

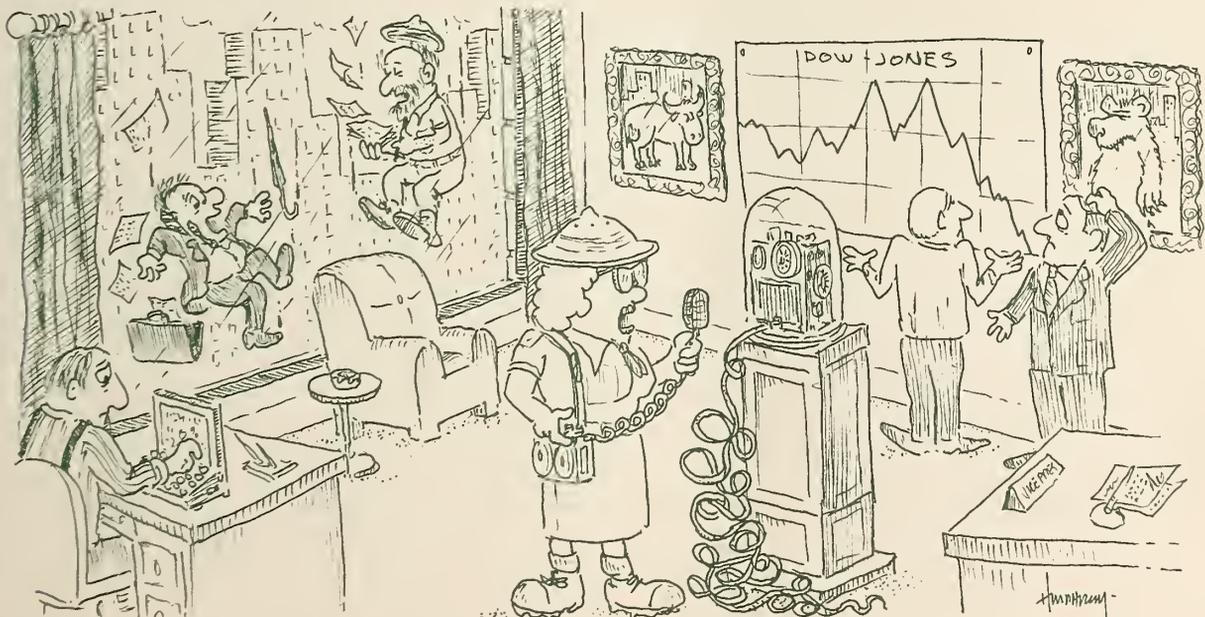
DOING ETHNOGRAPHY AT MACALESTER COLLEGE "FROM THE INSIDE OUT"

Armed with a tape recorder, anthropologist Dave McCurdy spent his sabbatical a few years back doing fieldwork--at a local stockbroker's office. Everyday he visited his informant, watching him "picking up his mail," "checking the Journal," "searching for ideas," "posting his books," "messaging clients," and "making cold calls." McCurdy socialized with his informant and his fellow brokers after work, and on their lunch break played racket ball. He attended "dog and pony shows" and went to "due diligence meetings." In this way, by learning a new language "from the inside out," McCurdy began to learn the intimate culture by which brokers conduct their lives.

Dave McCurdy states the fact simply, "Meeting Jim Spradley changed my life." For several generations of anthropology students, the names Spradley and McCurdy are inseparable, known as joint authors and as creators of an innovative fieldwork approach to teaching anthropology. Few people, however, know the story behind this remarkable collaboration or that Jim Spradley died ten years ago--of leukemia--at the age of 48.

In 1969, Dave McCurdy, the only anthropologist at Macalester, hired a second anthropologist to help him develop an anthropology program for undergraduate students. Thirty-three year old James Spradley had just completed his ethno-

graphic study of Skid Row alcoholics living in Seattle, Washington. For that study, Spradley had adapted a new research technique called "ethnographic semantics," based on a theoretical approach pioneered by Harold C. Conklin, Charles O. Frake, and Ward H. Goodenough. Spradley believed that his methodology, largely dependent on learning the way people categorize, code, define, and describe their experience through language, enabled him to understand and analyze the culture of "tramps." The title of Spradley's highly acclaimed book, *You Owe Yourself a Drunk: An Ethnography of Urban Nomads* (1970), comes from the phrase these men used to describe their feelings after being released from jail. As you learn people's own



language, Spradley believed, you learn their culture from their point of view--"from the inside out."

