



# Chapter 1

## A QUEST FOR DISCOVERING ETHNOCULTURAL THEMES IN PSYCHOLOGY

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*A deep distress hath humanized my soul.*

—William Wordsworth,  
"Elegiac Stanza Suggested by a  
Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm"

RIGHT NOW, I am sitting in front of the bay window that looks out over the plush green grass that gently slopes down and meets the shores of a small lake. A misty rain falls as it mostly does in the early morning in the months when flowers spread their colors and fragrances. Across the lake to the east a wispy fog sits on Lookout Mountain, and over near Chuckanut Mountain on the west side, streaks of blue sky peek out through the puffy rain clouds. Gaggles of geese are grazing in the grass, and ganders are watching closely for intruders that might pose a threat to young goslings pecking away at some tasty, dainty delicacy. Two bald eagles perch high up in nearby cedar trees scanning the water for their breakfast. Not far away sit a covey of banded doves cooing and flapping about as they guard their nests from scavengers. Lurking in the tall reeds is a small coyote waiting patiently for the moment when he can single out his next meal. Three small otters frolic and gambol near the dock, all the while keeping a sharp eye on the lurking coyote. There is a good deal of commotion this morning as many birds are squawking and shrilling, alerting all others to the early morning drama. For the past 20 years, I have witnessed similar early morning scenes from the same seat where I usually start out my day. Paying attention to all that occurs around me is a lifeway orientation that has its origins in the wisdom of the elders and provided me with direction.

### A MODEST AND HUMBLE LIFEWAY ORIENTATION

Grandfather Sage told us that we should pay attention to all that nature presented us no matter where we were or what we were doing. "Stop and look closely at what's going on around you. Listen carefully to the sounds of birds, the wind, the noise in the air, and take in all of the aromas and fragrances of the life that surrounds you," he would often say in his quiet and gentle manner. During the summer months when we visited him more frequently than other times, we would take long walks through the tall grass in the nearby fields and wander through the narrow trails in the wooded area behind his small farm. Sometimes, he would stop, look around, and occasionally point to something of interest by gently jutting his chin in the general area. "Shush," he would whisper in his soft voice. Then he would add, "Pay real close attention because you're going to see something wonderful happen right about now." We knew that he was sensing much then, so we paid close attention to his admonitions. Each walk through the tall grass and the narrow trails brought us new experiences and filled our lives with wonder and respect for all that Mother Earth and Father Sky had to offer.

Grandfather Sage was a mere 6 years old when he left school. He never returned and never complained to us about his lack of formal education. He loved to read, and whenever he had a spare moment he would pull out a book, newspaper, or magazine from the depths of his overalls pockets and spend the time picking through the printed words. Sometimes, he would look at us and say something like "Did you know that . . ." Then he would fill in the sentence stem with a little bit of trivia gleaned from something he was reading. All of us remember that he was full of wisdom, humor, and inquisitiveness and that he was reflective, generous, and kind. I sure do, and Grandfather Sage's characteristics made an indelible imprint on my life's philosophy and worldview.

Grandpa's advice not only influenced my values and beliefs, but his words influenced the way I scan the world around me no matter where I am or what I am doing. I remember him saying to us repeatedly that we must "look and then think about what you're looking at. Ask questions when you can, but don't be too pushy and nosy. Make sure you run all the things before your eyes and heart before you jump to conclusions because you may hurt some soul with your choices. And remember that all things have souls and spirits, even though you can't see them." As a youngster, I am not too sure I fully understood Grandpa's wisdom and pointers; nonetheless, I accepted his words without hesitation and question. Inquiry, doubt, hesitancy, and skepticism would come later as I ventured away from the security and stability of nature's way and the loving care and attention of kinship.

## SUSPENDING NATURE'S WAY FOR FORMAL EDUCATION

Like most all of my brothers, sisters, and relatives, I graduated high school, but unlike any of my 100 or more close kin, I was the first one to head off to college. I was not supposed to go to college, as my parents and just about everyone else expected me to hit the workforce right after I received my diploma. All of my ancestors did, and so it was expected of all of us. For some unexplained reason, I decided to apply for college. My parents did not approve at first and tried to talk me out of it. When I told Grandfather he nodded approvingly but did not say much else. My first and only acceptance letter arrived soon after my decision, accompanied by a small athletic scholarship.

My parents and Grandfather were not certain what psychology was after I told them that it was to be my area of inquiry and study. My parents wanted to know what I could do with a "psychology education," whereas Grandfather asked me to tell him about psychology when I learned more about the field. Mixed emotions tied in with apprehension, a state of brooding disquietude, and an uneasy sense of responsibility traveled with me when I left home for the beginning of my long journey to a career in psychology.

