

Anthropological Psychology

Psychology and anthropology have not shared a comfortable meeting ground (Jahoda & Krewer, 1997). According to Schwartz (1992), the two disciplines have had a “mutual estrangement” (p. 324). 103 (...)

(104) Several decades ago, Edgerton (1974) argued that the divergence between psychology and anthropology is huge, a representation of East and West. He identified a primary difference between cross-cultural psychology and psychological anthropology as the psychologist’s experimental orientation and the anthropologist’s opposition to this, writing that “At heart, anthropologists are naturalists whose commitment is to the phenomena themselves. Anthropologists have always believed that human phenomena can best be understood by procedures that are primarily sensitive to context, be it situational, social, or cultural. Our methods are primarily unobtrusive, nonreactive ones; we observe, we participate, we learn, hopefully we understand. We rarely experiment, and then only under special conditions. This is our unspoken paradigm and it is directly at odds with the discovery of truth by experimentation which, at least as many anthropologists see it, ignores context and creates reactions” (pp. 63–64). More recently, anthropology has embraced a deeper study of subjectivity, of the inner life of people, including agency (Biehl, Good, & Kleinman, 2007). This might be seen as psychological; however psychology still lacks agentic theory (Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003). Can there be a meeting ground between psychology and anthropology?

Psychology has been a deductive science, objective and hypothesis testing, while anthropology is inductive with a focus on first-person accounts and much time spent by the researcher with the people being studied, conducting participant observation or ethnography. The differences between the disciplines are epistemological and ontological, and the data for psychology is primarily quantitative, while for anthropology it is primarily qualitative. Shweder (1996) describes the ontological difference between quantitative and qualitative research as being the object of investigation: hypothetical constructs versus subjective meaning and signification. This distinction is the old philosophical question of objectivity and subjectivity, of science versus hermeneutics, of the nomothetic and the idiographic. While psychology has held onto a positivist, experimental method, it has always had its “softer” side, within what Taylor (1973) called psychology’s two worlds. At the time he wondered if the two could coexist peacefully within

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psychology. The great psychological experimentalist Wundt also had his Volkerpsychologie, a social/cultural psychology, published in ten volumes between 1900 and 1920, yet he never brought his two psychologies together. Experimental, quantitative, deductive psychology has ruled. The two worlds have not existed peacefully in psychology (see Fish, 2000; Greenfield, 2000; Kral, 2008). (...)

Shweder (1990) defined cultural psychology as “the study of the way cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, and transform the human psyche, resulting less in psychic unity for humankind than in ethnic divergences in mind, self, and emotion” (p. 1). This would include all forms of human group difference. Cultural psychology has grown in part from American anthropology (LeVine, 2007), and the investigation, the discovery, of meaning is central (Cohen & Kitayama, 2007). (...)

Definition

Anthropological psychology will be seen today as a new term. It fits within an interpretive social science, stemming from the later Frankfurt School that has been a critique of positivism with an emphasis on subjective meaning, context, history, the moral, and the political (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1985). This psychology is anthropological because of the focus on shared subjective meanings, on first-person points of view, and on stories and narratives. It also examines, according to Bruner (1990), situated action, what people say, folk psychology, symbolic systems, agency, and intentional states, whereby “culture and the quest for meaning within culture are the proper causes of human action” (p. 20). Anthropological psychology is countercultural to mainstream psychology.

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