AMERICAN SUBCULTURES

A brilliant and charismatic teacher, James Spradley urged anthropologists to take the ethnographic study of American culture and subcultures seriously. During the 1960s he came to believe that American urban crises demanded that people in our cities be understood from their point of view--not ours. As he explained in his book, "by defining people as bums, Skid Road alcoholics, vagrants, common drunkards, or homeless men, the average citizen or even the professional knows these men only through the values and language of their own culture--through a popular, medical, sociological, or legal framework" (p. 68).

To develop policies and laws that could help these men, one first had to understand who these men really were and why they lived as they did. Spradley believed that anthropology could contribute vital information to public policy and to practical solutions for social problems, if anthropologists could demonstrate their ability to analyze and describe the culture of others "from the inside out." (In the anthropological lexicon, this analysis of the "culture-bearer's" world from the inside is called "the emic" view as opposed to the outsiders' view that is called "etic.") Anthropologists have long believed that one of their discipline's unique strengths lies in its ability to understand and describe cultures from the emic point of view, and that this view is essential to understanding human cultures worldwide.

ETHNOGRAPHIC SEMANTICS

You Owe Yourself a Drunk is an eloquent, highly detailed ethnographic study of the way tramps organize and identify their life experiences by means of a specialized vocabulary of English, a lexicon that Spradley believed held the key to understanding their culture. Learning this complex language enabled Spradley to

identify five major cultural scenes that tramps find themselves in: buckets (jails); farms (treatment centers); jungles (encampments); skids (Skid Rows); and freights (railroad cars). Within each of these scenes, Spradley identified the various terms that help tramps understand and organize their world: from 15 different kinds of tramps they distinguish among themselves, to one hundred types of sleeping places ("flops") they utilize, to strategies for survival while "making the bucket" (the cycle of getting arrested, pleading guilty, and doing time in jail).

Ethnographic semantics and related methodologies such as componential analysis were developed in the 1960s to apply explicitly "scientific" analytical frameworks to the analysis of cultural phenomena. These techniques sought to determine the definitive attributes of various local terms and cultural concepts in order to get at culturally important distinctions.

Throughout his book, Spradley used ethnographic semantics, identifying the terms tramps used and organizing these terms into chart form in order to create "hierarchical taxonomies." For example, he charted the terms used by the tramps for the people tramps interact with "in the bucket" (jail), the inmates, bulls (people with power), and civilians. Inmates, in turn, include drunks, lockups, and kickouts; bulls include matrons, bailiffs, sergeants, court liaison officers, and others; civilians include cooks, doctors, and nurses.

The organization of these terms into chart form transforms a collection of "folk terms" into a "hierarchical taxonomy," with each group of terms categorized within its proper "domain." Hence, people "in the bucket" are divided into three "domains": inmates, bulls, and civilians. On another and even more complex level, Spradley analyzed the various dimensions or "attributes" that explain the differences among domains. In the above example, the distinction among inmates, bulls, and civilians is the relationship each has to the system (inmates

are held by the system; bulls run the system; and civilians are employed by the system). Such a "componential analysis" results in the creation of "paradigms," a charting of attributes that show exactly how people divide up the various experiences they have. For Spradley's tramps, for example, whether a man travels, how he travels, what kind of home base he maintains, and what livelihood he utilizes turn out to be the four "attributes" by which these men divide themselves up into fifteen different types of tramps. The key role of mobility led Spradley to call tramps "urban nomads"--since that term most closely describes the way these men view themselves.

THE SPRADLEY/MCCURDY TEAM

At Macalester College, Spradley and McCurdy became a team, developing a new approach to teaching anthropology to undergraduate students and co-authoring numerous publications based on their understanding of culture and their approach to doing ethnography. Spradley and McCurdy increasingly came to believe that students could best learn anthropological concepts, perspectives, and even theory by doing fieldwork. The anthropologists' challenge was developing a systematic, focused, and rigorous methodology for students to use within a realistic time frame to complete a fieldwork project. Ethnographic semantics applied to the study of microcultures provided this methodology and structure.

Inseparable as friends, colleagues, and daily racketball partners, Spradley and McCurdy worked together over a period of thirteen years, changing the way anthropology was understood and taught to undergraduates--at least at Macalester. According to former student and anthropologist Marlene Arnold, "we didn't learn theory, we were doing ethnography and discovering theory ourselves. Anthropology students became famous on the Macalester campus because we worked so hard and became so totally involved in the ethnographic studies we were carrying out in the community. Many of the studies by my classmates were

published by Spradley and McCurdy in their book, *The Cultural Experience, Ethnography in Complex Societies.*" This volume, first conceived by McCurdy, details the fieldwork approach for students and includes twelve ethnographic reports written by Macalester students. This book is still used in classrooms today.

