

**CULTURE AS KNOWLEDGE: DO WE SEE REALITY OR REALITY FILTERED  
THROUGH CULTURE? ©Carol C. Mukhopadhyay**

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A version also appears in the Teacher's Guide for the Companion Website of the American Anthropological Association RACE project.

For more conceptual background material for this activity, see Chapter 5 (Mukhopadhyay), in ***How Real is Race? A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, And Biology. SECOND EDITION. 2014.*** C. Mukhopadhyay, R. Henze, and Y. T. Moses, AltaMira Press. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/978-0-7591-2273-4>

A CD/DVD version demonstrating the ritual is available for viewing at:  
<http://www.sjsu.edu/at/atn/webcasting/archives/anthro/albatross/index.html>

## **Introduction**

Anthropologists have long appreciated the role direct experience plays in understanding complex phenomena. This is especially the case when trying to teach about "culture". How does one adequately describe the subtle yet profound ways in which culture shapes individual and collective perceptions, interpretations and emotional responses. How can we adequately demonstrate the "symbolic" nature of culture, the varied "collective meanings" human cultures

bestow on the world, the enormity of cultural knowledge an individual acquires in the process of "growing up". And, how can we impress students who believe they carry little cultural baggage, with the degree to which they, too, experience the world through a cultural filter.

This paper describes one "experiential" exercise I use to illustrate the idea that culture profoundly affects how we experience reality, in this case, what we see and observe. It involves students observing a fairly elaborate [ten minute] greeting "ritual" of the "Albatross" culture which, unknown to students, is a hypothetical culture.<sup>1</sup> In the "live" version, two pre-selected individuals play the roles of the Albatross man and woman. Class members are invited into the Albatross culture to observe and, for some, to participate in the greeting ritual. They are often asked to look for recurring "cultural themes", particularly about gender and gender relations, that are reflected in specific aspects of the greeting ritual.

Numerous aspects of the ritual indicate a male-dominated culture. The Albatross female and the female "guests," unlike males, go barefoot, sit on the floor, and aren't given the opportunity to wash their hands before eating the ritual food offerings. Males are served first by the Albatross female while the Albatross male sits on his chair, directing her [speaking, of course, in unintelligible Albatross "tongue"]. He periodically tilts her head towards the ground in what appears to be a "bow". At the end of the ritual, the Albatross couple selects a

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<sup>1</sup> This is an adaptation of a simulation called "The Albatross" which was circulating among multicultural education people in the 1970s [Gochenour, Theodore, 1977.] Although the basic ritual is similar, the pedagogical context, principles illustrated, and discussion aspects are different. A teacher-education

female guest to join them, she is seated on the floor by the male, and he “bows” her head towards the floor.

After the greeting has been performed, “guests”—i.e. class members—are asked to describe what they have just seen, to identify recurring themes and the portions of the ritual which illustrate these themes. Predictably, students are convinced they are observing a male dominated society and provide descriptions replete with inferences and culturally-specific interpretations of behaviors which support these presumed cultural themes.

Finally, having reached consensus, the instructor suggests that perhaps the entire class is wrong, that the Albatross may attach different meanings to these behaviors. The instructor, or the Albatross couple, then proceeds to explain the meaning of the ritual in the Albatross culture. superiority.

Students are invariably shocked at how deeply they have misinterpreted what they have observed. Discussion follows of the various “lessons” about culture to be learned from the activity, including how our deeply internalized cultural knowledge [including from popular media] provides a cultural lens through which we observe “reality”.

### **Time and Context of Use**

The simulated greeting ritual takes approximately 10 minutes and at least 40 minutes should be allowed for the subsequent discussion. I have used both a “live” and a videotaped version of the Albatross simulation successfully with pre-college teachers and with a variety of students: from anthropology majors

and graduate students to undergraduates who have never taken an anthropology course. It works as well with a class of 125 students [especially if you have access to a video-projector] as in a small classroom. I have managed to make it relevant to virtually every class I teach, emphasizing different points for different groups [e.g. Language and Culture, Ethnographic Methods, Human Sexuality, Gender and Culture classes].

### **More Detailed Procedures for the “Live” Simulation**

The simulation can be run “live” by having pre-selected volunteers learn the roles of the Albatross female and male and recruiting, on the day of the performance, 6-10 students [equal males and females] to participate as “guests” in the culture. While enormously effective “live”, it can be difficult and time-consuming to recruit, train, and suitably garb the actors. In 1990, with the help of the Chico State, California, media center, I videotaped a live version of the simulation, complete with 8 naïve student “participants”. After coming to San Jose State, a heavily commuter school, I have found it easier to use the videotaped version. It has proven virtually as effective as the live simulation.<sup>2</sup>

If using live actors, you should plan on 1-3 hours of preparation time. Two “actors” – one male and one female—must be pre-selected and “taught” the different stages in the ritual as well as the underlying themes of the culture. They must create some appropriate clothing and perhaps body decoration,

