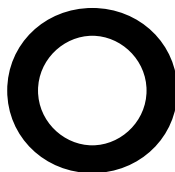


Hypocognition, a “Sense of the Uncanny,” and the Anthropology of Ambiguity: Reflections on Robert I. Levy’s Contribution to Theories of Experience in Anthropology

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ABSTRACT *This article examines how Levy’s pioneering work in Tahitians on hypocognition, feeling, and sensation can contribute to recent attempts in anthropological theorizing to address the problematic relationship between “culture” and “experience.” Informed by the phenomenologically oriented works of the likes of Dilthey, Husserl, Schutz, and Merleau-Ponty, this growing body of literature in anthropology has become increasingly concerned with clarifying the relationships between culture and “objective” and “pre-objective” modes of “lived experience.” This article suggests that in many ways Levy can be understood as one of the first anthropologists to systematically investigate this relationship ethnographically with his focused attention on the role that culture plays in differentially articulating patterns of conceptualization and sensation in the structuring of experience cross-culturally. [Experience, Robert Levy, phenomenology]*



ver the past decade we have witnessed a growing concern in the discipline of anthropology with the concept of “experience” (see Csordas 2002; Desjarlais 1994, 1997; Mattingly 1998, 2000; D. Scott 1992; J. Scott 1991; Spicer 1998; Throop 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). While a largely

unquestioned reliance on the concept has pervaded anthropological writings ranging from feminist theory to critical ethnography, psychological anthropologists have played a significant role in theorizing the variegated structures of experience cross-culturally. Indeed, psycho-cultural anthropologists have long sought to explore the interplay between culture and experience (Hallowell 1955), often seeking to investigate how cultural forms are differentially articulated in the lived experience of particular culture bearers. One of the central insights to arise out of more recent attempts to theorize experience in psycho-culturally informed anthropology, however, is the notion that there are at least two basic modes of experience that need to be carefully delineated if ever a tenable theory of the relationship between culture and experience is to emerge, namely, “pre-objective” and “objective” modes of experience (see Csordas 1990, 1994a, 2002).

In this article, I examine how Robert I. Levy’s pioneering work in *Tahitians* (1973) can be understood to contribute to these more recent attempts in psycho-cultural anthropological theorizing to address the problematic relationship between culture and experience in its objective and pre-objective modes. While anthropologists prior to Levy tended to focus much of their attention upon investigating those experiences that were systematically encoded into the cultural scripts and conventionalized conceptual frames that were most accessible to their informants’ discursive levels of awareness, in *Tahitians*, Levy turned to consider those varieties of experience that seemed to largely defy overt cultural categorization. As I hope to show below, by focusing on those experiences that seem to resist the mind’s culturally organized patterning proclivities, Levy’s work in *Tahitians* provides anthropology with an important window through which to explore the relationship between objective and pre-objective modes of experience. In many ways Levy can be understood as one of the first anthropologists to systematically investigate this relationship ethnographically, with his focused attention on the role that culture plays in differentially articulating patterns of conceptualization and sensation in the structuring of experience.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE

There is a growing movement in psycho-culturally informed anthropology to view experience in terms of a number of distinct modalities (see Crapanzano 2004; Csordas 2002; Desjarlais 1997; Good 1994; Jackson 1996; and Kleinman 1999). Although there are certainly a number of differing theoretical and practical approaches to the problem of experience in anthropology, there seems to be an emerging consensus that experience

can be understood as most generally structured according to two basic modalities: objective and pre-objective.

Drawing inspiration primarily from the phenomenological tradition, psycho-culturally oriented anthropologists have tended to characterize pre-objective experience as a mode of experience that exists prior to conscious reflection, articulation, conceptualization, and categorization. In contrast, they view objective experience as a mode of experience that is fully reflected on, articulated, conceptually mediated, and categorically structured. Of these two modalities, pre-objective experience has garnered special theoretical attention since it presents interesting challenges to theories of culture and consciousness that rely on overly propositional, reflective and intellectualist renderings of lived experience. Moreover, as Csordas (1990) explains, the postulation of a continuum of experience that ranges from pre-objective to objective modes highlights the necessity for recognizing the significant insight that our perceptual processes do not begin with, but instead end in the objects and qualities inherent in experience.

Before turning to discuss how Levy's work in *Tahitians* can be read as largely prefiguring this more recent interest in theorizing pre-objective experience in psycho-cultural anthropology, I believe that it is first necessary to gain some conceptual clarity regarding the possible meaning of this particular experiential modality. To this end, it will be fruitful to turn briefly back to four philosophers who have done much to influence current anthropological discussions of the topic, namely, Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As we will discover below, of significance to current debates in anthropology is the finding that there are indeed a number of important conceptual differences in the ways that these various philosophers have theorized pre-objective varieties of experience.

