From Conception Through Birth: Origins of the Society for Cross-Cultural Research

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This article describes the origins and founding of the Society for Cross-Cultural Research 25 years ago. The idea for the Society was conceived by a group of anthropologists at the 1971 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. The Society itself, however, was founded on February 19, 1972 by a multidisciplinary group of scholars from throughout the United States and Canada.

CONCEPTION: NOVEMBER 18, 1971

Although yet unnamed, the Society for Cross-Cultural Research was conceived in the New York Statler Hilton hotel on the evening of November 18, 1971. There, a group of 15 anthropologists met in my room to discuss possible interest in founding a professional, multidisciplinary organization devoted to cross-cultural comparative research. That evening's meetings grew out of informal discussions earlier in the day among several participants at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) already under way in the hotel.

The driving force behind the idea of a new organization was that of the then reigning dean of American anthropology, George Peter Murdock. Murdock wanted to explore the creation of a full-fledged...
cross-cultural comparative organization. And he wanted to hold a conference on the topic at his home university, the University of Pittsburgh. He would host the meeting but he did not have time to organize it, so he asked me if I could do it. I was thrilled and honored to be invited. But first we needed to get an estimate of how realistic the whole project was. What kind of professional support would the idea receive among anthropologists? To find out, I volunteered my room for a meeting that evening, and several of us set about inviting everyone at the AAA conference who might share an interest in the venture. Already that day Melvin and Carol Ember had expressed their enthusiasm, as had Ward Goodenough and John Whiting. The six of us located nine others at the convention who wanted to attend the evening meeting. These included Barbara Ayres, Robert Carneiro, Richard Chaney, Roy D'Andrade, Frank Moore, Alice Schlegel, Richard Shweder, William Stephens, and Douglas White.

That evening the group heatedly debated the pros and cons of establishing a new organization: Should we found a separate, independent organization, or join an already existing one? Should we create an organization with a formal structure, or keep the group entirely informal? Should it be large or small? Who should be part of it? What exactly should the organization's mission be? What should the organization be called? When should a conference be held to resolve these questions? And, where should the conference be held?

The "where" question was resolved easily because Murdock had already volunteered to host a meeting at the University of Pittsburgh. The "when" question was more problematic because issues arose such as: How long would it take to organize the conference? And, when would be a good time that does not conflict with personal and academic calendars? Most participants in the room seemed eager to hold the conference as quickly as possible, so the decision was finally made to convene the organizing conference on the weekend of February 19-20, 1972, almost exactly 3 months from that night. This was a short gestation period, I thought, with a great deal of work to be done during the process. And I remember wondering out loud if we couldn't find a warmer month to hold the meeting.

The attending group that night was able to agree on only one other point, as I recall. That point had to do with the purpose of the new organization. Following Murdock's lead earlier in the day,
several of us had agreed that we would argue for a multidisciplinary organization devoted to comparative research. In addition, we would argue for an organization that was scientific and generalizing in its orientation. I do not recall any disagreement or dissent on these points, so the meeting ended with the charge to me to organize the conference by Saturday, February 19, and to Murdock to develop the local arrangements. In addition, members of the group promised to help formulate a list of scholars from throughout the behavioral sciences—anthropology, psychology, sociology, political science, and the like—who should be invited to attend the organizing conference.

Many of us left the meeting that night, I think, with a sense of excitement and hope for a more promising future for cross-cultural comparative research than we had experienced up to then. Many of us had come to the AAA meeting with a sense of frustration and perhaps even disaffection with the dominant idiographic, humanistic, sometimes historicist, functionalist, and extreme relativist bias of much of sociocultural anthropology at that time, a bias that tended to disapprove of if not outright reject generalizing cross-cultural comparative research. All of us in the room that night had heard many times grumblings from mainstream sociocultural anthropologists, such as “You can’t do cross-cultural comparative research. It rips data out of its sociocultural context.” And, “What you’re doing isn’t anthropology anyway!” Moreover, some of us felt distressed by the growing anonymity of the AAA. Because of these feelings, many of us felt the need for a primary reference group of like-minded scholars. And we understood that at least some psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, and other behavioral scientists felt the same way.

