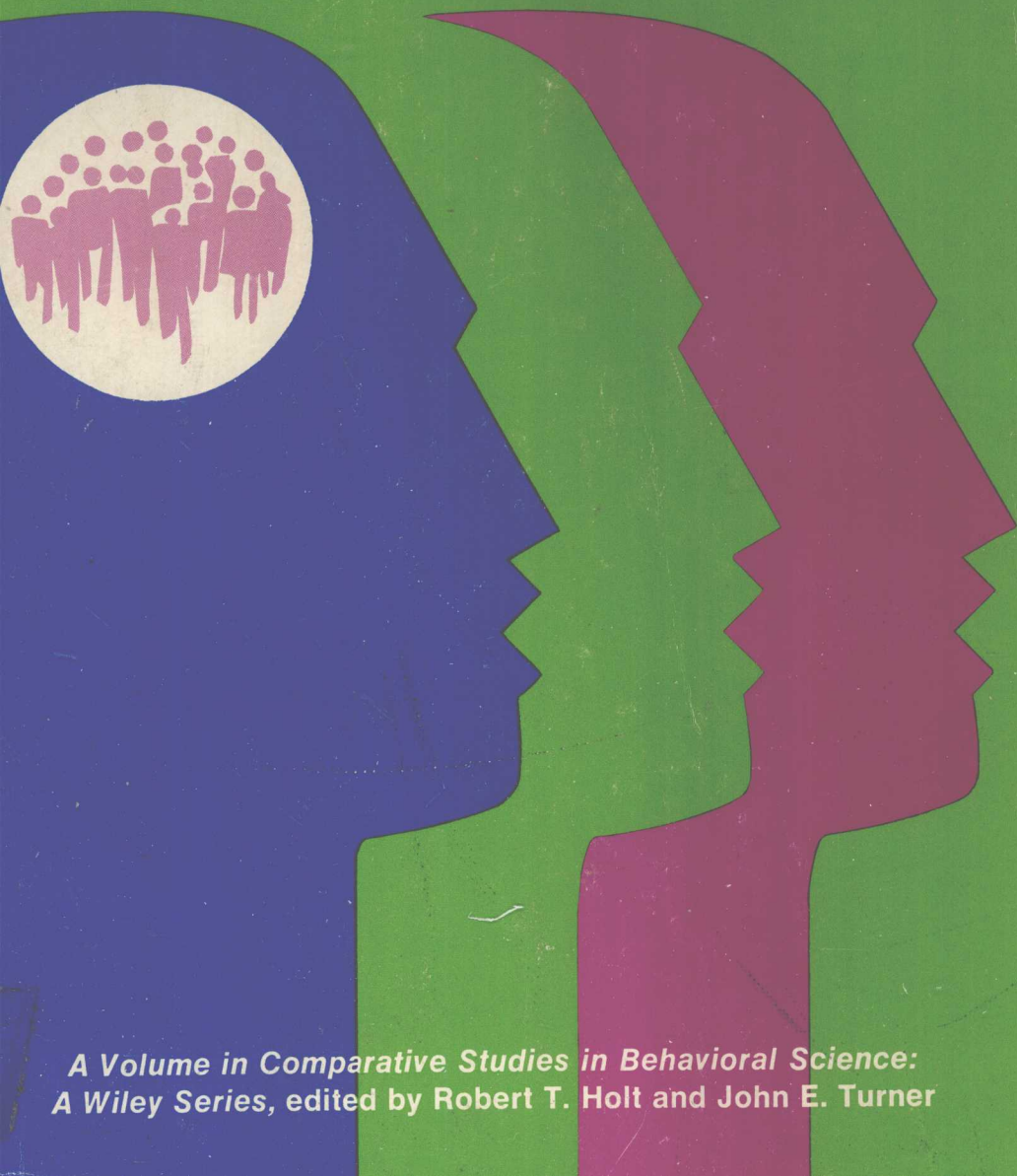# The Analysis of Subjective Culture

By Harry C. Triandis

In association with Vasso Vassiliou and George Vassiliou, Yasumasa Tanaka and A. V. Shanmugam

A Volume in Comparative Studies in Behavioral Science:
A Wiley Series, edited by Robert T. Holt and John E. Turner

The Analysis of
Subjective Culture

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The Analysis of Subjective Culture

Comparative Studies in Behavioral Science:

A WILEY SERIES

Robert T. Holt and John E. Turner, *Editors*
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University of Minnesota

The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry
    by Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune

The Analysis of Subjective Culture
    by Harry C. Triandis

The last decade has witnessed the burgeoning of comparative studies in the behavioral sciences. Scholars in specific disciplines have come to realize that they share much with experts in other fields who face similar theoretical and methodological problems and whose research findings are often related. Moreover, specialists in a given geographic area have felt the need to look beyond the limited confines of their region and to seek new meaning in their research results by comparing them with studies that have been made eleswhere.

