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Psychological anthropology

Another discipline that shares the interspace between psychology and anthropology is psychological anthropology (formerly known as “culture and personality”). As noted by Jahoda and Krewer (1977), filling the space between the two parent disciplines was of concern to many social scientists over half a century ago. It was the anthropologist Boas who provided a psychological orientation to US-American anthropology (particularly to Benedict and Mead; see below). In Europe, both the psychologist Bartlett (1937; see also Saito, 2000) and the anthropologist Malinowski (1931) sought a way to work with, and between, the two disciplines:

Between the spheres of psychology and anthropology, there is today a No-man’s-land. Whether or not this will ever be claimed a special branch of science, it must for the present be filled by workers in both fields making excursions towards the other’s province. Nor should the serious worker in either field ignore or resent such excursions, for they may have much of value for him in indicating new lines of research.

(Malinowski, 1931, p. xi)

There are some features that distinguish psychological anthropology from cross-cultural psychology: the latter is conceptually and methodologically rooted in academic psychology, while psychological anthropology is rooted primarily in anthropology and to some extent in psychoanalytic psychiatry. Those wishing to have a recent and more extensive discussion of the field of psychological anthropology are referred to Bock (1999), Casey and Edgerton (2005), Suarez-Orozca, Spindler and Spindler (1994) and Lindholm (2007), as well as to the journal *Ethos*. The contributions of John and Beatrice Whiting to the field have been portrayed by Edwards and Weisner (2010). The critical evaluation by Shweder (1979a, 1979b, 1980) is also useful in understanding the evolution of the field. Indeed, for some (including Shweder, 1990, p. 17), the field of “cultural psychology is psychological anthropology without the premise of psychic unity.”

At the outset the name of the subfield needs to be explained. Originally referred to as “culture and personality,” it has now become generally known as “psychological anthropology” following a proposal of Hsu (1961). The two terms will be taken as synonyms in this book. One definition of the field (Bock, 1980, p. 1) is that “psychological anthropology comprises all *anthropological investigations* that make systematic use of psychological concepts and methods.” Its development “has been influenced

by the interplay between *anthropological problems* and the psychological theories that were being formulated” at the time (Bock, 1980, p. xi). In these two assertions, the added emphasis draws our attention to the fundamentally *anthropological* nature of the field. What does this mean? First, it signals that most of its practitioners are anthropologists, whose education, theoretical preferences and methodological practices are firmly rooted in that discipline. In contrast, cross-cultural psychologists are usually rooted in psychology, with its own disciplinary biases. Second, the theoretical level of analysis remains distinctive: population-level concerns predominate in psychological anthropology (with some inferences occasionally made to individual dispositions), while individual-level issues (individual processes and interindividual differences) predominate in cross-cultural psychology. Third, there is, as noted by Edgerton (1974), a long-standing methodological commitment to “naturalism” in anthropology and psychological anthropology and to “experimentalism” in psychology and cross-cultural psychology. Phenomena are typically observed in the field in one case, while they are stimulated in the laboratory, or other standard situations, in the other. These characterizations are only general modal descriptions; the use of tests and interviews is not uncommon in psychological anthropology, while field observations are also employed by cross-cultural psychologists.

The origin of the field of psychological anthropology is usually traced to the simultaneous interest of anthropologists (mainly from the USA) in psychological explanations of cultural phenomena, and the availability of the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis. The major period of development was in the 1920s and 1930s, and the central issue was the “relationship between culture in the widest sense (including economic, sociopolitical and even ecological) and personality characteristics, as mediated by the socialization process” (Jahoda, 1980, p. 76).

Bock has distinguished four main approaches: *Configurationalist* (1920–1940) with Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead as the main figures; *Basic and Modal Personality* (1935–1955) with Abram Kardiner, Ralph Linton and Cora DuBois; *National Character* (from 1940 on) with Clyde Kluckhohn; and *Cross-Cultural* (from 1950 on) with John Whiting and Robert LeVine. The first three are largely concerned with single-culture analysis, while the last approach studies relationships comparatively. For Jahoda (1980, p. 76) these two trends are easily distinguishable: “one is concerned with the analysis of the role of socialization processes and personality factors *within* a cultural group; the other concentrates on attempts to identify the general processes whereby culture shapes, and is shaped by, personality factors *across* human cultures.”

The configurationalist approach derives its name from the writings of Benedict (1932), who proposed that culture is the personality of a society: “cultures ... are individual psychology, thrown large upon the screen, given gigantic proportions and a long time span” (Benedict, 1932, p. 24). Like personalities, cultures are complex, organized and patterned.

