

RECONSTRUCTING INDIGENOUS PSYCHOLOGICAL THOUGHT: ERNEST BERNEA AND THE CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF ROMANIAN ETHNOPSCHOLOGY

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Abstract

This article reconsiders Ernest Bernea as a precursor of Romanian ethnopsychology. It argues that, although Bernea was not a disciplinary psychologist, his writings articulate a coherent model of personhood, meaning, and communal life that can be reconstructed within the broader historiography of psychology in Eastern Europe and in relation to cultural and indigenous psychology. Recent historiographic work on Romania, the Czech lands, and the former Yugoslav space shows that psychology in Eastern Europe developed under conditions of institutional fragility, ideological rupture, and uneven international circulation. Against that background, Bernea appears as a border-zone thinker whose reflections on the village, spirituality, and tradition illuminate culturally embedded forms of mind and selfhood. The article argues that including such figures produces a fuller and more historically adequate account of Romanian psychological thought.

Keywords: ethnopsychology; cultural psychology; indigenous psychology; Ernest Bernea; interwar Romania.

INTRODUCTION

The historiography of psychology in Eastern Europe remains uneven, not simply because many archives are incomplete or because national scholarly traditions have been unequally studied, but because the discipline itself developed under historically discontinuous conditions. Read side by side, the regional literature keeps circling back to a similar point: in Romania, the Czech lands, and the former Yugoslav space, psychology grew under rather unstable conditions – weak institutions, political interference, uneven modernization (Marinković, 1992; Klicperová-Baker *et al.*, 2020; David *et al.*, 2023; Pajić & Biro, 2023).

This historiographic situation has an important methodological consequence. If one writes the history of psychology only through formal institutions, laboratories, testing bureaus, associations, and university departments, one captures an indispensable part of the story, but not the whole of it. In Eastern Europe especially, psychologically important ideas often circulated through neighboring

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domains such as philosophy, ethnography, sociology, pedagogy, literary reflection, and religious thought (Hoskovcová *et al.*, 2010; Mészáros, 2017). A narrow institutional history therefore risks mistaking one mode of psychological articulation for the entirety of psychological reflection.

This limitation becomes especially visible in the Romanian case. Studies of Romanian psychology have drawn attention not only to internal disciplinary development but also to issues of international visibility, publishing infrastructure, and academic circulation (David *et al.*, 2002; Glăveanu, 2009). These perspectives already imply that the history of psychology must be understood in relation to broader cultural and communicative conditions. Once that broader frame is adopted, it becomes easier to recognize that psychologically significant reflection may emerge outside formal psychology as such.

Ernest Bernea belongs to this wider field of non-canonical but psychologically relevant thought. He was not a disciplinary psychologist, and it would be misleading to recast him as one. Yet his work repeatedly addresses questions that later became central in cultural psychology and indigenous psychology: how forms of life structure perception, how communal worlds shape conduct and self-understanding, how symbolism mediates belonging, and how tradition works not only as heritage but as a living framework of intelligibility (Bernea, 1985, 2006, 2009; Adams *et al.*, 2015; Bruner, 1990; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). To ignore such work because it falls outside official psychological institutions would be to reproduce precisely the kind of historiographic narrowing that recent Eastern European scholarship has begun to correct.

The present article therefore proceeds from a reconstructive rather than identificatory premise. It does not ask whether Bernea “was” a psychologist. It asks whether his writings contain a sufficiently coherent model of culturally mediated psychological life to warrant inclusion in the historiography of Romanian psychology, especially in its ethnopsychological dimension.

Within that widened frame, Bernea becomes newly legible. He appears not as a marginal traditionalist of merely local interest, but as an intellectually important figure located at the intersection of ethnography, rural sociology, philosophy of culture, and symbolic anthropology. The aim of the present article is to make that legibility explicit and to show that Bernea’s work can be understood as part of the cultural foundations of Romanian ethnopsychology.

