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978-0-521-02806-6 - Culture and Human Development: The Selected Papers of John Whiting
Edited by Eleanor Hollenberg Chasdi
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Introduction: John Whiting and anthropology

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Within anthropology there exist a number of deep and enduring debates. In some periods one side of the debate is in ascendancy, and only a few voices rise to oppose the majority. At other times there are many conflicting voices to be heard, no consensus exists, and the best direction for future work is unclear to the field at large. The present period of anthropology seems to be characterized by a series of such protracted debates. The result is a great deal of fragmentation and argumentation, rapidly changing theoretical vocabularies, along with quick shifts of interest in the work of leading figures in the field.

One important part of John Whiting's contribution to anthropology has been a particular vision of anthropology. This vision is relevant to the current debates which engage the field. 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.

In some respects this vision is quite similar to current positions while in other respects it is different. My purpose here is to attempt to locate Whiting's work within a general map of the field. This map of the field concerns the *underlying* issues that I believe are the truly basic intellectual tensions that have for so long engaged anthropology. I say "attempt" because in trying to formulate and state what these underlying issues are, I find myself often uncertain and unclear. I believe one part of my confusion comes from the fact that it seems to me a great deal of what anthropologists currently *say* about their research and writing is not what they actually *do*.

The place of psychology in socio-cultural anthropology

One of the great underlying tensions in anthropology involves the opposition between biological determinism and socio-cultural determinism. The position of biological determinism holds that human behavior can

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best be understood as the result of genetic inheritance, built into our bodies and brains so deeply that culture variation is a relatively minor part of human existence. Modern socio-biology is a modern version of this position, attempting to use concepts of adaptive fitness and reproductive success to explain a wide variety of human behaviors. Of course, the people working out of this model do not completely deny that cultural factors have *some* influence, but tend to argue that the greatest proportion of human behavior can best be explained within an evolutionary biological framework, and that much apparent cultural variation is simply the result of people enacting different biologically determined adaptive strategies to shifting external conditions.

In opposition to this position, socio-cultural determinists hold that cultural variation is so great that even comparison across cultures is problematic. The variation across cultures is seen to be the result of particular historically occurring processes that emerge as humans develop new solutions to old problems. These new solutions are thought not to be based on biologically driven reactions, but on past cultural understandings and particular innovations. Acceptance of new solutions is seen to be influenced by complex social processes interacting with the fit between the new solutions and current culturally given moral and symbolic systems. At any point in time there will be a dominant ideology which holds to some degree symbolic hegemony over a society, but there will also be ambiguities in this ideology as well as counter-ideologies, both of which make possible constant social negotiation and resistance to the centers of power.

Of course, the positions of socio-cultural determinism and biological determinism have had different emphases and formulations over the course of the development of anthropology. Current socio-biology is quite different from the radically based explanations of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The current emphasis on negotiation and resistance in socio-cultural anthropology is quite different from the earlier emphases on the description of cultural structures or the postulation of economic determinism. But the basic opposition remains – is human action to be understood best as the result of our bodies or our socio-cultural milieu?

This basic opposition is built into the institutional organization of anthropology, with its sub-disciplines of biological anthropology and socio-cultural anthropology. Both fields have journals, associations, and distinguished university based centers of training and research. Within any department of anthropology which contains both fields there is a constant tension with respect to course curriculum, hirings, promotions and professional advancement. This tension can be handled by mutual

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More information

isolation and disengagement between the two fields, by open warfare, or by many shifting combinations of these two strategies. Sometimes there is even real collaborative research between the two fields, but this is relatively rare.

There is an important mediating position between these two opposing polarities. This position holds that both the biological factors and socio-cultural factors affect human action. More than this, the mediating position holds that biological factors and socio-cultural factors *interact*. This interaction occurs because humans are malleable; they are deeply influenced by experience. However, the influence of experience is not like stamping a wax tablet with a metal stamp, in which the nature of the wax has little influence on what gets stamped in. Rather, humans are malleable only in certain ways and to a certain extent. Given our biologically given potentialities, some things are hard for us to learn, while other things are easy. How we remember things, reason about things, respond emotionally to things, and learn to want things, is dependent on the fact that we have a certain kind of brain and body.

