

# DOING Anthro- pology

**in Consumer Research**

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## **Framing Cultural Questions: What is Coffee in Benton Harbor and Bangkok?**

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In this chapter, our aim is to further elucidate the meaning and implications of cultural analysis by focusing on methodological considerations that animate the research process. We do so through the presentation and framework of a “what is coffee?” exercise that we have used in training corporate clients as well as other research professionals in ethnographic research techniques. The exercise shows participants how coffee, its consumption, and its meanings are cultural matters. It demonstrates how a cultural analysis can be generative of new product ideas, brand positioning, retail design, and the like. Our goal in these trainings, as it is in this chapter, is to show how ethnographic cultural analysis is inherently multimodal (e.g., about listening as well as observing, about actions as well as artifacts) and analytic (about analytic thinking as well as questioning). In its rendering, this final introductory chapter is also an ethnographic account of explaining cultural analysis.

### **Coffee in Benton Harbor, Michigan**

The first time we posed the question of “what is coffee?” as part of a teaching exercise was in Benton Harbor, Michigan, at the headquarters of the Whirlpool Corporation. Donna Romeo, a cultural anthropologist employed there at the time, had asked us to provide a seminar and training in ethnographic methods for interested staff. The point of the training was not necessarily for everyone to become an ethnographic researcher, but for those attending to be able to appreciate the parameters, use, and value of ethnographic cultural analysis. During the first part of the seminar we covered practical matters ranging

from the need to design ethnographic research projects to fit the questions at hand, to some of the nuts and bolts practicalities of recruiting research participants, to strategies for the successful communication of the results within the organization. Amid these issues, we also discussed specific research techniques. The point of the “what is coffee?” exercise was to give everyone a chance to experience ethnographic interviewing in order to garner a feel for the approach.

We divided the group into pairs to conduct ethnographic interviews with one another. Each was to take a turn at both being the respondent and being the interviewer. The interviewing task was to find out what people thought about coffee and about the circumstances of coffee consumption in their daily lives. Consistent with the analytic assumption of the ongoing filtering of what we hear and see, an important instruction for those asking the questions was to remember that their own minds and actions were refracting agents, and thus they needed to be consciously open to matters other than those they already thought or assumed were important. We were trying to instill the appreciation that the focus, resolution, and fidelity (to borrow Fischer’s list and metaphoric phrasing) of what is perceived were dependent on their own filtering processes.<sup>1</sup> Participants were urged to really try to understand, in detail, the point of view of the person being interviewed and to remember that something quite other than what they were expecting might be the truly important thing to realize about coffee.

To achieve this openness, we suggested they needed to try to imagine they had absolutely no preconceived notions about coffee. We advised that they could try to consciously garner the perspective of someone from another planet (using the 1984 John Sayles cult classic movie, *The Brother from Another Planet*, as a muse), or, if that perspective seemed too difficult to imagine, to try to take on the perspective of a child’s first learning. Their goal here, we maintained, was to attempt to comprehend and appreciate everything that needed to be taken into account, learned, and practiced to become culturally competent in this realm. This stance comes about rather naturally when investigating in an unknown social milieu where the varied mistakes, social faux pas, and “stupid” questions one cannot help but ask actually help to illuminate the symbolic meanings and practices in play. We conceded that it is more difficult to have a naïve stance investigating coffee amid one’s own social group, but emphasized that this stance is crucial for cultural analysis, otherwise too much can be left implicit, unanalyzed, unquestioned, unconsidered, or underutilized. The initial challenge was really to listen to others without preconceived notions or constraints about what kinds of information can or should come out of it.

Practically, we suggested they start their interviews simply with the very open-ended question of what coffee meant to the person. For instance, “Tell me about coffee in your life.” We suggested they encourage their respondents to tell them about actual instances and specific examples and to elicit stories about coffee events in their lives. We stressed that in the responses, the person’s categories of meaning, the conversational direction, the stories that were chosen, the tones of voice that indicated what they thought was important (or not), were *all* telling. We comforted them with the idea that *everything* counted as data—what was talked about or what was not, the way something was talked about (e.g., with pride, embarrassment, a sense of wonder). It did not matter if people could not think of something to say, since this, too, was considered data. We reminded them that in the real world of ethnographic inquiry, it is also important to consider what people do and thus that one should have an eye to the interaction with artifacts, the organization of the environment, the activities, and the match as well as the mismatch of thought, talk, and behavior.<sup>2</sup> So, they should also keep those kinds of observations in mind if their conversational partners were drinking coffee or, in fact, drinking or eating something else during the interview. Finally, we entreated them to pay careful attention to the details. We stressed that stories are often good vehicles for understanding meanings because they are full of telling details (and emotion), often without people even realizing it.<sup>3</sup> We noted that props and behaviors contain details and if one is not in the environment (by necessity, as for this practice) then one needed to ask about those details as well. And as we reiterated before everyone started, all of these details would be the fodder for developing a powerful analysis, thus it was crucial to also record them. So, please take detailed notes.

