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SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

How They See Me vs. How I See Them: The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self

Sam Pack

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The nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched is critical to understanding the nature of the research as a whole. To be sure, the form that a particular ethnography takes emerges in discourse. An ethnographic interview, for instance, is a highly personal encounter that is shaped by the interpersonal exchange between the ethnographer and the informant. The speaker will only reveal what he or she wants the researcher to know. Therefore, the quality and depth of the relationship between the two individuals determines what will be said. Usually, the longer and more amiable the relationship, the richer and more consistent is the final product.¹ Even if narrators answer a prepared set of questions, *how* they respond depends entirely on the level of rapport. As Clyde Kluckhohn stated: “No two researchers will ever see ‘the same’ culture in identical terms any more than one can step twice into the same river” (1959:254 cited in Pandey 1972:335).

Strangely, despite all of the uproar surrounding the “crisis of representation” (Marcus and Fischer 1986) and all of the literature spawned as a result, there has been little more done than just talking about and around it. Countless books and articles are filled with well-intentioned theoretical pontifications, but only a small percentage of these are field-tested.

Methodological rigor—or honesty—has not yet come to fruition. Instead, it appears that most scholars are content to continue practicing an academic sleight-of-hand.

If there is indeed such a “crisis” of representation, it seems to me that the obvious solution is to disclose the ways and manner in which the representation takes place. Although revealing how texts are constructed may spoil the aura of inviolability, it also lends credibility to the research. The only honest alternative is to acknowledge our particular role in the ethnographic process. What I am advocating here, of course, is reflexivity. According to Jay Ruby, to be reflexive “is to insist that anthropologists systematically and rigorously reveal their methodology and themselves as the instrument of data generation” (1980:153). More specifically, it is to be accountable to the three components of the communicative process: producer, process, and product (Ruby, 1980:157). While all ethnographies focus on the last, very little is explicitly mentioned about the first two.

The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self

In his essay “The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self,” Edward M. Bruner calls the tendency for ethnographers to segment one from the other an exercise in futility: “The idea of a scientific, supposedly objective, ethnographic report that left the individual observer out of the account is not only a cliché, it is an impossibility. Every ethnographer inevitably leaves traces in the text” (1993:2). Ethnographers generally keep anything of a personal nature out of the final manuscript as a protective mechanism for fear of compromising scientific integrity. However, according to Bruner, to divorce the personal from the ethnographic is to create a false dichotomy because data are not independent of how they were acquired (Bruner, 1993:4). Thus, in this next section, I expose how my personal self has irrevocably influenced my ethnographic self.

This article is based upon my experiences conducting research among members of the Benally² family, a matrilineal network of clan related kin. In support of my doctoral dissertation in anthropology, I spent three years doing fieldwork on the Navajo reservation where I investigated the crucial role television plays in the formation and contestation of social and cultural identities. However, this anthropological relationship was preceded by a personal relationship with the Benallys that spanned over a decade.

There is an old joke that a typical Navajo family consists of a mother, father, children, some sheep, and an anthropologist. I suppose this is true in

my case as well, but I must add that I was considered a member of the family long before I ever thought of becoming an anthropologist.³ In fact, I have maintained a continual presence on the reservation for so long that other Navajos not only assume that I am from there but identify me as an actual member of the Benally clan.

I first visited the reservation during the summer after my freshman year of college. This was a very disillusioned time in my life, and I was looking to get away and do “something different.” Through a friend, I found out about work-camps, which were Peace Corps-type programs that provided room and board in exchange for manual labor. It sounded perfect. After doing a little research, I learned that many of these camps were located on Indian reservations. Based on the proximity and type of work, I signed up for a construction project on Hopi land. A few days before I was scheduled to leave, I called the coordinator to confirm my travel plans and was told that the project had been cancelled. The only camp available was a gardening project on the Navajo reservation. I was not too keen on gardening—in my youthful bravado, I thought of it as a hobby for old ladies—but I had already slotted the time and did not have anything better to do. So off I went.

From the moment I arrived, I felt strangely comfortable. Such a reaction is extraordinarily rare since I usually do not adjust well to new environments, especially one that is so different from any place I had ever known or seen. Yet I noticed that the Navajos and I shared certain similarities. The first was the most obvious: we looked alike. As a Korean-American, my Asiatic features often “pass” for Navajo.⁴ Indeed, the other members of the camp (all of whom were Anglo) as well as the Navajos who came to greet us initially assumed that I was Indian.

