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VIRTUAL WORLDS AND FUTURES OF ANTHROPOLOGY

by Tom Boellstorff



Welcome to Second Life

Imagine yourself suddenly set down alone on a tropical beach close to an island village. Spread out before you on a gorgeous blue sea is an archipelago of islands and continents. While the boat that has brought you to this place sails away, you realize you are alone and have nothing to do but begin your ethnographic journey. You have no previous experience in conducting fieldwork in this environment; there is little to guide you and no one to help you. Thus began my two-year field study in Second Life.¹

Having made eight different trips to Indonesia, totaling almost three years of fieldwork, in June 2004 I began my new field study by logging onto my computer. I entered Second Life as an “avatar,” a virtual person named Tom Bukowski.² What I found was a stunning vista of green hills, sandy beaches and lands dotted with homes, streets, even whole cities, a new world populated by people appearing as humanlike “avatars,” each having entered this virtual world by logging on from an actual location around the globe.

Since childhood, I have always been fascinated by technology. Born in 1969, I am a member of the first generation in the United States for whom video games were a part of everyday life. I was an avid player as well as a voracious reader of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*.

In graduate school I discovered Sim City, a popular simulation released in the late 1990s. But also around this time, computer engineers were pioneering a new technology that could generate a three-dimensional virtual world that could be experienced by many people at the same time, people who could communicate with one another through text (and eventually though voice).

In June 2003 Linden Labs invited the public to join Second Life; by November 2007, when the final manuscript for my ethnography was submitted, there were over 10 million registered Second Life accounts, with over 1.5 million people logging on per month, and tens of thousands of persons “inworld” at one time. About a year later, just over 15 million accounts were registered, with residents spending over 28 million hours “inworld” each month, with, on average, over 50,000 residents logged in at any particular moment. Second Life is not a small phenomenon, and there are many virtual worlds much larger than Second Life (including those designed for children, like Club Penguin, and those designed as games, like World of Warcraft).

30th
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Issue

How Can an Anthropologist Study Virtual Worlds?

After some preliminary searching among various “virtual worlds,” I settled on Second Life for my particular study.

Inside: *Obesity and Culture, Iraqi Ethnic Groups, Applied Readers, Discounted Text*



I began my fieldwork by logging into my computer and joining Second Life through my avatar Tom “Bukowski.” I spent two years conducting this research using, to the greatest degree possible, the same methods I had used in Indonesia. At the end, rather than publish my research findings in the form of a blog or webpage, I decided to create the “traditional” product of anthropological research: a book, published on real paper and ink in the physical world, which I titled *Coming of Age in Second Life*, with its obvious reference to Margaret Mead’s classic study of Samoa.

I decided quite consciously to structure my research around the idea of “old method, new topic.” However, this is an oversimplification, since the methods anthropologists use are never “traditional”—they are constantly being revised and updated to fit the incredibly varied fieldsites in which anthropologists conduct research.

Thus, I set out upon my Second Life research as a kind of ethnographic experiment. I did not know if it would even be possible to conduct anthropological research in virtual worlds. Was there really “culture” there?

Are people spending time in Second Life nothing more than people who “need to get a first life”—geeks, losers, the socially isolated and misfit? What is happening in virtual worlds? What kinds of culture and subcultures are appearing there? In what ways do virtual cultures differ from those in the actual physical world? What are the promises and the perils of this new venue for human societies? What can anthropologists learn from a study of virtual worlds?

It soon became clear to me that what was happening inside Second Life was absolutely worthy of anthropological attention. In fact, I came to believe that ethnography may be particularly well-suited for the study of virtual worlds. After all, from its beginnings anthropology has worked to place the reader “virtually” in the culture of another through the ethnographer’s central methodology of participant observation.

The open-endedness of Second Life meant that I was able to subordinate interviews and surveys to participant observation, the centerpiece of any truly ethnographic approach. Not only did I create the avatar Tom Bukowski,



Author Tom Boellstorff in Second Life.

I shopped for clothes for my avatar in the same stores as any Second Life resident. I bought land with the help of a Second Life real estate agent and learned how to use Second Life's building tools. I created a home and office for my research named "Ethnographia." I learned games created and played inside Second Life, like "primtionary" (a variant of Pictionary). I wandered across the Second Life landscape, flying, teleporting, or floating along in my hot air balloon, stopping to investigate events, buildings, or people I happened to encounter. I also used the "events" list and notices in Second Life publications to learn of interesting spaces to visit. I joined many Second Life groups and participated in a range of activities.

Ethnographic knowledge is situated and partial. Just as most Indonesians have spent more time in Indonesia than I and know many things about Indonesia that I do not know, so many Second Life residents spent more time inworld than I, and every resident had some kind of knowledge about the virtual world that I lacked. But I was struck by how the idea of someone conducting ethnography (as stated in my profile) made sense to residents. In fact, residents often commented upon my seeming comfort with Second Life, particularly my skills at building (an unexpected benefit of my growing up as a video gamer). One resident noted, "You seem so comfy in here—like you study it yet still live it." I found it remarkable the degree to which the challenges and joys of my research in Second Life resembled the challenges and joys of my research in Indonesia. Perhaps the most surprising and significant finding from my research was that I needed to make only minor changes to my "traditional" methods to conduct research in Second Life.

In my earlier fieldwork in Indonesia, I complemented participant observation with interviews, archival research, text analysis, and focus groups. I found all of these ancillary methods helpful for my research in Second Life. For example, I conducted about 30 formal interviews, each one preceded by the signing of a consent form. Ethnographers often face the challenge of filtering huge amounts of data. In my case, my data set constituted over 10,000 pages of fieldnotes, plus approximately 10,000 additional pages of blogs, newsletters, and other websites.³

What Can Anthropology Tell Us about Virtual Worlds?

Anthropological inquiry has long demonstrated that there are many forms of human being—many ways to live a human life. In a sense, there are many actual worlds and now many virtual worlds as well. I examined one of them for what it could teach us about what it means to be virtually human. It is in the effort to bring together everyday detail and broad pattern that anthropology has a special contribution to make to the study of virtual worlds.

Unlike the network of relationships created on MySpace and Facebook, virtual worlds are places existing online where social relationships abound. In this virtual culture, I could study the concepts of place and time; self, gender, and race; social relationships including family, friendships and community; material culture; economics and politics — all helping to contribute to a holistic anthropology of virtual worlds.

