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Introduction: The Continuing Legacy of Melvin Ember (1933-2009)

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Abstract
[AQ: 1]

Keywords

Melvin Ember, biography, cross-cultural research, kinship, warfare

This and the next issue of *Cross-Cultural Research* are dedicated to Melvin Ember, editor of this journal from 1982 until his death on September 26, 2009. These two special issues are intended to provide both an overview of Mel's contributions and an exploration of the impact his work and ideas will continue to have in years to come. The articles in this issue focus on Mel's career and focal areas of research. They review specific areas of his work and reflect on the ways in which Mel's work has affected the work of other scholars. The articles in the next issue of *Cross-Cultural Research* will take aspects of Mel's work as a starting point for developing new ideas. They will provide a glimpse of how Mel's work might be expanded on in the future.

There is one article missing from these two special issues of *Cross-Cultural Research*—the one that Mel himself was going to write. The articles in these special issues come from two symposia, one held at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 2009 and the other at the annual

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meeting of the Society for Anthropological Sciences in 2010. Mel was to be a discussant at both but died just 2 months before the first was scheduled to be held. The symposia went forward, and the articles here and in the next issue of this journal provide a glimpse of how informative and stimulating they were. Mel would have loved them.

Mel was born in Brooklyn, New York, on January 13, 1933. Drawn to anthropology after reading the works of Margaret Mead, he attended Columbia University at the young age of 16 where he was further inspired by Elman Service and Morton Fried in the anthropology department (BA, 1953). He then went on to Yale to study for his PhD in anthropology (received 1958), primarily under the mentorship of George Peter Murdock. Conrad Kottak provides some insights into Mel's long and distinguished career, especially his role at the Human Relations Area Files, in his contribution to this volume.

In contrast to most cultural anthropologists at the time, who conducted their fieldwork in a single community, Mel's fieldwork in American Samoa was explicitly comparative, using community variation to test theories about culture change. He chose three communities differing in distance from the commercial center to evaluate how commercial involvement affected political change (Ember, 1963, 1964a, 1964b). His assessment of Samoan kinship (Ember, 1959, 1962a, 1962b) was subsequently challenged by Derek Freeman, long before the now-famous Freeman-Mead controversy about Samoa (Ember, 1964a, 1964b, 1966). As Mel knew, from his cross-community comparisons, that there was substantial variation within American Samoa, he questioned how Freeman, working in a very different time and in Western Samoa, could doubt Mead's veracity (Ember, 1985).

After a year's postdoctoral work at Yale, Mel spent 4 years at the Laboratory of Socio-Environmental Studies at the National Institutes of Mental Health (1959-1962), working on the universality of the familial incest taboo. As all societies prohibit familial incest, he decided to focus on cross-cultural variation in cousin marriage to try to understand why some societies allowed close cousin marriages whereas others forbade it. After evaluating the various explanatory hypotheses of the time, his own empirical research confirmed that much of the variation in cousin marriage could best be explained as an adaptation to the harmful effects of inbreeding (Ember, 1975).

As a professor at Antioch College (1963-1967) and Hunter College (1967-1987) Mel continued his cross-cultural work on aspects of kinship and social organization, picking up first on topics that Murdock was unable to explain, such as variation in postmarital residence (Ember, 1967, 1974a; M. Ember & Ember, 1971; C. R. Ember & Ember, 1972) and unilineal descent (C. R. Ember, Ember, & Pasternak, 1974), areas that are reviewed in this issue by Carol Ember.

Traditional theories had focused on economic factors, such as which gender contributed most to the economy, but finding these explanations lacking in predictive value, Mel began to explore other possibilities, particularly the effects of warfare in the social environment (Ember, 1974b). Marc Ross provides some insight into Mel's research on warfare in his contribution to this issue. As warfare seemed so central in explaining various aspects of social organization, he then turned to research that tested ideas about why societies varied in type and frequency of violence, looking at variation in warfare frequency, homicide, and corporal punishment of children in the anthropological record (Ember, 1982; C. R. Ember & Ember, 1992, 1993, 1994). Believing that laws about human nature should hold true among technological complex as well as simpler societies, he persuaded political scientist Bruce Russett to join him and his wife Carol in a project to test the theory that "democracies do not fight each other" (C. R. Ember, Ember, & Russett, 1992; Russett, Ember, & Ember, 1993). Although the concepts of democracy and international war had to be transformed to fit the anthropological record, the results of their collaborative research were consistent with many studies conducted by political scientists. Mel later worked with cross-cultural psychologists to explore the relationships between aggression and war (M. Ember & Ember, 2001a, 2001b; Segall, Ember, & Ember, 1997).

Branching out into diverse and interdisciplinary research areas was not unusual for Mel, and examples are provided and explored by Gary Feinman and by Garry Chick and Xiangyou Shen in their contributions to this issue. Indeed, Mel published scholarly articles in archaeology (Ember, 1966, 1973; C. R. Ember & Ember, 1997; M. Ember & Ember, 1995), linguistics (Ember, 1978; C. R. Ember & Ember, 1979, 2000, 2007; M. Ember & Ember, 1999), biological anthropology (C. R. Ember, Ember, Korotayev, & de Munck, 2005; Peregrine, Ember, & Ember, 2003), and even ethology (C. R. Ember & Ember, 1984; M. Ember & Ember, 1979). Mel fervently believed that the work of different anthropologists in far-flung places and across time could be used to test theories about why cultures varied or were similar, and he devoted most of his research career to systematically testing explanations, rather than just expounding them. His passion for systematic comparative research on challenging questions in all areas of anthropology influenced a generation of younger scholars through his direction of the first Summer Institute for Cross-Cultural Research in 1964, his active participation in NSF-funded Summer Institutes in Comparative Research between 1991 and 1999 and through the series of publications in comparative methods (Ember, 1991; C. R. Ember & Ember, 1998, 2001, 2009) that resulted from these institutes.

Mel and his wife Carol (married in 1970), also an anthropologist, were notable in being able to fully work together—writing textbooks, carrying out research, and working together in the same department (first at Hunter College and then at the Human Relations Area Files). Although anthropology values individual work, they found brainstorming with each other and collaboration with others to be extremely helpful and fruitful. Working with Mel was always easy, instructive, rewarding and entertaining. As one of his collaborators (Burton Pasternak) recently put it, "Mel had no fear of being wrong on the path to understanding. His ego never got in the way of giving full attention to, and having respect for, alternative ideas and explanations."

Mel had a quick wit, enjoyed humor, and in characteristic fashion requested jokes rather than a funeral. In that spirit I end this introduction with the following joke, one of Mel's favorites, and one that captures his approach to anthropological research:

> A couple dearly loved their 8-year-old son, but they were troubled by his unreasonable sense of optimism. No matter what distressing incident occurred, he always saw the bright side. They decided to find a way to cure him. After months of thought they came up with a plan. On the morning of his ninth birthday, they told their son that he could find his present in the attic. The son bounded up the stairs and they heard the attic door flung open. The parents waited, listening for cries of distress. To their amazement they heard shouts of glee. The parents ran up the stairs and found their son flailing his arms and pushing through the enormous piles of horse manure they had spread throughout the attic for him to find. The father, both surprised and confused, exclaimed "Son, what are you doing?" The son replied happily, "Looking for the pony!"

Mel found many ponies during his long and successful career, and he encouraged many others to undertake the search. He will be missed.

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