

SENIORS

Think young

Herb Kriesel may be 81, but he still helps other seniors, including some who are younger than himself. **Flip Side, 6D**

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TODAY

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U-M scientist adds a personal touch to her work

Professor's book fuels debate about allowing gut feelings in reports

By **Sheila Schimpf**
Lansing State Journal

Should scientists who study the lives of people include their feelings in their report?

Or should they remain distant observers?

The world of anthropology is divided on this one — politely, of course, since this is a field that uses words like "ethnography" to describe writing about human cultures.

The old objective standards are coming under scrutiny by a group of scientists who argue that the voice of authority is stronger when it comes from someone involved in the culture.

"Oddly enough," says Ruth Behar, professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan, "you can gain more objectivity if you have been able to get into a subject so much more fully. With distance you might get only half the picture. You didn't swim in the material. You stayed at the shore. It's actually a better way to study things than through distance."

Behar, a MacArthur Fellow, has written a book, "The Vulnerable Observer," which argues skillfully

that the classical objective tradition in science should be expanded to include personal insights.

She talks about the book at 7:30 p.m. today at Schuler Books in Okemos.

In the classic scientific tradition, says Fredric Roberts, associate professor of anthropology at Michigan State University, social scientists didn't talk about themselves.

"You acted as if you were removed," Roberts says. "It made it seem much more scientific without the word 'I.'"

Roberts, who calls Behar a great anthropologist, is sympathetic to the personalization movement.

"Even while we are observing as human beings," Roberts says, "we

are part of a relationship."

Knowledge can be intellectual, but it can also be emotional, he says.

"Emotional knowledge is very valuable," Roberts says. "At a gut level, you have emotional knowledge in the study."

Behar called the book, which was published about two months ago, controversial. It has provoked a number of letters from people in different fields, including dance, psychology and journalism, who are struggling to incorporate something of themselves in their work.

Some anthropologists — including one of Behar's professors from Princeton — say that adding the voice of the researcher to scientific papers introduces the potential they

Speaking

■ Ruth Behar, University of Michigan anthropology professor, will talk about and sign copies of her book, "The Vulnerable Observer"

■ 7:30 p.m. today

■ Schuler Books, 2075 W. Grand River Ave., Okemos

could be reduced to memoirs. But many are happy the question has been raised.

"This kind of enterprise is very risky," Behar says. "We don't know

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Behar: Fuels scientific debate

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its limits the way we do with classical anthropology. I'm trying to break the boundaries in search of engagement and connection, how I connect to the people I study."

Even undergraduates struggle with the idea of personalizing their work, she says.

"More and more so, people don't really do these projects unless they have figured out what the personal connection is," Behar says. "They are not going off and doing projects just as an intellectual exercise."

A lesbian student may study a gay and lesbian community. A Chicano student may study a Chicano community. Another Chicano student may study a group of Mayan immigrants because she comes from an immigrant family.

"The question of anthropology as an enterprise," Behar says, "is, what right do you have to study me? This is an issue in anthropology very hotly debated. What gives me the right to go to Africa and write about women's rights in Africa?"

Behar herself comes from an immigrant background — Cuban Jews who came to the United States.

In the little things that happen to people — things that anthropologists observe and then connect to their own lives — sometimes generalizations can be drawn, she says.

"There is no way to create generalizations without specifics," she says. "There is not any way to come up with a general point of humanity without minutiae. Little things do illuminate all kinds of things. They connect us out into the whole world."

So, in her story, "Death and

Memory," she wrote about a 1987 trip to Santa Maria, a northern Spanish village where she did work as a 21-year-old graduate student in 1978.

In 1987 her grandfather, Zayde, a Russian Jew who ended up in Cuba, was dying in Miami Beach. She left him reluctantly but with a sense that life had to go on. When she arrived in Spain, she found many of the people she knew in 1978 had died. The village itself was dying.

In her writing, she recounted interviews with the people about the end of their village. She writes about death with insight that comes from her grandfather's sickness.

She studied their funerals and their cemetery. Then she got word her grandfather had died.

"I had gone to Spain to hear the death stories of my Spanish friends because I had not wanted to face the fact that Zayde was dying," she wrote. "I cried in my solitude, but found it difficult to mourn alone."

She recounted her own personal grief then compared her work and her life.

"Zayde, in particular, was a link for me to my own peasant past and to the peasant existence that was still a living reality in Santa Maria," she wrote. "He had large hands, thickened by work, like the hands of the peasant men in Santa Maria."

The essay tells two stories, she admits.

"It is a lament about death, loss, and grief, inscribing my mourning, a double mourning, as an anthro-



Book signing: Ruth Behar, a University of Michigan anthropology professor, will talk about and sign copies of her book, "The Vulnerable Observer," today at Schuler Books in Okemos.

pologist and a granddaughter."

She defends that personal style with vigor.

"Sometimes you have to be very very personal so people can see you

in a fully fleshed way and be able to identify with you," she says. "That's what we want when we read autobiography. We want to be able to identify."