PHILOSOPHY, PHENOMENOLOGY, AND "PRE-OBJECTIVITY"

The 19th-century German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey's discussion of pre-objective experience is perhaps best understood in the context of his attempt to outline various modes of subjective experience which range along a continuum from an "immediate" or "simple having" to "full fledged clarification" and "objective knowledge" (see Dilthey 1883; Ermarth 1978; Throop 2002). Instead of postulating a general distinction between objective and pre-objective experience, however, Dilthey outlines a detailed account of seven different modes of experience, two of which are delineated as pre-objective. Dilthey refers to these modes as *erleben* and *innerwerden*. According to Dilthey, whereas *erleben* can be understood as a pre-predicative awareness that serves as the "most rudimentary level

of experience prior to the analytical separation of subject and object” (Ermarth 1978:130), *innewerden* is “an immediate pre-reflective mode of self-givenness in which the dichotomies of form and content, subject and object characteristic of reflective consciousness do not yet exist” (Dilthey 1883:247). Varying in intensity in accordance with the functioning of our attention and interest, these varieties of pre-objective experience can be present yet “unnoticed” at the fringes of our awareness, while still being considered properly conscious, albeit of a different degree (Dilthey 1883:300, 305).

Much like Dilthey, the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) spent much of his career attempting to outline the parameters of pre-objective experience (see also Throop 2003a). In fact, Husserl is perhaps best remembered for his concept of the “natural attitude,” which he characterized as that attitude in which the world as given to our various sensory modalities is taken for granted. Accordingly, in his book *Experience and Judgment* (1948), Husserl argues that all the mental operations which underpin the formation of the “natural attitude,” including operations of interpretation and judgment, are based upon a substrate of “pre-predicative” experience. For Husserl, this pre-predicative substrate is itself founded upon a passive synthesis of polythetically constituted percepts (*noema*) which derive their form through acts of consciousness that are patterned according to the sedimentation of past experiences. In this framework then, it is through various acts of constitution in consciousness that sensation becomes imbued with meaning such that “sensuous data . . . [are] raised to prominence within a field” (1948:74). Without getting into the details of Husserl’s complex project here, it is enough for us to realize that Husserl clearly spells out careful distinctions among: (1) “predicative/categorical” experience of the world; (2) “pre-reflective” experience of the world from the stance of the natural attitude; and (3) “pre-predicative” experience as a passive foundation for the constitution of those meaning-imbued percepts that come to constitute a given life-world.

Like Husserl and Dilthey before him, Alfred Schutz (1899–1959) similarly understood that there are a number of levels at which our attentional modalities can function, ranging “from actual comprehending to merely noting to hardly noticing to leaving completely unobserved” (1932:73). According to Schutz, the key to understanding the relationship between pre-objective and objective experience lies in comprehending the relationship between a reflective glance and time (see Throop 2003a; Throop and Murphy 2002). Prior to reflection on an elapsed lived experience, Schutz holds, consciousness is immersed in the felt flow of duration and as such is pre-objective. Schutz thus conceives of an ever-present tension between “living experience within the flow of duration and reflection on

the experience thus lived through" (1932:70). In addition to this distinction between reflection and duration, Schutz goes on to argue that there are a number of "vague" or "ambiguous" experiences that can further resist objectification. According to Schutz:

[there]... are as a matter of fact, experiences which are experiences when they are present but which either cannot be reflected upon at all or can be reflected upon only through an extremely vague apprehension and whose reproduction, apart from the purely empty notion of 'having experienced something'... is quite impossible. (1932:52)

These "ineffable" experiences can "only be lived but never 'thought'... [and are] in principle incapable of verbalization" (1932:53).

Finally, moving to Merleau-Ponty's (1908–1961) influential take on pre-objective experience, we find that he argues in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) that it is the sedimentation of historical moments that habituates perceptual modalities to take what is "given" in experience as a meaningful synthesis (see Csordas 1990, 1994a, 1994b). Like Dilthey, Husserl, and Schutz before him, what is given for Merleau-Ponty in pre-objective experience is a world taken for granted and unscrutinized. Merleau-Ponty is careful to make clear, however, that he does not support a view that there is ever an immediate and/or passive grasping of various qualities and sensations that form the foundation for the active constitution of a culturally mediated life world. Rather, he understands pre-objective experience to be a thoroughly meaningful synthesis, that is only later parsed into its constituents through second-order analytical operations. In this light, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the world as given to the senses is always a significant whole and accordingly the postulate of "pure sensation" is a necessary abstraction. For Merleau-Ponty, the world as given in pre-objective experience is thus not a world unmediated by cultural constructs, but rather a world that is constituted from the unnoticed ossification of habituated perceptual acts of constitution (cf. Bourdieu 1977).