### “But I Don’t Drink Coffee”

Asking “what is coffee?” as a training exercise has many virtues. At the outset the question can strike people as mundane; in fact, for many it borders on boring.<sup>4</sup> The meanings and practices that surround coffee, even when fairly elaborate as they now are in the United States, tend to be taken for granted, or at least taken as just the “natural” and “true” circumstances and meanings that coffee should have, even while some people profess that other people do not necessarily know how to appreciate coffee “correctly” and others may contend that those who say such things exaggerate.

In this seminar as in others, when given this co-interviewing assignment, there were the usual types of pleas from some of the participants: “But I don’t drink (or don’t like) coffee, what can I say?” For us, these utterances are cases



in point. As we tend to say, “You can still talk about it; not drinking it does not mean that it does not carry meaning for you. Coffee still exists for you.” Moreover, talking to people who do not drink coffee can, in fact, provide considerable, often extremely enlightening information about relevant cultural matters. Among clients commissioning research, we often find much unneeded worrying about having to talk strictly to those defined as fitting the target audience profile. Talking to people with other profiles is frequently conceived of as a waste of time, and when it happens it is often framed as a mistake in respondent recruiting. Yes, it is true that one generally needs to speak to the members of the key audience for a product or service. But as we are not trying to plumb an individual psyche for psychological motivation, but rather trying to elucidate the relevant symbolic cultural meanings and practices, information garnered from those who do not like something is also relevant to understanding the cultural picture. In fact, contestation between points of view and meanings is a crucial aspect of the social dynamic. These nodal points of disagreement and different points of view can be precisely the most intriguing domains of cultural movement and thus new opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

### “Is Cappuccino Named after Monks?”

And so we talked to one another about coffee. There were an odd number of participants, so Patti was part of a group of three, including one person who was a proud nondrinker of coffee. She drank tea, she said. There was ensuing talk about caffeine, heart palpitations, and liking Sprite because it lacked caffeine. There was mention of how “weird” it was that people would have coffee when first waking up, that it was a stimulant, like a drug or a “fix.” While not liking coffee, she noted with new realization that she liked things that tended to go with coffee, for instance Kahlúa. And, in fact, she liked coffee ice cream. She also thought that the foam on cappuccino made coffee look “cooler” than coffee without foam. She talked of having heard that cappuccino was named after monks, though she did not feel certain that this was true.

From the person who did like coffee, there was talk about relaxing, about coffee being associated with sitting around with friends and taking one’s time, not rushing. There was imagery of the special coffee cups at home which were used only on Sundays, of lazy mornings spent drinking coffee made in the French press and reading the *Chicago Tribune* with her husband. There was also talk about specific cups; for instance, for cappuccino she liked a larger cup. The larger cup felt better in the hand; it was more comforting. Coffee was also associated with being out with friends; for instance, during college, coffee shops were places to go hang out, and notably, coffee shops have great desserts.

There were also stories of having studied in Brazil and experiencing the coffee there, which seemed to be remembered primarily in terms of the senses: by the amount of sugar, the little cup, the smell, and of not liking it but in fact of drinking it “out of necessity.” There was talk of office coffee, which included issues of paying for it, and powdered creamer, styrofoam cups, and sipping at one’s desk. There was the particular story of a new puppy’s barking at a time when her husband was traveling, which meant trouble with the neighbors and no sleep, which meant knowing that in the morning, “it was going to be a coffee day.” She told of coming into work and “chugging it” which gave the feeling of “finally, something that will help me through the morning.” But, like the non-coffee drinker, there was also talk about wanting to stay away from coffee, about not wanting to have too much caffeine, about wanting to try to be healthier and so maybe when feeling desperate at work in the afternoon, going to get a Pepsi instead.

From both of them there was also mention about *adults* drinking coffee, about adult family and friends drinking coffee at the conclusion of a meal, about temperature, about drinking hot things when not feeling well and as a way to stay warm, as well as about iced coffee. There was discussion about coffee makers (having them or not having them at home) and, again, talk of sensations. There was talk of smells, that sometimes ground coffee smells good. And there was more, even though each had talked for such a short period of time. Given the lunch break and that they had interviewed Patti as well, perhaps each person had spoken for approximately ten or fifteen minutes.

### “I Never Thought of it that Way”

After these conversations, the next and, as we stressed, crucial step in cultural analysis was to go back and think about it. Part of the reason for writing down, for putting down details, for recording as much as possible was to be able to go back and consider the details. The reason we can now provide the description of bits of the coffee drinker and non-coffee drinker’s conversation is because we had taken notes during these practice interviews. Putting things down on paper or in electronic files (or audio- or videotaping) also allows one to think about and (sometimes literally) see and hear things and connections not noticed before.

