

## The culture and personality school: A questionable contribution to anthropological theory

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### Abstract

This paper describes how the Culture and Personality School, an important anthropological approach that arose in the 1920s, has developed over the years. In order to do this, the birth of the school, its distinctive features, and criticism that has been leveled against will be discussed. This will be briefly illustrated using Ruth Benedict's influential work "*The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*." We will also briefly discuss whether the Culture and Personality School really is a school. The paper concludes with the statement that the ideas presented in the Culture and Personality School are no longer fitting in the contemporary discourse of anthropology. However, contemporary anthropologists still find little inspiration in the school and it has been of great importance in the development of anthropological theory.

**Key words:** *Culture and Personality School, culture, personality, configuration, school, Benedict, Mead*

### Introduction

"No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking."<sup>1</sup> This is what Ruth Benedict, a famous anthropologist and Culture and Personality School theorist, wrote in her influential book *Patterns of Culture*. This quote provides an explanation for why the social sciences are constantly evolving. As we learn more and more about the world we live in and the people we live with, our views on the world change and thus our way of thinking also changes. Every person on earth learns different things, which leads to every person having his or her own way of thinking. All these unique ways of thinking lead to the asking of different questions and the acceptance of different answers. Ruth Benedict once wrote the following in her journal: "The trouble with life isn't that there is no answer, it's that there are so many answers."<sup>2</sup> The questions Ruth Benedict asked are related to culture. The answers she provided are found in the Culture and Personality School, of which she was a leading figure (Barrett, 2009). Her book *Patterns of Culture* (1934), one of the seminal works of the Culture and Personality School, had an immense impact on both anthropologists and lay readers alike (Barnard & Spencer, 2002).

Ruth Benedict is not the only theorist of the Culture and Personality School; There are in fact many others. The basic notion on which the Culture and Personality School is based is, as its name suggests, that every culture shapes a certain personality type for the people that grow up in that culture. Ruth Benedict suggested that there is a high degree of consistency

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<sup>1</sup> From <http://www.poemhunter.com/quotations/famous.asp?people=ruth%20benedict>: Ruth Benedict (1887-1948), U.S. anthropologist. *Patterns of Culture*, ch. 1 (1934)

<sup>2</sup> From <http://www.poemhunter.com/quotations/famous.asp?people=ruth%20benedict>: Ruth Benedict (1887-1948), U.S. anthropologist. *An Anthropologist at Work*, part 2 (1959). Written in her journal on January 7, 1913.

between cultural type and patterns of emotion (Barrett 2009, p. 59). Another important theorist of the Culture and Personality School is Margaret Mead. She mainly focused on how experiences in childhood influence the behavior and personality one has as an adult.

Adolescent identity and becoming an adult are important themes in her key works, perhaps the most important of which is *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) (McGee & Warms, 2008).

Abram Kardiner also influenced the Culture and Personality School. He introduced the idea that members of a certain culture share several fundamental personality traits, which he called the culture's *basic personality structure*. Cora Du Bois added the notion of a *modal personality* to this, suggesting that there is a certain personality type which is statistically most likely to occur within a culture (Barnard & Spencer, 2002).

This paper will be about the Culture and Personality School and the main question we focus on is as follows: How did the Culture and Personality School develop over time? First, the origins of the Culture and Personality School will be discussed. Then, the central ideas and features of the Culture and Personality School will be presented. Afterwards, criticism of the Culture and Personality School will be presented. Finally, the characterization of the Culture and Personality School as a "school" will be discussed. Some authors content that the Culture and Personality School was improperly labeled, and never had all the characteristics of such a school. In this part of the article, more information about the emergence and features of such schools will be provided. The paper will conclude that, even though its ideas are no longer fitting in contemporary Anthropological theory, anthropologists still find inspiration in the school.

