3.4: Culture and Personality

Attributed to anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, the Culture and Personality school of thought drew on the work of Edward Sapir to explain relationships between childrearing customs and human behaviors in different societies. They suggested anthropologists could gain an understanding of a national culture through examination of individual personalities. There were two main themes in this theoretical school. One was about the relationship between culture and human nature. The other was about the correlation between culture and individual personality.

The theory of Culture and Personality also drew on Boas’ cultural relativism and Freud’s psychoanalysis about early childhood. If we premise that all humans are hereditarily equal, why are people so unique from society to society? The theoretical school answered this question by using Freud’s psychoanalysis: the differences between people in various societies usually stem from cultural differences instilled in childhood. In other words, the foundations of personality...
development are set in early childhood according to each society's unique cultural traits. Based on this basis, the theoretical school of Culture and Personality researched childrearing in different societies and compared the results cross-culturally. They described distinctive characteristics of people in certain cultures and attributed these unique traits to the different methods of childrearing. The aim of this comparison was to show the correlation between childrearing practices and adult personality types.

The Culture and Personality proponents were on the cutting edge when it emerged in the early 20th century. Using clinical interviews, dream analysis, life histories, participant observation, and projective tests (e.g., Rorschach), the culture and personality analysis of the correlation between childrearing customs and human behaviors was, at that time, a practical alternative to using racism explanations for analyzing different human behaviors. In fact, the culture and personality school was responsible for greatly limiting the number of racist, hierarchical descriptions of culture types common during the early to mid-20th century. This approach to understanding culture was instrumental in moving the focus to the individual in order to understand behaviors within a culture instead of looking for universal laws of human behavior.

References