My research was not just an experiment in methodology but an experiment in the ethics of virtual anthropology. I worked to avoid being identified with any particular subset of residents. My avatar took on different fashions and genders during my research as these were options open to all residents, but my default embodiment—as Tom Bukowski—was both white and male, in line with my actual-world embodiment, and I was also openly gay. When debates or conflict broke out in my presence, I did not feign neutrality. I would, for instance, file an "Abuse Report" if I saw someone mistreating another resident, as others would likely have done. I gave my own opinions in informal conversations, interviews, and focus groups, but I did work to interact with residents whose political and personal views might not reflect my own.⁴

A common tactic in writing on virtual worlds is to emphasize the sensational: men participating as women and vice versa, humans participating as animals and so on. Looking to the unusual to tell us about cultures, however, is of limited use. If in the actual world we were to do nothing but read the headlines of our newspapers and television reports, we would not have an accurate understanding of everyday life. Ethnographers are not oblivious to the extraordinary but find that culture is lived out in the mundane and the ordinary.

Thus it was also with sexual activity that existed in Second Life during my fieldwork—people using their avatars to do everything from live as loving spouses to engaging in non-monogamous sexual behaviors. Since sexuality is an important part of human life in the physical world, the existence of sex in Second Life is hardly surprising. Nor should it be surprising that crass commercialism, fraud and deceit, and even sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination can be found in Second Life and other virtual worlds. But if this was all that was happening in Second Life, or even the predominant things happening in Second Life, why would so many people spend so much time there?

What soon became clear as I conducted my research was that an overly exclusive focus on these unusual aspects of virtual world societies missed the more prevalent (and, I would argue, more significant) forms of community, kindness, and creativity that made these worlds attractive in the first place.

While some Second Life residents would find that their time “inworld” got in the way of time with their physical-world families, occasionally, to the extent they would reduce their time in Second Life or leave it altogether, what was far more common was for Second Life to simply replace television. If you consider the average hours a week that Americans (indeed, people around the world) watch television, replacing that time with far more active engagement in virtual worlds is not necessarily a bad

thing. Contrary to the idea that Second Life and other virtual worlds, online games, and networking sites lead to isolation, I was surprised to find many examples of families participating in Second Life together, a state of affairs that in some cases helped families stay actively involved in the lives of family members living at a distance. Disabled persons often found Second Life a liberating environment in which they could be as “abled” as anyone else, or explore aspects of their disabilities and build community. Linden Lab, the company that owns and manages Second Life, built it around the idea that residents could optionally sell things for “real-world” money, and there are persons who make thousands of dollars a month from commerce in everything from clothing for avatars to virtual real estate. However, many residents create things that they sell for pennies or even give away for free, finding in the virtual world the chance to unleash creative energies that find no outlet in the physical world.

When I followed the precepts of anthropological research and tried to understand Second Life without rushing to judgment, I found a space that for many was a powerful space of creativity, community, and self-exploration. There are important differences between virtual worlds and the actual world—for instance, the fact that persons can usually change their embodiment at will, so that things like race and gender become alterable choices, while still imbued with meaning. Yet many aspects of virtual-world sociality are quite similar to those in the physical



world. Researchers always like to find something new, emphasizing (and occasionally overemphasizing) the novel. Continuities, however, can be as informative and significant as differences.

There are, in fact, three things these continuities between virtual worlds and the physical world can teach us. First, these continuities show us how online environments import (and transform) social norms from the physical world. They import differing norms, depending on aspects of the virtual world in question, and if people enter it globally or mostly from certain regions (China versus Europe, the United States versus Korea, and so on). But in every case we do not become electronic robots when we are online—we remain human. This is one meaning of the phrase “virtually human” that appears as part of the title of my book *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*.

A second thing the continuities between the physical world and virtual worlds show us is that one reason so many people can find virtual worlds meaningful is that being “virtual” is not unique to virtual worlds. Forms of virtuality shape our physical-world lives. In a sense, culture itself is “virtual” to the degree that it is not only made up of behaviors and material objects, but also shared symbolic meanings and beliefs. Human societies have long been shaped by technology—in fact, many would argue that our tool-making capacity is what makes us distinctively human, *homo faber*. This is a second meaning of being “virtually human”: virtual worlds can help us understand how, in a sense, we have always been virtual.

A third thing the continuities between the physical world and virtual worlds demonstrate to us is that anthropology has, in a sense, anticipated the emergence of virtual worlds. Ethnographic methods of participant observation have always worked to create a sense of “being there” in another culture, to see things from the point of view of persons who at first glance live lives utterly different from our own. A good ethnography always allows us to feel we are “avatars,” so to speak, in a reality not our own, but that we can learn to understand on some level. And though it is difficult to convey the sense of beauty and joy and wonder of a virtual world, it is important to note that one reason many people participate in virtual worlds is because it is fun to live in a world that is so much a product of the human imagination.

It is with a hope of further understanding these emerging relationships between the actual and virtual that I will continue to conduct research in virtual worlds, for Internet technologies are certainly here to stay and will shape human societies in ways we can scarcely imagine today. Virtual worlds are quite new, despite the fact that their antecedents can be found in early computer games, the telephone, or even cave paintings. There is often great interest in trying to predict the future, in discovering trends and working to anticipate that which will come. Unfortunately, there is no way to research the future. It is only through careful ethnographic research in the present, coupled with careful historical research, that we can gain a better understanding of virtual worlds. And it is only through such an understanding that we can move beyond the hype and dismissal to arrive at a more robust and nuanced appreciation for the unfolding importance of these new virtual frontiers in the human journey.

Endnotes

¹ This paragraph is adapted from Boellstorff 2008, p. 3.

² With a few exceptions, Linden Lab, the company that owns and manages Second Life, allows you to choose any first name you want for your avatar, but requires you choose a last name from a predefined list. It is, of course, not a requirement of virtual worlds that avatar names differ from actual-world names.

³ This paragraph is adapted from Boellstorff 2008, p. 70.

⁴ This paragraph is adapted from Boellstorff 2008, pp. 79-80.

[Note: In order to fill out further details for this article, *AnthroNotes* editors adapted, with permission from the author, selected passages from his work, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Princeton University Press, 2008. See Endnotes.]

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THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF OVERWEIGHT, OBESITY AND THE BODY

by Peter J. Brown and Jennifer Sweeney



Throughout most of human history, obesity was not a common health problem. It was not even a realistic possibility for most people. Today, particularly in affluent societies, obesity is common and has increased dramatically in recent years.

For example, among American adults obesity increased 61% from 1991 to 2000. Most recent estimates classify 63% of the adult US population as overweight and 29% as obese. Internationally, over 300 million adults are obese and 700 million are considered overweight (Nishida and Mucavele 2005).

Because obesity and overweight involve the interaction of genetic traits with culturally patterned behaviors and beliefs, the causes of obesity can best be understood in the context of human cultural and genetic evolution. Behaviors that were adaptive in the context of past food scarcities may be maladaptive today in the context of affluence and food surpluses.

