

# ONE / Orientation

**I**n 1977, on a whim, I decided to try passing as an overage, out-of-state freshman for the first few days of the fall semester at Rutgers College. I had been on the Rutgers faculty for four years at the time. My serious anthropological interests then lay in south India, but it would be some years before I could get back into the field. Meanwhile I wanted to practice my professional skills. I was curious what a big, confusing institution like Rutgers looked like from a worm's-eye view, and I wanted to know more about the undergraduates I was teaching in large, often impersonal classes. For already, by the age of thirty-three, I no longer understood my students. By 1977, my own college years, the early and mid-sixties, were beginning to feel like very distant times indeed.

My little foray into the dorms was not likely to develop into serious research, I thought. It really would not be wise if it did, for in cultural anthropology, your professional prestige depends on how distant, exotic, and uncomfortable your research site is.<sup>1</sup> But what harm could a little underground investigation of the undergraduates do? At the very least, it would be fun to see if I could get away with it.<sup>2</sup>

I made my arrangements, and on a hot Saturday morning in early September I showed up at one Gates Hall, in the main cluster of dormitories on the old College Avenue Campus of Rutgers (see map 1), dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and sneakers and carrying a battered old suitcase.<sup>3</sup> Nobody in the dorm would know who I was, I'd been told. I was typically late sixties in appearance at the time—long-haired, with a moustache and wire-rimmed glasses. I was alone. All around me were students in similarly casual dress, with somewhat shorter hair, accompanied by their better-dressed parents, unloading carfuls of clothes, stereos, and other personal possessions. As I waited for the elevator to take me up to my floor, I began to have second thoughts. I would never get away with this. Perhaps I should just confess my real identity from the beginning: Hi, I'm a Rutgers professor, here to study you for a few days. Please don't pay any attention to me. But when I arrived on the third floor, a nice-looking young woman greeted me in a friendly but practiced manner: "Welcome to Rutgers! Are you a new student? Tell me your name and I'll tell you what room you're in. My name is Melanie. I'll be your preceptor this year."<sup>4</sup> "Mike, Mike

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MOFFATT,  
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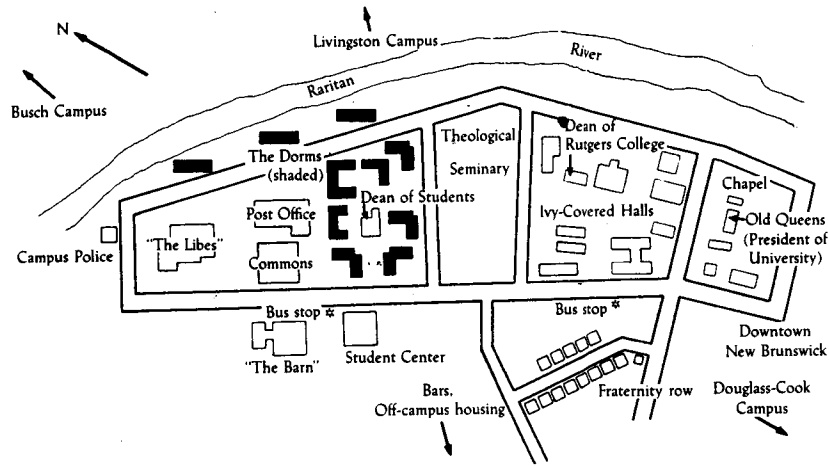
Moffatt," I replied. And, like it or not, I was launched into my temporarily fraudulent role.

I walked into the "staging area" to which I had been assigned, a room that usually served as the lounge between the two "sections" of fourteen double and triple student rooms on one floor in this particular dorm plan.<sup>5</sup> Our floor was "coed by sections"—the females on one side, the males on the other. The more popular arrangement was "coed by alternating rooms." My staging area looked like a small army barracks: six temporary cots lined up side by side, with a few of my new roommates already moving in. We exchanged hi's and first names, and I shoved my suitcase under one bed, flopped down, and started doing research. That is, I started eavesdropping.

My roommates continued to trickle in with various family members in tow. One had a mother who was vigorously acting out "mother": setting up his little refrigerator, explaining what food he had and what clothes she had packed, instructing him mock-seriously to be "nice to his roommates, they look like nice boys." Another came with a pipe-smoking older brother who speculated in a worldly way about the sex life of the residence counselor downstairs, an older male in a coed dorm. Soon we were all there, however, and soon all the family members had taken themselves away. And immediately, good Americans that we were, we started making friends. We started exchanging the innocent biodata that Americans spontaneously verbalize under such circumstances—a few personal and academic interests, idle stories about home and coming to Rutgers, initial sketches of likes and dislikes.

Or more precisely, my five roommates immediately started exchanging initial confidences. I threw in the occasional friendly remark, but I mostly listened, fascinated and slightly nervous about my acceptance by them. Also, I could not think up details of high school life quickly enough to play. It had been too long to remember about parents and old buddies and girlfriends and high school capers and summer camps and regional travels . . .

All five of my new roommates on Gates Third in 1977 were eighteen years old. All five were white, like many Rutgers students the children or grandchildren of white ethnics who had entered the United States in the twentieth century. All five were males; the sexual integration of the Rutgers dorms had not yet extended into individual rooms, nor has it done so by the late 1980s. And all five were recent graduates of high schools in suburban towns in northern New Jersey. None of them lived more than



MAP 1 / The College Avenue Campus

fifty miles from New Brunswick, and two could easily have commuted. But they had all “gone away to college,” as you are supposed to do after high school in the United States in the late twentieth century if you have middle-class career goals and if you can afford it.

