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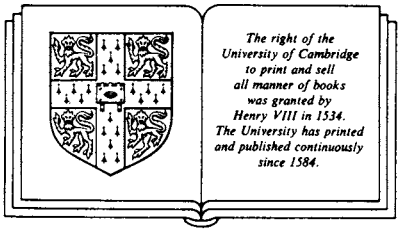
Self and Society

NARCISSISM, COLLECTIVISM, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORALS

DREW WESTEN
University of Michigan



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More information

Contents

Preface *page* xi

Part I *A theory of personality* 1
1. Personality theory: the three faces of psyche 3
Psychoanalysis and its discontents 4
Skinnerian behaviorism and the response to its stimulus 9
Humanistic and existential psychology 16
Theories past and present 18
2. Emotion: a missing link between psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioral psychology? 22
Counter-conditioning behaviorism to respond to emotions 24
Psychodynamic psychology: defenses can be reinforced 30
Systems theory and the integration of two relatively closed systems 33
Wishes and affects: where drive was, there shall affect be 49
The case for unconscious emotion: must we feel what we think we feel? 64
Affective arousal and management: a general model 71
Stress, coping, and affect 91
Conclusion 96
3. The structure and dynamics of personality 97
Self-needs and other-needs 98
Ego processes: ego real and ego ideal 103
4. The development of personality, narcissism, and moral judgment 128
The development of narcissism, moral judgment, and ego processes: current perspectives 129
Internal narcissism 154
External narcissism 162

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Cambridge University Press
0521317703 - Self and Society: Narcissism, Collectivism, and the Development of Morals - Drew Westen
Frontmatter/Prelims
More information

Synthetic narcissism 176
Conclusion 180

Part II *A theory of culture* 187
5. Social theory in sociology and anthropology 189
Classical social theory and the sociological tradition 191
Affinity and consanguinity in anthropological theories 194
Social-cultural theory: prospects and retrospects 210
6. Societal structure and dynamics 216
Group-needs and member-needs 217
Culture processes: culture real and culture ideal 219
Function and functionalism: the uses and abuses of teleology 229
Class as a multifaceted phenomenon 234
Conscious and unconscious emics: the case of the starving cow 237
7. The development of collectivism and the culture ideal 241
Primary communitarian collectivism 245
Secondary communitarian collectivism 255
Individuated collectivism 266
Synthetic collectivism 280

Part III *Personality and culture: a synthesis* 283
8. Culture and personality: dying species or vigorous hybrid? 285
The totem-pole-is-a-symbolic-penis approach 285
The cultural configuration approach 288
The personality mediation approach 289
Darwin meets Oedipus 293
Approaches past and present 296
9. Psychic and sociocultural structure and dynamics 299
Psychological motives and cultural processes 299
Stasis and change 306
10. Personality and communitarian collectivism 310
11. The psychodynamics of modernization 330
Psychology and modernization: empirical, psychodynamic, and sociological approaches 333
Modernization and the content of the ego ideal: self versus other 346
Modernization and the form of the ego ideal: the apostasy of early internalizations 349
Conclusion 352
12. Personality and sociocultural change 355
Personality and the breakdown of meaning 356
A Javanese example 360

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Cambridge University Press
0521317703 - Self and Society: Narcissism, Collectivism, and the Development of Morals - Drew Westen
Frontmatter/Prelims
More information

13. Breakdown and recovery: paradigmatic processes in personal identity and cultural integration 367
Kuhnian scientific revolutions 368
Revitalization movements 371
The structure of religious experience 373
Identity crisis and identity formation 375
Brainwashing as forced identity resynthesis 377
Rites of passage as forced identity resynthesis 380
Conclusion: paradigmatic processes and the identity of two identities 382
14. Personality and individuation 386

References 394

Index 431

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0521317703 - Self and Society: Narcissism, Collectivism, and the Development of Morals - Drew Westen
Frontmatter/Prelims
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Preface

> Society must be studied in the individual and the individual in society; those who desire to treat politics and morals apart from one another will never understand either.
>
> Rousseau

Two hundred years after Rousseau wrote these words, the social sciences relate to one another like the three rings of a circus: their activities are largely independent, though an occasional tightrope walker straddles the boundaries in defiance of the frightful distance between himself and solid ground. The purpose of this book is to provide a safety net, so that momentary stumbles do not prove fatal or debilitating.

