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Excerpt

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*Part I*

Theory

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## 1 Theoretical roots of cultural-existential psychology

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As Edgar Allan Poe wrote, “Misery is manifold. The wretchedness of earth is multiform.” It is a reality of the human situation that we are both embodied and symbolically conscious – aware of ourselves as existing through time – and while this is the source of our greatest potentialities, it also makes us subject to intense experiences of adversity. Like any other organism, our bodies are vulnerable in countless ways – to bacteria, toxins, accidents – and are continually undergoing processes of decay that will eventually result in death. Yet, unlike any other organism, we also experience the ineffable vulnerability of our sense of self: we fear the uncertain future, feel regret or mourn the irretrievable past, and are often discontented with the present state of our lives. We encounter negative information about ourselves, unexpected disasters and illnesses, belief systems radically different from our own, and pangs of separation from other people who are important in our lives, and, after a certain point in our mental development, most of us become perennially aware of the looming fact that we will die.

In short, one of the problems that has plagued psychology throughout its history is the seemingly endless capacity for humans to undergo diverse forms of suffering and threat. Unlike any other animal, perfectly mentally sound humans can be almost paralyzed by fear of things that *are not present in the moment* and which *might not even be real*. Surely all of us remember a childhood terror of monsters or ghosts. Yet, many of us still know all too well what it is like to worry about the disapproval of a god, the possibility that a friend is betraying us behind our back, or the potential death of a loved one who is gone on a trip. Because we humans can be threatened by imagined or nonempirical entities and events, there is a staggering malleability to the sources of our suffering, such that we cannot even agree as a species about what real evil is. Indeed, what is *terrifying* to one person might seem laughable to another.

Consider the possibility that another person might make your genitalia disappear by touching you. This possibility might not rank high on the list of fears that keep the readers of this book awake at night. And yet within

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the cultural context of certain parts of West Africa at certain times, this fear has made a great deal of sense and been a source of real anxiety for people (Adams & Dzokoto, 2007). On the other hand, consider the possibility that humankind may be destroying the planet through our unremitting use of fossil fuels and production of greenhouse gases. Although rather difficult to grasp mentally, this fear ranks high among the concerns of many contemporary US citizens, yet it would hardly make any sense to most people in most cultures through most of history, who would likely shrug it off as nonsense.

Remarkable in the human experience is not only the diversity of real and symbolic concerns from which people suffer – from poverty to debilitating pain to neurotic disorders – but also the sometimes unfathomable resilience and creativity demonstrated by people in their attempts to cope with suffering, and to live every day with the bitter knowledge of death. How is this so? How is it that we humans consistently find the means – as André Malraux put it – “to deny our nothingness”? (qtd. in Friedman, 1967). Part of the answer is that we live largely in a symbolic world – a world of language, culture, art, and religion. Although this world can be complicated and even cruel, it is vastly preferable to the indifferent, destructive world of *decaying physical matter* in which we also live. We are not helpless in a world of physical and symbolic dangers, of threats to our bodies and our sense of significance. Rather, we employ those same cognitive capabilities that made us recognize our mortal limits to convince ourselves that we are powerful and immortal. Yet, we do not all live in the same symbolic world, and humans have devised an array of imaginative strategies for denying the same biological realities that have haunted and will haunt every person on earth.

This book provides a comprehensive, interdisciplinary framework, rooted in social psychology, for synthesizing the plethora of data and theories relevant to human suffering and coping. Research in social psychology suggests that people typically rely on psychological coping mechanisms for dealing with physical and symbolic threats, and that they derive these buffering mechanisms from the local *cultural worldview* in which they are immersed as a function of being connected to a particular social group. Research also suggests that these cultural worldviews are radically diverse. Yet, prior investigations have not generally integrated these two insights. Correcting this gap, the present study is an exercise in *cultural-existential psychology*: an investigation of the ways in which different cultural patterns orient individuals toward certain categories of suffering and coping. It explores the central thesis that *culture filters all aspects of the experience of existential threat and defense*. People in certain cultures are predisposed to see certain kinds of information and events as

threatening to their sense of meaning or self-esteem, even though similar information and events might not be threatening at all to people in certain other cultures. Furthermore, culture also orients us toward certain psychological defenses and means of coping when we are confronted with events we see as threatening.

