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INTRODUCTION: BIOGRAPHIES OF ANTHROPOLOGISTS AS ANTHROPOLOGICAL DATA

Roger Ivar Lohmann

Biographies of anthropologists are widely recognized as useful for the history of science and the discipline. Introducing this special issue “Biographies of Anthropologists,” I argue that they not only provide information about anthropology, but also data for anthropology because they are studies of human agents enmeshed in social and cultural contexts, comparable to life histories of ethnographic informants. Biographies of anthropologists are of similar importance for empirical and theoretical anthropology as ethnographies, grammars, and monographs in archaeology and biological anthropology. They depict cultural dynamics from a person-centered, intimate, experience-near, and diachronic perspective on anthropology’s cluster of sodalities.

Keywords: anthropologists, biography, cultural change, ethnographic data, lifecycle

What person, after all, can count the facts of his or her life without making evaluations about what is important, what is good, what is painful, what necessary, and what the product of outside forces...? (Langness and Frank 1981:5)



ROGER IVAR LOHMANN is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Trent University. He is Editor-in-Chief of Reviews in Anthropology and editor of this special issue, “Biographies of Anthropologists.” His research concerns the blending of perception and imagination in experiences that serve as personal evidence for cultural beliefs. Among his publications are “Dreams and Ethnography” in The New Science of Dreaming (2007), “Sound of a Woman: Drums, Gender, and Myth among the Asabano of Papua New Guinea (Material Religion 2007) and “The Supernatural Is Everywhere: Defining Qualities of Religion in Melanesia and Beyond” (Anthropological Forum 2003).

Address correspondence to Roger Lohmann, Anthropology, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7B8, Canada. E-mail: rogerlohmann@trentu.ca

LIVES FOR ANTHROPOLOGY

The lives of anthropologists are often extraordinarily rich. Their stories are not merely entertaining, not merely of historical value. As documentations of human beings enmeshed in particular social and historical circumstances, they are valuable data for anthropology. “Biographies of Anthropologists,” this special issue of *Reviews in Anthropology*, focuses on this genre of historical anthropology as represented by a recent burst of monographs and volumes featuring anthropologists as biographical subjects. While continually produced, and read with interest to learn about the discipline’s personalities and past, biographies of anthropologists are seldom the object of analysis *for*—as opposed to *of*—anthropological method or theory. This issue represents several efforts to read biographical work on anthropologists as empirical research on the social culture of anthropology.

In this brief introduction I cover central issues that arise from a constructively critical engagement with biographies of anthropologists. I first discuss issues surrounding the biographical endeavor. Second, I explore approaches to life histories of anthropologists in particular. Third, I consider why biographies of scholars are written and their uses as scholarship. I argue for thinking about biographies of anthropologists as anthropological data. Seeing them in this light can provide guidance for their research, writing, evaluation, and use. Following this discussion, I preview the essays in this collection noting some of their implications and contributions toward these goals.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL ENDEAVOR

Biography—written description of life story—exists in a variety of forms that are continuous with and blend into other genres of writing meant to convey accurate information about the world, including people’s understandings and experiences. Biography’s narrative form, an experience-near, empathetic vision of a single individual’s point of view and interactions with others, lends it an appeal and readability similar to fiction. Nevertheless, biography is emphatically nonfiction: a representation of reality, including inner, psychological realities reconstructed as accurately as possible from evidence such as statements, letters, and analysis of the biographical subject’s behaviors.

Biographies are more likely to be produced when the events featured have receded into the past. This is so either because the researcher-author wishes to be able to write as close to the “full”

story as possible, or because the potential dangers of writing about matters regarded as personal or private recede with the passage of time, especially with the deaths of biographical subjects. Furthermore, in some cultural-legal circumstances, access to information about biographical subjects may be restricted for a certain period. When these become available, new biographic work can commence (see Sullivan, this issue).