Epistemologically, cultural analysis is true to its name: It assumes that analysis is part of the process. Even though one must truly try to consciously open the mind and erase preconceived notions that could inhibit discovery for as long as possible while “in the field,” there is always a filter. Even in the midst of a conversation, there is the filter of conversational and situational context. There

is also always ongoing analysis. Once one has begun an ethnographic inquiry and started sorting out the symbolic terrain and practices, it is a constant, iterative, ongoing case of analytic learning, even as one continues to try to be open to surprises and other unexpected avenues along every step of the way. An analysis at the end is also crucial: If the ethnographic process is to remain open-ended, there will be some potentially irrelevant things included in the record; although, what is irrelevant? One must really think about it. Data are not transparent; meanings are not transparent. Different people and different researchers often come away from encounters with different insights because it is about making connections. In our research practice, we encourage clients to accompany us during fieldwork or to look at videotaped recordings of these encounters. We want clients to engage in the lived worlds of their customers. But we do not believe that we are necessarily all thinking about, or attending to, the same things in that environment. Meaning is not transparent, but we sometimes experience that assumption when clients who join us in the field are surprised by what we “took away.”

The process of final analysis can be slightly idiosyncratic. (Patti’s favorite mode is to first make an exhaustive, uncensored brainstorming-fashion list; Rita’s favorite is first to write down the overarching categories that seem to have emerged and then to see how other bits of data and ideas mesh, or not, with those initial categories.) There are many other good suggestions to be found in the literature, but whatever one does should ideally fit with one’s most productive or at least most pleasurable mode for thinking.<sup>6</sup> Because in the end, at its core, cultural analysis is about going back through one’s materials and thinking as hard and as long as possible about what has been said or done and what it all implies. This thinking and rethinking can sometimes happen long after the exploration began (see, for instance, Chapters 8 and 10). Cultural analysis is about looking for connections and disconnections, similarities as well as contradictions, among what has been said and done. And at this stage it is about utilizing every single synapse and every single particle of any ideas, however recessed in the mind, to find every metaphor, meaning, and connection. The goal is to try to discern what it all means and implies and to use every other bit of cultural knowledge to help interpret the matter at hand, thus also connecting everything that is in the nonempty mind with what has been taken in with as open a mind as possible.<sup>7</sup>

And so, in the margins of the interview’s notes from that day, one can now find “Tea is the comparison beverage” scribbled next to the strong statement of “I drink tea.” Alongside this is also scribbled, “iced tea, iced coffee,” a scribble that would indicate that the later mentions of both iced tea and iced coffee

seemed further indication of the parallel nature of coffee and tea. “Addictive things” is written next to “stimulant,” “drug,” and “fix” and about it being “weird” that people drink coffee when first waking up. Near the notes about cappuccino and monks and the foam looking “cool,” there are notations of “cooler” and “folklore.” In other margins, one finds “energy,” “relaxed,” “the temperature of coffee really important,” “smell,” “ways of preparing,” “ways it didn’t work” and “coffee as friend/enemy.” This list is also telling. There were perhaps fifteen minutes of analysis time that day. Besides trying to be relatively uncensored (and thus noting things that just jumped out such as “temperature is important” and “energy”), one can see the attempt to make connections, thus the notation of tea as the comparative beverage, as well as the attempt to understand some of the metaphoric and more complex symbolic meanings, thus the notations of drug like addiction and coffee as friend/enemy. That coffee’s connection with adulthood, a culturally constituted life stage and category of personhood, was deemed an important detail was marked in the notes by an arrow and the slightly larger way in which it was written at the time of the interview.

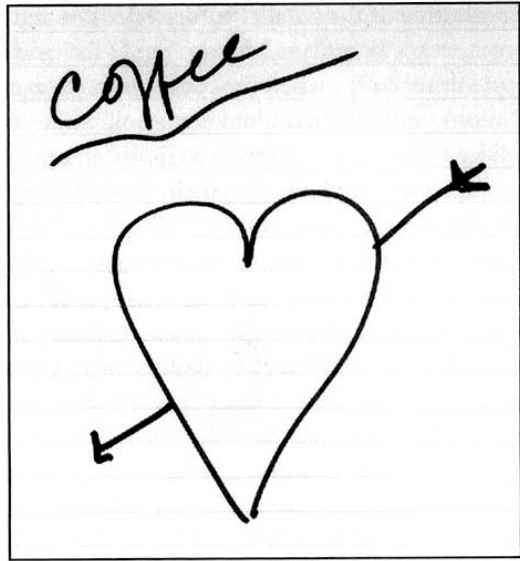
Coffee also engenders strong emotions; it can be loved. We have no notes for the interview Patti provided as a respondent. But we do still have in the folder that corresponds to this training an image she drew, perhaps to both depict the way she felt about coffee and to make the point that one can ask respondents to select and create imagery which then can be both simultaneously telling and a potent illustration for a report, as in Figure 3.1.

### “You Could Get Ideas from This”

After each person had spent some time looking for connections and doing the analysis of their notes, the next step in the training was to gather together the analyzed content. This was done as a group. We collectively voiced the findings, while one person wrote them on a large board, the length of one of the room’s walls, meanwhile grouping findings in provisional categories. This concurrent attempt to group the insights into overarching categories and related issues was another analytic step in the process to see connections and garner new insights. Altogether, as a group, perhaps ten to fifteen interviews had been conducted (not unlike what we might do in our actual ethnographic practice, except then the interviews would tend to be three to four hours long and videotaped). Based on this small amount of interviewing time, the board ended up completely covered with tidbits of cultural insight.

