Encomium for Robert A. LeVine

RICHARD A. SHWEDER

This tribute was delivered by Richard A. Shweder at the meeting of the Society for Psychological Anthropology in San Diego, California, on October 9, 1997.

Tonight the Society for Psychological Anthropology is honoring one of its great heroes and intellectual emissaries, Robert A. LeVine. I am especially pleased to have been asked to sing Bob's praises this evening. Back in 1972, when I was still a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed graduate student at Harvard University, I submitted a paper to the AAA Stirling Award competition, which, as serendipity would have it, was chaired by Bob LeVine. That is when we first met, when he shook my hand for receiving an honorable mention prize. One thing led to another, and much to my delight, Bob was soon my mentor, guide, colleague, and friend at the University of Chicago. Later, after he moved to the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, we were coconspirators on a Social Science Research Council Planning Committee on Social and Emotional Development in Childhood, where, against all odds (it was the heyday of universal facial expressions research), we somehow managed to get “culture” on the intellectual agenda of some of the developmental psychologists on the Committee; and we worked together to organize the “Culture Theory” conference and to bring out the edited volume by that name.

The colleagueship, and the friendship, has continued through all these years. In fact, just yesterday, my wife, Candy, pointed out to me that at least one of the “LeVine plants” passed on to us in 1975, when Bob and Sara LeVine left Chicago for Kenya, and then went on to Harvard, is still alive and well in our apartment in Hyde Park. So it is especially significant and moving for me to be standing here tonight, 25 years later, no longer bushy-tailed, but still wide-eyed, to gaze in amazement at Bob LeVine’s contribution to our field, and to be the one who shakes his hand for an intellectual life so full of stimulation and excitement, for an academic life rich in adventure, for a life of the mind so well done. Just bring to your mind such now-classic works as Nyansongo or Culture, Behavior and Per-
sonality. Or think of his recent empirically grounded book *Child Care and Culture: Lessons from Africa*, which I highly commend to you, if you have not read it, and which is so timely, given our nation’s current public policy concerns over issues of ethnicity and family life. Or just list the places, the six cultures, in which, at one time or another, Bob LeVine has either conducted or directed field research: Kenya, Nigeria, Mexico, Nepal, Zambia, Venezuela. It’s awe-inspiring.

As I stand here looking back over Bob’s career, looking around this room at your familiar faces and thinking about the future of psychological anthropology I can’t help but have a keen sense of the ancestry of this tribe. So I feel moved to tell some of its lore, with special references to our hero of the evening. Bob knows the lore of our discipline very well, and he is a terrific storyteller. My own sensibilities and sentiments concerning tribal identity and anthropological storytelling go back to a seminar I took at the University of Pittsburgh with George Peter Murdock in 1965. Murdock gave a survey course on the history of anthropology, which started with Herodotus and ended with Murdock. The students in the course delivered intellectual biographies from Murdock’s list of the immortals. He listened, smoked his pipe, and initiated his students into anthropology by “telling all” about almost everyone he had known in our profession. He told all about Margaret Mead and her four husbands. He told all about Edward Sapir and his inability to get Franz Alexander to psychoanalyze him at the Chicago Institute because Alexander believed that Sapir’s resistance would be too brilliant for him to overcome. He told about Murdock himself, who was first startled into seriousness when, as a young man, he visited Franz Boas at Columbia, seeking possible admission to the department and was astonished to hear the famous founder of American anthropology say, “Mr. Murdock, you are a dilettante. Get out of my office! I never want to see you again.” So he got on a train heading north and got off at New Haven, Connecticut, and the rest is history, as we shall see in a moment.

That year, 1965, was a very good year for anthropology, for at least two reasons. For one thing, if you went to the AAA meetings then, which I did as a college senior, you discovered that there were seven times more job opportunities in anthropology than anthropologists to fill them. More importantly, however, that was the year Bob LeVine, Ray Fogelson, and Mel Spiro taught a psychological anthropology seminar on aggression in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago, an intellectual hat trick yet to be repeated there.

That seminar was a kind of return for Bob, for in 1953, after four years of study in the famous college at the University of Chicago, he had entered the graduate program in anthropology only to discover that no one was interested in psychological anthropology at the University of Chicago. So he left, and he ended up at Harvard, where he ran into John Whiting and
Clyde Kluckhohn, who were members of his thesis committee. Well, perhaps saying that he ran into Clyde Kluckhohn is not the best way to put it. Kluckhohn directed the Russian Research Center at Harvard and did not teach very much. But he did give a small weekly seminar at his home, which invariably started with three glasses of bourbon for each student in the course—all two of them: Bob LeVine and Kathleen Gough (there may have been a third). Bob does not remember much that followed that ritual initiation each week, but Clyde Kluckhohn got him his first job after graduate school at Northwestern, in Melville Herskovitz’s part of town.

Those were the days when the major lineages in anthropology were few, and most anthropologists could be traced to, or through, Kroeber at Berkeley, Kluckhohn at Harvard, Boas at Columbia, Murdock (still) at Yale, Hallowell at Penn, Herskovisz at Northwestern, and Eggan, Tax, and perhaps Radcliffe-Brown, at Chicago. The Whiting tribe, of which Bob is progeny and progenitor (and I will have more to say about his many students in a moment), ultimately descended out of Murdock at Yale, and perhaps goes back even further to Sumner, the famous sociologist who studied “mores and folkways,” who handed over all his files and drawers of ethnographic reports to George Peter Murdock, thereby setting the course for comparative work in anthropology and for the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF).

