Anthropology 104

# **Reading Response 1** | Body rituals among the Nacirema

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**Discussion Section Number: 320**

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# Getting Started

Welcome to your first writing assignment for Anthropology 104! Please add your information to this template (above), rename and save it in Microsoft Word **.docx** or **.doc** format.

Make sure the filename includes **your name** and the **name of the assignment** (RR1).

*(Example)* RR1 Wendy Liu.docx

*Submission:* This assignment template contains all the instructions and questions you need for this assignment. The reading itself (“Body rituals among the Nacirema” by Horace Miner), is available on Canvas.

# Background

Anthropologists conduct research through ethnographic fieldwork. This involves living and interacting with a community over an extended period of time in order to better understand the systems of power and meaning that shape people’s lives. One of the outcomes of ethnographic fieldwork is that by becoming involved in other people’s daily activities and learning about their distinct experiences, cultural practices that may have seemed “strange” to the anthropologist when they first started their fieldwork can soon feel familiar.

At the same time, the experience of fieldwork often leads anthropologists to see their own lives and cultural practices from a new perspective. In other words, what was originally familiar to the anthropologist can come to appear “strange.” The same can be true when we read the work of anthropologists. Their research can help us avoid ethnocentrism, in which we view our own cultural practices as “natural” or “right.” It can unlock our ability to analyze and appreciate the diversity of human cultures, none of which is more “normal” than another.

In 1956, the anthropologist Horace Miner wrote an article called “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema.” In it, he examines the seemingly “strange” cultural beliefs and practices of a group of people that have  developed elaborate rituals focusing on the care of the human body.

## **Reading Response 1** | Horace Miner’s “Body rituals among the Nacirema”

### Instructions & Expectations

Before you begin this writing assignment, read “Body rituals among the Nacirema” (available as a PDF on Canvas). Read the article and reflect on it by answering the questions below.

Each answer should be written using full sentences and should be **100 – 200 words**.

DUE DATE: This assignment needs to be completed by **11:59pm the day BEFORE your Discussion Section in Week 2**.

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| 1. **Do any of the Nacirema’s rituals seem strange to you? Do any seem familiar? Why? Explain your answers.** |
| The way that Horace Miner describes the rituals is purposefully unfamiliar, but once I thought about what he was actually saying, my daily activities are similar to many of those said “rituals”. For example, Miner mentions that the medicine men “decide what ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language”; this seems almost exactly like what happens when a doctor prescribes a patient some medication. Another ritual that I do twice daily is what Miner calls a “mouth-rite”. He describes “inserting a small bundle of hog hairs in to the mouth… and then moving the bundle in...gestures.” I do this as well, but I just call it brushing; it’s completely natural to me. Finally, the most prevalent example: the “holy-mouth-men”, who “enlarges any holes which decay may have created in the teeth” and puts “magical materials...into these holes.”. This is simply a dentist. |
| 1. **What did you find most interesting, important, and/or confusing about this article?** |
| What is most important about this article is Miner’s purpose. With this article, Miner attempts to cause us to think about our perspectives on “exotic” cultures. Nacirema is simply just an anagram of American, and the other words are just backwards renditions of American institutions that have been present for hundreds of years. When Miner describes our traditions from an outsiders’ perspective, we consider our outsiders’ perspectives of foreign cultures, such as our consideration of indigenous people as “primitive”.  However, the article was confusing as well. Miner phrased his “observations” of the Nacirema to be as demeaning as possible. For example, he mentions that the “medicine-men” (in other words, our doctors) “may not cure, and may even kill the neophyte [patient], in no way decreases the people’s faith in the medicine men.” Miner implies that the medicine-men more often hurt than help the patient, which is the opposite of what is actually true. |
| 1. **Why do you think Miner wrote this article? What might he have been trying to get readers to think or feel?** |
| Miner’s purpose in writing this article was to cause readers to think about their perspectives on foreign cultures that they deem as “exotic”. Any time someone purposefully distances themselves from a certain point of view, it will always seem strange. However, if they consider the rituals from the point of view of the people doing them, the rituals might seem perfectly reasonable. With this article, Miner proves the point of cultural relativism, or that there is no dominant culture to consider other cultures from; one must consider foreign cultures from the natives’ perspectives. This also makes the reader think about both viewpoints; if we consider a culture from a foreign perspectives, we might catch things that we might have not seen before. However, we should practice this in moderation, since if we don’t see the inner context of the many rituals a society practices, the culture will seem quite strange. |
| 1. **Miner wrote this article in 1956. If an anthropologist wrote an article like this today, how might it be different?** |
| If an anthropologist wrote an article about the Nacirema today, he might mention the fact that people have a strange obsession for black slabs of metal; in fact, they almost worship it; they spend more time staring at the metal than talking to other people or eating! The anthropologist could also elaborate on the meaning of music in our culture; before, music was a performance that people went to and actually paid attention to, but now more often people use music as a backdrop for work they have to do, such as listening to music on headphones while during homework. Finally, the anthropologist could talk about higher education, such as the concept of dorms in college. |
| 1. **How does this article connect to concepts discussed in class (i.e. in the lectures, discussion section, or textbook)?** |
| This article connects to the concept of *cultural relativism*, or the view that “ethical and social standards reflect the cultural context from which they are derived.”(Carnegie Mellon) . Miner showcases the detriments of *ethnocentrism*, or using one’s culture to evaluate and judge the practices and ideals of others. This is similar to my feelings when I watched the documentary *The Gateway Bug*, which explored Latin America and Africa’s common practices of eating insects as a delicacy. My feelings changed while I watched the documentary; at first, I was mildly disgusted with the practice, but as I saw the justification (e.g. crickets are a viable alternative for protein) I realized that the only reason I considered entomophagy to be distasteful was that of the culture that I grew up in; I feel that if I grew up in a culture where eating insects was as normal as stop signs, I would feel a completely different way, yet another example of ethnocentrism and its effects. |
| 1. **Have you ever had an experience that made you see one of your own cultural practices from a new perspective? If so, explain your experience. If not, describe two to three of your own cultural practices in detail (reviewing Chapter 2 of the textbook, particularly pages 37-42, may help you formulate an answer).** |
| When I first went to my friends’ house for a sleepover in 7th grade, his family did things much different than mine. For example, I had accepted that shoes do not belong in the house, and are taken off at the entrance. My friend did not do this, and it took a great deal of convincing from him for me to continue wearing my shoes in his bedroom, his kitchen, and his bathroom. Additionally, his parents usually didn’t bother cooking food for meals, and generally bought pre-made meals or ordered takeout, unless they had special occasions to cook for. However, almost every meal I ate at my house was cooked from scratch by my parents, using raw ingredients like potatoes, curry leaves, and other vegetables. |