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Out of the Lab and Into the World: How One Psychologist Became Cross-Cultural

Marshall H. Segall
mhsegall@maxwell.syr.edu

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That Psychology, introduced to me while an undergraduate in 1950 at Northwestern University as “the **science** of human behavior”, could become that *only* by attending to the cultural contexts in which all humans behave, was so obvious to me that I could not imagine anyone not sharing that insight. But, in fact, during that era, all of my professors, fine teachers all, (but without Donald Campbell who had not yet come to Northwestern) blithely pointed me toward graduate study in experimental psychology. They pointed me toward the University of Iowa, where I could assist Kenneth Spence, arguably the preeminent experimentalist in America, famous for his laboratory studies of eyelid conditioning.



As it turned out, Spence is the first psychologist who must be thanked for orienting me toward what was to become cross-cultural psychology, because when I visited Iowa City and saw what was going on among the white-coated, hard-headed Midwesterners, I fled. Did they believe that undergraduates, in order to fulfill a course requirement, serving as laboratory subjects, performing un-natural acts like blinking before receiving a puff of air on their eyeballs, revealed anything non-trivial about human behavior? Well, they surely did. So I high-tailed it back to Evanston, searched the library for alternative graduate school possibilities and in a moment of great good luck found a fellowship that would take me to Geneva.

At age 22, I left the United States for the first time. My year in Francophone Switzerland, interspersed with occasional hitch-hiking jaunts to Paris, changed my life. Piaget's work was not cross-cultural (Pierre Dasen had not yet appeared in Geneva). Nevertheless, living and learning outside my culture of origin sufficed to confirm my confidence that cultural contexts had to be attended to since they were the source of some of the most significant variables influencing human learning and behavior. Any research method so naïvely shaped that it ignored cultural contexts was doomed to fail. The illusion of a science might be produced, with quantitative data analyzed by sophisticated statistical tests, but it would be, after all, only an illusion.

In Geneva I also learned to speak French, drink wine, eat good food, and never to be satisfied again with a constraining single-cultural identity. The wanderlust that helps make us cross-cultural psychologists got into my blood and it never left.

Still, I had to go back to the USA and, having burned the bridge to Iowa City, I went instead to New Haven to pursue graduate study at Yale. For the most part, Yale, was also laboratory oriented, even in social psychology. Many faculty members wore white lab coats, some even rat-blood stained. But a countervailing condition prevailed; the Department of Psychology was embedded in the Institute of Human Relations, an interdisciplinary organization that included anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists who not only attended to each other's work, but also often worked collaboratively. Irvin Child, a personality theorist worked with John Whiting, the anthropologist. Ethnographic data were systematically being coded in the tradition of Murdock's "Outline of World Cultures", an enterprise that was to become known as the Human Relations Area Files

(HRAF). My cohort of graduate students included Herb Barry (who later was to help produce the ground-breaking Barry, Bacon, and Child studies of child-rearing), and Mel Ember, who was to go on to become President of the HRAF once it matured. Just as our professors worked across disciplinary boundaries, so did the graduate students. Some of us were psychologists (e.g., Herb Barry), some of us anthropologists (e.g., Mel Ember), but all of us worked on much the same issues, not necessarily aware that we were practicing interdisciplinary social science.

And best of all for me, there was Leonard Doob, who had studied the social influence techniques of Josef Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Propaganda during the Third Reich in Germany. When Doob returned to the USA he pushed Psychology, in his quiet, mild-mannered way, to attend to real world problems, to issues that mattered to millions of human beings across the world who were not themselves academics. So, Doob fought against at least two manifestations of ethnocentrism: the national kind that kept most psychologists at home, and the intellectual kind that bound so many psychologists to work only on problems subject to experimental control.

My assistantship at Yale was with a young experimental psychologist who later committed suicide, probably as a result of competing with five colleagues for tenure (the Yale mode those days generated great stress among the younger faculty members). The practice was to hire six, only one of whom at the end of their multi-year provisional stay would gain tenure, and so they published, and published, and publishedor perished. During my assistantship, I actually published an experiment done with kittens in a journal devoted to experiments with animals, but my truly happy hours at Yale were spent in very small group meetings with Leonard Doob – usually just he and I – where we discussed each week a book that he had suggested. I sensed that Doob was not at the center of the discipline as it was manifest at Yale and I began to sense that I did not want to be at that center either, but out there on the periphery with this man whose eyes sparkled whenever he recounted his international adventures. He was to go on to seek ways to resolve intractable intergroup conflicts, in far-flung war-torn parts of the world. I was to find him again from time to time, later on, when I had matured and he had become old, but still lithe and full of life, at the New Stanley in Nairobi or on a cafe porch in Dar-es-Salaam.