In summary, there are a number of differences among the various definitions of pre-objective experience reviewed here, ranging from the pre-reflective realm of sensory immediacy in Dilthey and Husserl to the thoroughly unnoticed culturally patterned habituation of perceptual acts in the constitution of the taken for granted world of experience in Merleau-Ponty. What these various positions share, however, is the belief that there is an important distinction to be made between experiences which are articulated according to various explicit conceptual modes of categorization and those experiences which have not been so conceptually parsed. Within the latter, there seem to be at least three distinct varieties of pre-objective experience. First, there are those that some scholars believe reflect a micro-genetic account of those stages of perception where the

mind is initially confronted with the unmediated flux of the sensory field before it has been categorically structured according to culturally shaped interpretive frames. Second are those experiences which, as Schutz has pointed out, seem to lack or defy objectification even when an individual's attentional modalities are focused reflectively upon them. Third are those pre-objective experiences that constitute the basis for what Husserl called the "natural attitude," that is, an individual's everyday experiences of the world which are taken for granted without explicit reflection or intellectual categorization. Although recent writings on pre-objective experience in anthropology do not seem to explicitly address these three phenomenologically distinct types of pre-objectivity, in the context of Levy's pioneering work in *Tahitians*, we do indeed see evidence for an active exploration of each of these varieties of pre-objective experience.

LEVY'S ANTHROPOLOGY OF AMBIGUITY

At a time when many anthropologists were working to capture culturally categorized experience, in his ground breaking ethnography *Tahitians* (1973), Levy turned to explore a number of experiences which fell outside of these objectified modes. In order to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Levy's ideas for current theories of experience in anthropology—in particular for current attempts to theorize the relationship between culture and pre-objective experience—I examine three of these: the "sense of the uncanny," *feruri*, and "hypocognized" emotion.

The "Sense of the Uncanny"

In *Tahitians*, Levy points out that within Tahitian classificatory schemes for feeling states, there lies a category for "fear-related feelings" that are separated from more "ordinary" feelings of fear. These supramundane feelings of fear are what he calls the "sense of the uncanny." While these feeling states have obviously been set aside and culturally elaborated in terms of meaningful interpretive frames that are tied to "non-ordinary experience," the very category itself is one wherein individuals are confronted with certain types of experiences that fall outside of, or actively resist, their abilities to categorize and objectify them.

Drawing from Jerome Bruner, Levy goes on to discuss how these "difficulties of categorization" are a critical element leading to the experience of a "sense of the uncanny." Levy cites Bruner, who explains that while sensations are most often categorized and conceptually elaborated such that a "certain sound may be heard simply as 'that sound which comes from outdoors late at night.' Or . . . may be heard as 'those porcupines chewing on that old tree stump.' When an event cannot be thus categorized and

identified, we experience terror in the face of the uncanny” (Bruner, in Levy 1973:152).

Levy is careful to point out that while an inability to categorize an experience is often closely tied to the “sense of the uncanny,” it is not just any difficulty in categorization that leads to this sense. It is, instead, specific difficulties “in making those categorizations which help anchor us in ‘common sense’ reality—in familiar time, space, size, causal and logical contexts” (1973:152). In Husserl’s terminology, for Levy the “sense of the uncanny” emerges only when the parameters and the integrity of the individual’s “natural attitude” are threatened by experiences which seem to fall outside of the personal and cultural frames that serve to structure it. In this case, we have, therefore, one variety of pre-objective experience—an ambiguous variety that actively resists categorization—that is necessarily tied to the breach of yet another variety—an everyday variety that takes the culturally constituted world of lived experience for granted.

