CogEthnogToolKit

In lecture today I tried to build a matrix of descriptions of the main themes of the readings. The themes were

1. The social construction of reality
2. Reference
3. Participation

For each theme I had hoped to provide the following sorts of descriptions.

- Name or brief description of the phenomenon
- Description of cognitive significance
- Description of operational principles
- Examples, including noting where they are described
- What Cognitive Ethnographers do to see it

I was not able to complete the job in the lecture period. You could do it yourself on the basis of what I began in lecture. Here are some notes I developed on the first two themes while getting the lecture ready.

Phenomenon: Constructing and enacting (cultural) objects.
Name or brief description: The social construction of reality.

Description of cognitive significance: Grasping reality is perhaps the most important of all cognitive accomplishments. The worlds inhabited by humans are NOT simply given by physical reality.* Human life is chock full of experienced realities that have no independent existence but rather are created on the spot by our ways perceiving, speaking and acting in the world.

Description of operational principles: Events and objects in the physical world acquire meanings as they are incorporated into human activity. For example, the activity of searching for something implies a role, the thing for which one is searching. When the searching activity is successful, one finds a physical object that is incorporated into the activity in the role of “the thing I was looking for.” Neither looking for a physical object, nor finding a physical object brings the physical object into existence. The physical object existed before it was sought. However, the activity grounded object “thing for which I am searching” IS brought into existence by engaging in the activity. As soon as you begin searching, there is a possibly weakly specified “thing for which you are searching.” Even before a physical object is found, this activity grounded object is a real thing that can play a role in social interactions. Someone else could say of this thing, “Is it in your pack?” In that question “it” refers to the activity-grounded object “the thing for which you are looking” even though that object is not associated yet with any physical object.
Of course, the “thing for which I am searching” need not be a physical object at all. It might be a relationship (See the “Personals” column of a magazine. Each listing is an activity grounded object that has been brought into existence by the listing activity.), or it might be a state of mind “I want to feel happy.” Saying this creates an activity-grounded object that may have no link to an actual state of affairs. All of the states of mind that have the direction of fit WORLD STATE SHOULD CONFORM TO MENTAL STATE (wants, desires, intentions, resolutions) bring into being new objects “a thing that is wanted or desired”, “a thing one intends or resolves to do.”

**Where described:** The strongest statements of this important phenomenon are in Lave et al. (1984) “Arena and Setting”; Goodwin (1994) “Shaping events in a domain of scrutiny into phenomenal objects.” and Heath and Hindmarsh (2000) “The social construction/constitution of objects.”.

Examples:

*The thing I am looking for.* Lave describes the enchiladas the shopper is looking for. H&H describe the representation of the train sought by a train controller.

*What this thing is/means.* The application of coding schemes. Goodwin describes the sought Munsell color code for the soil sample. Goodwin, Rodney King beating. Holland & Skinner describe what types of men there are. Being a jerk is not a state of the physical world. It is brought into existence through activity (although H&S do not emphasize that aspect).

**What Cognitive Ethnographers DO to see this phenomenon**

The first step is the most difficult one. It comes from a theoretical source and an empirical source. The theoretical source is the recognition of this phenomenon and the willingness to notice that activity creates THINGS THAT MATTER but that do not have physical existence independent of the activity. We come to understand the theory by reflecting on convincing examples. The kicks and blows the police directed at Rodney King exist. But what they WERE (in the sense of what they mean) is not a matter of physical events. Were these events a savage beating or were they careful police craftwork? Savage beatings and careful police craftwork are things. But these things do NOT have an independent existence in the physical world. They are brought into existence in activity, in habits of thought and in discursive practices.

The second source is the empirical source in which you discover these phenomena in your own observations. You become open to the possibility that human reality is not simply given by the physical world. You look at activity in a new way. You observe specific actions of particular people, but you SEE an activity structure that has roles. As soon as you notice a role in an activity, you have noticed a thing that can be brought into existence when people engage in that activity.

* This is a weak statement of the facts of this matter. A stronger statement is created by changing the order of the words “NOT” and “simply.” Thus: The worlds inhabited by humans are simply NOT given by physical reality.
Phenomenon: Multimodal reference
Name or brief description: Using both speech and gesture to refer to (simultaneously bring attention and significance to) something in the setting.
Description of cognitive significance: Reference is a key cognitive phenomenon. It is how we establish associations between representations and the things they represent. Reference is commonly conceived of as a mental phenomenon that links internal representations to objects, events, and states of affairs outside the person. That common notion of reference relies on belief in processes that cannot be directly observed. Cognitive ethnographers realize that reference can be directly observed when it is conceived of as a process that links external representations to external objects, events, and states of affairs.
Description of operational principles. Multimodal reference involves the coordinated production of gesture and speech such that each semiotic resource has the role of standing for some aspect of something that it is not. The speech often includes some idexical elements, the meaning of which is constrained by the gesture. The gesture often highlights or brings attention to particular parts of the world.
Special cases of multimodal reference rely on additional meaning that can be conveyed by gesture when it is performed in relation to features of the setting. This is what Goodwin calls environmentally coupled gesture
Where described: All of the papers that analyze video. This should tell you something.

What Cognitive Ethnographers do to see it.
It helps to understand the meanings being made in the activity. That is what ethnography is for.
Look for unresolved indexicals in speech. Look for indexical gestures. When these two are coordinated, you have multimodal reference.