Since the inception of the modern social sciences little more than a century ago, scholars have amassed a great deal of data and theoretical perspectives pertaining to the human capacity for suffering. The present volume draws on this vast body of information, as well as my recent, modest empirical studies to present a novel theoretical and methodological lens through which to view human experience. This lens – cultural-existential psychology – incorporates ideas from across the history of the social sciences to understand how people think about and react to adverse events. This perspective is concerned both with the *existential* realities of suffering and death that all humans face, and with the striking *cultural* differences in how groups of people around the world process and respond to these realities.

This perspective offers the theoretical and methodological tools to answer questions such as these: Why do members of traditional Jewish communities respond to death by burying the dead quickly, tearing their garments, and refraining from celebrations for a long period, while members of the contemporary Asante nation engage in lavish funerary celebrations to display their family's wealth? Why did the threat of being buried alive terrify nineteenth-century Americans, but has been considered a great honor reserved for priests among the Dinka of South Sudan? When different cults in the United States and Japan, both believing that the world was going to end at a certain time, were confronted with the reality that the world *did not* end, why did the US cult's members cling even more rigidly to their beliefs, while the leader of the Japanese cult attempted suicide in dishonor? And why do North American children fear monsters, while Vietnamese children fear the disappointment of their parents?

A cultural-existential perspective will help scholars across disciplines answer countless such questions pertaining to the ways in which cultural patterns shape our reactions to unfortunate or unexpected events. But this synthetic framework offers more than a solid basis for interdisciplinary research. It also sheds light on a number of areas of considerable importance for our collective well-being in contemporary society. Understanding how cultural beliefs shape our experience of threat reveals why there are such tremendous political divides in the United States and elsewhere – conflict is bound to occur if members of different political parties literally *see* completely different threats in the world (e.g., global

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climate change versus the immorality of abortion). This synthetic understanding can also provide practitioners with much-needed tools for translating the large body of research on coping with trauma or disorder (primarily conducted among North American populations) to diverse communities in other parts of the world, who also need assistance recovering from disaster or treating mental illness. And finally, the cultural-existential view helps clinicians reconsider many prevalent contemporary ailments – from sleep disorders to anxiety about one’s workplace status – as stemming from cultural factors endemic to contemporary capitalist society.

I believe that it is an important moment to articulate interdisciplinary perspectives such as cultural-existential psychology. The opening epigraph from Jürgen Habermas has in this regard a twofold significance. On the one hand, as I hope to show in later chapters of this book, most of its readers will likely hail from a culture which creates a “fragmented consciousness” because the breakdown of binding meaning systems (under individualization and modernization) has predisposed us to anxiety and self-doubt. For the self-understanding and improvement of individuals from such cultures, an exploration of the roots of our fragmented consciousness will be essential. Furthermore, insofar as these proclivities to anxiety and our defensive reactions to them are heightening political discord, illuminating their cultural origin may permit our societies to move forward on major problems. Yet, at the same time, the fragmented consciousness to which Habermas refers has a more insidious effect within the academy, which is perhaps preventing it from serving its social function. In the cultural collapse of “grand narratives,” people are hesitant to embrace totalizing, cross-disciplinary perspectives, for fear of doing violence to some corner of reality. One can pose the question: Would not the greater violence be to allow human reality to destroy itself?

This introductory chapter aims to summarize the interdisciplinary background of the proposed cultural-existential psychology. As mentioned, scholars across the human sciences have at different times presented models and data relevant to understanding cultural diversity in the experience of threat and defense. I begin my presentation of the current framework with an overview of these important past efforts, beginning with more recent trends in social psychology and moving backward to earlier approaches in the other human sciences. In Chapter 2, I will then present the foundational principles of cultural-existential psychology, before turning in subsequent chapters to detailed theoretical consideration of existential threat experience, cultural diversity, and their intersection.