1. ETHNOPSYCHOLOGY AND CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Any attempt to reconstruct Bernea’s relevance to psychology requires conceptual discipline. Without such discipline, one risks either a vague celebration of interdisciplinarity or an anachronistic retrofitting of present-day psychological categories onto an interwar author. The appropriate method is a cautious

comparison of conceptual structures. The question is not whether Bernea used the vocabulary of cultural psychology, but whether his treatment of communal life, symbolic order, and selfhood exhibits structural affinities with later ethnopsychological and cultural-psychological approaches (Bernea, 2009).

At its broadest, ethnopsychology concerns culturally specific models of mind, selfhood, motivation, emotion, and social conduct. It departs from strong universalist assumptions by treating cultural forms not as secondary “influences” on an otherwise fully constituted psyche, but as part of the very conditions through which psychological life becomes intelligible. In this regard, ethnopsychology overlaps with cultural psychology and indigenous psychology, although the emphases differ. Cultural psychology tends to stress the mutual constitution of mind and culture, whereas indigenous psychology emphasizes the importance of concepts emerging from local traditions rather than being imposed by dominant academic paradigms (Adams *et al.*, 2015).

The longer genealogy of such thinking includes Wilhelm Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie*. Historiographically, this matters because Wundt’s importance is often reduced to experimental psychology, whereas his work on language, myth, and custom foregrounded the view that higher mental life cannot be adequately understood through the isolated individual alone (Wundt, 1916). Klautke (2010) has shown that the debates around *Völkerpsychologie* were central to nineteenth-century attempts to conceptualize the relation between mind, nation, culture, and historical life. That genealogy is relevant here not because Bernea was demonstrably dependent on Wundt, but because Bernea’s project belongs to a recognizable family of questions about how shared symbolic worlds shape human understanding.

Bruner (1990), for his part, shifts the focus away from the mind as mere information processing, and toward meaning; people don’t just respond to stimuli, they move – often half-unaware – within worlds already shaped by stories, symbols, expectations.

These perspectives are highly relevant for Bernea because his analyses repeatedly presuppose that the person is not psychologically self-sufficient, but shaped through participation in inherited communal forms (Bernea, 1985, 2009).

Indigenous psychology adds a further reason to revisit Bernea. Its importance lies in challenging the assumption that valid psychological concepts must always originate in dominant Western academic centers and then simply be exported elsewhere. In regions such as Eastern Europe, intellectual traditions dealing with personhood, collective life, and symbolic order often emerged in mixed forms: partly sociological, partly philosophical, partly ethnographic. Bernea’s work exemplifies that hybrid formation (Bernea, 2006). Recovering him is thus not merely an antiquarian exercise; it is a way of asking whether Romanian intellectual culture articulated locally grounded resources for thinking psyche and culture before such issues were standardized by later disciplinary vocabularies.

The methodological limit, however, must be stated clearly. To say that Bernea is relevant to ethnopsychology is not to say that he anticipated all later theoretical distinctions, nor that his work can be uncritically incorporated into present-day psychology. The proper claim is narrower and stronger at once: Bernea developed a conceptually recognizable account of how communal forms, symbolic structures, and inherited traditions shape lived experience (Bernea, 2009). That is enough to justify his inclusion in a broader history of psychologically relevant thought.

2. THE INTERWAR ROMANIAN INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

Bernea's work becomes more intelligible when located within the interwar Romanian debate on modernization and cultural continuity. The interwar period in Romania, as in much of Central and Eastern Europe, was not only a time of state-building and institutional reform but also a moment of intensified reflection on what kind of human being modernity produces and what older forms of life it disrupts. In that sense, the period generated not just political ideologies but competing cultural anthropologies.

The village, the nation, the peasant, the intellectual, the modern citizen, and the believer were all figures through which deeper questions about order, belonging, and historical direction were being negotiated. Part of the explanation may lie here as well. The village, in this context, was not really treated as just a social or economic category. It tended to be seen in a thicker way – as a space where continuity had not entirely broken down, where memory was still lived rather than archived, and where things, for better or worse, still seemed to “hold together” in a recognizably cultural sense.