### **Origins of the culture and personality school**

The ideas that later became central to the Culture and Personality School existed long before the School itself, which arose as an expression of different scientific disciplines. The recognition of the connection between a person's psyche and the social and cultural features of a group is much older than the institutionalization of psychology, anthropology, or sociology (LeVine, 2001, p. 803). In the 1920s and the 1930s, the relationship between human behavior and human institutions was characterized in terms of culture and personality. The ideas of the Culture and Personality School had a lot of supporters, but its popularity waned beginning in the early 1960s. It was around that time that the blurring of lines between different scientific disciplines came to be widely recognized and accepted. The Culture and Personality School is an example of a discipline which is on the borderline between anthropology and sociology on the one hand, and psychology and psychiatry on the other (LeVine, 2001, p. 805).

Although many people think the discipline was developed in the 1930s, the first connection between culture and personality was drawn as early as 1918.

"Elsewhere we have outlined the standpoint that a nomothetic social science is possible only if all social becoming is viewed as the product of a continual interaction of individual consciousness and objective social reality. In this connection, the human personality is both a continually producing factor and continually produced result of social evolution, and this double relation expresses itself in every elementary social fact; there can be for social sciences no change of social reality which is not the common effect of pre-existing social values and individual attitudes acting upon them. When viewed as a factor of social evolution, the human personality is a ground of the causal explanation of social happenings; when viewed as a product of social evolution, it is causally explicable by social happenings". (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1927, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Vol. II, p. 1831 in LeVine 2001).

The Culture and Personality School is a reaction to the anthropological theories of evolution. The central ideas of the theory of evolution among anthropologists must be discussed in order to understand the development of the Culture and Personality School. In the theory of evolution, human behavior was regarded as the outcome of the rules of nature and nothing more (Barrett, 2009, p. 50). Barrett (2009) states that according evolutionary theory cultures in the world would go through the same stages of evolution, whereby the Western and 'developed' cultures had already passed through all the stages and 'primitive societies' would be at the bottom of the stages of evolution. This unilinear scheme, the idea that Western cultures would be more developed than others, and the inevitable progress of a culture getting more civilized through the stages of evolution were central ideas in evolutionary theory. People and societies act the way they do because of nature and the inevitable process of developing from a stage of barbarism to civilization (Barrett, 2009, pp. 51-54). Culture was not seen as the primary cause of human behavior. Franz Boas was the first prominent anthropologist who reacted to the theory of evolution, and this can be seen as the origins of the Culture and Personality School. According to Boas, even a primitive tribe could not act and live according to a natural state of simplicity (Layton, 1997, p. 28), even though many Western eyes viewed them as living according the rules of nature and nothing more. Boas also stated that these people lived and acted according to the framework of their total culture. The spirit of a given people should, in his view, give unity to its culture and, to fully understand this process, Boas contended that it was necessary to examine all the aspects of a culture; beginning with studying its history (Layton, 1997, p. 29).

In the 1940s, the Culture and Personality School was not solely popular among social scientists, but also among an educated public. The Culture and Personality School was strongly influenced by the ideas of both the Gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis (McGee & Warms, 2008, p. 204).

### **Gestalt psychology**

"Gestalt" is the German word for the outline of a physical shape. Gestalt psychologists suggested that people act in response to certain underlying patterns, rather than directly in response to a situation. When we learn how to behave in a certain situation, we will apply this behavior in similar situations (Moore, 1997, p. 82). A central idea in the Gestalt theory is that a phenomenon like culture consists of collective patterns rather than of different separate elements which together form a collection. This idea of culture as a unitary whole became central in the Culture and Personality School. Especially Ruth Benedict drew upon Gestalt theory as a source of inspiration, because she was not searching for the relationship between behavior and a set of things, but instead was looking for the explanation of the relationship between the two. Barnard and Spencer (2002) use a metaphor for explaining the ideas about culture according to Gestalt theory. They say that one can compare it to a painting of a landscape. When one looks at the painting, one does not usually see different layers of paint next to and against another, but one sees a 'whole' landscape. Accordingly, Culture and Personality theorists argue that although one sees in social reality different acts of culture, each of the individual acts are the outcomes of and part of a given culture as a whole.

