



## The influence of Jewish culture on cultural psychiatry: personal reflections

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**Abstract** *The purpose in this paper is to briefly outline the theoretical foundations of cultural psychiatry; to describe some of the characteristics of Jewish culture; to outline some aspects of the culture of medicine and psychiatry as a medical discipline; and to draw some comparisons between anthropology and psychiatry. With this material as background, this article intends to describe the influence of Jewish culture on the development of the field of cultural psychiatry, mainly during the second half of the twentieth century. The works of several people who have had a major influence on theory and research in cultural psychiatry during the twentieth century will be considered. Not all of these luminaries in cultural psychiatry's evolution are Jewish, but all of them have been strongly affected by their Jewish family background and/or by Jewish mentors in their professional lives. Finally, several current contributors to the evolution of cultural psychiatry in the twenty-first century will be mentioned, who are carrying forward the influence of Jewish culture in their work.*

**Key words:** Cultural psychiatry, Jewish culture, history of psychiatry

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### The theoretical foundations of cultural psychiatry

There are three domains of knowledge that form the foundations of cultural psychiatry as a clinical discipline and as a field of research; 1) medical and biological sciences, 2) social sciences; anthropology in particular, and 3) psychology and psychoanalysis. While the first of these three domains has been evolving for many centuries, it is only in the last century that anthropology, psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis have flourished and explored the inter-relationships between cultural beliefs, values and behaviors, in terms of normative and highly stressful conditions.

Emil Kraepelin was one the earliest of medical contributors to the field of 'comparative psychopathology'. Freud and Jung were both fascinated with the historical, religious and cultural roots of human behavior. Their writing had a strong influence on social and cultural anthropologists of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; including Roheim, Malinowski and Kroeber, and later Benedict, Bateson, Mead, Kluckhohn, Opler, Devereux and many others.

### Some descriptive characteristics of Jewish culture

Since the beginning of the Diaspora, Jewish communities throughout the world have shared, to a greater or lesser extent, the characteristics of being a discriminated against minority group, often restricted in their freedom of movement, in their access to educational institutions of the nations in which they lived. Jews were prohibited from involvement in many occupations. They were often ghettoized and forced to practice their religion surreptitiously. They were the subject of a

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great deal of negative stereotyping and were often the object of intense persecution. Almost everywhere, they were excluded from military and political participation, and especially from leadership positions. In their efforts to cope with such prejudice and discrimination, Jews tried to avoid confrontation with the majority population, adopted a demeanor of long-suffering accommodation and 'kept a low profile'. These very characteristics, intended to avoid harm, were the stuff of further negative stereotyping and further discrimination. In response, a 'ghetto mentality' developed in Jewish communities, characterized by intense fears of persecution, suspiciousness and avoidance of contact with 'outsiders' and seeking solace in family, religious and communal activities, away from the hostile glare of outsiders. The positive features of the life of such communities included perseverance in the face of discrimination and adversity, and both faith and the determination not to give up that faith; as the cornerstone of their survival, as individuals and as communities of shared burdens and shared convictions.

### **Psychiatry and the culture of medicine**

If we think of medicine and all medical institutions as a culture of its own, we could say that as a specialty of medicine, psychiatry has long been perceived as a marginal and low status specialty, viewed with suspicion and negatively stereotyped by the hierarchies of other, more 'mainline' disciplines such as internal medicine and surgery. This made psychiatry a marginalized and relatively powerless...one might even say discriminated against...specialty within the hierarchy of organized medicine throughout most of the twentieth century.

Looked at in a somewhat different way, psychiatry was viewed as the medical discipline that served among the most marginalized, powerless, feared and discriminated against of almost all medical patients. For a large part of the last century, psychiatric patients, and also to a considerable extent, the staff who cared for them, were sequestered from the 'normal' population in 'asylums', farm communities and hospitals; somewhat analogous to 'leper colonies', and kept out of sight to the extent possible. Comparatively few national resources were directed to the care of the mentally ill during those long decades in the last century. Psychiatric patients were the underserved, the underinsured and the stigmatized.

### **Anthropologists and psychiatrists**

For more than a hundred years, anthropologists have been living with and studying the cultural ways of minority populations; usually indigenous tribes and/or isolated communities within nation states. Anthropologists have striven to understand and describe the beliefs, life experiences, values, communal organization and aspirations of 'their people', most of whom could also be characterized not only by their isolation, but also by their economic and political powerlessness within the national society, and viewed by the majority population with skepticism, negativity, prejudice and discrimination. In this context, the work of anthropologists, somewhat analogous to psychiatrists in their work with the mentally ill, can be seen as valuing and validating the devalued and the powerless in society, giving voice to and empowering the disdained and disenfranchised, helping those to whom little help is given and little hope is offered. That is, anthropologists, like psychiatrists, are 'outsiders' who devote their effort to helping other 'outsiders'.

