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Social and cultural anthropology

Standard level

Paper 1

6 November 2024

Zone A afternoon | Zone B afternoon | Zone C afternoon

1 hour 30 minutes

Instructions to candidates

- Do not open this examination paper until instructed to do so.
- Read the passage and answer questions 1 and 2. Choose either question 3 or 4. Answer question 5.
- The maximum mark for this examination paper is **[30 marks]**.

Read the passage.

Passage adapted from Samanani, F., 2022. The long road: Hope, violence, and ethical register in London street culture. *American Ethnologist* 49(1), pp.64-76.

Across 2014-15, I lived as an ethnographer on “the Caldwell”, a social housing project in London, England, renting a room in a tower block. The day after moving in, a neighbour warned me that the place could be dangerous. Across the following months, from locals and through the media, I frequently encountered the image of the Caldwell plagued by a local “gang.”

5 I got to know an ethnically and racially diverse group of young men and women who had grown up on the Caldwell together, including Damon and his circle of friends. This process was slow, uncertain, and occasionally tense. Many local men had been drawn into drug dealing and violence between rival housing projects, and several had been to jail. Men and women had lost friends or family to shootings, stabbings, or jail. Yet their relationship to these dark histories and activities
10 was never straightforward. Young people continually struggled with how they ought to live, given the circumstances they faced; they played with different values, identities, and ways of being as a matter of everyday life. Rather than classifying this group as part of a clear-cut “gang,” I see them as engaging with local “street culture” in a range of different ways.

15 In the beginning I was often frustrated. I met people who insisted that we should talk. As a researcher, they said, I needed to understand their perspective, because they embodied “the real community” or “how it really is.” But I soon found that I couldn’t reach them by phone, and nobody recognized their names. Later I discovered that I had been given nicknames and the numbers of burner phones*. Other practices added to this evasiveness. When people agreed to meet me,
20 plans were treated as fluid, and continually revised regarding time or place. This altered power dynamics. When people shared stories of street life, it was often difficult to tell what was intended as an honest retelling and what was fabricated or embellished. Repetition was no guarantee, since an exaggerated or absurd story could form part of elaborate, collective jokes.

Being vague and evasive was also a strategy to resist or rework expectations—to tell a different story about themselves and to challenge the classifying gaze of others. Deflecting police scrutiny
25 helped counter feelings of constraint while buying time for friends or family to intervene in tense situations. Fluid markers of belonging allowed for movement between close circles of trusted people and the wider community. Stories remixed from familiar elements allowed friends to spontaneously construct coherent alibis and maintain good relations when confronted by family. All this sustained a sense that life contained just a bit more potential. Evasion was not simply
30 pragmatic, it characterized an ethical stance that was playful, creative, and funny.

Relations between individuals and the collective reworked the available foundations of agency in ways that could be perceived as ironic. In these cases, individual potential both emerged from and transcended the collective. Before going out for drinks, Damon and his friends played a game called “money up.” The rules were simple: rebound coins off a wall, trying to land yours as close
35 to the wall as possible. The closest shooter keeps all the coins, and a new round begins. Games would often continue until someone had acquired most or all the coins available, leaving someone with all the money, and everyone else at a loss. However, the winner was expected to buy drinks for everyone else. Financially, this practice left participants roughly back where they started. Socially, however, it made it possible for one person to play benefactor, treating their friends for
40 the evening.

Most ethnographic accounts of Britain’s urban margins, and of street cultures, have adopted a determinist lens—representing street culture as a survival strategy or as habituated dispositions that emerge in response to systemic exclusion that limits potential success. However, my ethnographic experience suggests that street cultures reflect creative efforts to “make life intelligible” by those facing marginality. Anthropologists hoping to take power seriously must simultaneously maintain an understanding of structure as somehow constricting and an understanding of people’s enduring capacity to bring new possibilities into being.

* burner phones: disposable, untraceable mobile (cellular) phones

Answer question 1 **and** question 2.

1. Define the term **structure** and describe how it can be understood and applied in the context of the passage. [4]
2. Analyse the ethnographic data presented in the passage using the concept of **social relations**. [6]

Answer **either** question 3 **or** question 4.

3. Compare and contrast the way in which the key concept of **culture** or **power** is evident in this passage with how it is evident in **one** other ethnographic example you have studied. [10]

OR

4. Compare and contrast the approaches to research adopted by the anthropologist in this passage to the approaches to research used by **one** other anthropologist you have studied. Make reference to concepts and ethnographic material in your answer. [10]

Answer question 5.

5. To what extent is knowing others possible? Discuss with reference to **at least two** sources of ethnographic material and examples from the passage. [10]
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References:

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