Looking backward: Thirty years of research in the anthropology of consciousness

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My aim in this paper is to consider developments in the anthropology of consciousness from a long-term perspective. It may therefore be helpful to look back some thirty years and consider the state of affairs at that time. Of course, there wasn't anything called the "Anthropology of Consciousness." Psychologists had long ago given the whole notion of consciousness a bad name and put its study beyond the pale. There were only a few exceptions. For example, Charles Tart began to study consciousness and its alterations in the 1950s, working with Aldous Huxley who was then starting to experiment with mescaline (Huxley 1963 [1954], Tart 1963, 1972).

In 1962 a group of us at Ohio State applied to NIMH for a grant in support of a project entitled "Cross-Cultural Study of Dissociational States." Several factors provided the impetus for this: There was my interest in possession beliefs and trance behavior based on my earlier fieldwork in Haiti. There was an argument in the literature of whether or not so-called "possession" was a hysterical or otherwise pathological phenomenon, a view rooted in the work of the 19th century French school of psychiatry under Charcot and Janet. In opposition to this was the insistence by M. J. Herskovits on the normalcy of behavior that was culturally approved, encouraged and rewarded. Could comparative study shed some light on this? Two books in particular, outside the Afro-American field, had provoked my interest. Both were published in 1960: Jane Belo's A Trance in Bali and M. G. Field's A Search for Security, dealing with shrine priests in Ghana. Belo raised the question of hypnosis in regard to trance. Field, a psychiatrist as well as an ethnographic field worker, considered the dissociation of the Ghanaian shrine priests to be non-pathological.

With the development of holocultural studies during the preceding decade, a systematic searching of the literature and ordering of the data for statistical manipulation appeared not only possible but a necessary preliminary step to take, if ad hoc conclusions, based on a handful of ethnographic cases, were to be avoided. There was also the possibility of a biological dimension of trance states to be investigated and this, at a time when what was happening in the body in connection with psychological states, was hardly being considered. At the time, too, NIMH was actively seeking proposals from social scientists with the purpose of increasing interest and training in the mental health professions.

As part of our effort we proposed, rather naïvely, it now seems, to map the worldwide distribution of what we called "institutionalized" dissociational states. By this we meant, primarily, that these states occurred in a religious context of belief and ritual. Our focus
was on states believed to be due to possession by spirits. We wished to develop a typology, we said, "through the use of biological, situational and cultural parameters." Our application being successful, we soon found ourselves confronted by a number of problems. A closer look at these, which ranged form the prosaic and elementary to the theoretical, will quickly show how the context of anthropological research has changed in general and specifically with regard to the anthropology of consciousness.

The problems we confronted ranged from the character of the available ethnographic literature to the definition of the ethnographic universe to be sampled, to issues of sampling, matters of coding and the appropriate use of statistics. Even on the elementary practical level there were obstacles to be dealt with: photocopying was in its infancy, cumbersome to access and expensive. Much of our extracting from the literature was done by laborious copying and typing out of passages. There were, of course, no PCs. All uses of computers involved punched cards, and, in some instances, the writing of our own programs. When members of the team went into the field, good tape recorders were heavy and cumbersome reel-to-reel machines, and there was no videotaping equipment. We reviewed the available literature on more than 1,000 societies. For our statistical analysis, however, we ended up with a sample of 488 societies for which economic and social structural codes were available in the Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962–67, 1967) which was then being published in installments. There was, as yet, no Standard Ethnographic Sample, and debate raged over how such a sample might be constructed.

Searching for data in the ethnographic literature presented its own problems. The older literature, and even some more recent presentations, often used notions of "demonic possession" and was clearly contaminated by ideas of possession presented in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The language of the reporters therefore made it difficult at times to discover native concepts (cf. Bourguignon and Pettay, 1965). More recent descriptions might use words such as "epilepsy," "hysteria," "hypnosis," etc. on purely impressionistic grounds.

On the theoretical level there was little to fall back on. Tart (1972:7) has noted how the scene changed with regards to altered states of consciousness (a new term) between the first edition of his book, in 1967, and the second, in 1972. On the biological side, brain research was limited and there were few tools available for physiological monitoring in the field. Split brain research, biofeedback, neurotransmitters, and endorphins were all concepts and topics of research to come into effective use only later. And then, the topic did not seem particularly timely. A colleague, a political scientist, I recall, chided me for wanting to deal with what seemed to him to be such an antiquarian topic when there were, as he saw it, so many burning contemporary issues to be addressed. Of course, we did not know then how heavily the CIA and the military were involved in experiments with LSD, sensory deprivation studies, brain washing and the rest.

However, the situation began to change almost immediately. First came the rather sudden public awareness of the drug revolution and the Psychedelic Movement. IFIF (The International Federation for Internal Freedom), the short-lived enterprise of Timothy Leary and associates, began the publication of the Psychedelic Review in 1963. That
year, too, Federal restrictions were imposed on the use of LSD, mescaline, psilocybin and other "mind-altering" drugs. Two principal forms of alteration of consciousness were much in the public eye: drug-induced states and meditation states (or combinations of the two). The former were linked with American Indian traditions and the latter with Asian traditions. African and Afro-American patterns of possession trance attracted little attention. Why that should be the case represents an interesting question in the history and sociology of both scholarship and popular culture, and as such a topic for another discussion. The development of neopentecostalism, the charismatic movement, the return of exorcism and of religious healing practices, all of this was still in the future.

