DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 220 541   TM 820 596

ABSTRACT
                Nearly parallel studies in two different cultural
settings are compared. The interpretations teachers make of students'
classroom behavior was the aspect of teacher cognition discussed. One
study took place in southern California while the other was done in
west central France. The participation of "problem" and "non-problem"
students during ordinary lessons was videotaped. In American
classrooms, "problem" students were children whom teachers had
previously referred to the district as candidates for special
education. In French classrooms, "problem" students were those who
would be required to repeat a grade, students whom teachers would
refer to special education classes, or those who were promoted only
with strong reservations. The preliminary results indicated
categories teachers use in judging students are not bound by
considerations specific to local classrooms or cultures. Teachers'
interpretations of individual students' behaviors are tailored to the
child and the specific situation in which the interpretation takes
place. There was a discrepancy between the perceptions of teachers
viewing videotaped sequences of classroom behavior and those of an
independent panel of judges. (DWH)

Teachers' Interpretations of Students' Behaviors

in French and American Classrooms

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Introduction

In recent years, many educational researchers have turned their atten-
tion to teachers' thought processes (Shavelson and Stern 1981). We report
here on our investigation of one aspect of teacher cognition, the interpreta-
tions teachers make of their students' behaviors in the classroom. The
information in this report comes from two studies which were initially con-
ducted separately. Here we are taking the first step toward comparing what
turned out to be nearly parallel studies in two different cultural settings.

Hertweck (1982), as part of a larger study of educational decision
making (Mehan, Hertweck, Combs and Flynn 1981), asked elementary school
teachers from a southern California school district to explain why they
had referred one or more students from their classroom for special education.
Twenty-seven teachers who had referred 55 students agreed to participate.
After explaining their referral reasons, the teachers watched videotapes
of representative events in their classrooms, and were asked to comment
on the videotaped behaviors of students who had been referred and students
who had not been referred. Hertweck analyzed the teachers' discourse to
determine their categories for success and failure and to determine
their perceptions of instances of those categories.

Anderson-Levitt (1982) conducted ethnographic fieldwork in three
first grade classrooms in a city in west central France. Her study, like
Hertweck's, took place during the 1978-79 school year. Anderson-Levitt aimed
to identify the criteria by which the French teachers recognized success and
failure in learning to read. She, too, elicited from each teacher the
categories the teacher used to mark "problem" students and she, too,
conducted "viewing sessions" in which the teachers commented about
students' behaviors in videotapes of representative classroom events.

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When we learned about each other's work, we decided to attempt a cross-cultural comparison of teachers' ways of thinking and talking about "problem" students. The way in which each study had been conducted facilitated this comparison. Both studies were ethnographic in nature. We had "thick descriptions" of our research sites which enabled us to re-analyze our data asking new and different questions. We had videotapes of actual classroom situations which permitted re-viewing and re-analysis. In both studies, we had conducted "viewing sessions" with the same teachers who had been observed, interviewed, and videotaped.

As we make this comparison, we are interested in the relationships among actual behavior, people's judgments, and cultural constructs. In terms of our particular data, we want to understand the connections among students' behaviors as coded during on-going observation, the ways teachers interpret and evaluate students' performances, and cultural systems of ideas which may inform the teachers' interpretations.

D'Andrade (1974) and Shweder (1975) have explored these relationships with respect to cultural constructs about personality (notions of what kinds of behaviors "go together"). For example, in a re-analysis of a study using Bales' interaction code, D'Andrade demonstrated that the correlation between persons' actual behavior as coded on the spot and raters' judgments of that behavior based on long-term memory was not particularly strong. At the same time, he showed a much stronger correlation between those raters' judgments of behavior and the independent judgments made by a different group of people regarding what behaviors are like others (1974:162-168). Figure 1 represents the relative

