Intersections between culture and health: how the concepts of culture shape the perception of mental disorders

Interseções entre cultura e saúde: como os conceitos de cultura moldam a percepção dos transtornos mentais

Intersecciones entre cultura y salud: cómo los conceptos de cultura dan forma a la percepción de los trastornos mentales

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ABSTRACT
The broadening use of the term "culture" and its frequent lack of adequacy generate ambiguity, challenging clarity and academic utility. This article examines the changes in definitions of culture in the social sciences and their impact on mental health paradigms. The narrative review encompasses research in databases such as LILACS, MEDLINE, SCIELO, IBEGS, Scopus, Science Direct, and Google Scholar, using descriptors like "Cultural Concepts," "Mental Disorders," and "Perception of Illness." The evolution of the concept of culture is addressed from Edward Burnett Tylor to Clifford Geertz's interpretative perspective. Tylor associated culture with human cognitive development, while Franz Boas emphasized its diversity and cultural relativity. The contributions of functionalist and structuralist theories in anthropology are discussed, highlighting Geertz's view of culture as a system of meanings interpreted by individuals. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of integrating cultural
understanding into the diagnosis and treatment of mental health, challenging traditional biomedical paradigms and advocating for a more inclusive and nuanced approach that recognizes cultural influences on mental health experiences.

**Keywords:** Autism, public policies, social psychology.

**RESUMO**
A ampliação do uso do termo "cultura" e sua falta de adequação frequente geram ambiguidade, desafiando a clareza e a utilidade acadêmica. Este artigo analisa as mudanças nas definições de cultura nas ciências sociais e seu impacto nos paradigmas de saúde mental. A revisão narrativa abrange pesquisas nas bases LILACS, MEDLINE, SCIELO, IBECs, Scopus, Science Direct e Google Acadêmico, com descritores como "Cultural Concepts", "Mental Disorders" e "Perception of Illness". Aborda-se a evolução do conceito de cultura desde Edward Burnett Tylor até a perspectiva interpretativa de Clifford Geertz. Tylor associou a cultura ao desenvolvimento cognitivo humano, enquanto Franz Boas enfatizou sua diversidade e relatividade cultural. Discutem-se as contribuições das teorias funcionalistas e estruturalistas na antropologia, destacando-se a visão de Geertz sobre a cultura como um sistema de significados interpretados pelos indivíduos. O artigo conclui ressaltando a importância de integrar a compreensão cultural nos diagnósticos e tratamentos de saúde mental, desafiando os paradigmas biomédicos tradicionais e propondo-se uma abordagem mais inclusiva e matizada que reconheça as influências culturais nas experiências de saúde mental.

**Palavras-chave:** Autismo, políticas públicas, psicologia social.

**RESUMEN**
La ampliación del uso del término "cultura" y su frecuente falta de adecuación generan ambigüedad, desafiando la claridad y la utilidad académica. Este artículo analiza los cambios en las definiciones de cultura en las ciencias sociales y su impacto en los paradigmas de salud mental. La revisión narrativa abarca investigaciones en las bases LILACS, MEDLINE, SCIELO, IBECs, Scopus, Science Direct y Google Académico, con descriptores como "Cultural Concepts", "Mental Disorders" y "Perception of Illness". Se aborda la evolución del concepto de cultura desde Edward Burnett Tylor hasta la perspectiva interpretativa de Clifford Geertz. Tylor asoció la cultura al desarrollo cognitivo humano, mientras que Franz Boas enfatizó su diversidad y relatividad cultural. Se discuten las contribuciones de las teorías funcionalistas y estructuralistas en la antropología, destacándose la visión de Geertz sobre la cultura como un sistema de significados interpretados por los individuos. El artículo concluye resaltando la importancia de integrar la comprensión cultural en los diagnósticos y tratamientos de salud mental, desafiando los paradigmas biomédicos tradicionales y proponiendo una aproximación más inclusiva y matizada que reconozca las influencias culturales en las experiencias de salud mental.