GESTATION: NOVEMBER 19, 1971 THROUGH FEBRUARY 18, 1972

I left the AAA meetings full of enthusiasm and vigor a day or so after that seminal evening, and I plunged into the challenge of organizing the conference. The most immediate and pressing task was to identify the universe of scholars from across all the behavioral sciences who might be interested in its objectives. Second, we needed to have a clearly articulated statement of purpose to send
these scholars. With the help of several members of the core group from the AAA meetings, I was able to generate a list of about 80 behavioral scientists from throughout the United States and Canada. Ten days after the AAA meetings I mailed this list to the entire core group. In my covering memo I solicited their input about any names that might be inappropriate, and especially about any missing names that should be included. Several people responded with suggestions, but Frank W. Moore, Executive Director of Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) at that time, was especially helpful. He provided names and addresses of approximately 60 additional scholars known at HRAF to have published one or more articles on cross-cultural or cross-national research. Together with my earlier list we now had the names of 141 behavioral scientists from throughout the United States and Canada, and even extending into Europe, who might plausibly be interested in participating in the organizing conference, or perhaps in at least becoming charter members of the new organization, should one emerge. This list included 73 anthropologists, 24 psychologists, 20 sociologists, 10 political scientists, 1 economist, 1 historian, and 12 people whose professional affiliation I did not know. Although concentrated heavily on the East Coast of the United States (n = 64), these people lived widely throughout the United States (Midwest, n = 36; West Coast including Hawaii, n = 27), Canada (n = 4), and, as mentioned above, Europe (n = 2).

In my memo to the core group requesting names of possible invitees, I also asked for suggestions for a title for the pending conference. No one responded to this request so I proposed to Murdock that we call it “Conference on the Search for Universals in Human Behavior.” Murdock did not like that title and countered with “Organizing Conference of Behavioral Scientists with Comparative Interests.” I felt this was a little too wordy, so we quickly compromised on the final title, “Organizing Conference on Comparative Research in the Behavioral Sciences.” We also agreed on a statement of purpose for the conference, namely “to consider forming a professional, multidisciplinary organization devoted to comparative research aimed at establishing scientifically derived generalizations about human behavior” (from the Invitation to Participate in an Organizing Conference on Comparative Research in the Behavioral Sciences, December 23, 1971).

With these agreements in place, I was now ready to develop the conference program. Murdock and I agreed that the conference
should provide time for both scholarly presentations on topics consistent with the conference's objectives, and time for discussion and debate about founding a new organization. He suggested that I might like to give the first plenary address on my research, and that Alice Schlegel-Biery might also be willing to give a plenary address on hers. Again, I felt flattered to be thought of in this capacity, and when I queried Alice, she seemed to feel the same way. Herbert Barry, III agreed to chair the morning session (Saturday, February 19, 1972), with opening remarks, and to introduce my paper on “The Causes and Consequences of Parental Acceptance-Rejection: Search for Universals in Human Behavior.” Following this plenary session, I scheduled an organizational luncheon to be followed by an all-afternoon general organizational meeting, with open discussion among participants. Ward H. Goodenough agreed to chair this session. These meetings were to be followed by a cocktail party hosted by Jerome Rosenberg, then Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh. The day was to end with a Dutch treat dinner at a local restaurant. The conference was to resume for half a day the following morning, Sunday (February 20, 1972). William W. Lambert agreed to chair that session, and to introduce Alice Schegel-Biery's paper on “Male Dominance and Female Autonomy.”

At the same time that these details were being worked out, Murdock sent me information about local arrangements, which included an invitation to his home for welcoming, preconference cocktails on Friday evening before the meetings. So, with these details in place, on December 23, 1971, I mailed 141 invitations to scholars throughout the United States and Canada to participate in an organizing conference on comparative research in the behavioral sciences.

In the invitation I set a deadline of February 1, 1972 to confirm reservations. By January 10 we had only 17 acceptances, and by January 17, only about a month from the conference, we had but 7 more. As I recall, the majority of these acceptances were from people already known to us from the core AAA group and from the other scheduled conference participants. Murdock and I became worried that our dream of a cross-cultural comparative organization might remain only a dream. But by February 1, 63 scholars had indicated their intention to participate. And by the time of the conference itself, 64 people had paid their $3.00 registration fee. These individuals represented most of the core behavioral sciences,
especially anthropology, psychology, and sociology. They also represented a wide geographic distribution throughout the United States and Canada. Additionally, we had received by then the registration fee from each of 24 individuals who could not attend the conference, but who wanted to be included among the charter members of the new organization if one was actually founded. (We promised to refund the money if no organization materialized from the conference.)

