

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on April 20, 2004, the following tribute to the life and service of the late John W. M. Whiting was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

JOHN W. M. WHITING

BORN: June 12, 1908

DIED: May 13, 1999

John Wesley Mayhew Whiting, Professor of Social Anthropology, Emeritus, died on May 13, 1999 in Chilmark, Massachusetts, where he had been born almost 91 years earlier. Whiting was a leading figure in psychological anthropology and the cross-cultural study of childhood and adolescence who played an important part in establishing those fields as specialties at the boundary of anthropology and psychology. He taught at Harvard from 1949 to 1978 and was involved in graduate and postdoctoral training here until 1985.

Whiting was born on June 12, 1908 on a farm on Martha's Vineyard and had a rural childhood there before attending Philips Andover Academy and Yale, where he was captain of the wrestling team and played varsity football. After graduating in 1931, he spent two years trying out different activities, including teaching at a boys' prep school in upstate New York from which he was fired because, "With my propensity to turn things upside down, I decided to teach my history course backwards by starting with the daily newspapers and going back in time, tracing the historical antecedents of current events." In 1934 John entered the new anthropology graduate program at Yale. He conducted ethnographic fieldwork on childhood among the Kwoma people of New Guinea in 1936-37 and received his Ph.D. in 1938. He was a postdoctoral fellow in the Yale Institute of Human Relations and, with the exception of service in the U.S. Navy during World War II, remained on the Yale research staff until 1947.

During his years at Yale, Whiting plunged enthusiastically into interdisciplinary activity: He helped found the Human Relations Area Files, the world archive of ethnographic data, and co-authored its conceptual table of contents, *The Outline of Cultural Materials* (1938). He was psychoanalyzed, conducted a laboratory experiment with white rats and revised his dissertation into a monograph, *Becoming a Kwoma* (1941), which combined psychological concepts with the functional anthropology of Bronislaw Malinowski, who was visiting Yale at the time. With the psychologist Irvin L. Child, he organized a cross-cultural study of Freudian theory, later published as an influential book, *Child Training and Personality* (1953).

In 1947 Whiting joined his former Yale colleague, psychologist Robert R. Sears, at the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station, where they studied preschool children. Two years later, when Sears became the founding Director of the Laboratory of Human Development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Whiting was appointed Associate Professor of Education. In 1953 he succeeded Sears as Director of the Laboratory, and in 1960 he was appointed the first Charles Bigelow Professor of Education. The human development program under John Whiting (1953-63) became an international center of cross-cultural research and training, launching the landmark Six Cultures Study, with field teams studying child rearing on four continents. In 1962 Whiting moved to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and became Professor of Social Anthropology, the position from which he retired in 1978.

John Whiting was as active a participant in interdisciplinary research at Harvard as he had been at Yale, beginning in 1949 with the Harvard Values Project of Clyde Kluckhohn and Evon Z. Vogt, for which he organized studies of parental values and behavior in the Ramah area of New Mexico, and ending in the period 1980-85, when he co-directed a cross-cultural study of adolescence with Irven DeVore. During most of those 36 years he and his wife Beatrice Blyth Whiting, who became Professor of Education in 1974, conducted an informal research seminar, first at Palfrey House, then at William James Hall and later at Larsen Hall, that was legendary as a lively forum and training ground in the comparative study of human development.

From 1966 to 1975, Whiting sought to realize his dream of making field studies of childhood truly international by training researchers from developing countries. He and Beatrice Whiting brought Kenyan—as well as Nigerian and Ethiopian—students to Harvard and conducted research in a Kikuyu community in Kenya.

Whiting published six books and about 70 articles. The 1994 volume, *Culture and Human Development: The Selected Papers of John Whiting*, edited with commentaries by his former student Eleanor H. Chasdi and published by Cambridge University Press, brings together many of his most interesting works and includes an autobiographical memoir. Whiting was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences. He received the American Psychological Association's G. Stanley Hall Award for Distinguished Contribution to Developmental Psychology in 1973 and (with Beatrice Whiting) the American Anthropological Association's Distinguished Contribution Award in 1982. He was the first President of the Society for Psychological Anthropology in 1978.

Whiting's contributions fell into four categories: (1) discovering and describing variations in the environments of children across human populations, (2) demonstrating empirically that these variations are grounded in the ecology and cultural practices of particular societies, (3) devising theoretical models of environmental influence on psychological development during childhood and adolescence, and (4) inspiring other scholars to take a serious interest in

comparative cross-cultural research on human reproduction, child rearing and development.

As a teacher, John Whiting shone in the seminar room rather than the lecture hall. He created an arena in which intellectual excitement was provoked by the participants critically evaluating each others' research ideas. He treated students as equals in playful debates that often featured John himself as the target for attack. His cheerful resilience and immunity to embarrassment or rancor in the seminar room endeared him to generations of students and colleagues.

Beneath John's genial, warm and casual style, there was an iron will and an unswerving dedication to personal principles—atheism, empiricism, equalitarianism—all of which he occasionally carried to quixotic extremes. John wore his eccentricities proudly and provocatively. His colleagues appreciated him as a unique character, the product of a vanished Vineyard world that he carried in his imagination. He personified more than anyone we knew the spirit of adventure in the interdisciplinary social science of the mid-twentieth century.

Respectfully submitted,

B.I. DeVore

Evon Z. Vogt, Jr.

Robert A. LeVine, Chair