There was much serendipity and even irony to Bob’s introduction into the Whiting tribe, as there is in all lives and careers. It is a very special tribe. Many of you who are here tonight (Roy D’Andrade, Kim Romney, Lee Munroe, Tom Weisner, Sally Nerlove, Mike Burton, Charley Super, Sara Harkness, Naomi Quinn, and all Palfry House and William James Hall offspring) know this so well. And I know John and Bea Whiting would have loved to be here tonight to see Bob honored this way. Here are a few words sent to me from Bea Whiting, which she asked me to read tonight: “Bob LeVine has developed and carried out the type of research we envisioned as essential for adding a cross-cultural perspective to the study of human development, insisting that psychologists and all social scientists take into account cultural conditions not found in the Western world. He has succeeded in designing studies that can be adapted to diverse social contexts. He has found and helped to train a cadre of students from Central and South America, Africa and India, as well as from the United States, who have or will become members of a community of scholars equipped to explore human development. His study on the effect of education on parental goals and behaviors is the type of project we hoped could be developed, a model for cross-cultural study. Sorry we won’t be there to honor him.”

In any case, to return to the story line, when in 1953, still a graduate student, Bob decided to leave Chicago, he thought the place to go to do
work in culture and personality was at Columbia with Abram Kardiner and Ralph Linton. Fred Eggan told him, “No, it’s all over at Columbia, go to Harvard.” But Bob applied to both places, leaning towards Columbia. Whether Fred Eggan arranged things to turn out the way they did (an attractive fellowship offer from Harvard and none from Columbia) we may never know. But off to Harvard went Bob, well-funded, to study psychological anthropology, not even knowing that John and Bea Whiting were there (he thought the Whitings were at Yale). And his very first advisor turned out to be David M. Schneider, the very David M. Schneider (of Homans and Schneider) who not only introduced Bob to African studies, but later pointed him to and supported him in the direction of psychoanalysis. Yes, David Schneider got Bob LeVine into psychoanalytic training. David was an advisor to the Foundations Fund for Research in Psychiatry. He convinced Fritz Redlick that they should support young people to be trained in psychoanalysis. The young people he had in mind were Ann Parsons and Bob LeVine.

Nevertheless, Bob eventually found his way to the Whitings. And by virtue of his consistent interest in child care practices around the world, an interest that has spanned four decades, he has, in so many ways, been one of the greatest heirs to the Whiting legacy and foremost in carrying forward the type of interdisciplinary research on culture, life-course development, and personality that John and Bea once envisioned when they set out to do the five cultures study. That’s right, the five cultures study. It was originally the five cultures study, and Bob was not part of it. Bob had worked with Bea at Harvard, but was not part of the five cultures project. He had gone ahead and gotten a separate and independent fellowship for work in Kenya. His thesis work was included later, and the project was renamed the six cultures study. Six cultures and scores of research proposals later, the Murdock-Whiting-LeVine lineage goes on, ramifying and diversifying across generations.

Bob’s intellectual offspring include Johnnetta Cole, his first student at Northwestern, who later became president of Spelman College; Byron Good, who took a reading course with him; as well as Waud Krauke, Jerry Barkow, and Liz Bates (the sociolinguist). Cathy Lutz, Lila Abu-Lughod, Rebecca New, Dinesh Sharma, Barbara Wells Nystrom, and Suzanne Kirshner also studied with Bob, as did many other students from all over the world. Bob also has claims on John Lucy and Allan Fiske, who were students of his when I first arrived at Chicago. Of course, Waud is now a Lacanian; Jerry, a sociobiologist; and Cathy and Lila, post- or anti-culturalists. I suppose that just goes to prove that the Oedipus complex is more universal than even Mel Spiro thinks (it seems to include girls as well as boys, women as well as men).
The awarding of this honor tonight is well timed. Bob plans to retire from Harvard at the end of the 1997-1998 academic year, even as his intellectual comet continues to light up our academic sky. His work in recent years on the role of maternal education in promoting development has kept anthropology and ethnography on the world stage of international policy studies. His conception of plural paths to development and his critiques of attachment theory have played a major role in reshaping the field of human development.

We are more than a little fortunate that he has understood and played such a central and constructive (and pro-psychological anthropology) role in the institutions of social science research, where he has been Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Social Science Research Council and a member of the Board of Directors of the Spencer Foundation. He has been on the National Advisory Board to Head Start and has worked with the National Center for Educational Statistics. Bob has served on innumerable review panels, including some key study panels at NIMH. In large part because of his voice, influence, and commitment, the interdisciplinary field of cultural psychology has been revived at the interface of anthropology, psychology, and linguistics; and the intellectual agenda of this wonderful professional association, the SPA, has become a growth industry once again.

In Kenya these days, in our postmodern world, Gusii intellectuals, many of whom are quite expert in Western philosophy and science, now read Bob LeVine's work to learn about the meaning and history of their own customary practices, their own "mores and folkways," which is probably the greatest honor that can be bestowed on Bob's career. Just short of that, however, is the esteem and love of colleagues and friends. That love and esteem has led the Society for Psychological Anthropology Board of Directors, in its great wisdom, to grant him this Distinguished Career Award and to say thank you. Congratulations, Bob LeVine, from all of us, for making us feel proud of you and of the intellectual tradition you so brilliantly embody. Congratulations!

RICHARD A. SHWEDER is a professor in the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago.

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LeVine, Robert A., and Barbara B. LeVine
LeVine, Robert A., and Sarah E. LeVine
Encomium for Robert A. LeVine ● 243


LeVine, Robert A., Sarah E. LeVine, Amy Richman, and Clara S. Correa

LeVine, Robert A., Sarah E. LeVine, Amy Richman, F. Medardo Tapia Uribe, Clara S. Correa, and Patricia M. Miller

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Sawyer, Jack, and Robert A. LeVine

Shweder, Richard, Jacqueline Goodnow, Giyoo Hatano, Robert A. LeVine, Hazel Markus, and Peggy Miller

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