Unlike my co-workers who tried to befriend the locals right away, I proceeded with my customary reticence. I did not know at the time that Navajos, like me, consider gregariousness from outsiders to be inherently suspicious. Whereas my proclivity to avoid eye contact and refusal to engage in frivolous conversation is often perceived as standoffish by mainstream standards of proper social conduct, my aloofness was perfectly understandable and even validated by our Navajo hosts. Once we got to know each other, I realized that we also found the same things funny. While my acerbic style of playful teasing usually elicits stern looks from politically correct social circles, they thought I was hilarious. In general, I believe the main reason the Navajos accepted me but kept my Anglo co-workers at a safe distance was because I never tried to be accepted.⁵

Dual Citizenship

I know better than most what it is like to be on the other side of the “anthropological gaze.” Based on the mistaken impression that I am Native American, missionaries have attempted to convert me, tourists have asked to take my picture, benevolent minded professors have offered me special benefits not available to my peers and, in one instance, an anthropologist actually tried to recruit me for an interview. In all of these instances, each of the perpetrators treated me in a very distinct way difficult to describe. With their overly polite manner of speaking, exaggerated enunciation of words, and friendly body language, I can best compare this treatment to the way adults speak to retarded children. Upon discovering that I am not Navajo but “just another Asian,” I invariably witness the dramatic transformation from obsequious respect to betrayed insouciance.

There was one memorable instance in particular. I was invited to speak as a guest lecturer by Dr. Oswald Werner at his Ethnographic Field School.⁶ Sponsored by Northwestern University, this field school has operated every summer for many years under the guidance of Dr. Werner, a Northwestern anthropology professor and preeminent Navajo scholar. After my talk, I was approached by one of Dr. Werner’s teaching assistants who had just completed her dissertation. She inquisitively asked me a litany of questions related to my research and then offered suggestions and encouragement.

I initially interpreted her interest as academic curiosity. Then she asked me where on the reservation I was from. Once I informed her that I was not from the reservation and, furthermore, that I was not even a Native American, her whole attitude and posture towards me changed in an instant. Suddenly, she lost all interest in my research and in me as an individual. But it did not end there. On the following day, she overheard me “correcting” one of the Navajo participants, and she went ballistic. What followed was a passionate lecture about *never* rebuking “our cultural teachers.” It mattered little to her that it was the Navajo participant who had asked me for clarification.

How They See Me

Not only is the ethnographic subject interpreting the native object, but the informants are also interpreting the ethnographer.⁷ Triloki Nath Pandey emphasizes that the people with whom the anthropologist works are usually able to size him up as a person and understand his role in the community (1972:335). Many ethnographers have described how they felt as if they were under constant surveillance of the natives while in the field (i.e. Adair 1960, Bowen 1954,

Cushing 1882,⁸ Maybury-Lewis 1965, Powdermaker 1966). William L. Rodman demonstrates that the interpretive process is a two-way street:

...the people we study study us, even in moments when we do not seek to study. *We are not just observers observed; we are interpreters interpreted.* To figure out what the devil they think they are up to requires us to try to figure out what they think *we* are up to—our motivation, purposes, and (sometimes) the moral message we bring with us. This is an other side to reflexivity, one crucial to understanding the dialogics of encounters in field research, and one that anthropologists have only begun to explore (1993:189; emphasis mine).

As anthropologists, we have to be more cognizant of how “they” interpret “us.” Often, Bruner contends, native peoples’ interpretation of their own culture is influenced in profound ways by their interpretations of us (1998:19).

But how does one go about acquiring such information? It is ineffective to ask informants directly since people generally will not tell you how they *really* feel about you to your face. This is especially true for Navajos, who tend to avoid personal confrontation. Originally, my plan was to recruit my research assistants—who are themselves members of the Benally family—to surreptitiously record comments about me from each of my informants. Upon further consideration (and after a trial run), I decided against this strategy partly for the ethical ramifications but mostly because of the technical limitations of my miniature tape recorder. As it turned out, however, any kind of subterfuge was unnecessary. Information in the form of gossip was relayed to me from all sources. Navajos love to gossip and cause trouble with revelations like “So and so said such and such about you.” Sometimes, these statements are true but, more often, eager messengers purposely exaggerate a kernel of truth and add their own malicious twist just to spread ill will.