During my first year and soon after my first psychology course, I quickly learned that to be a psychologist I had to put aside any interpretive tendencies based in presumptions and inferences. Subjective and impressionistic interpretations of human conduct were not acceptable. My professors insisted that the human was a "black box" and that observable behavior was the sole unit of analysis. A few argued forcefully that the study of lower-order species was the true path to understanding human behavior. I struggled constantly with the uncharted and new orientation, especially in courses where the nature-nurture controversy was the prevailing theme. The content and argument presented in several philosophy courses also roused my confusion about the tenets of mind and behavior. More than anything, though, the idea that the human was a hodgepodge of behavioral units ran counter to many folktales and legends I'd heard as a child—tales and legends that dealt with the human's beginnings and one's character development. My overwhelming desire to earn a degree in good fashion eventually compromised my confusion as I gradually accepted the psychological orientation opined by my first round of professors.

The effects of one's enculturation run deep though, so my confusion and accompanying thoughts were never far away. Grandfather told us that most of the time our fate was in the hands of the Creator; however, sometimes we have to be self-reliant. He also would point out that every now and then chance and curiosity could change our life's course, so we must be sensitive to the occasions and circumstances when they are presented to us. In

the course of my career, Grandfather's prophecy was fitting, as on several occasions circumstances challenged and eventually reformed my life's course. The first instance occurred when I was a graduate student in 1964 enrolled in an advanced course in personality theory at a reputable New England university. In the early beginnings of the semester, the professor and my colleagues constantly emphasized the importance of mental processes, early childhood experiences, and the universality of personality theories. Without giving it much reflection, one evening I asked a question that would dramatically alter my career path. The question was "Where are the group and cultural influences in the science of the individual?" The professor's reply was gentle, direct, and firm: "Well, the way we divide up the situation is a function of the understanding we bring to the situation." "So," I replied rather meekly, "if we have no understanding about culture's effects on individual behavior, then one is not likely to raise the question. And if psychology's unit of analysis is solely the individual, then one also is not likely to seek answers about group influences." For once, my colleagues were silent. The professor, on the other hand, dismissed the class early and invited me to walk him home on that memorable snowy New England evening. The subject of culture never made its way into the seminar discussion; however, the professor and I continued to discuss the subject in the weeks that followed. During those long walks, we often talked about the lifeways and thoughtways of certain American Indians and how that tied in with understanding personality from a conventional psychological perspective. None of that information ever made it into any of his classes, and that saddened me and indeed caused me a little distress.

The notion that the study of culture belonged in the study of personality and the individual was an epiphany. The insight revitalized my then rapidly waning interest in the field and led me to read the works of the culture and personality field of anthropology. I must confess, though, that I never took a formal course in anthropology. If I had it to do over again I would have. Nonetheless, as I pored over the works of anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, John Honigmann, and Ruth Benedict, I came to the conclusion that psychology was rather exclusive, myopic, prejudiced, and presumptuous to believe and profess that psychological findings applied to all humans regardless of their cultural and ethnic background. Anthropological writings told a different story. I discovered, too, that the words *culture* and *ethnicity* could not be found in psychology textbooks, and it certainly was not the topic of conversation at psychological conventions. Although I was rather distressed by my findings, they provided me with a renewed interest in the field of psychology. I did not know where to take that interest as I knew the choices around me in New England were very limited.

Choice and chance played their hand again. A colleague and I walked into a Boston restaurant one hot and humid spring evening after spending the day attending boring sessions associated with a psychological

convention. There my colleague introduced me to one of his friends, a graduate school colleague of years gone by. Our interesting and lively dinner conversation eventually focused on my disillusion with psychology. After listening to my interests, my newly found acquaintance invited me to transfer and enroll in the social psychology program at the University of Oklahoma's Institute of Group Relations. Additionally, he reminded me that Oklahoma was at one time "Indian Territory" and that there were numerous opportunities to work with various tribes through programs at the university.

After a few weeks of deep reflection and contemplation about my future and emerging interests in culture and psychology, I decided to head to the southwestern part of the United States and enroll at the University of Oklahoma. The drive from New England to the southern plains was a long one and thus provided me with the opportunity to assess where I had been and where I was headed. Grandfather Sage's words and witticisms floated in and out of my mind. His words provided me with inspiration that my choice to move on would bring closure to some sour, distressful, and painful past experiences and open up new opportunities that could expand my intellectual curiosity and a new way of living. In retrospect, the decision to move on set a course that far exceeded my expectations and visions. My distress over the past indeed humanized my soul as my emptiness was replaced with excitement and spiritual renewal.

