

SCCR History Comments: Murdock v Whiting Redux

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The fate of my suitcase may have played a causal role in the founding of the Society for Cross-Cultural Research (SCCR). In the winter of 1972, a long delay in retrieving my luggage at the Pittsburgh airport resulted in the rather late arrival of the Harvard delegation on the night before the decision was taken to actually establish a new scientific society, a decision which took place as I recall in that architecturally unique thirty-six floor academic building known as the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. The fate of that bag turned out to be a necessary condition for the consequential dispute between George Peter Murdock and John Wesley Mayhew Whiting that unfolded at the founding of the Society and was described by Carol Ember in an earlier SCCR Newsletter (Fall 2012). Whiting had planned to contact Murdock upon arrival to hammer out the aims and agenda for the proceedings. Because of my suitcase, by the time John Whiting arrived at his campus hotel Murdock had gone home. There was no meeting of minds. The rest is history.

Carol Ember's wonderful recollection of the conflict that surfaced the next day (Murdock v Whiting), which she described as a rivalry with psychological undercurrents, stimulated many memories of my own, including the role of that suitcase. Murdock v Whiting was the highlight of the meeting, as Carol noted. It was also personally significant for me because George Peter Murdock and John W.M. Whiting were both teachers of mine. At the time, John Whiting was my PhD thesis advisor at Harvard University. Six years earlier, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Pittsburgh, Pete Murdock had advised me to do graduate work at Harvard and to study with John Whiting, who was Murdock's former student. Six years later, Pete Murdock had put out a call for a tribal reunion to discuss the future of cross-cultural social science research. I flew back to the University of Pittsburgh (for my first and to this day only time) with John and Beatrice Whiting and the Harvard delegation.

I had not only been an undergraduate at the University of Pittsburgh, I had also spent countless hours on the 35th floor of the Cathedral of Learning, where the Department of Anthropology and the office of George Peter Murdock was located in those days. In that building, I had attended Murdock's graduate seminar on the history of anthropological thought. The seminar was designed as a gauntlet for recently admitted anthropology graduate students but he allowed me to register for the course as a college senior. The seminar might well have been entitled "The Ascent of Anthropological Thinking from Herodotus to Murdock," for the reading list started with the writings of the Ancient Greek and ended with the writings of Murdock himself. Throughout the semester, students presented detailed intellectual biographies about this great chain of beings (I recall making presentations on the work of Ibn Khuldun, who was next on the reading list after Herodotus, and Alfred Kroeber) while Murdock, quite formally dressed in tie and jacket, leaned back on his chair while smoking a cigarette, and evaluated the incoming class of anthropology prospects. He retained our interest in the course by happily passing on the lore of the tribe, gossiping away to our delight. My main memory of the seminar are his personal anecdotes – about Franz Boas (the master of all four fields of anthropology who dominated AAA meetings when Murdock was a graduate student), about William Sumner (who had died in 1910 but had founded the Department of Sociology at Yale out of which Yale anthropology had emerged and whose folkway files were somehow inherited by Murdock and became the foundation for the Human Relations Area Files), about Edward Sapir (in Murdock's estimation Sapir was the only true genius the discipline has ever had and, according to Murdock, Sapir was devastated when the famous psychoanalyst Franz Alexander declined to have him as his patient at the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute on the grounds that Sapir's resistance would be too brilliant for Alexander to overcome), about Margaret Mead (we heard about the many husbands).

He even told the following story about himself. Murdock was a Harvard Law School dropout who, as a young man, did not know what he wanted to do with his life. So he took a year-long boat cruise around the world. He arrived back in New York City where he heard about this field called anthropology and this person called Franz Boas who had started a department of anthropology at Columbia University. So he made an appointment to see the famous Boas. Boas interviewed the young Murdock for fifteen minutes and then (as told by Murdock) said to him: "Mr. Murdock you are a dilettante. Get out of my office. I never want to see you again." Murdock then got on a train heading northeast and got off at New Haven, where he entered Yale University and stayed for most of his life.

In a sense that meeting in Pittsburgh in 1972 was a gathering of the Yale University William Graham Sumner lineage. The descent line ran from Sumner's spirit (and the legacy of his cross-cultural files) to Murdock and his many students at Yale (which included prominent anthropologists such as John Whiting) to their many students all over the country. Forty years ago a rather substantial number of eminent American anthropologists could trace their academic descent lines to a handful of eponymous ancestors – for example, Franz Boas at Columbia, Alfred Kroeber at Berkeley, Hallowell at Penn, Kluckhohn at Harvard, Radcliffe-Brown at the University of Chicago, Murdock (and through him the spirit of Sumner) at Yale.

