Introduction to Assessing Michael Brian Schiffer and His Behavioral Archaeology

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Published online: 23 June 2011
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Over three decades ago (Schiffer 1972, 1976), Behavioral Archaeology was proposed to address the deficiencies of processual archaeology and thus complete the Kuhn-like paradigm shift in archaeology. Such a shift to Behavioral Archaeology, or any other type of archaeology, never transpired as planned. Instead, Behavioral Archaeology has become but one of a number of players in an ever expanding theoretical landscape. What then has been the contribution of Behavioral Archaeology? A group of distinguished scholars, none of them self-identified behavioral archaeologists, has been assembled to assess the role of Michael B. Schiffer and his Behavioral Archaeology in the history of archaeological theory.

All three of us—Mike Schiffer, Jim Skibo, and Jeff Reid—thought it was a novel idea, a bold experiment in archaeological dialog, to invite well-known archaeologists to participate in a forum to critique Behavioral Archaeology. We sought to recreate the pyrotechnic displays of yesteryear, and the centrally located St. Louis Society for American Archaeology Meeting in 2010 would be the ideal venue for ensuring high attendance and spirited discussion.

The assembled forum comprised Linda Cordell, Diane Gifford-Gonzales, Robert Kelly, Michael O'Brien, Stephen Plog, and Jeremy Sabloff—three members of the National Academy of Sciences and three who should be, but before commenting on their contribution to this issue, we think it instructive to reveal the process of selection and invitation. We sent out the following invitation under Skibo's email imprimatur:

“For over three decades Mike Schiffer has been actively engaged in archaeological method and theory. He is one of the original architects of Behavioral Archaeology, his work on Formation Processes changed the way archaeologists infer activities from the archaeological record, and he now spends much of his time applying the behavioral approach to modern-day technologies. Clearly, Mike has had an impact on archaeological method and theory that requires some formal acknowledgement and assessment of his

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remarkable, yet ongoing, career. Mike, however, does not want to be part of a “suck-up-fest,” as he calls it, but rather a forum at the SAA meetings in St. Louis that will provide an opportunity for assessment of his work by individuals who do not self-associate with Behavioral Archaeology or the University of Arizona. You along with a stellar lineup of archaeologists have been invited to participate in this forum, “Critiquing Michael B. Schiffer and his Behavioral Archaeology.””

Mike often says, “Never write a word unless you intend to publish it,” and this special volume in the *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* makes good on this advice. Publication here is especially pertinent as Mike is the founding editor of the journal whose genesis can be traced back to *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, which was first published as a once-per-year edited volume beginning in 1978. By advancing the work of other scholars in this way and through the multiple books, papers, and edited volumes of his own, Mike has certainly been one of the primary players in archaeological method and theory for over three decades.

We sought to invite representatives of the major theoretical programs as well as individuals with an established history of critical comment. The premier postprocessualists were either unavailable, planning to be out of the country, or otherwise unable to make the meeting. Thus, that important corner of the discipline is unrepresented.

Kent Flannery responded to the invitation with the terse statement, “At the moment, Dr. Flannery is not on email.” Lew Binford’s failing health made it impossible to attend the meeting, but we did receive a warm response to our invitation via Amber Johnson. Other invitees had previously committed to the maximum number of three program activities by the time our invitation arrived, and a surprising number of senior scholars were simply not going to St. Louis. The final six forum participants provided insightful comments to a packed room of archaeologists young and old, and five of those presentations were expanded for publication in this issue. Jerry Sabloff’s appointment and move to Santa Fe precluded his meeting the publication schedule. The order of the papers is intentional, and our brief comments serve to highlight their contribution and their connection and to orient the reader to Schiffer’s concluding remarks.

Before reviewing the papers, it is important to discuss what we mean in the title by saying we are assessing “his” Behavioral Archaeology. This theoretical program was hatched at the University of Arizona in the early 1970s by Bill Rathje, Jeff Reid, and Mike Schiffer. A fundamental component of this new type of archaeology, which grew out of the deficiencies of the new archaeology, is a redefinition of the discipline. Archaeology, according to Reid *et al.* (1975), is the study of the relationship between human behavior and material culture at any time or place (see Schiffer 2010 for the most recent discussion). It involved the now infamous “four strategies,” which both provided room in the discipline for ethnoarchaeology, experimental archaeology, and Rathje’s garbage archaeology, and also kept the focus of our research where it belongs—at the relationship between people and things. Although Behavioral Archaeology has certainly evolved since its inception (see LaMotta and Schiffer 2001; Schiffer 2010; Skibo and Schiffer 2008; Skibo *et al.* 1995), it still holds together because as Schiffer (2010: 8) notes, “behavioral