Such symbolic investments were often selective and idealizing, but from the standpoint of cultural psychology what matters is that they involved implicit theories of socialization, selfhood, value formation, and collective memory.

The relevance of the Gustian milieu is considerable here. The monographic tradition associated with Dimitrie Gusti aimed at a total analysis of social life, integrating economic, moral, spiritual, juridical, and historical dimensions (Gusti, 1946). Although Bernea's work moves in a more interpretive and inward direction than a purely empirical village survey, the Gustian commitment to understanding the whole of a communal world forms an important part of his intellectual background. This makes Bernea particularly significant for a reconstructive history of ethnopsychology, because he helps show how communal life can be approached not only as social fact but as lived order (Bernea, 2009).

And if one looks beyond the Romanian case, something similar appears elsewhere in Eastern Europe. The historiography itself makes this fairly clear. Work on the Czech lands and the former Yugoslav space suggests that you cannot really tell the history of psychology by focusing only on departments or institutions; the surrounding intellectual climate and political context keep

intruding into the picture (Hoskovcová *et al.*, 2010; Klicperová-Baker *et al.*, 2020; Marinković, 1992; Pajić & Biro, 2023). In the Czech case, for example, successive political shifts seem to have left their mark even on how the field later reconstructs its own past, while in Yugoslavia the situation is different again – shared structures, but still quite divergent local developments.

These lessons are directly relevant to Romania: one should not expect a single uniform pathway of psychological development, and one should be prepared to find psychologically meaningful discourse in border zones between disciplines. The interwar Romanian context also matters because later communist suppression altered the disciplinary map retrospectively. Once formal psychology suffered restriction, marginalization, or ideological filtering, earlier and parallel sources of reflection could become forgotten, misclassified, or detached from the history of the discipline. This is one reason why present-day historiography must remain attentive to non-canonical materials. In Romania, at least, it's difficult to tell the story in a straight line. One can follow the institutional side – departments, journals, the usual markers – but that doesn't quite capture what actually happened. There are stretches where things seem to stop, or fade out, and then, later on, something comes back, though not exactly as before (David *et al.*, 2023; Glăveanu, 2009). Bernea's work places itself in that uneven terrain of relative, often challenged continuity.

3. ERNEST BERNEA: INTELLECTUAL PROFILE

Ernest Bernea is best approached as a multidisciplinary thinker whose importance lies precisely in his refusal of rigid disciplinary separation. He moves across ethnography, rural sociology, philosophy of culture, and reflections on symbolic and spiritual life. That mobility is not accidental. It corresponds to an object of inquiry – the communal world as lived and interpreted order – that cannot easily be contained within one disciplinary register.

With Bernea, one gets the impression that culture is not simply something you stand outside of and describe. It's more like what you are already inside of when things begin to make sense. That, perhaps, is what makes him worth revisiting here. He is not really concerned with isolated actions as such, but with how a kind of order takes shape – quietly, over time – through habits, through repetition, through practices that are rarely spelled out but still guide how people experience what is around them (Bernea, 1985).

In this respect, his work is better understood as a conceptual inquiry into lived intelligibility than as a mere archive of folklore.

This also helps distinguish Bernea from a simplistic traditionalism. He is not valuable merely because he praises the rural world or opposes modernity. His more enduring significance lies in the way he treats culture as formative rather than decorative. Communal life, in his work, is not a background condition external to the self; it is one of the media through which selfhood, evaluation, and meaning are

structured (Bernea, 2005). That is why his thought can be brought into dialogue with later theories of symbolically mediated personhood without collapsing historical distance.

At the same time, Bernea should not be exaggerated into solitary originality. He belongs to a broader interwar effort to understand the relation between culture and communal form. What makes him distinctive is that his version of that effort is especially compatible with later cultural-psychological questions. That is enough to make him historiographically important.