Four of my new roommates had well-defined vocational goals linked to their college educations, to their intended majors in particular: premed, engineering, criminal justice, and “junior high math teaching with coaching on the side.” The fifth didn’t know—“something in the liberal arts,” he said dismissively. Two had hometown girlfriends to whom they hoped to remain faithful. All five talked about their families casually and fondly (“My mother sewed my name on the bottoms of all my socks!”). And all but one apparently took me at face value, as an older, out-of-state freshman. The exception was John, a handsome young man with a friendly, half-aggressive manner—the intended cop, interestingly enough. Just after introductions, when no one else was in the room, he suddenly asked me, “Are you a freshman, Mike?” I inwardly cursed him for making me tell my first overt lie, and I told him that I was. But he obviously continued to regard me with suspicion.

Our preceptor, Melanie, put her head into our room and told us to go get our student handbooks and course registration materials at “the barn,” the old gym on College Avenue, have lunch, and be back at 1:30 for the first meeting with all the first-year students on our floor. I went off as instructed, on my own—practicing my act as a dumb freshman, trying to walk familiar paths unfamiliarly, enjoying the surprising thrills of an apparently successful con—and reported back to Gates Third just before the meeting. Now orientation was really beginning.

Orientation is the well-scripted routine by which anyone who has gone away to college since about 1925 has probably first experienced American higher education. Historically, it replaced the older, hairier student-to-student initiations of the late nineteenth century: hazing and some of the other colorful customs of the old undergraduate college life.<sup>6</sup> Modern orientation can be seen as a firmly entrenched college custom as well, however—in this case, as a deans’ ritual. It is the one institutional moment during which the student-life specialists who run the nonacademic side of undergraduate Rutgers have a chance to tell *their* version of college to the freshmen, to try to represent Rutgers as a rational, well-ordered institution that cares about the individual student and, through a series of student-life specialists, sees to her or his health, welfare, and personal development.

Except that, as the deans themselves know, Rutgers is not really quite so caring, so orderly, or so personal. Accordingly, deans’ orientation, as experienced by the freshmen, was shot full of contradictions and double messages. Some of these double messages might have been intentional. Others were inevitable. Still others were, as far as I could tell, unplanned and probably unknown to the deans.

Ours began in 1977 with the first of what were to prove the invariant subrituals of intimacy of the contemporary deans’ routines: “boundary-breakers” or “icebreakers.” The friendliness of roommates was being left to private enterprise at the moment, but the friendliness of new floor members was not about to be left to chance.<sup>7</sup> Our preceptor asked us to form a circle and introduce ourselves one by one, each with a personal detail or two that would help others remember us. Everyone began with, “Hi, I’m [first name, short form; no last name].” Everyone indicated their hometown, almost all north Jersey towns. A few mentioned their intended academic majors. And everyone provided some cute personal taste or characteristic—a hobby, a favorite kind of music, and so on. That year no one mentioned anything remotely intellectual during this first exercise. My own introduction passed muster: “Hi, I’m Mike. I’m from Connecticut. I like to eat, and I canoe sometimes.” When I added, “I’ve also been out of school for a few years,” I saw Melanie nod as though I had confirmed something she had been wondering about.

After our icebreaker, our residence counselor (RC) stopped in and said a few breezy words, first articulating what was to be the fundamental sociological dichotomy in the daily lives of the students at Rutgers, the strong contrast between the personal world of the students and the impersonal qualities of the official college. The RC put it vividly. Higher education Rutgers-style, he said, was no longer “a few students sitting under a fig tree with a professor.” It was a giant business. “*We’re* here,” he said, “to help you, to give you support against that factory system out there.” He recommended that we use college to work on our “social skills,” which might help us get jobs out there after graduation more than anything we learned in the classroom. He told us our preceptor was a great person, but he said we could also always bring our problems to him: “My door is always open.” Then he withdrew.

Melanie then carefully delineated her relationship to us, denying in loco parentis but not her formal authority in the dorms: “I’m not your mommy. I *want* to be your friend. But there *are* some mean things I have to do.” She went on to the nitty-gritty of life on the floor. Keep marijuana

out of sight, in the rooms. Liquor was OK anywhere on the floor (this was to change, drastically and controversially, in the mid-1980s), but the “boys” had to clean up their own messes. Firearms were out of the question, and hot plates were technically illegal because of fire regulations, though preceptors were to tolerate them in every dorm I was in, warning students when the fire inspectors were due on their “surprise” visits. Get to recognize one another and look out for one another, Melanie continued. Look out for strangers on the floor or in the dorm—“people who look like they are much older, or who aren’t dressed well.” I glanced around to see if anyone was looking at me. No one was.

A good thing about coed floors, Melanie generalized, was that “the boys can protect the girls.” Boys, she warned, watch out for female cleaning ladies who walk suddenly into the men’s bathrooms in the mornings. Girls—to a gasp of collective embarrassment—no used sanitary napkins on the floors or in the toilets in your bathroom. And sorry for the urinals in *your* bathroom; this was once an all-male college. Rutgers had “gone coed” five years earlier, but the bathrooms still all contained urinals. According to Melanie, the females on another floor of Gates Hall had neutralized theirs the year before by planting flowers in them.

Then on to academic advice. The technicalities of academic registration and the “drop-add period,” a little inaccurately. Study time. Melanie, who had identified herself as a physical education major, looked around to make sure no one but the other preceptor and the freshmen were in the room and gave us her opinion of the lowdown on this important topic. Her first year at Rutgers, she said, she had been very upset by a preceptor who told her that she would be OK at Rutgers if she studied five hours a day. But this was nonsense, she told us: “You have to make up your mind what you want here. If you want to enjoy yourself, if you want to have any social life at all, two hours a day is plenty, one in the morning and one in the evening. A ‘B’ or a ‘C’ isn’t a disaster. Of course,” she amended, alluding to the great status divide among undergraduate majors, “you bio-sci people are different . . .” Biological science majors were premeds, the most respected undergraduates on academic grounds, then and later in the mid-1980s.