What amazed this group were the potential new product innovations and product positionings that jumped out from the insights garnered, even from





**Figure 3.1** A cultural expression of an author's musings about coffee

this short, practice exercise. Given this particular group's business focus, products imagined were those that might enhance the smell or foam in coffee, varied automatic ice coffee makers and coffee ice cream makers, as well as, attesting to the value of including those who did not drink coffee, great comparative products for tea drinkers and the like. In terms of positioning products, there was the coolness factor, the relaxation factor, the strength factor—a whole host of potential angles to be considered. It was clear there was merit in cultural analysis. It was generative. You could get ideas from cultural analysis. Good ones, in fact.

### Coffee in Bangkok, Thailand

In Bangkok we elaborated this “what is coffee?” training in both methodological scope and time. Here we were training a group of senior qualitative researchers from Japan, India, New Zealand, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, China, Holland, and the U.K. They were all senior members of Research International (RI), most of them the lead qualitative researchers of their respective offices. Thus, all were experienced leaders of focus groups and standard qualitative interviews; all were experts in the kinds of things that brand managers, advertisers, and corporate research departments needed to derive

from qualitative consumer research. This week-long seminar, a combined training in semiotic analysis and ethnographic methodology, was commissioned by Malcolm Baker, then Global Managing Director of Research International (RI) Qualitatif. It was in the early 2000s, a period in which ethnography and semiotics had become increasingly important in applied consumer research; Baker wanted to be sure that RI played a part.

This time we also gave seminar participants “homework.” We often give our ethnographic research respondents a pre-meeting assignment. The reason for homework is twofold. On the one hand, it helps to make research participants partners in the endeavor: As it prepares respondents for the upcoming ethnographic encounter, it invests them in the process and the question. Just as any traditional fieldwork carried out by anthropologists depends explicitly or implicitly on the willingness of those who are the focus to go along with the endeavor—on their partnership—so does ethnographic consumer research. The second reason is that homework, especially in the form of diaries—video, photo, or audio—helps extend the ethnographic inquiry across time and space. Diaries allow the research to continue beyond the face-to-face encounter and for the researcher to be there without being there. In corporate consumer research, this is often needed given the limited time frame of the research. In anthropological research more generally, there has also been the realization of the need and value of extending ethnographic interactions beyond the face-to-face given the spatially dispersed, telephonically, electronically mediated nature of much contemporary interaction.

In this instance, prior to meeting, we assigned participants articles to read (not something we generally do in our research, although it would perhaps be a novel method worth trying), and we asked them to take photographs. These photos were to include the places in their countries where coffee would typically be consumed or purchased. We asked them to take photographs of the interiors, the exteriors, the details they found interesting, as well as to take photographs of whatever in their minds captured a given place. We also asked them to take photographs that would bring to life what coffee meant in their own homes. Here we used the comparative example of Rita's home where the photos included the coffee grinder and coffee maker in their prominent place on the kitchen counter, the beans in the freezer, the cups, and the favorite places for reading while drinking coffee. Given the aspect of the training that involved the semiotic decoding of advertisements, we also asked participants to bring along examples of coffee advertising, which here we suggested meant not only advertisements from magazines and newspapers, but also from billboards.

### Advertisements Are Data Too

The advertising examples gained everyone's attention. Large billboard ads from India featured women alone with hands tenderly embracing a cup, or head back, eyes closed, and imagery of wafting aroma, depicting coffee as a private moment of experiential sensations. Among the ads from Japan was one featuring two cups and hands, with the hands referencing the close relationship of a couple. Beyond intimacy, coffee in Japan was also associated with modernity, urbanity, sophistication, self-expression, and style as indexed by the clothes worn by those featured in other ads. Nescafé ads in Malaysia, China, and the Philippines invoked moments of mystery and romance as well as indulgence and getting in touch with the self through imagery of closed eyes, gold cups, and so on. (The billboard ads of coffee in India were also for Nescafé.) Yet in their power to entertain and amaze (at least us), no advertisements quite topped those from New Zealand. These ads took on the addiction metaphor that had been touched upon in Benton Harbor. This brand, *roasted addiction*, was uncompromising in its iconography of coffee as a drug with its drug paraphernalia imagery and copy such as "by the hit, by the gram, by the kilo."<sup>8</sup> But it did let you know that it was not really about straight-on addiction via the playful misspelling of addiction in the brand's name (see Figure 3.2). A *roasted addiction* card that the participant brought was also printed with the ironic, implicitly playful instruction to "call from a public phone, don't use your real name and ask for 'bob.'"