Many problems confront theorists who attempt to reconcile psychological with sociocultural variables, the greatest of which is the integration of different levels of analysis. The easiest – and the most fallacious – method of simultaneously examining personality processes and sociocultural phenomena is reductionism, i.e., considering one set as dependent, and the other as independent variables. A truly integrated approach, in contrast, must be able to treat both individual and social variables as dependent and independent and to reassemble the data in some coherent fashion. Such is the aim of this project.

The book proposes a theory of personality, a social theory, and a theory about the interrelation of the two. Not only analytically, but stylistically, such a crossing of traditionally distinct disciplinary boundaries presents problems that I have been only partially successful in resolving. The analysis of psychological data, for example, is written with the intent both to suggest to psychologists a new way of viewing personality and psychological development, and to explicate for nonprofessional readers the personality theory. A similar situation occurs in sections of the book that are anthropological, sociological, or philosophical. The problem lies in creating exposition that is neither too elementary, and therefore redundant for the specialist, nor overwhelming for the "visiting professional" from

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another field. In some cases I have tried to write on two levels, choosing words that convey meanings for those who know the nuances of the discipline as well as for those who do not. In many cases I am sure to have succeeded both in boring the expert and bewildering the alien. As to the former, I can only beg the reader's indulgence. For the latter I have tried to cite copiously from the literatures that have informed my views.

I am not, in this book, producing any new data. We have plenty of "evidence" in the social sciences; the problem is that we have difficulty deciding what it is that our evidence documents. If "science progresses," it does so through an interaction between inquiring minds, empirical observations, and previous theories. We do not advance our knowledge through the dogged collection of statistically significant but scientifically and socially insignificant trivialities; empirical observation is useless if it cannot corroborate, disconfirm, or otherwise provide insight into theoretical perspectives or practical applications that are not, themselves, trivial. Pouring "facts" into "science" is like pouring sand onto the beach: no matter how much we accumulate, knowledge will always slip through our fingers. Yet the equal and opposite danger is that we create deductive havens for our homeless minds, that our quest for cognitive order is prepotent over our interest in reality. The contrast between these two modes of inquiry seems to loom as large in twentieth century social science as it did in the philosophical skirmishes between Locke and Descartes (if not in arguments between Plato and Aristotle), and the preferences of researchers for one style or another probably rest as much upon temperament as upon substantive issues.

In this book the reader will participate in a dialogue with both "facts" and "theories." Perhaps we would sometimes do well to treat facts as theories, since all observations are theoretically tinged, and theories as facts, since past and current theories present themselves as social facts with which every new generation of researchers must reckon. The arguments presented here will rely upon empirical data, whether from the clinic, the laboratory, or the field, as well as critical analyses of the theories and concepts of thinkers whose footprints indelibly mark the psychological, sociological, and anthropological paths to be traversed. Our current understanding is a partial function of both our own observations (and those of others) and of paradigms lost:[1] one person's, generation's, or tradition's conceptualizations uniformly arise in relation both to "objective reality" and to previous thought. The approaches we develop must always be viewed in context of the approaches we shed. Intellectual advances are moulting seasons, and in the moments of transitional bareness, we must

[1] My apologies to whoever first used this phrase.

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examine both the stimuli impinging upon us and our previous coats if we aspire to brighter plumage.

The book consists of three parts. Part I, "A Theory of Personality," proposes a view of the structure, dynamics, and development of personality that draws upon a wide spectrum of theories and data, including psychoanalysis (particularly ego psychology and object relations theory), cognitive social learning theory, existential psychology, systems theory, attribution research, social cognition research, moral psychology, and ethology. Chapter 1 provides a brief review of competing traditions in personality theory. Chapter 2, entitled, "Emotion: A Missing Link Between Psychodynamic and Cognitive-Behavioral Psychology?" offers a theory of emotion that serves as a conceptual bridge between aspects of the two most sophisticated and seemingly irreconcilable contemporary approaches to personality. Chapter 3 proposes a model of the structure and dynamics of personality, and Chapter 4 focuses on the development of personality, narcissism, and moral judgment. It argues that the development of ego processes, narcissism, and moral beliefs are intertwined and attempts to show how the child moves from an initial reconciliation of self and other in which only his own needs are important, to a later position in which morality is defined by significant others, to a possible synthesis in which the individual creates her or his own idiosyncratic view of the ideal relation of self and other. The final section of the chapter discusses the relevance of the perspective proposed here both for future research and for clinical practice.

