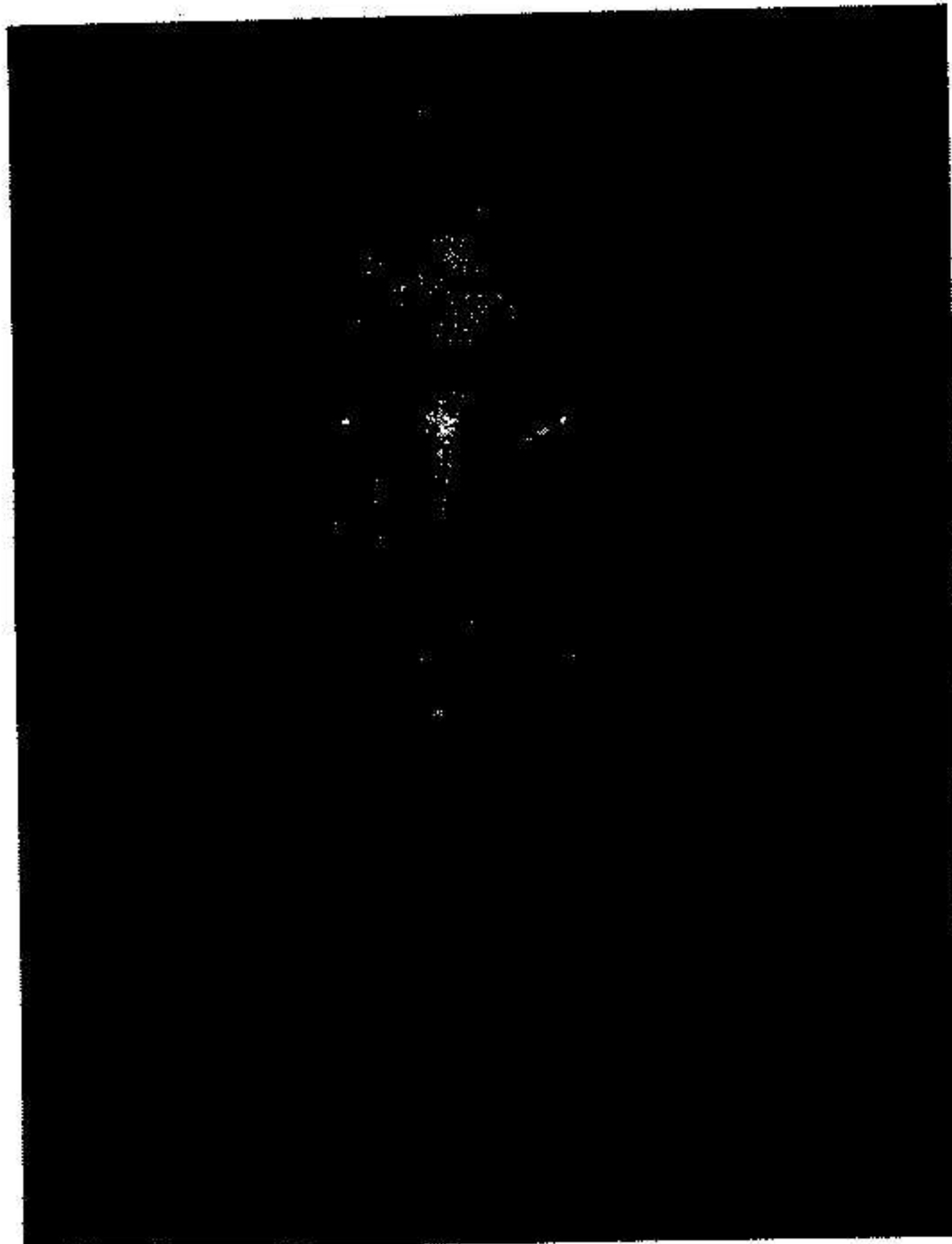


RUTH BENEDICT: CONFIGURATIONALISM AND THE PATTERNS OF CULTURE

Sapir's idea of configurations of culture was picked up and developed by his friend Ruth Benedict (1887–1948), also a student of Boas (for an overview, see Barnouw 1985: 59–75). Configuralism was “a latter-day Boasian paradigm,” the leading expositors of which were Sapir, Benedict and Margaret Mead (Adams 1998: 318). However, this perspective was soon adopted by a number of anthropologists, such as Morris Opler, Cora DuBois, and Clyde Kluckhohn, who were not trained by Boas but who shared his idealist epistemological point of view (Adams 1998: 318).