Figure 1. Strength of Relationships in D'Andrade's Model
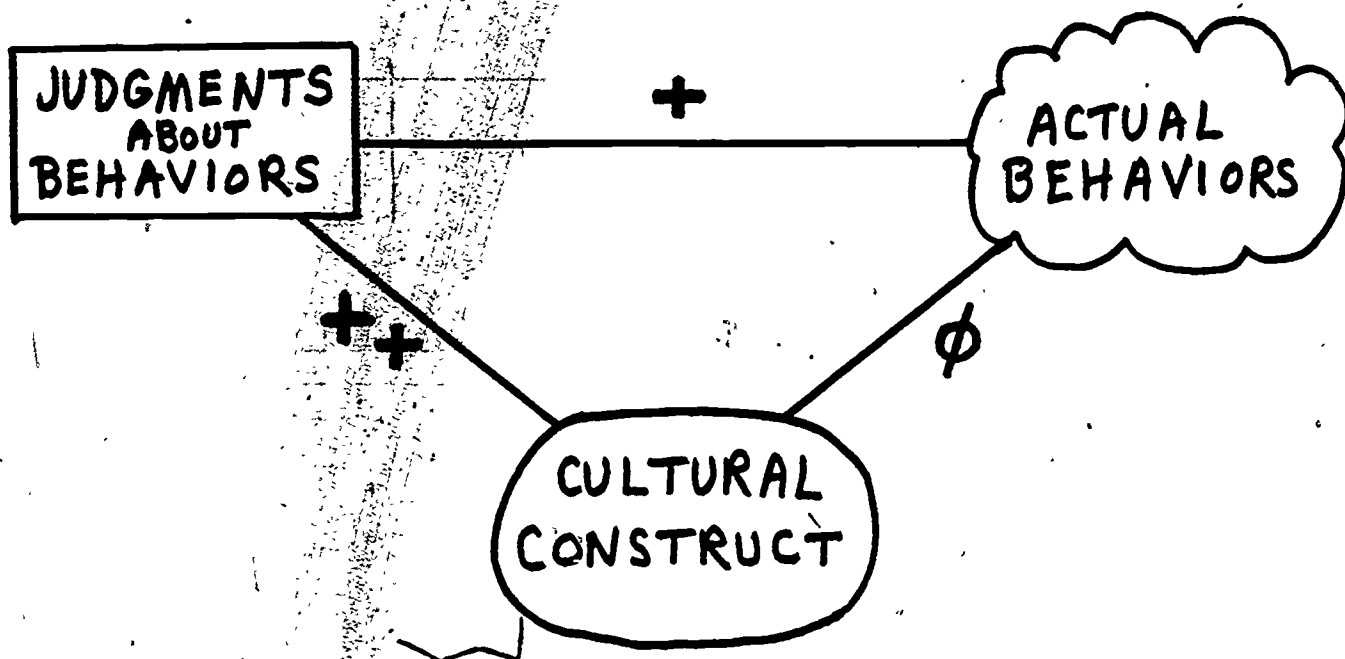
strength of these relationships. In short, D'Andrade and Shweder argue
that generalizations about a particular person's behavior reflect cultural
ideas more than the actual behavior (cf. Cantor and Mischel 1977; Chap-
man 1967).

Comparison of the data from our two studies will permit investigation
of certain issues raised by D'Andrade's model. Eventually, we hope to
make a four-way comparison, as sketched in Figure 2. The left side of the
figure represents the information we have about categories teachers use
in France and in the United States when they judge particular students'
performances. The right side of the figure represents our records of actual
student behavior in both the French and the American teachers' classrooms.
The term "cultural construct(s)" in the middle of Figure 2 is merely
speculative at this point. We have not made independent assessments of
any system of ideas which French teachers might share, or American teachers
might share, or both groups of teachers might share with each other.
We have placed the term inside our four-sided comparison simply to suggest
the relationship between this model and D'Andrade's: The inverted triangle
with line b as its base and the upright triangle with line c as its
base both correspond to the three-way relationship studied by D'Andrade.
While we do not plan to make a direct measure of cultural constructs, we
believe our study of relationships a and d, projected below, will result
in indirect information about the system of ideas teachers are hypothesized
to share.

Taken together, comparisons b and c determine the extent to
which teachers' judgments are linked to actual student behaviors. These
relationships have already been examined in independent reports (Hertweck
1982; Mehan, Hertweck, Combs and Flynn 1981; Anderson-Levitt 1982), and
are analyzed further in the next section of this paper. In general, we