### **CULTURE, PSYCHOLOGY, AND DISCOVERY**

Social psychology at the University of Oklahoma was housed in the Institute of Group Relations located in an old wooden barracks-type building on the edge of the south campus. The program, founded and molded by the eminent social psychologist Muzaffer Sherif and his colleagues, emphasized that social psychology was interstitial to all other academic disciplines that in some form or another involved the study of the human condition. Sherif defined social psychology as the scientific study of the experience and behavior of individuals in relation to social stimulus situations. As students we were thoroughly grounded in Sherif's firmly held notion that all behavior and experiences were situational and contextual. Culture and ethnic influences therefore were considered worthy units of study.

To ensure that one's academic experiences reflected the interdisciplinary orientation, students were encouraged to pursue studies outside the field of psychology and include nonpsychologists on their advisory committees. In fact, psychologists often were in the minority on one's committee, and that was not fully respected by several conservative and traditional faculty in the psychology department. My committee consisted of a social psychologist, an ethologist (he was in the psychology department), a

sociologist, a philosopher, and a faculty member from social relations, all of whom strongly encouraged my cross-cultural studies especially with and among American Indians.

In the late 1960s, there was little or no information about ethnic and cultural groups in the psychological literature—almost none concerning American Indians. I was puzzled why anthropologists representing the culture and personality school devoted considerable attention to psychological constructs yet psychologists almost completely ignored cultural and ethnic influences on behavior and experiences. Psychology's blithe and myopic view of cultural influences fueled my seemingly insatiable curiosity and interest. My weekend excursions to the communities and homes of my numerous American Indian friends in almost every region of Oklahoma also spurred the interest along more so because I was awakened to and reminded of the extreme prejudice, economic disparity, and alcoholism that surrounded life in the Indian communities. The visits also reminded me that I should not become too absorbed in social psychological abstractions. The application of social psychological knowledge to solving fundamental social problems rapidly became a concern. However, I realized then and still do to this day that I must strive to achieve a balance between theory and real-life problems. Sometimes, that is difficult, as I tend to get totally absorbed in working on the problems and forget the value of research. A pinch or two from my friends and colleagues often helps to joggle my senses and nudges me back to that balance I strive to maintain.

My Oklahoma graduate school classroom experiences were not much different from those I experienced in New England. Students and some faculty viewed my interest in culture, ethnicity, and American Indians with suspicion and contempt. I also had the feeling, a deep and profound one, that a few of my colleagues were quietly racist toward Oklahoma Indians; however, no one ever confronted me on the topic. Occasionally, someone would ask me why I was not majoring in anthropology, with the comment that "anthropology is where one should be to study culture and American Indians." In one late afternoon graduate seminar, I talked openly about my experiences with different Native healers and provided examples of the way each of them worked with those who were in need of assistance. To a person, the students became openly derisive and peppered me with questions concerning the scientific nature of my observations. Challenges were launched at me from all corners of the seminar table directing me to justify the study of traditional Native healing in the context of contemporary social psychology and the rigors of the scientific method. The next morning I found a copy of William James's wonderful and insightful book *Varieties of Religious Experiences* in my mailbox with a note attached that simply said "I want you to know that I share your convictions and so does one of the most prominent American figures in psychology." It was unsigned. I learned many years later that the book and note were provided by the

seminar's instructor. Sadly and unfortunately, I was never able to discuss the event with him as he passed away after I made my discovery.

The seminar experience and my interactions with certain faculty and students taught me several valuable lessons. I had to choose my audience prudently when I discussed spiritual matters and the lifeways and thoughtways of indigenous cultures—some psychologists can be unsympathetic and merciless in their criticisms of topics that depart from conventional practices. I also learned that one does not attempt to change deeply held convictions fueled by a lifetime of dedication to one small slice of human behavior as the conversation goes nowhere.

I completed my doctoral degree in 1969, and as promised I discussed my experiences with Grandfather Sage. After spending many hours on the old wooden porch, I believe he grasped what psychology was all about. He summed it up this way: "Well, Joey, so there are really three kinds of people in this world of ours—yesterday people, today people, and tomorrow people—and psychology tries to explain who they are and why they do things." "Indeed, an insightful summative comment," I mused. Maybe more of us should spend some time with our elders, as they may understand our seemingly complex world in the academy more acutely than we do. At that time some 30 years ago, Grandfather provided me with additional advice: (a) Never forget where you came from and the lessons you learned in your childhood; (b) you now have a responsibility to pass along your knowledge, experiences, and skills in ways that are nonthreatening yet informative; and (c) always remember that no one has ever accomplished greatness by themselves.