### **Psychoanalysis**

Many theorists in the Culture and Personality School borrowed theories from the work of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. Freud stated that each individual's mind was a battleground of three different components whose relative strength and dynamic interaction determined one's actual behavior. Freud also was interested in anthropology. From the beginning of the 20th century, he began writing books in which he attempted to explain the origins of cultural institutions (McGee & Warms, 2008, p. 204). He compared studying

culture with studying a patient's neurotic symptoms. Freud's ideas were mainly evolutionary and therefore rejected by many anthropologists, because notions about evolutionary ideas in anthropology had already changed and been criticized among others. Although Freud's evolutionary ideas did not have many supporters, anthropologists did have an interest in his notion about the relationship between the individual and its culture. Psychoanalysis became an important tool for understanding the "psyche" of institutions (McGee & Warms, 2008, p. 205).

It was through psychoanalysis that the idea of a basic personality structure was advanced (Barnard & Spencer, 2002, p. 143). The idea of the existence of institutions that shaped the causal relationship between culture and personality thus arose. A distinction was drawn between primary institutions – which shaped the basic personality structure, and secondary institutions, which were products of basic personality structure. Primary institutions included social organizations, technology and child rearing activities and were the product of adaptation to environment. In the adaptation process itself, someone unconsciously developed a set of conflicts and anxieties that were expressed in projective systems (Barnard & Spencer, 2002, p. 144).

So it is clear that the Culture and Personality School is both a mixture of and a reaction to a number of important scientific currents. It was a reaction to evolutionary thinking and heavily influenced by psychoanalysis and Gestalt Psychology. In order to better understand the Culture and Personality School, the next section of this paper will discuss its central characteristics.

### **Features of the culture and personality school**

One of the central ideas of the Culture and Personality School is, as the name suggests, that each culture promotes a distinct personality type. In fact Ruth Benedict, one of the leading figures of the School, coined the expression "culture is personality writ large" (Barrett, 2009, p. 59). Benedict suggested that there is a consistency between the culture you grow up in and the emotions you feel. Every culture was thought to be unique, creating its own personality type (Barrett, 2009). The notion that each culture has a unique pattern is called a "cultural configuration." The fundamental personality characteristics of the people who grow up in this culture are determined by this cultural configuration, as Ruth Benedict writes in her book *Patterns of Culture* (McGee & Warms, 2008).

It is important to note that "a cultural configuration" is not merely the expression of the relationship between a set of things and behaviors, but also the expression of the underlying ideas, values and mores that characterize a certain society or culture (Moore, 1997, p. 82).

Benedict's notion of cultural configuration was largely accepted by other Culture and Personality theorists. However Benedict failed to provide an explanation of why a culture or the people that grow up in a culture have certain personality traits or of how these personality traits are passed on from one generation to the next. This is why other theorists started focusing on discovering the sources of cultural configuration and on addressing the questions Benedict left unanswered. Their investigations were centered on the interdependence of biological and cultural factors (McGee & Warms, 2008).

One of these theorists was Margaret Mead, a student of both Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict (Barrett, 2009). Mead focused mainly on Freud's notion that child-rearing practices exert a decisive effect on the personality one has as an adult. In three of her studies, she attempted to separate the biological and cultural factors that control human behavior and personality development (Barnard & Spencer, 2002; McGee & Warms, 2008, p. 206): *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), which focused on adolescence; *Growing up in New Guinea* (1930), to which socialization is central, and *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive*

*Societies* (1935), which focused on the relationship between sex roles and temperament. Mead made many comparisons between the people she studied and Americans, and her work was intended as a critique of American culture (Barnard & Spencer, 2002; McGee & Warms, 2008).