For all our similarities and compatibilities, they still considered me to be fundamentally different from them. I am not like many of the other men on the reservation in that I do not drink, smoke, do drugs, or have illegitimate children by various women. I was a college student when I first met them (and still was a decade later when I conducted my fieldwork), which was as exceedingly rare then as it is now. In a society where alcoholism, domestic violence, chronic unemployment, and parental absenteeism among men are the cultural norm, I served as the only positive male role model for the youngsters in the community.

Even more perplexing in their eyes was the fact that I was a vegetarian. They simply could not comprehend the existence of somebody who refused to eat mutton stew despite their best goading. (“You don’t eat sheep?” they would gasp.) But my peculiar dietary choices did not end there. They also could not understand my aversion to soda, candy, and processed foods—all staples of the contemporary Navajo diet. I must have appeared to be a strange breed, indeed.

Prior to meeting me, they had also never known anyone who espoused anti-materialism, pro-environment views before (which I know sounds odd given the “children of nature” stereotype). Without being aware of it, I was proselytizing my values and beliefs by disseminating advice at every turn. For example, I constantly would urge the kids to focus more on their schoolwork or I would suggest healthier eating alternatives to the families. Soon, I was being consulted for everything from relationship problems to the best way to change a flat tire.

I knew they considered me eccentric, but I never realized just how much so until I learned that they attributed my prolonged lack of contact during the several years I was attending graduate

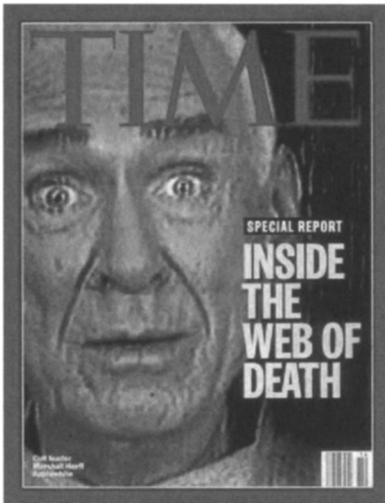


Figure 1. Marshall Applewhite

school in Philadelphia to my perishing as one of the members of the Heaven’s Gate cult who committed mass suicide. This religious group, readers will remember, was led by a bright-eyed eunuch named Marshall AppleWhite, a.k.a. Do, who convinced his followers to shed their earthly bodies so that they could rendezvous with a UFO traveling behind the Hale-Bopp comet that would take them to a higher plane of existence. It was sobering to realize that, as far as they were concerned, it was not outside the realm of possibility for me to leave this world in a pair of new

Nikes in hopes of boarding a magical spacecraft. Although (hopefully) intended to be humorous, the very fact that they associated me with these religious kooks tells me just how strange and “out of this world”—literally—they perceived me.

All of this changed, however, when I resurfaced to do research for my dissertation. This time, I was no longer alone but married with children. But it was not just my change in domestic status but *whom* I chose to marry that made

such a difference: an Indian woman with Navajo kids, one of who is named "Hosteen," the Navajo word for "man." In fact, my children are related to their relatives who live only a few miles down the road.^{ix} My change in status from an unmarried outsider to somebody married to an Indian woman with Navajo children narrowed the gap separating us enough that I detected dramatic differences in the way I was henceforth perceived, and thereby, treated. Since they now saw me as being closer to one of "them," the de-facto neutrality tag that I had enjoyed for so many years was concomitantly revoked. The change was most clearly evident in my relationships with Navajo women, my becoming a subject of gossip, and my unwitting participation in family feuds.

I first noticed a variation in my dealings with pubescent females. There are a wide assortment of aunts and female cousins with whom I had become accustomed to engaging in playful banter. Suddenly, it became inappropriate to be alone with any of these women lest "people talk." Even females I had known since they were little girls would no longer talk to me in public or private. In fact, Isabelle made the following announcement at a cookout held in my honor: "Sorry, ladies, he's no longer available."