Soon thereafter, I received additional advice from an Arapaho elder from western Oklahoma who gently reminded me that "the American Indian is a frozen image in the minds of many. You can draw attention to the way we live and the many things that affect our daily lives, particularly the bad ones." I made a commitment to both elders that I would honor their advice and strive to realize their pronouncements. Despite many criticisms, frustrations, and self-doubt, I have faithfully struggled to honor and abide by their wishes.

### ON TO A CAREER AND THE PERSEVERING SEARCH FOR CULTURE IN PSYCHOLOGY

After the defense of my dissertation, I interviewed at several universities and colleges and eventually decided to stay in Oklahoma to begin my long anticipated career in higher education. Upon accepting the appointment, I was carefully reminded by the then department chair and several academic colleagues to set aside my interests in culture and psychology and focus on conventional social psychological research. Although most

respected my interests in working with and for American Indian groups, they were really saying that for me to advance up and through the professorial ranks, attention had to be devoted to "acceptable psychological research topics." With some reluctance I designed and conducted several attitude and attitude change studies following Muzafer Sherif's social judgment model and presented the findings at psychological conventions. Interest in the model remains with me, yet a few unintentional and heartening events occurred that would define my research and scholarship for the next 25 years.

In 1971, a well-known social psychologist and I submitted a symposium proposal for consideration at the annual meeting of a regional psychological association. The topic focused on American Indian developmental issues. A proposed multidisciplinary panel consisted of a sociologist, an anthropologist, a psychiatrist, and two social psychologists. The proposal was well written, tightly conceptualized, and emphasized the topic from an interdisciplinary perspective. The proposal was politely rejected. The rationale for the decision essentially stated that (a) psychologists generally are not interested in American Indians; (b) the panel was too interdisciplinary and should have more psychologists represented; and (c) the American Indian population in the region was small, hence there was the likelihood that there would be little interest in the topic. We challenged the Program Chair's decision with a carefully crafted rebuttal and followed it up with a few telephone calls—our letter and telephone calls were never acknowledged. The unpleasant and wrenching experience was a pivotal point in my career and served to solidify my belief that I must bring the experiences of contemporary American Indians into the realm of psychological theory. The experience also reminded me of the ethnocentric bias, provincialism, bigotry, and ignorance of my chosen profession. If psychology professed to increase one's understanding of the human condition, how was it that the credo seemed to apply only to laboratory animals and university-based research participants who, in the main, represented a Euro-American ethnocultural orientation? In discussions with a few other ethnic psychologists, I also discovered that other ethnic groups were excluded from psychological conversations and studies, so that furthered my resolve to bring the subject of culture and ethnicity to the attention of the discipline.

Little twists of fate and chance occurrences have been a major part of my life and indeed have influenced my professional development. In 1972, a prominent social psychologist stopped me in the hallway of a hotel in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and inquired about my interest in American Indians and ethnocultural topics in psychology. We discussed our mutual interests for the better part of the afternoon. The discussion soon led to my contacting the Executive Secretary of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), Division 9 of the American Psychological Association (APA), for assistance in bringing my concerns to the forefront of discussions within the community of psychology. Assistance was provided in grant



form, and my involvement in SPSSI activities rapidly accelerated to the point where I served on the SPSSI Council for two terms, chaired the 1976 American Psychological Association SPSSI convention program, and served a term as SPSSI's representative to the APA Council of Representatives. My involvement in SPSSI and the fervent commitment and support of many of its members bolstered and validated my enthusiasm and commitment for the psychological study of culture and ethnicity and "putting the emic to work." SPSSI has been an advocate and champion for social issues for a long time, and in the early 1970s it was the only division within the APA that supported ethnic minority psychological concerns.

