



The Cultural Background of Personality

by

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TO
THE STUDENTS
WHOSE QUESTIONS MAY INDUCE THEIR PROFESSORS
TO READ THIS BOOK

Preface

IN February, 1943, Swarthmore College invited me to deliver a series of five lectures on the general subject of the interrelations of Culture, Society and the Individual, these lectures being given under the auspices of the Cooper Foundation. As an alumnus of the institution and one who had had few opportunities to revisit it since graduation in 1915, it gave me great pleasure to accept. My stay at Swarthmore was an exceedingly pleasant one, and I wish to thank President John W. Nason and Dr. Charles B. Shaw for the invitation which made my visit possible and for their many kindnesses during the time that I was in residence at the college. I also wish to express my appreciation for the many pleasant contacts which I had with various members of the faculty. I was especially happy to renew my acquaintance with Dr. Harold C. Goddard and Dr. Samuel Palmer, both of whom had contributed greatly to my education as well as my instruction in the days when I was an undergraduate.

In the course of preparing my lecture notes I became keenly conscious of two things: the complexity of the problems involved and the necessity for a clearer exposition of certain of the concepts which it was necessary to employ in dealing with these problems. I was still more impressed with these when I came to prepare the lectures for publication. After various attempts to adhere to my original outline, it seemed that a thorough revision would be necessary to make the material of any value. As a result, the five essays included in the present volume differ con-

siderably from the original lectures in both form and content. They represent the lectures as they should have been delivered, not as they were delivered.

In the preparation of these essays I received substantial assistance from certain members of the Department of Anthropology of Yale University whom the fortunes of war had placed temporarily at Columbia University. Dr. George P. Murdock, Dr. John M. Whiting, and Dr. Clellan S. Ford all read the various essays as they were completed and made many valuable suggestions. I am also indebted to Dr. A. H. Maslow for a thorough and painstaking critique of the entire manuscript, and to Dr. Abram Kardiner for numerous suggestions on points involving psychoanalytic theory. Last but not least, I wish to thank Miss Ruth W. Bryan, Secretary of the Department at Columbia, for her invaluable assistance in preparing the manuscript for publication.

R. L.

Introduction

THE most recent development in man's long effort to understand himself is the systematic study of the interrelations of the individual, society and culture. This study lies at the meeting point of three long-established scientific disciplines: Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology. Each of these disciplines has elected to deal with a particular series of phenomena, has developed its own techniques and can show a fine record of accomplishment. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that there are certain problems which cannot be solved by any one discipline alone. The term *certain problems* is used advisedly since each discipline covers a wide area and deals with problems of several different sorts and magnitudes. Certain of these can be dealt with quite adequately without collaboration across disciplinary lines. Thus the Experimental Psychologist working with animals can go his own way with little reference to the findings of Sociology and Anthropology. These become important only when he tries to apply his own findings to the understanding of human behavior. Again, the Social Worker, confronted by concrete problems which must be solved within the frame of our own society and culture, needs little help from the Anthropologist. At the same time, he is beginning to lean on the Psychologist and the indications are that he will do so increasingly as time

goes on. Lastly, within the wide and diffuse field of Anthropological studies, the Archaeologist or Physical Anthropologist can answer many specific questions without taking council with either Psychologists or Sociologists. It is the workers in the fields of Personality Psychology, Social Structure, and Cultural Anthropology who find themselves drawn together by common interests.

Out of the collaboration of such workers there is beginning to emerge a new science devoted to the dynamics of human behavior. This science is still in the first stages of its development, but it is characterized by a willingness to follow problems without reference to disciplinary boundaries and to use any data or techniques which seem germane to the research in hand. Its practitioners have, for the most part, received formal training in only one of the established disciplines and often find it difficult to deal with the materials provided by the others. They also tend to be most conscious of problems which have originated within their original discipline. Thus investigators who, like the present writer, have been drawn into the new area from Anthropology, are most keenly aware of the implications of the new approach for the understanding of cultural problems. The Anthropologists' studies of culture process and culture integration have now reached a point where further progress necessitates the use of the findings of Personality Psychology. Every culture is participated in, perpetuated and modified by a particular society but every society is, in the last analysis, a group of individuals. These individuals constitute

the unsolved X in every cultural equation and an X which cannot be solved by purely Anthropological techniques. Although Anthropologists have long since abandoned the "Great Man" theory of the early Historians, they know that there can be no inventions without inventors. They also know that there can be no lasting modifications in culture without the acceptance of new ideas by a society's members. The next step is to discover what makes a man an inventor rather than a passive culture carrier and why the members of a particular society are ready to accept one innovation or to reject another. As applied to the development of cultures, the convenient phrase "historic accident" is only a screen for ignorance; a magic word which serves to lull the curiosity. There are many cases in which the activities of the inventor cannot be related to the obvious, conscious needs of his society. Similarly, a society's acceptance or rejection of a new thing very often cannot be explained in the simple, mechanistic terms of culture integration. To understand these things we must turn to the findings of Psychology. It seems highly probable that the phenomena of acceptance and rejection are related in some way to the congeniality of the new thing with the personality norm of the society's members. The application of the techniques of Personality Psychology to the study of societies and cultures has already enabled investigators to recognize that there are differences in these norms and to gain some insight into the factors responsible for such differences. When these investigations have been completed, we may anticipate

that the particular directions which various cultures have taken in their development will no longer appear accidental.