Benedict came to anthropology from a background in English literature at Vassar College. She was also a published poet who wrote under the pen name Anne Singleton (S. Barrett 1996: 57). Benedict received her doctorate at Columbia under Franz Boas in 1923 and thereafter remained closely associated with her teacher until his retirement in 1936. Benedict's early works, including her Ph.D. dissertation, were based on



Ruth Benedict, Boasian cultural anthropologist known for her interest in the relationship between culture and personality.

library research. She conducted a brief field study of the Serrano in southern California, in 1922, and subsequently conducted several summer field studies in the Southwest. Benedict's work among the Zuni became an important aspect of her most famous work, *Patterns of Culture* (1934).

Like many of her colleagues, Benedict shared her teacher's beliefs in cultural determinism and the idea of cultural relativism. "To the anthropologist," Benedict (1934: 1) wrote,

our customs and those of a New Guinea tribe are two possible social schemes for dealing with a common problem, and in so far as he remains an anthropologist he is bound to avoid any weighting of one in favor of another.²⁶

Moreover, like Sapir and other Boasians, Benedict was fully committed to a humanistic

anthropology. In words reminiscent of present-day interpretive anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz (1983: 19; see Chapter 13), Benedict (1948: 585) observed that

to my mind the very nature of the problems posed and discussed in the humanities are closer, chapter by chapter, to those in anthropology than are the investigations carried on in most of the social sciences.

Benedict was well aware that the diffusionist studies of culture had failed to yield any integrating principle. Instead, such studies demonstrated that when cultural traits are passed from one group to another they were combined in different ways with other traits in a random fashion and the degree of importance that a particular trait acquired as part of a new trait constellation varied from culture to culture. Benedict's 1923 library based Ph.D. research on the role of the "guardian spirit" among Native North Americans, which followed the Boasian diffusionist approach, confirmed this. Benedict found, for example, that among one group the concept of guardian spirit was associated with male puberty rites, among another it was a hereditary lineage marker, and among still another it appeared in association with vision quests (Benedict 1934: 39-43). Benedict (1923: 84-85) concluded that

it is, so far as we can see, an ultimate fact of human nature that man builds up his culture out of disparate elements, combining and recombining them; and until we have abandoned the superstition that the result is an organism functionally interrelated, we shall be unable to see our cultural life objectively, or to control its manifestations.

As Benedict's anthropological thought matured, however, she became uncomfortable with the diffusionist view espoused by Boasians such as Lowie, that cultural integration is nothing more than the totality of the linkages between its traits (cf. Leaf 1979: 222). Boas (1938: 680) himself had in his later years begun to entertain the "superstition," namely the idea that cultures

are integrated: "It seems more desirable and worth while to understand each culture as a whole and to define its character."

Benedict undertook the search for an underlying explanatory principle, or as Margaret Mead (1959: 204) put it, "some integrating principle that would explain both the disparate origins of elements of which a culture was built and the wholeness which she felt was there in each culture." Benedict came upon an answer sometime in the late 1920s and early 1930s. For her it was a people's shared basic attitudes and values that gave uniformity to behavior. Benedict presented an elaboration of her ideas in her highly influential book *Patterns of Culture* (1934), which gained her an international reputation (Mintz 1981: 144). Like the work of Kroeber, Benedict's work represents another permutation of the culture-comes-from-culture perspective, but along a different line, which led her to consider human psychological factors.

Benedict argued that cultural integration occurs not at the level of traits, trait complexes, technologies, economies, or ecological settings, but rather in the pattern of ideas and emotions characteristic of any given culture. In other words, order, what ties a culture together, exists in the minds of the members of the culture (cf. Leaf 1979: 223). These patterns make cultures into "articulated wholes" consistent with the temperament of their members. For Benedict "pattern" referred to a distinct underlying set of values and emotions people have that pervades and integrates their cultures. How traits are integrated in a particular culture is to a large degree determined by the emotional theme characterizing that culture. Benedict (1934: 49) wrote that

If we are interested in cultural processes, the only way in which we can know the significance of the selected detail of behaviour is against the background of the motives and emotions and values that are institutionalized in that culture.²⁷

Like Boas, Benedict stressed the plasticity of human behavior and the powerful impact of

culture in shaping that behavior. Moreover, the starkly contrasting patterns of culture Benedict described among such groups as the Zuñi, the Kwakiutl, and the people of Dobu served as examples of the primacy of culture over biology, which, as we have seen, was an essential feature of Boasian anthropology.