4. CORE CONCEPTS IN BERNEA'S WORK

4.1. THE VILLAGE AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

The village occupies a central place in Bernea's writing, but its importance is not exhausted by sociological description. In his work, the village functions as a structured field of meaning: a world in which rhythms of time, spatial relations, obligations, rituals, expectations, and hierarchies converge into a relatively coherent order of experience. To call this a psychological structure is not to psychologize away its material and institutional features. It is to note that for Bernea the village forms subjects (Bernea, 2009).

This point is crucial for distinguishing Bernea from a merely descriptive ethnographer. He does not simply record customs attached to rural life. He reads village life as a matrix within which conduct becomes interpretable. In modern cultural-psychological language, one could say that the village furnishes shared cultural models: implicit schemas through which actors recognize situations and orient action (Bruner, 1990). Bernea's analyses of custom and communal order suggest precisely such a model, even if he does not use that vocabulary. Persons do not first exist as fully abstracted selves and only later "enter" village life; rather, village life is one of the media through which selves become socially legible in the first place (Bernea, 2006).

This emphasis on communal embeddedness also resonates with later work on relational and interdependent forms of selfhood. Markus and Kitayama (1991) approached the issue differently, but reached a related point, questioning the idea that the self is everywhere the same. What counts as a "self," they suggest, depends quite a bit on the cultural setting. Their line of thought was continued and empirically grounded by Cross *et al.* (2011), who produced evidence for relational-interdependent self-construal.

Bernea does not formulate these distinctions in modern psychological terminology, but his treatment of communal life presupposes a personhood that is socially and symbolically structured rather than radically atomized.

The village is also psychologically significant because it implies a theory of socialization. Norms are not merely taught propositionally; they are absorbed through participation in patterned practices. Here Bernea can be read fruitfully

alongside approaches that emphasize practice, embodiment, and distributed meaning. Bourdieu's (1977) notion that social practices embody durable structures of perception and evaluation helps illuminate the kind of order Bernea is attempting to describe, even if the two authors emerge from very different intellectual contexts. Likewise, D'Andrade's (1995) work on cognitive anthropology is useful insofar as it highlights how shared cultural schemas organize interpretation and behavior. Bernea's communal world appears, in this sense, as a culturally thick environment in which norms and meanings are sedimented in life rather than merely stated as doctrine.

Another reason this section matters is that it helps connect Bernea to earlier Romanian discussions of collective mentality without forcing a direct lineage where evidence is limited. Drăghicescu's *Din psihologia poporului român* remains a major Romanian attempt to characterize a collective psychological profile through historical and cultural patterns (Drăghicescu, 1996). Bernea's procedure is less overtly national-psychological and more ethnographically textured, but both works share the intuition that forms of communal life shape durable dispositions, habits of judgment, and styles of response (Bernea, 2009).

This is also where critical vigilance becomes necessary. To treat the village as psychologically formative is not to deny internal conflict, stratification, gendered power, local variation, or historical transformation. One danger of traditionalist writing is that coherence becomes over-coherence. Yet this danger does not cancel the conceptual insight. Bernea's lasting value lies in grasping that communal worlds do not simply surround persons externally; they enter into the formation of perception, judgment, and affect.

4.2. SPIRITUALITY AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Bernea's treatment of spirituality is one of the main reasons his work remains relevant for an expanded history of psychology. In his writings, spirituality is not simply a matter of confessional doctrine or private belief. It functions as a lived symbolic horizon through which a community experiences continuity, value, and orientation. This is psychologically important because it moves spirituality from the margin of social life to its interpretive center.

A community's symbolic-religious order tells its members what is worthy of reverence, what counts as defilement or blessing, how suffering may be situated, and how life events acquire significance beyond immediate utility. In this respect, Bernea's perspective converges with the broader insight that human beings do not inhabit a morally neutral world of bare facts. They inhabit worlds saturated with meaning, and those meanings are often stabilized through ritual, symbol, and inherited spiritual forms (Bernea, 2009; Bruner, 1990; Taylor, 1989, 2004).

At this point, interpretive anthropology starts to feel useful, though not in a rigid way. Geertz (1973), for instance, describes culture as something like a web of meanings that people themselves have spun, which suggests that understanding it is less about finding causes and more about trying to read those meanings – slowly, and maybe never completely.