The prescription against being seen alone or overly friendly with a married man gave way to another big change. For the first time (or at least the first time it was brought to my attention), I became the subject of rumors and bad-mouthing from others. Revelations of this sort were especially disconcerting since I had always tried to be on civil terms with everyone. Except for a few individuals, I thought that I was generally well liked. But my change in status rendered me vulnerable to being judged or even attacked.

On a related note, I also made a concerted effort not to get involved in family politics and intra-clan squabbles. Before, I moved effortlessly between family groups. Every time I made a trip to the reservation, I would routinely travel the "circuit" by visiting each house and greeting each family member. By virtue of my affiliation with a specific family within the matrilineal kinship group for the purposes of my research, I became identified with them. As a result, I unwittingly inherited their rivalries: their enemies suddenly became my enemies.¹⁰ Thus, Isabelle's ongoing feud with her Aunt Thelma (whom she pejoratively refers to as "Chocolate Sister" because of her dark complexion) translated into Thelma coolly ignoring me when she saw me at the store. This snub was disarming since there was no falling out incident that precipitated such frosty treatment as well as the fact that we always had an amicable relationship before then.

Perhaps another way of looking at this is as an initiation of sorts, a type of cultural baptism by fire. Keith Basso, an anthropologist who has conducted

research with the Apache for decades, is proud that he has established a close enough relationship with his informants that he is gossiped about (Lincoln, 1993:103). But being accepted on such an intimate level necessarily entails a double-edged sword. While it means that they consider me more of an insider, I also lose the privileges and freedom that came along with being an outsider. Just as some doors opened, others closed.

TV Shame Syndrome

Titled *Television Through Navajo Eyes: Situating Reception in Everyday Life*, my dissertation examined whether there are uniquely “Navajo” viewing habits and interpretive strategies as they specifically apply to watching television. One aspect of this research involved quantitatively measuring how much television each of my five informants watched in a given day over a period of one calendar year using three different techniques: my observations, a daily log that they maintained, and employing my research assistants as “undercover spies” to surreptitiously monitor their viewing. These different techniques were necessitated by the varying degrees of inadequacy of each. Following Heisenberg, as soon as my informants realized that I was watching them watch television, they deliberately altered their normal behavior. It was as if the appearance of my yellow notepad was an immediate signal to leave the room or find something else to do.

If the scrutiny of my presence served as such a distraction, I reasoned, perhaps they would be more forthcoming if they recorded their own television viewing habits. With this in mind, I provided each of my informants (except for Grandma Elsie who is not literate) with a “TV journal” and instructed them to maintain a daily log of what they watched and for how long. The journals were ineffective because of their lack of diligence in maintaining them. Claiming to be “too busy,” my informants obviously perceived written documentation as being too much of a chore. Furthermore, the self-reported entries that they did report indicated even *less* time watching TV than my observations.

Realizing these shortcomings, I next decided to employ my research assistants as “undercover spies.” Their mission was to secretly keep track of their family members’ television viewing. Although they did not take this task very seriously, their findings are by far the most accurate of the three.

While it is true that “TV is bad” is a class-based assumption, my informants seem to have been influenced by my own views—or their perception thereof—regarding television. For over a decade, *before* I began this research, I

repeatedly implored the Benally children to stop watching so much television. I remember even ominously warning that the “TV is going to fry your brain cells.” I would also frequently make snide remarks about their tastes in programming. (“You *like* Married With Children?”)

One of the Benally children lived with my family for almost six months. I am certain that Todd relayed my “no television” policy for my kids upon returning home to the reservation. Concomitantly, I know for a fact that he proudly shared his newfound enjoyment of reading, which I encouraged him to do instead of watching TV while he was living in my house. On numerous occasions, I have heard Todd chastise his siblings to “turn off the TV and go read a book”—an injunction he has heard from me countless times.

People always talk with a delicate responsiveness to what they think that other people know and believe. John Tulloch asserts that peoples’ utterances should never be separated from their vivid sensitivity to setting (2000:167). For example, Regina claimed to prefer educational shows on the Discovery Channel ostensibly because she assumed that the listener (in this case, me) shared in the kinds of distinctions that this utterance conferred and therefore would perceive her as somebody with sophisticated viewing tastes. In a similar capacity, the reason Isabelle conspicuously placed a collection of brand new—and, I would later learn, never read—books in her youngest son’s room was so that I would think she promoted literacy. The problem, then, of inquiring about tastes is that people like to think about themselves in a particular way that they prefer to present to others as their public self.