Benedict viewed each culture as occupying a segment of a vast continuum of variability, or "great arc" of culture. In other words, each culture was seen as having its own particular primary focus point to which considerable energy is devoted.

In culture . . . we must imagine a great arc on which are ranged the possible interests provided either by the human age-cycle or by the environment or by man's various activities. A culture that capitalized even a considerable proportion of these would be as unintelligible as a language that used all the clicks, all the glottal stops, all the labials, dentals sibilants, and gutturals from voiceless to voiced and from oral to nasal. Its identity as a culture depends upon the selection of some segments of this arc. Every human society everywhere had made such selection in its cultural institutions. Each from the point of view of another ignores fundamentals and exploits irrelevancies. One culture hardly recognizes monetary values; another had made them fundamental in every field of behaviour. In one society technology is unbelievably slighted even in those aspects of life which seem necessary to ensure survival; in another, equally simple, technological achievements are complex and fitted with admirable nicety to the situation. One builds an enormous cultural superstructure upon adolescence, one upon death, one upon after-life (Benedict 1934: 24).²⁸

Benedict elaborated on the idea that different cultures may come to emphasize particular features that then become central and around which other aspects of that society are organized:

The diversity of cultures can be endlessly documented. A field of human behaviour may be ignored in some societies until it barely exists; it may even be in some cases unimagined. Or it may

almost monopolize the whole organized behaviour of the society, and the most alien situations be manipulated only in its terms. Traits having no intrinsic relation one with the other, and historically independent, merge and become inextricable, providing the occasion for behaviour that has no counterpart in regions that do not make these identifications. It is a corollary of this that standards, no matter in what aspect of behaviour, range in different cultures from the positive to the negative pole (Benedict 1934: 45).²⁹

She reiterated this point of view in her 1938 paper on religion:

Religion is a spotlight that swings quite indiscriminately, in one region bringing it about that property and all the concepts that center around it are religiously guaranteed, and in another leaving property entirely secular; in one region centering upon weather control, in another upon curing (Benedict 1938: 648).³⁰

Benedict was expressing the Boasian assumption that institutions are purposeless (i.e., spotlights that swing indiscriminately) and operate virtually independently from the material requirements of human life.

The selection of any segments of the arc of human possibilities by any culture, as Benedict saw it, was not dictated by external factors such as economy, environment, demography, or technology. The reason one domain of culture takes on great significance in one place and another domain elsewhere is to be accounted for entirely in terms of internal cultural dynamics. This approach was perfectly consistent with Boas's teachings that cultural integration was psychological in nature, according to the *Geist* or spirit of a people, and was based upon unconscious categories and dominant ideas (cf. Stocking 1974: 8).

For Benedict (1934: 37) cultural variations and permutations were infinite: "[t]he possibilities are endless and the adjustments are often bizarre." She added, "The diversity of the possible combinations is endless, and adequate social

orders can be built indiscriminately upon a great variety of these foundations" (1934: 44).

In Benedict's view, any culture could develop along any trajectory because of its internal dynamics. However, Benedict maintained that it was impossible to specify why individual cultures developed along any given pattern (R. Barrett 1991: 84). Benedict (1934: 254) added that "any society selects some segment of the arc of possible human behavior, and in so far as it achieves integration its institutions tend to further the expression of its selected segments and inhibit its opposite expressions." Cultures, in other words, come in infinite varieties and why any particular culture develops along a particular trajectory cannot be explained.

Benedict attributed total determining force to culture by arguing that once a set of values came into existence they acquired a determining influence of their own completely detached from external factors. Placing the locus of cultural organization and integration in the level of subjective thought was again consistent with Boas's ideas (Hatch 1973: 80).

It was the influence of Benedict's work that, in accordance with Boas's teachings, further emphasized the idea of "cultures" in the plural in American anthropological thought. Her work led, once and for all, to the abandonment of the conception of culture in the singular, which was most often equated with "civilization" (Langness 1993: 108).

For Benedict (1934: 48), all aspects of culture were subject to the determining force of the underlying emotional pattern or configuration. For this reason, some refer to Benedict's formulation as **configurationalism** (Salzman 2001: 70). This is because "all miscellaneous behavior directed toward getting a living, mating, warring, and worshipping the gods, is made over into consistent patterns in accordance with unconscious canons of choice that develop within the culture." The circularity of reasoning here is fairly easy to see.