No one else on the regular faculty at Yale captured my attention as did Doob. But then, during my second year there, in the role of visiting professor, there appeared Donald Campbell, on leave from Northwestern, my undergraduate alma mater. In 1954 there began a teacher/student relationship that was the single most influential of my life. Don reinforced my international interests that had been encouraged by Doob and he added an exceptionally brilliant integrative approach to psychology, melding the seemingly adversarial “schools” of thought in learning theory, the response oriented behaviorism that prevailed in New Haven and the cognitive approach that was stirring in California. Thus, there were the Campbellian parables of the Yale rats who transferred to Berkeley and the Berkeley rats who continued their education at Yale, both taking their behaviors with them but being described exclusively (but perfectly adequately) in the language of the institution in which they found themselves, stimulus/response learning theory jargon in New Haven and cognitive theory jargon in California.

I soon abandoned my plans to remain at Yale through to a Ph.D. and followed Don to Northwestern in 1955. My former undergraduate teachers in the Psychology Department, the same ones who had tried to send me to Iowa, must have forgiven my Spence-spurning, because they welcomed me back to Northwestern, where I enjoyed a stimulating two years as one of Don's students, earning the degree in 1957.

To be a student of Don Campbell was to be, eventually, a colleague of his, because he elevated his students to that status in very short order. He encouraged me to get engaged with the African Studies Program at Northwestern, the first such Africa-oriented academic enterprise in the United States, created and directed by the noted anthropologist Melville Herskovits, himself a student of Franz Boas, and an early advocate of the need to dispel some of the most pernicious stereotypes then prevalent in psychology about African-American capacity. Don encouraged me as a budding psychologist to engage in anthropological ways of thinking, noting that the two disciplines were mutually reinforcing – that while psychology might reveal how we *find our ways through* the mazes, anthropology reveals the *nature* of the mazes.

Campbell and Herskovits together spawned a number of intriguing ideas about possible ways in which aspects of culture, especially environmental features, both natural and man-made might lead, through learning, to the production of what Campbell had dubbed “visual inference habits.” They did not agree in every respect about how much perceptual habits might be acquired by human beings, reflecting aspects of their environments (the *nurture* side of what we used to call the nature-nurture controversy) but they did agree that empirical research ought to be done to find out. And, obviously, it had to be done systematically in a number of cultural settings. And I was the lucky guy who got to work with them on the design, implementation, analysis and write-up of the study. The result was a paper in *Science* and a book with the title “The influence of culture on visual perception”, for both of which my teachers insisted I take first authorship.

By the time the publications appeared, I had accepted my first teaching job, as an assistant professor at Columbia University in New York City, where I enjoyed four years teaching social psychology to undergraduates and a few graduate students. Otto Klineberg was one of my senior colleagues; he was clearly the one who influenced me the most. His work that demonstrated the non-genetic basis of “intelligence” test score differences across so-called “races” (“whites” and “blacks” in America) and his international commuting to serve UNESCO in Paris drew my admiration, respect, and envy. He, as well as Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, whose office was a few doors from mine at Columbia, may have helped me decide to take a year's research leave and, under the auspices of the Ford Foundation, go to Uganda in 1959. As a Foreign Area Fellow, I spent a year there, partly at Makerere University in Kampala, but mostly in Mbarara, in the Ankole district of Uganda, where I gathered a very large set of data based on questionnaires designed to help me understand some psychological processes of acculturation – those data remain to this day in a filing cabinet...a study of acculturation that never got written. During the 1960-61 academic year at Columbia University, I edited film footage and tape recordings that I had made in Ankole and produced a 30-minute film

entitled “Gentle Winds of Change”, my only publication in that genre – it has been transcribed to a DVD format and is available in an academic film archive.