Bernea's emphasis on spirituality as part of the communal order is entirely consistent with such an approach. Spirituality matters not because it is reducible to belief content, but because it helps organize a symbolic universe in which persons can orient themselves.

The sociology and anthropology of religion deepen this point further. Something similar, though coming from different directions, can be found in earlier work. Durkheim (1995) treats religious categories as actively shaping social life, not just reflecting it after the fact. Douglas (1966), in her own way, looks at how systems of classification – especially around purity or taboo – help hold a symbolic order together. And then Turner (1996) and van Gennep (1960) focus more on ritual, on moments of transition, showing how these processes seem to organize not just change, but also how people come to see themselves within a group. Bernea is not reducible to any of these frameworks, but they help clarify why his treatment of spirituality belongs to the domain of psychological relevance. Spiritual life, in his perspective, is not an optional ornament added to social existence; it is one of the media through which identity, valuation, and collective continuity are sustained.

This perspective is also important in the Eastern European context. Histories of psychology in the region cannot be limited to formal theory and institution-building, because symbolic and ideological orders often shaped the very conditions under which selves and disciplines could emerge. Mészáros's (2017) account of psychoanalysis in Eastern Europe is instructive here: repression and later revival affected not only organizations but broader cultural possibilities for speaking about interiority and psychic life. By analogy, Bernea's concern with spirituality illuminates a dimension of communal identity that disciplinary histories often leave underdeveloped (Bernea, 1985).

At the same time, this area requires critical care. Spiritual orders can unify, but they can also exclude; they can orient meaning, but they can also legitimize hierarchy and suppress plurality. A critical reading of Bernea should therefore preserve the conceptual importance of spirituality without treating it as an unquestioned source of authenticity. Once that caution is in place, however, the psychological relevance of his treatment becomes difficult to deny.

4.3. TRADITION AS A COGNITIVE AND NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

Among Bernea's most fertile ideas for a history of ethnopsychology is his treatment of tradition as more than inherited content. In his work, tradition functions as a framework through which reality is apprehended and evaluated. It tells people not only what ought to be done, but how situations are to be recognized in the first place. In that sense, tradition is not merely normative; it is cognitive.

This is a particularly strong point of contact with later cultural psychology. The modern temptation is to imagine cognition as beginning in the solitary mind and only afterward consulting culture as a storehouse of optional meanings. Bernea's perspective runs in the opposite direction. Persons think within inherited

forms before they reflect on them. Tradition is not external data added to completed minds; it is part of the medium through which minds become socially operative (Bernea, 2005). This makes his work especially useful for reconstructing pre-disciplinary forms of ethnopsychological thought.

D'Andrade (1995) is relevant here because his account of cultural models and cognitive anthropology helps explain how shared interpretive structures shape understanding. In a similar fashion, Bruner (1990) portrays human cognition as culturally mediated and narrative in character. Although Bernea is not working within identical frameworks, his treatment of tradition as a living order of sense is highly compatible with them.

Bourdieu (1977) is again useful as an interpretive parallel. If one shifts back to practice, the picture becomes a bit less explicit, but perhaps more telling. The idea is that certain structures don't always need to be stated in order to persist – they get carried along, embodied, repeated. Bernea seems to be moving in that direction as well. When he writes about tradition, it's not really as a set of rules people consciously follow, but more as something that quietly shapes how situations are perceived and responded to, often before any reflection sets in.

Tradition is not merely cited; it is lived. This is one reason Bernea's analysis retains value even when read critically. He recognizes that culture enters the subject at the level of habit, evaluation, and salience, not only at the level of explicit doctrine.

This section also provides a useful bridge to older European debates on collective mentality. Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* and the wider discussion of "psychology of peoples" sought to conceptualize how language, custom, myth, and shared historical life shape mental forms (Klautke, 2010; Wundt, 1916). Bernea does not reproduce that discourse in any simple way, but his treatment of tradition as constitutive of understanding places him within a broader genealogy of attempts to think psychological life beyond the isolated individual (Bernea, 2009). The Romanian case becomes more intelligible when seen against that wider European background.

