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Driving Organizational Change: 2020 Bronislaw Malinowski Award Address

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This article represents my 2020 Bronislaw Malinowski Award Address that I delivered virtually at the 2021 Society for Applied Anthropology Annual Meetings, March 23-27, 2021. The address focuses on the value of organizations as both a field of study and a place of employment for anthropologists. On the one hand, organizations have been largely excluded from anthropological field research in favor of research in communities. On the other, academic anthropology departments (applied anthropology programs excepted) have been largely reluctant to engage with anthropological practice and scholarship in the classroom or view organizations as a vital source of careers for their graduating students. I use my own career trajectory as a model to raise awareness of what anthropology might learn from organizations as well as what anthropologists might offer them. I will close with an initiative for a cross-section of the discipline to work together on the Career Readiness Commission to address the lack of student preparation and professionalization for careers in and for organizations.

Key words: Malinowski Award, organizational culture and change, anthropological practice, student professionalization skills, organizational careers, Career Readiness Commission

I am deeply grateful for the 2020 Bronislaw Malinowski Award from the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA). As the first private-sector recipient in the forty-eight-year history of the award, I will focus on organizational culture and change. I have devoted my career to it, whether for companies, non-profits, universities, professional associations, and government agencies. I am not entirely sure what Bronislaw Malinowski would have thought of fieldwork inside and for organizations, but I am guessing he could have imagined it as a dynamic new frontier for anthropological work.

There are over 7.5 million organizations in the United States. I use the term organization to mean a group of people with an overarching collective purpose—including businesses, non-profits, and government agencies. Every one of us is associated with organizations in some way whether as an employee, volunteer, member, or customer. And yet, anthropology's track record in understanding them is poor.

Organizations are part of our culture. They can improve lives, particularly with the help of anthropologists. Yet, they have been largely overlooked by the discipline, both as a focus of study and as a source of careers. I will use my own career trajectory to cover the value of an anthropological perspective in organizations. I will close with the start of a plan for the discipline of anthropology to work together to address the lack of student preparation and professionalization for careers in organizations.

Figure 1. Briody's Journey to Anthropology and Anthropological Practice

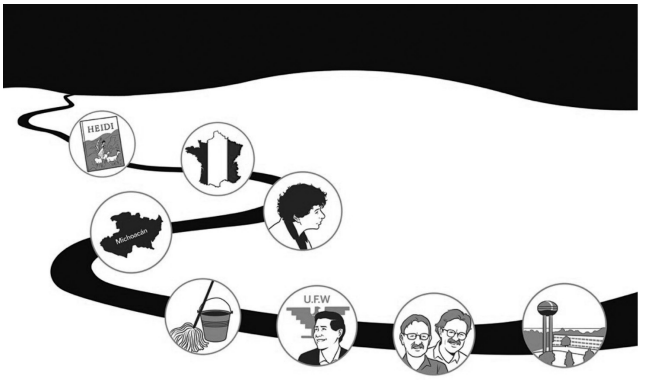

Photo courtesy of Nathan Anderson

Career Journey

Since I spent more than two decades as General Motors' (GM) anthropologist (1985-2009), I will use an automotive metaphor. I'll begin by looking in the rearview mirror of my GM car to offer some background and context (see Figure 1).

Elizabeth K. Briody is Founder and Principal at Cultural Keys LLC, Troy, MI. She has been involved in cultural-change efforts for over 30 years — first at General Motors Research and later through her own consulting practice, Cultural Keys. She has worked with clients in health care, petrochemicals, aerospace, nursing care, consumer products, manufacturing, marketing, the U.S. military, and service industries. Her career has focused on both explaining employee perspectives and work patterns and identifying alternative work practices and policies with the goal of improving organizational effectiveness.

The road to my career was grounded in my lifelong interest in different cultures and in my formal training in anthropology. One of my earliest recollections was my mother reading *Heidi* to me, a children's book about a young Swiss girl who lived high in the Alps. Oh, did I want to meet her!

High school language instruction made me a good candidate for a year-long American Field Service exchange program to France. There, I lived with the Jourdain family, attended a *lycée* (or high school), had to speak French 24/7, and endured the often-dreaded rite of passage known as *le bac* (or baccalaureate exam).

My next road stop was Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. I was diverted from my plan to become a high school French teacher by an inspirational anthropology professor, Ina Rosenthal-Urey. Not only did she encourage me to switch majors to anthropology, but she persuaded me to go to The University of Texas at Austin (UT) for graduate work and later took me along to do summer fieldwork in Michoacán, Mexico.

While at UT, my interests first turned to occupational differences—such as janitors and Catholic sisters. I branched out to study farmworkers, those settling out of the migrant stream, and the non-profits (e.g., United Farmworkers, local churches, Valley Interfaith) that provided emergency support and had political influence in South Texas. This fieldwork was supervised by my dissertation co-chairs James Brow and Doug Foley.