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<sup>2</sup> PAT: HELP!! I am happy to share the videotape with others. Logistically, I’m not sure how to handle the cost and time of making copies. We have very little student help. Someone at this end would need to make a copy of the video...assuming others sent us a blank tape. It’s probably doable. I need to check on who owns the copyright for the video which was done at Chico State...I’m assuming I do! I better! But the Albatross simulation [written form] was developed by someone else. I once got the permission to use it in a volume for teachers which contains a description of this simulation: Hernandez and Mukhopadhyay, *Integrating Multicultural Perspectives into Teacher Education*.

although this need not be elaborate. You must decide on some “food” to serve and some liquid to drink. Some practice will be necessary. Actors can be taught the parts easily by having them view the Albatross video tape, reading the detailed description below, and then giving them a “cue” card listing each of the stages in the greeting ritual.

**Materials Needed for Live Version:**

- Dishes or bowls for: 1) hand washing 2) liquid to drink 3) food to eat.

For food, the videotaped simulation we used crushed olives but they were served from a dish labeled “marinated bumblebees”. For liquid, we used cold, diluted coffee—but I told students it was, predictably, marinated bumble bee juice.

- A circle of chairs, enough for the male participant and with the Albatross male chair somewhat apart. There should be enough room between chairs so that each female can sit on the floor next to a male.

## **Preparation of Students for the Simulation.**

You can preface the simulation by telling students they will be visiting a new and interesting culture. They are to try to observe carefully the elaborate greeting ritual and to also identify the underlying themes of the culture, especially gender themes. If the class is large, and you want to reduce visitors to 8-10 students, the remaining students will simply be “observers” and you should encourage them to take “fieldnotes” on what they see. After the simulation, have “participating” students return to their seats and begin the discussion phase.<sup>3</sup>

### Stages in the Actual Greeting Ritual

#### Stage 1: Seating of Albatross couples and guests.

- Albatrossian couple enters the room, the Albatrossian sits on the male chair, the Albatross woman kneels on the floor to his right. They “speak” to each other in their language, which consists of hisses, indicating disapproval; hums, indicating approval, and clicking sounds for transmission of other messages.
- Class enters room. “Participant-observers” are selected, males sit on remaining chairs, females [only] are asked to remove their shoes and are seated on the floor by each male. Faculty person or coordinator helps seat participants.

Stage 2: Greeting Ritual—6 parts. After each part, the Albatross woman returns to her seat by the male, they “speak” briefly, there is a short pause, and then the

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<sup>3</sup> If you are using the videotaped version, there is a written introduction to the tape. I would advise, however, explaining to students that they will be seeing a couple from the Albatross culture but that the rest of participants are students like themselves, who know nothing about the culture, and have volunteered to participate in the greeting ritual.

Albatross male carefully and gently tilts her head towards the earth, in a kind of “bow”.

- Gender-specific greetings. First, the Albatross male gets up and greets each male in turn. In the generic greeting the Albatross male holds each guest by the shoulder or waist and rubs his right leg against the leg of the guest, sometimes turning in a circle. Then the guest reseats himself in his chair. After all males are greeted, the Albatross woman greets each female guest individually. She asks the guest to stand, she then kneels, runs both hands down the lower legs and feet gently, ceremoniously. The participant then returns to a seated position on the floor. Actors interpret and elaborate these generic greetings, often in very creative ways.
- Washing the Hands. The Albatross woman circulates a bowl of water to males, beginning with the Albatross male. Each male dips his right hand into the bowl and then shakes off the water. Only males participate. Then the Albatross woman returns to kneel by the Albatross male.
- Serving the Food. On a clicking cue from the Albatross male, the female rises, obtains the food, and offers it to each male, beginning with the Albatross male. Then, each female guest is given food. She does not eat herself.
- Serving the Drinks. Once again, the Albatross female gets the drinks, and serves them first to the males, beginning with the Albatross male, and then to the females. She does not drink herself.

- Selection of Ms. Big Feet. The Albatross couple examines the feet of each female and, unknown to guests, selects the female with the biggest feet. She is led to the male Albatross chair and is told to kneel at his side, like the Albatross woman. He “bows” her head and then that of the female “guest”.
- Gender-specific greetings. The same initial greeting is repeated, first for males, then for females.

Stage 3: Albatross couple leaves with Ms. Big Feet. The Albatross couple instruct the selected female guest to leave the room with them.

**Discussion of the Ritual. This is the most important phase. What follows, however, can be altered and expanded to fit your own learning objectives and class.**

Have students first describe the ritual, allowing them to give their interpretations of what they observed—both general cultural themes and specific parts of the ritual. You may prefer students to write, either as an exercise or to help them organize their ideas. You may ask them to share their impressions with their “neighbor”. Or, you can immediately elicit descriptions from the class as a whole.