It is a simple fact that informants will only disclose what they want researchers to know, and it is only natural for them to want to present themselves as positively as possible. My informants did not want me to look down on them for watching so much TV or to report these “negative” findings to others and thereby cast them in an unfavorable light. Simply stated, the main reason that most of my informants denied both the amount of television and the type of programming they watched was because they cared about what I thought of them.

How I See Them

In spite of all our similarities, I could not help but to notice our glaring cultural differences. Nowhere was this more the case than in our contrasting approaches to financial matters. The Benallys engage in endless contests of one-upmanship with their friends, relatives, and, most often, each other. Indeed, the satisfaction

of a new purchase is not complete until the item can be paraded in front of friends and family. Since I have known them, I was always struck by how eagerly they flaunted their new purchases, either individually or collectively, by asking (usually rhetorically) onlookers: “Did you see our/my new _____?” This type of thing is not uncommon, and I suppose it could be attributed to making conversation. More peculiar, however, is their proclivity for volunteering the price of their various purchases, whether it is a new car, an item of clothing, or even groceries. Revelations of this sort are manifested in statements such as, “We just got back from Wal Mart. Two hundred and fifty bucks.”¹¹

The Benallys even play a game, which has turned into something of a ritual, on those rare occasions when they go out to dinner as a family. Once the bill arrives, every person sitting at the table (guests included) takes a turn guessing the amount. The “winner” gets to leave the tip. But perhaps the real prize is the satisfaction that they indulged in an expensive meal—and, thanks to the game, everybody knows just how expensive.

Along similar lines, whenever my research assistants receive their paychecks from their respective places of employment, they will cash the entire check—even though they have no intention of spending the full amount—just so they can walk around like some big shot with a thick wad of bills in their pocket. Then they will make sure that everybody nearby will get a good look when they open their wallet to pay for an item (usually something small like a soda). Such exhibitionism is not confined to the younger generation. Every two weeks, I can count on their mother, Isabelle, bragging about the amount of her paycheck.

I consider this type of behavior to be the epitome of tackiness. My family has always subscribed to a strict “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy when it comes to all things monetary. While I was growing up, my parents never disclosed to me how much money they made or how much something cost. When I did inquire out of curiosity, I was promptly admonished and reminded that it was inappropriate to ask about such things. Moreover, to this day, whenever my family dines at a restaurant with another family, the post-meal ritual consists of the fathers arguing over the bill with each insisting on paying.

Individualism

The adoption of a cash economy has created a wide range in income within kinship groups. Among the members of the Benally family, for example, there is a significant variation in socioeconomic level. Isabelle and her live-in

boyfriend's combined monthly income, including wages and child support payments, exceed \$7,000—*after* taxes. Meanwhile, her mother and brother survive on less than that in an entire year.¹² While Isabelle and most of her children drive their own vehicles and watch their own television sets in their respective rooms, Grandma Elsie and Delbert live in dilapidated housing with no electricity, telephone, or running water. Worse, Isabelle does not allow her mother or any of her siblings to use any of her possessions, such as her washing machine, shower, or telephone.¹³ Not only does Isabelle refuse to share what she has, she openly flaunts her belongings in their presence.

The cash economy created imbalance and conflict within kinship groups as those with money became splintered from those without. Separate classes of “haves” and “have-nots” redefine relations among individuals by categorizing them as either similar or different. Such differentiations with other consumers based upon unshared consumption practices are potentially infinite, and it is this infinite potential that makes it possible for consumers to create for themselves a specific individuality (Foster, 2002:79). Not surprisingly, prioritizing the wants of the individual over the needs of the group has resulted in deleterious consequences for both. Family unity has weakened, community life has wilted, and religious meaning has waned.