Genetic and cultural traits related to obesity, remarkably common in human societies, are evolutionary products of similar selection processes related to past food scarcities. In a modern context of food abundance, such cultural and genetic traits cause some people to add dangerous levels of fat tissue to their bodies. The increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity in the United States, especially in children, has risen to national attention and concern; in fact, it has been called an “epidemic.”

Unfortunately, existing biomedical treatments for these conditions are not effective and the risks for obesity-caused chronic diseases are high. Furthermore, obesity prevention poses a special challenge for Public Health officials since meeting this challenge necessitates a more thorough understanding of multiple and complex factors of causation.

An Anthropological Model

This article uses an anthropological model of culture to explore why and how societies have encouraged behaviors and beliefs that predispose individuals to overweight.

This approach has advantages over the commonly used undifferentiated concept of “environment” for generating hypotheses about behavioral causes of obesity. It is particularly useful for understanding the social epidemiological distribution of obesity and minimizing the widespread notion that obesity represents psychological failure.

We begin with two questions: Why do people find it so hard to reduce their intake of fat and sugar even when the medical risks and benefits of a dietary change are well known? Why do people find it so hard to exercise?

Anthropology suggests that the answer to these questions is a complex combination of near-universal, in-born preferences for sugar and fat. These calorically dense substances were rare in the pre-agricultural world where prey animals often carried little extra fat and natural sugars (honey, ripe fruit) were very limited. Such food preferences are coupled with cultural practices that are salient in shaping food preferences and activity patterns from a young age (Turner et al. 2008). Like many aspects of human biology and behavior, the ultimate answers are linked to our evolutionary heritage.

Contexts of Food Scarcity and Abundance

Many global health problems are related to food: some people are underfed and some people are over-stuffed. This striking inequality did not always exist. In most of prehistory and history, food shortages were common; in fact, seasonal hunger was a virtually inevitable fact of human life. Because food shortages affect health, survival and reproduction, they were a powerful evolutionary force. Seasonal food availability results in a seasonal cycle of weight loss and weight gain in both hunting and gathering and agricultural societies. Approximately 12,000 years ago, some human groups shifted from a food foraging economy to one of food production. This economic transformation allowed the evolution of complex civilization. The archeological record clearly shows that agriculture was often as-

sociated with nutritional stress, poor health, and diminished stature, whether due to tooth decay from increased consumption of sugars and carbohydrates, or an increase in infectious disease from more crowded living conditions, or actual food scarcity.

Anthropological research has demonstrated that food foragers are generally healthier than many less industrialized populations relying on agriculture – at least before they were displaced from their original territories. Although our food foraging ancestors suffered risks of periodic food shortages, they commonly enjoyed high quality diets, low exposure to infectious diseases, and high levels of physical fitness. In addition, studies of traditional hunting and gathering populations report no obesity.

Since food shortages were ubiquitous for humans under natural conditions, selection favored individuals who could effectively store calories in times of surplus. For most societies, such fat stores would be called on at least every two to three years. The evolutionary scenario indicates that females with greater energy reserves in fat would have a selective advantage over their lean counterparts in withstanding the stress of food shortage, not only for themselves, but for their fetuses or nursing children.

In this evolutionary context the usual range of human metabolic variation must have produced many individuals with a predisposition to become obese; yet such individuals would never have the opportunity to do so. Furthermore, in this context there could be little or no natural selection against such a tendency towards fatness. Selection could not provide for the eventuality of continuous surplus because it had simply never existed.

In contrast to a history of scarcity, developed societies like the contemporary United States have created an obesogenic environment, wherein the physical, economic, social and cultural environments encourage a positive energy balance in their population. The idea of a “nutrition transition” is one way to explain the emergence of the obesogenic environment (Popkin 1994). According to this theory, as societies undergo globalization, westernization and urbanization, their diets change dramatically. Post-transition diets are marked by energy dense foods with high levels of quickly digestible carbohydrates as well as high levels of dietary fat.

Three basic cultural changes accompany such nutrition transition:

1) Diets decrease in fiber intake and increase in fat and carbohydrate consumption, particularly in sugar and its substitutes such as high-fructose corn syrup. The industrialized food system adds calories and encourages increased food portion size due to consumer demand and higher profit opportunities.

2) The nutrition transition is associated with decreased energy expenditures related to work, modes of transportation, recreation, and daily activities. Because technological changes have reduced requirements for human labor, people in developed societies must burn energy to prevent overweight and obesity through daily workouts rather than daily work.

3) From the cultural perspective of the populations undergoing the nutrition transition and economic modernization, increasing body size may initially be seen as a good thing (rather than a health problem) but subsequently fat becomes a symbol of lower class status.

The Problems of Obesity and Overweight

Throughout most of human history, obesity was never a common health problem. Today it is common and has increased dramatically in recent years. Not only are overweight and obesity relatively common conditions in our society, but they are also extremely complex and intractable.

Obesity is a serious public health problem not because it is a disease itself but because it is associated with major causes of morbidity and mortality from chronic diseases. These include cardiovascular disease, type-two diabetes mellitus, hypertension, and some cancers. Cardiovascular disease is the most common cause of death in developed countries.

The direct relationship between overweight and health is under debate, as physical activity may actually be more important to health than body weight. On the individual level, obesity and overweight bring with them an enormous amount of personal psychological pain. The fact that the obese are subjected to significant social and economic discrimination is well documented.

Fat is extraordinarily difficult to shed because the body guards its fat stores. The remarkable failure of diet therapies has made some researchers rethink the commonsensical theory of obesity as being simply caused by overeating. Clinical evi-

dence of the past forty years simply does not support such a simplistic notion. Increasingly, obesity and overweight are being linked to physical inactivity and metabolic pathways that lead to excess fat storage related to modern diets.

Even in the absence of good scientific data about the effectiveness of diet therapy, the diet and weight loss industry in the United States is remarkably successful in capturing the hope and money of people who perceive themselves to be overweight. This industry thrives because of a complex of cultural beliefs about the ideal body and sexual attractiveness rather than medical advice and the prevention of chronic diseases per se. The American cultural concern about weight loss and the positive value placed on slenderness among American middle and upper class women is difficult to over-emphasize. Chernin (1985) has referred to this cultural theme as an “obsession” and the “tyranny of slenderness.” Within this context, it is impossible to claim that overweight and obesity are purely medical issues.

Changing Definitions of Obesity

Many basic scientific issues regarding obesity are, in fact, controversial. Obesity is simply “excess adipose tissue,” but most measures in medicine and public health cannot measure this directly. Definitions of obesity and overweight are partly debated because they are based upon inferred definitions of normality or “ideal” body proportions. Current medical literature utilizes Body Mass Index (BMI) defined as body weight divided by height squared. BMI (W/H^2) is correlated with total body fat, and a BMI greater than 30 is generally considered obese.