### Emergence of Cultural Categories

When the participants interviewed one another about coffee, we asked that they use the photographs they had taken prior to the training, as well as their collected advertising texts, as stand-ins for being in situ and immersed in the context and artifacts of each other's everyday lives. After interviewing one another, participants then jointly analyzed the results by country and presented these to the whole group. The presenters analyzed coffee in Malaysia as a fashion product, that is, an expensive product consumed outside the home within an upscale, fashion ambience because of its "cool" factor. In other situations, they suggested, coffee was just another drink and even associated in Malaysia with a lower class milieu. For Indonesia, we also heard that coffee could be understood as just another beverage, as well as the articulation that "coffee is not coffee per se" because coffee only existed as a beverage once other ingredients such as milk, chocolate powder, and creamer were added



**Figure 3.2** An example of *roasted addiction*'s messaging brought by a New Zealand participant to the seminar

to it. From the U.K. we heard about coffee as a ritual of work, as a social drink, just part of the expected daily diet. For China, we observed a recurrence of coffee as a metaphor for work, with the addition that coffee was a symbol of modernity and western urban values. For Holland, coffee consumption was analyzed as a rite of passage, based on the data that the teenage years were a time to take on coffee drinking and that, in fact, in Holland coffee consumption demarcates generations. The myriad rituals and social rules that surrounded coffee consumption in the Netherlands were also noted—the assumptions of fixed times for drinking coffee and fixed times for not, the role of coffee in social obligations and its contribution as social lubricant. For New Zealand, we were told, coffee was an all-occasion drink, as well as tied to social moments. For India, coffee was social and trendy, whereas tea was intrinsic to life, and



instant coffee was coffee's traditional form. Two narratives were articulated for Japan. One strand emphasized special occasions, in which time was needed to enjoy the coffee and emphasis was put on issues of purity, genuineness, authenticity, and flavor. The other strand focused on how coffee was about stimulation or getting a kick start, in which the modal form for consumption was out of a can. A dichotomy between the version that stressed masculinity and potency and framed coffee as old-fashioned, versus a new and trendy, younger consumption arena for coffee, was the case presented for Singapore. But there also existed, we were told, a more mundane take on coffee in Singapore as "just a beverage" that could be consumed either cold or hot, along with mentions of unhealthiness and substitutes such as Red Bull, the energy drink.

The fact that these analyses stressed multiple categories of meaning was testament to the additional time given to the task, the sophistication of those analyzing, and the encouragement in the assignment to come up with multiple, even potentially contradictory strands of cultural meanings. For this training we had created an interview guide that extended beyond the general "tell me about yourself and coffee" and had explicitly included probes about different times, places, and people. There were questions about different instances of one's own coffee consumption and its change over time, as well as about oneself versus others in the family, friends, and colleagues. There were also subcategory notations about coffee versus other types of beverages and different brands of coffee. Again, one does get the answers to the questions one asks, and that is precisely why it is also so important to be open to the unexpected.

### When is Observation Cultural Analysis?

As enlightening as participants' interview analyses were, these exercises were still only part of practice and subassignments to the major assignment of examining, "What is coffee in Bangkok?" We were all assembled in Thailand for this training and we were asking participants (and ourselves) to conduct an analysis of coffee in Bangkok functionally, symbolically, and aesthetically. What we wanted participants to do was to conduct a semiotic analysis of coffee based on the analysis of retail environments. In this case, the primary goal was to look at retail environments as types of semiotic texts, that is, to look at the codes, the cues, the references, the symbols, the icons, the indexes, in essence the myriad messages locatable in the environments, rather than necessarily to talk to people. There was the practical problem, shared among virtually all of us, of a lack of fluency in Thai. But we also wanted to stress the aspects of

trying to look at environments (architectural layout, artifacts, as well as behaviors within an environment, which would as a rule include the what and how of speech) as conveyors of potential informational fodder for a cultural analysis. We supplied participants with an observational protocol (or guide) that included two major categories: "layout of environment" and "browsing and consumption patterns." Sub-categories included props, signage, milieu (table, chairs, floors, lighting, litter), and questions such as, "What do aesthetics of the setting tell you about coffee?" "Who are the customers?" "Who aren't they?" "Coffee making and serving rituals?" and "What is a person looking at, drawn to, touching, talking to, reading?" We then set off in two teams, each with one of us acting as participant mentor.

We had, in fact, conducted our own exploratory mission for this exercise before the training. We had arrived in Bangkok a day or so early because we thought that we should have some coffee places in mind for the teams to visit. We set our agenda with the help of guidebooks for finding coffee places in Bangkok. But before taking on our list of possible locations, we first indulged our own predilections for local markets by going to an open-air market. While there, our attention was drawn to a vendor mixing coffee with condensed and evaporated milk and pouring it into a plastic ice-filled bag, then tying it for easy carrying and puncturing it with a straw (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4). At the open-air market, we also found a stand of what seemed like a more elaborate set-up of various coffees for sale, but we did not linger too long as we were in our search of coffee shops and coffee stores for the upcoming assignment.