Of course, what is considered “private” and thus not appropriate for public writings varies cross-culturally, as do which stories of life-adventures might be regarded with disdain versus admiration. Are biographers or other documenters of human reality, such as historians, ethnographers, and psychologists, to write only those stories that they suspect their research subjects and audiences will regard as showing admirable character traits and agency? Even if this were possible—and it is not, because culture continually changes, and we write for residents of the distant future as well as the multiple-cultured present—such whitewashing is anathema to the scholarly quest for accuracy and truth. Yet the author of a biography is in the powerful but challenging position of recording and evaluating for posterity someone’s legacy.

When ethnographers describe a whole people in the abstract, even when they are critical, no named individual need be exposed to either canonization or blame. Quite often, individuals are made anonymous or given pseudonyms. Biographers cannot elide this responsibility. This is one of the reasons why writing about individuals by name in anthropology can be problematic, why fieldworkers offer to hide informants’ identities except when this is impossible, as when they write at length about and evaluate the careers of public personalities—something I have found challenging in my own work (Lohmann 2007).

Anthropologists are obliged to be honest and balanced, to tell the facts and reveal their positionality and sources of knowledge as accurately as possible. Avoiding ethnocentrism while providing accuracy in written accounts is a central tenet of anthropological wisdom; applying the cognate principle to biography, anthropological biographers are compelled to write sympathetically yet honestly of individual biographical subjects, representing subjects’ own perspectives and analyzing the causes and consequences of their actions. Doing this well in biography is made more complicated by the convention in some cultures that the recently dead are not to be criticized, and by the fact that those yet alive are likely to disapprove of at least some of the ways they have been portrayed. Awareness and separation of emic and etic perspectives are as important in biographies as they are in ethnographies.

When written records are available, there are complementary advantages and disadvantages of writing biographies of living individuals—who can be interviewed—versus subjects who are deceased and beyond living memory. The greater the experience-nearness of the data and narrative, the greater the potential for emic richness (see Lindholm 2008). Conversely, when the subject's life has receded into the past, knowable only through documents, the cultural and historical context of that person's life and actions can be assessed with greater hindsight and broader contextual perspective.

The production and evaluation of any biography is aided by characterizing the relationship between the biographer and the subject. This reveals something about how the data were selected, gathered, and interpreted. For example, Lewis (this issue) shows how the different perspectives and purposes behind the biographies of Franz Boas that he compares provided different takes on this founding father. He furthermore makes clear his own admiring relationship to the memory and ideas of Boas. Such reflexivity makes for more accurate social science. As Grinker (this issue) notes, those writing with too much admiration about a subject-as-hero, particularly when that subject is still alive, are susceptible to being incomplete in their coverage. Hagiography easily slips into positive bias. The same is of course true when one writes with distaste about one's subjects—something that ethnographers and archaeologists, describing social practices of which they personally disapprove, must strive to rise above (see Lohmann 2004:122).

In evaluating biographical and biography-like sources, published and otherwise, one must scrutinize for possible positive or negative bias or "spin" and ask the question, to what purposes were these biographical records made and how does that affect their accuracy and value as data? Spin is, of course, *itself* data about the author, and the effects of the subject on the author. While information in biographies can provide great insight into why particular actors did what they did, including their research choices and the consequences for disciplinary trajectories and progress, knowledge of the motives of authors of biographical information aid the evaluation of that information as data.

The purposes for writing the many biographies of anthropologists, like other writings, are enlightening for our consideration of them as secondary historical sources and anthropological data. Biography of anthropologists is ubiquitous in the discipline's corpus: obituaries written in tribute to colleagues and teachers; brief biographical accounts in textbooks designed to introduce students to anthropological theory (e.g., Emuseum of Minnesota State University 2008;

Moore 2004); even briefer biographical statements on contributors to edited volumes or journals (including this one); memoirs about oneself or others (e.g., Fox 2004); and accounts of one's own life events and their effects on empirical discoveries and theoretical trajectories. An example of this last type is Rosaldo's (1993) account of his wife's death in the field to explain his ethnographic insight in "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage." This is a reminder, too, that elements of biography and autobiography are often included in much anthropological writing not explicitly devoted to biography, regardless of subfield, much of which can be characterized as autoethnography (see Reed-Danahay 1997).

