

# 1 Introduction

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Common experience provides a glimpse of what psychological anthropology is about. We are individuals who have feelings, desires, thoughts, and memories. We are, in effect, psychological beings. Yet we are social and cultural creatures also. We live in communities and in moral worlds of shared (and contested) symbols, beliefs, and values.

Ordinary experience also suggests that these subjective and social worlds affect each other. Our feelings register our successes and disappointments in social life. We often think with the words, meanings, and images of our cultures. Even our dreams and daydreams reflect our social experiences and cultural surroundings. It is perhaps less apparent that this relation between personality and culture is reciprocal, that culture reflects intrapsychic states and processes. Even so, with a little effort we can notice that we bring feelings, desires, thoughts, and purposes to social relations and cultural activities.

Psychological anthropology is concerned with these subjective and sociocultural worlds and with the interplay between them. Scholars in psychological anthropology examine social and cultural influences on individual psychology and the psychological foundations of social behavior and shared culture. As individuals, we have a great deal of intuitive knowledge about personality and culture. Still, such knowledge is constrained by our cultural and social horizons and, perhaps, by the fact that meanings and motives can be unconscious. In psychological anthropology scholars try to go beyond these limits by studying personality in other cultures and by entering into an ongoing discussion about ethnographic observations and interpretive perspectives.

I take a position in this discussion by arguing for a broadly psychoanalytic view of personality and a socially grounded view of culture. Personality and culture, it seems to me, are complicated phenomena. I prefer psychoanalytic and dialogical perspectives on personality because they recognize this complexity. Together, they imply that human beings are embodied, desiring, willful, anxious creatures as well as thoughtful, moral, speaking subjects.

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Psychoanalytic and dialogical views of personality also afford a more interesting view than other theories of the social entanglements of personality and culture. Whatever else it may be, culture is a social phenomenon. Cultural beliefs and practices symbolize and sanctify social relations or, alternatively, they are used to call social relations into question. Expressive culture in particular reflects and informs sociality in these ways. People use cultural symbols, idioms, and rituals to mark social boundaries, to affirm social positions, and to negotiate (and renegotiate) the social contract. While informing culture in these ways, social relations also involve emotion and motivation. Thus, social relations are important for understanding the connection between personality and culture. We will see that many of these connections involve dialogue or discourse about power, eroticism, attachment, and anxieties about self-preservation, that is, issues that figure prominently in psychoanalytic thinking about motivation.

Human beings are power-seeking creatures. Hobbes and Nietzsche made this observation, as have various twentieth-century writers. Social theorists recognize power as a ubiquitous dimension in social relations. It can involve not merely an ability to coerce but also authority, prestige, and wealth. Psychoanalysts refer to the power-seeking impulse as narcissism – the person's striving for and experience of social and moral superiority. Eroticism informs courtship, art, ritual, humor, folklore, carnival and saturnalia and, in more subtle forms, many other activities as well. Attachment appears in parent–child relationships, kinship, friendship, and other social ties. Eroticism and attachment occur together in passionate attachments, marriage, and zealous loyalty to charismatic religious and political leaders. Many individual and collective beliefs and practices can be seen as attempts to allay anxiety by ensuring a safe and predictable environment.

I also stress that the interconnectedness of subjectivity and sociocultural milieu involves discursive interaction and individual agency. Subjects interact with one another and take turns influencing each other. Subjects are shaped by social and cultural expectations; they listen and accede to what others are saying, learn the rules, and internalize the norms. They follow political leaders, respect the knowledge and expertise of elders and authorities, model themselves after cultural heroes and exemplars. Yet subjects not only listen, they also speak. They become authorities and leaders. They argue and negotiate with one another about values and about the meaning, form, and salience of cultural practices. They produce things and create culture. Even when working within existing institutions and genres, subjects are constantly experimenting and inventing. They may conform to the canons of accepted usage, but what they say is often original. It may

also prove persuasive, thus modifying the body of received opinion and understanding.

### **Culture and personality studies**

The social dialogical-psychoanalytic approach I favor and develop here differs from the earlier culture and personality studies. It also differs from contemporary forms of cultural determinism. The psychological approaches in culture and personality studies were too reductionistic and, at the same time, too preoccupied with accounting for differences between cultures. The culturalist versions and their contemporary successors, on the other hand, put too much emphasis on the cultural shaping of the individual while giving too little thought to human nature and the general psychological foundations of culture.

