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Teaching Psychological Anthropology

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The current situation in teaching psych.anthro is an interesting one. There has been an continuous enormous expansion of the field, so that it seems not to have a circumscribed core subject matter, nor is there a clear textbook definition of the field. In fact, there is no readily available textbook that covers the field, however one might wish to define it. This presents the instructor with the obligation, but also the opportunity, to make personal choices with regard to coverage and assignments. In this respect we find ourselves in some sense in a situation similar to those who first put culture and personality into the curriculum, when there were no textbooks and each instructor had an individual and often very personal idea of what such a course should look like, what students should be introduced to. Of course, the field is so vast now that perhaps the choices are more difficult. Also, we deal in significant ways with a rather different student population. Choices about the course, or sequence of courses, will be determined not only by the
instructor's tastes and interests, but also by the population to be served/attacted. This population, I think, is likely to be a good deal more heterogeneous now than 50 years ago, and also more travelled and acquainted with foreign peoples and places.

Here are some obvious basic questions to start with: Is this a single course or part of a series? Where does it fit into the curriculum? Is there a program in child development in the college of education, for example or in the dept. of psychology and can students from those departments be attracted into the course? Is there an interest in the life history, to be developed in conjunction with a program in folklore or oral history? If there is an interest in primatology, either in anthropology or psychology, or even zoology, the topic of behavioral evolution may be of particular interest. In each of these cases, however, the psychological anthropologist has to be aware of the language used in the cognate field, and perhaps the different meanings given to the terms we use. For example, in my department, primatology students are taught that primates have "culture." And then there is the now ever-present "ethnography." It is also true that what was "hot" and eagerly sought out even just a few years ago, may no longer be of quite as much interest. For example, it would seem that sociobiology and the issues raised by it, is of less interest now than it would have been a few years ago. (I might mention in passing that E.O.Wilson uses the term "protoculture," a term used by Hallowell in his work on behavioral evolution. When Wilson came
to Ohio State a few years ago, I asked him about that and it turned out that he, or more likely, a research assistant, had found Hallowell's usage in my textbook! Needless to say, neither H. nor I were acknowledged. A footnote on the topic of diffusion, you might say!)

But to get back to the possible content of a psych anthro course: Can the diversity in the classroom or presence of immigrant groups in the community be used to introduce the subject of cultural diversity and cross-cultural comparisons? To start discussions of acculturation, if that word can still be used, or of some of the implications of culture change? An example that comes to mind is that of a Korean social work student who was concerned about intergenerational conflict among Korean immigrants she was working with. She was surprised to find many similarities with the situation of families in other immigrant groups. So perhaps a course on the psychological implications of culture change with special emphasis on migrants might be developed in conjunction with a program in social work? Or perhaps, in education, where teachers are to be taught awareness of diversity in the classroom. Here, I think, it is important to discuss words such as culture, race, language, ethnicity—the old topics, indeed, with reference to situations in the American classroom and campus as they exist now. This matter of differences and similarities might well be used in raising issues of cultural sensitivity in connection with programs in abnormal psych and even psychiatry, if that opportunity arises.
As you can see from these comments, I tend to think of psychological anthropology less as a specific list of topics or core subjects, but rather more as a perspective or point of view from which a series of anthropologically central subjects can be considered and perhaps illuminated. My own experience in teaching psych.anthro. for about 40 years has involved a range of the subjects and connections listed above. I am no longer teaching that course, which was originally billed as part of a social psych sequence in a department of sociology—a very long time ago.

If you get to teach only one course and not a sequence and you have a heterogenous class, as I had for many years, this may be an opportunity to take advantage of this diversity by letting students pursue a range of topics for their outside reports, perhaps present some of them in class. It is also possible to draw on students’ cross-cultural experience, and travels, as I mentioned before. Make them interview foreign students on campus, or immigrants in the community, or members of their families to become aware of cultural differences, to the extent that these do, or do not exist, as well as cultural and social change.
To put this in more explicit terms: we need to know who the members of our classes are, and take their preparation and interests into consideration. We must then move to build at least a minimum of common language. This means that for some students there will be some recapitulation of material from earlier courses, and these students might then be drawn into the
presentation of familiar materials to students who lack the particular background. This applies to a lack of psychology background for anthropology majors, as well as a lack of anthropological familiarity by students not only in psychology but other fields as well.