Figure 2. Model for Four-Way Comparison
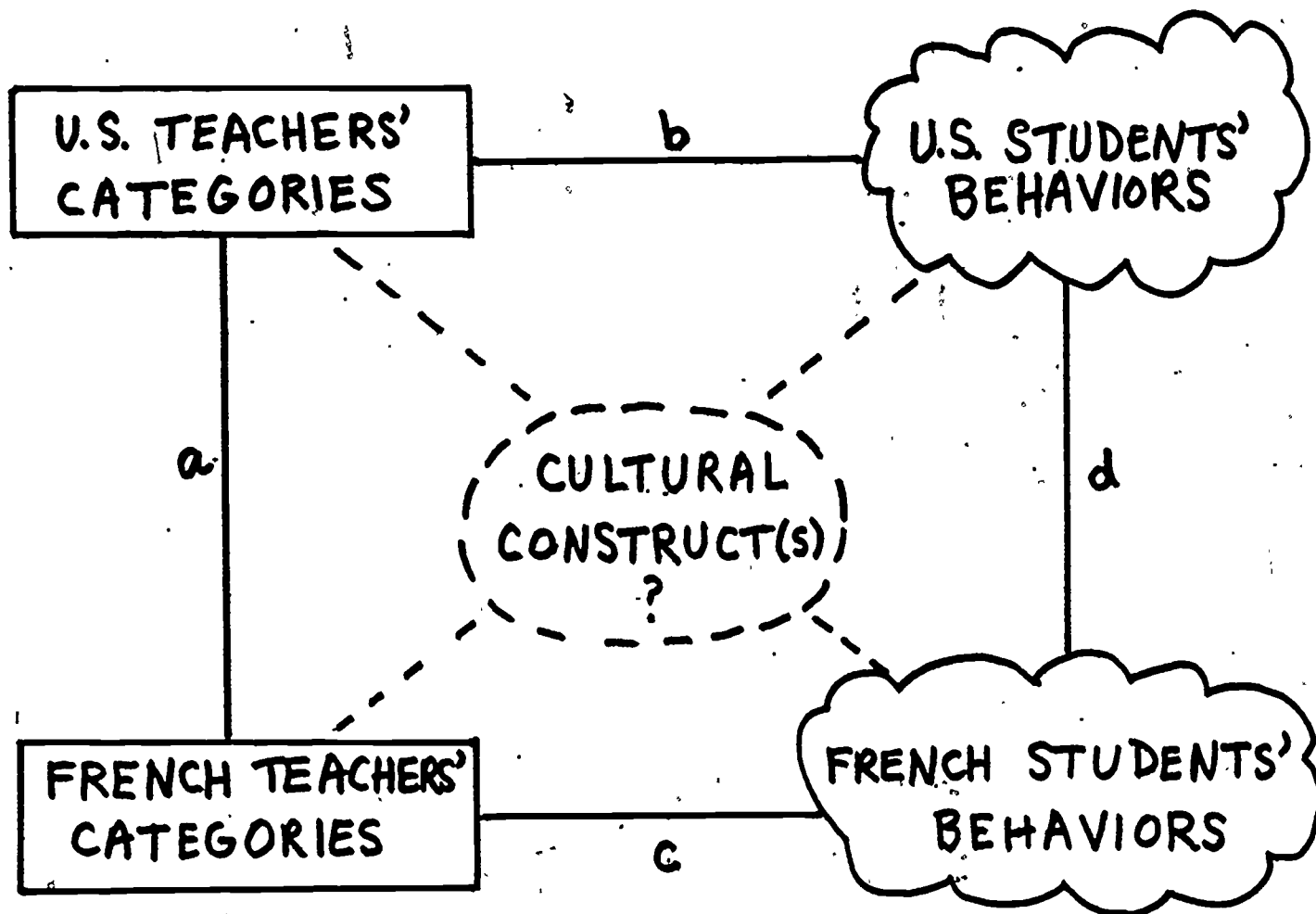
have found the link between teachers' accounts of problem behaviors and the behaviors themselves to be relatively weak and inconsistent, because of the nature of everyday thinking and the complex task facing the teacher.

The weakness of relationships b and c already points to a cultural construct or constructs as one possible source of teachers' interpretations of students' behaviors. But what is the nature of the system of ideas which may shape a teacher's schema for teaching and thus his interpretation of a student's performance? Is it a cultural construct for person perception which "belongs" to what is generally thought of as the teacher's "native" culture, e.g., "French culture," "American culture"? Or is there a system of ideas shared by the teacher not with fellow French or fellow Americans, but with teaching colleagues across national boundaries? Examination of relationship a, which we initiate in the third section of this paper, will help answer these questions. If the connection is weak--that is, if French teachers' ways of talking about "problem" students differ markedly from American teachers' ways of talking--we will have evidence that teachers' judgments about students are bound by local context. If, on the other hand, we find a strong relationship between French and American teachers' accounts, we will suspect the existence of a "culture of teaching" which transcends local context.