Part II, "A Theory of Culture," leaves the individual level of analysis and starts afresh with an examination of the development of social theory in sociology and anthropology in Chapter 5. The aim of Part II is to elaborate a theory of sociocultural structure and change that brings together ideas and data from such diverse thinkers and perspectives as Marx, Durkheim, functionalism, structuralism, ecological anthropology, symbolic anthropology, and systems theory. Chapter 6 provides a structural model which examines the dialectic between ideals and social structure and shows how culture mediates between conflicting needs of collectivities and individuals. Chapter 7 proposes a theory of the evolution of collectivism and morality at the societal level, focusing on the way in which a collectivism that ascribes value and power to the group is being overturned in favor of a conception that gives primacy to the individual.

Part III, "Personality and Culture: A Synthesis," integrates the models enunciated in Parts I and II. Chapter 8, "Culture and Personality: Dying Species or Vigorous Hybrid?" critically reviews the literature which has attempted to understand the relation between culture and personality and argues that a key flaw in much of this literature is the assumption that one

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can develop a model that bridges the two levels of analysis without first developing sophisticated (and interlocking) theories at each level. In other words, the only way to begin to comprehend the interrelation of personality and culture is to develop, first, an adequate theory of personality which can deal with such issues as the motivation and dynamics of normal and pathological functioning, and second, an adequate theory of culture which can aid in the understanding of sociocultural dynamics in times of both relative stability and relative change. Chapter 9 discusses the relation between sociocultural and personality structure and dynamics. Chapter 10 examines the question of "primitive mentality" and explores the relation between collective representations and individual psychology in preindustrial societies. After a discussion of the concepts of "modernization" and "development," Chapter 11, on "The Psychodynamics of Modernization," points to two psychological changes that consistently correlate with various processes of modernization: a heightened emphasis of self and a breakdown of accepted and internalized structures of authority. These changes are related systematically to the theories of personality structure and development of Part I and sociocultural structure and development of Part II, and several aspects of modernization are delineated which produce these effects. A central thesis of this book is that greater emphasis of self is an inherent aspect of modernization, not primarily a by-product of capitalism, colonialism, or social change in general; and that the greater self-emphasis that arises with the processes of modernization constitutes a moral revolution. Chapter 12 explores the psychological impact of the breakdown in shared systems of belief that occurs in periods of rapid social change and shows how the theory developed here can elucidate a concrete case by reanalyzing data from Java on events surrounding a funeral in the midst of social upheaval. Chapter 13 is entitled, "Breakdown and Recovery: Paradigmatic Processes in Personal Identity and Cultural Integration." It examines six seemingly unrelated phenomena – Kuhnian scientific revolutions, cultural revitalization movements, personal religious experiences, identity crises and reformations, brainwashing, and rites of passage – and demonstrates that they share a common pattern that provides insight into the relation between individual identity and cultural integration. The concluding chapter draws from a wide array of independent empirical studies, with the intent of demonstrating that modernization produces a type of self-oriented personality which correlates with an emerging cultural shift in moral orientation from a belief in the legitimate primacy of the group to a belief in the sovereignty of the individual.

Some readers may already be taken aback by the abstract and theoretical nature of this enterprise. The reader may be uneasy not only with such a heavy dosage of theory, but she or he may also find unsettling "grand theories," of which this is undoubtedly one. My justification for presenting

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an abstract theory – and an exceedingly broad one, at that – is that we simply cannot and do not operate without such frameworks. The alternative to devising new and better theories is not to work without them but to accept old and faltering ones. The anthropologist who examines a ritual and determines that it fulfills a socially necessary purpose is making an extraordinary assumption – that groups or societies have collective "needs" that somehow become translated into concrete acts – which is essentially functionalist and presupposes functionalist *theory*. The sociologist who makes a statistical study of income distribution while consciously eschewing social theory does not realize that he is tacitly accepting a positivist-empiricist philosophy of science which sees the "observable facts" as the essence of science, and social science as modeled on the natural science paradigm. Not only may such a researcher be taking for granted such highly abstract concepts as "socioeconomic status," but he is committing himself to a view that sees meaning as secondary to – if not entirely outside the parameters of – the study of human beings. This is a very *theoretical* view which asserts that important social facts can be expressed statistically, a perspective which without doubt requires strong and explicit justification. To assume, further, that one can fruitfully examine income distribution without simultaneously examining class relations is implicitly to take a theoretical position against Marxist sociology, which asserts that one cannot understand the former without examining the latter. The psychologist who studies "self-esteem" as an isolated personality variable has chosen his object of study because of implicit beliefs and assumptions about personality that lead him to believe that people's judgments of self-esteem are somehow psychologically significant.