Between 1930 and 1960 or so the working hypothesis was that personality and culture are mutually congruent elements of a society. One version of this thinking tried to account for cultural differences in terms of group differences in personality. The neo-Freudian psychoanalyst Abram Kardiner (1939) argued that the “primary institutions” (family organization, childcare and rearing practices, patterns of neglect, etc.) of a society produce a shared “basic personality structure.” This set of shared, core features of personality, in turn, affects the projective style of individuals and thus the “secondary institutions” of a culture (e.g., art, religion, folklore, politics). According to this view, the effect of one set of cultural institutions on another is mediated through shared personality.

Studies were undertaken to support the group personality idea with ethnographic description and personality tests, particularly the Rorschach Ink Blot Test and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). Other researchers attempted to document childhood determinism of culture with the cross-cultural method. Correlations between child-rearing practices and secondary institutions in large samples of the world’s cultures were seen as indicating the influence of formative experiences and shared personality (Whiting and Child 1953).

Generally speaking, the efforts to explain cultural differences psychologically were not very successful. For one thing, it was found that the people of different societies could have similar psychological characteristics even though they had very different cultures (Kaplan 1954). Studies also revealed considerable psychological variation in human groups, even when the people of a group seemed to share a homogeneous culture. Shared psychological traits were often abstractions that subsumed actual individual differences (Devereux 1961).

Childhood determinism of personality was another questionable

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postulate. Culture and personality theory assumed that socialization practices have highly predictable consequences for adult personality. The findings from child development, however, were ambiguous on this point, and cross-cultural correlations between child-rearing practices and adult customs varied from modest to nonexistent. In an important review of the field, Anthony F.C. Wallace (1970) concluded that “organization of diversity” probably better describes the relation between personality and society than “replication of uniformity.”<sup>1</sup>

Another approach in culture and personality studies emphasized the role of culture in shaping subjective experience. In *Coming of age in Samoa*, Margaret Mead (1928) contended that adolescent emotional turmoil is a by-product of culture; while it may be commonplace in the west, it is largely absent in Samoa. In *Patterns of culture*, Ruth Benedict (1934) suggested that different cultures form distinct configurations, much like individual personalities, and she emphasized that culture shapes the thought patterns, attitudes, and moods of entire peoples.

#### **Cultural interpretivism, postmodernism, and cultural psychology**

Many scholars find in the shortcomings of psychological explanation an argument for the cultural determinism of Ruth Benedict and the early Margaret Mead, that is, for focusing on how culture or discourse shapes individual subjectivity. Current versions of this approach reflect the influence of cultural interpretivism and postmodernism.<sup>2</sup>

Clifford Geertz, the leading advocate of cultural interpretivism, was influenced by the sociologist Talcott Parsons. Parsons viewed culture as a system of symbols and meanings and as a powerful influence on the individual. Drawing on Durkheim and Freud, he understood this influence in moral terms. Durkheim saw symbolic orders as collective representations that reinforce social solidarity and moral order while suppressing the egoistic inclinations of individuals. Parsons supplemented this insight into the role of collective representations in shaping the moral behavior of the individual with Freud’s concept of the superego. For Parsons, the notion of the superego helped to explain at a psychological level how a collective moral order actually shapes the moral behavior of the individual.

Building on Parsons’s view of culture as a system of symbols, Geertz (1973, 1983) reasoned that understanding culture requires interpretation, not explanation. To Geertz, cultures are exemplified in public symbols and meanings. The self, emotion, and subjective experience are shaped in different ways by local cultures.

Postmodernism has roots in both Durkheim’s emphasis on the collective nature of culture and the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure

distinguished between speech and language. Speech is a novel concatenation of signifiers that affirms something, often something about the world. Language, in contrast, is a system of shared and arbitrary conventions involving relations between signifiers. Saussure's concept of language, in other words, drew attention to relations between units within language and away from the ways in which intentional subjects use signifiers to represent the world (Harland 1987).

This inclination to emphasize group and language was taken further by Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Althusser, and, more recently, Foucault, Barthes, and Derrida. Lévi-Strauss argued that cultures are constructed on frameworks of symbolic oppositions, mediations, and analogies. He assumed that such structures are shared and unconscious, and he paid little regard to intentional individuals or actual sociality.

