



## Special section: Psychological anthropology

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### 1 Diversifying psychological anthropology

In this special section we introduce current research in psychological anthropology, a subdiscipline that sits at the cusp of anthropology and psychology, and which looks back at 100 years of scholarship in the USA, but has only recently (re-)emerged as concerted scholarly engagement in other domains. Psychological anthropology is in many regards related to cultural psychology, transcultural psychiatry, and cultural sociology as it shares their interest in human behavior and experience at the interface of culture, history, psychology, and psychiatry. It is, however, distinct from neighboring disciplines through its grounding in ethnography, a long-term perspective, and its openness to mixed methods that can include both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In the following, we point out why we think it is important for psychological anthropology to become a multi-sited and multi-vocal project that takes inspiration from US anthropology and extends to Europe and other academic landscapes.

In this first edition, we summarize how Germany-based anthropology in its founding phases inspired the project that later became psychological anthropology in the USA. We also describe how psychological anthropology became institutionalized in Germany and highlight current lines of research, before we contextualize the subsequent three papers of this special section, which converge on “environments of care” as an interweaving theme. The articles can be considered as an aperture of a continued series of contemporary research in psychological anthropology published in this journal. By prioritizing the contributions of scholars working in German-speak-

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ing academia as the initial focus of this special section we do not intend to foster epistemic nationalisms. On the contrary, our aim is to strengthen translocal research networks that highlight diversified research traditions and historical pathways in the broad context of psychological anthropology.

For many decades psychological anthropology had been a Northern American project, with only a few temporary outposts in other parts of the world. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that it has developed in an American fashion. However, this situation has changed over the last decades, as psychological anthropology has become institutionalized in a growing number of countries outside the USA, for example, in the UK, in Italy, Spain, and Germany. It is our conviction that psychological anthropology as an academic project will benefit greatly from a decentralization of its institutions as we believe that a plurality of discourses is badly needed in times of “contested knowledge.” Or, to put it differently: we hope that psychological anthropology eventually learns to stand on several legs, and not just on one.

A multi-vocal outline is especially necessary, as one of psychological anthropology’s main objectives consists in positioning itself against hegemonial discourses of the “good life,” and how they govern institutionalized formations of shaping selves and personhoods through schooling and laboring. Psychological anthropologists tackle questions of variation, ontogeny, and change with regard to human behavior, experience, and development. They show how populations vary in their psychological make-up, which factors in individual development account for such variations, and how individual motivations are related to institutional stability and change (LeVine 2010). This translates, for example, into the more precise questions of what kind of behaviors are considered to be “normal” in a sociocultural setting, how people define a “healthy life,” and which strategies and practices they choose to socialize and educate their children. However, how researchers perceive what people do in their field sites and how they interpret what they say strongly depends on their own socialization, up-bringing, and learned value systems. From this it follows that doing (psychological) anthropology is at its core based on implicit or explicit cultural comparison. For this reason, we need researchers from diverse sociocultural contexts, as their ways of seeing and interpreting the world might be different from each other and thus will help us to reveal conceptual constraints in thinking, experiencing, and feeling.

These differences not only exist between “North” and “South” (or “East” and “West”), they are not confined to the binaries of “wealthy” and “poor” or “privileged” and “unprivileged,” but they appear in ways that cannot be neatly categorized in geographical, social, or cultural terms or entities. What has formerly been called “the West”—a term that is still used in psychological sciences—is now increasingly seen as heterogeneous and diverse, partly also due to recent political developments within the “Euro-American” region.

From a German or European perspective, psychological anthropology is deeply embedded in American culture without its protagonists being always fully aware of it. The simple fact that we use English as a lingua franca to facilitate global communication has led to an “anglophone dominance” that can be experienced in many ways and on different levels of scientific exchange. For many non-native

speakers it is considerably more difficult to take part in global anglophone discourses than it is for researchers who grew up speaking English as a mother-tongue as they lack the capacity to understand nuances and often cannot reply with the same speed. For them publishing in English means that they have to invest more time than their colleagues in the USA, the UK, and other English-speaking countries on their achievements. As bi- or multi-linguals they are, however, familiar with different conceptual approaches of perceiving and being in the world—an experience that lies at the very heart of psychological anthropology.

We find ourselves in the midst of a rapidly changing world in which power relations are constantly being questioned, negotiated, and rearranged. Answers for postcolonial critique and postfactual politics still need to be found, not just in psychological anthropology but in society at large. The necessary and important debates about minority rights have become increasingly polarized. Academic debates are caught up in moralizing discourses (e.g., critical whiteness; cultural appropriation) in which subjective traumas and static concepts of culture as ethno-local entities sometimes prevent conflicting yet productive discussions. As we intend to shed light on systemic racism and chauvinism in academia, we are also troubled by the extremity of polarizing rhetoric on “culture” and “identity.” Psychological anthropologists are well-suited to contributing to such scholarly and political debates and we believe that their active involvement in diverse applied fields is badly needed.

