Cultural-Existential Psychology

Cultural psychology and experimental existential psychology are two of the fastest-growing movements in social psychology. In this book Daniel Sullivan combines both perspectives to present a groundbreaking analysis of culture's role in shaping the psychology of threat experience. The first part of the book presents a new theoretical framework guided by three central principles: that humans are in a unique existential situation because we possess symbolic consciousness and culture; that culture provides psychological protection against threatening experiences, but also helps to create them; and that interdisciplinary methods are vital to understanding the link between culture and threat. In the second part of the book, Sullivan presents a novel program of research guided by these principles. Focusing on a case study of a traditionalist group of Mennonites in the Midwestern United States, Sullivan examines the relationships between religion, community, guilt, anxiety, and the experience of natural disaster.

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The Role of Culture in Suffering and Threat

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To Leah and Beckett

One of the ultimate concerns of the modern worldview can be thus characterized. Man has always been aware of certain realities and values, certain objects of belief and validities, for which there is no room in his seemingly strictly circumscribed space . . . At first he expresses the certainty of this awareness in that he consolidates all such things in separate existences outside of life. He beholds them in the sharply separated beyond and lets them react back from there onto life . . . Against this naiveté arises critical enlightenment, which recognizes nothing "beyond" the subject; it throws back everything located in the beyond within the bounds of subjective immediacy, and thus declares as illusion whatever tends to persist nevertheless in independent confrontation. This is the first step of the great tendency in intellectual history: to place back into life itself, by means of a mighty revolution, everything that had been established outside of life in its own existence and which came to life from beyond. But since at this point life is conceived as absolute immanence, everything remains in a subjectivization . . . a denial of the form of the beyond, and one fails to notice that with this delimitation of the subject he has in fact made himself dependent on the idea of the beyond, and that it is only in and from this beyond that the boundary could take shape in which life was caught and busied itself in the unbreakable circle of the self.

– Georg Simmel (1918/2010, p. 17)

When the auratic traces of the sacred have been lost and the products of a synthetic, world-picturing power of imagination have vanished, the form of understanding, now fully differentiated in its validity basis, becomes so transparent that the communicative practice of everyday life no longer affords any niches for the structural violence of ideologies . . . In place of the positive task of meeting a certain need for interpretation by ideological means, we have the negative requirement of preventing holistic interpretations from coming into existence . . . The desired equivalent for no-longer-available ideologies might simply consist in the fact that everyday knowledge . . . remains diffuse, or at least never attains that level of articulation at which alone knowledge can be accepted as valid according to the standards of cultural modernity. *Everyday consciousness* is robbed of its power to synthesize; it becomes *fragmented*.

– Jürgen Habermas (1987, pp. 354–355; emphasis in original)

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Preface

This book attempts to be interdisciplinary, and to draw on a considerable body of literature that has amassed in the social sciences and philosophy in the past 200 years. Its format is somewhat unusual: Part I of the book presents a new theoretical perspective, cultural-existential psychology, while Part II reports original research that I conducted as an initial demonstration of the fruitfulness of this perspective.

For these reasons, readers from different disciplines may find some parts of the book more difficult to process than others. The aim of this preface is to state clearly the intentions of the book and each individual chapter, as a kind of guide for the reader.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the research traditions that preceded and contribute to cultural-existential psychology. It begins with summaries of the recent experimental existential and cultural movements in social psychology, and discusses the need to combine these two perspectives to provide a comprehensive scientific account of how people in diverse settings differentially experience and react to suffering and threat. It then reviews some of the precursors of a combined cultural-existential perspective in the history of the social sciences.

Chapter 2 lays out the three "fundamental principles" of cultural-existential psychology. The first is that humans are unique animals by virtue of our capacity for symbolic consciousness. The second is that culture is both a defense against and a source of the problems of theodicy and nihilism. In other words, cultural systems provide "threat orientations" – they predispose us to experience certain kinds of events as threatening, while also simultaneously providing characteristic means of interpreting and defending against those threats. The third principle is that multiple, interdisciplinary methods are required to fully understand how the individual's experience of threat and suffering is shaped by culture.

Chapter 3 offers a new integrative model of the types of threats that all humans are capable of experiencing, derived from existential philosophy. In line with terror management theory, the cultural-existential

perspective posits that death is the ultimate threat in human experience, and that death awareness is the ultimate source of all other threats. However, because people invest in symbolic structures that protect them from awareness of death – such as religion and self-esteem – they often experience threat not as death angst, but rather as an infringement on one of these protective structures.

The chapter distinguishes between three general levels of threat experience that are hierarchically related to the ultimate threat of death angst. At the lowest level of threat experience, people often undergo everyday feelings of either *anxiety* or *guilt*. Anxiety broadly encompasses feelings of uncertainty about how to act in the world, the probability of certain desired or undesired outcomes, or the meaningfulness of one's daily activities. Guilt broadly refers to feelings of inadequacy, immorality, or low self-esteem that individuals experience after a behavior that violates internalized standards for proper and worthy conduct.

If these lower-level threats are not resolved, they can become more serious, and the individual may feel that higher-order symbolic structures – such as their basic conviction that they are a worthy person – have come under threat. At this stage, individuals undergo the second-level threat of *angst*. Unresolved angst can bring the individual to the rare third-level threat of *nihilism*: the lack of any belief that life is worth living. The chapter distinguishes between *nihilistic disorientation* – the belief that there are no meaningful goals or values worth achieving – and *nihilistic despair* – the belief that I, as an individual, am completely incapable of achieving the goals or values that I consider meaningful.