With standing offers from some of the best universities in the country, Spradley elected to remain at Macalester, where he could work with McCurdy, pioneering their new approach to anthropology and co-authoring publications, including the widely used *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, now in its seventh edition. Tragically, Spradley died in 1982, but the Spradley/McCurdy legacy remains vital even today, through McCurdy's popular courses at Macalester and through their joint publications that McCurdy rewrites, updates, and reprints. In all the publications, culture is a central focus.

CULTURE AND ETHNOGRAPHY

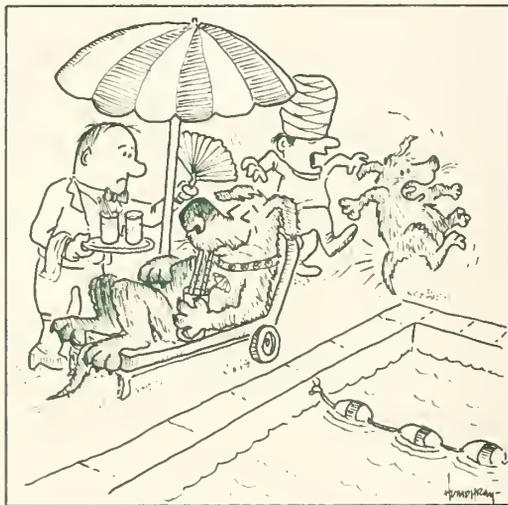
Culture, as defined by Spradley and McCurdy, is not behavior. Culture is a kind of knowledge, "the acquired knowledge that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience." As Spradley and McCurdy explain, as we learn our culture, we acquire a way to interpret our



ANTHROPOLOGISTS DISTINGUISHED FIFTEEN DIFFERENT KINDS OF TRAMPS

experience. One example they cite, based on McCurdy's field experience in village India, is the comparison of the American and Indian conception of dogs.

We Americans learn that dogs are like little people in furry suits. Dogs live in our houses, eat our food, share our beds...villagers in India, on the other hand, view dogs as pests....Quiet days in Indian villages are often punctuated by the yelp of a dog that has been threatened or actually hurt by its master or by a bystander. Clearly, it is not the dogs that are different in these two societies. Rather, it is the meaning that dogs have for people that varies. And such meaning is cultural; it is learned as part of growing up in each group (*Conformity and Conflict*, p. 7).



DOG DOMAINS

CRITIQUES

As Spradley and McCurdy's approach and publications became better known, anthropologists responded to their work, and to the more general question of whether undergraduates can or should do fieldwork, regardless of what methods they used. Many anthropologists use the field approach to teaching anthropology, particularly in courses on methodology. As Ruth Krulfeld of George Washington University explains:

In my methods class, I always have my students do a fieldwork project. They don't usually use ethnographic semantics, but they read Spradley and McCurdy, and they develop a focus and methodology best suited to the project they choose. They can't do the sort of in-depth, sophisticated study a graduate student can do, or an anthropologist who does a two year field study, but, nevertheless, they learn a great deal about culture and about anthropology from their participant-observation study. Through their own projects, many students become so excited about what they are learning that they decide to pursue graduate work in the field.

Sociolinguist and Beloit College anthropologist Lawrence Breitborde explains the appeal of the Spradley/McCurdy approach:

By utilizing a highly structured and precise methodology, Dave McCurdy is able to give his students, even first year college students, a practical and systematic way to get into the field, and to understand culture from the insider's point of view. I admire the precision and the structure, and it's been an influential force in teaching anthropology, spreading to a number of departments across the country.

In the 1970s the early promise of ethnoscience--to provide a scientific basis for ethnography--was never fully realized. Anthropologists could see that language was only one important "window" to another culture, and that ethnographic understanding required several methodologies. Defining groups within the urban underclass as separate cultures or microcultures also was criticized for suggesting that the behavior of these individuals was due to cultural transmission of different values rather than to common reactions to similar pressures of the larger society. (see, e.g. E. Liebow, 1967, *Tally's Corner*, pp. 208-231).

