

Amit, Vered [ed.] (2004) *Biographical Dictionary of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Routledge, pp. 554-55

Whiting, John W.M.

- b. 12 June 1908, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, USA
- d. 13 May 1999, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, USA

John Whiting was responsible for introducing new standards in the research methodology of the twentieth-century 'culture and personality movement'. He was a student of George P. Murdock, his mentor and thesis adviser at Yale University, who instilled in him an interest for cross-cultural research on a worldwide basis. Whiting was very much influenced by learning theorists such as Clark Hull, Neal Miller, and Robert Sears, while at the same time he drew from psychoanalytic theory through John Dollard and, particularly, Earl Zinn, who acted as his analyst. Whiting pushed Kardiner's analytical model of the relation between culture and personality to the level of worldwide cross-cultural surveys statistically validated. In this sense he was a continuator of the Human Relations Area Files initiated by Murdock at Yale.

Whiting and Irvin L. Child, one of his lifelong collaborators, presented a model to explain the relation between individual personality and culture that ran as follows: the 'maintenance systems' (i.e. economy, family, political systems) determine the 'child training practices' (e.g. type of mother-infant contact, infant feeding and sleeping practices, mother-father interaction, etc.), these influence the 'personality variables' (e.g. anxiety, aggressiveness, fear, self-confidence, etc.), which in turn

determine the 'projective systems' (i.e. music, games, religious belief, notions of illness, initiation rites, etc.). The core of Whiting's theory is that the way each society deals with its infants influences the nature of each cultural system and the nature of the personality of its individuals. Contrary to the traditional psychoanalytical Freudian view, which put primary emphasis in the relation between enculturation practices and sexual behaviour within the family, Whiting's view extends the influence of infant enculturation practices to the whole of cultural behaviour and institutions.

The main contribution of Whiting and his collaborators to the analysis of the relation between environment, culture, and the individual was the so-called 'six-cultures' project, which aimed at comparing child-rearing practices across a number of different cultures worldwide.

Education

BA Yale University, 1931

Ph.D. Yale University, 1938

Fieldwork

Fieldwork among the Kwoma of New Guinea, 1935-6

Yale Institute of Human Relations (except for the period he worked in the US Navy during the Second World War), 1938-47

State University of Iowa, 1947-9

Laboratory of Human Development at the Graduate School of Education (Harvard University), 1949-63

Department of Social Relations at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (Harvard University), 1963-78

Key Publications

(1941) *Becoming a Kwoma: Teaching and Training in a New Guinea Tribe*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

with Child, Irvin L. (1953) *Child Training and*

Personality: A Cross-Cultural Study, New Haven: Yale University Press.

with Whiting, Beatrice B. (1974) *Children of Six Cultures*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

(1994) *Culture and Human Development: The Selected Papers of John Whiting*, ed. Eleanor Hollenberg Chasdi, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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