In Benedict's main work (*Patterns of culture*, 1934), the influence of Gestalt psychology is also apparent: patterns or forms are emphasized, and give meaning to the details that constitute them; indeed, details are often downplayed, even ignored, in her preference for understanding the overall configuration. Such an orientation led Benedict to describe and label whole cultures with diagnostic terms derived from clinical and psychoanalytic psychology. Margaret Mead is also usually identified with the configurationalist approach. Her views on the nature and origin of sexual behavior have become very well known and have tended to overshadow her early and important role in configurationalist studies. However, this work on sexual behavior (e.g., *Coming of age in Samoa*, 1928) has been severely criticized for its ethnographic accuracy (Freeman, 1983).

Mead was one of the most influential of all cultural anthropologists. She was convinced that human beings are almost infinitely malleable, and much of her research was undertaken to investigate, and prove, this point. In Samoa, she found evidence for liberal attitudes toward sexual relationships, with equal rights for boys and girls. These writings were influential and fueled beliefs in the power of sociocultural factors at the cost of biological constraints on the development and educational potential of children. However, Freeman (1983) pointed out numerous discrepancies between Mead's description of Samoan culture generally (and Samoan female adolescents specifically) as lacking in guilt, conflict and turmoil, and the observations of other ethnographers. Freeman's own view emphasized such Samoan cultural and psychological qualities as violence, jealousy, competitiveness and stress, as indicated in high rates of rape, assault and homicide. The publication of Freeman's book unleashed a storm of controversy that soon entered the realms of ideology and politics (including cultural vs. biological determinism, the women's movement, sexual liberation and permissive parenting). The subjective nature of the ensuing debate has revealed, to a substantial degree, the subjective nature of the anthropological enterprise itself. Most explanations of the discrepancy between the two views are based in their different a priori ideologies. Access to different sectors of Samoan culture, and their varying command of the Samoan language appear to take second place to the preconceived explanations with which *both* researchers approached their informants (see Cote, 1994, for a review and analysis of this controversy).

The basic and modal personality approach developed during a seminar at Columbia University in New York; "anthropologists 'presented' the cultures with which they were most familiar, after which psychologists 'interpreted' the data to reveal their dynamic significance" (Bock, 1980, p. 86). In their book Kardiner (a psychiatrist) and Linton (an anthropologist) worked out the concept of the "basic personality structure," which "places the focal point of culture integration in the common denominator of the personalities of the individuals who participate in the culture" (Kardiner and Linton, 1945, pp. viii-ix). This approach asserts a causal

link between personality and culture, not just a similarity or identity between the two concepts (as proposed by the configurationalists). The causal chain begins with *primary institutions* (such as the subsistence activity, family organization and socialization practices present in a culture), leading to the *basic personality* found in the culture, and then leading to the *secondary institutions* (such as religion, myth and folklore) of the culture. For Kardiner and Linton, secondary institutions are to be understood as the effects of the primary institutions acting on the human mind; put another way, basic personality is an adaptation to the fundamental realities of life in a particular culture.

Following the basic personality approach, DuBois (1944) proposed the notion of “modal personality” in which the more *global* notion of basic personality was replaced by a *statistical* one that expresses greater frequency (mode), rather than a fundamental or basic uniformity in personality. This permitted her to deal with variability in personality, and with discrepancy and incongruity between personality and culture. Moreover, she thought it likely that only a small percentage of people in a society would belong to these modal groups (1944).

Cross-cultural and cross-national studies have conventionally been distinguished from each other by one focussing on small-scale traditional and usually non-industrial cultures, and the other on contemporary industrialized nation states. So too in the field of psychological anthropology, we find studies of *national character* as a distinct approach, one that attends to the psychological qualities of present-day nation states. For example, both Clyde Kluckhohn (1957) and Ruth Benedict (1946) worked on characterizations of the Japanese. Benedict sought to explain the contradiction in Japanese character between restrained aestheticism (seen in art and ceremony) and militarism (typified by the ideal of the samurai warrior). A similar analysis of German national character (Fromm, 1941) during the Nazi period was rooted in the national characteristic of the “authoritarian personality” (see also Adorno *et al.*, 1950), which was thought to be present in German society.