Jacques Lacan asserted that language and culture are part of the very structure of the mind. For Lacan, Freud's early work on hysteria suggested that the "unconscious is structured like a language" (1978: 20). The unconscious minds of Freud's patients seemed to Lacan to incorporate the voices of social others. In effect, the unconscious is the language and culture of the group. Language, the signifying chain (the Other), is held together by moral authority, by what Lacan called "The-Law-of-the-Father" or the "Phallus." In effect, Lacan tended to merge the superego with the id, the seat of unconscious desire, and to expand the superego-id at the expense of the ego, which he viewed as a fiction of western society. The neo-Marxist Althusser equated the symbolic with ideology. Thus it was the dominant ideology, the "Law of Culture," that constructed the subject (see Smith 1988: 19–20).

Postmodernism retains structuralism's emphasis on the group and on the relations between signifiers, but it no longer portrays cultures as coherent systems. It questions the representational functions of language and even the existence of a conscious, intentional subject. Skepticism is expressed about the power of signs or signifiers to represent meanings or the objective world, and attention is turned to the "play of signifiers," to how signifiers refer to other signifiers. The individual subject ceases to be a locus of intention who speaks about the world and becomes instead a decentered artifact of the symbolic system. Lacking depth, continuity, coherence, moral center, agency, or – it seems – contact with reality, the individual is little more than a relay in the semiotic circuitry (see Colapietro 1990). According to Kenneth J. Gergen, "The question 'why' is answered not with a psychological state or process but with consideration of persons in relationship" (1985: 271). Meaning is unstable and displaced; there is never a fixed meaning or purpose in any human activity. Structures are critiqued or deconstructed in terms of what they exclude or take for granted (Sampson

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1989). Postmodernism, then, disregards underlying motives, meanings, or structures. The emphasis falls instead on the way in which social and cultural context shape various subjective positions, experiences, and modes of living.

Richard A. Shweder (1991) has been a forceful advocate of culturalist and postmodernist thinking in psychological anthropology. Shweder (*ibid.*: 88) opines that “psychological anthropology” is a misguided search for the “transcendental” in a world of mere “appearances,” and for universals where there are only local, cultural psychologies. Shweder urges us to avoid assumptions about psychic unity or underlying mechanisms in human psychology and to consider instead the ways in which individual psychology is culturally constituted and culturally variable. Shweder and others who share his culturalist orientation attempt to show that emotions, intentions, the self, and moral reasoning vary from one culture to another.

Intentional individuals and intentional worlds, according to Shweder, create and recreate each other through dialectical interaction. “The breath of psyche is the stuff of intentional states, of beliefs and desires, of fears and fancies, of values and visions about this or that” (Shweder 1991: 101). “Culture,” meanwhile, “refers to the intentional world” (*ibid.*). The distinction between intentional selves and intentional worlds seems to allow some separation between psyche and culture, and even seems to leave the door slightly ajar for a motivated subject; on closer inspection, however, we see that “the breath of psyche” reflects cultural conceptions about “self, society, and nature” (*ibid.*: 102). The breath of the individual, that is, comes from the surrounding atmosphere. In effect, the metaphor downplays the embodied, stable nature of personality and construes personality as a transient effect of culturally patterned discourse.

In cultural psychology the emphasis falls on language and intellect.<sup>3</sup> Cultures consist of cultural values, principles, or schemas, particularly as they are expressed in language. Moral beliefs are especially important for understanding behavior. Thus, the superego is the one concept from psychoanalysis Shweder finds useful (Shweder 1980). This, of course, is the same theme we see in Durkheim, Parsons, and Lacan.

Each culture, according to Shweder, defines a distinct reality. The origins or reasons for cultural beliefs do not seem especially problematic for Shweder. Sociological, pragmatic, and psychoanalytic strategies of interpretation are dismissed as “Nietzschean” because they treat the “reality posits” of other peoples (e.g., their beliefs about gods, ghosts, spirits, demons, etc.) as manifestations of underlying forces or structures rather than as self-sufficient propositions.

There is much that is appealing in interpretivism, postmodernism, and cultural psychology. The contention that cultures shape thought, emotion,

moral orientation, and the self is well-documented and unexceptionable. Human behavior is meaningful, and understanding it requires interpretation. Memory and perception are structured by cultural assumptions and preconceptions, and signifiers can have multiple, shifting, and contextual meanings. A good deal of human behavior makes sense in terms of culturally constituted situations.

