



PROFILES IN PRACTICE

On the recommendation of the Practicing Advisory Work Group, AN has launched a series of Practitioner Profiles to illustrate the work currently done by practicing anthropologists. It is very difficult to make sweeping generalizations about the practice of anthropology. While there are still fuzzy boundaries defining the identity of a practitioner or professional anthropologist, it is clear that there is a significant trend of more anthropologists working outside of academia. PAWG concludes that over half of all PhD anthropologists and virtually all anthropologists holding a master's degree work outside of full time academic positions, in a range of jobs, from methodological and statistical development, to analysis,

to management for the federal government, work as contractors, as independent consultants, for nonprofits and for corporations large and small. Each month, this column will feature jobs held by practicing anthropologists.

Improving the Effectiveness of Corporate Culture

SHIRLEY FISKE
PROFILES IN PRACTICE CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Since she received her doctorate in anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1985, Elizabeth Briody has worked at General Motors Corporation (GM) in Warren, Michigan. She is part of GM's industrial research laboratory, the world's first automotive research organization, created in 1920.

What do you do in the world of General Motors?

"I conduct studies of GM culture. My role is to come up with ways to improve GM's effectiveness. In my research, I try to understand the issues that people face in doing the work they have been asked to do, and then offer suggestions to make their work lives better."

Whether conducting rapid assessment, a full-blown ethnography or a focused evaluation, she uses the full range of the anthropological toolkit: interviews, observation and documentary materials combined with analysis of key themes and patterns. Typically she produces presentations first, followed by peer-reviewed internal research reports and later, external publications. Whether a project is initiated by Elizabeth or organizational leaders, she tries to educate internal GM groups about their culture while exposing them to the methods that she uses to describe and explain it.

Most outstanding finding of current project:

"Our study highlighted the most desirable elements in a manufacturing work environment. Many people talked about features related to work practices, the physical environment of the plant and various attributes of the plant workforce. However, the statements and stories that were most prevalent centered on the importance of relationships—both among peers and up and down the chain of command. Without exception, employees wanted to be able to collaborate—to work effectively with each other. And they felt that they couldn't do it consistently."

"To a certain extent, we were surprised by the strong emphasis on collaboration. It seemed so different from what we think of as the

central norms and values in American culture. Americans are ardent individualists with a strong independent streak and focus on their own self interests. For example, we can see how individualism is reflected in the way assembly-line work has traditionally been done—in which an individual was responsible for a particular job."

Over the last several years, GM has restructured work practices in its plants. Most are now "team concept" plants in which small work groups of 4–6 people rotate through a set of jobs over the course of their shift. "But the problem," according to Elizabeth, "is that the cultural or ideological dimension of the plant environment hasn't caught up with the new team structure. Collaboration is not consistently emphasized as a critical component of getting the work done. So, there are lots of opportunities for improving problem solving, cultivating stronger, healthier relationships, focusing attention on plant goals and reducing conflict."

"This project is a great example of applied anthropology," said Elizabeth. Not only did it involve ethnographic data collection and analysis, but it also encompassed the development, validation and implementation of a set of "Collaboration Tools." She explained that these innovative techniques were designed to be used both by those on the plant floor as well as those in plant offices to establish and maintain a "culture of collaboration."

Resources range from a packet that helps plant employees learn how to ask questions neutrally "so that they won't get peoples' backs up" to a sophisticated computer game that teaches all employees—including plant leaders—how their decisions impact key attributes in plant culture such as role effectiveness and relationship health. The Collaboration Tools are in-house, designed responses to employees' expressed desire for more collaborative relationships. "When we did a pilot test of these tools in two GM plants, they were extremely well received," noted Elizabeth.

The next step in the ideal culture project is an evaluation to assess the implementation, acceptance and adoption of the Collaboration Tools in one particular demonstration plant. "The difference from the pilot is that all work groups in this demo plant, rather than just a few, will be exposed to the tools and have the opportunity

to use them." The objective is to institutionalize their use and to integrate them into the day-to-day life of the plant.

How did you get here from there?

In graduate school at University of Texas at Austin, Elizabeth focused on studies of work and workers, such as migrant farm workers, Catholic sisters and janitors. UT was a 5-field program (cultural, archaeology, folklore, linguistics and physical), not an applied program. "I did not emerge from that program with any background in identifying and addressing real world issues," reflects Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Briody

Title: Staff Research Scientist, General Motors R&D Center

Salary Range: \$100,000+ and good benefits

Organizational Memberships and Activities: Served as president of the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology from 1994–96, on the AAA Executive Board, and maintains active participation in AAA Annual Meetings. Produced the classic (and only) NAPA video *Anthropologists at Work: Careers Making a Difference* (1993).



Elizabeth Briody, talking with a GM worker.

In her last year of graduate school, she heard about a job opening for an anthropologist at GM from a friend of hers who was a demographer. Although she first was not interested as she wanted to be a professor, she was convinced to apply and was soon invited to GM for a day-long interview that included giving a seminar. As part of her talk, Elizabeth argued that her background in "issues related to work could readily be applied to the occupational

specialties with a corporate environment. They bought my argument. It is an argument that I continue to stand by today."