**Palabras clave:** Autismo, políticas públicas, psicología social.
1 INTRODUCTION

Changes in the concept of culture significantly influence approaches in various areas of knowledge, reflecting a dynamic interaction between cultural perceptions and broader epistemological frameworks (Marin et al., 2016). The interdisciplinary perspective of the social sciences is indeed crucial for the advancement of research related to mental disorders, as it covers a wide range of knowledge, from clinical diagnosis to the formulation of public policies aimed at social inclusion. This approach is necessary to address the complex challenges presented by mental health problems, which cannot be effectively tackled through a single disciplinary lens. The integration of various disciplines in the social sciences facilitates a more holistic understanding of mental disorders, combining insights from clinical practices with those from social policy, education and social care, thus ensuring a comprehensive approach to diagnosis, treatment and social integration (Ibsen; Eriksen, 2022).

Initially, culture was perceived as a determinant of individual, ethnic, national and sometimes civilizational group behaviour, a view that led to a separation between the disciplines of anthropology and psychology (Aggarwal, 2023). This initial perspective, influenced by the work of early anthropologists such as Tylor (1871), conceived of culture as a complex whole encompassing knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, customs and other capacities acquired by members of society (Tylor, 1871).

Over the years, the anthropological concept of culture has undergone considerable changes, moving towards a more nuanced understanding. This refined perspective recognizes the role of culture in shaping the expression, perception and treatment preferences for mental disorders, acknowledging that each culture has its own way of explaining mental disorders based on a set of beliefs and practices (Esperança; Rochmawati, 2019). In this way, the concept of culture significantly influences approaches to health because it shapes beliefs, perceptions and behaviors around health and illness, necessitating personalized health interventions and policies. Culture creates a unique prototype of beliefs and perceptions about what constitutes “health” or “illness”, which in turn affects how symptoms are recognized, interpreted and treated, as well as the choice between traditional and Western healthcare systems (Vitrai, 2018).

The evolution of cultural psychiatry reflects these changes, with current approaches emphasizing the fundamental role of culture in both the causes and courses of psychopathology
and the effectiveness of healing systems (Scupin, 2017). The DSM's approach to culture and mental disorders illustrates this evolution. From DSM-IV's focus on ethnically coherent communities to DSM-5's broader, de-emphasized concept of culture, and finally DSM-5-TR's emphasis on social structures after the death of George Floyd, there has been a significant shift towards recognizing the complex interplay between culture, social justice and mental health (Bhugra; Poole, 2011).

This progression highlights the importance of considering cultural and biological factors together, within a biocultural framework, to understand susceptibility and variation in the experience and expression of mental illness (Shattuck, 2019). Furthermore, the recognition of culture-bound syndromes in DSM-IV and the subsequent critical examination of the role of culture in mental health reflect an ongoing effort to integrate cultural sensitivity into psychiatric diagnosis and treatment. This effort is supported by the understanding that culture influences not only the presentation of mental health conditions, but also their course and outcome, necessitating a cross-cultural approach in mental health care (Karthick; Barwa, 2017).

This study addresses the following question: how does the diversity of cultural concepts contribute to and influence perceptions of mental disorders? Therefore, the aim of this narrative bibliographical study was to investigate the influence of the concept of culture on variations in the approach to mental disorders over time.

2 METHODOLOGY

This narrative review involved a comprehensive and interpretative approach to synthesizing the literature on the influence of the concept of culture on approaches to mental disorders. Thus, this investigation focused on the interaction between cultural concepts and the perception of mental disorders, based on a search for scientific articles in the databases Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS), National Library of Medicine (MEDLINE), Scientific Electronic Library Online (SCIELO), Spanish Bibliographic Index in Health Sciences (IBECS), Scopus, Science Direct and Google Scholar.

The descriptors used were “Cultural Concepts”, “Mental Disorders” and “Perception of Illness”, combined using the “AND” operator. The references were managed using the SciSpace
platform, which allowed the articles to be organized, filtered and selected according to their relevance and adherence to the topic.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The social sciences have different approaches to the definition of culture, and this concept is currently under discussion, especially due to its increasing use, which is often inappropriate (Scupin, 2017). This phenomenon can be seen in the wide diversity of expressions such as “rock culture” or “drug culture” that are part of our everyday language, which has led to an increase in the vagueness of the term (Pasquinelli, 2002).

“The culture of autism” is an expression that has also aroused interest and produced echoes in the scientific community, especially by uniting different areas of the social sciences with different areas of health (Straus, 2013). However, the epistemological discussions guiding the topic still point to structural gaps that weaken the construction of a paradigm opposed to ableism (Ferrán, 2023), which is in force in most nations. In this sense, it is necessary to understand the anthropological conceptualization of culture over time and its implications for today.