On a purely practical level, be aware of how much time is available for a course. At Ohio State, we have a quarter system, of ten weeks of classes, so that even though the class may meet every day, there is little time to read and digest between classes. Use films and videos. Here I think it is really important to allow for full discussion of the materials; this applies to readings as well. It is not enough to present materials and let students draw their own conclusions. I have found some of things that students see in illustrative materials surprising! But this in itself can be grist for the mill.

I wonder at this time how much of the history of psych.anthro. should be taught, or how much the course needs to be primarily a survey of topics that are currently under debate, such as those being discussed at this conference. We are probably all more likely to talk about "self" rather than about "personality", unlikely to offer images of national character structures or modal personalities. And when we talk of relativism, that word will have meanings that are importantly different from what it was 50 years ago. On the other hand, is it possible to make sense of current debates without some historical perspective? At the heart of it all is still the, or a, concept of culture, and
the need to create awareness of cultural differences and their implications. Here I suspect we would all be interested not only in overt behavior but also in meaning, experience, symbolism. Also some other "hot" issues, such as dissociation, and its pathological as well as nonpathological manifestations—I refer here to MPD as well as to trance states and possession beliefs in a religious context. In addition to "self" and dissociation, there is, of course, the topic of dreams, which seems to fascinate students, and which seems to be "hot" and appears in what seem to me to be unexpected place. While I was writing this, I heard a discussion of dreams and even an impromptu dream interpretation on the radio on Westcoast Live (8/26/95). The guest and interpreter was Naomi Apple, whose book Writers Dreams: 36 Writers Tell Their Dreams was recently published. Since I had just been reading Michele Stephen's remarkable book: Alissa's Gifts, about magic, and the self among the Makek of Papua New Guinea, in which dreams and dreaming play such a significant role, I was particularly struck by what these two examples shared and how importantly different they were. This brings me to a pedagogical point: I try to encourage students to develop selective perception, that is, to become alert to examples in their day to day experience of some of the things we talk about in class, for instance, how dreams and dreaming are treated in their environment, whether among the people they know, on news reports, Oprah or whatever they watch on TV.

If there is an opportunity to teach more than a single general
survey of psych.anthro, or a general survey seems not to fit your particular needs. What other courses can be developed? Child development from a cross-cultural perspective clearly is one such topic, but any of the sections of Phil Bock's handbook might serve as a basis for building a course (Greenwood, 1994). Ethnopsychiatry or psychiatric anthropology is one that might be taught, perhaps in conjunction with a sequence or program in medical anthropology. I have taught this as a graduate seminar, usually of an interdisciplinary nature, for a number of years, and will do so again in the Spring. There are different ways to go with this: emphasize psychiatry of a biomedical variety, the work of the World Health Organization, the Transcultural psychiatric program at McGill, the kinds of questions Kleinman and his associates have been dealing with, etc., including the appropriateness of various diagnostic and therapeutic measures to specific populations, the topic of culture-bound syndromes, including the applicability of this concept to manifestations in American society and the debate surrounding this. On the other hand, as I am increasingly tempted to do, one might focus on the overlap of religion and world view with diagnosis and healing. This should, of course, include American as well as Third World materials, for example reports on work such as that of Tom Csaardas on Catholic Charismatics. In this context it is interesting to look at "exotic" materials and have students consider comparisons with more familiar phenomena. I think here specifically of a several student papers in the past comparing various African therapeutic ritual systems with family therapy in
this country. In such graduate seminars I have had, in addition to anthropology students, people from psychology, social work, folklore, sociology, language programs, psychiatric residents, journalism and others. Their interactions and the experience they have available to draw on have made these seminars very interesting to me and lively and provocative to the students. I stress the students' professional backgrounds, but their ethnic identities, including that of immigrants and foreign students are of interest here; other types of cross-cultural experience are of course also relevant, e.g., peace corps, military service, study year abroad, etc. What I wish to stress in this discussion is that there has to be more than the reading of books and articles, though I certainly do not wish to minimize the importance of the literature. But the readings need to be highlighted or accentuated by some aspects of lived experience. Films and videos are only second best, but Les maitres fous or The Holy Ghost People do provide a certain intensity, and drama, to serve as a basis for the raising of questions and the exploration of psychological as well as cultural sameness as well as difference.

In sum, as must be clear from these remarks, I do not see a single standard psych anthro course. Even when people have used textbooks, they have always tended to pick and choose and to supplement, and that is the way it must be. On the other hand, I do think that whatever our individual theoretically stances and ethnographic experience and hence our preferred examples, these
must be balanced by the presentation of other positions and other
terms, to provide the student a sense of the diversity and the
excitement of the field.