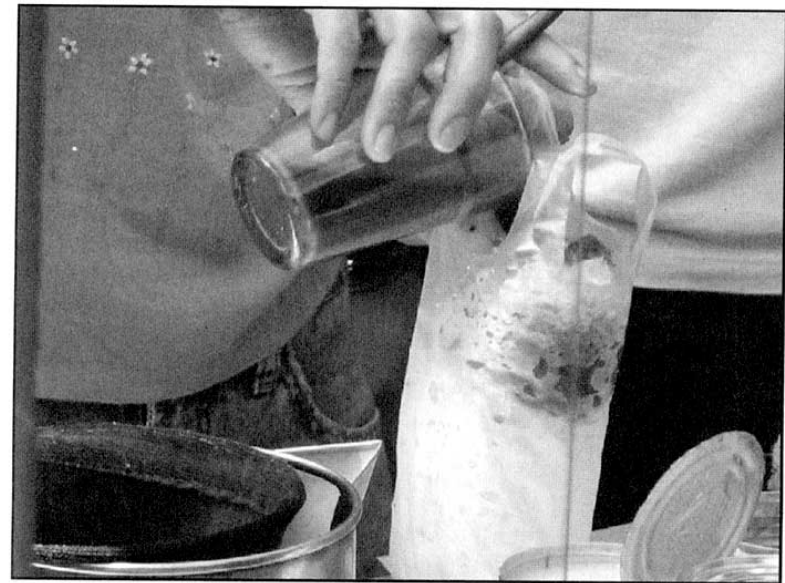
Negotiating both guidebooks and public transport, we did find Starbucks, rather brimming with young, cell-phone-carrying professionals, and UCC, an expensive place that seemed to give at least as much priority to food as to coffee, but which prominently featured individual-serving drip pots (see Figure 3.5) which, we were later told, were very *au courant* at that time in Japan. Many of these coffee drip pots, in varying states of warming, dripping, and waiting, lined a highly visible, rather centrally located work counter in the restaurant.

We also found the casually chic Coffee Corner, located in an air-conditioned, upscale shopping center, replete with menu of individual, specially prepared coffees and canisters of beans lining the counter. Yet, it was not until after the training that we located the much-harder-to-find old storefronts in Chinatown (with their tiled floors, marble-topped tables, and local denizens, largely older men). These shops, more than any other, gave a feeling of a "really Thai" place for coffee, even though they also seemed to do a significant business in food, from sandwiches to the more substantial, in addition to coffee (see Figure 3.6).



Figures 3.3 Coffee vendor at the open air market in Bangkok

However, what we did begin to realize in our search for varied coffee environments was that the assumption of places centered on coffee consumption was an inappropriate assumption in Thailand. In fact, it was an assumption that unless discarded endangered a full understanding of what coffee was in Bangkok. What became apparent was that while “coffee places” were relatively few and far between and took some searching to find, coffee was, in actual fact, everywhere.



Figures 3.4 Pouring coffee into a plastic ice-filled bag

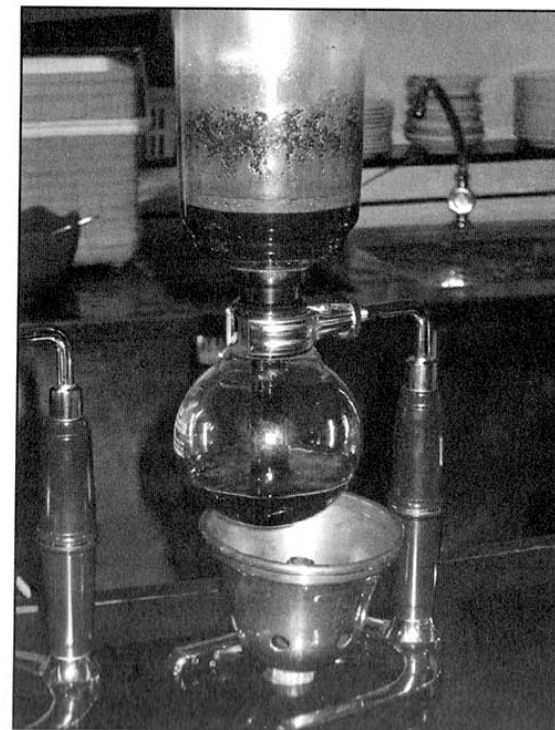


Figure 3.5 UCC coffee pots





**Figure 3.6** Coffee in Bangkok's Chinese storefront restaurants

Coffee was routinely sold in Bangkok at the ubiquitous carts and stands of street vendors, which sometimes also had a few tables for eating nearby. It was just another beverage choice among many (see Figures 3.7 and 3.8). Once one knew to look, the warm pots of waiting coffee could often be readily spotted alongside these stands. It also became clear that coffee's presence was indexically marked by canned milk, often Carnation. That is to say, just as smoke is a semiotic index of fire, if one saw Carnation, coffee was likely nearby (see Figures 3.9–3.11).

Before we accompanied seminar participants on their ethnographic excursion, we did not mention this street vendor coffee. Perhaps we wanted to allow them to experience the process of discovery, and especially the experiential pleasure at the moment of an unexpected realization, or maybe we were just hoping to make a didactic point. In any case, notebooks in hand, Rita's team set out to Starbucks, UCC, and another mall-based location on Rita's mental must-see list. Patti's team set off to explore a small restaurant beautifully and intricately composed of numerous small rooms, trinkets, and flowers; the casually chic Coffee Corner; and the unstated discovery of street vendor coffee. For Patti the process felt a bit like a game in which she had hidden something and had



**Figures 3.7** Coffee on the street in Bangkok, one beverage among many



**Figures 3.8** Vendors and sidewalk tables



Figures 3.9 Warm pots of waiting coffee



Figure 3.11 Canned milk poured into a plastic bag as an ingredient of street coffee



Figures 3.10 Cans of milk, indexicals of coffee on the street

to watch as participants fumbled around to find it. There were the moments of help—akin to when in such a game the hider says “cold,” “warm,” or “hot” to let participants know their relative chance of finding the hidden goods in that location. The hints started with the suggestion of getting something to drink from one of the vendors, “because it was so hot,” to finally something fairly obvious on the order of raised eyebrows and a moving finger pointed at a sitting coffee pot. Like us, participants had a difficult time finding the coffee at a street vendor’s cart because they also were not expecting it; they undoubtedly also were carrying the notion of (closed in, coffee-focused) place in their minds, even if for no other reason than that we had told them to look for “coffee places.”