If the Anthropologist can profit from collaboration with the Personality Psychologist, he can at least offer a fair exchange of aid. The most fundamental problem which confronts students of personality today is that of the degree to which the deeper levels of personality are conditioned by environmental factors. This problem cannot be solved by laboratory techniques. It is impossible to create controlled environments comparable to the social-cultural configurations within which all human beings develop. Neither can one appraise the influence of many environmental factors by observations carried on within the frame of our own culture and society. Many of the factors operative here are taken so much for granted that they never enter into the investigator's calculations. The only way in which the Personality Psychologist can get the comparative data which he requires is by the study of individuals reared in different societies and cultures. Under present conditions he rarely has the opportunity to make such studies at first hand, but he can obtain much of the information which he needs from the material which has been or can be collected by Anthropologists. The so called "primitive" societies which Anthropologists have made their special field of investigation presents a variety of social-cultural environments sufficiently great to provide answers to most of the Psychologist's questions. Moreover, in their studies of culture the Anthropologists have developed effective techniques for summarizing this environmental mate-

rial and showing the experiences to which the bulk of any society's members are subjected in the course of their lives. Unfortunately, the information which Anthropologists can provide on the personalities of individuals reared in these varying environments is still far from satisfactory. However, their sins in this respect tend to be those of omission rather than of commission. They frequently fail to record data which would be of great interest to the Psychologist simply because they do not realize that such data are important.

Since the present volume deals primarily with problems which are of interest mainly to the Psychologist and Anthropologist, the rôle of Sociology in the development of the new science of human behavior can be passed over lightly. Suffice it to say that the interpersonal relations which are of such paramount importance in the formation of personality cannot be understood except with reference to the positions which the individuals involved occupy in the structural system of their society. It is also impossible to understand or delimit the individual's culturally ascribed rights and obligations without taking this system into account. Conversely, the structure of any society is itself a part of the society's culture and many of its features cannot be understood except in relation to the organization of that culture as a whole. Sociology has as much to gain and as important contributions to make in collaboration as have either of the other two sciences in the triumvirate.

At the present time the most important barriers to successful collaboration between the three sciences seem to be two. First, there is the ignorance of the con-

tent of other disciplines natural to those who have received intensive training in one discipline only. This can be overcome in large measure by collaboration between individuals trained in different disciplines. While the most effective collaboration is that which can be achieved by two disciplines under one skull, specialists can assist each other in the solution of joint problems if they can develop a common field of discourse. This brings us at once to the second difficulty, which is the lack of a consistent terminology shared by all three sciences. Even with the best intentions in the world, the specialist from one discipline often cannot understand what a specialist from another discipline is trying to say. The situation is complicated by the fact that many of the terms used in each of the three disciplines involved are still employed with a variety of meanings even within the disciplines themselves. In general, such terms possess a core of meaning accepted by all workers in the discipline surrounded by a shadowy zone of secondary meanings which lack such universal acceptance. Since a clear understanding of the terms and concepts employed by the various disciplines is vitally necessary for collaboration, a considerable part of this volume has been devoted to an attempt to define some of those which are in most frequent use. In this attempt I have tried to follow the democratic principle of majority rule, basing my definitions and explanations upon those meanings on which there seems to be general agreement and ignoring minority usages. It follows that such explanations will not make it possible for those trained in one discipline to understand everything

that all workers in another discipline may be talking about. However, the attempt has been to provide a sort of lingua franca or trade language on the basis of which the simpler ideas and factual knowledge of the three disciplines can be exchanged. Whether I have succeeded in this only time can tell.

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5100

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Contents

	PAGE
PREFACE	vii
INTRODUCTION	xiii
CHAPTER	
1. THE INDIVIDUAL, CULTURE AND SOCIETY	1
2. THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE	27
3. SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND CULTURE PARTICIPATION	55
4. PERSONALITY	83
5. THE RÔLE OF CULTURE IN PERSONALITY FORMATION	125
INDEX	155

I

The Individual, Culture and Society

STUDIES of the individual, culture and society, and of their manifold interrelations are a response to the old admonition, "Man, know thyself." Most of the phenomena with which such studies deal have been tacitly recognized since time immemorial, but their investigation has been left largely to the philosopher and theologian. It is only within the last two or three generations that they have come to be considered an appropriate field for scientific research. Even now, such research is fraught with great difficulty. Although scientific attitudes are being invoked with increasing success, many of the recognized scientific techniques simply are not applicable to phenomena of these orders. Thus the very nature of the material precludes, in large part, the use of experimental methods. The intrinsic qualities of cultures and societies are such that it is impossible to produce them to order or to study them under rigid control conditions. The individual is more amenable to experimental techniques, but even he leaves much to be desired. Even as a small child he comes to the investigator with his own distinctive configuration of experience and of innate, biologically determined potentialities. These constitute an unsolved X in all equations; one which

2 CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF PERSONALITY

cannot be solved by any of the techniques now available to us. In theory, it might be possible to take care of the innate factors by developing, through controlled breeding, human strains of nearly uniform heredity. Given these, it might then be possible to observe the sorts of personality produced by various environmental conditions created by the investigator. However, such human guinea pigs belong to a future as remote as it is depressing in terms of all that we have been taught to value. Even the first step, that of developing pure strains, will have to await such an improbable event as the disappearance of incest taboos.

These limitations on the use of the experimental method are by no means the only difficulties which confront the investigator. Personalities, cultures and societies are all configurations in which the patterning and organization of the whole is more important than any of the component parts. Until very recent times the scientific trend has been toward the increasingly minute analysis of such configurations and the study of the parts rather than the whole. Even today, when the importance of configurations as such is generally recognized, there is a notable lack of techniques for dealing with them. Lastly, the lack of exact and demonstrable units for the measurement of most social and cultural phenomena is still a severe handicap. Until such units have been established, it will be impossible to apply many of the mathematical techniques which have proved so valuable in other fields of research.

The greatest technological advance within the general area under discussion has been made in connec-