### Theoretical roots in social psychology

My research background is in social psychology, and I believe this field is well positioned (in terms of methods and theoretical approach) to serve as a starting place for investigation of culture's influence on adversity. While sociology tends to focus on structural variables and macro-level demographics, and anthropology and ethnography focus on the localized experiences of particular groups of people, social psychology straddles the line between these areas of focus, illuminating how subjective, local experiences influence and are influenced by broader social trends. The positioning of cultural-existential psychology within this particular niche thus offers several advantages. Methodologically, the framework is centered at the intersection of subjective experience and immediate contextual factors, which can be explored through experiments and cross-cultural comparisons. However, methodological moves can easily be made from this starting point in either direction, whether "upward" toward the examination and classification of more macro-level, social structural factors, or "downward" toward more detailed, person-centered explorations of subjective experience.

As a framework grounded in social psychology, cultural-existential psychology draws most immediately on two subfields that have emerged in this discipline over the past three decades. The first is experimental existential psychology (XXP; Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004), which seeks to understand human experiences of threat, defense, and flourishing by testing the ideas of existentialism using contemporary experimental methods. The other is cultural psychology (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder, 1995; Triandis, 1989), which uses a variety of methods to demonstrate (1) the complex interrelationship between culture and psyche and (2) the resulting diversity in motivational, cognitive, and attitudinal processes – once assumed to be fairly universal by social psychologists – as a function of variation in cultural and social organizational factors. One simple way of summarizing the aims of cultural-existential psychology is to view it as an attempt to bridge these two subfields, which I will now consider in some detail.

**Experimental existential psychology.** This research area was inaugurated three decades ago with the emergence of terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), which proposes that people are motivated to maintain the symbolic resources of self-esteem and a meaningful cultural worldview in order to protect themselves from the haunting awareness of their mortality. Terror management research highlights the largely nonconscious role of death awareness in the creation and maintenance of human culture, as well as in the everyday motivations

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of individuals. This role of death angst has long been acknowledged by existentialists such as Heidegger (1962), but is generally unacknowledged in most accounts of social life and individual psychology (Hankiss, 2001). Indeed, the major breakthrough of experimental existential researchers has been to take such ideas – once deemed the special province of philosophy – and devise a variety of means for testing them with current methods and statistics.

For example, hundreds of psychological studies carried out in dozens of countries have shown that reminding people temporarily of their own death increases their investment in cultural beliefs or markers of their personal value – to the point that they will aggress against others who endorse opposing political views, or show willingness to engage in risky and even suicidal behaviors to demonstrate their personal worth (for a review, see Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008). Importantly, these compensatory behaviors do not bear any logical relation to the problem of death; being an ardent Democrat or a Republican is not likely to make one live longer. Instead, these studies demonstrate that humans rely on specifically *symbolic* resources to maintain equanimity in the face of death awareness. Among organisms, only we are fully aware of the devastating fact that we will inevitably die, and only we must convince ourselves that we are so special that we will be immortal: in an afterlife, in the memory of others, or by belonging to a group that transcends our individual existence.

Starting from the initial contribution of terror management theory, XXP has provided the most comprehensive and compelling account to date of how individuals are motivated by the need to protect themselves from basic anxieties. In general, XXP research builds off of and empirically supports the six central themes of existential philosophy (Barrett, 1962; Cooper, 1990; Cumming, 1980; Guignon & Pereboom, 1995; May, 1983; Schrag, 1961; Tillich, 1959): (1) the uniqueness of humans as a species, and the unique nature of each individual existence; (2) the psychological importance of personally meaningful experiences of concrete situations; (3) the reality of human embodiment, which implies the psychological unity of motivation, cognition, and affect; (4) the importance of will and symbolic cognition for humans; (5) the importance of both existential threat *and* existential freedom in psychological experience; and (6) the dialectical nature of human psychological processes. I will briefly review how XXP research has substantiated these existential claims, acknowledging that some issues have received greater attention than others.

Perspectives such as terror management theory emphasize the unique aspects of human psychology, such as our capacity for symbolic cognition and our awareness of personal finitude. These unique species-wide



attributes are central to cultural-existential psychology, and they will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2. Some contemporary perspectives in psychology that claim to be resonant with an existential perspective (such as the meaning maintenance model; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012) do not actually fit within the boundaries of XXP because they largely ignore those aspects of human psychology that make us unique. Perspectives such as these attempt to reduce human experiences of meaning and threat to functional patterns observable in other species that lack symbolic cognition, an untenable reduction from an existentialist vantage.