**“But Real Coffee is . . .”**

At the end of the day when we all reconvened and set about going through notes as a first step in analysis, we reminded participants once again that one of the hardest things to overcome in any cultural or semiotic analysis is the impact of one’s own ingoing assumptions. Thus participants were encouraged to use their own feelings and reactions regarding what they had seen and thought of as not “real” or “good” coffee as clues and catalysts for looking more carefully at what coffee *is* in Bangkok. Focusing the initial analysis on what coffee *is not* also served as a useful way to acknowledge and make explicit the group’s own ingoing assumptions. As seminar participants noted, in Bangkok:

- Coffee was not black and not hot. What Americans and Europeans consider “coffee” (hot black essence sometimes “diluted” by other elements) was rarely seen. Coffee during the day was routinely poured into plastic bags of ice. Participants concluded that “coffee is an ingredient.”
- Coffee, when served, was not “refined” through a mechanical process. Unlike the exceptional and clearly imported (the Starbucks machine or the Japanese drip pot), there was no homage to bean-grinding machinery or dripping process; there was an absence of mechanical spectacle. Vendor coffee sat waiting in pitchers of warm/hot water, in its filter sock, poured out when someone ordered it. While instant coffee was found on the shelves in local groceries, coffee was not often found in freshly ground or bean form. A seemingly ubiquitous use of old instant coffee jars as containers for other things also suggested that instant coffee had an appeal.
- Coffee did not have its own places. As a group, we set out looking for coffee places: cafés, special stores, boutique environments. Instead, we did not find any stores specifically dedicated to coffee and we found that coffee typically had no special place dedicated to its drinking; along with other drinks and food, it was routinely found with the street vendors. The assumption of a place focused around coffee was simply another assumption we had carried with us.<sup>9</sup> A Western import like Starbucks, truly a *place* for coffee, was inhabited by young, cell-phone-carrying professionals. Starbucks is about fashion and social currency. Coffee more generally, was not.

Thus, traditionally at least, coffee was neither a visual nor a conceptual focal point in places where it could be purchased, and the “freshness” of coffee was not fetishized, as coffee, in general, was not fetishized. The lack of differentiated status among beverages (at least as it was sold), its lack of focal

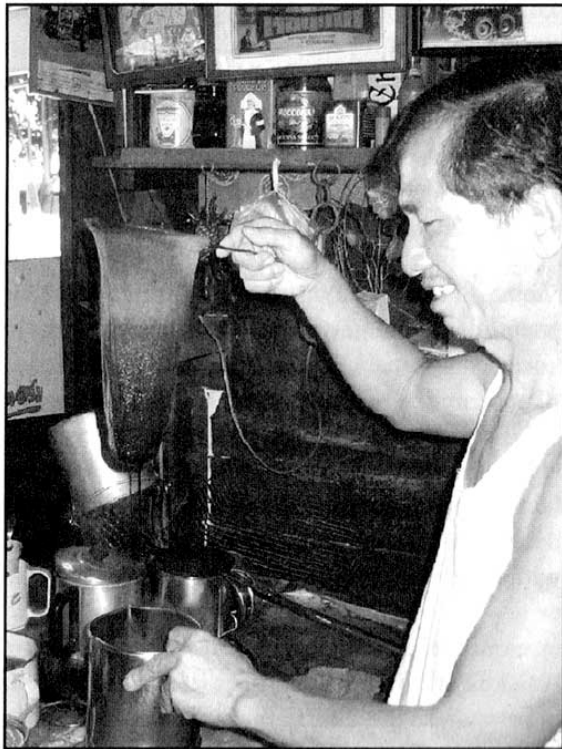
point for social activity, its lack of physical place for consumption all seemed to indicate “unelaborated commodity.” But this would be viewing coffee in Bangkok solely through a Western lens—as black, hot, espresso machines, aromas, beans, and places for coffee (coffee shops or cafés) are signs (symbols and indexes) conventionalized in our own terms for carrying meaning about coffee (potency, performance, intensity, productivity, depth).