This series is designed to meet the needs of the growing cadre of scholars in comparative research. The emphasis is on cross-disciplinary studies, although works within the perspective of a single discipline are included. In its scope, the series includes books of theoretical and methodological interest, as well as studies that are based on empirical research. The books in the series are addressed to scholars in the various behavioral science disciplines, to graduate students, and to undergraduates in advanced standing.

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Preface

In the last quarter century indications leading to the view that man has evolved from a species of carnivorous, tool-using apes who lived in Africa a million years ago have been accumulating in the fields of anthropology and paleontology at a rapid rate. Interestingly enough, it seems that most of the major social characteristics of these apes, as far as we can reconstruct them from fossil evidence, can still be found in modern man. Specifically, these apes hunted in packs and used a good deal of cooperation within them while defending their territories in ferocious battles. Within the packs there was a pecking order similar to those we find today among many birds and mammals, including man.

Man's recorded history is but a mere moment on the time scale of evolution—specifically, less than 1% of the time since he started using tools. Culture, which is the man-made part of the human environment, is also relatively recent. Yet, because man is so high on the phylogenetic scale and has such a long maturation period, cultural influences make a major impact on his development.

Modern man's culture for the first time in the last quarter century includes the capacity to destroy all life on earth. Thus we have the paradox of a relatively primitive animal, which only recently killed millions of his own species in wars and concentration camps, now possessing the ability to destroy all life by the most advanced methods of science. And, more, man's science has developed to the point at which it can dramatically change the environment by pollution, overpopulation, and atomic fallout.

The history of human conflict of the last few years suggests that man has not evolved much beyond his primitive ancestors. Everywhere we look we see conflict—tribal, religious, ideological—escalating to the destruction of human beings. Unless we find new ways to reduce conflict we may not be able to survive as a species and may destroy the ecology of all living things in the process.

Human aggression is clearly a product of both biological and cultural

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influences. While biologists are working on possible changes in human genetic structures, which may provide the needed breakthrough to the reduction of human aggression, other behavioral scientists must work on the cultural influences. Furthermore, it seems more realistic to hope that the solution will be found in the modification of the environment rather than in the restructuring of human genes, since there will be tremendous ethical, political, and social problems to be solved if we seek a biological solution to man's aggression.

One of the keys to this aggression can be found in ethnocentric concepts, ideological differences, and culturally determined ways of perceiving the social environment. We define *subjective culture* as a cultural group's characteristic way of perceiving its social environment. Differences in subjective culture are responsible for a good deal of intergroup conflict. In this book we hope to provide some concepts and new methodologies for its analysis and some insight into its relation to human conflict.

This work was undertaken in the spirit of cooperation by behavioral scientists concerned with the reduction of human conflict. Several behavioral scientists, from different disciplines, living in four different parts of the world, were concerned with the human condition and hoped to discover new ways to reduce conflict. When right conditions for cooperation were made available, they were ready to join in a common effort.

The opportunity to do large-scale studies which would be freely published and available to all those who read the professional literature, no matter what their tribe, religion, or political persuasion, was most appealing. It is exactly this freedom to do whatever studies we wished to do, to cooperate across highly diverse cultures, and to send our reprints east, west, north, and south that convinced us that we could proceed with these projects.

The strange dialectics of life which dominated social-science support in the 1960's made it possible for the very source of the "by-force-solutions" to open the way to studies aiming to facilitate communication, mutual understanding, and solution by negotiation. In any case, in the early 1960's the "defense establishment" was the only source of research funds available for large-scale studies as controversial as those we planned to do. At that time studies of stereotyping, social distance, and the like were considered by funding agencies as a means of increasing conflict, by detecting it, measuring it, and pointing to it. It was only in the last part of the 1960's that it was realized that conflict cannot be reduced by ignoring it, suppressing it, and pretending that it does not exist; on the contrary, it must be studied, analyzed, and understood.

It was high time to face the problem of cultural differences squarely. Centuries ago Herodotus described such differences in detail. Later the

astonished Montaigne observed that what held true on one side of the Pyrenees did not hold on the other. Since then many psychologists have attempted to propose general laws that transcend culture. Yet the application of these laws in different cultural settings has often led to disappointment. Very abstract concepts, such as the strengthening of the bond between stimuli and responses via reinforcement, may be universal, but they are of limited use to those who need to know which stimuli are perceived, how they are categorized, what responses are reinforced, and under what conditions. As soon as we reduce the level of abstraction of our psychological laws, we need to know something about cultural influences. At this greater level of specificity we discover that variables change their relationships from one culture to another. Hence we must rediscover these relationships or find a way to translate them from one system to another. The concepts that we propose in this book may help. Once such translations are made available it may be possible to show the generality of several psychological laws, and we may discover that we are quarreling about something that we actually agree on.

The world of the 1970's is tantalizing because science can provide many of the solutions to its problems. Yet unless we undertand how man's subjective culture is involved in conflict we may find that, as one of us put it, "Anthropos may not avoid the fate of Tantalus." We hope that this book will make a small contribution by providing some concepts and new methodologies for the analysis of subjective culture.