The field of psychology specializes in the study of how people are affected by and respond to experience. The psychologist's study of perception, cognition, emotion, and motivation is exactly the study of the interaction between the biological givens and external events. Psychology studies human *learning*, and learning is the modification of the human by the environment. Anthropology has always recognized that culture is learned, and that the organization and content of culture depend on the nature of constraints affecting human learning. This is received wisdom in anthropology; a kind of almost self-evident truth.

What has not been self-evident to socio-cultural anthropologists is that they are concerned with the particularities which affect human learning – that is, with psychology. There would be no issue if socio-cultural anthropologists were *truly* unconcerned and uninvolved with psychology. Socio-cultural anthropology would simply work within its own confines, keeping away from psychological speculations. Indeed, this is what many socio-cultural anthropologists believe – that their work is not psychological, and the relevance of psychology to the work that they do is minimal. Much of the opposition to the work of psychological anthropologists like John Whiting is predicated on just this premise; that is, that psychological questions are at best irrelevant to basic work in socio-cultural anthropology, and at worst are attempts at a reductionism that denies the validity of cultural and social realities.

However, as I mentioned earlier, what socio-cultural anthropologists say about what they do and what they actually do are often quite different things. What is apparent from reading the work of past and present

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More information

socio-cultural anthropologists is that they are continually involved in psychological issues, and that these issues are of central importance to their attempts to describe and understand human life. As an initial example, consider Durkheim's stated position with respect to psychology and contrast it with a small part of his actual theorizing. Durkheim took the explicit position that social facts should only be explained by other social facts, not by the psychological make-up of the individual. His arguments on this point are well known. As Durkheim states in *The rules of sociological method* (p. 110): "We arrive, therefore, at the following principle: *The determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of individual consciousness.*"

The problem with Durkheim's principle is not whether or not social facts are causes of other social facts; clearly they are. The problem is whether or not "states of individual consciousness" are *also* causes of social facts.

Contrast this general dictum about not seeking causes among states of individual consciousness with what Durkheim actually has to say about one of his central types of suicide, termed "anomic suicide." The problem Durkheim is attempting to answer concerns the reason for a greater rate of suicide under conditions of "normlessness" in which human conduct and aspirations are unregulated. He states in his great work *Suicide*:

> human nature is substantially the same among all men, in its essential qualities. It is not human nature which can assign the variable limits necessary to our needs. They are thus unlimited so far as they depend on the individual alone. Irrespective of any external regulatory force, our capacity for feeling is in itself an insatiable and bottomless abyss.
>
> But if nothing external can restrain this capacity, it can only be a source of torment to itself. Unlimited desires are insatiable by definition and insatiability is rightly considered a sign of morbidity. Being unlimited, they constantly and infinitely surpass the means at their command; they cannot be quenched. Inextinguishable thirst is constantly renewed torture.

Here is a fascinating *psychological* speculation. Under conditions of anomie there is a general lack of the kind of social regulations which can limit desire. As a result, people suffer from unlimited desire. Unlimited desire is so painful that people kill themselves to escape it. What Durkheim does here is to link a social condition, anomie, to a psychological process, the pain of infinite desire, to a social outcome, suicide. In a similar fashion Durkheim also uses psychological explanations to account for *egoistic* and *altruistic* suicide – both "egoism" and "altruism" are treated as general motivational states of the individual induced by social

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More information

conditions which at intense levels can lead people to take their own lives. Nor is this an isolated case in Durkheim's work. Obeysekere (1990) has presented a detailed analysis of Durkheim's use of the concept of "collective consciousness" as a set of psychological processes that explain the link between the social system and collective representations as well as a similar analysis of Durkheim's use of psychology to explain anomic suicide.