Instead of continuing to conduct conventional and uninspiring social psychological research, I shifted my direction and thus my professional journey toward bringing American Indian social and psychological topics to the attention of the psychological community. Again, another chance event influenced the direction of my scholarship. While attending a meeting of the APA in Honolulu, Hawaii, in the early 1970s, I met Paul Pedersen and spent an afternoon discussing his emerging and newfound interest in culture and counseling. Paul asked me what, if anything, had been written on the effectiveness of counseling and psychotherapy with American Indian populations. "Maybe one or two articles," I answered and added that I thought that conventional counseling and therapy approaches probably were incompatible with most traditional American Indians. I had a little graduate-level training in clinical psychology, so I knew I was on safe ground with my comments. Paul then asked me to write a chapter on the subject for a book he and a few others were editing entitled *Counseling Across Cultures*. I accepted the challenge and a few years later joined Paul, Walter Lonner, and Juris Draguns as the fourth editor—the book now is in its fifth edition and has been awarded several citations. Since I knew little about how effective clinical and counseling approaches might be with various Indian and Native populations, I decided to conduct a little ethnographic research on the topic with Indians from different states largely in the central and south-central plains of the United States. I eventually wrote that chapter and several others like it, although I must confess that each time I did write something I felt very uncomfortable and uneasy mainly because I was fearful that I was creating unnecessary stereotypes and recommending broad generalized counseling considerations. Fortunately, many others have written about counseling American Indians since then, even to the extent of applying the concept to specific tribal groups. My initial and only hope was to bring the subject to the profession's attention and to spur others on to explore and write about the topic.

After a four-year stint as a scientist at a research institute in Seattle, an experience that I wish to forget for many unseemly reasons, in 1978 I accepted an academic position at Western Washington University. Western, as it is affectionately known in local parlance, had a solid and growing

reputation for its interest in supporting and advancing cross-cultural psychology through the Center for Cross-Cultural Research located in the Department of Psychology. Walter J. Lonner, founding editor of the well-known *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, directed the Center's operations and taught several courses in the department dealing with culture and psychology. At that time, it was the only academic institution anywhere that gave credence to the study of culture within a psychological framework, and I was thrilled beyond belief to become a part of the venture. I no longer had to apologize to my colleagues for my interests, research, and scholarship, for the study of culture and ethnicity was openly accepted and promoted in the department and the university. My quest for finding ethnocultural themes in psychology had ended, but with that discovery I began a new journey to focus my energies more directly on fundamental American Indian problems that could be dealt with with solid and practical psychological theory.

My appointment at Western was an entreaty for adventure to explore undertakings that were embedded in the voices of my elders, community members from various reservations, trusted colleagues and friends, and students. My research and scholarship accelerated to the point where over the past 22 years I have published numerous articles and book chapters on stereotypes, intergroup conflict, self-image, alienation, mental health models, adolescent socialization, life-threatening events and the elderly, prevention of substance use and abuse, ethnic identification, cross-cultural counseling and psychotherapy, and research methodology and measurement. In almost all my work, I emphasize the significance of the topic for ethnic minority groups in general and American Indians and Alaska Natives specifically.

Grandfather Sage often reminded us that we should value our relationships with our family, friends, and colleagues and, where possible, invite them to participate in our work. I have always valued collaboration and find that most of the time we benefit intellectually, emotionally, and, dare I say it, spiritually from the ventures. Sometimes, when I am working alone late into the night or very early in the morning I feel the presence of others sitting next to me guiding my thoughts and my fingers as they move about the keyboard. During those moments, I feel a oneness with the world and the life force that flows in and through all things. Once in a while I am reminded of the words of Lone Man, a late-19th-century Lakota, who reportedly said, "I have seen that in any great undertaking it is not enough for a man to depend simply upon himself." I live and work in a world that places a high premium on individual invention and scholarship; yet while I may be the sole author of a written piece, I am continually conscious of the fact that I have never done anything solely and totally by myself—someone or something influenced my thinking and acting that led me to another level or to another idea. If we really reflect on the point, I suspect most would agree that our individual success is built on the encouragement, teachings, advice, and the

wisdom of others and that we all really depend on one another for what we are all about in our fields of inquiry and endeavor. We are all connected and related to one another in some form or another, and thus we influence and are influenced by all things in ways we may never know.

My quest for finding ethnocultural influences in psychology is far from over. Indeed, our discipline is now alive with discussions, research, and teaching about ethnic and cultural topics, and the interest is increasing at levels that exceeded my expectations. The interest is changing the field of psychology as more and more people from different ethnocultural groups introduce lifeways and thoughtways that challenge conventional psychological tenets and principles. A knowledge revolution is occurring in the discipline—an ideological revolution of ideas based in cultural-specific perspectives. The field of psychology and its subject matter is becoming more inclusive of the lifeways and thoughtways of all ethnocultural groups. The field is not there yet and has a long journey ahead before no one is truly excluded. In the meantime, all of us deeply devoted and committed to ethnocultural studies should be watching closely just as Grandfather Sage advised.

### RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

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