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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.

*Based on a paper contributed to the Symposium on the Concept of Culture arranged by the Anthropological Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1950). Apart from a synopsis in the *Proceedings*, it has not been previously published. A few later references have been added and a few minor changes made in the text which was lost for many years and only came to light when the present volume was being prepared.

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-

social and quasi-physical facts of Lewin's life-space (Lewin, 1935; 1936). They constitute the material on which the archaeologist and culture historian are accustomed to work. They encompass the simple tools of pre-literate peoples and the complex systems of the modern engineer or computer expert.

As regards cultural patterns, one large class may be defined to include all cultural patterns with primary external reference. These include all forms of knowledge and skill, spoken language, beliefs, codes of morals and manners, values, prejudices and social attitudes, as these are carried by the individual. All cultural patterns are internal in the sense of being located in the person. Those listed, however, refer directly to external social objects and are regarded by the individual as his psychological possessions rather than as himself. By this is meant that they exist within him as material which he can use, of which he is partly aware, and which he is able to make available to himself by the normal processes of recall. Awareness tends to be of content rather than of structure; the "grammars" remain intuitive and are left for the social scientist to "write."

But there are also cultural patterns with primary internal reference. These patterns refer to unconscious internal objects in the psychoanalytic sense and compose the basic social character of the individual. He regards them as part of himself and they are usually so regarded by others. Beyond a certain point of perception their social configuration becomes lost. They appear merely as personal idiosyncrasies or as universal qualities. They act as an internal source of influence on the patterns at a more conscious level and reach into society through them. They may also be directly, though still unconsciously, projected onto various types of external social objects which themselves are then partly fashioned by these investments. Topics of this kind have been investigated in many studies. Notable are those of H.V. Dicks (1950; Vol. I, "Notes on the Russian National Character") on the relationship between Nazi ideology and character traits. The corroboration of his findings by the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950) has suggested that the concepts of social and, indeed, national character are not the fictions they had been supposed to be.

From the psycho-physical point of view cultural patterns can be said to exist at all levels of consciousness. But while consciousness (or unconsciousness) is a property of the psycho-physical organism, the phantasy activity of the internal world is a psycho-social process (Isaacs, 1952). Cultural patterns related to the deeper character level derive from the phantasy activity of unconscious systems of internal object-relations. This phantasy activity is the basic process of "culture" within the individual, founded as one is on the activities of the living "internal society" composed by these object-relations. Beyond studies which draw on psychoanalysis are those which emanate from Jung (1934-1954) which postulate that the individual carries a collective

unconscious containing archetypes of a psycho-social character. These have been used by such writers as Joseph Campbell (1959–1968) to explain the structure and function of myths in both Eastern and Western societies.

Socialization may be taken up from the point of view of the degree of universality in the distribution of given cultural patterns in groups of various sizes, as these are organized in terms of institutional systems. The wider the distribution, the more forcibly do structural factors come into play—and produce standardization (norms). In field theory terms, this would be regarded as the induction of group standards through the power-field of the institutionalized group. From the standpoint of developmental psychology the early phases of socialization are seen as involving the internalization of social norms and values. They are part of the frustrating necessity of having to grow up in a particular family, which exemplifies in its own way the kinship system of a given society. It has to learn to manage this situation in terms of the culture of this society—as this has come to exist in them as one group of interacting individuals.

But it must be remembered that, on the Rorschach for example, an “original” response is one pole of the same continuum of which a “popular” response is the opposite. Some degree of variation always remains from the fact of the internal location of culture, which means that it is continually being re-vamped in personality terms. Always, the actual existence of culture is in personal versions (Sapir, 1927), however close such versions may be to each other. It is this personal quality that allows culture to impart vitality to a society and the culture-carrying individual to function as an agent of social change.

Cultural patterns operate socially only in concrete situations where inter-personal and inter-group relations are actually taking place. Here, we may distinguish autistic behavior as an exclusively intra-personal function, from social behavior involving inter-personal and inter-group relations.

There is evidence from work on groups that new and different forces begin to operate when the two-person situation is changed to that of the small face-to-face group. The work of Bion (1961), with his theory of “basic assumptions” has pioneered this area. The different approach of S.H. Foulkes (1964) similarly attests to the existence of a level of group behavior over and above that of the component individuals. Lewin’s (1951) work on group decision-making during World War II showed still another way of attesting to the reality of the group level.

As group studies develop with larger social units it is likely that still other forces will come into focus. Political processes arise at the level of inter-group relations (Higgin and Bridger, 1964; Vol. I, “The Psycho-Dynamics of an Inter-Group Experience”). Dangerous processes of regression appear in the large face-to-face group (Turquet, 1975; Main, 1975). There is grave fallacy in proceeding in one jump from personality to society. Psychologically, it is in the

area between small social units and the larger society that our knowledge is least developed (Crozier, 1974; Trist, 1977).

Beyond the large face-to-face group a wide range of communications media influence personal attitudes and social behavior. They may act as variety attenuators (Beer, 1979), and agents of distortion as well as extending the range of information available to the individual. One may begin to think of an order of social magnitude: the person; the pair; the triad; the double pair; the singular group; the multiple group; the singular organization; the multiple organization; the singular community; the multiple community; the total society; transnational social orders. It seems likely that at each step there will be changes in quality as well as quantity in the processes which occur though there will be many continuants.

Perhaps enough has been said to illustrate the usefulness of a concept of culture which regards cultural phenomena as consisting of a variety of psycho-social patterns which persons and groups actively operate in order to take roles and make relationships in the institutionalized social systems of their society. These societal systems have an objective, impersonal reality which is independent of the individual himself. From the point of view of sociology they are non-psychological. The social environment also contains the various sets of behavioral products which have been called cultural objects. These include all the technologies of material culture; they, like institutions, are experienced as non-psychological. But, without psycho-social patterns which individuals themselves carry, they would be quite unable to operate socially the psycho-physical systems on which they are founded as biological organisms, while the institutions of society and its heritage of "products" would exercise no effect on behavior.

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