archaeologists have maintained a focus on describing and explaining the varied relationships between people and artifacts...and these relationships can be investigated from both historical and scientific viewpoints.” So despite the varied research trajectories of Reid, Rathje, and Schiffer, their approaches still hold together because they continue to share an approach to archaeology that was hatched three decades previous. In fact, the research of these three scholars is emblematic of the expanded Behavioral Archaeology of the twenty-first century. For example, Rathje (see Rathje 1995; Rathje *et al.* 1992; Rathje and Murphy 1992) can use Behavioral Archaeology to investigate modern material culture, our own garbage, as a means to understand and explain modern human behavior. Reid (see Reid 1974, 1982; Reid and Whittlesey 1997, 1999, 2005, 2010), has spent his career in Strategy 1, investigating material culture from past societies to draw inferences about prehistoric groups. His research, along with those of his colleagues and students (Ezzo 1993; Olsen 1990; Riggs 2001; Triadan 1997; Van Keuren 1999; Zedeño 1994) focused on a number of important issues in the American Southwest including processes of aggregation, movement, and abandonment. Schiffer has spent more of his energy on theory building including the investigation of formation processes (e.g., Schiffer 1987), technological change (e.g., Schiffer 1992, 2011), experimentation (e.g., Schiffer 1990) and more recently the analysis of the processes involved in the development of various industrial technologies (e.g., Schiffer 1991, 2008). These disparate interests by the original three behavioral archaeologists hold together because of their focus on people–artifact interactions and because Behavioral Archaeology does not preach a particular social theory. Consequently, any one cause for behavioral change is not privileged, and thus this approach can serve as a large tent for those who may wish to use a particular social theory to explain change. So what is Mike Schiffer’s Behavioral Archaeology? We left it up to the contributors to decide, and each focused on a different aspect of “his” Behavioral Archaeology.

Steve Plog is about as friendly a commentator as one could select and the only member of the forum to provide the *longue dureé*. He and Schiffer go back to the late 1960s and with Steve’s brother Fred formed an unusually close group of kindred archaeologists. Steve is historically significant as one of the first reviewers of Behavioral Archaeology in *American Antiquity*, which we also suggest gave it street credibility in Ann Arbor. Steve’s contribution in this paper is to continue the discussion of the role of laws in archaeology as a critical element in every scholar’s epistemological struggle.

Robert Kelly joined the forum to speak for the human behavioral ecologists, but took a uniquely personal perspective in raising the question of why Binford’s Middle Range Theory program out-competed Schiffer’s Formation Process program. As a graduate student at the University of New Mexico during the Binford era, Bob speaks of concepts and conversations from the time-honored anthropological vantage of having been there. His answer to his question raises issues addressed more appropriately by Schiffer in his concluding remarks than by us. Bob does, however, alert us to the enduring significance of personality and place in the pursuit of archaeology.

Linda Cordell was on the anthropology faculty at the University of New Mexico at a time when archaeological discourse occasionally became dysfunctional and influenced perception of larger issues. In a rare archaeological display of

reevaluating previous positions, Linda looks at her piece of the Grasshopper–Chavez Pass debate of the 1980s from the stand point of “What were we thinking?” back then. She uses the Fred Plog–Schiffer debates over the controversial Hohokam culture sequence as the model of a productive presentation of interpretative differences between colleagues. Her discussion provides excellent examples of what Diane Gifford-Gonzales labels the “sociological hurly-burly” in archaeology.

Diane Gifford-Gonzales takes a highly personal, historical approach to the comparison of Behavioral Archaeology with her own research trajectories and those of her colleagues and students to conclude that they have progressed in parallel with numerous convergences. The differences have been largely in terminology and subject matter. She also does an excellent job of placing Schiffer’s work within the context of laboratory-based material analysis. Diane gives credence to a remark made by Steve Kuhn to Jeff Reid several years ago to the effect that “Behavioral Archaeology has become everybody’s archaeology.” Well, perhaps not everybody.

Michael O’Brien came on board to provide an evolutionary perspective, and with his co-author Alexander Bentley is the only member of the forum to address directly Behavioral Archaeology concepts stemming from Schiffer’s more recent writings on technological change. Mike and Alex tackle Schiffer’s cascade and stimulated variation models by placing them “in a modern evolutionary framework that correctly identifies, and does not oversell, the role played by cultural selection.” We applaud the zeal with which they address these models of technological change, but direct the reader to Schiffer’s lengthy, concluding remarks on their paper.

We think that our bold experiment in archaeological dialog was a success, if one metric of success is room and audience size and another is publication of the papers. The papers published here present fresh historical perspectives as well as raise a number of important questions of method and theory for behavioral archaeologists to ponder. The usefulness of this collection is further enhanced by the close reading and thoughtful comments of two outside reviewers. We cannot thank them enough. Ultimately, it will be for present and future generations of behavioral archaeologists to continue the critique in the never-ending effort to refine the tools and techniques for explaining the relation between people and things.

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