Evidence for the existence of a "teaching culture" would suggest further stages for research. First, we must consider that if French and American teachers use similar categories, perhaps there is a basic similarity in the way French and American students behave in class which leads

teachers to develop the same general vocabulary for describing students' performances. This possibility, analogous to Mulaik's argument as reported by Shweder (1975:457-58), requires analysis of relationship d in our model. We would have to risk an attempt at comparing videotaped samples of students' behaviors in French and American classrooms. Strong similarities in the way French and American students displayed "behavior problems," "inability to decode," "immaturity," or other hypothetical shared categories would suggest that the categories are grounded in the students' behaviors. Strong differences would require that we look elsewhere for an explanation of why American and French teachers shared the same basic "culture of teaching."

In the latter eventuality--if French and American teachers' accounts of behavior are similar but the specifics of their students' behaviors differ-- we would have to pursue our cross-cultural investigations beyond the current data. We would want to understand whether the hypothetical "culture of teaching" originated in the common history of Western schools some centuries ago, or whether it is independently re-invented by teachers in different societies, Western and-non-Western. This question could be studied by comparing our French and American teachers and classrooms to·their counterparts in non-Western settings for formal schooling, e.g., Soviet schools, Japanese schools, or the Koran schools of Africa or Southeast Asia.

Teachers' Interpretations of Students' Behaviors

This section summarizes what we know about the link between teachers' accounts of problem students and students' actual behaviors (relationships b and c). The data come from the "viewing sessions," in which teachers were asked to point to instances of problem behaviors which they had discussed with the researcher earlier (in Anderson-Levitt's study) or had listed on official school records (in Hertweck's study). Here we are discussing not only teachers' judgments based on long-term memory (their prior statements about problem behaviors in particular students), but their judgments of on-going student behavior, as recorded in the videotapes. One would expect teachers' on-the-spot interpretations to conform more closely to actual behavior than judgments based on memory.

In both the French and the American classrooms, we videotaped the participation of "problem" and non-"problem" students during ordinary lessons. In the American case, the term "problem" student identifies children whom the teacher had previously referred to the district as candidates for special education. In the French case, the "problem" students were those whom the teacher would require to repeat the grade at the end of the year, those occasional students whom the teacher would refer to special education classes, or those students whom the teacher allowed to pass to the next grade only with strong reservations.

The teacher's identifications (by commenting or pointing) of students' "problem" behaviors during the viewing sessions was juxta-posed to an independent analysis of the taped classroom events.

For Hertweck's data, a three-person panel, and for Anderson-Levitt's data, a four-person panel conducted the independent analysis. (Hertweck was a member of both panels, and the panel for the latter study included a native French speaker.) In these analyses, the teacher's prior statements about "problem" behaviors were used as a template or "emic grid" to guide the panel in identifying all the instances of "problem" behavior within the videotaped sequence. That is, the videotape of each classroom was analyzed in terms of that classroom teacher's categories of "problem" behavior.

Table 1 summarizes the results of this comparison in Hertweck's focused study of seven American teachers. All teachers except one (Teacher 3) identified more "problem" behaviors in referral students than they did for non-referral students observed during the viewing sessions. Indeed, three of the teachers did not identify any "problem" behaviors at all in non-referral students, although the independent panel of observors located a number of "problem" behaviors as defined by the teacher for non-referral students in each class. These American teachers identified 46.4% as many "problem" behaviors for referral students as the independent observers identified--which seems a very high rate, since the teachers generally watched the tapes only once while the independent panel rewatched them many times. However, the American teachers identified only 13.9% as many "problem" behaviors as the panel identified in non-referral students.

Table 2 presents parallel data for two of the French teachers studied by Anderson-Levitt. Like the American teachers, the French teachers identified many more inappropriate behaviors displayed by students they considered "problems" than they identified for students they considered to be progressing normally. The two French teachers

Table 1

American Teachers' Identification of "Problem" Behaviors

	REFERRED STUDENTS			NON-REFERRED STUDENTS		
	Instances of Behavior on tape [a]	Instances of behavior identified by teacher	Percentage	Instances of Behavior on tape [a]	Instances of behavior identified by teacher	Percentage
Teacher 2	29	10	34.5	19	0	0.
Teacher 3	98	23	23.5	8	8	100
Teacher 5	22	14	63.4	8	0	0
Teacher 8	27	40	148	12	3	25
Teacher 11	43	12	27.9	26	0	0
Teacher 15	7	8	114	6	3	50
Teacher 17	28	11	39.3	29	1	3
Total	254	118	(46.4%)	108	15	(13.9%)
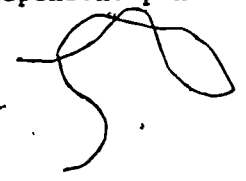
[a] As identified by independent panel of observers.