A penultimate exhortation: we could have lots of fun on our floor this year if we brought our freshman enthusiasm to the formal dorm programs fostered by the deans, if we counteracted the possibly more blasé returning upperclassmen, and so on. And a final plug for the sophisticated adult pleasures of urban New Brunswick, for two nearby bar-and-grills.

My freshmen peers listened quietly to this presentation and asked a few routine questions. More privately a few minutes later, however, they were talking about it in a voice I soon came to think of as Undergraduate Cynical:

It’s all bullshit.—Freshman female

What they said was, you can do whatever you want as long as you don’t get caught.—Freshman male

My roommates and I retired to our room for another hour or so of idle chat, and then four of us went off to dinner together. On the way, I reminded myself again that I was not supposed to know my way around. I told myself to keep my mouth under control, to keep the polysyllabic words in my vocabulary to a minimum, and to avoid initiating conversation or collective actions as much as I could. John took charge and got us across a street and through an outdoor concrete mall surrounded by undistinguished dorm architecture—brick high-rises built in the 1950s, more collegiate-looking brick dorms from the 1920s, one impressive old nineteenth-century pile—to Brower Commons. In that vast, half-underground undergraduate dining area, with six separate cafeteria lines debouching into the drinks, condiments, and salad dispenser area, around which several hundred students danced, I didn’t have to remember to try to look like a novice. Like virtually all my faculty peers, I had never dined at these depths before.

At our table, my roommates and I fell into the light banter that marks American male friendliness. I was enjoying myself tremendously. It was not all that hard to keep up with them—to think, at thirty-three years old, of a line or two that might be amusing to eighteen-year-olds. Just as I had to watch my high or academic talk among the freshmen, however, I discovered that I had to watch my low talk as well. Maybe intimate sex-talk was more explicit among people my own age; maybe I was making the wrong assumptions about “college men.” In any case, I found myself being smuttier than they were if I wasn’t careful.

After dinner we walked out amiably together on a very hot night and eventually made our way back to the barn for a class meeting with a thousand and a half of our peers.<sup>8</sup> Inside the temperature had risen to over a hundred degrees. I almost told off a snotty upperclassman who ordered me impolitely to go sit in a particularly hot freshman location. And I laughed,

I was told later, much too appreciatively at the sophisticated collegiate jokes of the guest speaker, the newscaster Dave Marrish. Marrish was the only adult, besides the dean of instruction two days later, who tried to evoke the possible intellectual values of college during that orientation. ("Marrish's law: Buy any secondhand paperback you see in college that costs fifty cents or less and throw it under your bed. Eventually you'll read it.")

Later that evening at the student center, John—still suspicious of me—managed to snatch my student pub ID card out of my hand when I took it out of my wallet to compare photos with my roommates. I was afraid he would see the checkoff for faculty. He missed it, but he did not miss my birthdate: "1944?!!" he burst out incredulously. He and my other roommates had been born in 1959 and 1960. I got mad at him and yelled back, "You bastard! What's the matter, aren't I a nice guy any more?" Then I saw a little kid hanging around the student center and half-apologized with a quip: "See, they're letting some people in a little younger these days. And they're letting others in a little older." But I did not give him or my other roommates any further explanation of my near senescence. And for another few days, by manipulating our developing loyalty as roommates, I managed to get them to keep the secret of my actual age from others on the floor. John did challenge Judy, a hometown friend of his, a freshman who happened to live on Gates Third, to "guess how old Mike is":

*Judy: I thought you were a little older. Oh, dear, I don't know which way to go. Either way you'll be offended. Listen, I have some older friends. One of my sisters is thirty! . . . I'll guess you're twenty-three! No? Then twenty-four!*

The next morning was a Sunday. John and one roommate went off to Catholic church. With another roommate, Chuck, I accidentally wandered to a newsstand I knew in downtown New Brunswick and picked up the Sunday *New York Times* I was after. That afternoon I began going on my own to some of the informational programs we were advised to attend. One was a fraternity-sorority promotion run by students. ("Fraternities are not just social groups. We also do important community services.") Another was a careers presentation run by an adult authority. "Is *he* a professor?" a girl asked me afterwards. I said I didn't know (he wasn't). "I'd hate to have *him*," she commented. "He's not very interesting."

Back in our room some of my roommates were doing their laundry. Others were just hanging out and trying to get to know the other "kids"

on the floor, especially some of the "girls." College adults usually tried to show their respect for the students by referring to them as "women" and "men," but these terms did not come naturally to the students in the dorms, especially to the freshmen and sophomores. The words were too old for their senses of self. "Kids" was a good colloquial compromise. Between the sexes, "boys" sounded too young. The usual asymmetric solution was that the males were "guys," but the females were "girls."

Other freshmen stopped by our door regularly and peered in, looking away in embarrassment if they happened to catch one of us in our underwear. Total nudity, I noticed, was generally masked even between male roommates. Then and later, undergraduates claimed that living in a coed dorm was "no big deal." But in my first couple of days in the dorm, I was finding the generally suppressed sexuality of the coed dorms, which I had never experienced in my own college years, a steamy business, more than a little stressful for my thirty-three-year-old libido. Sexuality was something students alluded to a great deal in dorm chitchat and in other forms of expression—in musical lyrics, for instance, or in the human icons that decorated the walls of their rooms. But the students only discussed sexuality honestly with close friends, if they discussed it honestly at all. And they were even less likely to discuss it with me once they knew I was an adult anthropologist.