I noticed an endemic greed and avarice from the first time I came to this community as part of the gardening workcamp. Our objective was to plant and grow fresh fruits and vegetables for a people whose diet had become dominated by processed foods.¹⁴ It was my understanding that the harvest would be rationed among the entire community or at least the whole residence group, which consisted at the time of six families related by clan. To my shock and horror, I learned later that the one family who owned the parcel of land on which the gardening project took place kept *all* of the fruits and vegetables for themselves. The amount of food produced far exceeded the eating capacities of three adults and four children—who, incidentally, did not even like the taste of vegetables in the first place—yet they allowed most of this precious bounty to rot rather than share any of it with their relatives. When I returned the following summer, I incredulously asked one of the shunned relatives why this particular family did not distribute any of the food that we as the workers had intended for everybody to partake. “That’s the way they are,” she answered, “they’re too mean.” Over the years, I would learn that “that” is the way they *all* are.

The refusal to share is not limited to any one family. In fact, this same woman who cast these aspersions against her frugal clan relatives stored all of her food in her room. Despite living under the same roof as her mother, two of

her sisters, and all of their respective children, she only bought and cooked food for herself and her kids—as did her sisters. Instead of everybody eating together, each “sub-family” would take their turn in the kitchen before relinquishing it for the next shift. At the time, I was struck by the oddity of the arrangement but attributed it to a “Navajo” custom that I knew nothing about.

Only later would I discover that Navajos traditionally defined a kinship group as a cluster of people “who cook and eat together” (Lamphere 1977:75). Furthermore, the sharing of food was always considered a symbol of solidarity and a primary social obligation among kinsman. Not to do so was considered an antisocial act of enormous proportions, as Gary Witherspoon points out:

The refusal to share food is a denial of kinship, and one of the worst things to be said about a person is, “She refused to share her food” or “He acts as though he had no kinsmen”—meaning about the same thing (1975:88).

Such statements no longer carry the weight they once did. Recently, I overheard Isabelle resentfully complain that her elderly mother had asked to “borrow” some hot dogs and Kool Aid because she did not have anything to eat. How Isabelle can spend money so frivolously while her own mother is forced to pawn her few remaining pieces of jewelry to buy wood for heat or how she can eat in front of her nieces and nephews whose only meal of the day was provided by their school is beyond my comprehension.

Unlike the case for contemporary Navajos, sharing remains an essential feature of everyday life for Koreans and Korean-Americans. I was raised in a cultural milieu where hospitality and generosity constituted the essential guideposts of a person’s character. Every visitor to our house is always welcomed with fruit or some other food item. It would be absolutely unconscionable to eat in front of another person—especially an elder—without first providing them with a serving.

An example of the mutual trust and cooperation among Koreans is the system of money borrowing known as “gaeh.” A “gaeh” consists of a financial group in which every member contributes the same pre-determined amount of money ranging from a few hundred to thousands of dollars every month. Each member takes turns acquiring all of the money until everybody has had a turn. This pooling of resources amounts to interest-free loans that enables participants to buy a home, start a business, or finance their children’s education. Often credited with helping Koreans to advance financially, this system is predicated entirely on honesty and fairness since no collateral is used.

My cultural background may explain why I am more sensitive to the “every man for himself” ethos commonly displayed by the Benallys. Perhaps another researcher from an upbringing steered more towards a “rugged individualism” orientation may not find their selfish attitudes and practices so bothersome. For example, I doubt that my college roommate, who could not go home during Christmas breaks because his mom and her boyfriend wanted to charge him rent for the two weeks he would be staying at their house, would be as offended and horrified by the hoarding techniques of a mother who to this day maintains a cache of snacks in her locked bedroom because she does not want to share her chips and candy with her own children.

“Look at Me” vs. “Look at Me See”

The title of this section is borrowed from Richard Chalfen’s (1981) “socio-documentary” research in which he provided cameras to different groups of Philadelphia teenagers and instructed them to make movies. He found two distinctly different structures of filmic narrative: black and lower socioeconomic level filmmakers preferred to use and manipulate themselves and familiar aspects of their immediate environment (“Look at Me”) while the white and more affluent subjects preferred to use and manipulate images of unfamiliar things and unknown people in areas away from their familiar environment (“Look at Me See”) (1992:229).

A parallel relationship exists between my informants and me. The reason that Navajos attribute so much value to superficial trappings such as vehicles, clothing, and jewelry is to validate their public personas. Their consumption practices are symptomatic of an underlying need to reinforce a sense of self. Those who have always gone without will understandably want to acquire as many things as possible and then show them off. It stands to reason that when a Navajo finally does get her hands on something of value, she will cherish it to the point of exclusion. The rationale follows along the lines of: “Why should I share this with you? I earned it. Besides, you didn’t share yours with me!” Such a mentality perpetuates mutual hoarding and competitive display.