Not everyone responded favorably to the idea of the conference or especially to the idea of founding a new professional organization. Frank W. Young (personal communication, January 4, 1972), a sociologist at Cornell University, for example, urged us to join the International Studies Association (ISA) rather than create a new organization. He candidly admitted, however, that “the identity of . . . anthropologists would tend to get lost in an organization such as ISA.” In that letter he also acknowledged that “the strong psychological interest that many of you have might get less play” there. Robert M. Marsh (personal communication, January 4, 1972) in sociology at Brown University had a similar concern. He wondered why we would want to create the overlap and duplication of a new organization when the ISA was already forming a new “comparative interdisciplinary studies section” within the larger organization. Clearly this was an issue that needed to be discussed at our organizational meeting.

Finally, prospective conference participants had a variety of opinions about a possible name for the new organization, should one actually emerge. Melvin Ember, for example, suggested Society for Comparative Studies; Murdock leaned toward Association on Comparative Research; and Raoul Naroll favored the title Hologeistic Group. With all this disparity of opinion, Murdock and I decided that John Whiting’s (personal communication, December 20, 1971) suggestion was probably most appropriate: “I think the name of the association should be decided at the conference.”

**BIRTH: FEBRUARY 19, 1972**

The Organizing Conference on Comparative Research convened Saturday, February 19, 1972. It was in the afternoon of that day in Room 208 of the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pitts-
burgh where the Society for Cross-Cultural Research was born, with about 64 people in attendance. Chairman Goodenough called the meeting to order and asked John Turner, Executive Secretary of the International Studies Association, to describe that organization. Perhaps we would want to join with them rather than create our own organization? Following Turner’s address, Herbert Barry, III described the newly forming International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology. Their mission seemed similar to ours, so maybe we would want to join forces with them? Quickly, though, John Whiting voiced the prevailing sentiment that we should form our own small, but independent organization. Raoul Naroll immediately framed this view as a motion, which was seconded by Murdock. The vote to form a new organization was immediate and unanimous. That settled, then came the question: What should the organization’s purpose be? That, too, was fairly simple, because my invitation to the conference had already specified “a professional, multidisciplinary organization devoted to comparative research aimed at establishing scientifically derived generalizations about human behavior.” Murdock reminded the group that the key concepts here were “interdisciplinary” (or “multidisciplinary”), “scientific,” “comparative,” and “generalizing” (or “universalist”). Following a brief discussion, my invitational statement was unanimously adopted as the organization’s statement of purpose.

At this point, Chairman Goodenough directed the group’s attention to the structure of the new organization. This directive unleashed the lustiest, most exhilarating intellectual debate I personally have ever participated in. Principal actors in the debate were two intellectual titans, George Peter Murdock and his former student, John W. M. Whiting. The two men argued opposing viewpoints that nearly divided the assembly into two factions. On one hand, Whiting argued that the organization should be small, selective, and absolutely loose and informal. That is, it should be open by invitation only, and it should have no formal structure. During the course of his argument he said something to the effect that “I already know everyone there is to know in cross-cultural research, and most of them are right here in this room. I don’t want to know anybody else!” Recently, Carol Ember (personal communication, November 27, 1995) reminded me that he also said, in effect, “Let’s just have fun and talk to each other.” In keeping with these sentiments, he proposed that the conference participants
should appoint a committee of five persons to organize the next year's meeting to get people together informally to talk about common interests, but to have no further organizational structure.

Murdock had quite a different vision for the organization. He argued an inclusionist perspective in which behavioral scientists everywhere interested in the objectives of the organization would be welcomed, especially young scholars and students. To assure long-term continuity of the organization, he advocated a formal organizational structure that he and I had worked out some weeks earlier. Specifically, he argued that we should have an elected president, president-elect, vice-president (this position to become the office of past-president after the initial year), secretary-treasurer, and three councillors—one for each of the major behavioral science divisions that he and I envisioned for the organization. These were the anthropological sciences, psychological sciences, and sociological sciences. The latter was to include sociology, political science, perhaps economics, and other social sciences except anthropology and psychology. He clearly specified that the organization should recognize issues of gender equality among its officers, and he specified that each year the president-elect should represent a different discipline from the preceding year. In keeping with these proposals, he suggested a specific slate of officers: Beatrice B. Whiting, President; Herbert Barry, III, President-Elect; John L. Fischer, Vice-President; James M. Schaefer, Secretary-Treasurer; Ronald P. Rohner, Councillor for Anthropology; Leigh Minturn, Councillor for Psychology; and Dorrian Sweetser, Councillor for Sociology. During his presentation, Murdock continued to argue that we probably would not have to worry too much about keeping the organization small and intimate because he did not envisage crowds clamoring to join us. Indeed, we might have just the opposite problem of recruiting enough members to sustain the organization over time.