However, muscular athletes have high BMIs because muscle mass weighs more than fat. BMI is currently used in clinical settings for individual patients even though it was developed as a population-level measure; some scholars believe this is an inappropriate use. Also, BMI measures may not be appropriately valid in all populations. Increased risk of chronic disease affects some Chinese and South Asian populations at lower BMIs than among European populations.

An important and often neglected dimension to defining obesity involves the distribution of fat around the body trunk or on the limbs. Central or truncal body fat distribution is closely correlated with serious chronic diseases like cardiovascular disease, while peripheral body fat in the hips and limbs does not carry similar medical risks. In other words, peripheral body fat typical of women

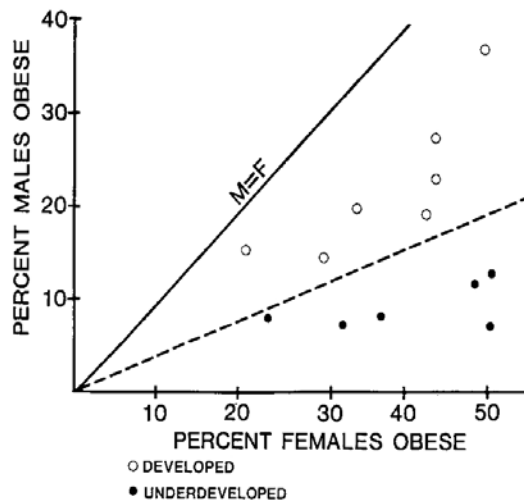
appears to be epidemiologically benign. Because of this clinically important distinction, measures of fat distribution like waist to hip ratio (WHR), wherein lower WHR indicates lower risk of chronic disease consequences, are a valuable addition to the measurement of obesity.

Increased morbidity due to disease is seen at both extremes of the BMI spectrum. Very low BMI—such as is seen in parts of the developing world like India—increases risk of deaths due to infectious diseases because of a lack of energy reserves. At the higher end, BMI is linked to chronic diseases including coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, type-two diabetes mellitus, and a range of cancers. Both high and low BMIs are associated with poor health, whereas “normal” levels of adiposity (fat) should include a range of body types. It is particularly important to note that levels of physical inactivity are linked to poor health outcomes more strongly than are body size or weight; in other words, it is possible to be fit and fat.

Biological and Cultural Perspectives on the Body

The nonrandom social distribution of adiposity within and between human populations may provide a key to understanding obesity. In addition to the circumstances of the nutrition transition discussed above, three features of the social distribution of obesity are particularly cogent for an anthropological analysis: one, a gender difference in the total percent and site distribution of body fat, as well as the prevalence of obesity; two, the concentration of obesity in certain ethnic groups; and three, a powerful and complex relationship between social class and obesity. Any useful theory concerning the etiology (origins) of obesity must help account for these social epidemiological patterns.

Sexual Dimorphism Humans show only mild sexual dimorphism in stature: males are only 5 to 9 percent taller than females. Men are larger than women in height and total body mass, but women have more subcutaneous fat. However, the greatest degree of sexual dimorphism is found in the distribution of fat tissue, with women having much more peripheral fat in the legs and hips. This difference is epidemiologically important. With the same BMI, the greater proportion of peripheral fatness in females may be associated with reduced morbidity and enhanced fertility, whereas more central body fat may partly explain higher cardiovascular disease rates and lower life expectancies in males.



Gender differences in prevalences of obesity in 14 populations by general industrial development. The unbroken line demarcates equal male-female obesity prevalences. The broken line indicates an apparent distinction in gender proportions of obesity in developed and underdeveloped countries. From Brown, P.J., and M. Konner, *An Anthropological Perspective on Obesity*. In R. J. Wurtman, and J. J. Wurtman, eds., *Human Obesity*, *Annals of New York Academy of Sciences* 499:29-46. Copyright 1987. Reprinted with permission.

Sex differences are also seen in the prevalence of obesity. Data from the 14 population surveys shown in Figure 2 indicate that in all of the studies females have a higher prevalence of obesity than males. Despite controversies concerning measurement, a greater risk for obesity for females appears to be a basic fact of human biology.

Evolution has favored female ancestors who are able to retain surplus body fat, thus improving their ability to bear and feed children even in times of nutritional scarcity. Peripheral body fat is mobilized after being primed with estrogen during the late stages of pregnancy and lactation. In addition, a minimal level of female fatness increases reproductive success because of its association with regular cycling as well as earlier menarche. Fat metabolism is influenced by hormones including reproductive hormones and insulin.

Pregnancy and lactation represent serious and continuing energy demands on women in societies that have not undergone the demographic transition – the historical shift from high to low fertility rates associated with the reduction of mortality due to infectious disease. In underdeveloped societies with high fertility, higher numbers of pregnancies and longer periods of breast feeding place high energy demands

upon women, especially if they cannot supplement their diet. As a result, such women suffer greater risk of protein-energy malnutrition. Conversely, with fewer pregnancies and the reduction of breast-feeding, women in developed societies have less opportunity to mobilize peripheral fat stores and suffer greater risk of obesity (Worthman et al. 1989).

Ethnicity The idea that particular populations have high rates of a genotype that predisposes individuals to obesity and related diseases is not new, and is supported by a convincing body of adoption and twin data, as well as work focusing on obesity-prone populations like the Pima Indians. This is evidence of genetic predisposition to obesity. In the United States, ethnic groups with elevated rates of obesity include: African Americans (particularly in the rural south), Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans. Given that these groups are often over-represented in lower socioeconomic strata, it may be difficult to distinguish the causal effects of class versus ethnicity. The fact that certain ethnic groups have high rates of obesity is not easy to interpret because of the entanglement of the effects of class with genetic heredity, cultural beliefs, and opportunities for exercise.

Social Class Socioeconomic status is a powerful predictor of the prevalence of obesity in both modernizing and affluent societies, although the direction of the association varies with the type of society. In developing countries there is a strong and consistent positive association of social class and obesity for men, women, and children. Correspondingly, there is an inverse correlation between social class and protein-calorie malnutrition. On the other hand, it has long been recognized that in heterogeneous and affluent societies like the U.S., there is a strong inverse correlation of social class and obesity for females. The association of obesity and social class among women in affluent societies is not constant through the life cycle. Garn and Clark (1976) have demonstrated a pattern of reversal in which economically advantaged girls are initially fatter than their poor counterparts. For females, social class remains the strongest social epidemiological predictor of obesity.

