

## **Unpublished Paper**

### **National Character Theory**

National Character Theory, an approach to differences in national culture popularized during World War II and its aftermath. Although a fascination with characterological differences between different peoples has ancient roots, and stimulated writings by scholars as diverse as Theophrastus (372-287 B.C.), Tacitus, Vico, Montesquieu, Baron Gottfried von Leibnitz and de Tocqueville, studies of national character took on special significance from the late 1930s through the 1950s, especially in the United States. Major impetus was given to such studies by the recruitment of anthropologists, psychoanalysts, historians and other social scientists by government agencies concerned with propaganda, the conduct of war and peace, and domestic morale. It was therefore primarily applied research. Contributors included Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Geoffrey Gorer and Gregory Bateson, among others. The focus was upon the wartime enemies of the United States, particularly Japan and Germany, although research was also done on the cultures of China, Russia, Romania, Thailand, France, Italy and other national cultures. One of the main research issues was to explain the social psychology of "totalitarianism" — the conditions that foster the unquestioned acceptance of authoritarian governance.

These studies were characterized by a distinctive theoretical perspective which derived from the teachings of Franz Boas and one of his most prominent students, Ruth Benedict. The concept of "culture" that emerged from this tradition emphasized historical developments, systematic configurations, and learning that was shared, and transmitted from one generation to the next through formal or informal inculcation. The emphasis on learning led to the psychologizing of culture, with psychoanalysis, learning theory and gestalt psychology exerting strong influence.

As used by these scholars the term "national character" referred to the principal motives or predispositions which could be attributed to the members of a given society, the means by which these motives or predispositions are elicited and maintained, and to "the ideal image of themselves in the light of which individuals assess and pass judgment upon themselves and their neighbors, and on the basis of which they reward and punish their children, for the manifestation or nonmanifestation of given traits and attitudes" (Gorer 1953:57).

Methodologically such wartime studies were hampered by the inaccessibility of field sites, the only available informants being emigrants and refugees. The "study of culture at a distance," as a research strategy, involved interpretation of films, art forms, games, slang and other available cultural products in addition to interviews in order to construct characterological images of the nations studied. Methods were based more on the unique interpretive skills of participating scholars — what Mead referred to as "reconstructive imagination" — than on rigorous and replicable research techniques.

The most prominent of these studies was Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), which attempts to explain the paradox of co-existent artistic sensitivity and fanatical militarism in Japanese character. The book was subsequently translated into Japanese and received mixed reviews by Japanese scholars. Although praised for several unique insights into Japanese culture, Benedict was criticized for ignoring diversity within Japan and for her reliance on child-rearing data to arrive at cultural patterns.

Studies of German national character emphasized the authoritarian nature of the family, and particularly the image of the father as harsh and autocratic (see, for example, Brickner 1943, Schaffner 1948). The most influential study of Germany during this period, however, was produced independently by the psychiatrist Erich Fromm. In his book *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Fromm attempts to explain why Germans so readily submitted to Hitler's rule. Child-rearing patterns characteristic of Germany during the time resulted in the prevalence of "authoritarian personalities," Fromm maintained. Persons of this type are held to be extremely obedient and subservient to superiors while being harsh and dictatorial to individuals under one's control. A contempt for social inferiors and weakness is also part of the pattern. Fromm believed that individuals of this type react to democratic institutions with anxiety, and prefer political systems based on clearly demarcated authority structures. Other studies of German character focused more directly on Hitler and his political appeal (for example Erikson 1950, Langer 1973).

Following the conclusion of World War II, and initiation of the "cold war" between the Western alliance and the Eastern Bloc, studies of Russian character came into vogue. Receiving most publicity was Geoffrey Gorer's "swaddling hypothesis", which attempts to relate the observed tendency of Russians to experience intense mood swings between long periods of introspective depression and short bursts of frantic social activity to the tradition of tightly

swaddling children during infancy. Although Gorer's analysis was not causal in form, it was severely criticized for oversimplification.

In addition to studying "enemies," several analyses of American character were offered during this period, including Mead's *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (1942) and Gorer's *The American People* (1948). These and other commentaries on American character generally emphasize the pronounced commitments of Americans to independence, or self-reliance, and their suspicion of authority figures (which in its positive form is expressed as a commitment to egalitarianism).

Several factors led to the demise of national character studies in this format. Perhaps most important was a shift in anthropological theory away from a model of culture that emphasized "the replication of uniformity" (of which national character studies represent the extreme instance) to a model based on "the organization of diversity" (see Wallace 1961). The latter view stresses cognitive compatibility rather than shared motives as the basis for cultural coherence. It therefore allows for a wide variety of motives within even small societies. Along with this shift in viewpoint came strong criticisms of psychoanalytic theory, especially when applied to social character. The explanatory value of child-rearing patterns for adult character was also questioned. Furthermore, renewed accessibility to field sites shifted priorities in anthropology back to studies based on participant observation within distinguishable communities.

Although these circumstances led anthropologists to shun national character studies for a period of time, they have been revived in a somewhat different form. The industrial ascendance of Japan during the post-war period has fascinated American (and Japanese) anthropologists. In attempting to account for this ascendance scholars have sought for the roots of Japanese industriousness in historically derived social structures and the values they engendered. Writers on the topic generally rely on their own, usually extensive, first hand field experience plus the now massive social science literature produced by both Japanese and foreign scholars. While such studies make liberal use of psychological principles, they do not place the same heavy reliance on child-rearing practices that characterized the wartime studies. They also tend to be much more complimentary in tone.

Interest in national character will be strong as long as nation states remain the basis of the world's political order. Stereotypes were formed almost as early as the states themselves. The

task of national character studies is to replace those simplistic, and generally ill-conceived, stereotypes with understandings that do justice to the complexities and subtleties that characterize each and every national populace.

Literatur.

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