An Ethnotheory of Objectification

Also of interest for the anthropology of pre-objective experience is the fact that in the context of this discussion Levy manages to outline what might be characterized as a Tahitian ethnotheory of objectification and its resistance in the context of a mental process called *feruri*. According to Levy, *feruri* is thought to be a process whereby “fragmentary feelings and ideas” are articulated in discursive thought. As he points out, according to the Tahitians he interviewed, it seems that as long as an individual does “not articulate the feelings and the fragments of thought, even though [they] may be well aware of them” these thoughts will remain relatively harmless (1973:187). Moreover, he describes this view as one wherein “Outside events are ‘seen by the eye’ or ‘heard by the ear’ [in such a way that t]hey tend to stir up a reaction in the body, particularly in the abdomen. This is a mixture of feeling and the first stages of thinking. The reaction can lead immediately to action . . . but more frequently thought/feeling is worked over by the head, in order to become a rational, planned decision” (1973:248).

What is perhaps most interesting about this particular description is that this Tahitian ethnotheory of objectification is more akin to the view of pre-objective experience, advocated by Dilthey, that is tied to describing the initial stages of perception at the intersection of sensation and meaning.

Hypocognition and Pre-Objectivity

Turning to Levy’s highly influential distinction between “hypercognition” and “hypocognition,” we find that he demonstrates that for his

informants there seem to be a number of emotions such as “anger” (*riri*) that are hypercognized in Tahitian society. “That is, relative to some other feeling states (for example, interpersonal longing and loneliness, which . . . may be interpreted as some vague ‘being out of sorts’), there is considerable doctrine about anger, its effects, and what to do about it” (1973:285).

In contrast to hypercognized emotion, which “is related to a considerable amount of theorizing,” there are a number of other affective states that are not so clearly delineated or culturally elaborated. These Levy terms “hypocognized emotions” (1973:287).

Significantly, Levy’s formulation of hyper- and hypocognition is greatly informed by Ernst Schachtel’s (1959) discussion of the relationship between focal attention and memory (see Chodorow 1999; Hollan 2000). According to Schachtel, there is an important connection between shared schemata, an individual’s focal attention, and the process of selectively parsing the vast field of sensory experience that confronts individuals from the moment of their birth. Central to Schachtel’s perspective is the idea that schemata—a term he borrows from Bartlett (1932)—selectively highlight some forms of experience, while “starving” others. Accordingly, it is often the case that non-schematic experience is difficult to incorporate and preserve in memory.

In building upon Schachtel’s ideas, Levy’s rendering of hyper- and hypocognition thus seeks to draw attention to the role that culture plays in differentially articulating patterns of attention, conceptualization, and sensation in the structuring of experience cross-culturally (c.f. Berger 1999; Berger and Del Negro 2002; Csordas 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Leder 1990). Whereas hypercognized experiences are those that through heightened cultural elaboration become highly conceptually salient and thus tend to be centers of recurrent attentional focus for individual culture bearers, hypocognized experiences tend to resist or defy explicit forms of representation due to their lack of culturally infused conceptual elaboration and because of the fact that they tend not to evoke the same culturally attuned attentional focus.

In this light, it would be a mistake to characterize Levy’s position as one where objective and pre-objective experience can be simply mapped onto hypercognition and hypocognition respectively. For instance, Levy recognizes the ever-present possibility for a pre-objective experience of those feeling states that are hypercognized in a particular culture. As he puts it, “Socialization techniques and other aspects of community experience seem to produce . . . orientations which are the common sense of individuals and which are in a way prior to doctrines [and reflective thought processes]” (1973:287). Not unlike Schutz who made a careful distinction between an immediate immersion in duration and the objective distancing

of a reflective glance, and Merleau-Ponty who held that even pre-objective experiences are thoroughly culturally patterned, in these instances Levy alludes to how it is indeed possible that individuals can immediately experience feeling states that are highly conceptually elaborated but yet not explicitly reflected upon in the moment of their immediate duration in direct experience. In other words, we see here that Levy clearly *distinguished between the degree of an experience's cognitive patterning and the relative degree of an experience's objectification*. Using Husserl's framework, it seems that Levy has attempted to demonstrate how both hyper- and hypocognition can serve as the basis for structuring the contours of an individual's "natural attitude."

Finally, it is specifically in terms of hypocognition that Levy turns to outline a number of experiences which, due to their lack of culturally infused conceptual elaboration, seem to resist or defy objectification. As Levy points out, even when these experiences are reflected upon, they tend to remain "vague," "diffuse," and "ambiguous." As he explains in the context of responses to personal loss and separation, for his informants there were "no unambiguous terms which represent the concepts of sadness, longing, or loneliness. . . . [In this light p]eople would name their condition, where I supposed that the context called for 'sadness' or 'depression' as 'feeling troubled. . . . as 'not feeling an inner push' as 'feeling heavy' as 'feeling fatigued' and a variety of other terms all referring to a generally troubled or subdued body state" (1973:305).