### Some luminary figures in the evolution of cultural psychiatry in the twentieth century

After Kraepelin, Jung and Freud, the major contributors to the advance of cultural psychiatry in the second half of the twentieth century that are most relevant to the theme of this paper, on the impact of Jewish culture on cultural psychiatry, are Abram Kardiner, Erik Erikson, Eric Wittkower and Robert Coles. In the following sections of this article, I will try to delineate the complex connections between their personal background and upbringing, their professional interests, and the influence of Jewish culture on their life and work.

#### Abram Kardiner

American-born physician and psychiatrist Abram Kardiner (1891-1981) went to Vienna in the 1920s in order to undertake a one-year psychoanalysis (standard duration in those early days of the psychoanalytic movement) with Freud himself. Kardiner subsequently developed and led the inter-disciplinary faculty seminar on culture and personality at Columbia University, in the 1930s and 1940s, that included some of the most eminent anthropologists of that era. The members of that group, including Edward Sapir, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Cora DuBois and Ralph Linton, along with Kardiner himself, contributed greatly to research in ‘culture and personality’.

In 1939, Kardiner and Linton published *The Individual and Society* (1939), followed in 1945 by *The Psychological Frontiers of Society*. Then, in 1951, Kardiner and his psychoanalytic colleague, Lionel Ovesey, published *The Mark of Oppression: A Psychosocial Study of the American Negro*. In these works, Kardiner formulated the theory of ‘basic personality structure’, integrating psychoanalysis with sociology and anthropology, and drawing on the historical period to provide context and meaning; in a way that would subsequently have a direct impact on Erikson’s work.

#### Erik H Erikson

##### *Family background and early years*

Erik Erikson lived through most of the twentieth century. He was born in 1902, in Germany, and died in 1994, in America. His mother, Karla Abrahamsen, was German-Jewish. His father’s background and other descriptive details are not known, other than that he was Danish. He left Erikson’s mother before Erik was born, and she did not talk about him.

When Erik was three years old, his mother married Theodor Homberger, Erik’s pediatrician, who was German-Jewish, like his mother. Erik grew up in Karlsruhe, in southern Germany. As a youth Erik was tall, blond and blue-eyed. Accordingly, at the synagogue, and at Jewish community activities, he was teased and ridiculed by his Jewish peers because of his “un-Jewish” Nordic appearance; whereas, at the public school he attended, he was taunted and discriminated against because of his Jewish background and upbringing.

##### *Youth and young adulthood experience*

Erikson rebelled against conformity in his youth and young adulthood. He rejected his father’s example of university education and a career in medicine. Instead he became an artist and lived a ‘bohemian lifestyle’. He never completed university. He drifted to Vienna in his early twenties, became friendly with some of the people there who were immersed in the psychoanalytic movement, and was drawn to it himself. He was analyzed by Anna Freud in the 1920s. He worked at the periphery of the psychoanalytic movement, interested in child development, and in creativity. Like Anna Freud, he became a child psychoanalyst. He also kept up his activities as an artist...and married a Canadian ballerina.

*Erikson's professional life in America*

In 1934 Erikson and his wife left Vienna for America. They settled in Boston, where Erik established a practice in child psychoanalysis; the first in Boston. He subsequently was invited to join the faculty of Harvard University. He was probably Harvard's first faculty member who had not earned any university degree. When he became a naturalized American citizen, he chose a new name for himself; Erik Erikson. Homberger became his middle name, in honor of his adoptive father. Soon after he settled in Boston, he became familiar with, and then strongly influenced by, the 'culture and personality' group at Columbia University, established by the psychoanalyst Abram Kardiner, along with such distinguished anthropologists as Ralph Linton, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Cora DuBois, Gregory Bateson, Edward Sapir and William Caudill.

*Erik Erikson; the growth of his work*

In Erikson's case, the Columbia group's focus on culture and personality, in combination with psychoanalytic theory, fit smoothly with Erikson's perspective on personality development in childhood that was familiar to him from his involvement with the child psychoanalytic movement in Vienna. However, Erikson added a dimension of his own; how the historical period in which an individual grew up influenced the personality and the leadership characteristics of historically important people. This theme was clearly demonstrated in one of his first published papers in a major American psychiatric journal; "Hitler's Imagery and German Youth", published in *Psychiatry*, in 1942. This was also his first paper, in what would later be defined as 'studies in psychohistory'. Considering his own background and upbringing, and his precipitous emigration from Vienna to Boston in the face of the emergence of Nazism, his interest in Hitler's impact on German youth takes on a very personal significance.

