford (1993) ‘Is the Western Conception of the Self ”Peculiar” Within The

Context of the World Cultures?’ *Ethos* 21(2) 107-153.

1. *What does Geertz mean when he describes ethnography as ‘thick description’? Do other anthropologists you have encountered this term espouse the same understanding of ethnography? Do others disagree? How do different anthropologists’ understandings of ethnography shape their ethnographic arguments?*

The goal of ethnography is to tell you something about how people live. What binds people together is their culture - the ideas and the standards they have in common (Benedict 1961:11), and the focus of the anthropologist is “the great gamut of custom that is found in various cultures” (Benedict 1961:1). Geertz says that men are “cultural artifacts” (Geertz 1973:51) and the title of his collection of essays, *Interpreting Cultures,* indicates the need for an interpretation of culture. Geertz emphasizes the necessity to discover “what the conceptual structure embodied in the symbolic forms through which persons are perceived actually is” (Geertz 1973:364). He goes on to say that “what we want and do not yet have is a developed method of describing and analysing the meaningful structure of experience (here, the experience of persons) as it is apprehended by representative members of a particular society at a particular point in time – in a word, a scientific phenomenology of culture” (Geertz 1973:64). In fact, Geertz was the most influential advocate of interpretive anthropology. He defined the concept of culture as being “semiotic” (Geertz 1973:5), thereby distancing himself from a more factual, scientific notion. The ethnographer was to focus on symbolic communication, thus the focal point of research turned to rituals and cultural performances and the task of the ethnographer was to interpret behaviour within a web of meaning. While ‘thin’ description would simply consist of a description without a context, ‘thick’ description indicates a search for meaning. The ethnographer has the task of identifying and explaining the key symbols of a society, in the same way that an interpreter interprets a language. Geertz stated that “culture is public because meaning is” (Geertz 1973:12).

The notion of interpreting a culture through context - by understanding how the actors within a given culture interpret themselves and their performances, was a sharp move away from the ‘objectivized’ ethnography associated with Malinowski that had previously been commonplace. Malinowski had transformed the practice of ethnography by not only observing the ‘objects’ of his study - the natives/’savages’, but he pointed out that “one step further can be made by the ethnographer who acquires knowledge of the native language and can use it as an instrument of inquiry (Malinowski (1922)2014:62). At times, it is not sufficient for the ethnographer to learn the local language while carrying out fieldwork. When researching infants on the Ivory Coast, Gottlieb was obliged to resort to diviners to help interpret infant and parental behaviour (Gottlieb 1998).

Benedict, Ruth (1961) *Patterns of Culture.* Routledge & K. Paul, London.

Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays.* Basic Books, New York.

Gottlieb, Alma (1998) ‘Do Infants Have Religion? The Spiritual Lives of Beng Babies.’

*American Anthropologist 100(1) 122-135.*

Malinowski, B. (2014) *Argonauts of the western Pacific: an account of native enterprise and adventure*

*In the archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea.* Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon.

1. *Is childhood a universal stage in the life course?*

Attitudes towards ‘children’ and the concept of ‘childhood’ have varied throughout history, however childhood is certainly not a specific biological condition, and the notion of childhood is by no means perceived in the same way universally. The absence of a natural period in a person’s life which coincides with ‘childhood’ means that essentially, childhood is a social construct. Understandings of what childhood actually is differed greatly according to specific historical and cultural settings. The French historian Philippe Aries stated that in the Middle Ages, the concept of childhood did not even exist. Today, in Western societies in particular, it is common to give an age-related definition of childhood. However, “the age classes that so shape the experience of childhood in the West are neither natural nor universal” (Gupta 2002:52). Over the years, many societies around the world, particularly industrialized societies, have sought to protect children from being exploited. As a consequence, child labour is frowned upon or even illegal. Sharon Stephens says that “modern children are supposed to be segregated from the harsh realities of the adult world and to inhabit a safe, protected world of play, fantasy, and innocence” (Stephens 1995, cited in Gupta 2002:45). However, different cultures around the world may have alternative views on this. In her fieldwork in a Brazilian village called Santa Lucia between 2001 and 2003, Mayblin explains that Santa Lucian people construct childhood in a particular way. They believe that if a person is to develop the right level of *coragem* (a learned mixture of bodily techniques and psychological states) to be able to confront life successfully when they are older, they ideally need to have begun working well before they reach the age of fourteen. This view is in stark contrast to the widespread idea that children should be shielded from the world of work.

The concept of reincarnation poses a challenge to traditional Western views of childhood. Gupta explains how Tibetan Buddhism provides us with examples of children playing out an important role in the phenomenon of reincarnation (Gupta 2002:35) and offer alternatives to “the modern Western myth of childhood” (Gupta 2002:52).

