

# Anthropology short response paper



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In Key Concepts and their Application Ahearn s: 'We must shift our focus away from searching for definitive interpretations and instead concentrate on looking for information that constrains the type and number of meanings that might emerge from an eventIt is therefore the job of the anthropologist to identify these interpretative criteria in particular discursive events by looking for textual, temporal, sociocultural and spatial constraints on meaning.' (Ahearn: 57)

Ahearn is at pains to divorce practice theorists definitions from her observations, using them as a guide rather than a mantra to understanding how the Junigau villagers themselves explain their society. For example she asks the Junigau villagers how they define the word 'literacy'. They point out there are many types of literacy, ranging from being able to sign one's name through to being able read contemporary literature. Ahearn adds both visual and cultural literacy to this broad definition as she argues that " Cultural literacy skills predispose people to read situations and texts in certain ways and constrain the types of interpretations they are likely to construct."

(Ahearn: 46). Ahearn quotes Mike Baynham on the 'ideological' model of literacy, who states that literacy needs to be understood as a strategic, social practice which defines and confines the choices available to individuals within a particular society. Hence she evaluates the literacy of the Junigau in their own terms, at that moment in their development and history. We are shown the contrast between Sarita and Bir Bahadur's command of language particularly through Bir Bahadur's letters and the impact this has on their relationship as it develops.

She examines the villagers' definition of romantic love through a variety of methods including letters, conversations and taped interviews. By examining

the most common words used for 'love' by the Junigau villagers she demonstrates how its meaning alters over time and in different contexts - it ties in with the ability to speak English, social position and the developing economic structures. For Bir Bahadur the word 'love' primarily embodies notions of autonomy and economic success, with intimacy and marriage being byproducts of that state.

Ahearn defines gender as 'a set of socioculturally constructed relationships, symbols, behaviors and identities which in the case of Junigau include age, caste, wealth and education level'. (Ahearn: 51). An example of this is the difference in behavior of Sarita's father who postures for the public about family dishonor when his daughter's relationship becomes generally known, yet in private he assures her that he wants only the best for her.

Letter writing is used to show social change taking place in Junigau as it 'embodies revolutionary ideas about agency and personhood even as it reinforces some long-standing gender hierarchies and ideologies' (Ahearn: 51). For practice theorists the interest is in observing how actors are able to transform the systems which produce them. Ahearn prefers to describe this phenomenon as 'structures of feeling' which she takes from Raymond Williams, a cultural Marxist. This phrase is used to describe the qualitative changes taking place in the way Sarita, Bir Bahadur, and their relatives experience and interpret events. As the relationship develops Sarita, Bir Bahadur and Sarita's mother in particular comment on changes in meaning and values in Junigau and how best to react to them.

The action of agency (defined as 'the culturally constrained capacity to act') involves both resistance and accommodation. An example of this 'accommodating protest' is seen as Sarita explains her decision to marry Bir

Bahadur as due to her karma of being born a woman in Nepal, and the 'circumstances' whilst at the same time negating the active role she has taken in continuing the relationship.

Ahearn is able to explain social transformation in the village of Junigau, Nepal by using a multifaceted approach through literacy, love, gender, social change and agency.

#### References

Ahearn, Laura M.

2001 " Key Concepts and their Application" and " Wearing the Flower One Likes" in Invitations to Love - Literacy Love Letters and Social Change in Nepal, pp44-59 and pp212-244: University of Michigan Press