

## News and Views

### A View on the Science: Physical Anthropology at the Millennium

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**EDITOR'S NOTE** The year 2000 marks the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this transitional year, prominent physical anthropologists have provided brief reflections on our discipline, including what attracted them to it, and their views on the directions our discipline may pursue as we enter, in January 2001, the third millennium. *Am J Phys Anthropol* 113:451–454, 2000.

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Photograph courtesy of S. Khorrami.

I have been (or wanted to be) an anthropologist for nearly as long as I can remember. Which may seem odd, since specializing in primatology as I do, some of my colleagues might conclude I am not an anthropologist at all. For me it has never been merely lip service to assert that the various subdisciplines of anthropology are united by the common theme of biosocial variation. Physical anthropology is the field where this integration of biology and behavior is most apparent and most avidly practiced. But over the course of my life, I have seriously considered a career in each of the major subdisciplines of anthropology. I will briefly outline what attracted me to each of these areas of anthropology, culminating with physical anthropology, and then turn to what I see as the most important challenge facing our discipline today.

### LOOKING BACK: ONE PERSON'S PATH TO PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

When I was ten or so my father brought home a copy of *Gods, Graves and Scholars* and read me passages, igniting my imagination about the possibility of rediscovering ancient civilizations. I decided I would become a classical archaeologist. I held fast to this ambition even during a Cold War interlude in the U.S. when I was awarded a scholarship to attend a special school where I was drilled in biology, chemistry, math, world history and Russian. This curriculum had no doubt been established in response to the 1950's American anxiety that "Ivan was smarter than Johnny" (we were also taught what to do in case of nuclear missile attack). My immersion schooling in the sciences was interrupted after a few years when my father was once more stationed overseas. Being born of a European mother and an American military father, I had the good fortune to live in several countries and learn multiple languages by the time I was in my teens. At 16, the high school career counselors decided I had been educated be-

yond the curriculum that the schools on the German military base had on offer and so I went off to the closest institute of higher learning—the American College of Paris. There I was plunged into the arts and languages and the cultural life of France. I also took an introductory anthropology course (where physical anthropology was not even mentioned as I recall) that appealed to my interests in great nation-states, culture and language. For half of the year-long course I thought perhaps my multilingual abilities could be parlayed into a career as a linguistic anthropologist. Then I read *Village in the Vaucluse* (Wiley, 1964), an ethnography of a community in rural France, and knew that I wanted to study how people manage to live in social groups, in particular how women live out their lives in the social company of men.

I applied to the University of Texas and signed up for every undergraduate anthropology course I could take. My first hands-on anthropology job was as a research assistant on a project where we interviewed women readers of romance novels about their views on sex, men and morality. I realized with dismay that my somewhat introverted personality made it difficult for me to ask people questions about such private matters. Simultaneously, I took an engaging primatology course and discovered at the local zoo that I had aptitude and enthusiasm for observational research on primates. So I took on a position helping to clean monkey cages and collect ethological data and rapidly encountered “Zen and the joy of monkey-watching”. It became clear to me that my interests in sociality and the relations between the sexes could translate nicely into primate studies. I went to the anthropology advisor and asked to switch into primatology—he told me that I would now need to concentrate on courses in physical anthropology. Happily, the university had a large complement of physical anthropologists in the early 1970s. As I signed up for courses in human genetics, biocultural adaptation, growth and development, osteology, human evolution and history of physical anthropology, it felt like I had returned full circle to the immersion in the sciences I had received a decade earlier. I embraced

the biology in physical anthropology like a lost childhood friend.

I tell this story because it demonstrates that for one practitioner at least, the sub-disciplines of anthropology flow seamlessly into one another. But I am not as entirely naïve as this image of unified anthropology might make me sound. First, I recognize that there is tremendous variety in the types of research conducted by anthropologists, a breadth that is both our strength and our Achilles heel. I chaired our department’s Graduate Awards Committee for many years and the most common response of my colleagues to reading any one of the inevitable array of research proposals was “but how is this Anthropology?” I started to keep track and this query was put to me at least 50 times and it was asked about research proposed in each of the recognized subfields — not just in primatology! The sheer diversity of research topics and questions addressed by anthropologists is a source of puzzlement and amazement to ourselves and others, particularly if we become invested in one particular way of doing anthropology, or one particular understanding of what anthropology should be about.