At my unthinking instigation, my roommates and I now began to give a little thought to our relationships with the upperclassmen who were moving back into the dorm. My roommate Fred suggested that we pass the time with a small bet on how many upperclassmen were back. I asked him how we were going to find out: "We can't go down the hall knocking on doors asking people if they're upperclassmen." The others asked why not? I was wondering about norms of deference toward the upperclassmen, as in my own college days and in earlier American college traditions of interclass hierarchy, and I said something to that effect. "Oh, no," John objected, "do you mean I have to worry about some upperclassman looking down on me?" I kicked myself for planting ideas in my roommates' apparently egalitarian little minds, but they knew what I was talking about. Fred later told me that he had had a nightmare just before he had come to Rutgers "of big upperclassmen throwing me in the Raritan river." But such norms were no longer mandatory at Rutgers in the late twentieth century. Interclass relationships were now considerably more informal, though they were not entirely egalitarian.

Meanwhile I was back up against the sexual conundrums of the new coed dorms. All Sunday I had been trying to get to know a few girls on the floor for research reasons. Other males had been doing the same thing with other ends in mind, however, and there was no reason my overtures should have been interpreted any differently by the women. But I hadn't figured this out yet. I was trying to attach to one of the all-female groups that had started going off to Commons together, the evolving female friendship groups on the floor, I had decided. I was not having much luck. I asked Stephanie, a pleasant extrovert, but she stalled me and then slipped off on her own. Later I saw her in Commons in the company of six males, some from Gates Third, others from elsewhere. Then I saw John's friend Judy, and she said I could go to dinner with her. I hoped she meant with her and some female friends, but it slowly dawned on me that such a request from a male was taken as a one-to-one proposal, and off Judy and I went on what seemed to me almost like a date.

We talked a little uncomfortably over dinner, and then on an impulse—perhaps correctly sensing that my time was running out—I asked her if it would amuse her to hear something very surprising about me. She looked guarded, but said OK, so I handed her my letter of identification from the deans, my research permission (“Mr. Michael Moffatt is conducting research on freshman orientation. . . .”). She gaped at it for a moment, and then expostulated: “Does this mean you’ve already *been* to college? . . . You have your Ph.D.?! . . . You’re a PROFESSOR?! . . . You’re writing a book about us? Are you going to write about *me*? Wait till I tell my mother!” She was very pleased I had told her first and promised to keep my secret (“You really don’t *look* 33!”). But it was not entirely keepable for much longer.

When we arrived back at Gates Third, John greeted me at the door of our room and asked me to come in alone. My other roommates were sitting on their beds looking serious and slightly embarrassed. John told me that they had started comparing notes about me in my absence, over dinner, and they had realized they knew nothing about me: “You’ve been witty and charming, Mike, and you’ve found out a great deal about us, but we don’t know a thing about you. What’s the story?” The jig was up. I had let the required verbal reciprocities of friendship slip too far out of balance. So I did with John what I had just done with Judy. I showed him my deanly letter. He looked at it, thought for a moment, and then exclaimed, “I get it! You’re a T . . . I!” I explained that I was not a TA (a graduate

student teaching assistant) but a “real professor,” and John appealed to the same offstage parental audience as Judy: “Wait till I tell my mother!”

I asked John and my other roommates to help me keep my secret from the rest of the floor for another day or so, and they did so with glee. At one point, a couple of them put their heads into preceptor Melanie’s room and teasingly said to her, “We’ve got a surprise for yoooooooo!” John told me that he had been so paranoid the night before that he had wondered if he dared to sleep in the same room with me. He told me his fantasy about me. I was a “returned Vietnam vet infiltrating the system to take knowledge back to the Vietcong.” My long hair and wire-rimmed glasses had looked “radical” to him. I had slept a lot. (I had really been listening in on them with my eyes closed.) I had been quiet and apparently relaxed when everyone else had been zinging with nervous tension. “Vets can sleep under fire in foxholes,” John explained.

Chuck told me that my vocabulary had been too advanced despite my quietness, and he had thought it odd that I read the *New York Times* every day (though he told me a few years later that he picked up the habit from me that year). Another roommate, on the other hand, said he had not noticed anything specially strange about me: “I’ve had other things on my mind for the last two days.”

None of my five roommates seemed ethically concerned that I had violated their privacy. None of them voiced any formal protest against my methods. They were thrilled when I told them I might write about them, but they seemed a little disappointed when I assured them I would change all their names to protect them. They did feel, a lot less theoretically, that I *had* tricked them, however; and in the next two days they pulled four practical jokes on me. Noticing that I clutched a pillow to my head at night to sleep in the noisy dorm, they inserted an empty quart-sized glass juice bottle inside the same pillow; it was much less soft the next time I threw it over my ear. They stole my clothes when I was sleeping, and I had to run naked onto a balcony to recover them. They spritzed shaving cream into my shoes. Etcetera. And they made the social dynamic of their jokes abundantly clear to me. “We’re just getting you back! You’re getting off light.”

I was very happy to have this explained to me. Though I had not yet figured it out at the level of cultural analysis, I knew implicitly that in modern American male conventions, you “bust on” your friends. We were

still friends! They were not suddenly going to give me a lot of distancing respect because they now knew that I was a professor.