Due to its methodological roots in social psychology, XXP possesses a natural focus on the significance of situational factors in human thinking and behavior, as well as the importance of the ways people differentially construe situations based on internalized motivations and cognitive patterns (Ross & Nisbett, 2011). Research has demonstrated the psychological impact of subtle (but existentially relevant) situational variables, such as standing by a cemetery (Jonas, Fritsche, & Greenberg, 2005) or feeling excluded by strangers with whom one is playing a simple online game (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). XXP studies also attest to the important role that individual interpretations of events (such as traumatic experiences; Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004) play in subsequent motivation and experience.

However, while some theories in XXP maintain a proper awareness of human species uniqueness, and all recognize the importance of situational factors, most (because of their grounding in a broadly empiricist approach to science) do not pay adequate attention to *individual* uniqueness (e.g., Sharpless, 2013), particularly as it manifests in the concrete, situated experiences of the existing individual (Schneider, 2013). Nevertheless, some promising ground in this direction has been covered by the study of individual “life stories” in narrative-based psychologies (Hammack, 2010; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). It will be argued in Chapter 2 that qualitative research is an important antidote to the bias against studying idiosyncratic individual experience in XXP.

Although it assumes certain existential givens that differentiate humans from other species, XXP also strives to retain an awareness that humans are embodied animals. This implies that the framework both is broadly consistent with evolutionary theory and traces a large portion of human suffering back to the conflict between biological limitations and symbolic consciousness (Pyszczynski, Sullivan, & Greenberg, 2015). Like much contemporary research in social psychology, XXP studies underline the existential theme of unity among psychological processes. Humans are not rational processors, comparable to computers, who occasionally experience emotions; rather, we are flesh-and-blood beings guided by

symbolic, long-term goals. The conditions of our bodies at any moment in time influence how we cognize our environment; for example, feeling physically warm makes us more likely to perceive strangers as friendly (Williams & Bargh, 2008). Being exposed to a physically disgusting smell or sight makes us more likely to condemn moral transgressors (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008). The reverse is also true – our symbolically mediated thoughts and perceptions can influence our relationship to our physical bodies. Feeling guilty about an action makes it more likely that we will take a bath or wash our hands, for instance (Rothschild, Landau, Keefer, & Sullivan, 2015). We are constantly monitoring our environments for information about whether we are proceeding toward our goals and whether the world is operating as we believe it should; even very slight disturbances in our conviction that these things are true can produce negative emotion, often on an unconscious level (e.g., Holbrook, Sousa, & Hahn-Holbrook, 2011). A variety of threats to habitual psychological experience, ranging from subtle anomalies such as a surrealist painting to more severe examples such as thoughts of death, arouse states of aversive affect and alter the way people evaluate others and perceive the world, even prompting them to find illusory but comforting patterns in random arrays of information (for review, see Jonas et al., 2014). In short, although psychologists have historically compartmentalized human motivation, perception, cognition, and emotion, XXP research is at the forefront of modern perspectives arguing for their indissoluble unity.

At the same time that XXP acknowledges the physical nature of human existence, it also recognizes the importance of human willing and our capacity for abstract, imaginative thought. Contemporary research has shown that humans have needs for ultimate meaning and purpose: we need to see our actions as contributing to something greater than the satisfaction of our immediate biological needs, and we need to believe that unexpected and unfortunate events nevertheless are sensible in light of some pattern of higher meaning (Wong, 2006). In other words, people do not only want to do things to survive; they want to do things that will make them immortal, and this is only possible by participating in a collective web of symbolic meaning. Yet, immortality does not only come from being part of something greater than oneself. A large branch of contemporary existential research has been spurred by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which holds that people have a fundamental need to see their actions as autonomously driven, and will experience a variety of psychological setbacks if they lack this sense of intrinsic motivation. In short, as terror management theory holds, people desire not only a clear sense of socially shared meaning, but also a sense of their own