## 2 Roots and routes: German (anthropology and) psychological anthropology

Before its long silence, Germany played an important role in the establishment of anthropology in the USA at the close of the nineteenth century<sup>1</sup>. There is an identifiable line of scholarship from Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) and Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) to Franz Boas (1858–1942), the founding father of cultural relativism and cultural anthropology in the USA, who was raised and educated in Germany before he migrated to the USA in 1886 because of limited career options in Ger-

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<sup>1</sup> Although German anthropology has not played a significant role since the 1920s, it has continually absorbed outside influence. In his account on the post-war history of anthropology in Germany, Dieter Haller lists the following characteristics to describe the uniqueness of German-based anthropology: an ethics of education derived from Humboldt, a sensibility for historical connections, a conviction that long-term fieldwork is important for understanding the specifics of a sociocultural setting, a certain skepticism about theories (as ideologies had been constantly misused in German history), the fact that material artefacts have never completely gotten out of sight when describing and theorizing about cultures, a romantic fascination about the foreign and unfamiliar, and – least but not last – the fact that both social anthropological and cultural anthropological traditions have been taught in the university curriculum (Haller 2012: 343). From the 1980s onward, most German anthropologists have followed a multiplicity of theoretical approaches. The mixing of different theoretical traditions was not seen as a contradiction but rather as a useful complementation (Haller 2012: 20). Despite frequently occurring institutional fighting over spheres of influence, German anthropology nevertheless can be described as comparatively open-minded. The German „middle way“ found its expression when the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde* (DGV) renamed itself in 2018 in *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie* (DGSKA), thus combining research traditions from the UK (social anthropology) and the USA (cultural anthropology) in its programmatic new name.

many owing to his Jewish descent. Boas studied physics and geography before his interests in anthropology were awakened. From 1882 to 1883 he worked at the Royal Ethnological Museum of Berlin under Bastian, from whom he took over the idea of psychic human unity. As early as 1869, Bastian had become a university lecturer in anthropology in Berlin (which was some 15 years before Edward Tylor took a position as a reader in anthropology at the University of Oxford). Bastian was originally a physician, who travelled extensively as a ship's doctor, which enabled him to gain a large body of ethnographic knowledge. He believed in the psychic unity of humanity and tried to prove in his numerous writings that cultural traits could be traced back to "elementary thoughts" (*Elementargedanken*), which were shared by all human beings regardless of the complexity of their culture (Hahn 2013; Rössler 2007).

The idea of psychic unity was also inherent in the teachings of Wilhelm Wundt, who was an all-round academic who not only founded the first laboratory for experimental psychological research and marked psychology as a separate discipline, different than philosophy and biology, in which it had been previously grounded, but also established a school of anthropological research that came to be known as *Völkerpsychologie* from the 1870s onward. Wundt was based in Leipzig, which in the second half of the nineteenth century had become one of the most innovative centers for anthropological study. In his teachings and writings, he further developed ideas taken from Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) and others about a *Volksgeist* or a *Volksseele*. The evolutionist Wundt believed that empirical facts could be used to speculate about the order of historical developments that correspond to the formation of a "collective psychic development of a people" (or *Volksseele*), which also includes ethics. However, Wundt, just like Bastian, was convinced that humans everywhere possess the same mental capacities and that differences had to be explained by environmental factors (Streck 2001).

This school of thought strongly influenced Boas, who throughout his career opposed evolutionist and racial thinking. He led the way for cultural relativism in the USA by proving that evolutionist and racial theories lacked an empirical basis (Boas 1940). Boas did not believe that some societies were further developed than others. For him, men and women in each setting had developed their sociocultural characteristics through an ongoing rational process of adaptation to the necessities of a specific environment. In Boas' view, anthropology was a discipline situated at the interfaces of natural sciences and history. It was neither the generalizing effort of the natural scientist, nor the careful putting together of specific details of the historian, which enabled anthropological research, but a conjunction of both. Conclusions about the histories of different peoples could only be drawn by carefully describing their cultural and linguistic characteristics and then comparing them with each other (Feest 2001; Hahn 2013; Darnell 2011). This, however, could only be done because humanity shared the same basic psychological make-up—the quintessential lesson Boas had learned from Bastian and Wundt.

In the last two decades of his life in particular, Boas developed an interest in the relationship between the individual and culture. He not only had great academic talents but was also a good organizer, as he managed to place many of his disciples in leading positions in anthropological institutions throughout the USA. His stu-

dents Edward Sapir (1884–1939), Margaret Mead (1901–1978), and Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) became the three founding members of the culture and personality school, which was later renamed psychological anthropology by Francis Hsu in 1961 (see Bock 1988; LeVine 2010; or upcoming Lowe 2023 on the history of the psychological anthropology movement in the USA).

