Commentary for “The Cultural Psyche, Or the Work of Culture in Psychology: The Selected Papers of Robert A. LeVine on the Development of a Psychosocial Science" (Dinesh Sharma, Editor)

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With Gratitude to Bob LeVine: His Scholarship, Character, Ancestral Consciousness and Tribal Lore

Bob LeVine informs us that he did not directly know Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, or Ruth Benedict; and, hence, he has no personal memories of them to share with us. But after reading his intellectual memoir “My Life in Psychological Anthropology” it appears he knew just about everyone else of ancestral significance in the lore of our academic tribe. In Bob’s autobiographical essay he generously (and in a procreative spirit) shares this academic tribal history with us, even while he himself has become a legend in his own time. We are very fortunate. More than twenty years after Robert A. LeVine officially retired from Harvard University, his mind, his spirit and his body just keep going, full speed ahead, all to our intellectual benefit and personal delight.

It has been many years since Bob “retired.” Back then (in the late 1990s) I delivered an encomium honoring his life and work. The occasion was his receipt of a “Life-Time Achievement Award” at the meeting of the Society for Psychological Anthropology in San Diego, California, on October 9, 1997. Preparing that address was a sentimental experience for me. I was flooded with memories, beginning with a recollection from my own graduate school days. I had submitted a paper during the summer of 1971 to the Stirling Award competition of the American Anthropological Association. As serendipity would have it the award committee was chaired by Bob LeVine. That’s when we first met. One thing led to another, and Bob was soon my mentor, colleague, and friend at the University of Chicago. “Causation” may be a complex concept. Logically speaking it implies all the necessary conditions that are jointly sufficient to produce some outcome. Nevertheless, it is a plain and simple truth that Bob

LeVine has been a major causal force in our academic corner of the universe. It was because of his initiative and support that I was hired at the University of Chicago, an outcome for which I will always be grateful.

Later, after Bob moved from Chicago to the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, we were coconspirators on a Social Science Research Council Planning Committee on Social and Emotional Development in Childhood. Against the odds (it was the heyday of universal facial expressions research) we somehow managed to get "culture" on the intellectual agenda of the Planning Committee. There we worked together to organize the "Culture Theory" conference (which featured several intense but quite memorable debates - Mel Spiro engaging David Schneider, Clifford Geertz engaging Roy D'Andrade, Paul Kay engaging Clifford Geertz, with the philosopher Jurgen Habermas acting as general discussant, and with Michelle Rosaldo, Jerome Bruner, Howard Gardner and many others engaged in those edgy colloquies).

Bob and I co-edited the subsequent conference publication, a book titled Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion which played a part in the revival of interest in comparative research on cultural psychology across several disciplines. He understood the importance of a rigorous interpretive approach to the study of behavior and customary practices. He had the vision to introduce the symbols and meanings conception of culture and cross-cultural comparative research strategies to mainstream psychologists. The colleagueship and encouragement he has routinely extended to future generations of psychological anthropologists is one measure of his character.

Some of the things I sang in praise of Bob's greatness over twenty years ago I am saying here again, plus more. As for the "plus more", he has given new meaning to the idea of "life-time achievement", for he has extended the academic life-span well beyond mere institutional retirement. The publication of this selection of his essays speaks volumes about the continuing presence and influence of his voice.

That influence of his interdisciplinary comparative approach to the study of child and adolescent development can be seen all over the massive 2009 University of Chicago publication of The Child: An Encyclopedic Companion (Shweder et al

2009); and not just because he contributed masterful entries on historical and comparative perspectives on the study of the child and on the socialization of the child. That grand publication project is one Bob himself initiated post-retirement. As the prospective Editor-in-Chief of the volume he had conceptualized the project's aim and scope and assembled a talented editorial board. He set the reference book project in motion before passing the baton and fighting a serious medical battle, which he won.