Another theorist who was inspired by the work of Sigmund Freud is the psychoanalyst Abram Kardiner, who worked together with several anthropologists. Kardiner criticized the configurational approach for being too broad and vague (Barnard & Spencer, 2002, p. 143). He contended that normal members of a society share a set of fundamental personality traits, which he called the *basic personality structure*. Kardiner's argument is based on the concept of *primary institutions* (e.g. certain child-rearing practices, like disciplining and toilet training, that are generally standardized within a society). Other examples of primary institutions are social organization and technology. Kardiner argues that these primary institutions constitute the basic influence on human personality. The product of these primary institutions is a personality that is similar among all members of a certain society, since these primary institutions are generally standard within a given society. Primary institutions thus shape the basic personality structure of a certain society. The basic personality structure, in turn, produces *secondary institutions*. While primary institutions are seen as a given, secondary institutions are produced in the process of shaping the basic personality structure. Primary institutions can be in conflict with one another, leading to shared, unconscious conflicts and anxieties within a society. Secondary institutions help members of a society to deal with these conflicts and anxieties, for example in ritual, religion or folk tales (Barnard & Spencer, 2002; Barret, 2009; McGee & Warms, 2008).

Kardiner's theory could not, however, explain the variation in personalities which are found in every society, regardless of its size. To resolve this problem, Du Bois, one of the anthropologists who collaborated with Kardiner, introduced the *modal personality*. The modal personality is the personality type that is statistically the most common in a certain society. Du Bois agreed with Kardiner's notion that primary institutions lead to the formation of a basic set of personality characteristics. She did recognize, however, that each person's personality is developed and expressed in a unique way, leading to variation in personalities within a society (McGee & Warms, 2008).

### **The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture**

Several ethnographies have been written by those associated with the Culture and Personality School, including Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (1946). This particular ethnography is a *national character study* (McGee & Warms, 2008). The book represents Benedict's methodological and theoretical contribution to the Culture and Personality School (Smith, 1980). The title of the book highlights one of the many contradictions found in Japanese culture: "When [a serious observer] writes a book on a nation with a popular cult of aestheticism which gives high honor to actors and to artists and lavishes art upon the cultivation of chrysanthemums, that book does not ordinarily have to be supplemented by another which is devoted to the cult of the sword and the top prestige of the warrior." (Benedict, 1946, p. 2).

The title is ironic, however, and Benedict did note that once she began her study of the Japanese, many contradictions quickly evaporated. She came to see how these seemingly contradictory behaviors actually are logical components of an integrated whole (Benedict, 1946).

Benedict was assigned by the US government to do a study of Japan in June 1944, so the United States of America could have a better understanding of the Japanese and thus could predict the outcome of and responses to their actions in the war. The US government also wanted to "understand Japanese habits of thought and emotion and the patterns into

which these habits fell. [They] had to know the sanctions behind these actions and opinions.” (Benedict, 1946, p. 3). Benedict notes that the fact that the United States was at war with Japan was a barrier for her work as a cultural anthropologist. She could not simply visit Japan and thus had to rely on written work, Japanese movies, Western informants who had lived in Japan and Japanese informants who had been raised in Japan but were at the time living in the United States (Benedict, 1946).

Aspects of the Culture and Personality theory, especially the aspects discussed in *Patterns of Culture*, are clearly seen in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. Benedict notes in the book’s first chapter that human behavior is learned in the process of daily living and that the way someone thinks and feels has some relation to his or her experience, no matter how bizarre the act or opinion may seem to an observer. She also declares that, as a cultural anthropologist, she “started from the premise that the most isolated bits of behavior have some systematic relation to each other. [She] took seriously the way hundreds of details fall into over-all patterns.” (Benedict, 1946, p. 8). She thus acknowledges that different aspects of society (e.g. politics, economics, religious rites and family arrangements) mutually influence one another. The book also focusses on the comparison of Japanese and Western culture, describing the cultural patterns that underlie the conduct of life. Benedict describes the ways that the different cultures look upon concepts such as law and how self-respect is gained (Bogardus, 1946). She also focusses on the different values that are attached to phenomena such as self-sacrifice, competition, and righteousness, and how pleasure, virtue and, self-discipline emerge from such notions (Bogardus, 1946; Hoijer, 1947). Benedict describes these patterns using her notion of “cultural configuration” (Smith, 1980).

