Careers in Anthropology
Profiles of Practitioner Anthropologists

■ Paula L. W. Sabloff, ed.

National Association for the Practice of Anthropology
A section of the American Anthropological Association
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Introduction

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This book has grown out of a series of practitioner profiles that Susan Squires and I published in the Anthropology Newsletter of the American Anthropological Association from 1994 to 1997. Building on the brief descriptions of practitioner career profiles organized by Karin Tice, the secretary/editor of NAPA, we networked with our NAPA colleagues and friends. We asked them to write about their career paths—from undergraduate and graduate school training to obtaining employment—and to describe their current jobs. We suggested that authors include their philosophies about their career paths and any suggestions they might have for young people contemplating or preparing for careers as practitioner anthropologists. The reader will see that different authors have emphasized different points.

All authors were incredibly sincere and concerned about helping young people plan career paths. Many thanked us for the opportunity to reflect on their work lives, to stop and think about anthropology, and to recommit themselves to linking their anthropological ideals with their work.

This bulletin is an expansion and update of many profiles published in the Anthropology Newsletter. All authors were given the opportunity to revise their practitioner profiles, and most have done so. The dates of original publication and updated material are provided so that the reader can place each profile in historical context. Also, for additional profiles, I networked with archaeologists and anthropological linguists to ensure that the book covers all four fields of anthropology—sociocultural, biological, archaeological, and linguistic anthropology. In this way, the book would reflect the field and complement the NAPA-produced video, Anthropologists at Work, a presentation of anthropologists' work in applied and practicing anthropology.

I was successful in finding archaeologists to contribute to this volume. I had difficulty locating anthropological linguists. Perhaps this was because my network does not extend far into this particular anthropological community. At any rate, the lack of representation of anthropological linguists in this book is a deficit I wish I could have overcome.

The reader will notice that the practitioners in the book seem to draw on two basic definitions of culture. Some who refer to the holistic, or systemic, approach to anthropology are working from the original perspective
of culture propounded by E. B. Tylor, who wrote, "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1871:1). This definition set the agenda for anthropological work for 100 years. Based on the idea that a society can be isolated from its physical and historical context, Tylor's definition does the following:

- It conceptualizes culture as a core of beliefs, attitudes, and values shared by a group of people, a society. It is these shared perceptions (or worldview) that make the population homogeneous and set it apart from surrounding groups (see Wright 1998:8).
- And it notes that the major characteristic of any culture is that it is holistic. This means two things: First, culture—the worldview of a society—affects all parts of group thinking and acting. That is, culture penetrates daily life in all its manifestations. Second, culture is holistic because all parts of a culture are interrelated. Another way of saying this is that a culture is a system with interdependent parts. If, for example, the political structure changes—through invasion, colonialism, natural disaster, and so on—then we can expect the economic and religious parts of the society to change; we can expect the socialization and enculturation processes to also change.

This kernel of Tylor's definition—that culture has a cognitive base and is systemic—has informed anthropological research and has contributed to the understanding of culture in many disciplines. It is our strength and part of our contribution to social science. Tylor's definition is still in use today and is the foundation for the work of many of the practitioners profiled in this volume.

In 1973 a new definition of culture coalesced in the writing of Clifford Geertz. He writes, "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (1973:5). His spider imagery may be interpreted as follows:

- Culture is the meaning that groups of people give to things they observe or experience. For example, some people understand lightning as a sign that God (or the gods) is angry, whereas others interpret it as an electric current resulting from friction between clouds.
- The meaning that people give to things is encoded in symbols, for example, the flag, certain foods, body language. Every culture has "key symbols"—symbols that are reminders of how people should behave and how people should view "reality." The combination of symbols is sometimes called a people's ideology (Wright 1998:9).
• A culture is not coterminous with a territory or group. One person can keep several cultures in her or his head at any one time and switch back and forth between them as the situation demands. Several cultures can occupy the same space (for example, over 146 languages are spoken in New York City). And one culture can be spread over vast noncontiguous spaces (for example, Mongolian culture is practiced in the People’s Republic of Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, Germany, and the United States where there are enclaves of Mongolians).

• Culture is a process. At any one time, there are several perspectives in a culture. Men and women contribute different meaning to a given event; so do ethnic groups (Americans’ reactions to the O. J. Simpson trial provide a good example of this). These different meanings are “contested meanings” because groups compete in the public arena to have their meanings/ideology predominate (see Wright 1998). Thus, culture becomes a constant process of “contestation.”

This new definition of culture enables us to apply an old concept to the modern world of complex societies and to all societies facing globalization. Geertz’s definition underpins several practitioner profiles in the book.

No matter which definition the practitioners subscribe to, I hope the reader will see that the concept of culture binds together all four fields of anthropology in academic, applied, and practitioner work. I hope the reader will also see the idealism in the practitioners’ lives. These authors recognize that anthropology has made major contributions to society and social science, for it is the discipline that has spawned the concepts of culture, cultural relativism, and cultural preservation and—most important for practitioner and applied work—the idea that the best way to solve human problems and understand the issues is to include the perspective of the people being affected by change, that is, the bottom-up approach to social change.

I would like to thank the NAPA Board for suggesting this bulletin. It is gratifying to know that my previous work is considered valuable, especially for the people I care about most: students and future colleagues. My NAPA colleagues are the ones I know best—friendly, inclusive, supportive, intellectually stimulating, can-do people. My association with them is always a pleasure. My thanks go especially to Linda Bennett and Dennis Wiedman, coeditors of the NAPA Bulletin Series. They have supported and encouraged this project (and me) from its inception. Linda was especially helpful in pushing this manuscript through to completion, and she deserves the credit for the highly effective idea of placing major ideas in bold throughout the text. Megan Tracy, a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, made the project possible through her careful administrative and editing efforts. And my husband, Jeremy A. Sabloff, makes everything possible through his love and support.
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April 1998
Revised, summer 1999
Ulaanbaatar and Philadelphia