Culturalism, postmodernism, and cultural psychology, however, reify and overemphasize the group and culture. In this respect, they recall Parsons's sociology. In a trenchant but now largely overlooked paper, Dennis Wrong (1961) observed that Parsons assumed that human beings are more socialized than they actually are. Wrong pointed out that Parsons's use of the superego concept disregarded Freud's understanding of intrapsychic conflict, and he questioned the inclination of his colleagues in sociology to overemphasize needs for social approval. "Sociologists," Wrong noted, "have appropriated the superego concept, but have separated it from the Freudian id" (*ibid.*: 187). These trends, he suggested, were corollaries of a tendency to exaggerate stability and integration in social formations. Sociology in Wrong's view had settled uncritically for a "disembodied, conscience-driven, status-seeking" caricature of real individuals (*ibid.*: 193). Melford E. Spiro (1984, 1986, 1993a) expresses similar reservations about culturalism and postmodernism.<sup>4</sup> He doubts that self and emotion are simply or primarily socially constructed or culturally formed, and, like Wrong, he wonders what happened to the id.

Desire and thought are influenced by discourse and expressed in words. And words figure prominently in the organization and expression of the self. It is too simplistic, however, to say that the unconscious is structured like a language. Images and emotion probably play a greater role in unconscious thought than language. Moreover, an emphasis on the linguistic structuring of the mind begs questions about the precultural and prelinguistic foundations of cultural schemas and linguistic structures. Culturalism and postmodernism have little to say, Spiro observes, about the enigmatic content of culture or about emotionality in human behavior.

Additionally, they underestimate human capacities for accurate observation and rational reasoning. In emphasizing how people make inferences from arbitrary "reality-posit" (i.e., beliefs about the world, natural and supernatural), culturalism and postmodernism tend to disregard the social and psychological foundations of collective beliefs and representations. They underestimate the ability of human beings to perceive and represent the world and thus to question and resist authoritative assertions and dominant ideologies. "Reality-posit," in other words, may be more or less rational than Shweder admits. The notion that cultural beliefs are valid in their own terms, moreover, disregards how beliefs are contested and negotiated

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in social life. It also blurs the differences between practical knowledge and ideology, reality testing and delusion, understanding and misunderstanding, and authenticity and artfulness. It thus glosses over variations in personality and many dialectical complexities and contradictions in social life.

My principal criticism of culturalism and postmodernism is that they simply have too little to say about the details of personality, society, and culture. They either ignore subjectivity or reduce it to culture or social context. And they tend to gloss over social structure and the symbolic content of culture. The two inclinations are interrelated. Social relations involve desire and emotion. In oversimplifying or ignoring desire and emotion, these perspectives also minimize or elide the subject's affective involvement in both mutually supportive relationships and competition for wealth and power.

Cultural psychology, it seems to me, is too postmodern insofar as it disregards the precultural origins of emotion and motivation. On the other hand it is not postmodern enough insofar as it ignores the political motivation of cultural constructions. Serious social theory involves concerns with power, agency, and pragmatics. Serious psychological anthropology, in turn, requires serious social theory. Psychological anthropology, in other words, must be Nietzschean to some extent.

Cultural psychologists may reply that they are interested in subjectivity, desire, or agency. Joan G. Miller (1994: 143–144), for example, avers that cultural psychology differs from cultural determinism and structuralism in this respect. If this is so, cultural psychology is more promising than one would have thought. In practice, however, cultural psychology has little to say about individual motivation or how, through social practice, motivation hooks up with social relations and culture. Cultural psychology clearly disavows human nature, and it reduces the psyche to internalized cultural ideas and propositions. In other words, cultural psychology lacks a compelling story about the intrapsychic, embodied foundations of will, desire, and agency.

**Freudian subjects and dialogical selves**

In this book, “personality” comprises the emotional and mental characteristics of the individual. It includes basic drives and needs, emotional capacities and dispositions, and ongoing wishes, desires, and purposes. It also involves representations of emotionally significant others, self-representations, cognitive style, attitudes and values, and patterns of moral reasoning.

Personality has various parts. In the psychoanalytic scheme, the *id*



includes drives and impulses and primitive, poetic thought processes. The *ego* is the executive agency of personality, the seat of the person or subject and self-representations. The person or subject is animated by drive, need, and emotion, and self-representations reflect embodied experiences with social others. The *superego* is the seat of conscience and the ego-ideal. Each of these components has its own purpose and agenda. While they work together at times they also may work at cross purposes.