Despite its promising start, research at the interface between anthropology and psychology in German-speaking academia was discontinued until the new millennium. Notable exceptions were the Zurich School of Ethnopschoanalysis, which was founded by the psychoanalyst Fritz Morgenthaler (1919–1984), the anthropologist and psychoanalyst Paul Parin (1916–2009), and his wife Goldy Parin-Matthèy (1911–1997) in the early 1950s in Switzerland. In the 1960s this team of three traveled together to West Africa to carry out extensive psychoanalytic research among the Agni and Dogon. Their aim was to gain new insights into psychoanalytic processes by applying psychoanalytic methods in a non-Western context. The Swiss ethnopschoanalysis project worked in close cooperation with the Hungarian-French anthropologist Georges Devereux (1908–1985), the founding father of ethnopschoanalysis in France, and was further developed by Mario Erdheim, Maya Nadig, Florence Weiss, or Jochen Bonz (Reichmayr 2016).

The ethnopschoanalysis project shares affinities with cultural psychology and contributed important methodical, theoretical, and transdisciplinary contributions to the broader anthropological project, whether through furthering our understanding of human socialization and the relationship between persons and sociocultural environments, or through illuminating the emotional-affective, cognitive, and physical ways in which persons relate to self and others. Since then, methodological, theoretical, and conceptual approaches to psychological anthropology have moved into rich new fields, becoming increasingly concerned with power asymmetries, critical epistemologies, and the social and human effects of universalizing “Western” psychologies. In the face of growing human and cultural interconnectedness, contemporary psychological anthropology has fostered important insights into new forms of inequality and structural violence in local and global contexts, into changing forms of human subjectivity, and into how different emotions, affects, and behaviors are understood, managed, and responded to in diverse settings.

In addition to the psychological anthropology units at Freie Universität Berlin (Birgitt Röttger-Rössler) and Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster (Helene Basu), anthropologists have founded the working group *AG Psychologische Anthropologie* at the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie* (DGSKA) in 2015. The working group comprises around 30 researchers, who contest the universalizing tendencies of psychological discourse, preferring to illuminate historically and socio-culturally situated concepts of self, personhood, and what it means to be human.

In short, psychological anthropologists broadly avoid postulating the “psyche” as an a priori given, rather understanding how different cultural understandings of “psyche” and “self” affect individual and social behavior and experience. This critical perspective at times conflicts with some of mainstream psychology’s key assumptions, according to which human beings are subjected to universal psychological patterns of feeling, thinking, and interacting. However, rather than only aiming

to refute such perspectives, psychological anthropologists seek to scrutinize, relativize, and contextualize them, thereby encouraging fruitful dialog and exchange with neighboring disciplines.

### 3 Environments of care

The subsequent three contributions reflect the diversity of themes and perspectives in this rejuvenated field of anthropology and are intended as an invitation to colleagues from different subdisciplines and academic landscapes to contribute their work to this periodical special section in psychological anthropology. The first article focusses on the silencing and ignorance toward queer persons' narratives in clinical everyday life and medical education. Annika Strauss takes the narrative and story of Ajay, a psychiatric in-patient, as a pathway into learning about the queer landscape in Mumbai (India) and about how local identity categories are socially constructed. The article takes up Ian Hackings' concept of "making up people," which depicts how the humanities create new classifications and knowledge, how people embody and perform these categories as social meanings and thereby manage issues of a vulnerable self and identity. By referring to diverse examples from South Asia and beyond, Strauss illustrates that "gender" and "sexuality" are not self-evident experiences but rather socio-cultural tools that extract certain information and feelings from the everyday stream of life before the purposes of making meaning about ourselves and others—a process that also includes representations.

In her sensorial exploration of urban environments Jeannine-Madeleine Fischer translates her protagonist's performative "City Walks" into activist practices of care in marginalized places in Durban (South Africa). By conceiving sensing as an active process new ethnographic pathways may emerge. The article illustrates how sensorial ways of caring can transcend boundaries of normativity, space, and time in the city. Fischer argues that urban walking practices of care have the potential to partially realize future visions of spatial and social justice within the urban environment.

Reflecting on her long-term fieldwork, Julia Vorhölder argues that care has become a key concept in psychological anthropology, and anthropology more broadly. Vorhölder points out that although the term generally evokes positive associations, anthropological studies mostly focus on the more ambivalent aspects of care such as paternalism, exploitation, or instrumentalism. The author rethinks anthropological critiques of care by drawing on examples from her research in Uganda where she accompanied a small group of local therapists, who were at the forefront of establishing psychotherapy as a new form of care in this East African country.

The articles remind us to retain some of the hopeful properties of care: not because critiques of care are invalid but because the contemporary global moment—characterized by widespread sentiments of powerlessness, futility, and paralysis in the face of climate change, pandemics, and war—calls for an anthropology that can do more than just critique. We believe that it is the responsibility of (psychological) anthropologists to care for others by sharing their knowledge with a broad range of people within and outside academia and not hesitating when it comes to putting visions into practice.

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