Within the conceptual framework of culture, Darwinian evolutionism had a great influence on 19th century anthropologists, especially the British Edward Burnett Tylor, one of the first to construct a structured definition. Tylor (1871) advocated a form of “psychic unity of mankind”, as well as that cognitive abilities were closely linked to varying stages and levels of evolution and social development (Scupin, 2017). According to Tylor (1871, p. 54):

“Culture... is that total complex which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capacities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

This concept still influences the perception of cultural influence on health in various regions of the world (Blute, 2022); (Hossain et al., 2020). As in other studies, Ali et al. (2023) also evoke the concept formulated by Tylor in their argument that a nation's culture influences the success of vaccination programs, thus highlighting the “vaccine culture” (Wang et al., 2022); (Chen; Biswas, 2018).

As a counterpoint to this evolutionary, deterministic (geographically and economically) and totalitarian view, the American anthropologist Franz Boas (2010), one of the founders of
modern anthropology, developed a disruptive concept of culture that emphasizes cultural diversity and relativity:

The totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the conduct of the individuals who make up a social group, collectively and individually, in relation to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the same group, and of each individual toward himself (Boas, 2010, p.113).

Based on this concept, there is a space-time disruption in the view of the phenomenon of “culture”, which from then on is perceived as unique and should be studied in its own terms, without value judgments based on external cultural standards, and is therefore relative. This approach was fundamental to the development of anthropology as a distinct scientific discipline and represented a break with the view that non-Western societies were inferior to Western societies. Franz Boas (2010) based his conception on Bastian's ideas of the “psychic unity of humanity”, as well as inspiration from German thinkers such as Herder and Kant (Scupin, 2017).

This conception influenced the understanding of psychiatric disorders by questioning the dominant explanations that attributed these illnesses to heredity. Instead, Boas (2010) argued that social and cultural factors played a significant role in the development of mental disorders. This approach was later incorporated into subsequent studies that provided foundations for establishing a broader and more holistic understanding of psychiatric disorders, leading to new treatment approaches that were more community-centered and prevention-oriented (Smith, 2023).

Following these two theoretical frameworks, the functionalist school of culture, led by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, defended the idea that cultural practices and social institutions should be understood in terms of their functions and contributions to the cohesion and stability of society as a whole (Aretz, 2022; Indriayani et al., 2023). In this current, culture has a function of satisfying the biological and psychological needs of individuals, and cultural institutions are interdependent systems that contribute to the maintenance of social order (Aretz, 2022); (Javedosokhan et al., 2022). The functionalist approach emphasizes adaptation, stability and cultural continuity, and sought to understand how the different parts of culture worked together to meet society's needs (Damon et al., 2022).

Unlike the perspective that culture presents a functional aspect to society, the structuralism defended by theorists such as Lévi-Strauss (1953) proposes culture as a coherent
and organized system of meanings, values and practices. These systems are expressed through myths, rituals, language and other forms of symbolic communication, which regulate human behavior in a society, being a powerful force that shapes social life (Allaire; Firsirotu, 1984); (Faulkner, 2006); (Lévi-Strauss, 1953).

This structuralist knowledge with an emphasis on symbolic systems has influenced and underpinned the development of technologies that help communication and social interaction for people with mental disorders (Malinverni et al., 2016). In this sense, a relevant concept is “bricolage”, which in anthropology is seen as a form of thought and action that is influenced and shaped by the culture in which it occurs (Lévi-Strauss, 1968). In this way, culture provides the materials, resources and knowledge available for bricolage, as well as the norms, values and meanings that shape the way people use and combine these elements. In this process, culture is constantly recreated and transformed, as new forms and meanings emerge from bricolage, which reveals the dynamic and adaptive nature of culture. Thus, this phenomenon reflects the human capacity to create meanings and solutions from available cultural resources, involving the combination and reinterpretation of existing cultural elements to meet new needs and contexts. As people engage in bricolage, they demonstrate the ability to incorporate cultural elements in creative and flexible ways, adapting them to their specific needs and circumstances. Bricolage advocates that culture is not a fixed set of practices and meanings, but a constantly evolving process, influenced by human interactions and individual and collective creativity (Sunduramurthy et al., 2016).