A final nuance matters here. Tradition in Bernea is not best read as timeless immobility. Even if his writing at times leans toward continuity, the very insistence on tradition in the interwar period suggests historical pressure and perceived rupture. In other words, Bernea's account of tradition is itself a modern reflection on what is felt to be endangered. That tension strengthens rather than weakens the argument: tradition is psychologically powerful precisely because it is both inherited and contested.

5. IMPLICIT ETHNOPSYCHOLOGY IN BERNEA

When the preceding elements are taken together, Bernea's work can plausibly be described as an implicit ethnopsychological framework. The term "implicit" is essential. Bernea did not formulate a disciplinary theory of ethnopsychology, did not deploy standardized psychological terminology, and did not work within an institutional psychological program. What he did provide was something

historically and conceptually substantial: a recurring account of how personhood, meaning, conduct, and social intelligibility are formed through participation in culturally structured communal worlds (Bernea, 2009).

The framework takes shape around four main elements. If one shifts back to practice, the picture becomes a bit less explicit, but perhaps more telling. The idea is that certain structures don't always need to be stated in order to persist – they get carried along, embodied, repeated. Bernea seems to be moving in that direction as well. When he writes about tradition, it's not really as a set of rules people consciously follow, but more as something that quietly shapes how situations are perceived and responded to, often before any reflection sets in.

The historiography of Eastern European psychology provides a strong reason to take this implicit framework seriously. Recent research has shown that the region's psychological traditions were shaped not only by internal scientific development but also by political bans, ideological filtering, and disruptions in educational continuity (David *et al.*, 2023; Heller, 2023; Klicperová-Baker *et al.*, 2020; Pajić & Biro, 2023). In Romania, for example, psychology's institutional life was sharply constrained at key moments; in former Czechoslovakia and across the former Yugoslav space, the history of the discipline also reflects major political interruptions and later reconstruction (Heller, 2023; Marinković, 1992). If such ruptures help explain why some formal psychological traditions became fragile or discontinuous, they also help explain why psychologically relevant reflection outside formal psychology deserves greater historiographic attention.

This is where Bernea's relevance becomes clearer. He is not simply an author to be appended to the history of psychology out of regional piety. He shows how, under Eastern European conditions, reflection on mind and culture often took interdisciplinary forms. His work belongs to a broader pattern in which psychologically meaningful ideas were carried by ethnography, philosophical anthropology, social theory, and cultural criticism. In that sense, Bernea does not stand outside the history of psychology; he complicates and enlarges it.

One may therefore say, with due caution, that Bernea contributes to the cultural foundations of Romanian ethnopsychology in two ways. Historically, he preserves and articulates a local language for thinking the relation between self and communal world. Conceptually, he provides a model of symbolic mediation and culturally formed subjectivity that remains legible within contemporary frameworks. That dual importance justifies his inclusion in a more capacious historiography.

6. CRITICAL ASSESSMENT: AMBIGUITIES, LIMITS, AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC RISKS

A reconstruction of Bernea's psychological significance would be incomplete if it did not address the limits and risks of such a reading. The first risk is ideological. Interwar studies of village life, tradition, and national culture were seldom neutral. Across Europe, and certainly in Romania, the village could become

a symbolic reservoir into which intellectuals projected authenticity, moral purity, continuity, and ethnic essence. Any present-day reading of Bernea must therefore ask whether his account of communal coherence sometimes suppresses plurality, conflict, and historical contradiction.

The second risk is homogenization. Ethnopsychological writing can easily slide into overgeneralized claims about “a people”, “a mentality” or “the national soul”. Drăghicescu’s earlier effort remains important precisely because it makes this risk visible as well as productive: it opened a Romanian path for thinking collective psychological style, but did so in a genre that can essentialize (Drăghicescu, 1996). Bernea’s work is subtler and more grounded in lived worlds, yet it is not immune from the same hazard. To use him responsibly, one must preserve the difference between identifying recurrent cultural patterns and attributing timeless, homogeneous essences to a population.