In the 1980s, ethnography itself, and in particular the writing of ethnography, came under serious attack, as revisionists (post-modernists) asserted that an anthropologist's understanding of another culture is so filtered through his or her perceptions, language, and culture, that any description of another culture is suspect. [Because this debate within anthropology has been so divisive and has created a crisis of confidence within the discipline, a future issue of *Anthro.Notes* will review two volumes of essays that illuminate the issue: *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (1986); and *Recapturing Anthropology*, edited by Richard M. Fox (1991).]

Not surprisingly, Spradley and McCurdy's approach to teaching ethnography has caused debate. Some anthropologists assert that unsophisticated undergraduates cannot do ethnography because they know so little anthropology, and, in particular, know so little theory; that practical considerations rule out the approach for most departments and most professors; and that student ethnographers, in fact, will make mistakes and run the risk of engaging in unethical behavior, such as not protecting informants, or trying to study illegal activities, such as groups involved with drugs or alcohol.

MCCURDY RESPONDS

At the 1990 American Anthropological Association meetings, McCurdy described his approach to student ethnography and answered these criticisms. To those anthropologists who assert that undergraduates are not trained to do fieldwork and need to learn theory first, McCurdy pointed out that an overall grasp of theory can, in fact, be important to providing structure, definition, and focus to field research. There are, however, other ways for students to focus their research. By beginning to collect and analyze data using one highly structured technique, the student can come to understand the theoretical basis of that technique and its

limitations, and can also develop hypotheses and interpretations based on the analysis.

McCurdy gave several examples to support his assertion that students can arrive at theoretical hypotheses through their own research. One student, for example, studied paramedics working on ambulance teams. The student discovered that these paramedics used three separate languages to convey the same information, depending on who received the message: a radio language, a technical-medical language, and a slang language. The student hypothesized that slang (for example, "crispy critter" denoting a badly burned patient) developed for functional purposes, easing the terrible emotional stress paramedics endured while caring for seriously injured and often mutilated human beings.

McCurdy offered several suggestions to ease the practical problems of teaching field research to students, although admitting that this is a problem with large classes of undergraduates. He suggested assigning limited problems for students to research in short papers (for example, ask students to report on the ways people celebrate birthdays); lecturing on field methods and using hand-outs; having graduate students or section leaders handle student discussion of their projects as they develop; or running a seminar in interviewing and field research or a summer field school.

Regarding ethical problems, McCurdy was emphatic. Students must learn from the beginning that informants need to be protected. Student researchers must explain to their informants and anyone they come into contact with who they are and what they are doing. No student can study any illegal activity. All students must read the AAA Statement of Ethical Principles and Responsibilities, and informants' privacy must always be the paramount consideration. Ethical risks exist, McCurdy stated, but they exist for all ethnographers, no matter how well trained or sensitive they are. McCurdy summed up his response:

I have argued that ethnographic research is a central and unique property of cultural anthropology. Ethnography can be undertaken by undergraduate students without theoretical training; it may actually be a useful way to bring students to theory. Although teaching ethnography may place a strain on faculty time, adaptive measures make it practical even for fairly large classes. Similarly, ethnography always entails ethical risk, but such risk may be reduced by openly facing ethical consequences.

Recently, McCurdy was asked to comment on his career at Macalester:

When I take stock of Macalester's anthropology program these days, I can't help but be pleased by its progress. The faculty has doubled in the last 20 years; it attracts a larger number of undergraduate majors than at many large universities. It has ranked first in the number of students per faculty member for five of the last twenty years, and it has never ranked lower than fifth. A significant number of our students go on to graduate school, and scores of them claim the value of anthropology in their lives. Although one can never be sure, I like to think that ethnography had something to do with it.

BOOKS CO-AUTHORED BY JAMES P. SPRADLEY AND DAVID W. MCCURDY

Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology, 7th ed. Scott Foresman/Little Brown, 1990. (First edition published in 1971.)

Instructor's Manual: Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology, 7th ed. Scott Foresman/Little Brown, 1990. (First published in 1975.)

Anthropology: The Cultural Perspective. 2nd ed. reissued by Waveland Press, 1989. (This edition first published in 1980.)

The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Societies. Waveland Press, 1988. (First published in 1972.)

BOOKS BY JAMES P. SPRADLEY

You Owe Yourself a Drunk: An Ethnography of Urban Nomads. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988. (Originally published in 1971.)

Participant Observation. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980.

The Ethnographic Interview. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979.

Ruth O. Selig

(In a future issue of *AnthroNotes*, a Teacher's Corner by David McCurdy will further describe the Spradley/McCurdy approach to teaching ethnography using ethnographic semantics.)