As far as our own project was concerned, it was clear, once we took a global view of our topic, that the first step was to put some order into what we were discovering. Or better, to layout a pattern for ordering what emerged from our initial ethnographic readings. We needed to distinguish between observable behavior and self-reports reflecting alterations of consciousness, which we called trance, on the one hand, and, on the other, beliefs, that is, explanatory concepts, used to account for them in local terms. Possession was only one set of such explanatory concepts. Others involved soul loss or spirit journeys and still others were of a secular type. Furthermore, not all uses of a possession concept referred to altered states of consciousness. Some concerned acquisition of power, or physical illness. Moreover, some of the societies we read about had more than one concept of possession or more than one pattern of trancing.

We were interested in looking at both patterns of belief and behavior on a worldwide basis, and also at seeing what linkages might exist between beliefs and behavior on the one hand, and between these and the larger ethnographic context on the other. That is, we collected our own data on trance states and related belief systems, but relied on the Ethnographic Atlas for other data. Here, however, we found that the Atlas did not deal with complex societies or settlements of overseas migrants, as, for example, Africans in the Americas or Asian Indians in the Caribbean.

It is evident how much has changed during 30 years. First of all, and most notably, we have available a much expanded corpus of ethnographic materials on all parts of the world with regard to the issues at hand. Much of this, too, is highly detailed and sophisticated in the questions asked and the observations made. We can often draw on multiple observers and long term studies where previously there was little or no material available. Moreover, fieldwork is nowadays documented with tape recorded interviews and often with videotaped records of observations as well. It is then possible to obtain a clearer statement of "the native voice" as well as responses by people to seeing themselves, and others, in trance states. The recording of trance music, too, provides a rich source for more specific analysis. Gilbert Rouget's important book, Music and Trance (1985) is a case in point. However, the issue of the psychobiological impact of music with regard to trance has not been settled. The writing of ethnography, too, has changed as a result of the changed circumstances of fieldwork, as well as the current reflexive moment in American anthropology. The changed political situation of former colonial peoples and the fact that people may actually read what we write about them is, of course, not alien to this situation.
As far as comparative, holocultural research is concerned, there, too, the situation has changed radically, whether with regard to the issues debated in the 60s, or the tools of research ranging from hardware, to means of data retrieval and newer types of statistical strategies, and procedures.

Advances in neurochemistry and psychobiology have led to the formulation and provisional testing of a series of models and specific hypotheses relating trance phenomena on the observational and experiential levels to what happens in the body. We may cite Wallace's (1961) well known hypothesis on the relationship between calcium deficiency and the so-called arctic hysterias, its testing by Foulks (1972) leading to a more complex model of the interaction between ecology, biology, culture and behavior (Foulks and Katz 1977). And, most recently the model developed by Raybeck et al (1989) of the relationship between women, stress, calcium metabolism in women and possession trance religions.

Other well-known models of trance are those by Locke and Kelly (1985) and by Winkelman (1986). Taking a somewhat different tack, the psychiatrist Raymond Prince (1982, 1984) has considered the possible relevance of endorphins to trance phenomena and in collaboration with Ronald Simons and others has tested it in the context of the Thaipusam ritual in Singapore (Simons et al 1988, Ervin et al 1988).

There is an interesting parallel here in research strategies with contemporary psychoimmunological research, which has shown the impact of stress, of whatever origin, on the immune system (cf. e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser, et al 1988). That is, this research does not consider only the consequences of stress, such as the incidence of disease, but concretely what happens in the blood. The body here is no longer a "black box," where we look only for inputs and outputs, but where we can actually investigate what happens inside "the box."

In still another direction, we find a renewed interest in consciousness viewed from an evolutionary perspective. On the one hand, there are studies considering human capacity for altered states of consciousness as products of behavioral evolution (Wedenoja 1990; Bourguignon 1991). On the other, we have large, encompassing schemes, such as those recently provided by the psychologist Robert Orenstein (1991) and the philosopher Daniel Dennett (1991). Robert Orenstein, who, 20 years ago (1973:xi) could write, to the shock of many of his colleagues, that "psychology is, primarily, the science of consciousness" has now returned to the subject with a full scale treatment. It seems that we need to place our ideas concerning altered states of consciousness into the larger framework of theories of consciousness of psychobiology and cognitive science.

There are still other differences between the "then" and "now" of studies in the anthropology of consciousness, which concern the larger context in which our research is conducted. There has been massive research on psychoactive drugs from the perspective of biochemistry and psychiatry as well as anthropology, as evidence by the existence, for the past 23 years, of the Journal of Psychoactive Drugs. The anthropological contribution
has involved historical, ethno-historical, cross-cultural as well as ethnographic research. In the area of psychiatry there has been a renewed interest in what has come to be known as Multiple Personality Disorder, a phenomenon that has made a striking comeback, as Michael G. Kenney (1986) has shown.

In sum, the contemporary moment in anthropological studies of altered states of consciousness and specifically of cultural constructions of such states and associated belief systems is greatly affected by a series of factors: the history of this type of research in anthropology, developments in research technology for holocultural as well as for field research, developments in psychiatry and psychoanalysis, in biomedical theories and research, in other related academic disciplines such as cognitive science, drawing on computer science, philosophy and psychology, the complexity of the relationships between self-conscious anthropological researchers and their increasingly literate subjects whose position is one of players on a world stage. Few societies remain that are truly remote. Many of the people went off to study in far away places that are now literally our neighbors. We can study Santeria, for example, in New York and Miami. At the same time, tourism and modernization have often led to the transformation of ritual into folklore. Margaret Mead (1970, plate XV) observed the last time she was in Bali that the trances performed for tourists were feigned or imitated.

Then, too, there is the phenomenon in this country of the New Age religions and what some have called pseudo- or neo-shamanism. Danforth (1989) illustrates both the folklorization of Greek firewalking and its similarities and differences with firewalking as part of American New Age religions.

A number of the themes mentioned here and some others are treated in the papers that follow. Clearly, anthropologists have participated in the building of a substantial body of research with regard to states of consciousness and, yet, much remains to be done.

References


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