Each culture, according to Benedict, not only has a distinct and unique configuration of traits, but each one also has its own unique emotional configuration (feelings and motivations). "Cultures from this point of view," wrote Benedict (1932: 24), "are individual psychology thrown large upon the screen, given gigantic proportions and a long time span." Culture, in turn, determines people's personality by favoring "temperament types" best suited to it (Benedict 1934: 258). For psychological anthropologists **personality** refers to

a more or less enduring organization of forces within the individual associated with a complex of fairly consistent attitudes, values, and modes of perception which account, in part, for the individual's consistency of behavior (Barnouw 1985: 8).

Benedict postulated a one-to-one relationship between culture and personality. The primary mechanism through which a culture's core values are instilled in its members, a process called **enculturation**, is through child-rearing practices. Parents using positive and negative sanctions teach their offspring the traits from their culture's segment of the arc, thereby molding the child into a particular personality type (Benedict 1949: 342-343). Thus human nature is shaped by the primary values of the culture to the degree that nearly all members come to believe that "their particular institutions reflect an ultimate and universal sanity" (Benedict 1934: 254). This does not mean, however, that Benedict (1934: 220) thought every member of a particular culture had the same temperament:

No anthropologist with a background of experience in other cultures has ever believed that individuals were automatons, mechanically carrying out the decrees of their civilization. No culture yet observed has been able to eradicate the differences in the temperament of the persons who compose it. It is always a give-and-take.³¹

Benedict observed that every culture contains individuals that deviate from the "personality

type selected by their culture." However, because cultural values are relative, deviance itself is relative as well. Thus one culture's madman can easily be another culture's saint or prophet. Among the Dobu, the man who is friendly is a deviant, while the man held in the highest esteem among the Plains cultures would be the deviant among the Pueblos. Similarly, the prestigious Potlatch chief of the Kwakiutle would be a megalomaniac paranoid in Euro-American culture (Benedict 1934: 195).

For Benedict, the personality types of entire cultures could be described in terms of a single trait. Thus the Dobuans of Melanesia were "paranoid," the Kwakiutl of the Northwest Coast of North America were "megalomaniacs," and the Pueblos of New Mexico, passive and unemotional. These characterizations were more than simply stereotypes, Benedict maintained, but were generalizations made on the basis of a careful comparison of the entire institutional and ideological aspects of each culture.

Because culture determines personality, people from different cultures therefore act, feel, and think differently. The implication here is that cultures are not only entities unique unto themselves but also that they are incommensurable with one another. Benedict was espousing the idea of the "radical plurality" of culture, arguing that each culture produces a set of unique and culturally particular human characteristics. The uniqueness of cultures, in turn, implies that the range of cultural diversity, the great arc of potentialities, is all but limitless. Human thought and behavior are therefore the product of each distinct culture, rather than "pan-human culture." Because cultures are radically different, they are incommensurable with one another.

Benedict's ideas reflect the Boasian particularistic and relativistic perspective that each culture can only be studied in its own terms. Stiffened variants of these ideas, as we shall see, reappear in the writings of present-day epistemophobic, antitheory interpretive anthropologi-

cal writers, who go on to argue that culture produces an essential "otherness" or difference between humans. Related to this is their fixation on the "politics of identity," which as one anthropologist put it "makes for little dramas, but doesn't do anything meaningful politically."

For postmodern anthropological writers this "otherness" precludes the possibility of anyone ever achieving true cross-cultural understanding. Benedict, however, never entertained the idea that it was impossible to understand another culture. As she pointed out in her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946),

A conviction of difference is dangerous only if a student rests content with saying simply that these differences are so fantastic that it is impossible to understand such people. The anthropologist has good proof in his experience that even bizarre behavior does not prevent one's understanding it (Benedict 1946: 10).³²

The present-day notion of the difference of the "cultural Other" has in fact led cultural constructionist anthropologists to rest content by saying that these differences are indeed so fantastic that it is impossible to understand other cultures.

Benedict's idea that culture was the primary determinant of the personality of its members became the central thesis of the **culture and personality** approach in American anthropology (Barnouw 1985; Langness 1993: 108). Among the first noteworthy works to investigate the relationship between culture and personality was Cora Du Bois's study of the inhabitants of the Indonesian island of Alor. In her study *The People of Alor* (1944), Du Bois relied upon a statistical concept called **modal personality**. Modal personality refers to a central tendency that appears in a society with a higher frequency distribution and entails the use of projective techniques, such as the administration of the **Rorschach test** and the **thematic apperception test** to sample populations. Today, many psychological anthropologists speak of a

basic modal, or typical personality, when referring to personality configurations in a given culture.

