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Psychological Aspects of Social Axioms

Understanding Global Belief Systems

 Springer

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Foreword

Humans are surrounded by trillions of stimuli. Their eyes, for instance, can discriminate 7,500,000 colors. But, there is a severe limitation in the number of discriminably different stimuli that they can process at one time. George Miller argued that they can handle no more than seven, plus or minus two independent pieces of information at any given time. Thus, necessarily they must develop ways to simplify the task of processing the information that exists in their environment.

They do this in many ways. One way is to select the stimuli that are most important in their lives, what are often called values. Another way is to chunk stimuli by linking them to each other, so they form bundles of stimuli that can be processed as if they are one entity. Generalized expectancies of what is linked with what are beliefs, and these beliefs are structured into bundles (see Triandis, 1972).

The exceptionally important research reported in this volume focuses on these chunks of beliefs, which are called social axioms. The researchers found that in most cultures, ideas related to cynicism, complexity, reward, religion, and fate hang together. Thus, we can expect that in most cultures people who are high in cynicism will view most events through a cynic's lens; those who see a complex world will see events in more complex ways than those who view events more simply; those who emphasize beneficial outcomes will look to resource investment for explanations of how the world ticks; those who emphasize religiosity will see supernatural interventions, while those who do not emphasize it will look for more mundane explanations of events; those who are high in fate control will expect external controls, while those who are low on this attribute will not expect fate, luck, destiny, and the like to influence the events in their life.

Thus, when humans have such beliefs, they are enabled to simplify the processing of information from the environment. The beliefs that are organized around cynicism form one domain; the beliefs that deal with religion and spirituality form another; and so on. It is then easier to process the stimuli in the environment, since the stimuli that are not important as well as the stimuli that do not belong to axioms can be ignored, and the trillions of stimuli then become manageable.

The famous anthropologist Redfield defined culture as shared understandings made manifest in act and artifact. In short, cultures help people adapt to their environment by developing shared understandings of what is important and how things go together, and how to make things so that the people in the culture can adapt more

successfully to their ecological niches. When humans are socialized into a culture, they learn what stimuli are important and which stimuli go together, so they can be sampled while ignoring the complexity of their environment. Since the environment of each culture is distinct, there are distinct ways to value the entities in the environment, and to organize stimuli so that they form distinct axioms.

This work then provides ways to characterize cultures, and gives researchers a set of lenses for looking at cultures. When researchers know what people value and how they use the axioms, they can predict what people will do in their cultural niche—how they are likely to interact with each other, how they are likely to relate to outsiders, how they are going to react to their jobs, what emotions they are likely to feel in different circumstances, and how they are going to deal with conflict.

This book is an essential reading for cultural and cross-cultural psychologists, as well as students of culture and psychology. Even educated laymen may want it in their library to occasionally find useful clues about the way culture affects people and learn how to honor the Greek admonition to “know thyself.”

University of Illinois, USA

Harry C. Triandis

Reference

Triandis, H. C. (1972). *The analysis of subjective culture*. New York: Wiley.

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