Cultural Perceptions of Body Size

From an anthropological perspective, the most important aspects of culture relating to body weight may be cultural symbols, beliefs and values. Aspects of ideology relevant to the

etiology of obesity include the symbolic meaning of fatness, ideal body types, and perceived risks of future food shortages. Fatness is symbolically linked to psychological dimensions such as “self worth” and sexuality in many of the world’s societies, but the nature of that symbolic association is not constant. In mainstream U.S. culture, obesity is socially stigmatized, but for many cultures of the world, fatness is viewed as a welcome sign of health and prosperity. Given the rarity of obesity in preindustrial societies, it is not surprising that ethnomedical terms for obesity are usually non-existent.

Perhaps it is large body size rather than obesity per se that is an admired symbol of health, prestige, prosperity or maternity. The agricultural Tiv of Nigeria, for example, distinguish between a very positive category “too big” (*kehe*) and an unpleasant condition “to grow fat” (*abon*). The first is a compliment because it is a sign of prosperity; the second term is a rare and undesirable condition. For women, fatness may also be a symbol of maternity, nurturance, and adult success. Symbolically, a fat woman is well taken care of, and, in turn, takes good care of her children. The ethnographic record indicates that Fellahin Arabs in Egypt describe the proper woman as fat because she has more room to bear a child, lactates abundantly, and gives warmth to her children. In contrast, the cultural ideal of thinness in developed societies is found where motherhood is neither the sole nor primary means of status attainment for women. The ideas that fat babies are beautiful and that fat children are healthy children are very widespread throughout the world. Foods, particularly sweet foods, can be treated as symbols of love and nurturance on the part of parents and grandparents; the growing problem of child obesity in China is related to increased economic resources, the one-child policy, and doting grandparents. In some cultures it may be impolite for a guest to refuse some offered food, but it is taboo to refuse food from one’s mother.

Fatness and CrossCultural Standards of Beauty

Culturally defined standards of beauty for women vary between societies and may have been a factor in the sexual selection for phenotypes predisposed to obesity. A classic example is the custom of “fattening huts” for elite Efik pubescent girls in traditional Nigeria. Here fatness was a primary criterion of beauty as defined by the elites, who

alone had the economic resources to participate in this custom. An important recent ethnography of Azawagh Arabs of Niger entitled *Feeding Desire* (Popenoe, 2004) illustrates these cultural notions to an extreme degree. Here, fatness to the point of voluptuous immobility is encouraged by systematic over-eating in order to hasten puberty, enhance sexuality, and ripen girls for marriage. The people believe that women’s bodies should be fleshy and laced with stretch-marks in order to contrast with thin, male bodies. Similarly, fatter brides (as well as early maturing brides) demand significantly higher bridewealth payments among the Kipsigis of Kenya. The Tarahumara of northern Mexico consider fat legs a fundamental aspect of the ideal feminine body; a good-looking woman is called a “beautiful thigh.” Ramotswe, the large and beautiful protagonist of a popular mystery series by Smith (2009) set in Botswana, is referred to as “traditionally built.”

Among the Amhara of the Horn of Africa, thin female hips are called “dog hips” in a typical insult, and thin women in Jamaica are thought to be meager and powerless, like a mummy or a dried empty husk. Yet in Belize body shape is more important than body size, with most people preferring women to have a curved, hourglass figure like a Coca-Cola or Fanta soda bottle.

Among the world’s cultures, it is difficult to know how widespread is the association of plumpness and beauty.



Zeinabou, considered very beautiful in the Azawagh Arab culture. Tassara, Niger, 1991. Photo courtesy Rebecca Popenoe.

A preliminary indication can be found through a crosscultural survey based upon the Human Relation Area Files (a cross-indexed compilation of ethnographic information on over 300 of the most thoroughly studied societies). This data offers the basis for some preliminary generalizations, notably that cultural standards of beauty tend not to refer to physical extremes. On the other hand, the desirability of “plumpness” or being “filled out” is found in 81 percent of the societies. This standard, which probably includes the clinical categories of overweight and mild obesity, apparently refers to the desirability of fat deposits, particularly on the hips and legs.

Although crosscultural variation in standards of beauty is evident, this variation falls within a certain range. American ideals of thinness occur in a setting where it is easy to become fat, and preference for plumpness occurs in settings where it is easy to remain lean. In context, both standards require the investment of individual effort and economic resources; furthermore, each in its own context involves a display of wealth. Cultural beliefs about attractive body shape in mainstream American culture place pressure on females to lose weight; such cultural beliefs are central to the etiology of anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

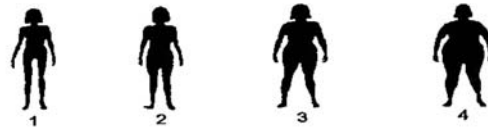
Ideal Male Body Type, Size, and Symbolic Power

The ethnographic record concerning body preferences in males is weak, yet preliminary research suggests a universal preference for a muscular physique and for tall or moderately tall stature. Men tend to aspire to a muscular shape characterized by well-developed upper body muscles and slim waist and hips. Efforts to achieve this ideal body generally center around exercise rather than diet.

Large body size may serve as an attribute of attractiveness in men because it symbolizes health, economic success, political power, and social status. “Big Men,” the political leaders in tribal New Guinea, are described by their constituents in terms of their size and physical well-being: he is a man “whose skin swells with ‘grease’ [or fat] underneath” (Strathern 1971). The spiritual power (*mana*) and noble breeding of a Polynesian chief are expected to be reflected in his large physical size. In American society there are historical vestiges of a similar idea, for example, a “fat cat” is a wealthy and powerful man who can “throw his weight around.”

Contemporary rap and hip-hop is filled with positive references to large bodies indicating largesse in life,

Female Silhouettes



Male Silhouettes



Figure 1 The silhouettes used in the perception of body size (1 = thin, 2 = normal, 3 = overweight, 4 = obese).

Illustration courtesy D. T. Simeon. Published in Simeon, D.T., et al. 2003.

especially in names such as the Notorious B.I.G., Heavy D, and the Fat Boys. Most male college students in the U.S., in contrast to women, want to gain weight because it is equivalent to gaining muscle mass and physical power in a process called “bulking up.”

Conclusions

Three conclusions can be drawn from this discussion of culture and its relationship to obesity.

- First, recognition of cultural variation in beliefs and behaviors related to obesity needs to be incorporated into health programs aimed at reducing the prevalence of obesity.
- Second, more education is needed about the importance of the location of body fat (rather than solely BMI) as well as the medical benefits of increased physical activity regardless of body size.
- Third, more research is necessary on the role of culture as it interacts with genes, on the etiology of obesity, and on associated chronic diseases.