The third risk is retrospective disciplinary projection. Because Bernea becomes intelligible in light of cultural psychology, there is a temptation to redescribe him as if he had already been doing cultural psychology in a modern sense. That would be historically false. The proper claim is comparative and reconstructive, not genealogically triumphalist. Bernea may be placed in dialogue with Bruner, Geertz, Bourdieu, or later theories of distributed meaning, but one should not erase the differences in method, vocabulary, and problem-setting that separate him from those later developments.

A fourth limit concerns historical situatedness. Bernea belongs to a particular interwar Romanian formation and should not be detached from it altogether. His writings emerged within debates over modernization, tradition, and cultural fidelity (Bernea, 2009). That context is partly what gives them force, but it is also what limits their transferability. Not every insight about communal meaning in Bernea should be generalized into a universal psychology of tradition. The value of his work lies in its historically situated conceptual richness, not in any timeless authority.

Yet none of these cautions invalidate the central argument. On the contrary, they clarify the terms under which Bernea can be productively used. It is probably not necessary to fully accept the more idealized aspects of this kind of perspective in order to see that something psychologically meaningful is being articulated there. Also, one need not accept essentialism to acknowledge durable cultural models. And one need not dissolve disciplinary boundaries in order to see that adjacent intellectual domains sometimes generated insights indispensable for a fuller history of psychology.

Finally, the Romanian case itself supports this broader historiographic stance. Work on imprisoned, surveilled, and politically damaged Romanian psychologists reminds us that the history of psychology in Romania cannot be told as a serene institutional narrative. It is also a history of repression, erasure, and interrupted memory (Neculau, 2010, 2012). Under such conditions, the border zones of thought become even more important, because they sometimes preserve lines of reflection that official institutions could not stably sustain. Bernea should be read within that larger ecology of fragility and survival.

7. CONCLUSION

Revisiting Ernest Bernea through the lens of cultural psychology and ethnopsychology makes it possible to broaden the history of psychological thought in Romania and, more generally, in Eastern Europe. The point is not to expand the canon indiscriminately, but to correct a historiographic narrowing that equates the history of psychology with the history of formal institutions alone. If one steps back again and looks at the wider literature – Romania, the Czech lands, the former Yugoslav space, Hungary, even the history of psychoanalysis in the region – a similar pattern keeps appearing, though never in exactly the same form. Psychology seems to have evolved in rather uneven conditions – often unstable, under political pressure, often interrupted, and not always fully visible on the international scene. (David *et al.*, 2023; Heller, 2023; Klicperová-Baker *et al.*, 2020; Marinković, 1992; Mészáros, 2017; Pajić & Biro, 2023).

Such conditions make a wider, more flexible historiographic method necessary. Within that widened frame, Bernea matters because he offers a coherent account of the person as culturally formed, symbolically mediated, and communally embedded. His village is a world of meaning, not just a locale; his spirituality is a horizon of identity, not just confessional residue; his tradition is a cognitive and normative framework, not just inherited custom. Taken together, these features amount to an implicit ethnopsychological model. They also show why excluding figures like Bernea from the history of psychology leaves that history thinner than the regional record warrants.

At the same time, critical vigilance must remain part of the reconstruction. Bernea should not be idealized, homogenized, or falsely modernized. His contribution is strongest when read as historically situated but conceptually fertile. Under those terms, he becomes an important figure for understanding how Romanian thought articulated relations among culture, selfhood, and communal life before those relations were fully absorbed into later psychological vocabularies.

A more inclusive historiography of Romanian psychology should therefore attend not only to departments, journals, and testing traditions, but also to the wider intellectual environments in which models of mind, person, and social meaning were elaborated. Ernest Bernea belongs to that wider history. Recovering him does not blur the identity of psychology; it helps explain how psychologically relevant thought actually developed in Eastern Europe.

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