When anthropologists write biographies of other anthropologists, this is a form of native anthropology—though as Kingston (2007:369) suggests, "native" versus "non-native" status in this regard is a matter of degree. Like many social cultures, anthropology is not homogeneous and circumscribed, and members of our loose "tribe," while sharing much, each have distinctive expertise and are uniquely connected to others within and beyond our scholarly sodality. Being a fellow anthropologist goes a long way to understanding the life of another, but for the last few kilometers at least, we are all foreign to one another. Anthropological autobiography, on the other hand, probably represents the closest thing to absolute native anthropology—and autoethnography—that is possible. The anthropological autobiographer faces the same challenge as the hagiographer to expand his or her perspective on the chosen biographical subject.

APPROACHES TO LIFE HISTORIES OF ANTHROPOLOGISTS

When anthropologists are the subjects of biographies a variety of approaches to biography and biography-like products are possible. These can take the form of raw, unpublished data or digested scholarship. One expects the typical biography of an anthropologist to include at least two components in the narrative. First, a description of the anthropologist's intellectual contributions to the discipline, including a behind-the-scenes look at the research and other experiences that led to these contributions. Second, an account of the subject's life events and relationships, particularly as these relate to his or her scholarly persona and accomplishments.

Another approach is to publish elements of the subject's own personal writings to provide an often richly detailed and emic account of life moments or phases, highlighting particular relationships and

events. Publication of letters—often between scholars to cast light on their thought processes and the origin of big ideas or “isms” in the field, is one example of this approach to biography (e.g., Robert Lowie’s publication of his letters from Edward Sapir [Sapir 1965]; see also Sullivan, this issue). Indeed, as Price (this issue) observes, familiarity with the lives of individual anthropologists shows that the famous isms of anthropology are neither easily defined nor mutually exclusive. Hinsley (this issue) further points out that biographical “intimacy with an historical subject” often reveals that their famous career accomplishments, far from having been planned and orderly, were greatly influenced by chance and accident. Like published letters, the publication of diaries, such as Bronislaw Malinowski’s fieldwork diary (1989[1967]), shine an intense light upon subjective moments and phases. Analyses of letters and diaries can be placed in introduction sections or footnotes; a powerful advantage of this approach is that it presents the subject’s own words.

As all biography is in the end a collection of stories, anthropological biographers do well to learn from and about other storytellers in the world’s societies (see Scheub 1998). Stories and shared memories of biographical subjects, told by those who knew them, can be assembled and published, though since they circulate for a variety of reasons other than the accurate preservation of knowledge, and may include fabrication and misinformation, they must be checked as thoroughly as possible and regarded with healthy skepticism. However, such stories form the oral tradition of anthropology, one of the ingredients from which the history of anthropology can be wrought. An example of this is a discussion thread of stories about the late Derek Freeman circulating on ASAONET, the e-mail listserv of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania as I write this in March, 2008. Sometimes second and third hand, these accounts of antics and traumatic and humorous experiences with him poured out from his former students and colleagues. Among the issues raised in this fascinating discussion were the need to identify why such stories are told when they are; the need to place fragments of a person’s life story into a broader context of his or her whole personality, experiences, and motives to render them explicable; and the dangers of allowing such stories to stand in for historiography. Ethnographers know these kinds of complications—and more—from their experience collecting memories in the field. Tracking down the bits and pieces to build a biographical narrative about a late anthropologist offers many of the same challenges as ethnographic or indeed archaeological work—and is a story in itself worth telling, as Lepowsky (2000) does to good effect in her account of the nearly

forgotten anthropologist, Charlotte Gower. Furthermore, *Festschriften* can include both brief stories and extensive tales about the subject (e.g., Williamson and Bisson 2006 for Bruce Trigger and Gross, Lyons, and Counts 2005 for Ann Chowning).