For another two days I continued to venture out of my room alone as a cryptofreshman. I experienced some of the impersonality and hassle of being an undergraduate in the college. I took an English test and a math test. A graduate student administering one test told us to watch out; he knew we were all “programmed to cheat,” he said. The room for the other test was, like the gym two nights before, over a hundred degrees in the late-summer heat. I theorized to myself that the long lines and other procedural ordeals of orientation at Rutgers were the modern functional equivalents of the older, suppressed practices of student hazing, an inadvertent way in which the bureaucracy, rather than the upperclassmen, now bonded us together in mild solidarity as common fellow sufferers.

I attended student-life orientation and listened to local samples of American psychobabble: “Ask yourself, ‘Who am I?’ ‘Where am I going?’ ‘What are my relationships like?’” I went to talks on professional and peer counseling, on student health, and on financial aid. And I sat through academic orientation, where the dean of the college told us we were a “select group” (a small exaggeration), an assistant dean of instruction reviewed the complex details of course scheduling and rescheduling, and the dean of instruction delivered what were to be the only official remarks I heard during all of freshman orientation in 1977 on the meaning of college as a place of learning. I listened to this dean carefully, for he did know how to articulate a value.

The “liberal” in liberal arts, the dean began by saying, meant “free,” and the liberal arts had been devised back in the days of the Greeks to educate free citizens, which we would soon be. Man was a feeble thing, a “reed in the wind,” quoting Pascal. But (still quoting Pascal) he was also a reed who *thinks*; thought was what gave him his power—his ability, like the reed, to resist natural forces much stronger than himself. And it was this power we should work on in ourselves during our four years at Rutgers, the dean proclaimed; we should try to use our God-given intelligence to the best of our ability.

College should also be a time to learn new things. Take a course in a subject we had never heard of before, the dean suggested. And do not

forget the foreign languages; language competence could be one of the most useful skills we acquired in college. (The dean was also a professor in a modern-languages department, which he admitted to us while making this pitch.) The dean recommended we pay more attention to the substance of what we were learning than to our grades. We shouldn’t hassle our professors about grades; “grades are the professional judgment *by* a professional *about* the professional quality of your work,” he informed us. Then he lightened up a little with an elaborate joke he had swiped from another dean, which illustrated, he said, the difference between really understanding a subject and “bullshitting” the professor to get a good grade.<sup>9</sup>

Now the dean was into his peroration, back up in his high ethical stance. College, finally, was a time for self-sacrifice, he instructed us. Our parents were making sacrifices to send us to college. We should repay them by working as hard as we could while we were in college. How hard should we work? He recommended two hours of preparation for every classroom hour of instruction. For the average student, this would work out to seventeen hours of classes and thirty-three hours of studying every week, he calculated, “leaving you plenty of time for fun on the weekends.” The dean’s advice amounted to over three times the academic work that Melanie had recommended to our freshman group two days earlier. An audible murmur arose from the freshman audience. The dean was aware that official culture and student culture were at odds on this issue and others in college. “Beware the advice,” the dean warned us in conclusion, “of those sidewalk philosophers who will be showing up soon, the sophomores and the juniors.” Ignore the peer group. Figure college out for yourselves!

Ignoring the peer group was about the last thing the new college freshmen I was living among were doing at the time, however. They were going to far fewer of these orientation programs than I was, and many of them were skipping them altogether. The official presentations were about things that were not yet relevant to most of them and might never be. It is possible that when and if they had a problem, the presentations would come to mean, There’s someone out there who can help. But for the more typical freshman listener, the presentations were soon amalgamated into undergraduate cynicism, into the idea of bureaucratic Rutgers as a set of complex rules and regulations just waiting to catch you off your guard—into Rutgers as “The Rutgers Screw.”

“The Rutgers Screw” had been in Rutgers student vernacular for about ten years, and it was still current in the 1980s. It was originally part of the

rhetoric of student radicals in the late 1960s, and then mainstream undergraduates had adopted it. In the mid-1980s, I even heard administrators allude to it, though most faculty members were too distant from the undergraduates to have picked it up after even twenty years. It was the way the students turned the perceived impersonality of bureaucratic Rutgers around on the bureaucracy, rereading at the same time the deanly assertion that "Rutgers cares" into a much more vulgar putative relationship. From this undergraduate point of view, Rutgers officialdom was not a personal entity. Just as it did not treat the students as individuals, it was not a "you" or a "we," and it was only sometimes a "they"; more often, it was an "it." And if you gave it half a chance, what would it do for you? It would certainly not care for you. Rather, it would fornicate with you.

Faculty members were not usually seen as impersonal institutional antagonists, however. Unfortunately, they were also almost not seen at all. They were curious, mildly respected personages, but they were distinctly peripheral; they were very much offstage in the consciousness of the undergraduates. No adult figure had appeared during orientation so far who was what I thought of as a real faculty member. No faculty members were present who did not have to be there in their capacity as deans.

In later orientations in the 1980s, the deans invented a new activity that did feature a faculty member: convocation, a supposed revival of Rutgers tradition. It was staged in the pretty Gothic-revival chapel on old College Hill, in the original block of nineteenth-century buildings that had once housed all of the old Rutgers College. The first year that convocation was held, 1984, an upperclassman told my group of freshmen to show up dressed "kinda nice, no tank tops or shorts, or the priest will get stressed." No priest or clergyman was actually involved. After we students had sat down in the chapel pews, the "faculty"—three-quarters of whom were actually nonacademic student-life personnel—processed in, in robes, mimicking rather nicely the older ecclesiastically derived ritual of the academic college. First the dean of the college and then the dean of students addressed us. Then a token faculty member gave a brief academic talk, followed by a few old Rutgers songs sung by members of the glee club.