Durkheim is not unusual in his use of psychological speculations to understand social and cultural phenomena. In the works of Weber, Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss, Geertz, Schneider, Turner, Sahlins and other exemplary figures in social and cultural anthropology, there is a wealth of psychological speculation, often implicit, that is used throughout their analysis of social and cultural facts. Given world enough and time, one could bring these various hypotheses into explicit form and compare them with each other and to the theories of relevant psychologists; such an enterprise might reveal a great deal that has not been discussed about the intellectual continuities and shifts in the discipline of anthropology over the past century.

A more recent example is Tambiah's book on *Magic, science, religion and the scope of rationality* (1990), which is an extended exploration of two kinds of cognitive processing. As Luhrmann says in her review of Tambiah's book (1991):

> The core argument is that there are at least two "modes" – the term is used loosely – of human thought. One is concerned with "causality": logic, distance from events and others, with classification, objectification, secondary process and "science." The other concerns itself with "participation": communion with the world and others, the experience of magic, myth and ritual, primary process, the totality of experience. "It is possible to separate analytically at least two orientations to our cosmos, two orderings of reality that women and men everywhere are capable of experiencing, though the specific mix, weighing and complementarity between the two may vary between individuals and between groups within a culture, and between cultures taken as collective entities." (Tambiah 1990: 105)

These are clearly psychological speculations. Tambiah, I think, would not deny this. He brings together work from a number of well-known psychologists, as well as philosophers and anthropologists, into a general theory of kinds of thought – surely a psychological venture. True, he does so because he wants to understand certain kinds of social and cultural institutions, not because he wants to be a psychologist. But the psychological nature of his theorizing is unmistakable.

Another recent example of psychological theorizing can be found in Renato Rosaldo's *Culture and truth: the remaking of social analysis* (1989). Based on his grief at his wife's death and the consequent rage he

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More information

experienced as a reaction to her death, he discusses the psychological foundation of Ilongot headhunting, pointing out that although the Ilongot had often told him of this connection between loss and the rage that leads to headhunting, he had been unable to understand such statements until he had experienced a traumatic loss himself. Rosaldo is explicit in arguing that good ethnography should include a description of emotional forces, although he does not characterize such description as "psychological."

The point that modern socio-cultural anthropology contains a great deal of psychological speculation and theorizing seems to me unchallengeable. Indeed, in recent years there has been an increase in the use of psychological concepts with the new focus on "identity" and "agency," discussed below. These concepts are certainly psychological; they have their locus inside the person, are part of the total cognitive, emotional, and motivational system by which the individual adapts to and assimilates experience, and are a complex creation of the interaction between our biologically given potentialities and the human social and cultural environment.

I will leave to historians of anthropology and others an exploration of the reasons for the great discrepancy between what many socio-cultural anthropologists say they do compared with what they actually do with regard to the use of psychological constructs. I believe the movement of the field towards a greater involvement with psychological theory, however implicit and however denied, is based on the same reasons that lead to John Whiting's interest in psychological theory; that is, in trying to move from surface description to a deeper understanding of how culture and society work, the investigator inevitably becomes involved with the reality of complex psychological factors.

Agency, identity and gender

One of the recent shifts in anthropology has been a turn to the analysis of humans as "active agents." Rather than treating people as passive recipients of cultural systems of meaning, there is a focus on the way in which people resist various hegemonic systems and negotiate for their own interests the multiplex meanings of their social statuses. There is also a greater interest in the way conflicting ideologies are contested in particular arenas of social life. Underlying this work is a new interest in the role of power in social life, especially symbolically mediated aspects of power.

This recent work raises a number of issues about causality. If people are not just passive carriers of cultural systems of meaning, but actively select, reinterpret, and reformulate their understandings of the world, what is the source of this resistance? There must be something "in" people – a kind of "directionality" or "striving" of a certain type. That is, agency presupposes that humans pursue certain objectives for their own reasons, and are not just passive followers of any doctrine or "players" of any role. In the standard vocabulary of the social sciences, such internally generated "pursuits" or "strivings" are called *motives*. When the cultural systems of meaning or institutional arrangements conflict with, or do not support these motivational strivings, people often directly resist, or attempt to change the institutions and systems of meaning through negotiation, or else they become socially and culturally alienated.