Storytellers even of their own adventures do not necessarily provide a neat and consistent, chronologically organized tale of their life trajectory. Much is forgotten, mixed up, or revised, if not for presentation, then in the person's own memory to create a pleasing self-image (see e.g., Hollan 2003). Unpleasant experiences may be repressed with the passage of time. Different people may have complementary or conflicting memories of the same events, from which the biographer must create a narrative (Bannerjee 2000). Moreover, dreams and fantasies may enter memory as "actual" events in one's life history. People influenced by formal science might discount or place these in a separate category from things that "really" happened, but then again, they might not. This became an issue for Crapanzano (1980) in researching his biography of Tuhami the Moroccan. Excellent biography of anthropologists aspires to portray their distinctive lived reality with similar depth and cultural sensitivity as Gapanzano's exemplary work, and incorporates what we have learned as a discipline about how to use life-history collection as an ethnographic method (see Langness and Frank 1981). The use of oral tradition as data for history and anthropology is also an art in which the anthropological biographer should become skilled (see Vansina 1985).

THE USES OF BIOGRAPHIES OF SCHOLARS

The most obvious use for biographies of anthropologists is to deepen our understanding of the discipline's history, an objective richly fulfilled in the voluminous work of George W. Stocking, Jr. (see e.g. 1995). As Arwill-Nordbladh (this issue) discusses in some detail, biographies of anthropologists, like biographies of scholars in general, have distinctive value for the history of science (see also Shortland and Yeo 1996). Decades ago, June Helm and her collaborators (1966) observed that biographies of anthropologists improve our comprehension of the discipline by showing the context in which its ideas have been and continue to be developed. There are plainly practical reasons for members of a discipline to know their own history: "If the destiny of those who are ignorant of the intellectual history of their science is to repeat its mistakes—and this does often seem to be the case—those who know nothing of the lives and times of individual anthropologists repeat tired little myths, charter

only for intellectual slovenliness and distortion” (Codere 1968:574; on the severity of some of this distortion, see Lewis 1998).

Life histories, biographies, and autobiographies of anthropologists’ informants have become a recognized and valued approach not only for the sake of recording the historical particulars of an individual’s life, but also for purposes of elucidating cultural complexes at a given point in time and space (e.g., Radin 1999[1926]; Shostak 1983[1981]). The many such anthropological biographies of informants, and researcher-subject collaborative autobiographies have produced some of the finest-grained ethnographic work, together with other person-centered approaches to ethnography (see Hollan 2001). In some of the best of this biographical and individualist tradition, social and cultural worlds come alive as readers experience them vicariously through the life and perspective of an inhabitant of that world. Resulting sociocultural generalizations are grounded in concrete particulars. In the case of biographies of anthropologists, particularly those written by anthropologists or scholars in related disciplines, the portal opens upon anthropological social culture from an individual’s positioned point of view. Biographies of anthropologists at their best are rich, person-centered ethnographies of anthropological cultures in fine temporal contexts. They are, by implication, data on humankind comparable to any other data in the anthropological record.

The key question is, what status as data for anthropology does biography of anthropologists have? First, it depicts the biographical subject’s culture, society, and agency from at least two perspectives, the author’s and the subject’s (as understood by the author). Second, it depicts anthropology as a dynamic, multi-pronged social culture, manifested in the behaviors of biographical subjects and their contemporaries in spatial and temporal contexts. Lavolette (this issue) suggests that the growth of biography of anthropologists represents an intensifying reflexivity within the discipline. All anthropologists participate in anthropological society—researching biographies is one way observation becomes hyphenated to participation in this disciplinary self-awareness. Third, it reveals something about the historical, agentive causes of fashions and advances in anthropological knowledge, and by extension, the play of cultural dynamics in general.