Despite its great influence in various areas of knowledge, the structuralist concept of culture has had its limitations because it emphasizes the structure and symbolic systems underlying culture, without also considering the meaning and interpretation that individuals attribute to cultural practices. In this sense, Clifford Geertz (2008), considered one of the greatest anthropologists of the 20th century, created the concept of “dense description” to describe an interpretive approach that seeks to capture not only the superficial and observable aspects of human behavior, but also the underlying meanings, cultural contexts and interpretations of individuals.

Geertz (2008) proposed an interpretive approach to culture, which focuses on the symbolic representations and cultural meanings attributed by individuals in specific contexts. Thus, culture is transmitted and learned through symbolic processes such as language, rituals and
social practices, and that these symbols are interpreted by individuals in their everyday interactions (Abolafia et al., 2014); (Geertz, 2008). According to Geertz (2008), culture is “a system of meanings that men create and live in”, so it is not something that exists outside of people, but something that is constructed by individuals in their social interactions. In this way, culture is a human product and, at the same time, a system of symbols that guides people's actions and thoughts (Geertz, 1973).

Clifford Geertz's contribution to understanding culture, particularly through his development of interpretive social science, has significantly influenced the approach to mental disorders by emphasizing the importance of cultural systems in interpreting human behavior and psychopathology. Geertz's (1973) early work, which focused on reformulating the concept of cultural systems, laid the foundations for a more nuanced understanding of how culture shapes the expression, perception and treatment of mental disorders (Wurtzburg; Rocchio, 2014).

This interpretivist approach to culture, developed by Geertz (1973), aligns with contemporary views of cultural psychiatry that recognize the fundamental role of culture in the etiology and treatment of psychiatric conditions (Kirmayer; Minas, 2023). From this perspective, mental disorders vary in different geographical and cultural areas, being deeply rooted in the sociocultural conditions from which they emerge (Maximino, 2023).

The variability in community perceptions of mental disorders and the influence of culture on health-seeking behaviors and treatment options highlight the practical implications of Geertz's work in the field of mental health (Maximino, 2023). Geertz's influence extends to the broader understanding of the role of culture in mental health, where culture is seen as central to the interpretation of human psychological and psychosocial development, and to the recognition of culture-linked syndromes in psychiatric diagnosis (Hope; Rochmawati, 2019). Their work supports a holistic view that considers the impact of cultural norms on neurobiology and the experience of illness, informing culturally sensitive treatments and highlighting the biological variations that affect medical treatment (Cossu, 2021).

After Clifford Geertz, the concept of culture advanced significantly, reflecting wider socio-economic changes and shifts in disciplinary boundaries, which in turn influenced the approach to mental disorders (Aggarwal, 2023). Key divergences from Geertz's (1973) theory of culture have emerged, particularly in relation to the dynamic and fluid nature of culture and its impact on individual identity and social structures. This has led to a more nuanced understanding...
of culture, which goes beyond static symbols and meanings to include the practices and institutions that shape everyday life (Kirmayer; Minas, 2023). This shift towards seeing culture as a common and pervasive aspect of social life, influenced by socio-economic changes, occurred after the Second World War (Barańska, 2021). This evolution in the concept of culture has significantly influenced the approach to mental disorders, emphasizing the cultural and social contexts in which they occur (Wurtzburg; Rocchio, 2014).

Psychological anthropology emerged with the proposal to fill the gap between individual psychology and cultural contexts. Its revival during the 1980s and 1990s marked a significant change, challenging previous approaches that neglected the psychological dimensions of culture. It also incorporated the integration of cognitive and cultural dimensions in understanding human behavior, aspects of cognitive anthropology and cultural psychology. This movement represented a departure from previous views that prioritized cultural determinism or treated psychological traits as isolated from their cultural context (Rothe-Wulf, 2023); (Surmanidze, 2022).