Table 2

French Teachers' Identification of "Problem" Behaviors

	"PROBLEM" STUDENTS			"NORMAL" STUDENTS		
	Instances of behavior on tape[a]	Instances of behavior identified by teacher	Percentage	Instances of behavior on tape[a]	Instances of behavior identified by teacher	Percentage
Madame D	10	4	40	1	0	0
Madame M	6	6	100	3	0	0
Total	16	10	(62.5%)	4	0	(0%)

[a]As identified by independent panel of observors.

considered together identified 62.5% as many "problem" behaviors as
the panel did for "problem" students, but none for normal students.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that teachers do not
interpret video sequences of their students' behaviors in a mechanical
or computer-like fashion. The teachers considered here paid selective
attention to students in whom they had a special interest, notably
students previously identified as "problems." While it is true that
the independent panels also identified more "problem" behaviors in
"problem" students than in normal students, the teachers exaggerated this
difference in their comments about the taped lessons.

In fact, the figures in the tables disguise the degree of discrepancy
between the teachers' perceptions and the panels' perceptions of the video
sequences. Although the viewing panel might identify some of the behaviors
noted by the teachers as problem behaviors, teachers typically commented on
additional behaviors which they saw as problematic. In addition, the viewing
panel might identify a behavior as problematic which the teacher did not
identify or vice versa. In fact, in most cases for the two French teachers--
the teachers and the panels did not identify the same incidents as
instances of problem behavior. One of the French
teachers identified the problem behavior of "repeating after the others"
in a problem student during a video sequence in which the panel failed
to locate that or any problem behavior in the child. In a particularly
dramatic example, Madame D, after complaining that a certain student's
problem was the inability to "decode," watched the student read a syllable
on the monitor without commenting. When the ethnographer asked whether
the student hadn't "decoded," Madame D was able to explain how the student
had actually recognized the syllable as a globally memorized small word
rather than sounding it out. Anderson-Levitt (1982), Mehan, Hertweck, Combs and

Flynn (1982) and Hertweck (1982) give other examples of discrepancies between the

teachers' interpretations and other observers' perceptions of the videotaped lessons.

Those discrepancies suggest that the teachers' comments during

the viewing sessions cannot be explained simply as cases of selective

attention. We have argued elsewhere that the teachers, in the context

of their social interaction with the researchers, were seeking to "account

for" previously expressed, individualized theories about "problem"

students (Anderson-Levitt 1981)--that they were attending to the stu-

dents' "actions in context" rather than to isolated behaviors (Hertweck, 1982;

Hertweck and Mehan 1981; Mehan, Hertweck, Combs and Flynn, 1981). As one part,

and only one part, of that process we believe there are "categories that the

teacher brings to the interaction" (Mehan, Hertweck, Combs and Flynn, 1981),

a general teaching schema (Anderson-Levitt, 1981) which aids the teacher in

organizing an interpretation of a student's behavior.

Teachers' Categories for Students' Problems

To begin to explore the fit of the French teachers' comments within

the categories emerging from the American teachers' comments (Hertweck,

1982), we selected two first-grade teachers from Hertweck's study to match

the two teachers from Anderson-Levitt's study. The four teachers' specific

comments about specific students showed considerable diversity. Yet

within this diversity, common themes emerge.

In her specific comments, American teacher Mrs. A noted the way a

problem student messes up his paper by drawing on it even when told to

stop, the way he hits other children, and the way he uses "bad language."

American teacher Mrs. B lists less concrete learning problems, including

her student's inability to "sequence," poor auditory memory, and limited

vocabulary. French teacher Madame D includes lack of participation in class, language problems, and inability to "decode" among the signs of problems in particular children, while Madame M mentions inability to pay attention, copying from neighbors, and lack of self-confidence, among other indicators.

