



The Psychological Foundations of Culture

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How is it that cultures come into existence at all? How do cultures develop particular customs and characteristics rather than others? How do cultures persist and change over time? Most previous attempts to address these questions have been descriptive and historical. The purpose of this book is to provide answers that are explanatory, predictive, and relevant to the emergence and continuing evolution of cultures past, present, and future. Most other investigations into "cultural psychology" have focused on the impact that culture has on the psychology of the individual. The focus of this book is the reverse.

The authors show how questions about the origins and evolution of culture can be fruitfully answered through rigorous and creative examination of fundamental characteristics of human cognition, motivation, and social interaction. They review recent theory and research that, in many different ways, points to the influence of basic psychological processes on the collective structures that define cultures. These processes operate in all sorts of different populations, ranging from very small interacting groups to grand-scale masses of people occupying the same demographic or geographic category. The cultural effects--often unintended--of individuals' thoughts and actions are demonstrated in a wide variety of customs, ritualized practices, and shared mythologies: for example, religious beliefs, moral standards, rules for the allocation of resources, norms for the acceptable expression of aggression, gender stereotypes, and scientific values.

The Psychological Foundations of Culture reveals that the consequences of psychological processes resonate well beyond the disciplinary constraints of psychology. By taking a psychological approach to questions usually addressed by anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists, it suggests that psychological research into the foundations of culture is a useful--perhaps even necessary--complement to other forms of inquiry.

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