By 1972, William Graham Sumner was long dead and possibly forgotten by most of those who showed up in Pittsburgh. Murdock himself was seventy-four years old when the SCCR was launched. He had been a former President of the American Anthropological Association and an influential figure in the profession. After retiring from Yale University, he had successfully engineered the vast 1960s expansion of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh and helped create a new academic journal, *Ethnology*. By the time

I became an undergraduate major in that department in 1964 the faculty included two former presidents of the AAA (Murdock himself and Alexander Spoehr), a former president of the Society for Applied Anthropology (John Gillin), and a host of brilliant younger scholars (Arthur Tuden, Harold Gould, Hugo Nutini, Leonard Plotnicov). It was Tuden who drew me into anthropology, Gould who introduced me to India, and Murdock who advised me to do graduate work in anthropology at Harvard.

Indeed, Murdock had encouraged me while I was a college senior to attend the 1965 meeting of the AAA in Denver. I first arrived at the convention hotel knowing almost no one. I walked into the bar. There was Pete Murdock sitting with A. Kimball Romney. I was introduced, sat down with the two of them, and Kim Romney (about to move to Harvard as a tenured Professor) immediately gave me a triads test and told me about anthropology at Harvard (apply to the Department of Social Relations he advised). From Murdock's perspective, the Whitings and Romney were the big draw. In any case, given the leadership roles that Murdock had played throughout his career and his stature as a respected elder in the eyes of those who conferred at the Pittsburgh meeting it is not surprising that in the winter of 1972 Murdock had in his pocket a plan to create and organize a new academic society, along with by-laws, elected officials, newsletters, and structured academic sessions.

John Wesley Mayhew Whiting was sixty-three years old at the time of the launch. In the 1930s, he had been a student of Murdock's at Yale University. He grew up on Martha's Vineyard where he returned every summer for several months and almost every other moment he could. He liked Yankee simplicity, and much preferred face to face oral communication over reading published work. Whiting was not a great fan of organizational hierarchies, institutionalized power, or vita building. Indeed he thought the world would have been a better place if the printing press had never come along. Consider the following measure of the man. The year after the founding of the SCCR, John Whiting was the "Distinguished Lecturer" at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association. On that honorific occasion, he was seated on a stage in a large auditorium in front of a very large number of professional colleagues. The proceedings began with a conspicuously inadequate introduction by the then president-elect of the association, an archeologist who had not done his homework and knew embarrassingly little about the corpus of work and the influence on psychological anthropology and the study of culture and ontogenetic development of the man he was introducing. In the middle of this pathetic performance – the president-elect of the association had even started to become apologetic about his lack of preparation for the grand academic event – John Whiting shouted out from his seat: "Just tell them I was captain of the Yale wrestling team and invented the first automatic clam digger. All the rest is just paper."

So John Whiting was not an organization man. He was an adventurous, lovable, inventive hypothesis generating grappler. His model for intellectual seriousness was the playfully combative and egalitarian atmosphere of data oriented lunch sessions held at Harvard's Palfrey House in the 1950s and early 1960s. Those lunch meetings were ancient history by the time I arrived at Harvard in 1966 but the legend lived on. Whiting believed that progress in comparative positive science research would best be served by just arranging from time to time for informal gatherings of curious minds willing to show up somewhere (perhaps in a hotel room, or a bar, or on Martha's Vineyard) to talk about their latest hypotheses or empirical findings and to argue things out. So John Whiting opposed Pete Murdock's plan in what I at least perceived as a show of mock combat. The outcome was nicely described by Carol Ember: the SCCR was formed with Beatrice Whiting strategically (but I also think sincerely) nominated by Murdock to become the first president of the new Society and then endorsed by acclamation. Murdock's desire to create a professional institution had prevailed.

As I recall (and as I try to interpret the recollected moment forty years later), as soon as Bea Whiting was elected President, Tom Landauer (a beloved member of the Whiting clan) tried to lighten things up. In the wake of the dispute that had just taken place over informality versus officialdom, Tom carried forward that theme with a hyperbolic suggestion for a linguistic compromise in which the new Society would avoid using bureaucratic titles. His suggestion (which was less a serious proposal than a spontaneous off-the-cuff quip) went something like this: Let's use kinship terms such as "Big Mama" for our officers so that we can all feel at home in this new organization. President Beatrice Whiting laughed but would have nothing of it.

On the flight back to Cambridge, I carried my suitcase on board and apologized to John for having made the mistake of checking it and sending it down on the way out. He smiled and said it was a good thing we had been delayed. Had we arrived at the hotel on time, he and Pete Murdock would have met the night before and reached some kind of agreement about how things should proceed. The meeting would have been a bore and who knows if it would have unfolded precisely the way it did. He seemed quite happy about the outcome.