Existing cultural beliefs must be taken into account in the design and implementation of health promotion projects. A classic example is an obesity prevention campaign in a Zulu community outside of Durban (Gampel 1962). It featured one health education poster that depicted an obese woman and an overloaded truck with a flat tire, with a caption “Both carry too much weight.” Another poster showed a slender woman easily sweeping under a table next to an obese woman who is using the table for support; it has the caption, “Who do you prefer to look

like?” The intended message of these posters was misinterpreted by the community because of a cultural connection between obesity and social status. The woman in the first poster was perceived to be rich and happy, since she was not only fat but had a truck overflowing with her possessions. The second poster was perceived as a scene of an affluent mistress directing her underfed servant.

Health interventions must be culturally acceptable, and in this regard we cannot assume that people place the highest priority on their health or on their physical appearance. Many people at risk of obesity live in poverty, or have a history of poverty, and therefore feel insecure regarding possible future food shortages. Similarly, eating high calorie comfort foods can be a psychological adaptation to stressful living conditions. Finally, disadvantaged people may discount their futures – that is, ignore somewhat vague risks of future chronic disease associated with obesity when they do not feel empowered and live in a fundamentally risky world. The social distribution of overweight and obesity may reflect social inequalities as well as a changing “obesogenic” environment.

The frequency of past food shortages, the social distribution of obesity, and the cultural meanings of fatness, when taken altogether, suggest a biocultural hypothesis of the evolution of obesity. Both genetic and cultural predispositions to obesity may be products of the same evolutionary pressures, involving two related processes. First, genetic traits that cause fatness were selected because they improved chances of survival in the face of food scarcities, particularly for pregnant and nursing women. Second, in the context of unequal access to food, fatness may have been socially selected because it is a cultural symbol of social prestige and an index of general health. Under Western conditions of abundance, our biological tendency to regulate body weight at levels above our ideal weight cannot be easily controlled even with a reversal of the widespread cultural ideal of plumpness.

Recent advances in understanding the genetic bases of obesity are echoed by new understandings about the role of “environment.” Recent research into the role of urban sprawl, the built environment, and resulting sedentary modern lives demonstrates that decreasing physical activity has contributed to current levels of overweight and obesity.

Despite increased understanding of the etiology of overweight and obesity, as well as the combined

biocultural contributions to the conditions, many questions and avenues for future anthropological research remain. These include: social discrimination against fat people, even when the majority of a population is fat; relative influences of dietary change and decreased physical activity in obesity; changing cultural standards of body ideals and physical activity related to acculturation and class mobility; the cultural perception of the medical community, particularly obesity researchers; cultural patterns of accommodations for an increasingly fat and less mobile population; and understanding of the cultural beliefs and behaviors of individuals or groups who are successful in reducing risks for chronic disease through sustained weight loss.

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UNDERSTANDING THE BEHAVIOR OF SHI'A AND SUNNI MUSLIMS IN IRAQ IS COMPLICATED

by William O. Beeman



The American news media often shows the cause of conflict in Iraq as the result of tension between Shi'a and Sunni Muslim communities. This idea is far too simple to explain the fighting between the various communities in Iraq. Both communities—Shi'a and the Sunni—are divided into regional, political and historical sub-groups. Only by understanding how these individual groups view and interact with each other can the real source of the internal Iraqi conflict be seen.

Introduction: Mythologies about Iraqi Ethnicity

Many Americans have come to see ethnic conflict as largely self-explanatory, needing no further analysis. Ethnic groups co-existing in any given state are frequently seen as naturally adversarial. This is especially true in Iraq, where the conflict between various groups is frequently portrayed as natural or inevitable.

Iraq is an artificial nation created by the British at the end of World War I out of three former Ottoman Empire Provinces—Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. The nation was held together by the British Army under a British installed monarchy. The monarchs were non-Iraqi Arabian Kings—descendants of the Sharif (chief religious authority) of Mecca—until both the King and the British were overthrown in 1958.

The nation is a patchwork of ethnic groups. Arabs, Kurds, Assyrian (sometimes called Chaldean) Christians, Turkmen, and Iranians constitute the largest communities. Cross cutting these groups are a number of religious faith groups: Sunni and Shi'a Muslim, Christian, Druze, Mandeans (also known as Sabean or Sabian) and a former large Jewish community.

Combining ethnicity and religious affiliation, we see many differ-

ent possible groups. In actual fact, however, the dominant groups in Iraq today are Sunni Kurds, Sunni Arabs and Shi'a Arabs, some of whom are of Iranian ancestry. The Kurds are not Arabs. They speak an Indo-European language related to Persian. Though most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, a minority of Kurds are Shi'a. This makes the Sunni/Shi'a split in the state particularly important as Iraq works out its differences in terms of power and authority.

In the U.S. Press these groups are often portrayed in simplistic, monolithic terms. In fact, there is considerable division within each of these communities. This division is one of the principal reasons that Iraqi leaders have had a difficult time forging a unified governmental system since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Shi'a and Sunni

Both Shi'a and Sunni communities have complicated compositions with sub-groups that have different histories and cultural makeup.

The Shi'a community has been present in Iraq since the earliest days of Islam. The earliest Shi'a believers were thus Arabs. The term Shi'a derives from the Arabic phrase: *shi'at Ali*—partisans of Ali. This reflects the belief in the community that the leader-



ship of Islam should pass through the bloodline of the Prophet Mohammad. Because the Prophet had no sons, the Shi'a believe that Ali, his son-in-law and cousin, should be considered his successor. The Sunni, by contrast, accept the leadership of Abu Bakr, Omar and 'Uthman as the first three "caliphs" of the faith. 'Ali is accepted by Sunnis as the fourth caliph, but after Ali's death, the communities diverge again. The Sunnis recognized the Umayyid line, based in Damascus, and the Shi'a the descendants of Ali.

After Ali's death, the conflict between the two communities resulted in the martyrdom of Ali's son, Hossein. He was killed by Umayyid forces at Kerbala near present-day Baghdad. The shrine of Hossein is in Kerbala. His father, Ali, is buried in Najaf, and his descendants—the Imams of Shi'ism—are buried in other sacred cities throughout present day Iraq (except for the seventh Imam, Reza, who is buried in Mashhad, Iran). All of these cities are pilgrimage sites for members of the Shi'a community.

Shi'ism spread throughout the Islamic world to many ethnic groups—other Arabs, Iranians (who are Indo-European, and not Arab), Turks, and Muslims in India. In the seventeenth century, the rulers of the Safavid Empire in Iran made Shi'ism the state religion. This is why today there are more Iranian Shi'a believers than from any other ethnic group.

Over the years many Iranians settled in the shrine cities of Iraq, and eventually spoke Arabic as their mother tongue. The shrine cities, particularly Najaf, have become centers of Shi'a learning as well as pilgrimage.

