

# *An SfAA Oral History Interview with Frederick L. W. Richardson*

## Present at the Founding of the Society

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Interview by J. Thomas May and Peter K. New

This transcript is of an interview with Frederick L.W. Richardson done by Tom May and Peter New in 1979. Frederick Richardson participated in the founding of the Society and served in various leadership roles including being president. He became an important figure in the anthropology of industry and business. His graduate studies in anthropology included a 1941 Ph.D. under the direction of Eliot D. Chapple. Chapple was a founder of the Society and its first president. During World War II Richardson worked in a number of federal agencies. He followed this with academic appointments at the Harvard School of Public Health and the business colleges of the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Virginia. He collaborated in research at various times with Elton Mayo, Eliot D. Chapple, Conrad Arensburg and W. Lloyd Warner and did consulting with a number of large business corporations. His accomplishments in applied anthropology were recognized with the 1988 Bronislaw Malinowski Award, shortly before his death. The interview was edited by Prof. Richardson initially. His annotations are in parentheses. John van Willigen also edited the transcript; his editorial comments are in brackets. The transcript, in this abridged version, starts with discussion of applied anthropology and the society.

**RICHARDSON:** We actually used applied anthropology like a Communist cell which has its own publication. If you don't have your own publication, you won't get anywhere in a racket like this. Zero! Of course, no one would hire us. When we came back from World War II, we developed the Harvard Business School. We were the young and promising anthropologists and all of that. Then Dean Donham retired, and Elton Mayo retired and went to England, and a whole new bunch came. And then, the whole psychological crowd, Fritz Roethlisberger and those, were the ones that were in.

We became spoiled because of all of the success that we have not gone into—how the society was started and all of the groups that we were able to bring together: the Indian Service, the Agriculture Department, business men, psychiatrists. I mean, you never saw the number of people that all got going.

The country was in ferment because of the Depression, anyway. And government didn't work, economics did not amount to a damn, nothing worked. Nobody knew

how to do anything well (which is about the way that it looks now). People were searching for something. Anthropology was tied in with the Business School and got all of the big deals in business. And here were all of these young men; and the newspaper reporters would come around. The people with any sense knew that the Communist thing did not work worth a damn, and here was this thing, applied anthropology, and it was comprehensive. Nothing else was comprehensive. Nobody pretended that it was. And so, we were able to get all kinds of people.

**NEW:** You started on a very intriguing point and I would like to follow it up. You noted that Paul Hare could not get his stuff published. But, that you and your colleagues had control of the publications of applied anthropology, and you did not have that difficulty.

**RICHARDSON:** Yes. So, we could publish our stuff. The other rule that we made was that it had to be English, and not academic jargonese. Now we didn't completely succeed, but we did in part. We had a wide following of persons. The whole thing was that society didn't work, and anthropology had something, and people were searching for something. They really were searching; not only academics but practical people as well.

**MAY:** Would you date this in the late 1930's?

**RICHARDSON:** Yes. The Harvard Business School began in the early 1930's and Lloyd Warner was there at that time. So, the research base got going. The results were coming in. We had the backing of President Lowell and the Junior Fellows and the whole business, and L. J. Henderson. We were the up and coming thing. The Anthropology Department was there.

Then, President Roosevelt came in. We had the stuff with the coalfields, and I was doing the original work in the coalfields. Regional Rehabilitation tied in with the Agriculture Department in the Extension Service. Rural sociology was going strong, and Carl Taylor. I don't have time now, but I could go into that whole thing.

There was, for example, the War Relocation Authority with the Japanese. That was partly run by John Collier who married Laura Thompson and who was the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. He ran it, and I was in touch with that. I also worked with the Quakers and the Quakers were tied in with Eleanor Roosevelt. Then there was the Extension Service of the Agriculture Department and M. L. Wilson. So, there was a whole network of us young guys who were tied in through the old people. And

we brought in sociology, psychiatry at the MGH, various anthropologists, and business, and god knows what else. Even agricultural economics was in there. There was a Professor Black at Harvard who was impressed by all of this, and he was interested; and his students were as well. The whole thing was just catching on like wild fire.

**MAY:** Perhaps we can go into that in the next interview. But I do want to inquire about something that interests us. If you had this critical mass of people organized around certain ideas and it appeared to be working, and being accepted, why was it necessary to form a national organization, such as the Society for Applied Anthropology?

**RICHARDSON:** Well you see, I was a geologist and an archaeologist and I didn't know all of this stuff. I came in late; I came in 1937. They had all been doing this for ten years before that. I didn't know much about it, really. [Eliot] Chapple and [Conrad] Arensberg began to question Lloyd Warner's interviewing methods.

Then Henderson impressed upon them that the basic notion of a science is to have phenomena in equilibrium. By that he meant that you have two or three or four variables, and these variables are all interdependent, such as water, whiskey, ice. Then you shake it up. Each is interdependent on the other. The equilibrium changes as the ice melts and all. He called this the cat's cradle—you know, you pull one string and the others are affected. There is no single causation; it is multiple causation. So Chapple and Arensberg were hearing all of this.

They then came to the interactional point; that A, and B, and C are all interconnected and all of these people have this interconnection. If one person dies, productivity goes down. What is there about the interconnection between A and B and C? Next, are there interactions between A and B and C. Interaction is defined by the frequency, duration, initiation, the tone of the voice, and all of this stuff. And these reach an equilibrium for periods of time. As people age and new people come in, this will change.