The concept of culture in psychological anthropology is multifaceted, emphasizing the shared structures of meaning through which individuals interpret their worlds, as well as the normative standards that regulate behavior in societies. This perspective is crucial for understanding mental disorders, as it highlights the role of cultural contexts in shaping experiences and interpretations of mental health conditions (Ciello, 2020); (Wurtzburg; Rocchio, 2014). Authors such as Janis H. Jenkins, who has extensively researched mental health from an anthropological perspective, make a significant contribution to this field by examining the cultural and experiential aspects of mental illness (Blonder, 1991). Jenkins' work, along with that of other scholars, highlights the importance of considering culture in the diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric conditions. The psychological anthropology approach to mental disorders is also underpinned by a critique of the mind-body dualism prevalent in anthropology and advocates an integrated understanding of the role of the brain in cultural phenomena (Bhugra; Poole, 2011). This perspective also advocates a differentiation between mental health resources and mental disorders, suggesting that cultural and environment-specific factors are essential for diagnosing certain mental conditions (Heinz; Kluge, 2012). The evolution of the concept of culture in psychiatric diagnosis, from DSM-IV to DSM-5-TR, highlights the shift in the understanding of culture from a focus on ethnic communities to a broader consideration of social structures and clinical practices (Harkness; Super, 1999). This evolution reflects psychological anthropology's
broader goal of understanding mental disorders not just as individual pathologies, but as phenomena shaped by cultural narratives and social interactions that explore the cultural dimensions of emotions, morality and disability (Aggarwal, 2023); (LeVine, 2009). In this way, this approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding mental disorders in cultural contexts, emphasizing the importance of cultural narratives, social structures and doctor-patient interactions in the diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions (Heinz; Kluge, 2012); (Schwean et al., 1998); (Weisner, 2017).

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) drew up the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), a classification system developed for the description and diagnosis of mental disorders. This manual provides diagnostic criteria and information on different disorders, helping mental health professionals to identify and classify psychiatric conditions (Spitzer et al., 1978). Researchers from various institutions contribute to the revision and periodic updating of this manual, which is currently in its fifth edition (DSM-5-TR).

From its fourth edition, the DSM began to consider cultural aspects in its formulation, due to the consensus that culture influences the way people understand and experience health, illness and treatment. As such, culture can affect beliefs, values, expectations and behaviors related to mental health, and therefore failure to take culture into account can lead to inaccurate diagnoses, inadequate or ineffective treatments and inequalities in the provision of mental health care. Starting with its fifth edition, the DSM created a sub-working group that developed a Cultural Formulation Interview (CFI), which has been applied in various parts of the world and validated with the aim of offering mental health professionals the possibility of considering cultural factors when assessing patients and planning treatment (Jarvis et al., 2020).

This cultural approach movement is based on the concept of culture as “systems of knowledge, concepts, rules and practices that are learned and passed down through generations. In this way, culture includes language, religion and spirituality, family structures, life cycle stages, ceremonial rituals and customs, as well as moral and legal systems” (Aggarwal; Lewis-Fernández, 2015).

Despite this movement towards cultural valorization in the biomedical perception of mental disorders, this approach is still limited, as it is based on stereotypes and does not take into account the complexity of individual cultural identities. Furthermore, the DSM-5 approach still
presupposes an ontological separation between nature and culture, which can reinforce reductionist views of mental disorders (Wenceslau; Ortega, 2022).

4 CONCLUSION

The analysis of the diversity of concepts of culture and their implications for the perception of mental disorders has revealed the intrinsic nature and complexity of this relationship. From the first evolutionist formulations to more contemporary approaches, such as Clifford Geertz's interpretivist approach, each theoretical conception offers different understandings of how culture shapes the experience and expression of mental disorders.

The different anthropological currents have influenced not only the academic understanding of mental disorders, but also clinical practice and mental health policies. The transition from a deterministic and universalistic view to a more contextualized and interpretive approach reflects a significant evolution in the way mental health professionals and researchers consider the influence of culture on health and well-being.

The incorporation of cultural aspects into the DSM-5 represented an important milestone in the history of psychiatry, recognizing the importance of considering cultural diversity in the assessment and treatment of mental disorders. However, as has been pointed out, this approach still presents limitations and challenges, highlighting the ongoing need for improvement and cultural sensitivity in clinical practice and mental health research.

Ultimately, the diversity of concepts of culture and the different anthropological approaches provide a solid basis for a broader and more contextualized understanding of mental disorders, promoting a more holistic and sensitive approach to the individual and cultural needs of people affected by these conditions. This interdisciplinary perspective, rooted in anthropology and the social sciences, continues to play a crucial role in the promotion of mental health and the development of inclusive and culturally sensitive public policies.
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