Thus, in 2015 it was Bob LeVine, still going strong at age 83, who was asked to deliver what turned out to be a brilliant and inspiring Keynote address about interdisciplinary research in the social sciences on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the creation of the Committee on Human Development (now called the Department of Comparative Human Development) at the University of Chicago, where he had been a faculty member in the 1960s and early 1970s. No one knows that history of interdisciplinary research better.

A year later he and his wife Sarah LeVine published Do Parents Matter?: Why Japanese Babies Sleep Soundly, Mexican Siblings Don't Fight, and American Families Should Just Relax (LeVine and LeVine 2016), an overview of comparative research on family life and childhood socialization, which was reviewed in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. You may have also noticed that he knows how to write, clearly and gracefully. And not only for other social scientists but also for the general public; and what he writes is always eye-opening and addresses issues of significance. His research on the role of maternal education in promoting development has kept anthropology on the world stage of international policy studies. His conception of plural paths to development and especially his critiques of attachment theory in mainstream developmental psychology have been a challenge to some of its reigning orthodoxies.

There are many dimensions to Bob's greatness, not just his longevity, productivity and writing skills. In that now ancient encomium singing his praise I referenced Bob's early ethnographic and behavior observational research, done in the 1950s among the Gusii people of Western Kenya and published in a monograph titled Nyansongo (which is available in a 1977 reprint). These days, in our contemporary

interconnected cosmopolitan world, there are Gusii scholars and intellectuals, many of whom are quite expert in Western philosophy and social science, who read the early work of this American anthropologist in order to learn more about the history and meaning of their own mores, folkways and once customary practices. That may be one of the greatest honors that can be bestowed on the life and work of an anthropologist. (Bob has thereby proven that you do not need to be one to know one.) But in his case that honor also obtains from his relationship to contemporary members of the academic tribe known as psychological anthropology. As one can tell from reading the essays in this book, he is that elder who links us to our ancestral past, and actually cares to do so for the sake of the future of the discipline.

We are lucky that the lore of our discipline as he narrates it is riveting, edifying and inspiring. Lucky too are we that we have such a scholar and researcher as a role model. For his intellectual life has been rich in adventure and full of significant ideas: for example, concerning psychoanalysis as a person-centered research methodology (and not just as a meta-psychology) as detailed in his book Culture, Behavior and Personality(1982); for example, by his pluralistic way of addressing ethnic variations in developmental ideals and customs (by which I mean his way of picturing the world's varieties of childhood experiences as different but equal) as in his empirically grounded book Child Care and Culture: Lessons from Africa (1994).

Or just bring to mind the locations where, at one time or another, Bob LeVine has either conducted or directed field research: Kenya, Nigeria, Mexico, Nepal, Zambia, and Venezuela. Through the research projects of several of his students Bob has also engaged cultural realities in India and Japan. He himself has written about child development, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the impact of global education or schooling in India. It was awe-inspiring to contemplate his comparative scope twenty years ago and it is awe-inspiring now.

Academic tribal lore helps one to form one's scholarly identity and Bob LeVine is a virtuoso anthropological story teller. Those who have the skill and commitment to narrate the history of our calling are doing something of great value that

should be recognized and applauded. I have long felt fortunate to have experienced this type of storytelling while I was an undergraduate. I now feel fortunate to have experienced it again reading Bob's memoir about his career in psychological anthropology.

Inspired by that memoir, permit me to recount that undergraduate experience and repeat here a story I told when he received his life-time achievement award from the Society for Psychological Anthropology. My own early 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's seminar was a survey course on the history of anthropology designed primarily for first year graduate students, although he allowed me to take his seminar during my senior year in college. The syllabus for the course started with Herodotus and ended with Murdock. George Peter Murdock the story-teller was very much a senior scholar in 1965; and he actually knew Franz Boas and Edward Sapir (and probably Ruth Benedict as well), and in a very personal sort of way. The students in the course delivered intellectual biographies from Murdock's list of the immortals. He listened, chain smoked a pack of cigarettes, and then 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 for Psychoanalysis because Alexander believed that Sapir's resistance would be too brilliant for him to overcome. He told about an English anthropologist born in Birmingham named Mr. Brown who changed his name to Radcliffe-Brown before taking up a position at Oxford. He told about an anthropologist named Clyde Kluckhohn who prepared himself to become a faculty member at Harvard University by taking cooking and cuisine courses designed to make him erudite and knowledgeable in conversations about wines and gourmet food preparations.