I enjoyed the event myself both times I attended it, in 1984 as a pseudo-freshman and in 1985 as the token faculty speaker, talking to the freshmen about the history of undergraduate culture at Rutgers. But freshman opinion was much more mixed. It cut too much against the collective attitudes of orientation as they had already been established. Most of the freshmen were not receptive to "serious stuff" at this juncture in their in-

troductions to college: "The songs weren't bad, but that faculty talk was BORING!" "That faculty member got me right in the mood for next week. He said the simplest things in the most complicated way!"

Back in 1977 I went from the last of the formal orientation presentations to my small group. Here, about fifteen freshmen were brought together randomly, apparently so that we would get to know other freshmen who lived somewhere besides our own dorm floors. And we were led by two of the red-shirted sophomores who had volunteered to help the deans' office with orientation. First we had to play four more icebreakers intended to speed up the process of our acquaintanceship. In one, we were given colored pencils and a large sheet of paper and asked to cover it with the images that occurred to us when we thought of Rutgers. I collected the sheet afterwards ("for my wall," I said, to curious stares). Drawings on it included a "joint" (a marijuana cigarette) labeled "hooch"; a No-Doz bottle, a toilet, a bottle of beer, and an open book; a stick figure saying, "chem is for nerds—auhhh!"; a dorm window with a cactus in it and the sun in the distance; an elegantly drawn comparison of a tall, complex "ideal hamburger" alongside the flat "actual hamburger" served by Commons; and the word *chaos* written chaotically (my contribution). As in our first introductions in the dorm, positively presented academic imagery was not central in these drawings.

In another icebreaker, we were asked to write our greatest hope and our greatest fear about Rutgers on a slip of paper and to throw the slips into the center of the room, where they would be scrambled and read out randomly. They were amazingly similar, apparently indicating the simple pragmatic orientations of most incoming freshmen *and* the simple bifurcation of "college" in unreflective student notions into two halves: "academics" and "social life." The hopes were either academic, in the narrow sense, or social: To succeed, To get good grades, To pass courses, To get into med school or To make friends, To find people like me. The fears were the other side of the same coin, all variants of "to fail" academically or socially. My own entries were very heterodox: "To attain true enlightenment" and "To be found out." The sophomore group leader who read them out looked around speculatively when he came to mine.

The small-group leaders went on to give us the least official—the most cynical—advice we had heard during all of orientation: how to beat campus traffic tickets, how to survive the allegedly deteriorating food in Commons, how to save money on the used-book market, what the best "gut courses" (the easiest undergraduate classes) were. One of the leaders



heard me say to my freshman partner during an icebreaker, "You're not sure of your identity?" My word choice was apparently too advanced: "Are you an English major, Mike?" he interjected. I said I wasn't sure, that I was thinking about anthropology. His face lit up, and he told me that anthropology was an interesting subject and an easy one, that he himself was a joint English-anthropology major hoping to be a travel writer. Since I had taught the only big introductory anthropology course in the college his freshman year, I wondered why he did not recognize me. When I met him a few weeks later as a professor, however, I found out that he had not in fact taken anthropology yet. He was passing on the ratings of other students as his own experience.

Back in our room, my roommates seemed more relaxed with me now that they knew my real identity, and they talked to me about many more topics. They asked me practical questions about the college and the university. Despite their orientation experiences to date, they were surprised at the size and complexity of Rutgers in my tellings of it. I had never met the president!? I didn't know Professor X or Dean Y!? I had less idea than they did of the intricacies of student course registration!? In tones of friendly male banter, they asked me about my own colleges and college experiences, or I reminisced about them spontaneously:

*Anthropologist* (looking at roommates poring over course schedules): I'm sure glad I don't have to go through all this shit again.

*Roommates*: You're not supposed to say that!

They speculated about the future of our odd relationship. "What are we supposed to call you when we bump into you around campus, 'Professor Mike'?" And now that I was a safe elder rather than a competitive peer, they confided in me more about certain things. As high school students with moderately good academic records, they were aware that they were likely to be overconfident about college. They all expected to get A's and B's. They all knew that not everyone did, and each one worried about how he himself might do. One evening I made a tape recording with all of them ("suddenly you sound different, Mike, more like a professor"), and they grew intense about religion (two were Catholics, one was a Baptist, and two were agnostics) and—in much more coded talk—about "going all the way" in sexual relationships.

John and I also extended our established friendly-aggressive relationship into new areas. Thinking about my being an anthropologist, John asked me if "blacks have a better survival instinct than whites?" "Well, for a start," I replied, "the question is a racist one." John blushed and hedged: "We could change the words . . ." And he labeled the college students of the late 1960s "rebels without a cause" who liked to smoke dope and burn down buildings. "Rebels without a cause?" I asked, taken aback. His own college generation, he maintained, was more mature. Stung, I shot back, "How about more quiescent, more apathetic, and more apolitical?" He looked embarrassed and asked me to tell him what those words meant.

That same evening, my roommates sat around working on last-minute details of their class schedules and then went to bed early, around eleven o'clock, mildly excited. The following morning, a Tuesday, three days after we had arrived, classes were starting. I went off with one roommate to his very first class (*Roommate*: "I feel like I can *dominate* all of this. I'm sure that's the wrong attitude"). Still wearing my student garb, I sneaked in easily. I did not know the young professor. Back at our room after class my roomie told our other roomies that I had laughed much too loudly at the professor's little jokes.

I finally went to see our preceptor, Melanie, and told her who I really was. She was less amused by the revelation than my roommates had been. Naturally, she feared I might report on her job performance to the deans: "I'm so naive! I never suspect anything! But I thought you looked a little older. I felt a little sorry for you." She agreed with my request that she announce me as a surprise speaker at the end of the first general floor meeting that evening, so I could explain myself to everyone on the floor.