Chapter 4 presents a novel, comprehensive model of cultural differences. Cultures vary on two primary dimensions. On the dimension of *social orientation*, some cultures are *collectivist* – people have a group-centric worldview, and they see themselves as interdependent with others. Other cultures are *individualist* – people have an egocentric worldview, and they experience themselves as independent from others. On the dimension of *social control*, some cultures are characterized by *visible control* – strong moral norms are reinforced by relative intolerance of deviant behavior. Other cultures practice *invisible control* – norms are primarily un-formalized and deviance is widely tolerated. Bringing these two dimensions together yields a model of four cultural "ideal types." The chapter concludes by discussing these types.

Chapter 5 concludes the theoretical portion of the book by integrating Chapter 3's model of existential threat with Chapter 4's model of cultural variation. Different cultural patterns provide different *threat orientations*, directing the individual toward certain kinds of threat experience and away from others. Two broad types of cultural threat orientation are

presented. *Disorientation-avoidant* cultures prioritize the avoidance of nihilistic disorientation – the beliefs and practices of such cultures protect the sacred nature of local values, but at the cost of orienting individuals toward experiences of lower-level guilt. A fundamentalist sect, for example, is disorientation-avoidant: strict religious beliefs shield members from any threat of meaninglessness, but feelings of guilt are inevitable when members fall short of their faith's high standards. *Despair-avoidant* cultures emphasize the avoidance of nihilistic despair – individuals are socialized to protect their sense of self-esteem and uniqueness, at the cost of predisposing them to lower-level anxiety. Secular members of middle-class and affluent US society are immersed in a despair-avoidant culture: when individuals in this setting encounter threats to their self-esteem, they invoke a variety of defenses to protect their self-worth, but these defenses often involve seeing the world as hostile and uncertain, creating potential anxiety. While collectivist/visibly controlled cultures (e.g., feudal Japan) foster a disorientation-avoidant threat orientation, individualist/invisibly controlled cultures (e.g., the contemporary United States) breed despair avoidance.

Part II presents a program of previously unpublished research, which serves as a case study demonstrating how the framework described in Part I may be used to generate novel hypotheses and insights. In particular, in three studies using multiple methods, I show how cultural-existential theory can illuminate the particular ways in which one cultural subgroup – traditionalist, rural Mennonites in the United States – experiences a variety of threats.

Chapter 6 presents the first of these studies. Archival survey data for this study were collected in 1980 from rural Mennonites born between 1898 and 1940. During the lifetimes of the participants, this particular group of Mennonites assimilated to mainstream US culture. I am therefore able to use these archival data to examine how processes of cultural change influence people's interpretations of negative events. Specifically, I present generational analyses showing that as the Mennonite community assimilated to mainstream values over time, their cultural values became intertwined with mainstream interpretations of suffering.

Chapter 7 presents a cultural-comparative study quantitatively assessing threat experiences in different subcultures. In this and the following chapter, I offer the results of a collaboration with a minority Mennonite group that has resisted assimilation, namely Church of God in Christ or "Holdeman" Mennonites. In terms of the cultural model presented in Chapter 4, Holdeman Mennonites represent a *collectivist/visibly controlled* culture. I administered a survey regarding experiences

of existential threat to these Mennonites, as well as individualist Unitarian Universalists and a standard sample of university undergraduates. The strongly collectivist Mennonites displayed a threat pattern characteristic of *disorientation avoidance*: they scored higher than the other two groups on measures of guilt, but lower on measures of anxiety and concerns about meaninglessness. By contrast, the other two, more individualist groups (undergraduates and Unitarian Universalists) displayed patterns more characteristic of *despair avoidance*: they scored comparatively higher on measures of anxiety and lower on measures of guilt.

Chapter 8 completes the empirical portion by examining in detail the subjective experience of actual threat in particular Mennonite individuals. Specifically, I describe results from in-depth interviews with members of a Holdeman congregation who survived the devastating Greensburg, Kansas, tornado of 2007. The entire population of Greensburg was reduced to half after the storm because many people lacked the financial means and support to rebuild their lost homes. However, the small Holdeman community had a swift and nearly full recovery. I found that the community-oriented, orthodox Holdemans interpreted the storm in light of their religious beliefs, and did not see the experience as threatening their meaning system. Furthermore, because of their communal social structure and practical knowledge, the congregation was able to quickly rebuild.

Finally, **Chapter 9** reflects on the ideas and findings presented throughout the book, probing and problematizing them in the hope of generating future research efforts. The book concludes with consideration of major existential problems faced in contemporary society by people from diverse cultures.

A few notes may help readers from different disciplinary backgrounds approach this work in ways that are best suited to their interests. First, in presenting a novel and interdisciplinary perspective, I have found it necessary to create many new terms or use terms that might not be familiar to those outside of a given discipline. I have therefore provided a short glossary of frequently used terms at the end of the book (Appendix A). Second, I have attempted to present the quantitative research in Chapters 6 and 7 in a nontechnical way that would be readily interpretable for readers unfamiliar with psychological research methods. For those interested in details of the study methods and statistical analyses, full information can be found in Appendices B–D.

For those readers who are primarily interested in the research reported in Part II, Chapters 3 and 4 are the most essential theoretical chapters for

interpreting the results. The other theoretical chapters may be skimmed. Other readers may be more interested in the overall framework of cultural-existential psychology than in the specific case studies of US Mennonites, in which case the first five chapters stand as an independent whole.

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