Without a clearly elaborated cultural frame for giving meaning to their experiences of loss, it appears that Levy's informants were forced to communicate their suffering through a phenomenological description of their internal bodily states. As Levy (1993) concluded, this situation points to the possibility that there are a number of feeling states that are " 'hypocognized' and controlled by cultural invisibility or at least by difficulty of access to communication."

With this review of Levy's insights into objectification, hypocognition, and ambiguity in the context of *Tahitians*, we are thus confronted with a scholar who, while not explicitly delineating a typology of pre-objective experience, has independently explored each of the varieties of pre-objective experience outlined above in the work of Dilthey, Husserl, Schutz, and Merleau-Ponty. Although he did not draw from the writings of these various philosophers, we find in Levy's ethnography a detailed discussion of experiences that reflect micro-genetic accounts of pre-categorical perceptual moments, experiences that actively resist categorization, and experiences that arise within the habitually instilled taken-for-granted contours of an individual's culturally constituted "natural attitude." Perhaps most importantly, Levy is also careful to distinguish between culturally configured conceptual elaboration and pre-objectivity as such.

In this framework, while a particular experience may be thoroughly culturally mediated and conceptually elaborated—as in the case of hypercognized emotion—this same experience may be relatively either more or less pre-objective depending upon the extent to which an individual's attentional modalities are focused upon it. Similarly, those experiences that are not selected as salient for a given culture and thus are not conceptually elaborated—as in the case of hypocognized emotion—may still also vary in their pre-objective status depending on the extent to which they are singled out by an individual's attentional focus and thereby brought to the foreground of his or her awareness. Once in the foreground of awareness, these non-conceptually elaborated experiences are thus to some extent objectified, thereby providing an opportunity for an individual to recruit personal and cultural resources in an attempt to give meaning to the experiences in question. Here, a previously non-conceptually mediated experience may be imbued with personal and/or cultural meaning and as such partially or fully objectified and incorporated into the person's and/or the culture's experiential repertoire (see also Obeyesekere 1981), or may remain stubbornly pre-objective in the individual's unfulfilled struggle to deal with the often obdurate resistance of the experience's inherent ambiguity (see Daniel 1994).

Significantly, what Levy's work brings to previous philosophical and phenomenological renderings of pre-objective experience is therefore an explicit cultural emphasis that situates these varieties of pre-objectivity in processes of cultural elaboration and obfuscation. What Levy's work brings to anthropology is a sensitivity to the complex relationships that can be found to exist among culture, cognition, meaning, and these differing varieties of pre-objective experience.

CONCLUSIONS

I would like to conclude with three observations. First, I believe that Levy should be recognized as a pioneer in directing anthropologists to investigate varieties of pre-objective experience cross-culturally. Although he did not use this precise terminology, nor did he draw from the same philosophical traditions as some more recent scholars, Levy's work in *Tahitians* most definitely attempts to shed light on this often elusive mode of experience. As was previously noted, Levy clearly outlines the parameters of pre-objective and objective experience for his informants through his exploration of the "sense of the uncanny," *feruri*, and his important work on hypocognition. Moreover, with much of his attention focused precisely on those experiences that were not overtly categorized by the

culture at hand, Levy sets out to elucidate modes of experience which were most often largely ignored by his predecessors and peers.

Second, it is important to acknowledge the fact that Levy was able to develop a theoretical framework within which to explore the complexities of pre-objective experience which, as we saw above, can connote a number of different varieties of experience—from initial stages of perception, to experiences resistant to objectification, to the stance of the natural attitude. Furthermore, Levy was careful not to conflate conceptual elaboration with the relative objectification of any particular experience and was further able at least to touch on each of these different modes of pre-objective experience in his discussions of Tahitian ethnopsychology.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I believe that by focusing on eliciting close phenomenological descriptions of the location and felt quality of the sensations underpinning these experiences, Levy established as early as 1973, the basis for formulating a methodology that may be amenable to the goal of the description of these pre-objective modes of experience. Just as Csordas has suggested, it is probably only in terms of a microanalytic approach which attempts to elicit a detailed descriptive phenomenology of the life-worlds of our informants that we will ever hope to gain some access to their pre-objective experiences (1994a). Ultimately, I believe that by turning to re-examine Levy's pioneering work in light of the detailed phenomenological accounts of pre-objective experience outlined above, anthropologists will likely be able to find many of the resources they will need to develop more adequate theoretical accounts of the relationship between culture and experience in both its objective and pre-objective varieties.

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NOTES

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