That evening, I wondered as I stood up from the floor, where I had been lounging with my freshmen roommates, whether any of the upper-classmen who were now back on the floor might recognize me as a faculty member. So I started by asking, "Does anybody here know me?" Someone yelled out, "Yeah, you're Mike the freshman! Sidddown!" But I persevered:

I'm an anthropologist, a faculty member at Rutgers. Anthropologists believe that when you study someone you live with them, like them. You get to know them personally. That's what I've been doing with you for the last few days. I wanted to see what Rutgers looked like from a student's point of view. I may write something about my findings, but I'll change your names and all the details so your confidentiality will be protected. . . . I hope you're not too mad at

me for doing this. I'll be leaving the dorm soon. Please stay in touch. If any of you ever need a friend on the faculty, please come and see me.

There was a buzz from the students, and after the meeting a number of the students, mostly freshmen women, came up to give me their reactions. Some said I had been "kinda scary"—I had been rather silent and I had often smiled mysteriously. Several said I had looked older to them. One had imagined I was a "parolee." Stephanie, the woman who had stood me up for the dinner date two nights earlier, told me:

I figured you were a burnt-out [drug-using] high school case who'd worked in a garage and then taken his little high school equivalency and come to college. You talked fancy because you read a lot on the side. I was *sure* you'd turn out to be the pusher on the floor. I was also sure you'd be good with cars, that I could get you to work on my car.

Half an hour later she came to my room to ask me to help her with her first freshman composition exercise.

Off and on for the next couple of days, with breaks to go home to my family, I hung around Gates Third. But my initial research in the dorms was really over. It had been surprisingly fun and interesting while it lasted. Compared to previous ethnographic research eight thousand miles from home, it was handy to have my natives right next door, to be able to go in and out of "the field" with the movement of a couple of miles and the change of a few articles of clothing. After trying to work in a difficult south Indian language, Tamil, it was a relief to know the language, or at least one age-dialect of it. It was interesting to attempt to apply, imaginatively, the anthropological outsider's perspective to something at once so familiar (my "own" culture) and so exotic (the subculture of contemporary late-adolescents). I remembered my own college adolescence as a time of uptight workaholism. It was undeniably fun to go back and experience vicariously what I had never really enjoyed when I was eighteen: college fun and games, peer-group sociability.

I also felt that I had a chance to look at some other, more serious, more generally American cultural notions and dilemmas in the late twentieth century among the students—individualism, friendship, adolescence, rac-

ism, sex, and sexism—with perhaps just the right amount of distance from the adult concepts of the same. And my faculty colleagues and other college adults seemed fascinated with my preliminary findings. They apparently felt as far from the worlds of the undergraduates as the undergraduates felt from theirs.

I visited my five roommates regularly that year and invited them to my home from time to time. And I stayed friends with four of them in ways I have never been friends with youths I have known only as a professor at Rutgers. Eight years later, Chuck, now with twin degrees in engineering and law and a job with a New York patent-law firm, married the Rutgers undergraduate whom he had met in the second week of his freshman year in 1977. Fred, working in biomedical engineering in a nearby corporation, was at the wedding. He had married the year before and Chuck had been his best man. Also at Chuck's wedding were myself and Ron, the liberal arts major. Ron had majored in political science and worked on the campus radio station. He was now doing video work for television in New York City. John, at present a junior officer in the Air Force overseas, sent his felicitations by mail. We had all lost track of Ed, the intended junior high math teacher, in 1978. He had gone somewhere else or dropped out, according to my old roommates.

But back in 1977, I discovered that I could not really keep up with my roommates' complicated late-adolescent lives when I visited them or they visited me. Most of what I was interested in they were learning or experiencing tacitly or implicitly. They could not redescribe these things to me. Now that I was no longer with them, I did not know what to ask them, and they could not have told me even if they had wanted to. There were no shortcuts available, no easy ways to pursue my new anthropological interests in a local culture. Ultimately, research among students in New Jersey—if it was to be done with any competence—was going to be as much work as research among villagers in south India. And it had some extra wrinkles. How do you write anthropologically for audiences who may already know a great deal about the "exotic" culture you are describing? How do you achieve the distancing that anthropologists strive for elsewhere in describing a culture very close to the one in which you yourself have grown up?<sup>10</sup>

In any case, more research was clearly necessary, a great deal more participant observation. In 1978, I arranged to live with John and Fred, now sophomores, a day and night a week all academic year on the third floor of Erehon Hall (see chapter 4). And six years later, in 1984, I repeated the

same yearlong field season in the dorms, on the fourth floor of Hasbrouck Hall (see chapter 3). What follows—the rest of this book—is my attempt to convey some of the things I found out about college life, adolescence, and American culture in the late twentieth century at Rutgers, on the basis of two more years of fieldwork in the dorms, and on the basis of other research methods as well.

## Further Comments

1 / I later encountered an only half-joking inversion of this prejudice, however. At several professional meetings, where cultural anthropologists routinely and matter-of-factly sit around exchanging details of daily life in the last poor Indian village or remote South Sea island where they did research, I told colleagues that I had spent a year or two living among undergraduates in the local dorms where I taught. “You lived in dorms with the *undergraduates!*” they would say. “What was it like?” Most American anthropologists spend most of their working lives in colleges and universities, yet no one else has ever applied intensive participant observation to these most local of natives. Could it be that, to these anthropologists, their undergraduate students are the ultimate unfathomable aliens?

2 / Anthropologists do not usually operate undercover in this way. In other cultures they often simply cannot pass themselves off as one of the natives. They look

too different; their language skills are too poor. But “spy” also goes against the ethics of the profession. According to the code of the American Anthropological Association, you are expected to always let your subjects know as honestly as possible who you really are and what you are really up to.