Inspired by Benedict's ideas, other anthropologists conducted studies focusing upon the relationships between personality and child-rearing practices such as swaddling (Gorer and Rickman 1949), contact between mother and child (Caudill and Weinstein 1969), and economic factors and modes of production (Barry et al. 1959; Edgerton 1965; Goldschmidt 1965).

Benedict: The Configuration of Cultures in New Mexico and the Great Plains

Benedict's psychological portraits of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and the Indians of the Great Plains enables us to gain insight into her approach to the study of culture and personality. To describe the cultural configurations among different groups, Benedict adopted terms from the German philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche's** study of Greek drama. Benedict thus characterized Pueblo culture as "Apollonian" and the Great Plains Indians as the diametrically opposite "Dionysian." She explicated the contrast as follows:

The basic contrast between the Pueblos and the other cultures of North America is the contrast that is named and described by Nietzsche in his studies of Greek tragedy. He discusses two diametrically opposed ways of arriving at the values of existence. The Dionysian pursues them through "the annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence"; he seeks to attain in his most valued moments escape from the boundaries imposed upon him by his five senses, to break through into another order of experience. The desire of the Dionysian, in personal experience or in ritual, is to press through it toward a certain psychological state, to achieve excess. The closest analogy to the emotions he seeks is drunkenness, and he values the illuminations of frenzy. With Blake, he believes "the path of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." The Apollonian distrusts all this, and has often lit-

the idea of the nature of such experiences. He finds means to outlaw them from his conscious life. He "knows but one law, measured in the Hellenic sense." He keeps the middle of the road, stays within the known map, does not meddle with disruptive psychological states. In Nietzsche's fine phrase, even in the exaltation of the dance he "remains what he is, and retains his civic name" (Benedict 1934: 78-79).³³

Benedict construed the cultures she studied in these terms. She described the Pueblos as having a suspicion of individualism and valuing the submergence of the will of the individual into the will of the group. Restraint, conformity to tradition and precedence, and moderation were exalted over individual initiative and innovation, according to Benedict. Furthermore, according to her description, the Pueblos were placid, unemotional and avoided excesses. Ecstatic religious experiences, the use of hallucinogenic drugs, and self-mutilation, so prominent among the Great Plains cultures, were absent among the Pueblos.

In stark contrast, Benedict depicted the Dionysian Plains Indians as warlike, individualistic, self-reliant, ambitious, and competitive. They valued "all violent experiences" and sought individual supernatural powers to help them in the vagaries of warfare and aggressive competition. Benedict (1934: 81) described the vision quest of the Plains warriors as follows:

Dionysian
In the western plains men sought these visions with hideous tortures. They cut strips from the skins of their arms, they struck off fingers, they swung themselves from tall poles by straps inserted under the muscles of their shoulders. They went without food and water for extreme periods. They sought in every way to achieve an order of experience set apart from daily living. It was grown men, on the plains, who went out after visions. Sometimes they stood motionless, their hands tied behind them, or they staked out a tiny spot from which they could not move till they had received their blessing. Sometimes . . . they wandered over distant regions, far out into dangerous country. Some tribes chose precipices and places especially

associated with danger. At all events a man went alone, or, if he was seeking his vision by torture and someone had to go out with him to tie him to the pole from which he was to swing till he had his supernatural experience, his helper did his part and left him alone for his ordeal.³⁴

Benedict was drawing a contrast between cultures that accentuated conformity and moderation with those that stressed extravagance and individual display (R. Barrett 1991: 84). As far as Benedict was concerned, her typology of the Pueblo and Plains Indians in terms of cultural configurations she called Apollonian and Dionysian was sufficient to explain the differences between the two groups. In other words, the two groups were different because their cultures differed.

The differences in question between the Pueblo and Plains Indians, of course, are explicable in terms of different subsistence systems and different ecological adaptations. The Pueblos were farmers who lived in villages and followed a routine of planting, harvesting, and storage of crops in an annual cycle. Conformity to precedence and tradition was desired, as in all agrarian communities, while individual initiative and inventiveness that would disrupt the agricultural cycle were viewed with suspicion and discouraged.

The Great Plains Indians, on the other hand, were nomadic horseback buffalo hunters who engaged in intense marauding warfare. They possessed institutions that engendered self-reliance through demonstrations of bravery and tolerance of pain and hardship and extolled the virtues of the warrior, all characteristics necessary for survival in the highly competitive and warlike environment of the Great Plains. These traits were also necessary for success as nomadic horseback buffalo hunters, which required reliance upon individual initiative, resourcefulness, and quick thinking.