I, on the other hand, come from a privileged background of private schools and piano lessons. For the most part, I did not covet because I always received whatever I wanted. The fact that making a lot of money was never an issue is clearly evident by my choice to devote so many years to studying anthropology, a vicarious discipline that epitomizes the examination “of unfamiliar things and unknown people.” Thus, my dissertation represents a dialogic encounter

between two diametrically opposed poles: the “look at me” mentality of my research subjects and the “look at me see” orientation of my research paradigm.

It is very easy for someone like me to ridicule the money management skills—or the lack thereof—of my Navajo informants. Their habits of wasting money on items with the least residual value, paying inordinate interest rates, and not saving for a rainy day provoked alternating feelings on my part of disbelief, distress, and dismay. But you should not judge a person, as the adage goes, until you have walked in his moccasins.

Many of us take having our basic needs met for granted and have no idea what it is like to go without. Native Americans remain the most disadvantaged group in the country both economically and socially. More than half of reservation Indians do not have telephones although that is true for just five percent of all households nationwide, and twenty percent of reservation households lack indoor plumbing while less than one percent of the nation as a whole suffers the same problem (Flynn 1995:10). And the Navajos are the poorest of the poor. Among the ten largest Indian tribes, Navajos had the highest proportion of people in poverty, the lowest median family income, and the lowest per capita income based on 1990 census figures (Associated Press 1994:1).

Statistics, however, fail to capture the degree of poverty in real life terms. Day to day existence includes conserving every drop of water,¹⁵ subsisting almost entirely on canned or dry goods, spending evenings in quiet darkness, sleeping on a dirt floor, and walking to the outhouse alone in the middle of the night. During my time on the reservation, I have experienced all of these things—but only in small “boy, am I lucky” doses and always with the assurance that I can return to the Shangri-La I call home anytime I wish. The people that live here do not have such an option.

There is validation to the belief that “the only people who don’t care about money are those who already have it.” Indeed, those most dispirited with materialism feel this way not because they have too little, but because they have too much. It is an exercise in futility—not to mention the ultimate in snobbery—to convince somebody who has lived his entire life in poverty about the pathology associated with wealth and then ridicule that individual for continuing to adhere to his materialistic aspirations.

Postscript

After fifteen years, I know a lot about the individuals whose lives formed the basis of my study—perhaps *too* much. Initially, I believed this familiarity

would serve as a tremendous advantage and result in my completing my dissertation quickly and smoothly. It turned out, however, to be much more of a handicap than a benefit. In an article titled "The Paradox of Friendship in the Field," Joy Hendry describes the difficulties she experienced as an ethnographer carrying out research in Japan when she turned one of her close friends into an informant (1992). Similarly, a well-established manual for ethnographic research positively warns against turning friends into informants largely because of the confusion of roles that is thought to arise as a result of each side having preconceived ideas about what the relationship should involve (Spradley 1979:26-28). My own experiences confirmed these findings.

Everything changed once this small community transformed from a refuge where I went to relax to a research site where I had to work. Since our entire relationship was based upon fictive kin, it became suddenly awkward to wear the "anthropologist hat." I had to switch gears from never knowing (or caring) what time it was to being constantly concerned with deadlines. This was exacerbated by the fact that my friends-turned-informants did not take my research seriously. "The rez" consequently became a place I associated with drudgery, frustration, and resentment resulting from missed appointments, lame excuses, and constant requests for "loans" (which always turned out to be "donations"). Indeed, I must confess that my fieldnotes are riddled with Malinowskian outbursts. Once a sanctuary where I used to go to escape, it turned into an abyss I wanted to escape from. Whereas I once took pride in our similarities, I eventually found solace in our differences.

However, it was during one of the Benally family get-togethers that I was reminded of how special this place and the people really are. My fieldnotes took a more benevolent and reflective tone on this day:

It has been awhile since I've seen everyone together like this. It feels good. Playing basketball and volleyball, everybody making fun of each other and laughing until it hurts, eating together, etc. brings back a lot of nice memories. After all of the "adults" played a game of volleyball, the younger kids got their turn to play. Most of them are the children of the "kids" I knew when I first came here! As I sat watching this next generation of Benallys, I couldn't help but notice the timeless quality of it all. While the faces have changed, everything else looks, feels, and even smells the same: the mountains looming over the desert landscape, the cool dusk wind against my cheeks, and the familiar stink of sheep from the nearby corral...I feel very blessed to be included.