In 1962, somewhat surprisingly, I was recruited by the University of Iowa Psychology Department, still headed by the same experimental psychologist, Spence whom I had, a decade earlier, spurned. There I taught social psychology, met and married Sally, and spent another four academic-year periods, one of which actually transpired in Africa, again in Uganda, this time doing research on family planning attitudes.

By then, I was as much an Africanist – shades of Herskovits – as I was a psychologist, so it is not odd that I was recruited to become a member and later director of the Program of Eastern African Studies at Syracuse University. I was to spend 42 years on the Syracuse faculty, with appointments in Psychology and Political Science and with a mix of responsibilities, including directing an interdisciplinary social science Ph.D program and serving as associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

It was during the Syracuse years that Pierre Dasen and John Berry became close colleagues and friends and we worked together, later with Ype Poortinga, Walt Lonner, Cigdem Kagitcibasi, Roy Malpass, Mel and Carole Ember and many others who helped shape the IACCP, the SCCR, and I'ARIC. Over several decades, after Pierre and I decided to work as partners on a book project and soon thereafter joined up with John and Ype, who had a similar notion, we enjoyed a collaboration which produced several multi-authored cross-cultural psychology textbooks. During those same decades of writing and teaching, one by one we retired from our teaching positions.

My retirement from Syracuse University occurred in 1998 and Sally and I moved to Martha's Vineyard in 2002. Once retired, I became involved in an enterprise that took me back to my beginnings and will be with me as long as I can think, talk and write. It has to do with “race” and I must conclude this memoir with an account of this ongoing involvement.

Throughout my career, with influences from Melville Herskovits and Otto Klineberg especially, I have been deeply concerned about racism in America and elsewhere. Actually, I have fretted about “race” ever since I was an adolescent in the late 1940s. One day, when I showed up with an African-American high-school chum at my hometown Jewish Community Center's bowling alley, we were politely but firmly asked to leave. How, I thought, could American Jews, all of them relatives of Holocaust victims, only three years after the end of World War II, behave like racists?

Whenever I wrote about what we all for decades called “racial” differences, I, like most other social scientists, explained those differences as the result of complex cultural facts, and not due to innate, genetic, determinants.

Then, one day in the early 1990s, while visiting Pierre Dasen in Geneva. I encountered a Franco-Swiss exhibition, entitled *Tous Parents, Tous Différents* (“All of Us Are Related, Each of Us is Unique”). What I learned there hit me like a ton of bricks. I suddenly realized that any effort to interpret *racial* differences made no sense, because, after all, there were not any races. There is just one unitary species, the human race. And I walked out of the exhibition space believing that this discovery had the potential to bring

an end to racism, since I thought, how could racism endure if there were no such things as races?

Andre Langaney, the Swiss genetic anthropologist and the force behind the exhibit, allowed me to produce an English-language version, comprising 18 graphic posters and a 30-minute film, distributed since the mid 1990s by Syracuse University (see <http://allrelated.syr.edu>). The exhibit has been seen at many sites across America and in other English-speaking countries. Wherever I have lectured, whether in Oxford, Mississippi, Washington, DC, or Melbourne, Australia, most audience members admitted surprise, while acknowledging that the perception of separate "races" was an illusion. (Isn't it ironic that my first cross-cultural work was in the field of perception, studying illusions, of the laboratory kind and now I study illusions of a worldly kind.)

Then, in 2001, what many social scientists had long suspected, and Langaney's research had shown, was reconfirmed when on February 12, *Science* magazine published the Human Genome, demonstrating unequivocally that all humans alive today, however diverse, are not divisible into biological "races." As the exhibit had earlier proclaimed, we are indeed all related.

So, it is undeniably true; there are no separate biological races. This is not a mere politically-correct claim. It is as indisputable as the fact that the earth is a sphere, revolving around the sun.

However, the Human Genome revelations failed to sound the death-knell in the 21st century to the wide-spread belief in "races" any more than the astronomical facts concerning the earth demolished beliefs in the 15th, that it was flat, with a sun revolving around it. Just as everyday experience competes with astronomical truths, the fact that there are no "races" is incompatible with what we seem to see every day. In our increasingly cosmopolitan world, confronted by people of many shades, of diverse backgrounds, speaking a Babel of tongues, we think we see "races". The concept of "race" is tenacious, because what most people think they know flies in the face of its scientific meaninglessness. Counter-intuitive discoveries that contradict compelling experiential evidence are hard to sell. Revolutionary advances in human understanding have never suddenly transformed popular thought. But to continue discussing human diversity as if it was the end product of biological races will have terrible consequences for humankind, in our own society and beyond.