Many people contributed to the studies that finally led to this book. Projects such as this require an extensive network of collaborators, intellectual stimulation, constructive criticism, and encouragement. Most credit in these categories goes to Charles Osgood. We are also grateful to Uriel Foa and Lawrene Stolurow for their stimulating ideas during the early phases of the project. A major share of the credit goes to Fred E. Fiedler, who as codirector with Triandis of the contract which supported the major part of the work, made invaluable contributions.

Earl Davis, in 1963-1966, and David Summers, in 1966-1968, as research associates, made important contributions to this project. Kuo-Shu Yang collected data in Taiwan, Tulsi Saral, in India, Wallace Loh, in Peru, and Keith Kilty and Howard McGuire, in the United States. Most of the analyses were done by McGuire.

This does not complete the list of those who helped make this book a reality. It is only by an accident of timing that some names do not appear in the front of this book. In Illinois Ellie Hall and Robert B. Ewen, Robert Potts and Erich Thomanek, and Gerald Oncken and Tom Stewart represent three "generations" of assistants who collected American data and analyzed cross-cultural data. In Greece Maria Nassiakou and Voula

Argyropoulou, in India, Vijayakumari Shanmugam, and in Japan, Yoko Iwamatsu and Tomoe Abe made important contributions to both data collection and preparation for analysis.

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August 1971

The Analysis of Subjective Culture

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Introduction

Preliminary Considerations

It is a common observation, even among casual travelers, that groups in different cultures differ in their behavior. No special training is required to note that there are major differences in dress, food, language, or customs of social behavior across cultures. It is almost certain that these differences are reflected in the way individuals experience their social environment. The problem in this book is to explore how reliable, cross-culturally equivalent methods can be developed for the study of such differences in "subjective culture." By subjective culture we mean a cultural group's characteristic way of perceiving its social environment.

Subjective culture refers to variables that are attributes of the cognitive structures of groups of people. The *analysis* of subjective culture refers to variables extracted from consistencies in their responses and results in a kind of "map" drawn by a scientist which outlines the subjective culture of a particular group. In short, when we observe consistent responses to classes of stimuli that have some quality in common, we assume that some "mediators" (attitudes, norms, values, etc.) are responsible for these consistencies. It is the cognitive structures which mediate between stimuli and responses in different cultural settings that we wish to study. The elements of subjective culture are hypothetical constructs that help us simplify our observations of human behavior. They do not "exist" except in the mind of the scientist. There are no physical entities that constitute subjective culture, yet the variables that will be included under this construct do help us to understand, predict, and possibly even control human behavior.

Subjective culture can be analyzed by referring to already well-established concepts such as attitudes, roles, and values. In this book these concepts are defined in ways that will allow cross-culturally equivalent measurement. Our attempt is to reveal the nonequivalence of measurement when equivalence cannot be attained.

Our approach utilizes a large number of cognitive tasks and obtains a

large number of responses from each subject. Elaborate statistical analyses of such data permit us to make explicit what is implicit in the responses of the subjects. In short, we produce a "map" of the subjects' subjective culture which makes explicit or visible what is implicit or subjective. In this book we have attempted to illustrate with data collected in Greece, India, Japan, and the United States how various aspects of a group's subjective culture may be studied and how we may establish the validity of these measures.

We do not see this work as a finished product. On the contrary, this is the first step in a research program that may require several centuries for its completion. To develop appropriate ways of describing the subjective culture of most of the significant cultural groups of the world is a task that can be completed only if many people work on it for a long time. To utilize further the elements of subjective culture to modify the generality of some psychological laws and to uncover the principles that interrelate social structural and ecological variables and psychological laws will require extensive work. We have made only a beginning. The reader will have to decide for himself whether the beginning is sufficiently promising to justify his participation in the next steps.

Some Definitions

Culture has been defined as the man-made part of the human environment (Herskovits, 1955, p. 305). *Subjective culture* is a cultural group's characteristic way of perceiving the man-made part of its environment. The perception of rules and the group's norms, roles, and values are aspects of subjective culture.

People who live next to one another, speak the same dialect, and engage in similar activities (e.g., have similar occupations) are likely to share the same subjective culture. Several theoretical systems which have been supported by empirical findings, such as those proposed by Homans (1950, 1961), Whyte (1959), and Newcomb (1961), include propositions that suggest that many of the elements of subjective culture are determined by the propinquity of members of a group. This is true because propinquity, a common language, and similar activities tend to lead to high rates of interaction among members of human groups. Frequent interaction usually leads to similar norms, attitudes, and roles, hence to similar subjective cultures. Similarity in race (physical type), sex, and age also lead to higher rates of interaction, hence to similarities in subjective culture. The causal chains are circular because similarities in subjective culture lead to greater satisfaction in interpersonal interaction, hence to its increased frequency. If we think of interaction as providing rewards or punishments and its