However, there has been an indigenous population of Sunni Arabs in the region of

southern Iraq since the beginnings of Islam. They are largely organized into tribal groups and occupy a large geographical area south and west of Baghdad.

The Ottoman Empire, founded by Turks from Central Asia in 1499, was thoroughly Sunni. The Ottomans ruled over present day Iraq, and generally repressed the Arabs living there. Originally these tribes were Sunni.

At some point in the 19th Century, the indigenous Arabs in the southern Basra Province began to convert in large numbers to Shi'ism. The reasons are somewhat obscure, but as historian Juan Cole writes:

"In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many tribespeople of the south converted to the Shi'ite branch of Islam, under the influence of missionaries sent out from the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala . . . This tribal conversion movement appears to have been a protest of the weak, a way of using religion to resist the power of the Sunni Ottoman bureaucracy. Over time, it created a Shi'ite majority in what was to become Iraq (Cole 2003:544-45. See also Nakash 2003:312)."

Many of the tribal and rural converts to Shi'ism are not particularly fervent in their beliefs, and they are definitely different in their political and social orientation from the urbanized Shi'a in the shrine cities.

Shi'a Diversity

There are important divisions among the Iraqi Shi'a that have been hard for Americans—especially American politicians and military leaders—to understand. Some of the main divisions are:

1. Non-Religious Shi'a

These are Shi'a community members who worked closely with member of the Bush administration in the invasion of Iraq. (Council on Foreign Relations 2003). This group is highly edu-



Iman Ali Shrine in Najaf. Photo courtesy William Beeman.

cated and feels they should be leading the nation, but they have limited public support.

2. Religious Shi'a

Shi'a Muslims choose a religious leader, called an *Ayatollah*, which means "reflection of God," to be their personal spiritual leader. There are very few of these men in the Shi'a world, and they are very learned. The principal Shi'a leader in Iraq today is Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

3. Revolutionary religious forces

These individuals are anxious to establish Shi'a rule throughout Iraq, and are willing to confront Sunni Muslims, Kurds and other more moderate Shi'a to achieve their aims. The principal figure is Muqtada al-Sadr, virtually the last remaining member of an historically prominent clerical family whose leaders have largely been assassinated. This group is politically active, not tied to religious leaders, and difficult to control.

4. Rural Shi'a

These are people living in rural villages. These were the former Sunnis mentioned above who converted to Shi'a Islam in the 19th Century. They are not active politically and are not especially religious.

Sunni Diversity

The Sunni community is equally divided. Some of the divisions are:

1. The Kurds

The Kurds in the North, who are, as mentioned above, not Arabs, are now almost independent from the rest of Iraq, and have little or no interest in the other Sunni communities. As mentioned above, some are even Shi'a, and they are not particularly religious. They will resist fiercely being ruled by any faction of the Arab population.

2. The Takritis

These are the Sunni Arabs who had ruled Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and who came from the town of Takrit,



Kurdish merchants in the city of Dahuk, Iraq. Photo courtesy William Beeman.

Saddam's birthplace, and other Western areas of the country, such as Anbar Province. They believe they have the right to rule the country. They were in power from 1979 until Saddam Hussein was deposed. They live in poor areas of the country where there is no oil. They fought against the United States after Saddam Hussein was removed from power because they felt that Americans wanted Shi'a Muslims to rule Iraq.

3. Non-Religious Sunnis

This group mostly lives in Baghdad and other large cities. These were the old rulers of the country from 1920 to 1958. The British felt comfortable with them, and saw that they were installed in government posts. They largely occupy the few non-Shi'a offices in the new Iraqi government. Many were active in the non-religious Ba'ath political party, which encompassed Christians as well as Muslims.

4. Tribal Groups

There are still dozens of active Sunni tribes in Iraq, headed by hereditary sheikhs and living in rural areas. Accommodating these groups was seen by the British as the key fac-

tor in ruling Iraq. Some British administrators reportedly knew every tribe and every Sheikh by name.

Internal Differences

When we look at these “religious” groups and their interests, it is easy to see that the basis for the motivations of their actions is not uniform. Some groups are motivated by personal family history. Others are motivated by the idea that they should continue to rule because they were in power in the past. Still others are motivated by religion.

Politicians frequently believe that members of a group will all behave in the same way. Many Middle Eastern people do not like this belief. They call this attitude “Orientalist.” They are right to feel that this view is too simple. The U.S. military in Iraq has had great difficulty in dealing with both Shi’a and Sunni communities largely because they have not looked closely at the different sub-communities within each group. It is important to understand that there is a lot of difference in behavior within Shi’a and Sunni groups.

An anthropological approach is very helpful in making clear why people have the attitudes and behaviors they do, based on the nature of their community and their past histories. Anthropologists examine individual communities in nations like Iraq with care, using ethnographic techniques that make the actions of these different communities and sub-communities more understandable.

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APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY: TWO READERS

by Scott Lacey

Locating outstanding texts and readers for students at any level always presents a challenge; for high school and beginning undergraduates, the challenge can be particularly frustrating. Two introductory readers, *Applying Anthropology* and *Applying Cultural Anthropology*, edited by Aaron Podolefsky, Peter J. Brown, and Scott Lacey and published by McGraw-Hill, now in their 9th and 8th printing, are two excellent choices for high school elective courses in anthropology and useful in creating lesson plans for precollege social studies classes.

Applying Anthropology, An Introductory Reader, 9th ed., 2008.

Applying Cultural Anthropology, An Introductory Reader, 8th ed., 2008.

Although the titles reflect the editors’ interest in the uses of anthropology in today’s world, the readers are not designed for courses in Applied Anthropology. Instead, the sequence of chapters follows the organization of most standard introductory textbooks. The articles in these readers, however, are anything but standard. For the

most part, the readings are short, well-written and varied, with many taken from “popular” journalistic sources such as *Natural History*, *Discover*, and *The New York Times*.

The first reader, *Applying Anthropology*, is divided into four sections: Biological Anthropology, Archaeology, Linguistics, and Cultural Anthropology. The longest section is the fourth, with articles arranged under seven sub-headings; Culture and Fieldwork; Family and Kinship; Gender and Sexuality; Health, Medicine, and Culture; Work and Business; Conflict, Law, and Culture; and Globalization and Culture Change.

