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The Climate for and Status of Cross-Cultural Psychology in the 1960s

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The Climate for and Status of Cross-Cultural Psychology in the 1960s

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My task is that of providing a brief sketch of the pre-history of our subject. My account will not only be condensed, but confined mainly to the area most familiar to me, that is Africa. However, I do believe that the lessons from it are similar to those from elsewhere.

It is sometimes said that our origin goes back to Rivers during the Cambridge Expedition to Torres Strait. However, there followed about fallow 60 years, though this is not to say that nothing happened all that time. During the inter-war years there occurred an extension of the testing movement to non–European cultures, and there were a few other kinds of empirical studies.

As regards the first, from the 1920s onwards IQ and educational testing was carried in the French colonial territories, in South Africa, and on a much smaller scale in British colonies. The chief objective was to assess the educability of the "natives". The findings generally seemed to indicate their mental inferiority.

At that period the 19-century notion that African mental development stops at puberty remained prevalent; astonishingly, it was still peddled in 1953 by a psychiatrist sponsored by WHO. By contrast, already in the 1930s several anthropologists strongly criticized such absurd conclusions based on testing. They had lived with Africans and knew that such notions did not make sense.

A South African educationist declared in 1938 on the basis of tests that Africans were not capable of benefiting of more than primary education. Another South African, the late Simon Biesheuvel, demolished that thesis.

Biesheuvel later became Director of the National Institute of Personnel Research where he encouraged rigorous investigations of African abilities, also employing African researchers.

The other strand during that period consisted of a few experimental and other comparative studies. For example Beveridge in 1935 reported an experiment on "racial differences in phenomenal regression". An interesting piece of work was carried out by Nadel (1937), an anthropologist also trained in psychology. He compared perception and memory in two Nigerian tribes, showing how differences between them could be understood in terms of their respective cultural backgrounds.

At the APA meeting of 1935 a large-scale experimental study of several hundred Liberians was reported. The team tried and discarded tests, experimenting instead using a tachistoscope and other devices. The outcome was hardly exciting: sex and age differences were found.

This brings me to another development in America that should be mentioned: it was the foundation in 1930 of the Journal of Social Psychology which had as its subtitle "political, racial, and differential psychology". It had a remarkable editorial board, comprising many international luminaries such as Franz Boas, Lucien Levi-Bruhl, Bertrand Russell, and Edward Sapir. From time to time studies relevant to culture appeared there; for instance, papers on "racial differences in linear perspective", or "color preferences of Chinese students (in China !) ". While at the outset the journal was highly prestigious, it later suffered a relative decline; but it played a significant role in the emergence of our field, as I shall show later.

As might be expected, little happened during and in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, though it is worth noting that psychological anthropology began to take off at that time. In the 1950s testing resumed and expanded in the French territories. That work was mainly concerned with applied problems of education and industry, and as such a good deal of it was funded by the French government. Later a number of studies of labour issues were commissioned by UNESCO. It is worth noting that some of these investigations were conducted by Africans. For example, Agblemagnon, whom I got to know, did a study of attitudes to women in what was then Togoland.

Some interesting developments took place in Belgium, where in 1950 Ombredane published a paper entitled “Principles for a psychological study of the Blacks in the Belgian Congo”, followed by several other works. He devised an African TAT (Thematic Apperception Test) and encouraged his students to pursue projects in the Congo.

My own entry into the field happened in 1952, and a few personal reminiscences will illustrate some points. In 1950 I was a lecturer in social psychology at the University of Manchester and knew nothing about all I said so far. We had a visit from Ernest Beaglehole, a New Zealander who had worked with Maori and published in both psychology and anthropology. He suggested to me that in order to become a good social psychologist, one should have the experience of living in a different culture. So I went to West Africa with the aim of replicating social psychological experiment there. I left behind colleagues who regarded me as very odd.

At that time there were of course no texts and one had to learn how to adapt research methods and work under often difficult conditions. During my years there American visitors came to the university, some of them psychologists who asked about my research. I received polite but critical comments to the effect that one should use only properly standardized methods. That was a widespread view at the time, and I have had papers rejected on that ground. There was little understanding then on the part of the EuroAmerican community of psychology that one has to adapt one’s approaches and devise new ones.

Anyway, I worked rather in isolation, with poor library facilities, but that did not trouble me unduly since the were so many interesting things to be done. After spending nearly five years in what was then the Gold Coast I returned to Britain and found that there was little interest in what I had done, Three years later, in 1960, things began to change.

You will probably have noticed that until now I have not used the expression “cross-cultural psychology”., because until the 1960s it did not exist. The Cross-Cultural part dates back to Murdock who in the 1930s at Yale set up the Cross-cultural Survey that later became Human Relations Area Files. In an African research bibliography up to 1962 ,with some 500 entries, hardly any had “Cross-Cultural” in their title. This is not just a minor matter: If a discipline is to have an identity, it needs a name; and that name emerged during the 1960s. Exactly when and how I don’t know – perhaps some of the fellow - ancients do?

The early French work I described failed to evolve into a cross-cultural psychology. The Belgian studies concerned with child development and personality in the Belgian Congo had to cease when conflict erupted later. But South African approaches broadened

into cross-cultural psychology; also elsewhere the 1960s saw a progressive expansion of the field. This may have had to do with the de-colonization of the period which aroused interest in the problems of the newly created countries.

An important factor in that development was the increasing willingness of journals to accept cross-cultural contributions. Among the more hospitable ones were the Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology and the British Journal of Psychology. But the most influential was probably the Journal of Social Psychology, which positively encouraged cross-cultural contributions. This was due to Leonard Doob, at the Yale University Department of Psychology. In 1960 he published a book entitled *Becoming more civilized*, which now has rather patronizing ring, though he explicitly stated that for him the term 'civilized' was value-free. He was one of the first to deal with what sociologists later called "modernization". With the help and advice of anthropologists he carried out interview studies of what he called "acculturation" (i.e. to civilization) in several African societies and in Jamaica.

Doob was on the editorial board of the Journal of Social Psychology and became its editor in 1966. A special section of the journal titled 'cross-cultural notes' still continues. In his editorial capacity he taught authors a lesson that remains highly relevant today. Doob insisted on clear specification of the nature of a sample, rejecting vague generalities. For instance, he would not have "West Africans", or "Nigerians", but Yoruba, Hausa or Igbo. Later in life he became active in conflict .resolution of a "hands-on" kind in Cyprus and Northern Ireland. He certainly deserves to be remembered.

In the course of the 1960s communications between Anglophone cross-cultural psychologists gradually improved, but in an informal way, until the initiatives to be described next by Harry Triandis. Harry himself was one of a group of talented researchers who came on the scene at that time; several of them, like Don Campbell or John Dawson, are no longer with us. These are or were creative people who introduced a flood of new ideas. The fundamental change was a move away from the diagnosis of deficiencies to analyses of the influence of culture on behavior in a variety of spheres.