

Learning in Culture: Anthropological Perspective

Skill in cultural analysis makes possible the identification of significant cultural influences on the conditions of learning. Such identification should aid in predicting consequences for various courses of educational action.

ANTHROPOLOGISTS cannot be said to have a theory of learning of their own. They borrow and apply concepts from behavioristic approaches in psychology, from theories of learning, from social psychology, and particularly from psychoanalysis.¹ This has made anthropological perspectives on learning somewhat less than systematic, but it has kept them flexible.

Until the influence of Edward Sapir, then Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, was felt in anthropology during the 'thirties, anthropologists were almost exclusively concerned with the patterned *results* of learning; the kinds of houses built, the customs about clothing, the adult use of language, and so forth, and including the patterning of ideas and attitudes in people's minds. The majority of anthropologists still are concerned with these results. Anthropological research problems, field studies, writings

¹ For reviews of relations between anthropology and psychology, or psychiatry, see Clyde Kluckhohn, "The Influence of Psychiatry on Anthropology in America During the Past 100 Years," in *One Hundred Years of American Psychiatry*, New York: Columbia University, 1944; and A. I. Hallowell, "Psychology and Anthropology," in *For a Science of Social Man*, John Gillin, editor, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954.

are concerned mainly with social, political, economic, and religious systems, their inter-relationships within societies, and the comparison of these from society to society.

Even in the study of how these systems change as a result of contact between societies, invention, diffusion of new cultural forms, or in adaptation to sweeping changes in the conditions of existence, the majority of anthropologists do not involve themselves with psychological problems of any sort, much less with learning.

But as a result of the influence of Sapir, Mead, Benedict, and many others, a "personality-in-culture," or "ethnopsychology" group developed in anthropology. The popularity of this field was extremely high from about 1940 to 1952, but has declined considerably since then. There is evidence, however, that the influence of the psychologically oriented work of this group on the whole of anthropology has been great, and is today represented in various implicit and subtle ways, as well as in the explicit approaches, techniques, and interpretations in research.

It should be clear that no more than a minority of anthropologists have ever been concerned about psychological

processes in their studies. But even the minority—the “personality in culture” group—who did acknowledge the relevance of such processes to their interests were not all concerned with learning. Many were, and are, more interested in how a personality type represented with high frequency (usually called “modal personality”) within a particular society fits in with (is “functional” with) the demands placed upon people by economic and social systems, than in how this personality type comes into being in individual development.²

Anthropological Viewpoint

This all means that there is no specifically anthropological conception of learning, or of how it occurs. But there is something to be said about learning from an anthropological point of view. When an anthropologist does concern himself with learning he is likely to start with some assumptions, and proceed to draw some inferences, that psychologists dealing with the same processes would not.

The most determinant assumption with which an anthropologist is likely to start is that virtually all human learning occurs in a culturally influenced, if not culturally created environment. This is at the same time a very profound and a virtually meaningless statement. To make it more the former than the latter for our purposes, permit me to discuss an example provided by Dorothy Eggan, an anthropologist who has studied with the Hopi Indians of the southwest.

One of her hypotheses is of particular

² The study of the psychological supports for social structures is among the most interesting to anthropologists with psychological leanings today. For an early and general statement of this kind of interest by a social philosopher, see Erich Fromm, “Psychoanalytic Characterology and Its Application to the Understanding of Culture,” in S. Sargent, editor, *Culture and Personality*, New York: Viking Fund, 1949.

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interest to us here: “That the Hopi, as contrasted with ourselves, were experts in the use of affect in their educational system, and that this element continued to operate throughout the entire life span of each individual as a *reconditioning* factor.”³ She describes how instruction went on, running through all activity “like a connecting thread,” “. . . children . . . learned what it meant to be a good Hopi from a wide variety of determined teachers who had very definite—and mutually *consistent*—ideas of what a good Hopi is.”⁴ There was, it is clear from her further description, reinforcement of desired learning in various situations, at different times, and at the hands of many people, and all of this reinforcement was patterned in Hopi terms.

What makes her analysis particularly interesting as an example, however, is that she is not satisfied with merely showing that Hopi children become Hopi adults because their learning to be Hopi is reinforced at every turn. She also shows how Hopi children “learn” to want to be good Hopi—to live and want to live by the Hopi ideal and conscience, the Hopi “Good Heart.” She points out that in one sense the weaning of a Hopi child from its biological mother starts from the day of his birth. There are many “arms to give him comfort,” many faces to smile at him, and the breast of his mother’s mother or mother’s sister if he cries for food in his mother’s absence. The Hopi family and household is such

³ Dorothy Eggan, “Instruction and Affect in Hopi Cultural Continuity,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 12:350. Winter 1956.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

that relatives of many ages and both sexes are always near. So while the Hopi child is being weaned from the breast of his mother, his emotional dependence upon the Hopi in-group is developing—his loyalties and his sources of satisfaction are extending from one person to many people, and they are all Hopi.

