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978-0-521-28419-6 - Anthropologists at Home in North America: Methods and Issues in the Study of One's Own Society

Edited by Donald A. Messerschmidt

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# Anthropologists at home in North America

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of one's own society**

DONALD A. MESSERSCHMIDT, EDITOR

Washington State University

Pullman, Washington

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*For Kareen, Liesl, and Hans*

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## Preface

This book deals with the very contemporary issue of doing anthropology at home in one's own society. All seventeen chapters are new and fresh, and not published elsewhere. They deal with methods and styles, theories and issues of doing research in contemporary North America. The authors, anthropologists from the United States and Canada, describe and define theoretical insights, methodological strategies, substantive data, and experiences that are current and important. They raise and examine issues at the forefront of American anthropology today.

Traditionally, the research domains of anthropologists have been societies and cultures other than North America. The relatively scant accounts of research methods and issues that exist in the literature tend to document and reinforce doing anthropology abroad, among the poor and the oppressed, in predominantly tribal and peasant societies, well away from home (see examples in Jongmans and Gutkind 1967; Frelich 1970; Spindler 1970; Foster et al. 1978). Lately however, there has been a surge of interest in research at or close to home – in the social milieu of the North American anthropologists.

The literature about the constraints and contingencies of doing research in one's own society is rapidly expanding (see the Bibliography at the end of this volume). But these studies are widely scattered, and, taken together, they lack unified focus or attention to such details as analytical style, strategy and research method, or new or recyclable tools of the profession. This book is intended to rectify the lack of focus in the growing field of anthropological inquiry at home.

Two reasons exist for publishing this collection of studies: (1) it is designed for use as a source book in the training of graduate and undergraduate students in the social sciences, and (2) it serves as a guide and reference (and perhaps as an inspiration) for professional social scientists who are considering or are presently engaged in anthropology at home and who are concerned with both practical (applied) and abstract (theoretical) issues and with the conjunction of these two parts of the discipline.

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This work was first conceived as a collection of articles about method, but it became obvious that, as Gillin said in a critique of the anthropological study of modern society, “methods cannot be meaningfully discussed without reference to theory” (1949:393). Similarly when pursuing anthropology at home, method and theory cannot be meaningfully discussed without reference to the social issues that attract attention.

Taken together, the contributors to this volume confront the theoretical problems of what to study, the practical questions of why to study it, the professional (and sometimes personal) concerns for the *entrée* and *rapport*, the best methods with which to approach the data and their analyses, and the social issues and political constraints encountered in accomplishing goals. Here you will find rich and sometimes quite candid descriptions of the research techniques and orienting paradigms employed to order the data. They make this book a unique contribution to the literature – a discussion of strategies, concepts, and issues that, to paraphrase John Honigman (1976:2), have clearly shaped our experience and guided our perceptions and have aided us in discriminating between types of events central to the subject studied.

I want to thank my colleagues and students who gave help and suggestions and participated in dialogue during the lengthy period in which this book was conceived and developed. Kathryn Golitko-White and Robert H. McDaniel were important to this effort. I owe them, and the faculty and staff of the Department of Anthropology at Washington State University, my gratitude. I am also grateful to the final contributors (and to many others who expressed their interest along the way) for their patience and perseverance, as well as for their many insights into the topic. Finally, I thank several anonymous reviewers for their critical assessments of the manuscript, their suggestions for improvement, and their welcome encouragement to complete the task.

D.M.  
Pullman, Washington  
June, 1981