So, we must demolish the illusion of biological races by teaching the facts, by stressing that our species, *homo sapiens sapiens*, originated at a single point in time in Africa, approximately 150 thousand years ago, and by insisting that all seven billion of us alive today share common ancestors, many times over.

During the first decade of the 21st century, National Geographic, with funding from IBM, commenced a 5-year project using DNA testing to trace the migrations of all of our ancestors, which is adding further evidence that all of us alive today, and all humans who have ever lived, derive from a common African ancestor. So, no matter how different we are superficially, we are all Africans under the skin. We will likely continue to speak of races in Europe and America, given racism's central role in our history. In the USA especially, we must continue to underscore the terrible discrepancies across so-called

whites and so-called blacks in access to health, education, and wealth, in order to encourage policies that could level the playing field. And we will probably have to continue to identify ourselves on the US census as a member of one or more so-called races, even though the options for doing so have never been the same in any two censuses! That, of course, because nobody really knows what we are talking about when we talk about “race”. The word is really several different cultural constructs, but since it still connotes a hierarchy of separate biological groups, differentially endowed, any continued use of the word gets in the way of efforts to emerge from our racist ways.

Will widespread acceptance that there are not biological races end racism? Of course not. Ethnocentrism is a profound and ubiquitous force, in Europe, America, and elsewhere. Even people who might acknowledge that there are no separate races may hate and despise any people who appear different, if only to have someone to whom they can feel superior. But until we admit that we are all related, racism will be fed and reinforced by an outmoded belief that is as flat wrong as the belief that the earth itself is flat.

Regardless of ideology, regardless of education, indeed regardless of skin color, many still do not get it. Some of our teachers got it wrong, our preachers got it wrong, our grandmothers got it wrong ...as well as a lot of psychologists. We live in a world where there were never races ...just racism.

In September 2009, campaigns to popularize the fact that there are no separate biological races had seemed to wither on the vine. However relevant this is both to our understanding of the cultural construct “race” and to efforts to combat racism, the campaign seemed to fall on deaf ears. At least, in the USA, interest waned as if the election of Barack Obama meant that the nation had somehow transcended racism.

But hardly a year after his election as President of the United States, the unrestrained manifestations of racism directed right at him became, as Bob Herbert, one New York Times writer, noted, “...disgusting and dangerous ...the same old filthy racism that has been there all along” (NY Times, Sep. 19, 2009).

Issues relating to the semantics of “race” attracted little attention in cross-cultural psychology, until a recent flurry of e-mail exchanges flooded the list-serve of the IAACP. One member, Valerie Pruegger, recalled the exhibit in 1998 several years ago at the 14th annual conference of the IAACP conference in Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, and wondered why some colleagues still spoke of races.

My own submission to the list-serve simply reiterated that, in the biological sense, “races” do not exist. This is not political correctness, some liberal wish that it were so, or some romantic poetry; it is simply hard scientific fact. I further noted that “the diverse cultural constructs of “race” have real meaning (as in the US census categories) with many incredibly awful social political and psychological consequences. That some people still believe that “race” is also a biological reality makes it harder to ameliorate the harm done by racism rooted in culture. I continued also to insist that keeping track of how resources are unfairly distributed across culturally defined ethnic groups in any country, whether we call them races or not, in order to foster affirmative action programs, or any other policies designed to redress wrongs, is an obvious positive reason not to ignore so-called “racial

group differences". Let us just be sure that when we advocate affirmative action programs, as I have done consistently throughout my life, we keep stressing that the people in these groupings do not belong to biological "races".

So there it is....my story of how I became a cross-cultural psychologist. The persons who influenced me and some of the experiences which shaped me are in this tale. What they taught me to believe about human behavior, how to study it and how to make the accrued knowledge actually useful for education, for battling the good fights that have to be fought for humankind, and, maybe most importantly, to add some real meaning to one's own life, were great gifts.