*The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* was enthusiastically received when it was first published in 1946, and positive reviews have been published far more recently (e.g. on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the book’s original publication). Hoijer, for example, writes: “In *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, her deserved reputation for clear thinking, sound knowledge, and careful research is ably upheld.” (1947, p. 108). It has, however, been criticized by both American and Japanese scholars (McGee & Warms, 2008, p. 208). Bennett and Nagai (1953), for example, summarize Japanese criticism on Benedict. First of all, Benedict has been criticized for not defining “Japanese” or the general concept of “culture” clearly. A very important criticism is that she did not use empirical data. She used only secondary data, which is understandable in the context in which she did her research, but which nonetheless limits the legitimacy of her research. Scholars also point to the fact that it is necessary to analyze differences within Japanese culture. Behavior among the Japanese differs, as people from different regions, ages, social strata, occupation, et cetera all behave differently. Benedict has not taken these differences into account. Furthermore, Japanese culture changes over time. Finally, some of the scholars on which Bennett and Nagai’s work is based state that an undertaking such as Benedict’s requires an interdisciplinary approach. Research on a whole nation requires many small-scale research studies on different aspects of Japanese society, in order to paint a picture of Japan as a whole (Bennett and Nagai, 1953). In addition to criticism of Benedict’s work in particular, criticism of the Culture and Personality School as a whole has been presented. This will be discussed in the following section.

### **Criticism on the Culture and Personality School**

An important criticism of the Culture and Personality School is that its assumptions require empirical investigation, which has not always been conducted. One example of this is the notion that every culture has a certain personality type. One would have to observe different people in the same society to determine their personalities and to decide whether these are the same. Even the later modifications of that notion (i.e. Kardiner’s basic personality structure and Du Bois’ modal personality) require empirical evidence. Yet no such evidence has ever

been provided. Another example is the assumption that childhood experience determines adult personality. One would have to perform longitudinal studies on the same persons throughout their lives to determine whether and to what extent this assumption is true (Barnard & Spencer, 2002). The Culture and Personality School is thus vulnerable to the charge of making generalizations which cannot and should not be made (Barrett, 2009).

Benedict in particular was criticized for using the information she obtained selectively, ignoring certain aspects of culture which did not fit her model of cultural configuration (McGee & Warms, p. 207). But perhaps the most famous criticism of the Culture and Personality School was Freeman's critique of Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*. In 1983, Freeman published *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*. Mead argued that adolescence in Samoa was free of tension, unlike in America. Freeman, however, claimed that her work was factually incorrect, and that her informants had lied to her. Mead and Freeman had differing theoretical perspectives, as Mead's starting point was culture, while Freeman's was sociobiology. This leads to their different arguments and the prolonged ensuing debate (McGee & Warms, 2008; Barrett, 2009). A lot has been written about the controversy, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe the entire debate.

Barnard and Spencer (2002, p. 144) include a citation in their work that identifies an important problem in Culture and Personality theory:

"Perhaps the most telling criticism came from within the culture and personality school itself. Melford E. Spiro ... argued that the school had failed to clarify its two central concepts, and that most culture and personality work was necessarily circular because 'the development of personality and the acquisition of culture are one and the same process' ... Instead of seeking causal relationships between personality and culture, we should try to overcome the 'false dichotomy' that separates them into mutually exclusive categories". (Bock, 1990: 10)

It is important to note that not only the criticism described in the quotation above, but most criticism on the Culture and Personality School, came from within the school itself. This is the reason the school has developed the way that it has. Kardiner's notion of the basic personality structure, for example, could not account for variation in personality within a society. Du Bois' modal personality originated from this criticism of Kardiner's notion. This has led the Culture and Personality School to evolve further, before it eventually disappeared.