Although such moments of clarity were few and far between, they were invaluable in helping me to persevere. I noticed that after I stopped trying to force everything, my eyes started opening to what was happening around me. In the course of learning about them, I also learned more about myself. Gradually, the ethnographic self and the personal self merged into one.

ENDNOTES

¹This is not always the case as a new relationship with an interview subject may work just as well or better in certain situations.

²I have changed all names of family members in order to conceal their identity.

³Gary Witherspoon's involvement in Navajo social life also preceded any anthropological interest: "I have never been in these communities for the purpose of anthropological research...I learned the culture as an interested and concerned participant, not as a detached observer" (1977:6-7). Likewise, Peter Iverson claims that his recent volume on the history of the Navajo is "told from the inside out rather than the outside in" (2002:2).

⁴Choong Soon Kim, also a Korean anthropologist, experienced a similar solidarity with his Cherokee informants:

The cultural similarities between the Cherokees and rural Korean peasants particularly struck me. Eerie feelings of *deja vu* crept over me when I spotted a woman carrying a child on her back and a dipper made from a gourd hanging on a wall. For a few moments, I was back in a Korean peasant village... (1977:69).

⁵This was made explicitly clear when one of the families sponsored a birthday party and I was the only one from the camp they invited.

⁶I had originally hoped to be a student at the field school but could not afford the \$5,000 tuition. I met Dr. Werner at the Navajo Studies Conference the previous spring and explained to him my financial predicament. He initially offered me a scholarship on the spot but rescinded it after I informed him that I was not Navajo. As a consolation, he graciously invited me to all of the meetings as an honorary participant.

⁷Judith Okely decries that most anthropologists' opening descriptions focus on superficial contrasts and first encounters but ignore the responses and insights from the hosts: "In the long run it is important to know how they viewed and related to the anthropologist as stranger, guest, then apprentice, perhaps friend and scribe" (1992:14).

⁸Frank Cushing, perhaps the personification of the anthropologist "gone native," acknowledges that the Zunis initially regarded him with suspicion: "Day after day, night after night, they followed me about the pueblo, or gathered in my room. I soon realized that they were systematically watching me" (1882:203).

⁹My children's biological "father"—and I use that term very loosely—has a brother who was once married to Isabelle's half-sister, Marilyn, and had several children with her.

¹⁰During her fieldwork on the Navajo reservation, Louise Lamphere describes how internal subdivisions within the community affected how she was perceived: "I, in turn, was being associated with their alleged activities simply by living with them" (1977:11).

¹¹How much they value an item is in direct proportion to its cost. For example, I gave Isabelle a cappuccino maker for Christmas one year. She did not seem to really like the pres-

ent until she saw the same item at Costco and learned of its price. Thereafter, I would always overhear her bragging not about receiving a nice gift but how much it cost.

¹²Grandma Elsie relies entirely on public assistance while chronically unemployed Delbert sells the occasional piece of jewelry but, for the most part, leeches off his mother and girlfriend(s) for his survival.

¹³I remember one particular incident when Elroy, Isabelle's youngest brother, made himself a sandwich from leftovers in his sister's refrigerator while she was not home. He made me promise not to tell her that he was "raiding the fridge." When I asked why he seemed so afraid that his own sister would become angry over a bologna sandwich, his answer was simple yet revealing: "That's the way she is."

¹⁴The ultimate goal was for the Navajos to continue raising the crops on their own so that they would eventually become more self-sufficient in terms of food while also vastly improving their diet. After the workcamp folded the following summer due to a lack of funding, the family who owns the land abandoned the fields altogether. Nobody has taken the initiative to resume growing any fruits or vegetables since.

¹⁵One develops a new appreciation for water when you have to "haul" it in giant barrels from miles away as opposed to simply turning on a faucet. Navajo children as young as five-years-old who are reared in households without indoor plumbing become readily adept at "sucking the hose" to transfer water from a barrel into a smaller container for daily use.

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