Advice to graduate students:

"If I were starting grad school in 2007, I would choose a strong applied program over a traditional program," advised Elizabeth. "Applied programs provide a grounding in theory and ethnographic methods, so you actually get the basic research training. However, applied programs have the added advantage of teaching students how to think about the applications of their research to the particular problems they have investigated."

She "would also choose a program that required and actively supported students with an internship experience during some part of their training." Elizabeth also urged participation in the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology Mentor Program to broaden an overall perspective on the world of work and help identify potential types of employment opportunities for anthropologists.

What kinds of career opportunities are out there today for graduate students?

"I think you start with your own interests and skills. Think about the kinds of job functions that you are particularly interested in. Is it a research job, a managerial job, a program evaluation job, an advocacy job? Does public policy appeal to you? Do you want to write papers? What about teaching? Do you like the idea of managing projects or programs? Have you explored the idea of consulting?"

Elizabeth continued, "Doing internships or short projects that require any of these competencies can at least give you insight into whether that kind of work is for you—or not! I would say, get out there and get the experience. Working in an organization or agency also has the virtue of giving you a set of contacts that can lead you down new paths, provide you with guidance and feedback, and even letters of recommendation."

Challenges in her job:

In many ways, Elizabeth says her challenges are similar to what most researcher-practitioners face. For instance, she works with research colleagues who bring different views, skills and capabilities to the projects on which they collaborate. They have to spend time "translating to make sure we understand each other." Another challenge that she sometimes faces is in getting her research reports released from GM so that they can be submitted to scholarly journals; "some of the projects are proprietary."

But, importantly, she does face a different set of challenges from many academics and consultants, because she has to think about and plan for *how the results will be used*. In her position, she has to think about how the findings are going to be applied, what the organization is going to do with the recommendations, and how to get those recommendations implemented.

At GM it can be difficult to convince organizational leaders to change current practices, even when the evidence for change is compelling. Change also tends to take a long time even after agreement is reached to make one.

Most intellectually exciting or satisfying aspect of her work:



"I think it involves being a seasoned anthropologist. I have now been at GM for 22 years. I believe that I have had an increasingly stronger impact on GM's operations over time."

She has the opportunity to work with a diverse set of smart colleagues, and the ability to design and carry out projects with little managerial oversight and few organizational constraints. "If the project is favorably perceived because it is considered to be of high potential value, you have the time to work on it." Seniority means they believe in her products.

A critical component in the success of Elizabeth's work comes from her initiative to build partnerships with academic colleagues and departments locally and in other states, notably at Wayne State University and Northern Arizona University. This commitment has stimulated the flow of research ideas, internships, students and teaching in both directions.

What can AAA do to help promote relationships with practitioners?

"One role, that is partially underway, is for the AAA to serve as an administrative linkage between firms, nonprofits and government agencies, with universities. Education and employment go hand in hand. Students need internships and jobs. Faculty need research opportunities. Organizations need expertise (in the form of consulting and training) to address the issues they face."

"Acting as a broker would enable the AAA to perform outreach to both sides of the equation, link people together and help showcase the value of anthropology in today's world." ■

GATEWAY TO NSF

The National Science Foundation funds basic research in cultural anthropology. But the opportunities are so many, so various, and just so plain changeable, that keeping up and figuring out what is best for your project can be a challenge. Part of Deborah Winslow's job as NSF program director for cultural anthropology is to help readers do that. Not only can you read this Gateway to NSF column for reminders of the usual NSF yearly competitions and reports about some NSF-funded research, but she will also tell you about unusual funding initiatives of interest to anthropologists. Do call her at 703/292-7315 or email her at dwinslow@nsf.gov to talk about funding possibilities.

The Old and the New

DEBORAH WINSLOW, PROGRAM DIRECTOR
NSF CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The "Old"

As it has for over 20 years, the cultural anthropology program supports basic scientific research about human social and cultural variability in all subfields of cultural anthropology. In NSF lingo, *basic* research is research that contributes to new, generalizable scientific knowledge. NSF does not fund clinical research *per se*, but NSF-supported research may have clinical applications, so long as that is not the primary goal (the National Institutes of Health is mandated by Congress to support clinical research).

We are particularly eager to support innovative research, research that extends understanding

beyond individual case studies, and research that contributes to building spatially and temporally specific theory. Here are the proposal types that the cultural anthropology program accepts:

- **Senior Research (scholars with a PhD):** Typically projects of up to three years in duration, with no budget limit (but, given our budget constraints, rarely more than \$90,000/year)
- **Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grants:** To support costs of doing dissertation research, budgets capped at \$15,000
- **Cultural Anthropology Scholars awards,** for research-related, post-PhD training, capped at \$50,000

- **CAREER awards,** to support a 5-year, integrated research and education program, limited to tenure-track faculty who do not yet have tenure (a minimum of \$400,000 over five years)
- **High Risk Research in Anthropology** for small projects (capped at \$25,000) that will collect ephemeral data or test out risky research ideas

We also consider proposals for workshops and training programs, as well as supplements to current awards to support *Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU)* and *Research Experience for Graduate Studies (REG)*.

Senior, doctoral, scholars and training proposals have two *target dates* a year: January 15 and August 15. Submit the proposal by that date, it will be reviewed in the upcoming review cycle;

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