There are many examples of this in the Culture and Personality School, and the attentive reader can find a lot of them in this paper. Another prominent criticism of the Culture and Personality School, its characterization as a "school," will be addressed in the following section.

### **Is "school" an appropriate characterization?**

The name "Culture and Personality School" leads people to think that it represents a coherent point of view shared by prominent practitioners of anthropology, but according to LeVine (2001) this is nothing more than a myth. One of his arguments is that the field of Culture and Personality was divided from the beginning and it did not have one standardized point of view, single leader, its own training program or its own teaching or research centers (LeVine, 2001, p. 808). It can rather be seen, according to these critics, as a field of research in which several scholars are bringing their ideas about culture and perspectives on culture and psychological data together. All theorists embracing this view must agree upon the following three statements: All of a person's behavior is shaped by cultural patterns; one's

childhood experiences greatly influence adult personality; dominant adult personalities in a society also influence culture.

Before a conclusion will be drawn, a number of other features of a “school” must be discussed. According to Bart van Heerikhuizen, a central feature of a school is that there is one masterpiece in particular and one work that can explain the exact characteristics and rules of research of a certain school (Westerbeek, personal communication, May 2013). When applied to the Culture and Personality School, it is clear that there is not one work which serves as a model in terms of either form of substance. Of course, there is no lack of masterpieces coming out of Culture and Personality School, such as *Patterns of Culture* and *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* both written by Ruth Benedict; and *Coming of Age in Samoa* written by Margaret Mead in which she explores the relationship among the configuration of culture, socialization, and the individual. Besides these works and figures, there are a lot of other key figures who have written influential works that reflect the discourse of the Culture and Personality School.

Heerikhuizen also states that a school must have a charismatic leader able to answer all the questions about the school. As previously indicated, the Culture and Personality School does have a lot of key figures, but none of them can be seen as the leading figure. All are able to explain certain topics, but all of them have slightly different points of view that are reflected in the way that they address questions. Both Heerikhuizen and LeVine (2001) state that a school must have a physical space in which people can meet, interact, and work. According to LeVine (2001) there was no such thing as a physical space for all Culture and Personality researchers.

So after all these arguments, one can only conclude that the Culture and Personality School was not a school after all and according to Heerikhuizen (Westerbeek, personal communication, May 2013) this may not necessarily be a tragedy. A school would be a place for a select group of people with very similar ideas. Members of a school are often hostile to those outside their school. The one characteristic of a school that the Culture and Personality School can be said to have is that it began and ended producing works during a certain period and then, after a time of further evolving, gradually lost force.

## Conclusion

We have seen how the Culture and Personality School developed over time, what its central features are, and how it has been criticized. We have also addressed the question of whether it can legitimately be called a “school.” But we left an important question unanswered: how is the Culture and Personality School regarded nowadays? The Culture and Personality School as a whole is no longer relevant in contemporary Anthropological Theory, but several anthropologists still find inspiration in some of the ideas presented in the Culture and Personality School. This may seem contradictory, but actually is not. Heerikhuizen states that schools are very stimulating and positive moments in the history of their discipline. However, they have a beginning and an ending. When the school has ended, one can only hope that those ideas that are valuable will be included in the general theory of the discipline (Westerbeek, personal communication, May 2013).

Several people have written about the enduring influence the Culture and Personality School has had and still has on anthropology. Shannon, for example, argues that the rise of multiculturalism has led to a new interest in Benedict’s work, especially her *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. The broader anti-Cold War rhetoric of tolerance and pluralism that are so deeply indebted to that work are being rehabilitated, thus connecting anti-Cold War intellectuals to contemporary multiculturalists (Shannon, 1995, p. 660). Not only anthropologists, but the public at large has found great inspiration in the Culture and Personality School. The works of both Benedict and Mead were and still are extremely



popular (McGee & Warms). We can thus conclude that the Culture and Personality School as a whole has ended, but some of the ideas presented in it have been and can still be an inspiration for new Anthropological theory.

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