So the whole thing began to take on the form that there was a science of human relations. It had been called anthropology or sociology or government, but those are just meaningless labels. People have been above nature. You see, people have a soul and a language and all of this, and people are above and beyond nature, and therefore, it is not subject to scientific analysis. This is still widely held, and it was even more widely held then.

The whole thing was that there was a science of human relations. And it was subject to analysis. Now, this was widely held at the Harvard Business School and the Anthropology Department. It became more and more widely held. And then, you see, Chapple and Arensberg and [Carleton S.] Coon were the ones who translated this into the forces, like gravity, which connect the elements like the stars. The comparable thing in human relations were the interactions between these planetary people moving around. And therefore, on that basis you have a system. Therefore, it was a science of human relations.

Chapple and Coon, from this basis, wrote the book *Principles of Anthropology*. Have you ever seen that? That was in 1942; quite early. And Chapple and Arensberg also wrote the book, *Measuring Interactions*, or whatever it is called.

Now, let me get back to your question of why it was necessary to form the Society. First of all, there was no organization or society at that time. I mean, as far as Chapple, Arensberg, and Coon, (I was sort of an adjunct to this because I came in late) nobody was really zeroing in on the scientific nature of it. There was just talk. I mean, the Business School was one thing. But, we got increasingly psychological and non-directed interviewing and not really seeing the big picture and not really buying the idea of field observation and interaction. You see, they still had the basic idea that it was the inner psyche that controlled behavior. They really felt that, and we felt that it wasn't. And there was no group. And everywhere you went, you got repudiated. Maybe there is another thing here, a political thing. I think it was important. Clyde Kluckhohn was coming into Harvard. You see, Coon was a very promising person at the time, following Dixon, [A. M.] Tozzer, and [Earnest A.] Hooton. Coon is one of the last, big generalists in anthropology. He really has a fantastic knowledge of archaeology and ethnography. So he was promising.

Then, Kluckhohn came in. He had been trained in Germany. If you were derogatory, you would say that he was a 'con' man of the first water. And he conned Hooton and Tozzer. Oh, god! He could spout all of this stuff; god, it was amazing. He just wowed them! He has a smooth manner; Carl Coon is gruff and has no proprietary social sense. My children used to love Coon because he used to swear and use vulgar words. They just used to think that he was terrific, and he did that with older people as well. He was just a bore the way that he behaved. This did not go well with Tozzer who was the prissy type, too.

And Kluckhohn came in and wowed them and told them this and that. And he was beginning to take over. He did take over and Coon had to leave and go to the

University of Pennsylvania. Chapple didn't have much of a chance anyway because he was so irritating all of the time and no one would have hired him anyway. So, there are these bright guys with all of this future and all of this thing, doing all of this, and getting nowhere. I think that this failure of acceptance was critical. I wasn't involved in it. Not that I was accepted, because I was on the periphery at this point. But this failure of acceptance, it seems to me, was a very strongly motivating force. I remember going to a literary society luncheon at Harvard, the Signet Society. I was a member of that as an undergraduate. It was a refined group and all of the smart intellectuals went there. It was supposed to be a big deal. I do not remember if Coon and Chapple belonged to that. But anyway, we had lunch and I had Coon and Kluckhohn there. And I remember Coon telling one of his vulgar stories (I even remember what it was. It sort of embarrasses me to tell you two what it was. I could be persuaded, but it is not worth it at this point.) And he told this story and Kluckhohn was mortified. It was just terrible. That was just the end. But Kluckhohn would play the dirtiest little underhanded political tricks and that was OK.

So there was this big personality thing. And the failure had a lot to do with it. In addition, they had a real message to carry, and no one would carry it. So they pushed it right through and we did it. Then he lined me up and he had a few others. Then at this time, Margaret Mead felt very hurt because she wasn't in on the inner group. She finally pushed her way in. And Pete [George Peter] Murdoch sort of liked it. I don't know; it sort of caught on. And we had quite a meeting there the first time. We controlled the Society for about 15 years and created a lot of antagonism because we were a clique. One of the things that they never understood (and I don't know if people do now), but if you are going to get anything done, then you have got to start with a clique. And a clique can get it done and it is a damn good way to get something done.

Then, of course, a clique has to enlarge, and bring everyone else in. But, we were sort of fighting the world with this theory and method. And people only partially bought it. Then we got to doing other things, and we got tired of doing it anyway and we gave over. And I think that the Society has slipped ever since.

We knew how to run meetings. Have you heard about this? Our meetings were famous. We had psychologists, sociologists, business people, and they all participated. And we worked out a beautiful way. I was the one who ran that. I used to run the meetings. I wasn't the policy maker; Chapple was the one who did that with all of the finagling. But, when it came to the routine things, I did that, and I ran the meetings.

I even gave a demonstration, for three years in a row, on how to run a meeting. It was in Lexington, Kentucky. And I remember that Omer Stewart was President. And dammit, Adams lost all of the minutes. But, I showed them how to run a meeting. And they never followed it. They got into this whole academic mode of boring talks and no discussion afterwards. But our meetings were famous. Margaret Mead would get so excited, and Everett Hughes would as well. Oh, god, we really had wonderful meetings.

I am doing the same thing for my wife's conference now. She is letting me run that for her.

**NEW:** Well, I think that we should close this off for now. We do appreciate very much your time and help.

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