The Biological Anthropology section includes primatology (“What are Friends For?” Barbara Smuts); forensic anthropology (“Identifying Victims after a Disaster,” Dick Gould); medical anthropology (“Ancient Genes and Modern Health,” S. Boyd Eaton and Melvin Konner), and classic selections on evolution, science, and creationism (“Teaching Theories: The Evolution-Creation Controversy,” Robert Root-Bernstein and Donald L. McEachron; Re-reading Root-Bernstein and MacEachron in Cobb County, Georgia: A Year Past and Present,” Benjamin Z. Freed). Topics like race, poverty, and environment span multiple subsections, and they are easily discerned using the chapter theme finder which follows the table of contents. In the new edition the authors place a significant emphasis on race from a sociocultural point of view.

The second reader, *Applying Cultural Anthropology*, is divided into eleven sections, from Culture and Fieldwork to Globalization and Culture Change. Many sections and selections overlap with the first reader. Each section has three or four readings that run the gamut from well-known classics (Horace Miner’s “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema,” Laura Bohannan’s “Shakespeare in the Bush”) to timely articles on war in the Middle East (“Army Enlists Anthropologists in War Zones,” David Rohde) and Sustainability and Fair Trade (“The Search for Sustainable Markets: The Promise and Failures of Fair Trade,” Julia Smith.).

The editors of these readers clearly care about students and anthropology. They believe that anthropology can inspire students and that students need to become familiar both with the fundamental questions that anthropologists address about humanity and the practical applications of the field.

In both readers, several of the articles exemplify research methods in action, or profile anthropologists

working outside of academia. For example, in the section on Race and Ethnicity in *Applying Cultural Anthropology*, Cheryl Mattingly’s “Pocahontas Goes to the Clinic” enables students to see how classic ethnographic methods such as direct observation, interviews, and long-term field research help medical practitioners better serve children and families across diverse cultural traditions and languages. Later, in the section on “Sacred Barriers to Conflict Resolution,” Scott Atran, Robert Axelrod, and Richard Davis investigate the cultural dimensions of symbolic concessions in the enduring conflict between Palestine and Israel.

To make these readers even more practical, the editors have added a short introduction with several questions before each reading, helping to focus students’ attention. Most of the questions highlight central themes of the reading or draw attention to important details. Some questions are open-ended and direct students and faculty to avenues for further thought and discussion. In summary, these readers are fine resources for bringing anthropological excitement to the classroom.

Scott Lacey of Emory University is coeditor of Applying Cultural Anthropology and Applying Anthropology.

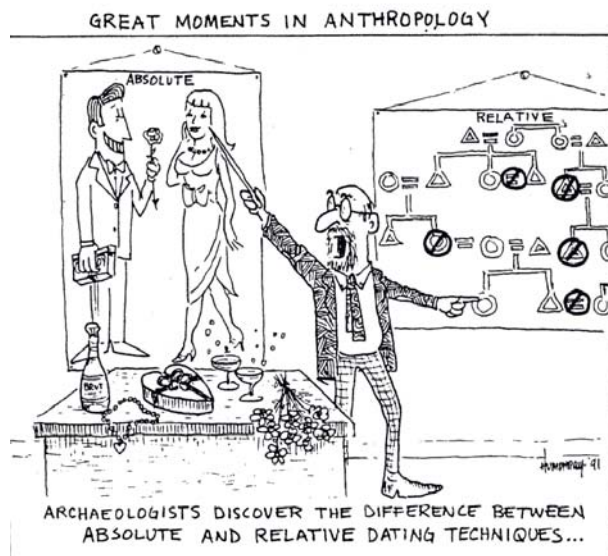


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The *AnthroNotes* editors choose topics central to the field of anthropology and contemporary concerns, then solicit articles and teaching activities from leading anthropologists and educators. All of our authors—over 175—have generously contributed their time and expertise writing articles on cutting-edge research and teaching activities for classroom use. All have worked closely with us through the years; we thank them for their patience with our editorial process as well as for their excellent contributions.

AnthroNotes has experienced some major changes in recent years. In 2002 our long-time cartoon illustrator, George Washington University anthropology professor



Robert L. Humphrey, passed away. Bob's cartoons contributed humor and insight into the world of anthropology while also providing the publication with a unique visual look. We continue to include some of Bob's cartoons in *AnthroNotes*, as we have in this particular issue.

In 2008, the *AnthroNotes* editorial team changed composition. One of the four original editors, JoAnne Lanouette—who helped create and teach in the GWU/SI teacher training program—retired. High school anthropology teacher Carolyn Gecan, a long-time *AnthroNotes* supporter, joined Alison Brooks, Ann Kaupp, and Ruth Selig as the fourth editor. [Read "Comings and Goings" in the Spring 2008 issue, p. 19.]

We've had fun for 30 years and always have appreciated the many positive notes (or today, emails) received from teachers and other readers. Our authors are especially pleased when we can tell them that their articles have been requested for reprinting in anthropology readers, college texts, and other compilations for classroom use. In 2002, we were honored to receive the Society for American Archaeology's Award for Excellence in Public Education. The award, citing *AnthroNotes* as well as the 1998 edition of *Anthropology Explored, the Best of Smithsonian AnthroNotes*, reads in part "for presenting archaeological and anthropological research to the public in an engaging and accessible style." In 2004 a second, revised edition of the book was published under the name *Anthropology Explored: Revised and Expanded* (see next page).

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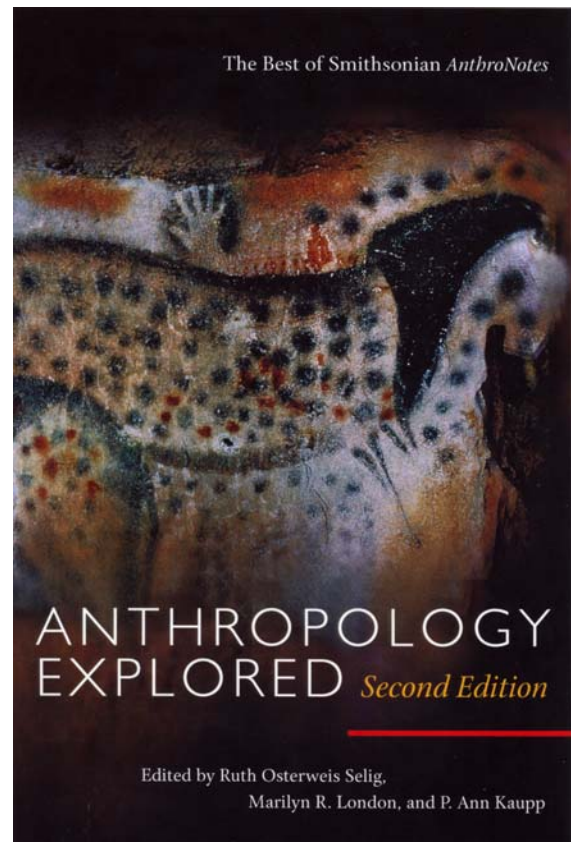
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