In my last year of grad school, I interviewed with General Motors Research Labs. At the time, "the Labs" was led by Bob Frosch (former Administrator of NASA and former Assistant Secretary of the United Nations), who saw the value an anthropologist could bring to the largest corporation in the world. A sociologist, Carroll DeWeese, was sent to find an anthropologist at the American Anthropological Association Meetings (AAA) but had no luck. A friend of mine came back from the American Sociological Association Meetings having met him and urged me to apply. I convinced GM that if I could talk to janitors and Catholic sisters, I could talk to engineers and designers.

At GM, I had exposure to a wide assortment of employee-focused projects in the United States and abroad. I also worked on projects involving GM partners—including other firms (e.g., Isuzu, BP) and many universities. I spent almost twenty-four years at GM, but like thousands of others, I lost my job during GM's bankruptcy in 2009.

I decided to hang up my own shingle to help other organizations improve their effectiveness. I called my consulting practice Cultural Keys LLC. Not long after, I saw anthropologist Fred Gamst at the AAA Meetings. I showed him my new business card and explained that I used my Dad's old keys as my logo (see Figure 2). Fred knew my Dad, an old railroad man himself. When Fred saw the logo, he said, "Elizabeth, do you know that these are your Dad's railroad keys?" I looked at him stunned. Do not ever underestimate the knowledge of a fellow anthropologist!

One of my first jobs as a consultant was in a medical start-up firm where we assisted a hospital's recovery from a significant downsizing by helping it rebuild its culture and focus its energy and attention on patients. Since then, I have worked in many industries including petrochemicals, universities, aerospace, pet food, consumer-products, insurance, financial advising, and long-term care. While the issues and proposed solutions that emerged from these engagements varied considerably, organizational leaders sought insights in transforming their organizations for a potential healthy future.

Figure 2. Logo of Cultural Keys LLC

Photo courtesy of David Anderson

How Anthropologists Can Improve Organizations

Working with organizational clients is not for the faint-hearted. You have to go down many rough, and sometimes gutted, roads to try and reach your destination. But I have learned that three features characterize or represent the hallmark of anthropological practice:

1. Problem focus
2. Collaboration, and
3. Change

A typical organizational project begins when a client asks a question or describes a problem. The anthropologist collaborates with others from the organization to answer the question or address the stated issue. The results, recommendations, and any interventions or tools position the organization to change, with the expectation that it will lead to a better future.

Retain a Problem Focus

Some examples of these three features help make their importance clearer. Organizational work starts with a problem focus. The question in one case was: How do we get three GM units to produce a vehicle that can be sold around the world? The three units were Small Car Group (a combination of Chevrolet and Pontiac), Saturn Corporation, and Adam Opel AG. I knew that solving this problem would be tough because GM had a longstanding tradition of autonomy, which made cross-unit collaboration difficult (Briody 1995).

One day, I was at a three-hour engineering meeting where conflict was rife! A small team had devoted hundreds of hours to select a single park-brake-cable routing. In analyzing the meeting's transcript, I found that the decision changed *five times*. First, a group of team members announced their decision to go with the Saturn routing—so the decision was made. Then Opel's chief engineer argued that his "guys didn't buy

Figure 3. Ideal Plant Culture Team Members Elizabeth Briody and Tracy Meerwarth Learning from a GM Electrician

Photo by George "Wolf" Gumerman

into it," so the decision was revoked. Later in the meeting, the decision was remade, voided, and finally put on hold.

None of the three units was optimizing for the corporate good. If a unit did not support the decision, that unit would appeal to its most senior leader. A credible threat to leave the vehicle program, delivered by the most senior leader, was enough to force a decision change. When that occurred, the decision was reversed, ensuring the global program manager had no authority, program delays occurred, and rework costs resulted (Briody 2010).

It took sixteen months to make a final decision about the path of (what I viewed as) *a wire!* Moreover, the final vehicle program decision was to diverge and use different paths!! There are thousands of decisions in a global product program; here, it was largely impossible to consent to even the simplest ones (Briody 2013; Briody, Cavusgil, and Miller 2004).

Trying to reach agreement was costing the program significant time and money, rather than saving it. As might be expected, the vehicle program failed, at a cost of 2.2 million vehicles. The failure forced GM to redesign global product programs drawing from my cultural analysis, recommendations, workshops, and reports. GM knew it had a problem; my analysis helped them fix it.

Engage in Multiple Forms of Collaboration

A second prominent feature of anthropological work in organizations is collaboration, which shares features with Community-based Participatory Research and Empowerment Evaluation. The highest-ranking stakeholder in this second project was GM's head of North American Operations. He asked: How do we adapt GM de Mexico's culture for GM's United States manufacturing plants? The local stakeholders included the management and union leadership sides of the newest plant that GM was planning to build in Michigan, as well as members of the

Figure 4. Ideal Plant Culture Team's DVD Cover of the ExplorePlantCulture Computer Game

Photo courtesy of George Pirvu

workforce who would transfer to it. Another form of collaboration also mattered: the interdisciplinary research team I led composed of five anthropologists and one computer scientist.