THE ESSAYS IN THIS COLLECTION

The essays in this issue all treat biographies of anthropologists as data for anthropological analysis. David H. Price begins the

discussion with “On the Ambivalence of Orthodoxy in American Anthropology,” noting the tension between the guidance of professional standards versus the creative freedom of independent, “amateur” anthropologists in the early era of institutional anthropology. He calls our attention to the often ignored, dark side of the professionalization of anthropology, that it stifles some even as it supports others.

Curtis M. Hinsley next takes the floor with “Personalities and Institutions in Americanist Archaeology, 1850–1950,” tracing a similar trajectory from amateur to professional for male archaeologists as Price does for mainly ethnologist male subjects. Focusing his comments on the lives documented in the biographies he considers, Hinsley observes the more positive influences of professionalization on social harmony among early American archaeologists.

Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh takes the discussion from there in “Twelve Timely Tales: On Biographies of Pioneering Women Archaeologists.” Her essay makes it clear that biography does not exist in a theoretical vacuum. Anthropologists’ lives can only be understood in the context of the cultures in which they partake, and anthropological theory is necessarily invoked in the description and analysis of these cultures. In the cases she considers, a feminist perspective reveals the gendered expectations and constraints that influenced early Old World archaeologists’ lives and works.

In “Franz Boas: Boon or Bane?” Herbert S. Lewis compares biographical work done by an historian with that of admiring grandchildren of the biographical subject, each with different purposes, perspectives, and methods. He reviews the profound and ingrained impact of Boas on anthropology, and uses biographical evidence to demonstrate the inaccuracy of more recent claims about Boas by critics within anthropology.

Gerald Sullivan collects the baton from Lewis’s Boas and hands it off to the next generation in “Three Boasian Women: Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Ruth Landes.” Like Lewis (who notes among Boas’s accomplishments his training of almost the entire first generation of female anthropologists in the United States), Sullivan points to biographical evidence that the theoretical accomplishments of these women was sophisticated and of ongoing value for anthropology, though some of it has failed to be widely transmitted within the discipline for reasons that their biographies partially explain.

Patrick Lavolette returns the gaze to European anthropology in his “Anthropology in the UK: Never Mind the Biographies, Here’s the Reflexive Symbols.” In his analysis of biographies of mainly British anthropologists, he argues that biographies of anthropologists, by

anthropologists, and for anthropologists represent the discipline's reflexivity over historical time.

Finally, Roy Richard Grinker writes in "The Politics of Knowledge: Julian Steward, Leslie White, Melville Herskovits, and L. Luca Cavalli-Sforza," that efforts to make anthropology serve the public good are nothing new. The biographies of these men whose work together spanned the four subfields reveal an abiding desire to learn about humankind not only for its own sake, but in order to engineer a better future. These biographies show that insofar as anthropologists make up a discipline devoted to the study of humankind, biologically and culturally, in all places and times, they must include a long view on their own discipline itself.

CONCLUSION: THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ANTHROPOLOGISTS

In this introduction I have noted that anthropology is itself a sociocultural complex that can be an anthropological research subject (or object, depending on the aspect studied and the source of data; see Lohmann [2006]). I have suggested that biographies of anthropologists not only reveal an experience-near, person-centered history of the discipline; as accounts of human beings in social contexts, they are also an excellent and underappreciated source of data for general anthropology.

Biographies are not the only source of published data on anthropologists as human subjects. Ethnographic studies of academic departments of anthropology provide another approach (e.g., Williams 2002). Writings of anthropologists make up the richest vein of published information on the topic, an emic literature that can be consulted in the same way that other cultural productions and artifacts can be analyzed to identify pattern and anti-pattern in anthropological society. However, as person-centered accounts of the discipline, biographical work is of value not only to understand the discipline, but also to understand the human bearers of this, as any other, continually changing tradition. Biographies of anthropologists not only describe people who lived for anthropology; study of their life stories *is* anthropology.

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