And Murdock spoke candidly about himself, especially about that revelatory moment in his life when he was startled into seriousness. As a privileged young

man who had just returned to New York after taking a boat cruise around the world he decided to have an audience with Franz Boas at Columbia University. The aim of the appointment was to decide whether to seek admission to the Columbia University department of anthropology. After interviewing Murdock for fifteen minutes the famous founder of American anthropology had this to say by way of an appraisal (this as recounted by Murdock himself): "Mr. Murdock, you are a dilettante. Get out of my office! I never want to see you again." So, Murdock got on a train heading north and got off at New Haven, Connecticut. The rest is history. Indeed, it is a history which (in an uncanny, fortuitous and distant way) is causally relevant to Bob LeVine's life in psychological anthropology.

That year, 1965, the year I experienced Murdock's tell-tale identity forming storytelling seminar was a very good year for anthropology, for at least two reasons. For one thing, if you went to the AAA meetings in 1965, which I did as a college senior on Murdock's encouragement, you discovered that there were seven times more job opportunities in anthropology than anthropologists to fill them.

More relevantly, 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 that was never repeated. Bob mentions the seminar in his memoir. Lucky were those University of Chicago graduate students of that era who took that course.

That famous 1965 seminar in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago itself was a kind of return for Bob. And here I repeat autobiographical facts that Bob recounts in his essay or told me years ago around the time he was honored by the Society for Psychological anthropology. In 1953, after four years of study in the famous college at the University of Chicago, he entered the Chicago graduate program in anthropology only to discover that no one was interested in psychological anthropology. So he left. He ended up at Harvard, where he had been advised to study with Clyde Kluckhohn. There he also found John Whiting, and both Whiting and Kluckholn became members of his thesis committee. As Bob notes 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, if I correctly remember from a conversation with Bob, invariably started with three glasses of bourbon for each student in the course- all three of them: Bob LeVine, Kathleen Gough and one other. Bob once told me he does not remember much that followed that ritual initiation each week. As he notes in his memoir Clyde Kluckhohn ultimately played a causal role in getting him his first job after graduate school at Northwestern, in Melville Herskovitz's part of town.

Nevertheless, it seems clear that it was John and Beatrice Whiting who loom large in Bob's ancestral history, which, if one is thinking about academic descent lines, brings us back to George Peter Murdock. Those were the days in the 1950s when the major lineages in anthropology were few, and a great many anthropologists could be traced to, or through, Alfred Kroeber at Berkeley, Clyde Kluckhohn at Harvard, Franz Boas at Columbia, George Peter Murdock at Yale, Irving Hallowell at the University of Pennsylvania, Melville Herskovits at Northwestern, and Fred Eggan and Sol Tax (and their mentor A.R Radcliffe-Brown) at Chicago.

The Whiting tribe, of which Bob is one of its most eminent progeny and a great progenitor, can be traced back to Murdock at Yale (perhaps a thank you is due to Franz Boas for throwing a young dilettante out of his office). Arguably the lineage goes back even further to William Graham Sumner, the famous sociologist who studied "mores and folkways," and whose files and drawers of ethnographic reports ended up in the hands of George Peter Murdock, thereby setting the course for comparative work in anthropology and for the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF).

As Bob notes there was much serendipity and even irony to his introduction into the Whiting tribe, as there is in all lives and careers. It is a tribe that ramifies across generations. Without tracing its many descent lines (that long list of students of students of students going back to the founding ancestors) the ramifying branches and offshoots traceable directly to Bob LeVine during his times at Northwestern, the University of Chicago and Harvard are alive and well. Thanks to Bob LeVine psychological anthropology is alive and well.

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