Thus the analysis of agency inevitably brings with it a conceptual framework which includes the notion of motivation, however labeled. Once the notion of motivation is brought into the analysis of social action, various issues related to motivation inevitably arise. Strivings after power, or strivings to resist power, are motivational factors. Are there different kinds of power which people strive after? Is power the only relevant motive for such analyses? What is the full range of motives that lead people to accept, resist, or reformulate social institutions and cultural systems of meaning?

For Whiting, motivational factors have always been of central importance. However, his approach has been not to postulate one universal master motive such as power, but rather to try to discover the ways in which development of different kinds of striving result from the way the child is socialized. His early work on the relation between frustration and aggression (1944), his cross-cultural study with Irvin Child on socialization experiences and different beliefs about illness (1953), his work on the motivational force of conflict in identity (1961, 1964a, 1975, 1981), and his later work on the learning of general motivational systems of responsibility, altruism, and egoism (1971, 1973) all share this concern with the way in which humans learn to become particular kinds of agents with particular agendas.

As analyses of agency become more sophisticated, the particular qualities of agency in different social groups will become more salient. While Whiting has generally worked within the paradigm of why people accept or even need particular beliefs and symbolic ritual practices, rather than why people resist or negotiate such cultural institutions and social practices, his model of how particular groups develop one kind of agency rather than another is of direct relevance. In Whiting's model, a great part of the learning of particular motivational orientations comes from early experience, primarily the social and interactional aspects of infancy and childhood. These early experiences, and the strivings they give rise to,

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More information

"pre-adapt," in Spiro's terminology (Spiro 1987), the person to internalize specific cultural institutions. To understand the great tenacity with which people hold on to apparently irrational cultural representations in the face of strong counter-evidence or pursue certain goals despite considerable personal difficulty requires a deeper analysis of agency than a simple reliance on the notion of power.

As do many current theorists, Whiting links agency to the formation of identity. Self-representations form the basis of a distinct cluster of emotions, conflicts, and motivations. According to Whiting's status-envy theory of identification (1960), identity and one's most fundamental sense of self come from certain aspects of early childhood and infant interaction, specifically interaction with those who control valued resources. The person who is perceived to control resources valued by the child, such as rewards and punishments, is envied by the child, who comes to wish to have the attributes of the envied figure. The child will play the role of the envied other in fantasy if he or she is negatively sanctioned for attempts at actual enactment of this role, and over time come to experience itself as if it actually had these attributes.

This model of identity formation is applied by Whiting primarily to the learning of gender. Nancy Chodorow's theory of gender identification (1978) has many features in common with Whiting's status-envy theory of identification.[1] Both stress the importance of the mother in the earliest aspects of identity formation, and the greater problem faced by boys compared to girls in reaching a gender-appropriate identity. Also both theories derive from the greater conflict for the male potential for a hypermasculine defensive derogation of women as a way of denying an underlying feminine identification. This general model forms the basis of a body of modern feminist theory exploring the underlying causes of gender relations. Again, let me make the point that once investigation of social and cultural phenomena goes deeply into a subject, whether suicide or resistance or gender relations, psychological factors emerge as important for understanding the phenomena in any depth.

The relation of truth to anthropological research

To this point most of what has been said here relates the work of *psychological* anthropology to the field of socio-cultural anthropology. However, there are a number of specific aspects of Whiting's work that also relate to general current issues in anthropology. One of these is Whiting's vision of the relation of *truth* to research.