Our computer scientist designed the model that characterized the aspirations of the 400+ employees and leaders with whom we spoke. It consisted of four quadrants of equal size—plant environment, workforce size and competencies, work practices, and relationships. The ideal plant culture is captured best through the theme of collaboration (see Figure 3). Our team agreed that the model would work best when those four elements were in balance.

This ideal culture model is embedded in the ten tools we developed and tested with our union and management counterparts. We designed one tool as a simple workshop to teach employees how to ask open-ended questions. Other tools are far more sophisticated, such as a computer game based on an actual observation involving a serious personnel confrontation—and twenty-five credible and realistic alternatives to the conflict. Players make decisions for the characters and receive immediate feedback from gauges representing the collaborative nature of plant relationships and work processes (see Figure 4). It was our strong belief that

collaboration both with the client and among the researchers strengthens project outcomes (Briody, Meerwarth Pester, and Trotter 2012; Briody, Trotter, and Meerwarth Pester 2010).

Assist with Planned Change

Change is the third feature of any kind of organizational work. Organizations must continually change and adapt or go out of business. Our job as anthropologists is to assist organizations in planned change, rather than simply conduct research on the sidelines (Briody and Meerwarth Pester 2014).

Ann Jordan had a prospective client whom she referred to me. This client, a Vice President of a southern hospital, called and said: "How do we become more patient-centric?" I wondered, "Did I hear her right?" and then immediately thought, "You are a hospital, and you are not patient-centric?"

I led a team of six hospital employees for over a year to understand what was going on in that culture and develop an approach and tools for organizational change. The client was correct. Our observations in the waiting room of the emergency department showed little interaction between staff and in-coming patients, along with long patient wait times. Other observations revealed the non-standard use of patient whiteboards in their rooms, reflecting the lack of a unified approach to patient care. We also found that patients were piling up as they moved through the hospital system—a process referred to as "flow."

We crafted numerous recommendations and developed sixteen tools to create a healthier hospital culture. One tool called the Bottleneck Buster Teams helped reduce bottlenecks—such as between the emergency department and the floors—so that patients do not spend eight+ hours waiting in emergency before being admitted. Several other tools focused on improving the quality of employee-patient interactions (Briody 2014) or employee-employee relationships. Our team believed that the implementation of these tools would be a recipe for effective planned change.

But, as we all know, change is frequently hard. It turned out that the hospital was enmeshed in a repetitive cultural pattern known colloquially in organizational settings as the "program of the month" or "flavor of the month." This pattern is typically associated with organizations whose internal units optimize for themselves rather than the whole and where micromanagement is common. New initiatives, such as our cultural change project, enable leaders to leave the impression with key stakeholders (e.g., hospital's board) that accomplishments are being achieved, when in fact, the status quo remains intact, and the recommended changes are never implemented. Such was the fate of our efforts, which battled unsuccessfully with a resistant leadership (Briody 2018).

Anthropologists Working in Organizations

Now let us turn to getting hired to work in organizational settings. What do employers want? Sometimes employers want anthropologists to give them a "temperature check" on the culture: find out what the culture is like, tell them some interesting things. For example, a recent project I did with Greg Urban, Bill Beeman, and Derek Newberry involved SABIC, a Saudi Arabian petrochemical firm. We found that SABIC's acquisitions in the 2000s, including GE Plastics and Dutch State Mines, faced a challenging integration since decision making and authority were largely centralized at headquarters. Consequently, problem solving was avoided, risk aversion was exacerbated, and inefficiency proliferated.

Sometimes, organizations want to learn from a cultural experiment. Cathleen Crain and Niel Tashima led a team of eight anthropologists including Peter van Arsdale, Ken Erickson, Dawn Lehman, Tracy Meerwarth, Keith Kellersohn, and me as we documented the experiences of NASA engineers. NASA wanted to know if it could bring together researchers who did not know each other and who worked at different NASA research centers, to work on a first-of-its-kind virtual project. They were to adopt new teaming skills and innovate around an ambiguous goal that no one knew anything about (Tashima et al. 2019).

Most of the time, however, employers want outcomes that will improve their operations. I have already talked about the tools or interventions developed in the GM and hospital examples. Employers often want immediate solutions. Sherri Briller and I devised a new marketing approach for a long-term care community, which included video clips of community members, as well as word clouds that portrayed how the community described itself (Briody and Briller 2015).

