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THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF PERSONALITY



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THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF PERSONALITY

by
RALPH LINTON



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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 considerably 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 behaviour. 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 Archæologist or Physical Anthropologist can answer many specific questions without taking counsel 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 behaviour. 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 to-day 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 present 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 material 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 behaviour 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 under-