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Informant Error and Native Prestige Ranking in Zinacantan

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In THEIR discussion of componential analysis, Wallace and Atkins leave as "a problem for research" the development of techniques for approximating psychological reality. By psychological reality they mean "... a description which approximately reproduces in an observer the world of meanings of the native users of that culture." This they contrast with "structural reality" which is "... a world of meanings, as applied to a given society or individual, which is real to the ethnographer ..." but is not necessarily real to anybody else (1960:75). In this paper I will present a technique which will distinguish more and less psychologically real descriptions from each other. The discussion is focused on a study of the religious cargo system in Zinacantan, a township of Maya Indians in the Mexican state of Chiapas. After presenting the ethnographic background, I will describe how informant error was used to demonstrate the psychological reality of a prestige ranking scale that was crucial to my research. The application of this technique to the solution of the problem posed by Wallace and Atkins is then discussed.

The religious hierarchy or cargo system in Zinacantan is, in many respects, similar in organization to hierarchies found in communities throughout the highland Maya area. The cargos are public offices, and Zinacanteco men fill them as community service. That is, the incumbents receive no pay and usually make very substantial cash outlays for saints' fiestas and ceremonies. The term of service is one year, after which men normally return to full-time corn farming. The period of rest between cargos varies from three or four years upwards, depending on the time the individual needs to liquidate the debts of the year in office and prepare himself for another cargo. In contrast with Guatemalan Maya communities where the office-holder normally alternates between religious and civil offices (Nash 1958), in Zinacantan only religious posts count for progress up the ladder.

The hierarchy is arranged in four levels of progress. The first level includes 34 cargos. After he has completed a first level cargo a man may go on to one of the 12 cargos of the second level. From there he may go on to one of the six cargos of the third level, and finally on to one of the two cargos of the fourth level. Virtually no exceptions to this order of progress are made. Almost all Zinacanteco males serve at least one cargo during their lifetime. That is, they participate on the first level. Obviously, only a few reach the top level.

In Zinacantan an average man is fortunate to clear 1,000 pesos (80 dollars) yearly after having put aside part of his corn and bean crops to feed his family. The cost of cargos varies tremendously, and only the rich can afford the most expensive ones. On the first level the cargos cost between 50 and 14,000 pesos.
On the second level they cost between 1,500 and 9,000 pesos. There is less variation in the expense of third and fourth level cargos, and all of them cost more than 3,000 pesos. With this information, I have constructed cost scales ranking the cargos of the first two levels according to the expenditures required during their service.

An analysis of a sample of 130 Zinacantecos who have passed more than one cargo shows that men who take an expensive cargo on the first level tend to take an expensive cargo on the second level. Those who reach the final level tend to have passed the more expensive cargos on the first three levels, and those who pass inexpensive cargos on the first level tend to drop out of the system and never pass a second cargo. In a smaller sample (N = 69) of the first level cargos of sons and their fathers, there is a statistically significant tendency for participation according to the same principle. That is, both son and father pass an expensive first cargo or both pass an inexpensive first cargo. On the basis of this evidence I conclude that there is something that might be labeled "economic stratification" in Zinacantan. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that the rich—as measured by cargo performance—tend to marry the rich, and the poor tend to marry the poor (Cancian 1962a).

Zinacantecos recognize these facts of economic life as they are represented in the cargo system. However, in talking with people and observing interpersonal behavior in Zinacantan, it is quite clear that expense is not the only factor that determines the "prestige" (respect, deference) that accrues to a man for his participation in the cargo system. Other factors are important. The most crucial of these seems to be the authority that the incumbent of one cargo has over the incumbents of other cargos in ritual situations. One cargo in particular, the senior mayordomo of the patron saint, clearly brings its incumbent more prestige than other cargos that cost almost twice as much. In other cases, however, the authority factor is not so obviously important. In almost all cases it is difficult to decide how much expense is equivalent to how much authority in calculating the prestige a cargo brings to the incumbent or the person who has completed it. Another difficulty is that the idiosyncratic features of some cargos, e.g., which fiestas they are featured in, seem to have influence on the prestige. In the end I had to construct a prestige ranking of cargos on an intuitive basis. I used the cost scale as a base line, changing the rank of some cargos according to my knowledge of the authority of the post and the idiosyncratic features involved. Any confidence I had in my intuition stemmed from extensive, but informal and unsystematic, observation of Zinacanteco interaction which I perceived as involving the "prestige" of individuals.