The influence of the Columbia group on Erikson's research on personality formation in childhood and youth led Erikson to study two Native American tribes; the Lakota Sioux of the Plains, and the Yurok of the Northwest. These and closely related studies led to the publication, in 1950, of the landmark volume; *Childhood and Society*. This work applied the theoretical background of culture and personality studies to understanding personality development in the context of the particular cultural history, traditions and values of two very different Native American tribes; the nomadic, hunting and warrior Lakota Sioux and the village-dwelling, fishing and farming Yuroks of the Pacific Northwest. Erikson emphasized the historical and cultural influences on group and on individual personality development. From this work emerged Erikson's theoretical formulation of "identity formation" through the life cycle, that soon came to be called the "psychosocial theory of personality development", in contrast to Freud's "psychosexual theory of personality development". The theoretical differences between these two perspectives have informed much of the field research in cultural psychiatry over the past fifty years.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Erikson continued his analysis of the historical, cultural and psychological factors that shaped the lives of specific individuals whose 'radical and rejected ideas', and whose perseverance and faith in their own convictions ultimately changed the world. In 1958, his study *Young Man Luther; A Study of Psychoanalysis and History* was published, followed, in 1969, by *Gandhi's Truth; On the Origin of Militant Nonviolence*. These two books were not only praised by scholars in the fields of history, political science, the social sciences, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. They were also widely acclaimed by the general public and received national book awards; thereby creating a wide following for the new field of 'psychohistory'. Erikson's monograph *Identity and the Life Cycle*, published in 1959, laid out the theoretical foundations of his psychosocial theory of personality development from infancy to old age. His book, *Identity*;

*Youth and Crisis*, published in 1968, consolidated the theoretical intersections of psychoanalysis, history and social sciences.

### Eric Wittkower

#### *Family background and developmental years*

The fabric of Eric Wittkower's family and personal life is woven of criss-crossing strands from Scotland, Germany, England and Canada. He was born in Berlin in 1899 and died in Montreal in 1983. He lived a very full and remarkable life during those tumultuous decades. Eric's father was of German-Jewish background, part of a large merchant family with business interests in Germany and in Britain. Eric's father, as well as his three paternal uncles, were born and grew up in Edinburgh, but moved to Berlin, to work in the family business there, before Eric was born. Because his father maintained a strong affiliation with Britain, Eric was registered, after his birth in Berlin, as a British subject. The Wittkower family suffered intense discrimination during WW1, being British subjects, of Jewish background, living in Germany during the war. Eric's father was imprisoned; charged with being a British spy. So were his three British-born uncles, who had also resettled in Germany many years before WW1. Eric himself was expelled from school; because of being British, and Jewish. After the war, Eric was able to complete his secondary education in Berlin and go on to university there, studying medicine in the 1920s. He had great academic ability and aspired to an academic career. However, he was told by his professors that if he hoped to be awarded a doctoral degree at Berlin University, he would have to produce a doctoral thesis far superior to any thesis submitted by his non-Jewish peers. It was.

#### *Starting an academic career in Berlin*

He trained in internal medicine and psychiatry in Berlin, and was subsequently appointed to the Medical Faculty, where he did research in the emerging field of psychosomatic medicine. However, Wittkower's promising academic career at Berlin University came to an abrupt end in 1933, when he was fired from his academic and clinical positions, in the wake of the rise of Nazism and virulent anti-Semitism. Faced with numerous threats to his own and his German-Jewish wife's safety, Eric and his wife fled Germany for England in 1934.

#### *Wittkower in WW2; intelligence officer in the British army*

In pre-WW2 London, Wittkower was able to do physiological research in a medical school context. During WW2 he served as an intelligence officer in the British Army, working on studies of German personality and character structure; strongly influenced by the 'culture and personality' theories of Kardiner, Mead, Linton, Benedict and others at Columbia University. Ironically, though perhaps not surprisingly, Wittkower was suspect by and experienced intense resentment from, some of his British Army superior officers and peers, because of both his German and his Jewish background. During his years in England, Wittkower completed a Kleinian analysis and became a training psychoanalyst himself.

#### *Wittkower in Canada, and the start of "Transcultural Psychiatry" at McGill*

In 1951 Wittkower emigrated to Canada, invited by Ewen Cameron, head of the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University, to establish a research unit in psychosomatic medicine. A few years later he started another academic program at McGill, in what he named "transcultural psychiatry". In 1956, together with anthropologist Jack Fried, Wittkower started the Transcultural Psychiatric Research Newsletter. In 1961 it became the *Transcultural Psychiatry Research Review*. Since the 1990s that journal is called *Transcultural Psychiatry* and is edited by Laurence Kirmayer, who is also the current director of the Section of Transcultural Psychiatric Studies of McGill's Department of Psychiatry.

