Hi, My Name Is

Greeting and meeting new people happens almost every day and, at Parkland, you will probably see that person in the halls again so making that greeting memorable is key. In our group’s ethnography, we focused on what Parkland students think the social normative behavior is for greeting new people. We were interested in this because we collectively had different ways that we felt were normal to greet people. To obtain the information to answer our question we conducted several interviews and in the interviews we focused on the importance of a handshake and the importance of titles or authority. Our group researched proper etiquette to gather a collective list of things to look for in our interviews; this became our participant observation. Personally, I am someone that thinks it is necessary to shake hands with everyone I meet no matter their title or authority over me. I was interested to see if other fellow Parkland students felt the same way.

Many people have their own definition of proper etiquette, and it is widely known that a handshake is the key to all formal and informal greeting. Scholars have gathered together and devised many lists of what constitutes “proper etiquette.” A professor from the University of Manchester even took the time to create the equation for a perfect handshake. In his equation, he includes details such as eye contact, firmness of grip, temperature of hand, smile symmetry, verbal greeting,
duration, etc. These details are not only important to people in a formal handshake but also in a formal greeting. From our class studies in anthropology, our group decided that a handshake is cultural mediation that takes place in the form of a ritual. Cultural mediation is the process in which someone learns social normative behavior and, in the case of a handshake, this behavior is learned over time from observing others or from being taught the specific behaviors (Katz 2013: 68). We say that handshakes are a ritual because they are an unspoken norm; or so we hypothesized before conducting our interviews.

We conducted several interviews and we chose our interviewees at random in the Parkland hallways. We had several males and several females and found that there were some gender differences in what was considered social norms. For example, in one of our interviews a male stated that he always feels it is necessary to greet someone with a handshake because his grandfather and father emphasized it when he was growing up. In a female interview, however, one interviewee stated that she had never had to formally greet someone before and that a handshake would not be her first choice if she ever had to formally greet someone.

We also found in our interviews that people, for the most part, didn’t find enough importance in a handshake to mention it before we did. Our initial question in most interviews was close to “what do you think is appropriate when you are first greeting someone new?” The most common ideas we received were good eye contact, smiling, and a warm introduction. Our follow-up question would often include the word “handshake”, and then immediately the interviewee would state that a handshake was important too. Going into the interview we expected the
participants to say that they think handshakes are appropriate in formal settings, but when meeting someone new or a peer, at Parkland, a handshake was not necessary. However, many participants simply didn’t mention the gesture.

Our group sees a handshake as a social equalizer in the same way our society could view a red solo cup as a social equalizer at a party (D’Costa 2013: 84). By offering your hand to another person you are not only offering your greeting but you are putting yourself on a equal playing field. In our interviews we wanted to know if greeting fellow Parkland students, who are usually your peers, felt as important as greeting an adult in a formal setting. We had one special interview where we unintentionally interviewed an older Parkland student. He stated that because he is not the typical college age student, he views every greeting as a formal greeting, and he uses handshakes. However, our younger interviewees who were our peers, stated that if they were greeting someone new at Parkland, a nod and smile would suffice. We were obviously surprised by these results because as stated earlier, our group sees a handshake as a simple but important gesture.

A handshake being simple was laughable after researching what goes in to a perfect handshake, however, we still felt like the idea of initiating a handshake was simple and easy. We found out that at Parkland it isn’t always the case. In one interview, Kendall initiated a handshake at the beginning and end of the discussion. We thought this gesture would get less awkward at the end of the interview, but instead became more awkward. We decided that it would be interesting to practice proper etiquette in our interview to see how the participant reacted. At the beginning of the interview, Kendall went in for a handshake to greet a girl. She was
reluctant at first but ultimately gave in because she realized that it might be proper for her to shake his hand. However, at the end of the interview when Kendall initiated the gesture, she looked at him like he was crazy and gave the most half-hearted handshake we had ever seen. This brought up our next idea, when are handshakes necessary?

We realized that there are many instances when handshakes are considered proper etiquette; instances neither our interviewees nor our group thought to mention. To properly use a handshake, it should be utilized when someone offers his/her hand to you, when first meeting someone, when greeting guests or the host, when renewing an acquaintance, or when saying goodbye. Because most of our interviewees didn’t even mention the handshake in the first place, we couldn’t expect them to state all of these instances, but we definitely hoped for it. In the end, we concluded that most students feel that an introduction including a name and a warm smile with eye contact are the proper way to greet fellow students. We also think that a handshake was considered necessary by our interviewees when the situation is formal or an older person is being greeted. However, just because the handshake is necessary doesn’t mean that it is viewed as a ritual. As stated before, cultural mediation and rituals are *unspoken* norms, or things that happen without thinking. From what our interviewees said, handshaking is something that you have to think pretty hard about; when to do it, when not to do it, how to do it, etc.

Our culture has used cultural mediation to create what we consider proper etiquette but we realized from reading the article “To Give up on Words” by Keith Basso, that a handshake and good eye contact are not always utilized in other
cultures. In the article, the main focus is the western Apache tribe and their commonly quiet culture. Basso brings up the fact that most people view American Indian tribes as anti-social or basically rude because they sparingly use their voices for communication. What this anthropologist found out was that the Apache tribe doesn’t see verbal communication as necessary in many situations. The Apache tribe stays silent when meeting strangers, when courting someone, when their children return home, when they are getting cussed out and in special ceremonies called “curing ceremonials” (Basso 2013: 42). They do it for no other reason other than that they don’t feel the need to talk to people right away. They feel that when it is right to finally communicate with a person, it will happen. We thought that it was interesting to compare how the western Apache culture acts compared to our own culture because it shows just how vastly different everyone is in our world.

Our group realizes that on a daily basis, most people meet someone new. In fact, when our group formed, we all were introducing ourselves for the first time. What we were most interested in when conducting our ethnography was what do Parkland students think are the social norms when first greeting someone new. In our group, we all contributed different ideas for how to properly greet someone and so we were interested to see how other Parkland students felt about the subject. We researched and compiled a collective list of proper etiquette including things such as good eye contact, a warm smile, an introduction, and most importantly a handshake. We focused on the use of handshakes and their importance depending on the authority or title of the person they are being used for. In the many interviews we conducted we used participant observation to see the body language and use of
handshakes that our interviewees decided to act on. We had varying answers from our participants including many that failed to even mention the use of handshakes, and ultimately we discovered that greeting a peer at Parkland is a much more informal setting and “simple nods” and “lots of hugs” will do just fine when greeting someone.

Works Cited