It is an often-made charge that an older generation of anthropologists had a simple-minded notion about the truth of ethnographic or other

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kinds of generalizations. It is said that they believed that they looked at facts dispassionately and objectively, and thought that if their generalizations summarized the facts adequately, then their generalizations were "true." To this account of truth it is objected that anthropologists or other scientists are rarely if ever entirely dispassionate and objective, that what appear to be the facts are highly dependent on the conceptual framework with which investigators begin their research, and that the generalizations which emerged from such work rarely adequately summarized anything but the most impoverished and vacuous statements. And finally, it is charged that the acceptance of any particular anthropologist's generalization depended more on rhetoric, ideology, and the author's personal "voice" than on whatever might be the "truth" of the generalization.

Such an account probably underestimates the sophistication of an older generation of anthropologists. Certainly, Whiting's notion of truth is quite different from anything suggested by these charges. For Whiting, the goal of research is to try to create a theory or hypothesis which has theoretical plausibility and empirical support. "Facts" are events in the world referred to by the theory or hypothesis. Therefore, as the theory changes, the relevant facts change. And further, according to Whiting, one never knows that a particular theory or hypothesis is "true." All one knows is how well it fits the facts at hand. To evaluate a theory, there must be some kinds of observation that could indicate the theory was wrong. By continually evaluating and testing a theory, and then changing the theory and consequent hypotheses so that they more adequately account for a greater range of facts, and then evaluating the theory again, the possibility of understanding advances. To escape from the biases of the investigator, data are collected by a number of people who do not know the hypotheses under evaluation, and standards of reliability are applied to assess the accuracy of the judgments involved in data collection. To avoid the reliance on rhetoric and personal authority, the results are presented in as complete, detailed and public a manner as possible, and statistical tests are used to assess the significance of the results. The degree to which the emerging generalizations are vacuous or impoverished is then a judgment to be made by the reader. In my experience, reviewers of Whiting's work have had critical things to say about the adequacy of the data he has used, the techniques by which the data were collected, and the degree to which the data actually supported the theory or model, but have almost always found his hypotheses innovative, interesting and relevant to basic anthropological concerns.

It should be pointed out that Whiting's idea of truth is not shared by all physical or social scientists. Some scientists privilege "predictability" as

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the main criterion of truth, some privilege "exact measurement," some privilege "axiomatic formulations of laws," some privilege "clarity and simplicity," and some privilege "experimental control." Defenders of each of these positions usually claim that *their* preferred criterion is the one which will lead to the most rapid advance of knowledge. Whiting's idea of truth as "not yet falsified but falsifiable," which is relatively close to Karl Popper's position (Popper 1957), seems to me a good strategy for anthropologists for whom experimental control or exact measurement or axiomatics or prediction are unrealistic goals. At least sometimes anthropologists can try to test their ideas to see if they could be wrong.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of working with Whiting and his colleagues was the public debate that constantly went on in seminars and lunchroom discussions about theory, the proper means of collecting and analyzing data, and the degree to which the data truly supported or invalidated these theories. This was possible because Whiting did not have a simplistic notion of truth or an authoritarian attitude about the conduct of research. Constant innovations in theoretical formulations, the continual introduction of new kinds of data to challenge the theory-building enterprise, and reliance on clear standards of evidence and demonstration made for an egalitarian world of enjoyable and rewarding intellectual voyaging.

It is interesting that in trying to build explicit psychological models to account for social and cultural institutions, Whiting developed a broadly eclectic approach. To apply the models of psychology to cultural phenomena, he found it most useful to modify and select from among a variety of standard psychological theories. John Whiting's psychological models reformulate and combine aspects of general behavior theory, psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, and theories of child development. The position of the psychological anthropologist is not like that of the biochemist, who can usually place great reliance on well-established theories of chemistry in trying to understand biological phenomena. The field of psychology contains a great number of theories, each based on particular kinds of data and special kinds of methodological techniques. These theories are still in a state of flux. This means that anthropologists who become involved with psychological issues in trying to understand cultural materials have to either select among many competing psychological theories, or develop their own psychological theory, or put together the most relevant aspects of a variety of theories into a new form. Whiting took this latter course, creating an eclectic body of theory that borrowed from a wide range of psychological work.

To the extent that anthropologists continue to be concerned with the psychological aspects of human action and thought, it seems likely that