Generally, there is overwhelming consensus that this is a male-dominated culture and women are subservient. Students easily, in creative ways, supply specific examples of behaviors from the ritual in support of their interpretation. Should someone suggest an alternative interpretation, ask other class members if they agree with these new opinions. Generally, they will discard any but their



own, culturally biased interpretation. Allow them to feel confident with their interpretation.

Having obtained consensus on the meaning of the Albatrossian greeting ritual especially for gender relations, either you or your actors next proceed to explain the real meaning of the Albatross rituals. I begin by stating that Albatross culture is not male-dominated but is a culture in which women have superior power and prestige to men. The reason is that Albatross view women as similar to the Earth because, like the Earth, they are essential to the survival and continuance of Albatross culture. Like the Earth, they reproduce....from their bodies come human beings just like food comes from the earth. Hence, they are “close” to the Earth and like the Earth, are “pure” and “sacred”. Only they [and not males] are pure enough to sit or walk directly on the ground or to take food without first purifying themselves. Their superior status, because of their closeness to the Earth, is reflected in the women’s greeting ritual, in their cultural standards of beauty [large feet, more contact with the ground], and in the symbolic “bowing” of their heads by males, in recognition of their closeness to the earth. I then ask students to reinterpret, in light of this understanding of Albatross beliefs, the specific behaviors they observed in the ritual.

As noted earlier, students are generally shocked, sometimes deeply concerned, that they have so misinterpreted what they thought they were seeing. In short, a form of “culture shock” often occurs. This provides an opportunity to discuss, in an experientially real way, the complex concept of culture and how it

affects our perceptions of reality.<sup>4</sup> By the time I do this simulation, I have introduced the basic concept of culture [and related terms, like ethnocentrism] which students have dutifully recorded in their notes. After the activity, I reintroduce these terms...they have acquired more salience. Among the many lessons to be “learned”, I usually emphasize the following:

- Misinterpretation occurred because students ignored the fact that the “mental products” of culture can differ—i.e. that cultures can bestow different meanings on the same behaviors. Students simply went ahead and applied their own cultural meanings to a new cultural context.
- Misinterpretation also occurred because students were too quick to “interpret” and make inferences about Albatross culture. They did not wait until they had a chance to ask the Albatross themselves...to obtain the ALBATROSSIAN view or perspective.
- Students AGREED or reached consensus on the meaning of Albatross behavior, yet they were still wrong. Hence, consensus among observers—especially from the same culture—does not guarantee accuracy. Consensus simply indicates that observers share the same cultural knowledge (and biases) which they use to interpret behavior.
- It is important to understand that we cannot always rely on our own cultural knowledge to interpret the behavior of others, especially from other cultures

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<sup>4</sup> Other possible discussion topics are the experience of cultural immersion—self-reflection about feelings, including “culture shock” and ethnocentrism, strategies for initial contact, for observing in order to participate, etc. Another topic is cultural and social conformity, the power of the group to “define reality” to ignore, even squelch, non-mainstream perspectives, even when accurate.

or microcultures. It is essential to obtain the native perspective or interpretation. In short, ask the natives what it means!

- It is therefore important to avoid premature interpretations of behavior, especially when dealing with an unfamiliar culture, and when you do not understand or have access to the cultural knowledge/belief systems of that culture.
- In short, it is essential to seek the native perspective on their culture. In short, ask the natives what their rituals mean!
- Close observation of behavior can help one to function in an unfamiliar situation or culture, particularly if one concentrates on IMITATING rather than INTERPRETATING the behavior.

### **Evaluating Student Learning and other Follow-Up Activities.**

At the conclusion of the discussion, tell students that the Albatross culture does not exist and that the two Albatross representatives were student actors. But emphasize that the ethnographic record shows there are beliefs that resemble those in the Albatross culture. And...that even if this was not the case, culture allows humans to create such meanings for such behaviors. More important, their experience was not artificial; they did not observe “reality” directly; rather, they experienced reality through a cultural lens.

This activity is an excellent foundation for writing assignments. In my large general education human sexuality classes, I assign the following topic to assess students understanding about the concept of culture: “What are the lessons [about culture] to be learned from the Albatross activity”. In gender and culture

classes, I ask students to use the activity to illustrate the complexities of assessing the status of women cross-culturally. In language and culture class, I ask students to analyze their original written description of the activity, looking for language that contains unwarranted, culturally-infused inferences [e.g. phrases such as “the women **had** to sit on the floor”, “the men got to eat first”, “ she bowed to him” ]. I have also been able to incorporate questions about the Albatross activity into “objective” multiple choice exams.

### **Supplementary Materials**

Videotape of Albatross simulation made at California State University, Chico. For a CD copy of this version of the simulation contact Mukhopadhyay or send a self-addressed stamped CD-envelope to Mukhopadhyay at the Department of Anthropology, San Jose State, San Jose CA 95192-0113.

### References:

Gochenour, Theodore. 1977. The Albatross. In *Beyond Experience: The Experiential Approach to Cross-Cultural Education*. D. Batchelder and E.G. Warner, eds. Brattleboro VT: The Experiment Press.

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