This contrasts to the situation in our society, as Mrs. Eggan points out. With us the training for *independence* starts at birth. "We sleep alone; we are immediately and increasingly in a world of comparative strangers. A variety of nurses, doctors, relatives, sitters, and teachers, march through our lives in a never-ending procession. A few become friends, but *compared with a Hopi child's experiences*, the impersonality and lack of emotional relatedness to so many kinds of people with such widely different backgrounds is startling. Indeed, the disparity of the relationships as such is so great that a continuity of emotional response is impossible, and so we learn to look for emotional satisfaction in change, which in itself becomes a value."⁵

She returns to the theme of reinforcement, and shows us how a Hopi child is given a dramatic shove towards adulthood during certain pre-pubertal initiation ceremonies. The social and psychological relationships activated here are too complex and subtle for summary. Suffice it to say that Hopi children at about age nine are shocked by the revelation that certain beings they have heretofore regarded literally as Gods are really men—and close relatives at that. But given the preconditioning of Hopi learning-in-culture, the initiation experience threatens a child's conscious beliefs at first, but then causes him to gain security by an even firmer internalization of in-group norms and values. And further, children

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

who have been through the experience now feel grown-up and responsible for maintaining the Hopi Way and living by the Good Heart.

Even from this brief summary it should be clear that learning to become a Hopi must involve the same general psychological learning mechanisms as learning to be a middle-class American, or for that matter, a Zulu, Puka-Pukan, or upper-class Egyptian, but that the content acquired in this learning, the way it is put together and with what motivations, is highly influenced by the Hopi's, American's, or Zulu's cultural heritage.

The validity of this generalization seems reduced somewhat by the fact that the American society is not culturally homogeneous, even within a single social class within a single community. Each small family group, in one sense, has a "subculture" of its own, and because our family groups tend to be comparatively isolated from each other a child may be decisively influenced by this subculture. On the other hand, family privacy and separateness is a part of our cultural pattern. We assume that every young couple will want to strike out on its own and establish its own home, preferably some distance from "in-laws." The variation in familial influences in our society may therefore be seen, at least in part, as the result of a culture pattern in itself.

Or if we consider an area of behavior such as the treatment of nudity within the home, we may find that American families, even within the middle-class, vary considerably in the degree to which nudity is allowable, or under certain conditions, encouraged. But the anthropologist would want to know to what extent people in middle-class society may be reacting to a traditional Anglo-Saxon cultural sanction against nudity, *even when*

they support or approve of it. One suspects that parents who believe strongly that their children should see each other, and the parents, in the nude, and that parents who believe this should be avoided if possible, may actually be communicating *the same cultural concern with nudity to their children.*

The discussion up to this point underlines the basic point of this short article. Although an anthropologist, *as anthropologist*, will usually not have a theory of learning, he will usually be concerned with the cultural context of learning. He will usually be able to identify a cultural component in any significant area of learning in our society, as well as in the more homogeneous, comparatively stable societies with which he has had most experience.⁶

Learning in Schools

When we move to the school as a learning environment we discover new complications, cultural and otherwise. Each child coming to the school represents a slightly, or widely, different culture. This is most apparent when major social class or ethnic differences exist within the school district, but it is true, for reasons already cited, in even the more apparently homogenous populations. But in each classroom there will usually be only one teacher—and this teacher is also a product of culture. The

⁶ For some experiments in this direction, see *Education and Anthropology*, G. Spindler, editor, Stanford University, 1955, particularly the chapters by D. Lee, J. Henry, C. W. M. Hart.

question is—to what extent is the teacher's cultural background similar to, congruent with, or antagonistic to, those backgrounds represented by his students? What avenues to communication are therefore open, or blocked? These questions can be seen as crucial when we realize that the teacher is charged with transmitting selected aspects (curriculum content) of our culture to *all* of the children, and that this teacher must create a receptive learning environment in order for this to happen.⁷

The Hopi teachers are experts (and all Hopi become teachers) at creating a situation receptive to Hopi culture-in-transmission. We have briefly explored some of the ways this is done. But the teacher in our schools faces a more difficult task. Perhaps the task may become more understandable as a cultural point of view becomes more widespread in educational thinking. Skill in cultural analysis, which can be developed in teacher training (both institutional and in-service), makes possible the identification of significant cultural influences on the *conditions* of learning. Such identification should, when coupled with other kinds of knowledge available through psychology and sociology, enhance the prediction of consequences for various courses of educational action.

⁷ This perspective on the teacher and classroom is developed in the Third Burton Lecture in Elementary Education, *The Transmission of American Culture*, by G. D. Spindler, published by the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, 1959.

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