It should be noted that other approaches, which do not originate from psychological anthropology, fit the modal personality or national character orientation. For example, Hofstede, whose four value dimensions we mentioned in Chapter 4, argues that national character traits can be revealed by survey studies of the kind he carried out and that the “mental programs of members of the same nations tend to contain a common component” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 38). This theme was carried further in his later work (Hofstede, 1991, 2001).

Finally, the cross-cultural approach to psychological anthropology emerged when attention switched from *intensive* examinations of single cultures and the collective personality of their members to *extensive* examinations of relationships across cultures between cultural and personality variables. As we saw in Chapter 2 (p. 44), Whiting and Child (1953) drew on psychoanalytic theory and

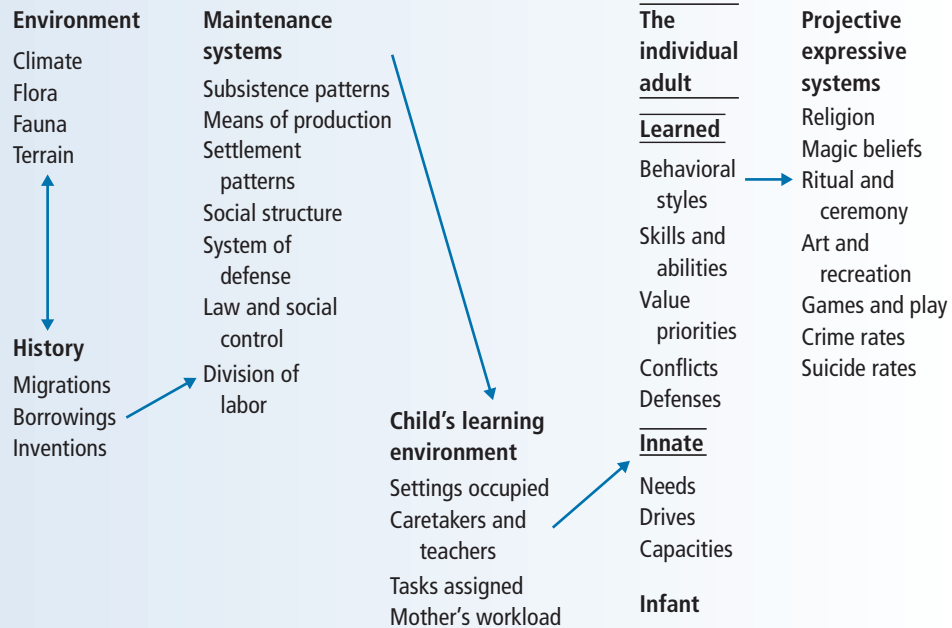
data in the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF; see main text Box 10.1) to explore the possibility that there might be systematic relationships between the ways in which children are socialized and their adult personalities. In this approach, as we have seen, correlations are sought between cultural characteristics (usually rated as present or absent for a particular culture) and some other characteristic (of the culture, or of individuals in the culture). Using these correlations, links are established between child personality and adult personality; antecedents to the former are sought in cultural characteristics (usually child training practices), and consequents of the latter are sought in cultural outcomes (cf. the secondary institutions of Kardiner).

An elaborate model has been proposed by Whiting (see Additional Topics Box 10.1) which is similar to the ecocultural framework that is employed in the present text (see main text Figure 1.1). These similarities are in part due to the obvious general influence of the early culture-and-personality schools on contemporary cross-cultural psychologists, in part to the specific influence that Whiting has had on the field and in part due to the similarities (both theoretical and methodological) between the cross-cultural approach in psychological anthropology and cross-cultural psychology.

Additional Topics Box 10.1 **Whiting's model for psychocultural research**

The model proposed by John Whiting (1974, 1994) is the most recent of a series of models that he developed to guide research into personality and its relationships to culture. The core assumption, derived from Freud's writing, was that child socialization experiences should be predictive of adult personality. To this core Kardiner added antecedent primary institutions and consequent secondary institutions in the culture. Whiting has elaborated all of these components, often renaming them as their nature became more clear or more specific. For example "primary institutions" became differentiated into a set of three interrelated contexts in Whiting's model: physical environment, social history and cultural maintenance systems. "Childrearing" became elaborated into the child's learning environment, now including physical as well as social aspects (and resembling the developmental niche; see Chapter 2, p. 40). "Adult personality" became a set of more specific attributes, with a basic distinction between innate and learned outcomes, and including cognitive and motivational characteristics, in addition to those conventionally included within the notion of "personality." Finally, "secondary institutions" evolved into a large range of projective expressive systems, including subjective aspects such as beliefs and myths, as well as objective social indicators, such as crime and suicide rates.