I knew this in 1977. But, as I argued to colleagues on a university review committee concerning research using human subjects, I might seriously disorient the incoming freshmen by immediately introducing myself to them as a professor. I thought I could operate more unobtrusively if they thought I was one of them at first. Then, I promised, I would “come out” and tell everyone I had fooled who I really was and what I was doing. And if I did more research in the dorms after that, I would tell new student acquaintances who I was and what I was doing as soon as possible, I promised. I would explain who I was before any formal interviewing. I would

use a tape recorder only with my subjects’ knowledge and permission, and so on. Students who objected to my research could then avoid me and not be part of it. The committee accepted my methodology—and this was the way I operated during all my subsequent research in the dorms.

3 / Gates is a fabricated name, as are the names of the other two Rutgers dorms studied here: Hasbrouck Hall (chapter 3) and Erewhon Hall (chapter 4). Merrill Edwards Gates and A. Bruyn Hasbrouck are the only two nineteenth-century Rutgers presidents who, due to obscurity or incompetence, do not have buildings or other parts of the sacred landscape named after them at modern Rutgers. They are honored here at last, if only fictitiously. Readers who don’t recognize the source of the “Erewhon” in Erewhon Hall have only themselves and their shoddy educations to blame.

I have altered the architecture of all three dorms in minor ways to make it more difficult for local people to identify them. These changes aside, however, all three dorms are real places.

4 / Like some building names, all personal names in this book are fictitious. I have also changed minor personal details here and there to make identifications more difficult, and I have

made several major changes in the identity of one actor. Otherwise, however, everything described here is as accurate as I have been able to make it.

Student quotes in this book that are taken from student papers are left exactly as they were written, without corrections. Dialogue from tape recordings will be identified as such in the notes. All other student quotes are dialogue as I remembered it, usually writing it down within a half-hour or hour of hearing it.

5 / Rutgers had fouled up that year and taken more students for housing than it could accommodate. Excess students would be relocated from the staging areas into real rooms as soon as the rooms opened up through attrition in the early weeks of the fall semester.

6 / In fact, I discovered during subsequent historical research, the deans’ orientation and a cleaned-up version of undergraduate hazing coexisted at Rutgers and at other American colleges for half a century. Hazing suited the deans’ purposes admirably: it stitched the students together; it taught them conformity to conservative student “traditions.” Only after the undergraduates laughed such practices out of currency in the late 1960s did the deans discover that hazing was illegal and

beneath the dignity of college youths.

7 / The preceptors followed common orientation routines on all dorm floors because they had been carefully trained in them during a week of workshops held on campus in the late summer by residence-life specialists in the deans' office.

8 / The freshman class numbered about two thousand individuals. Not all of them had made it to orientation, however.

9 / The other dean in turn may have swiped the joke from *Saturday Review*:

On a physics exam, a student was asked how to determine the height of a tall building using a barometer. He answered, take the barometer to the top of the building, tie a rope to it, lower it to the ground, pull it back up and measure how much rope was let out. For this he was flunked, on the grounds that, though his answer was correct, he had not demonstrated any knowledge of physics.

When the student protested his grade, his professor agreed to re-examine him on the question. The second time round the student gave five answers (still managing to resist the obvious rote response, differential barometric pressures at the top and bottom of the tower): drop the barometer off the roof, time its fall and calculate the height with a particular formula; take the

barometer out on a sunny day, hold it upright, measure the length of its shadow, measure the length of the shadow of the tower, and determine the height of the building with a simple proportion; measure the length of the barometer, climb the tower marking off lengths of the barometer on the inside wall, and multiply; tie the barometer to a string, swing it as a pendulum at the street level and at the top of the tower, measure the value of "g" at both points and calculate the height from the difference in the two values; and, the best and easiest way, take the barometer to the superintendent of the building and bargain with him thus:

"Mr Superintendent, here I have a fine barometer. If you tell me the height of this building, I will give you this barometer."

For these answers, the student received an A.

Our dean concluded with the simple observation that the student had now demonstrated not just rote knowledge but also a wide grasp of the subject, the point of higher education. He did not confuse us with the more critical moral of the tale as it was originally published: the student gave his original answer, he said, because he was fed up with the "pedantry" of high school and college instruction, which expected cer-

tain routine answers and seldom encouraged students to learn the real structure of a subject (Calandra 1968). See chapter 7 below to guess what this student critic would have thought of most of the teaching that undergraduates received at Rutgers.

10 / One answer is to have a foreigner study *you*. Another is to conduct research in an alien culture, as I had done, and to try to bring that distant comparative sensibility back into your research at home. A third is to use social historical methods to achieve distance on the cultural present, which I subsequently tried to do. A fourth is simply to attempt to locate that tone and attitude of relativistic detachment often (but not always) adopted by anthropologists with respect to other cultures. For the best example I know of an "at-home" study that successfully solves all these problems—with-

out, in this exemplary case, adopting a morally neutral tone—see Barbara Myerhoff's modern classic, *Number Our Days* (1978).

As for what it is an ethnographer does when she or he works at home, two types of findings seem possible. One is shared with good reporting—making unknown or partly known subcultures (here, contemporary late-adolescent culture) more widely known. Another has to do with making tacit knowledge explicit, with bringing the taken-for-granted of daily life to the surface, where it can presumably be looked at with greater clarity. Closely related to this is a third ethnographic goal I have tried to accomplish, at least sketchily, here—relating the local knowledge of the students to some of the much bigger concepts, notions, themes, attitudes, and values in general American culture in the 1970s and 1980s.