#### LOOKING FORWARD: CHALLENGES TO THE COLLECTIVE ENDEAVOR

I also realize that the inherent stress point in our discipline is the relationship between those anthropologists who focus more on sociocultural aspects of humanness and those who concentrate on biological phenomena. Nearly half a century ago, a scientist and philosopher named C.P. Snow (1959) wrote a now classic description of the two academic cultures of science and humanism. These “two cultures” still hold sway in anthropology and are dichotomized in the minds of many anthropologists. Four years ago, I co-hosted an international workshop with Shirley Strum in which we tried to coax participants from all sides of the “Science Wars” to exchange ideas rather than insults. Even with the goodwill of our participants, it was an enormous undertaking to try to bridge the gap between the worldviews of those who identify primarily as scientists and those who identify mainly as humanists. We cannot claim to have done

more than begin to lay the foundations on the two banks of this conceptual divide, and yet it is important to persist in this endeavor (Strum and Fedigan, 2000). If we don't succeed, the so-called science wars have the potential to be the undoing of anthropology in the new millennium, much as they have, in the recent past, led to the unraveling of several anthropology departments in major universities across the U.S.

Furthermore, this talk of holistic anthropology may sound strange coming from a primatologist—more than any other type of specialist in our discipline, primatologists are continually required to justify our presence in anthropology departments. As Karen Strier put it during our international workshop: "primatologists in Anthropology Departments are like the lone gorilla in the zoo—no one quite remembers how he got there, no one is convinced he needs a companion, and they probably won't replace him when he dies." I find it necessary to caution all of my graduate students to develop their own coherent, unhesitating answer to the question: "what is primate studies doing in anthropology anyway?" There are many acceptable answers, not least the one that Sherwood Washburn gave when he conceptualized the "New Physical Anthropology" in the 1950s—that our primate relatives provide many unique insights into the evolution of the human species. Whether we think of the nonhuman primates as phylogenetic homologies or ecological and social analogies, they can provide us with the ability to use the comparative method so favored by anthropologists. This is a long way from the biological reductionism propounded by some early popular culture ethnologists and so disliked by our cultural anthropology colleagues (see Pavelka, *In Press*). Sometimes I answer this question about why primatologists in North America are found mainly in anthropology departments by explaining that primatology is really an extension of the cross-cultural perspective to a cross-species perspective. For example, when I went to live with my European family as a teenager, that was the first time I really understood what it meant to be a North American. And it wasn't until after I spent my first year living day-in-day-

out with a group of monkeys, that I developed a contextualized perspective on what it means to be human. Admittedly, some people listen to this explanation about a cross-species perspective and look at me warily as if I might start doing a Tarzan imitation next—probably it is that part about "living with monkeys." But I believe we cannot fully develop self-understanding without some standards of comparison, and the other primates provide anthropologists with a wide array of comparative possibilities for understanding ourselves.

Finally, my lifelong commitment to the diverse fields of anthropology is tempered by the recognition that I too have been lured by the siren call of better resources and lower teaching loads (not to speak of fewer staff meetings) in the neighboring biology department on my campus. What always reaffirms me as an anthropologist is the bio-social or biocultural perspective, the broad but integrated (cross-disciplinary) possibilities of anthropology. Recently I was privileged to be one of the participants at Sydel Silverman's final conference before her retirement as President of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research—a workshop on anthropology at the turn of the century. All of the participants were former conference organizers who had worked with Sydel Silverman over the previous 12 years. We had hosted conferences on topics that ranged all across the subdisciplines but that found common ground in the need for integration and sustained conversation if anthropology were to advance as a scholarly discipline. As I heard about conference after conference from the respective organizers it was remarkable how the same themes kept emerging from these diverse specialists and topical areas—what I have come to think of as the "Four C's": complexity, comparison, cross-disciplinarity and conservation. Each anthropologist referred to the complex nature of their research topic and the need for a multifaceted approach. Many organizers also referred to the comparative method and the need to address questions with this method. Each conference topic involved cross-disciplinary research and the bringing together of many types of experts. And finally there was much

talk about the over-riding importance of conservation in the next century. As a primatologist I had been aware that conservation of the nonhuman primates has moved to the top of our own priority list. But during this conference on anthropology at the turn of the century, I also fully recognized that the protection of the people who work with sociocultural anthropologists and the preservation of the records collected by archaeologists and linguists and the safeguarding of anthropology itself as a collective endeavor are all at stake in this era.

There is an animated Canadian short film called "The Big Snit" in which a couple begins to quarrel over a small matter in their home. Their disagreement escalates into a great row that fully captures our attention until we start to notice through their living room window that, outside, there are frightened people running in all directions and a mushroom cloud billowing. Finally we realize that a nuclear holocaust is taking place in the larger world while the internecine battle continues between the oblivious couple locked in shortsighted combat. Let us hope that Anthropology in this new millennium can transcend its internal divisions and attend to the important task of protecting all that anthropologists hold dear—the

people, material cultures, and primates we study, the data we collect and the enterprise of anthropology itself. Even with our highly varied specialties, we all have a contribution to make toward the collaborative venture of understanding the human place in nature.

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