A basic assumption here is that wishes, desires, and thoughts are often unconscious. Individuals may be unaware of their personal desires, purposes, and fantasies and, at the same time, less than fully aware of the layered meanings of their cultural beliefs and practices. Such lack of conscious awareness can be habitual but, also, it can be intentional, a form of self-deception. Whether unconscious motives and meanings are personal or widely shared, they may be influential precisely because they escape conscious scrutiny.

Another notion is that the most influential unconscious desires and fantasies often develop in the early and middle years of childhood, especially in experiences with parents and siblings. These “nuclear fantasies” center on attachment, separation and loss, gender identity, and the self, or they involve erotic desire and needs for empowerment. Unconscious wishes and desires may conflict with the demands of objective reality and cultural rules. As a result, thinking and behavior are often mixtures of will and desire on the one hand and moral values and social aims on the other.

These ideas about the role of unconscious thought and conflict in mental life were first formulated in systematic fashion by Sigmund Freud. In his studies of hysteria, Freud discerned anxiety about repressed wishes and traumatic experiences. Obsessive-compulsive disorder, in contrast, seemed to involve guilt about illicit wishes. The hysterical patient expressed unconscious conflicts in a language of the body or splitting of consciousness, whereas the obsessive patient was caught in a cycle of forbidden wishes, guilt, and expiatory rituals. In both conditions, Freud found the beginnings of disorder in childhood traumas or fantasies. He also noticed, however, that constitutional factors, idiosyncratic perceptions of objective events, and creative revisions of memories in response to later experience make the consequences of childhood events and fantasies hard to predict.<sup>5</sup>

The study of hysteria and obsessive-compulsive neurosis and their childhood origins led Freud to a theory of personality and mental disorder. Sexual and aggressive drives were singled out as especially important. These were seen as regulated by the ego and superego. Distinct personality styles represented variations in emotional disposition and diverse compromises between desire and self-control. Dreams, humor, and the errors of everyday life also revealed intrapsychic tensions. Depression was a turning

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of anger against the self, and schizophrenia was a dreamlike state resulting from a major rupture in ego organization.

In psychoanalysis, these formulations have been emended and revised in various ways (see Eagle 1984; Pine 1990). Object-relations theory has drawn more attention to human needs for attachment and security and to the inherently social nature of all drives and emotions. Self psychology and clinical studies of personality disorders have brought narcissism, an affectively colored striving for perfection and “a felt quality of perfection” (Rothstein 1984: 17), to the fore of theoretical discussion (Kohut 1971).

A corollary of this increased attention to needs for love, attachment, and empowerment is more recognition of emotional vulnerability to loss and narcissistic injuries. Losses of love and blows to self-esteem are common sources of negative affect in human beings. Such traumas figure repeatedly in the etiology and onset of various emotional disorders. Early psychoanalysts were aware of this fact but it took self psychology and object-relations theory to refocus attention on objective events in childhood. The result is a clearer picture of the childhood experiences that are most apt to have important effects on the development of normal and abnormal personality.

In trauma, defenses are overwhelmed and the sense of safety is shattered. After trauma, people try to reestablish control and a feeling of security. To this end they may revisit or recreate traumatic scenes to try to transform victimization into security, agency, or triumph. They also may try to redress losses and blows to self-esteem with substitutive objects or ego-enhancing tokens of power and prestige.

Since its beginning, psychoanalysis has been interested in the way in which people use words to express desire and to defend themselves against anxiety. This interest in language is even greater in contemporary psychoanalytic thought, partly because of the influence of Lacan.

Lacan is controversial (the unconscious, contrary to his notion, is not simply or primarily linguistic), but there is an important sense in which the personality involves language. People express themselves in behavior but, also, and perhaps especially, in speech. They identify, define, and memorialize themselves in the stories they tell about themselves (Spence 1982, 1987). Symbolic interactionists similarly see the self as a narrative, as stories individuals tell about themselves (Sarbin 1986). This role of story telling in self-representation is not, it seems, merely a western phenomenon. Ethnographic reports show that in many cultures narratives are part of self-organization (Peacock and Holland 1993).

According to psychoanalysis, wishes, desires, anxieties, and fantasies develop in relationships, and self-representations reflect both identifications with others and the way in which others mirror the self back to the self. The individual's habitual modes of relating to and talking with others,