The marauding warfare complex in the Great Plains, which evolved following European contact and the introduction of horses and firearms,

has been described as a system of free enterprise (R. Barrett 1991: 84). There were opportunities for any man to attain great status through displays of individual acts of bravery in warfare, seizing enemy horses or weapons, being victorious in hand-to-hand combat, and competing with one another for prestige.

What Benedict provided in her *Patterns of Culture* was description, not explanation. She did not address the question of why the Plains Indian cultures were so different from those of the Pueblos. Benedict did not believe that there were any causal connections between ecology, subsistence, and culture. As we have seen, she thought that it was impossible to specify why cultures developed along any particular pattern. Just as in the works of Kroeber, the idea of adaptation was absent from Benedict's work as well. True to the Boasian program, she seemed content to artfully describe the diversity of human cultural patterns without seeing the need to explain them.

In this, Benedict's work has much in common with that of present-day writers who have retreated to ethnographic particularism. Her answer to why the Plains Indians were so different from the Pueblos was simply to say that cultures are different because they are different and quoting a saying from among the Digger Indians:

God gave to every people a cup, a cup of clay, and from their cup they drank their life. . . . They all dipped in the water . . . but their cups were different (Benedict 1934: 21–22).³⁵

The statement that cultures are different because they are different is a proposition in which the conclusion is already present in the premise. The logically vacuous circularity in argument is all too evident and entails the logical fallacy of begging the question. As such, Benedict's formulations do not advance our understanding of sociocultural phenomena.

Benedict has been criticized for selective omission and de-emphasis of contradictory and

incompatible ethnographic data in constructing the psychological configurations described in *Patterns of Culture*. Moreover, Benedict has been criticized for a lack of methodological rigor and highly impressionistic and scientifically unreliable procedures (Harris 2001: 404, 407). Her attempt to describe the personality types of whole cultures under a single label is also seen to be a gross oversimplification.

Benedict and the Samurai: Anthropology from a Distance

During World War II, Benedict worked for the Bureau of Overseas Intelligence, in the Office of War Information in Washington, D.C. During this time a number of anthropologists were recruited to conduct research to promote the war effort. Benedict was asked to provide anthropological information on Japanese cultural values and how these might influence Japanese behavior during the war.

Benedict's attempt to discern the "national character" of the enemy, which had to be done without fieldwork, since the United States was at war with Japan, came to be known as "cultures at a distance" or **national character studies** (see the volume edited by Mead and Métraux 1953). Benedict had to rely on written accounts by Westerners, interviews with Japanese-Americans, and a variety of other materials, such as Japanese films, mythology, and propaganda pamphlets.

She applied the idea of cultural configurations to the study of the dominant theme or core values of Japanese culture. Her findings were presented in the book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), from which I earlier cited a passage. In this work, Benedict described the Japanese in terms of dual traits, preoccupation with aesthetics (hence the chrysanthemum) and militarism (hence the sword). *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* became the model for many other national character studies that were motivated by

the endeavor during World War II to understand the character of enemies and allies. Geoffrey Gorer (1943) produced a similar study on the Japanese. Erik Erikson (1963: 326–358) provided an analysis of German national character and the cultural reasons for Hitler's appeal to German youth.

The adequate description and interpretation of the personality patterns of other cultures requires a depth of understanding and familiarity with those other cultures that was lacking in the studies cited here. Stereotyping was therefore the end result in most cases.

In general, the one lesson of national character studies was not that they shed light on the personality structure of other peoples but rather what they reveal regarding the follies of research based on over simplifications and insubstantial data (see Haring 1949).

Benedict's work, regardless of its serious shortcomings, was influential in pointing out to anthropologists the importance of considering personality as an aspect of the cultures they studied. This led to a number of attempts to develop more sophisticated methods for measuring and describing personality traits and personality structures cross-culturally in a trend generally known as "culture and personality" studies, as noted previously (see Barnouw 1985; Suárez-Orozoco et al., 1994; Wallace 1970; Whiting and Child 1953).

Although the theoretical contributions of Benedict's work (and the work of her student Margaret Mead, which I shall discuss next) were far from being earth shattering, this was not the case with respect to the intellectual impact of her work. As Harris (2001: 409) put it,

The artful presentation of cultural differences to a wide professional and lay public by Mead and Benedict must be reckoned among the important events in the history of American intellectual thought. The significance of their contributions as far as cultural theory is concerned cannot be regarded as of a similar magnitude.³⁶