Moving into the Future

We need to look ahead into the traffic and around street corners as we imagine the future of anthropological work. To me, the question is not: "*Why* should we train the next generation for organizational work?" but rather "*How* do we train the next generation for organizational work?"

Necessary Changes in Academia

At a minimum, we need to take two actions to improve student undergraduate and graduate education: enhance the curriculum and offer students professional development (Briody and Nolan 2013). In terms of the curriculum, organizational scholarship should be incorporated into syllabi. Class projects, particularly for graduate students, should be done with organizational clients to give students hands-on client experience. Internships should be required to familiarize students with workplace issues and tap into their creativity and problem-solving abilities. And we should broaden the focus of anthropological work from "do no harm" to actually "do some good" (Briody and Meerwarth Pester 2014).

We also need to offer students professional development to ensure that they have appropriate training for a range of workplaces. Anthropology departments should run a required professional development course. Faculty should engage with professional development services and resources on campus

on behalf of their students. Practitioners should be invited regularly to lead activities such as workshops and webinars.

Now, I would like you to get in the front seat with me. We, you and I, must drive the change.

Anthropology's Crises

Anthropology is in crisis. One crisis involves jobs, and that crisis is urgent. When 400 applicants with advanced degrees are competing for a single academic position, the discipline is demonstrating its inability to adapt to a changing world. Too many Ph.D. programs continue to train students for academic jobs and promote the ideology that the *only* reputable employment involves securing an academic position.

Colleges and universities offering bachelor and master's degrees, as well as Ph.D. degrees, also routinely demonstrate another consequential problem (applied programs excepted). When professors are unable or unwilling to prepare students for and coach them on potential internship and employment options, no one benefits.

1. Students have difficulty articulating their value to prospective employers, reducing their chances of finding employment and applying what they have learned.
2. The institution loses opportunities for building and strengthening relationships between anthropology and area organizations (e.g., firms, agencies, nonprofits).
3. The wider community does not reap the benefits of an anthropological approach, relying instead on other social scientists, engineers, and businesspeople.
4. And the discipline of anthropology retains its inward orientation, essentially circulating its students and instructors within a closed system while refusing to acknowledge the discipline's potential to make a significant impact on organizational life.

What are we thinking? There are untold numbers of organizations that desperately need us. As a discipline, we need to overcome the fracturing long evident between academia and practice and speak with one voice. We need to restructure and fill gaps in academic programs to ensure that students can apply their anthropology effectively in *any* workplace. We need to recognize that student aspirations and preferences vary, with many seeking job opportunities beyond the university. And we need to realize that just as theory contributes to practice, practice—and the students that participate in our anthropology programs—can have an enormous positive influence on theory.

Career Readiness Commission

I propose framing an initial solution in this way: a single voice on student preparation by creating an anthropology-wide, cross-association commission with a one-year deadline. Commission members are recruited from anthropology associations, diverse occupations, and all subfields. They are charged with identifying best practices on training, drawing especially on lessons from current applied anthropology programs. Then they promote job preparation guidelines for all anthropology programs.

I will end with the point I made at the outset: organizations are part of our culture. They can improve lives, particularly with the help of anthropologists. Anthropologists can build their careers in organizations. Now *we* just need to act to get this commission started. I will begin by reaching out to leaders in SfAA and the AAA.

I hope you enjoyed this road trip with me!

Epilogue

Since I gave the Malinowski address, the Commission's work has gotten underway. I had preliminary conversations with the leaders of 11 anthropology associations in the United States. Their responses were extraordinarily positive and encouraging. Riall W. Nolan (2021 Sol Tax Awardee) agreed to Co-chair the Commission with me. Together we launched our Commission kickoff meeting on May 25, 2021, with the participation of about 40 anthropologists. Interest in the Commission's work continues to grow. Stay tuned!

Acknowledgments

I want to recognize many people who enabled me to receive this honor. First, I want to thank my family—my husband Marc; father-in-law David and his partner Jeanne; my children Andrew, Kathleen, and Anton; my daughter-in-law Angela; and granddaughter Flora. All have been a strong source of support and encouragement, centering me and teaching me the value of living life to its fullest. Next, I want to acknowledge my colleagues: I could not have accomplished even half of what I did without them—their wisdom and experience and willingness to teach me what I needed to learn. I want to recognize Maryann McCabe who organized and submitted the Malinowski Award nomination materials on my behalf. Twelve others were signatories on her letter, and two of them—Ann Jordan and Riall Nolan—wrote additional letters of support. What a wonderful tribute! I am grateful for their belief in me. Finally, a big thank you to the SfAA: to their Awards Committee, Board of Directors, and President Sherri Briller, for the role they played in selecting me as an awardee. I am truly grateful. It was critical for my career that I had a community of colleagues and friends who were anthropologists—many of whom were SfAA members. I gave my first paper at SfAA in 1986, and thirty-five years later I was able to give this 2020 address.

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