Gottlieb highlights the contrasting views of newborn babies in the West and the Beng babies of the Ivory Coast. While the Western concept of a newborn baby is that of being “mute and uncomprehending,” Beng adults maintain that “each baby is said to be a reincarnation of someone who died” (Gottlieb 1998:122). Beng babies emerge from a place called *wrugbe* (Gottlieb 1998:123) and, unlike babies in the West who are thought to “have no language other than crying” (Leach 1983, cited in Gottlieb 1998:128), Beng babies are said to be multilingual (Gottlieb 1998:128). Having recently reincarnated from the afterlife, Beng babies may feel drawn to return there. Consequently, every effort is made to ensure that the babies feel loved and valued and are given gifts (Gottlieb 1998:126). Special diviners are responsible for acting as mediators between the land of the currently living and the land of the previously living (Gottlieb 1998:130). It is therefore evident that childhood embodies quite different notions in different societies and draws particular responses from different societies.

Gottlieb, Alma (1998) ‘Do Infants Have Religion? The Spiritual Lives of Beng Babies.’

*American Anthropologist 100(1) 122-135.*

Gupta, Akhil (2002) ‘Reliving Childhood? The Temporality of Childhood and Narratives of

Reincarnation.’ *Ethnos* Vol.67(1) 33-55.

Mayblin, Maya (2010) ‘Learning Courage: Child Labour as Moral Practice in Northeast Brazil.’

*Ethnos* Vol.75(1) 23-48.

1. *My learning experiences.*

Turnhouse Airport, September 2021. A cab rolls up and I let out a sigh of dismay. The driver was vaping and I had already had a far from peaceful flight. I would have preferred to have a cloudless taxi ride but then I saw that there was a glass partition which left the passenger side vape-free. Greg (so it said on his name badge) rolled up his sleeves and effortlessly placed my heavy bags neatly inside the cab. He eyed the pile of suitcases and made a gutteral comment which at first I didn’t grasp. Seeing my confusion, he asked “You at the Uni?” I nodded hesitantly. “Welcome back” he said, “the city missed the students.” This took me back a little. I hadn’t thought about the crisis that the lack of students had caused for Edinburgh. I was already starting to see things from a different perspective and it was nice to feel welcomed.

As a complete novice to Social Anthropology, I had already anxiously checked out the Life Course reading list. I felt I could identify with both “the good daughter” and “the modern woman” (Mills 1997:37). My family had proudly waved me off to Scotland and I don’t want to disappoint. I am also excited to finally be living independently, especially after being confined to my family home for the past 18 months. My accommodation is perfect for a Social Anthropologist: my bedroom window conveniently overlooks the main entrance to the halls of residence so I can observe all the comings and goings. I have been fortunate enough to be allocated a room in a flat with other students whose first language is not English and it is exciting to be in a multicultural environment in a cosmopolitan city. I have baked homemade bread for my flatmates and yesterday they spent hours concocting a sweet creamy dish made from potatoes. Sharing food leads to enjoyable social and cultural interaction.

It is disappointing not to have in-person lectures, but it is amazing to finally ‘feel’ like a student. I was sitting in the Quiet Study Area the other day, and it suddenly dawned on me that I wasn’t an ‘outsider’ observer, I too was a university student! Wearing masks is obviously not ideal for making new friends. It is very isolating to constantly be behind a mask (just like the title of the chapter by Allerton 2007:1) and I can partly relate to the Oku children’s fear of adult masks (Argenti 2001:67). I am in dozens of WhatsApp groups with other university students, but I have probably only met about 2% of them. However, I appreciate being able to follow lectures whenever it suits me and as I am fairly disciplined, I manage to keep up with the work. I love the fact that I can pause lectures while making notes and can rewind to go over the tricky bits if necessary. It is touching to see that the teaching staff are making a huge effort to communicate with us and practically reach out of the computer screen to put us at ease.

I feel an overwhelming connection with all the topics on the course programme: I live and breathe social anthropology. From adapting to life in Scotland and using English more than my first language, mixing with students from other cultures, having a close relationship with the digital world – just like the Chile miners (Haynes 2020:126) - and adapting my traditional study methods e.g. I no longer use highlighter pens as I have downloaded Goodnotes 5, I frequently sit and muse over the ‘imponderabilia’ (Malinowski 2014:54) of my new life and I am keen to immerse myself in the study of Social Anthropology.

Allerton Catherine (2007) ‘What does it Mean to Be Alone?’ in *Questions of Anthropology,* Astuti,

R., Parry J. & Stafford, C. (eds.), Berg, Oxford.

Argenti, N. (2001) ‘Kesum-body and the places of the gods: the politics of children’s

masking and second world realities in Oku (Cameroon).’

*Journal of the Royal Anthropologist Institute* 7(1) 67-94.

Haynes, Nell (2020) ‘Making migrant identities on social media: a tale of two neoliberal

Ciities on the Paciific Rim.’ *Media, Culture & Society* Vol.42(1) 126-135.

Malinowski, Bronislaw (2014) *Argonauts of the western Pacific: an account of native enterprise and adventure*

*In the archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea.* Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon.

McGranahan, Carole (2015) ‘Anthropology as Theoretical Storytelling.

Mills, Mary Beth (1997) ‘Contesting the Margins of Modernity: women, migration, and

Consumption in Thailand.’ *American Ethnologist* Vol.24(1) 37-61.