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Culture as a Psycho-Social Process*

Social psychology is the intervening discipline between general psychology and general sociology. Its function is to enable the social and psychological fields to become related to each other. For this purpose it requires a concept of culture as a psycho-social process.

The psychologist begins with people whether as individuals or as members of particular groups. Since, however, individuals and groups exist in a society, he or she is obliged to follow them through into the institutional systems in which they take roles and make relationships. On the sociological side, the anthropologist in particular follows the opposite course, being concerned first with social structure, as otherwise there would be no institutional framework in which to place the people to be described. This determines the methods used, apart altogether from decisions subsequently made regarding the sociological or psychological emphasis of interests.

At the time that the original version of this paper was prepared I was engaged in the first phase of an action-research program focussing on methods of work organization at the coal face (Trist and Bamforth, 1951). This experience forced me to combine a psychological with a sociological approach. Elliott Jaques had to do the same in the Glacier project, which he was carrying out in parallel and which involved learning about group processes at all levels of the organization as they were occurring (Jaques, 1951). It is my contention that action research, which expresses the social engagement of social science, compels the research worker to make interdisciplinary combinations in order to understand the many-sided real-life situations being dealt with. These processes operate dynamically through time. To proceed with field projects I needed a concept such as culture as a psycho-social process to act as the medium through which I could bring together the sociological and psychological phenomena I was encountering. They can be separated only by abstracting them from their event contexts when they become static categories.

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The two projects mentioned drew attention to the way in which psychological forces, unconscious as well as conscious, at the level of the group and of the individual, interacted with structural forces to bring into existence a concrete "field" with a dynamic pattern which is specific for a given social situation, even though it may have wider implications. The aim of action research is to understand such dynamic patterns. To gain such an understanding is impossible with either psychological or sociological concepts alone. The social scientist is forced by the nature of such data to search for concepts that will enable psychological and sociological constructs to be brought into effective communication.

For a considerable number of years the concept of culture had been moving into a position where it could function as the middle and intervening term. It was well set on this course in the inter-war period when Edward Sapir's (1927) interest in the impact of culture on personality exercised a major influence. The even earlier work of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918/1920) on *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* exercised a strong effect in the same direction. The concept of attitudes as task-set, which had grown up in general psychology, was re-inforced by the sociological insights of these workers. A concept of social attitudes emerged which gave defined psychological content to social norms. The usefulness of the concept of social attitudes, however, was limited by its segmental character. It was unable, externally, to make comprehensive reference to the structure of social systems or, internally, to reach down to emotional phenomena at the deeper levels of personality. The concept of culture has no such disadvantage and may be used in relation to all phenomena of a type to be referred to as psycho-social processes.

Historically, there have been two major conceptual schemes in the human sciences: that of the psycho-physical system, or organism, and that of social structure, or the institutional system. The first of these is non-social and is concerned with the relationship of psychological processes, externally to the stimulus-field of the physical environment and, internally to the physiological environment of the organism. Examples of psycho-physical constructs are those of configuration in gestalt psychology, with such corollaries as the law of prägnanz and the principle of closure; retroactive inhibition in learning; and libido theory in psychoanalysis. The second frame of reference is non-psychological and is concerned with social process for its own sake. Externally, social systems may be related to the physical environment in the ecological sense, but internally to real people only in terms of the institutional roles taken by persons and groups in social structures.

The concept of the psycho-social organism or, more generally, of psycho-social systems, is proposed as a third frame of reference to focus research on processes whose distinctive character is that of being psychological and social at the same time. It is to this frame of reference that the concept of culture will

be ordered. The function of culture as a psycho-social process is to permit the psycho-physical organism to operate socially and the institutional structure to operate psychologically. Some of the properties and varieties of cultural phenomena will now be outlined.

Empirically, it may be shown that the process character of cultural phenomena as psycho-social is genuinely distinctive in that more is in question than a mere admixture of psychological and social factors. A number of such processes have been investigated. The work of the late Sir Frederic Bartlett (1932) on the social fashioning of memory schemata may be regarded as having provided the first experimental demonstration. In field theory terms, psycho-social processes are resultant compounds in which the psychological component attains social existence while the social component attains psychological existence.

As regards function, cultural phenomena may be viewed as having the status of techniques in the dimension of means/ends relations. In this perspective culture may be seen as the instrumental aspect of social life as distinct from the structural. An example would be ritual. But means frequently become ends as substitutive goals become established; and ends, once immediate, often become incidental to the pursuit of remoter goals. With such phenomena learning theory has long made us familiar. The practice of culture tends to enlarge the scope, increase the differentiation and change the direction of social objectives, and in so doing modifies in some measure the social structure in which it operates.

To be included under techniques are not only skills in the manual or cognitive sense but customs, attitudes and systems of strategy and tactics of an emotional order, used wittingly and unwittingly in making inter-personal and inter-group relations. They deal with social objects of all types—good, bad and mixed—with varying degrees of success. Many such phenomena appear as defense mechanisms against anxiety. But anxiety is a psycho-physical rather than a psycho-social concept. Recent developments in psychoanalysis have shown how defense mechanisms may also be seen in a psycho-social perspective as techniques of “object-relations” (A. Freud, 1946; Klein, 1948; Fairbairn, 1952). Certain of these techniques may pervade groups in given environmental situations—as in the hospitals described by Menzies (1960; Vol. I, “Social Systems as a Defense Against Anxiety”).

With regard to content, a distinction may be made between cultural objects and cultural patterns. Cultural objects are artifacts of all kinds, whether technological, utilitarian, sacred or aesthetic. They are behavioral products determined by cultural patterns. They are external to the individual and are experienced as non-psychological. They include written language and documents; all representational and recording systems; and all technologies when ordered to the psycho-social organism. They correspond to the quasi-conceptual, quasi-