There were a few close parallels in the teachers' accounts of problem behaviors. For instance, Mrs. B said that her problem student "can't learn sounds," Madame M mentioned two boys who had not yet mastered simple vowel sounds, and Madame D identified one child's problem as the inability to "decode." In another rough parallel, Mademe D remarked about a student that she works only when the teacher works with her, and Madame M conplained about students who needed her help rather than being able to work by themselves. Mrs. B, citing a more specific classroom situation, said of her problem child that he required "patterning," the aid of the teacher tracing with her finger while he read. Finally, Mrs. B mentioned her problem student's "distraction," and Madame D said that one child was "never there." Madame M noted two students who wouldn't "follow" if she let them out of her sight, and another who paid attention only "every five minutes."

At a broader level of generality, greater similarity seemed to appear. In an earlier study, Hertweck (1982) demonstrated that a group of fifteen American teachers, though they taught at different grade levels in different schools and were speaking of children referred to different programs, all talked about students' academic difficulties in similar ways. The majority of their comments concerned the broad categories of students' ability, students' behavior in class, students' psychological

state, others traits of the student, or students' cognitive focus (i.e.,
paying or not paying attention). For the twenty categories into which
Hertweck coded the teachers' comments, there was statistically significant
agreement on the rank order of the frequency with which different categories
were used (Herweck 1982:164). We have not yet analyzed the French teachers'
comments with the precision which Herweck applied to the analysis of these
American teachers' remarks; therefore, we cannot make a direct comparison.
However, inspection of the French teachers' comments strongly suggests
they they share the same types of concerns as the American teachers
and suggests that their descriptions could be coded into the same twenty
categories developed by Hertweck (1982). Any particular teacher, French
or American, may place emphasis on two or three or four
general categories for explaining students who have trouble in class,
but it appears that each teacher's categories form a subset drawn from
the same broad set of themes (Cf. Hertweck, 1982).

The most striking common theme in the teachers' accounts of problems
concerned the source of origin of students' difficulties. Findings
from this study support Hertweck's (1982) findings concerning American teachers'
attributions to internal factors. Teachers from west central France and
southern California overwhelmingly attributed students' academic and
classroom difficulties to factors internal to the student. School problems
are treated as if they are the student's personal and private possession.
This is a prime example of the use of dispositional properties in the search
for an explanation of other people's behavior (Cantor and Mischel, 1979;
D'Andrade, 1974; Shweder, 1975).

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Conclusion

Our preliminary comparison points to a commonality in the ways
teachers account for students' problems. As mentioned, Hertweck (1982)
has already shown that American teachers, discussing children at
different grade levels in different schools, draw from a single set
of themes in explaining a student's academic and classroom difficulties.
While the present study is only a small pilot which does not permit
much beyond speculation, it does seem to suggest that the range of
similarity is even wider, encompassing two cultures. We expect
further comparison will confirm that the categories teachers use in
judging students are not bound by considerations specific to the
local classroom or culture. The categories seem to be part of a system
of beliefs and values which is divorced from association with one
particular locale or even one particular society (cf. Goodenough 1971).

At the same time, we are acutely aware that teachers' specific
interpretations of specific students are embedded in their particular
context. Indeed, we believe it is this embeddedness in the particular
situation which explains the diversity among the teachers' accounts
of problems at the specific level, as well as the discrepancies between
the teachers' remarks during viewing sessions and the panels' perceptions
of the videotapes. Teachers tailor their interpretations of individual
students to the child and to the situation in which the interpretation
takes place. The theories they construct about their particular students'
problems are unique and context-bound; the building blocks of those
theories are not.

In _The Savage Mind_, Lévi-Strauss describes human thinkers as bricoleurs, handymen who construct myths and meanings out of odds and ends, whatever material is "at hand." People, he argues, use a set of tools and materials which is finite, and which (like Rube Goldberg's building materials) may bear no relation to the finished product (1966:16-22). When teachers construct an interpretation of a student, they operate as any human thinker does--they grope among a limited number of building blocks, a finite "stock of knowledge at hand," a bounded set of "recipes, rules of thumb, social types, maxims and defintions" (Leiter 1980). But because the old, familiar cultural constructs have an "open horizon of meaning" (Schutz 1962)--because categories like "needing help from the teacher," "saying anything," and "inability to sequence" are ambiguous enough to shift in meaning depending on the context in which they are applied--teachers are able to construct new, sometimes unexpected interpretations of classroom behavior (cf. Anderson-Levitt 1982).

In the long run, we hope to understand the processes by which teachers fit together cultural constructs to develop particular judgments. For the moment, though, we have paused to investigate the nature of those constructs, on the hunch that they will reveal something about the nature of success and failure in the classroom.

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