These two competing visions for the future of cross-cultural comparative research, the Whiting vision and the Murdock vision, generated heated controversy, and indeed elements of personal tension among the conferees. Chairperson Goodenough allowed the debate to continue for some time. Finally, though, he called for a show of hands: How many people were in favor of Whiting's proposal? How many people were in favor of Murdock's? By a vote of 19 to 28, Murdock's vision was endorsed.
Following a coffee break that afternoon, Goodenough then called for an election of officers. He asked for additional nominations in addition to those proposed by Murdock. None were made, so Murdock's slate was unanimously approved by acclamation. We now had an organization with elected officers and a statement of purpose, but no name and no provision for future meetings. Both of these issues generated lively discussion, but little of the heat we had just witnessed—with the slight exception about when the annual meetings of the organization would be. Many members of the group wanted to convene annual meetings in warmer places or at warmer times of the year than are offered by Pittsburgh in February. Whiting, however, energetically argued for the month of February, specifically the week between Lincoln's birthday and Washington's birthday. Carol Ember (personal communication, November 27, 1995) recently recounted to me her recollection about why Whiting was so insistent on this time. According to her, when the question came up about when the meeting should be held, Whiting volunteered,

I think we should have the meeting on Washington's birthday. Everybody looked at him, [as if to say] “Are you out of your mind? Meet in February? It's cold in the northeast!” But John replied, “No! No! No! It's got to be in February because my father said if you can make it through the winter to Washington's birthday then you've made it for another year!”

Out of respect for Whiting and for the passion of his arguments throughout the day, the group acceded to this view, but not without some rueful joking about meeting in cold places and at cold times when both could be warmer.

The final major issue to be addressed by the assembled body was that of naming the new organization. Because it now had elected officers, the decision was made for the new Executive Committee to consider suggested names at an evening meeting and to report back the following morning. Six names were proposed, but the conferees Sunday morning quickly reduced the list to two major competitors: Society for Comparative Studies, and Society (or Association) for (or, of) Cross-Cultural Research. Popular sentiment seemed to favor the idea of Cross-Cultural Research. But left in question was the issue whether the organization should be called a society or an association, and whether it should be “of” Cross-Cultural Research or “for” Cross-Cultural Research. President
Beatrice Whiting chaired a short debate on these questions, and then called for a vote that ended with the victorious title, Society for Cross-Cultural Research.

With this decision made, the principal business of the organizing conference was nearly complete. Only six technical issues remained to be resolved. These included questions about: What should the dues structure be? When and where should next year's meeting be held? What form should the meetings take? Who should organize them, and who should host them? Each of these questions was easily settled after short periods of discussion. Faculty would pay $10 annual dues, but students would pay only $3. The next year's meeting would be held for 2 1/2 days at the University of Pennsylvania, on Washington's birthday weekend. Ward H. Goodenough would be responsible for local arrangements, and members of the Executive Committee would jointly organize the meeting, with some combination of symposia, contributed paper sessions, plenary addresses, workshops, and educational sessions. Finally, President Whiting announced that the Executive Committee had asked me the night before to write the Society's by-laws and constitution, and to present them for discussion and vote at next year's meeting. I accepted this responsibility with pleasure because it gave me a unique opportunity to influence the future of cross-cultural comparative research, at least as that future was to be affected by the Society for Cross-Cultural Research. But that project takes me beyond the scope of this article. Its description will have to await another occasion when I or another founding member of the Society have an opportunity to describe the growing pains of the Society.

Note

1. Although there were about 64 behavioral scientists registered for the conference, this vote shows only 47 people voting. My records show nothing about the remaining 17.

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