So, we then asked participants to try to think about coffee in Thai cultural terms. Though truly an impossible task given that most of us had spent a total of two days in Thailand and no one spoke fluent Thai, it was important to try to examine coffee from a Thai point of view, to try to see it in those terms. The provisional analysis was provocative. As we reasoned, perhaps:

- Coffee was a deftly constructed concoction (akin to a good bartender’s movements) that is like Thai dishes in its medley of ingredients, its place on the streets, and its to-go form. Just as Thais seemed to evaluate food as better when there were more individually, thoughtfully added ingredients, a really good coffee we were told was achieved by first adding the condensed milk, then the coffee, then the evaporated milk, and so on.
- Coffee was refreshment, more ubiquitous than soda, an antidote to city heat while making one’s way from point A to point B. Sold in the same beverage stands as fruit drinks (also served on ice in bags with straws), street coffee, at least, suggested interlude.
- Coffee forms were symbolic of larger cultural discourses and flows between East and West, tradition and modernity. Participants from Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Singapore, and India extrapolated from similar cultural and coffee phenomena in their own countries to reason that Starbucks and similarly processed and packaged coffees operated as icons of Western modernity. Consumption of the “traditional” Thai street vendor coffee as opposed to Starbucks or UCC could thus make a statement about people’s values in addition to their taste preference. A participant who had spent time in Thailand further observed that instant coffee had once been the symbol of westernized modernity. The seemingly ubiquitous old Nescafé containers, now filled with other things, were thus reminders of an earlier time.

The results we outlined above are based solely on a few hours of seminar participants’ Bangkok observation coupled with the few extra hours of preparation on our part. Given this time frame, we believe the results to be truly a testimonial to the power of cultural analysis. At the same time, we would argue

that they are woefully incomplete. We encouraged participants to try to think in Thai “insider” categories as we maintain that without the insider’s point of view, cultural life is ultimately always misunderstood, filtered to obscurity given its view only through the eyes of the observer. To do the study as a research project, not just a training exercise, one would need to talk with Bangkok coffee drinkers, to understand what they think about coffee, to hear how they talk about coffee, to know what goes on in their heads and what things they do as they take their first, middle, and last sips, to know what they think and do when drinking different types of coffee, to know what they are thinking about while waiting at the street vendor or in the Starbucks. If the study had been a full one, we would have perhaps heard that, in fact, morning coffee is often drunk hot, and that we were just not touching that part of the elephant, focused as we were on the afternoon. In fact, a man with a small storefront, who sold us some more sock-steeped coffee poured over ice, told us that he sold more coffee in the morning and that, at that time, he sold it hot.



**Figure 3.12** A Bangkok vendor, with the coffee “sock,” who told us he sells more coffee in the morning than in the afternoon . . . and sells it hot.

## Notes

1. Fischer’s (2007:3) more complete formulation was, “Objects, theories, and techniques change in focus, resolution, or fidelity (to draw on visual and sonic descriptive modalities) as we vary our cultural concepts.”
2. Discussion of the match, and particularly the mismatch, of what people say they will do and what they do has been considerable within the academic literature of consumer research as well as psychology. We actually originally heard the tripartite construction—thought, talk, and behavior—used by Dominique Desjeux during a seminar he organized in January 2007. The tripartite model including thoughts as well as voiced opinions and action seems a more precise model for this phenomenon than simply talk vs. behavior, which, in the actual training described, is what we most likely said.
3. Note also Levy (2006b), who discusses the role (and consumption) of stories in negotiating identity.
4. See Sherry (1995b), who, in an analysis of coffee, using American TV programming as data, comments on coffee’s ubiquitous presence in living, its consumption akin to breathing.
5. See Thompson and Arsel’s (2004) discussion of anti-Starbucks discourse and places as a case in point in the domain of coffee.
6. For background and discipline, see Glaser and Strauss’s 1967 classic, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. See also Strauss (1987), McCracken (1988b), and Chapter 8 of Barrett (1996) including what he has to say about the modes of analysis suggested in these other works. Note also Arnould and Wallendorf (1994), Thompson (1997), and Valentine (1995). Developed out of the growth of ethnographic research in realms of product design, the use of affinity diagramming and other means of visualizing connections and analysis have also gained currency; see Beyer and Holtzblatt (1998).
7. As Malinowski wrote in 1922 in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1984:8–9) “Good training in theory, and acquaintance with its latest results, is not identical with being burdened with ‘preconceived ideas.’ If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. But the more problems he brings with him, the more he is in the habit of moulding his theories according to facts, and of seeing facts in their bearing upon theory, the better he is equipped for the work.”
8. See their Web site, [www.roastedaddiction.co.nz](http://www.roastedaddiction.co.nz), for other examples of the metaphor. Coffee has long been viewed as a drug; see, for example, Dufrenoy and Dufrenoy (1950). See also Gladwell (2001) and compare Roseberry (1996).
9. The assumption of place, given coffee’s social history (see Clayton 2003; Hattox 1985) and contemporary Western practice, is understandable if not forgivable. As Sherry observed in his analysis of coffee in American TV programming, coffee emplaces—its presence is a magnet, “people are drawn to the site of its production” and “the coffee machine and the beverage it produces help emplace and embed consumers in existentially profound quality space” (1995:359). This also provides a case in point of how meaning is constituted through social practice, and how difficult it can be to relinquish assumptions of what is “real.” Note also Thompson and Arsel’s (2004) analysis of the influence (and flourishing) of local coffee places in light of (opposition to) Starbucks’ globally branded places.