### Robert Coles

Robert Coles was born in Boston in 1929. He is still very much alive and continuing to write articles and books. He has published an extraordinary volume of work in psychiatry and child psychiatry, focusing particularly on the theme of how children who grow up in families and communities discriminated against on the basis of racial, ethnic and religious differences from the majority population, learn to cope with discrimination. He has been one of the most powerful psychiatrist writers in the past fifty years. His five-volume opus, *Children of Crisis*, describing in vivid terms the intrinsic dignity, resilience and strength of character of his subjects, has had a huge impact on the fields of literature, philosophy and political science, as well as being unique in psychiatry and the social sciences, and a landmark achievement in cultural psychiatry qualitative field research.

#### *Education and early professional years*

Unlike Kardiner, Erikson and Wittkower, Coles' family background is not Jewish. His father was English and Protestant. His mother was American and Catholic. However, his professional life has been strongly influenced by Jewish mentors; particularly Erik Erikson. Coles was drawn to both medicine and literature from youth. During his college years at Harvard University, he was strongly influenced by the physician-writer William Carlos Williams. After graduating from Harvard in 1950, Coles went on to Columbia University medical school, with the intention of becoming a pediatrician, like Williams, and providing care for the most under-served of the urban poor. He graduated from Columbia University medical school in 1954. As an undergraduate at Harvard in the late 1940s, Coles studied with Erik Erikson. He became Erikson's academic assistant for his course on Childhood and Society. Coles trained as a psychiatrist and child psychiatrist in the Harvard hospital system in the late 1950s, influenced by his experience with Erikson. He developed an enduring interest in psychoanalytic theory and the psychoanalytic method of data gathering, due in large part to Erikson's influence. Erikson and Coles became friends and colleagues. In 1970, Coles published *Erik H Erikson; The Growth of his Work*.

#### *The study of minority children and families in the United States*

Having completed his training in child psychiatry, in the early 1960s Coles served in the US Army medical corps. He was posted to Mississippi and Louisiana. There he started getting African-American children he encountered in the community, to do crayon drawings of their life experience, and talk to him about their lives. This became his principal method of data collection for decades to come, and the prose he wrote, giving voice to the children's courage, endurance and resilience in the face of intense discrimination, has been compelling reading for psychiatrists, psychologists and social scientists, for political scientists and philosophers; and also for the informed public. Coles' first book, *Children of Crisis; A Study of Courage and Fear*, published in 1967, movingly described the grit and suffering, the courage and resourcefulness, and the dignity in the face of discrimination, shown by poor and mainly black children and their families in the rural US south in the early 1960s. It became the first of Coles' five volume series, *Children of Crisis*, published between 1967 and 1977, that extended our understanding from the experiences of African American children living in the deep South, to the families of miners and mountaineers in Appalachia, American Indians and Native Alaskans, and Chicanos living in the Southwestern states. Volumes two and three; *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers* (1971) and *The South Goes North* (1971) were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for literature, in 1973.

*Faith and moral reasoning in children*

During the 1980s and 1990s Coles has wrote extensively about faith and moral reasoning in children, especially in discriminated-against minority children. This work resulted in the publication of *The Moral Life of Children*, in 1986, followed, in 1990, by *The Spiritual Life of Children*, and in 1997, by *The Moral Intelligence of Children*. In 1995 Coles published *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, the biography of the young African American girl who persevered in the facial of intense racial hatred and harassment, to be among the first black children to desegregate the primary schools of New Orleans. She was a central figure in the first volume of *Children of Crisis*, and stimulated his later work on the spiritual and moral development of minority children.

In the 1970s Coles began an ongoing correspondence with Anna Freud, continuing his fascination with psychoanalytic theory, despite his great skepticism of its clinical usefulness, that led to the publication, in 1993, of *Anna Freud; The Dream of Psychoanalysis*.

**CONCLUSION** I have endeavored to show the influence of Jewish culture on cultural psychiatry over the latter half of the twentieth century by describing the influence of Jewish culture on the personal and professional lives of several eminent contributors to cultural psychiatry. The individuals I have focused on made a major impact during those decades in which cultural psychiatry was transformed from a small group of psychiatrists investigating culturally shaped manifestations of psychopathology, to a greatly expanded community of clinicians, teachers and researchers concerned with how culture affects personality development, access to care and the quality of clinical care for all people, in all countries.

If I were to continue to assess the influence of Jewish culture on contemporary cultural psychiatry, I would follow on from Kardiner, Erikson, Wittkower and Coles, to an examination of the lives and work of people such as Arthur Kleinman, Laurence Kirmayer and Mitchell Weiss. But that will have to wait for another day.

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