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Culture, Personality and Prejudice

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The culture and personality approach emerged in the first half of the twenty­tieth century as an ambitious attempt to understand the nexus between individual psychologies and their sociocultural contexts. While the approach produced some enormously influential work, such as Margaret Mead’s classic studies of gender, by the 1960s the field of culture and personality had essentially come to an end. There were a number of reasons for this. Most fundamentally perhaps, as the first chapter in this volume suggests, the conceptual and methodological tools available at the time were far too primitive for such an ambitious task.

In this chapter I will argue that important conceptual and empirical advances have occurred in the latter half of this century that now make this enterprise feasible. Two developments have been particularly important, with both enabling critical conceptual linkages between individual and sociocultural context. First was the development within psychology of the concept of cognitive schema to describe how individuals represent knowledge in order to perceive, interpret and respond to the world, and its extension by psychological anthropologists (D’Andrade, 1992; Ross, 1993; Strauss, 1993) to that of cultural goal schema, or the cultural worldview, through which culturally derived interpretations of social reality generate shared motivational goals and responses.

The second important advance occurred in crosscultural psychology. It consisted of the elucidation and measurement of basic sociocultural value and attitude dimensions that differentiate cultures, and the demonstration that essentially similar dimensions differentiate individuals within cultures as well (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 1996; Triandis, 1996). In this chapter I will show how these two developments enable linkages between cultural systems and their individual members, which cast new light on the sociocultural bases of social and collective behavior: in particular of conflict, prejudice and ethnocentrism.
The authoritarian personality

One of the culture and personality approach's most ambitious and flawed undertakings was the attempt to explain the emergence of Nazism in Europe after World War I, its virulent anti-semitism, and culmination in genocide and world war. Wilhelm Reich (1975) and Erich Fromm (1941) sketched in broad outline links between authoritarian societies, their family structure and socialization patterns, and an authoritarian personality structure. Their emphasis on the social and cultural dimension was embedded in a frank critique of capitalist culture and society.

In 1950 this approach was empirically developed and theoretically elaborated into the theory of the authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson and Sanford, 1950): an ambitious attempt to elucidate the psychological bases of ethnocentrism, generalized prejudice and fascism. These phenomena were seen as rooted in a particular complex of social attitudes, measured by the F-scale, and an underlying personality structure, which itself sprang from a particular family structure and kind of childhood socialization. However, the approach had already been narrowed. Influenced by the political, empirical and epistemological zeitgeist of America at the time, the theory now focused almost entirely on individual attitudes and personality, and their relation to family and socialization. The role of culture and society was, as Samelson (1993) has noted, 'passed over quickly in the introduction to disappear from sight afterward' (p. 36).

Initially the theory of the authoritarian personality attracted enormous interest, but by the early 1960s it had collapsed completely under the weight of its numerous weaknesses. Particularly critical in this respect were the psychometric flaws of the F-scale, which largely derived from its lack of reliability and unidimensionality when acquiescent bias due to the all positive formulation of its items was controlled. As Altemeyer (1981) later showed, it appeared to be measuring several poorly related factors, and this was reflected in weak and inconsistent correlations with important validity criteria of authoritarianism.

Finally, in the early 1960s there was a marked shift in the prevailing zeitgeist: away from explanations of prejudice in terms of personality towards explanations in terms of culture and society. The explanatory problem that now preoccupied social scientists was that of explaining prejudice in the American South and South Africa, where prejudice, as Pettigrew (1958) argued, seemed to be culturally and socially determined. Thus, a complete reversal had occurred from the 1950s when culture and society were ignored and prejudice explained in terms of personality, to the 1960s when personality based explanations were dismissed as inadequate. The original insight that both culture, society and personality could be dynamically interwoven and operate together to influence prejudice and ethnocentrism had been completely lost.