As soon as one crosses disciplinary boundaries, the importance of attending to covert assumptions multiplies. The difficulty in developing a broad interdisciplinary theory that is not naive, reductionistic, or simply absurd is enormous, and has discouraged many from undertaking the task. Yet the absence of an explicit theory bridging individual and sociocultural levels of analysis does not imply the absence of implicit theory. Researchers in all disciplines use poorly articulated grand theories all the time. The foundation of many anthropological analyses of decision making in preindustrial societies is an unexamined rationalistic psychological theory that few who study personality would accept. The implicit sociological theory of dominant models of cognition in psychology is of individual information processors separately encoding and retrieving information about the world, themselves, and the other information processors with whom they come in contact.

The point of all this is that to reject explicit theory is to demonstrate not a noble agnosticism, but a profound naivete about the nature of thought as well as social science. People cannot perceive the world without conceptual

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frameworks, and as people are both the subject and object of social study, the elaboration of these schemata is indispensable. To provide a broad theoretical framework is not dishonestly to pretend omniscience; to the contrary, it is to be intellectually honest in enunciating one's perspective, which would otherwise remain penumbral and unexamined, and to suggest that this model would be useful for others to use.

One final word about the nature of the constructs proposed here requires brief mention. "Reality" is not directly recorded in scientific concepts. As Kuhn, among others, has emphasized, psychological, sociological, and cultural factors intervene in the "scientific" attempt to describe our universe. If this is true regarding such topics as the nature of planetary motion, in which we can take a somewhat disinterested perspective, one would certainly expect to find such factors operating in relation to the object of thought in which we have the most stake: ourselves.

In proposing a set of constructs (such as "culture ideal," "internal narcissism," and a number of others), I am in one sense suggesting that these concepts denote real objects and, in another, claiming them to be only of heuristic value. In contending that a person may experience guilt when he compares aspects of his "self-system" with aspects of his "ego ideal" (Chapter 3), I am obviously not arguing that one can see sections of the brain roped off and marked accordingly. What I am saying is that the discrepancy between a self-image and an affect-laden moral goal is a real discrepancy that is more easily understood by postulating psychic "structures," defined as constellations of functionally related processes. In this sense I clearly differ from structuralist theories in social science that view structures as real in some physical sense. Perhaps the most one can say about concepts in the social sciences is that they somehow reflect both the object and the observer, that they point to real phenomena in an imperfect way because of the needs and imperfections of the observer. Science, Sphinxlike, lies somewhere between humanity and nature, and since *human* nature is the object of social scientific inquiry, then social science is to be found somewhere between mind and humankind.

By way of acknowledgment, my three greatest intellectual debts are to Freud, Marx, and Durkheim. The orthodox Freudian who reads this book may fear that I have emasculated Freud's theory, that by abandoning energy concepts and the id I have murdered the primal father and now intend to devour him. The orthodox Marxist who scans these pages may similarly brand me a bourgeois apologist or (if charitable) a misguided sufferer of false consciousness, having cast aside economic determinism, faith in a radical proletariat, and an exclusive emphasis on class as an analytical (if not a political) tool. One who reads more closely, I hope, will see that I have not castrated psychoanalytic notions but have tried to work through them to arrive at a fuller understanding; and that I have, indeed,

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struggled with Marx, and through a process of critique have appropriated some, though certainly not all, of his productive insights. Few today would consider themselves orthodox Durkheimians, but for those whose perspectives are fundamentally derived from his, I hope this work adds to the understanding of societal integration and disintegration and of the massive change in social forms that he perceived. My other intellectual debts have largely, I think, been indicated in the text.

On a more personal level, a number of individuals provided invaluable comments on all or part of various drafts of the manuscript, some of them years before this project even looked like it would turn into a book: Chris Bell, Eric Bermann, Helene Boyd, Robert Coles, Roy Edgley, Andrew Hahn, Carol Holden, Alfred Kellam, Harold Korn, Lucian Pye, Joel Migdal, J. Christopher Perry, Roy Rappaport, Kay Saakvitne, Russell Smith, Susan Suckling, Marc Westen, Sheldon White, Lewis Wurgaft, Robert Zajonc, and three anonymous reviewers. Susan Allen-Mills at Cambridge University Press has been invaluable in her advice, critical suggestions, and support for the project. Janis Bolster and Amit Shah at Cambridge worked diligently at production and copyediting. To these people I owe much of the book's coherence, and the foolishness that remains is of my own doing.

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