I guessed that the ranking I made, the prestige scale, was a close approximation to the prestige ranking of cargos as it is perceived by Zinacantecos. Tests of the same samples of cargo careers and father-son participation using the prestige scale showed an even stronger tendency to consistent performance over a man’s lifetime and over generations than did the tests based on the cost scale. This finding gave me more confidence in the "psychological reality" of
the prestige scale as a picture of the way Zinacantecos perceive participation in
the cargo system. However, there was no way to get informants to directly
state that this was in fact the prestige ranking they had in mind. Any attempt
to ask about the relative prestige of cargos in a direct way always drew either a
statement about the relative cost (which is public knowledge), or a retreat to
the cultural ideal that all cargos are in service of the saints, and all service of
the saints is equally virtuous. This ideal blocked every attempt to get direct
estimates of relative prestige of cargos from informants.

In this situation informant error became important. I found that the pat-
terning of erroneous statements about participation of individuals in the cargo
system was the best systematic check on the psychological reality of the
prestige scale. I had statements from more than one informant (or more than
one statement from a single informant) about the cargos passed by many of the
individuals included in my samples. In some cases informants disagreed. In al-
most all cases of disagreement, it was possible to make systematic decisions
about which statement to accept as correct and which statement to label as
error. Thus, I have a number of cases about which I can say, "Individual num-
ber 1 in fact passed cargo Y, but the informant says that he passed cargo Z.
When arranged on the prestige scale, these errors tend to be very close to the
actual performance of the individual concerned. That is, the informant who did
not have correct information did not make a random guess. He apparently
guessed in terms of some general impression of the cargo-holder's prestige in
the community.

![Figure 1. First Level* (N=38).](image_url)

* Entries in parentheses are less than expected for those cells.
The 38 erroneous statements about first level cargos and the 73 cases of erroneous statements about second level cargos are presented in Figs. 1 and 2, respectively. In Fig. 1 the 11 ranks represent the 28 first level cargos that are served in the ceremonial center of Zinacantan. Each of the first ten ranks includes a pair of cargos that is devoted to the same saint and performs much ritual as a unit. The 11th rank includes all 8 mayores (policemen and messengers) who have very low prestige positions that are only marginally "religious"—though they count for progress in the hierarchy. They are lumped in this fashion because informants could seldom remember finer distinctions. In Fig. 2 each of the 12 ranks represents one of the 12 cargos of the second level. The distribution of cases is shown in Tables 1 and 2. For the first level (Table 1) 31.6% of the cases are in the 18.2% of the cells closest to the diagonal and 52.6% of the cases are in the 34.6% of the cells closest to the diagonal. Application of a binomial test to these data shows that the distribution would have happened less than one time in 20 if all the informants had been guessing randomly. The corresponding probability for second level cargos is much more satisfactory—less than one time in 100,000.

While both of the prestige scales that I constructed yield statistically significant distributions of errors, there is the possibility that some other ranking might be more appropriate. In the case of the data for the first level there are obvious changes that would yield a distribution closer to the diagonal—i.e., if
TABLE 1. FIRST LEVEL  
(N = 38)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adjacent to the diagonal</th>
<th>Within two of the diagonal*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total cases</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total cells</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P less than</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes all cells adjacent to the diagonal and all cells adjacent to them, e.g., for row 5 "within two of the diagonal" includes the cells in columns 3, 4, 6 and 7.

position 9 were placed in position 6, and positions 6, 7 and 8 became 7, 8, and 9. In the case of the data for the second level these alternative arrangements are less obvious. In both cases, however, there is no major change that could be justified in terms of what I know about the cargo system in Zinacantan. That is, I attribute the "imperfections" in the distributions to the fact that the sample is small.2

A more serious possible objection to the conclusions I am about to draw may be stated in the following form: the ordering may be correct, but my reasons for making it may be incorrect. That is, the manner in which I combined cost, authority, and a few idiosyncratic features may be said to yield an appropriate ordering by chance. For instance, on the second level, positions 5 and 6 are adjacent in the ritual walking order of the cargo-holders as well as in my prestige ranking. It is possible that the informant confused them not on the prestige dimension that I postulate, but simply by their position in the line as

TABLE 2. SECOND LEVEL  
(N = 73)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adjacent to the diagonal</th>
<th>Within two of the diagonal*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total cases</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>64.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total cells</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P less than</td>
<td>.00001</td>
<td>.00001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* See note on Table 1.

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he remembers them. While some of the cases of error may be explained by such alternative principles, there is no one such principle or combination of such principles, that I can think of, that orders all the errors as well as the prestige dimension.

Since the prestige scale was constructed prior to and without regard to the analysis of errors, I feel relatively safe in drawing the following conclusions from the data:

First, I conclude that Zinacantecos, though they will not openly discuss it, actually do perceive cargos in terms of relative prestige; and are apt to remember the approximate prestige of an individual even when they have forgotten the particular cargo he passed in the process of achieving it.

Second, I conclude that my prestige scale is a fairly accurate ranking of the cargos in terms of the prestige that they bring to the person who passed them.