Box 10.1 continued



Additional Topics Figure 10.1 Model for psychocultural research (from Whiting, 1974).

Whiting's model is illustrated in Additional Topics Figure 10.1. A comparison of it with that outlined in Figure 1.1 in the main text reveals many similarities. Beyond the common structural features, Whiting has also adopted research strategies that resemble the empirical and theoretical approaches advocated in this text. As characterized by D'Andrade (1994, p. 1), "Whiting's vision involves a model of a psychological anthropology in which human biological potentials interact with culture and society, and in which research is carried out using a systematic comparative and cross-cultural methodology based on the testing of explicit stated hypotheses." Extending this view, Whiting (1994, p. 36) has strongly advocated use of the comparative method in psychological anthropology.

Another frequently made criticism of the cross-cultural method is that it takes data out of context, thus distorting their meaning. This criticism rests on the assumption that each culture is unique and cannot be compared with any other. However, if scientific principles of cultural integration or culture change are to be developed, cultures must be compared. To do this, the transcultural attributes must be identified.

We end this overview of earlier work in culture and personality with some evaluative comments and critical observations. From the point of view of cross-cultural psychologists, many would agree that the field of culture and personality is “untidy” (Jahoda, 1980) and “fuzzy” (Hsu, 1972). These judgments arise for a number of reasons, some theoretical, some methodological.

On the theoretical side, there is the widespread attachment to the psychoanalytic theory of Freud. Given that this theory is often judged by psychologists to be untestable, not to say unscientific, this attachment was bound to raise doubts about the scientific status of the field of culture and personality.

More specifically, both Bock and Shweder have presented similar criticisms, often employing similar terms. First is the issue of characterizing whole societies with a single label (“global traits” for Shweder, 1979a; and the “uniformity assumption” for Bock, 1980). Psychologists usually discover distributions within populations; there are variations within groups, and individual differences between persons in virtually every psychological study ever conducted. This common finding is ignored in most research in psychological anthropology, where differences within groups are ignored or minimized, and differences between groups are magnified.

Also dubious is the premise rooted in Freudian thought, that the “child is father to the man” (“search for childhood origins” for Shweder, 1979a; and the “continuity assumption” of Bock, 1980). Research examining relationships between child training and childhood experiences on the one hand, and adult personality on the other, has not been so clear. As suggested by the reviews of Orlansky (1949) and Shweder (1979a), individual adult personality is not *determined* by individual childhood experiences. This does not undermine the claim that some aspects of behavior are influenced by characteristic socialization practices used in a particular society (as proposed and documented in Chapter 2). However, whether or not such practices are predictive of broad personality traits in adults remains an open question.

With respect to method, researchers in psychological anthropology have not been able to “make really independent assessments of the two major sets of variables relating to culture and to personality” (Jahoda, 1982, p. 87). This problem has arisen because ethnographic accounts are often the source for evidence regarding *both* cultural and personality variables. Correlational techniques, at the very least, require independence in measurement. In part, this problem is overcome by the use of personality tests by some researchers. However, most tests used by anthropologists have been projective tests, and imply substantial subjective involvement of the ethnographer in their interpretation.

The “objectivity assumption” (Bock, 1980) is related to this issue: can an outsider like an anthropologist ever really take an unbiased or objective view of the personalities of other peoples? Anthropological field methods require personal immersion, whereas psychologists often distance themselves with the

use of “objective” tests. There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, but it can be argued that systematic data collection that is repeatable by others, with culturally appropriate and standard tests, protects the researcher (and the participants!) from gross subjective assessments and interpretations.

LeVine (1999, p. 15) has expanded the agenda for psychological anthropology, in an effort to revitalize the field:

The promise of psychological anthropology resides in its roles as a bridge between social science and psychology and as a means of integrating them in theory and research. Its goals should be to rebuild anthropology on firm psychological as well as cultural foundations; to revise psychology in the light of evidence from all parts of humanity, and to launch psychosocial research programs yielding knowledge that leads to deeper understanding and wiser policy.

Given this agenda, it remains difficult to distinguish psychological anthropology from cross-cultural psychology. His final criticism of psychological anthropology is that it lacks comparative analysis; however, the comparative approach is at the very core of cross-cultural psychology. Despite these similarities, the traditions that separate the fields are strong and are likely to remain distinct ways of working in the “no-man’s-land” identified by Malinowski so long ago.

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