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## Mind, Culture, and Activity

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## Psychological Anthropology

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## Psychological Anthropology

**Psychological Anthropology: A Reader on Self in Culture**, edited by Robert A. LeVine,  
Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 408 pp., \$99.95 (hardcover).

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There have always been strong links between Vygotsky-inspired cultural psychology and psychological anthropology. In the interdisciplinary entanglement between the two areas a new field has formed in which anthropologists find themselves working side by side with psychologists, educationalists, philosophers, linguists, and so on. At the same time, the field of psychological anthropology has experienced a growing crowd of fans both within anthropology and in kindred disciplines. The anthology *Psychological Anthropology: A Reader on Self in Culture* creates new intersection points between the fields while also exposing a need for closer exchange and contact between Vygotsky-inspired psychology and psychological anthropology.

The anthology *Psychological Anthropology: A Reader on Self in Culture* was initiated and edited by Robert A. LeVine, who has been named one of the “great heroes and intellectual emissaries” of psychological anthropology (Shweder, 1999, p. 235). The collection presents a carefully chosen selection of readings spanning more than 90 years of anthropological research and discussions in psychological anthropology, centered in particular on questions of selfhood, personality, and identity. Some texts are now classics in anthropology, like Anne Parsons’s (1964) discussion of the universality of the Oedipus complex; other contributions are unprinted papers presented at seminars and conferences, like Jean Briggs’s delightful description and analysis of the Inuit emotional education of a 3-year-old child.

A discussion of the possible relations between culture and selfhood runs throughout the anthology and its five parts. Part 1 discusses the construction of the paradigm around culture and personality that developed in the United States between 1917 and 1955. LeVine’s call for a reconsideration of the so-called “Culture and Personality” School and his argument for Edward Sapir as one of the invisible pioneers in the field of psychological anthropology is included in this section. In the two subsequent parts, human variations within cultures are discussed in relation to emotions and morality, as well as through psychoanalytic explorations in post-Freudian anthropology. Part 4 explores the concept of internalization and cultural schemas in childhood. Here we find interesting discussions on the contrast between Chinese and American early-childhood socialization.

In Part 5, the self is discussed in relation to rituals, healing practices, gender, and cultural narratives of self in a number of studies of everyday life. In the final part, psychosocial processes and their relation to cultural change and social transformations are discussed.

What is interesting about this anthology is not only what is included but also what is left out of this collection of texts. The work of a number of seminal anthropologists from the field of Vygotsky-inspired psychological culture theory is absent. A few of the authors who directly deal with questions relating to constructions of selves and identities who are missing from the anthology are Ray McDermott, Jean Lave, and Dorothy Holland. Anthropologists like Roy D'Andrade, Ed Hutchins, Brad Shore, Tim Ingold, Maurice Bloch, and one of the most frequently cited anthropologists by psychologists, Gregory Bateson, could also have been included.

Another omission in the anthology is related to the latter part of the title. The absence of classical texts by two important American anthropologists—founding mothers of psychological anthropology, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict—is disappointing. In the introductory chapter by LeVine, a rift in psychological anthropology (which many younger anthropologists may never have heard of) is torn wide open: the conflict between Edward Sapir, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict. And LeVine makes no effort to disguise who he sides with.

Around 1930, these three anthropologists, all students of Franz Boas, founded the school of “Culture and Personality.” After a period of tremendous success in the 1940s, the school went into decline in the 1950s and was largely declared dead by 1960. This was, according to LeVine, mainly due to confusion spread by the two female members of the triangle (Mead was especially blamed for conducting “scandalous” projects at Columbia University; LeVine, 2010, p. 10). The main problem, from LeVine’s perspective, was that Mead and Benedict insisted on culture as “personality writ large.” That is, that culture “imprints” itself on individuals who *become* the character types provide by his or her culture. In Benedict’s (1934) well-known book *Patterns of Culture*, she argued that the cultures of the Kwakiutl, Zuni, and Dobu people form three different personality types. In Mead’s (1928) extremely popular book about Samoan culture, she argued that members of this culture lack sexual anxiety so typical in American society. In her later study of “sex and temperament” in three “primitive” societies, Mead, like Benedict, contrasted the personality types of different people and argued that the differences between them were due to their culture. Sapir opposed his colleagues’ views on culture as “personality writ large” and underlined both individual differences and psychological deviation patterns in cultures. Benedict and Mead’s arguments became famous all over the world, whereas Sapir’s views were known only to his graduate and postdoctoral students at Yale, even though he had been teaching a course on the “psychology of culture” since 1926 (LeVine, 2010, p. 13).

LeVine set out to give Sapir, his views, and his critical questions full redress for the many years of disregard (underscoring that Sapir was never alone in his criticism of Mead and Benedict). LeVine reprints an extract of Sapir’s 1993 lectures under the title *The Psychology of Culture* (Sapir, 2010). In these lectures (which are filled with comments and additions by former students and editors), Sapir raised fundamental questions about the relationship between culture, deviance, and personality. Similar to this previous volume, *Psychological Anthropology: A Reader on Self in Culture* emphasizes individual diversity within culture, and Sapir explicitly makes a distinction between the individual and what he calls the culture of “as-if” psychology. This distinction has never been clear in cultural psychology, Sapir claims. On one hand, we find a statement of the general tendencies or traits characterizing a culture, such as the pattern of “self-help” in the American culture; on the other, we find individuals with certain kinds of behavior related to these

cultural patterns. But when Mead and Benedict attributed psychological traits to *cultures* they blurred this distinction. Strictly speaking, culture in itself has no psychology, Sapir argues, but only what he calls “as-if” psychology. Sapir refers to a set of psychological standards found in each culture guiding members, for example, to determine how much emotion can be expressed in a given situation, and so on. It is this as-if psychology, which belongs to what Sapir calls “the culture itself,” and it is not synonymous with individual personality (Sapir, 2010, p. 24). This position leaves us with the general question: How can “self” be in a culture and how can a culture be something in itself? It is good to be reminded of the basic and unsettled Sapir–Mead–Benedict debate.

Like Sapir, LeVine and many of the contributors in the anthology take an interest in the individual. The anthology lacks the Vygotsky-inspired anthropologists who have been more interested in relations and in what constitutes collectivity. These scholars, in general, do not take for granted that culture is an entity of standards that each individual deals with in his or her own way. In the process of internalisation/inteORIZATION the construction of self and personhood is inseparable from what is learned.

Vygotsky-inspired anthropology does not build a bridge between an individual personality and the culture in “itself”; rather, this tradition explores collective culture as complex patterns of internalized and embodied schemas and practices, which are learned in active engagement with the world (e.g., Holland, 1992; Holland & Cole, 1995; Strauss, 1992). Anthropological studies of self in culture moved from “personal trait[s] to agency” (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 344) a long time ago.

All in all, *Psychological Anthropology: A Reader on Self in Culture* is an interesting collection of texts. I welcome LeVine’s return to basic questions raised by Sapir many years ago, but the anthology does not give a representative picture of the rich field of psychological anthropology and its classical texts. Even if we narrow the field down to the psychological anthropology of self in culture, more contributions by Vygotsky-inspired psychologists are needed to further discussions raised by the Mead–Benedict–Sapir debate.

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