These conclusions may be drawn only if it is postulated that: when an informant makes an error that results from lack of precise information, he is most likely to approximate the truth in terms that are meaningful to him.

This "postulate" seems to be a reasonable one, and there is some evidence that may be marshalled for it. First comes the evidence contained in the present paper. That is, highly significant patterning of informant error about cargos in Zinacantan is best explained by the use of the postulate. In addition, Miller uses essentially the same kind of reasoning in inferring the dimensions of the perceptual space of subjects who confuse English phonemes. "We say that two stimuli are (psychologically, F. C.) similar to the extent that both tend to evoke the same behavior, other influences remaining constant. If two stimuli tend to evoke the same behavior, we can say that the two stimuli tend to be confused under the stated conditions of the experiment and so we substitute confusability for similarity" (1956:354). He concludes that, "in psychology at least, truth can be revealed by errors and order can result from confusions" (1956:359). De Soto and Bosley, in their study of errors made in learning to apply labels (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior and Senior) to fictitious persons, successfully use "... the supposition that confusions are inversely related distance between points (in the cognitive space, F. C.)" in their analysis of the data (1962:303).

Given the postulate stated above, informant error, which is usually a hindrance to the ethnographer, becomes an invaluable aid. Especially in cases where the cultural ideal prevents natives from openly expressing the factors which influence their perceptions of a situation, the analysis of error may provide an excellent way for the anthropologist to test his hypotheses about what these factors may be.

I would suggest that, where it is possible to record informant error, induced or natural, the analysis which best patterns the error best approximates the psychologically real one. However, just as my analysis must leave in doubt whether the precise ordering of cargos that I made is psychologically real (if, indeed, there is a psychologically real ordering at all), the componential analysis which best explains the errors of informants can only be said to be the best
among the structurally real analyses done by the anthropologist. The possibility that this most psychologically real of all existent structurally real analyses is not the psychologically real one remains. In any case, the analysis of informant error can be used to eliminate from consideration the structurally real analyses that are furthest from the psychologically real one.

NOTES

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2 More recently Wallace seems less optimistic about solving the problem. "The problem of defining psychological reality is a knotty one and will . . . probably require the acceptance of a principle of cognitive (or semantic) indeterminacy" (1962:11).

3 There are 14 alfereces (second level) who do all ritual activity together, but in actual practice one of the posts is often passed as a third cargo and another is usually passed as a third or fourth cargo. These two are considered as third level in this statement.

In addition to the 54 cargos mentioned, there is another which "counts" in the hierarchy. Usually passed by old men, and carrying very low prestige, it is taken without regard to level, except that it is always the last cargo for the individual who undertakes it.

Elsewhere (Cancian 1962b) I have stated that there are 32 first level cargos in Zinacantan. Two new cargos were created in a hamlet far from the ceremonial center at the beginning of 1963.

4 Especially in Fig. 2, the distribution is clustered at the middle of the scale. There seem to be two reasons for this: 1. Informants tend to make very few errors about very high prestige people, and 2. The samples are deficient in cases of very low prestige people. In addition the distribution may be showing "end-anchoring" (De Soto and Bosley 1962).

5 In calculating the probability that the distributions occurred by chance the number of cases falling in cells adjacent to the diagonal (or within two) is compared with the number falling further from the diagonal. Under the null hypothesis the distribution is random, i.e., the cases adjacent to the diagonal (or within two) are not a significantly greater proportion of the total number of cases than are the cells adjacent to the diagonal (or within two) of the total number of cells. For the test (actual figures for Table 1, adjacent to the diagonal): p = proportion of total cells (.182); r = number of cases falling in these cells (12); and n = total number of cases (38). The cumulative probability for this distribution and all more extreme ones was read from tables (Aiken et al. 1955).

6 The most glaring imperfection in the data for the first level is the 6 cases in the cell at row 9, column 4. Five of these actually involve only two individuals and repetitions of erroneous statements about them by the same informant at different times. How the informant got his mistaken idea I do not know, but I felt that each repetition had to be counted as an independent case since the errors were made at intervals so great (1 or 2 months) that it is unlikely that he was merely covering for his previous mistake.

7 A related logic, the use of erroneous recall to infer important cultural and cognitive principles, is illustrated by Nadel (1937) and Kennedy and Lasswell (1958). The use of ambiguous stimuli, e.g., TAT pictures, to get at cultural themes (in contrast to use for depth psychology) also follows a related logic.

8 In this paper I have not followed this rule exactly, because my sample is small and has peculiar features (see note 6 and the paragraph in the text to which it refers). With a systematically gathered and larger sample of errors, one would go to the prestige scale directly from the ranking that best patterned the errors.
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