

Psychology and the Search for Certainty in Everyday Life

Edited by

Daphne Halkias

Institute of Coaching, McLean Hospital, Harvard Medical School

Athens Institute for Education and Research

2013

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List of Contributors

Saeid Abdolmalaki, *Academic Member of the Psychology Payame Noor University, Iran*

Radvan Bahbouh, *Assistant Professor, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic*

K. Funda Barutçu, *Researcher, Middle East Technical University, Turkey*

Alfredo Bautista, *Post-Doctoral Fellow, Tufts University, USA*

Christina Bermeitinger, *Professor, Department of Psychology, General Psychology Unit, University of Hildesheim, Hildesheim, Germany*

Elson M. Bihm, *Professor, University of Central Arkansas, USA*

Eva Bolceková, *PhD Student, Psychologist, Charles University, Faculty of Arts, Department of Psychology, and Thomayer Teaching Hospital, Department of Neurology, Czech Republic*

Isabel Altenfelder Bordin, *Child Psychiatrist, MD, PhD, Department of Psychiatry, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Brazil*

Nara Lucia Poli Botelho, *PhD Psychologist, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Brazil*

Bárbara M. Brizuela, *Associate Professor, Tufts University, USA*

Charles I. Brooks, *Full Professor of Psychology, Kings College, USA*

Sonia Brondi, *Post-Doctoral Fellow, Sapienza - University of Rome, Italy*

Adelinda Araújo Candeias, *Professor, University of Évora, Portugal*

Lucas de Francisco Carvalho, *PhD Student, Universidade São Francisco, Brazil*

Michael A. Church, *Associate Professor of Psychology, Kings College, USA*

Vitor Alexandre Belo de Moura Pereira Coelho, *PhD Student, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal*

Alberta Contarello, *Full Professor, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padua, Italy*

Kenneth M. Cramer, *Professor, University of Windsor, Canada*

Catarina Dias, *Master Degree Student, University of Évora, Portugal*

Elena Dorosheva, *Scientific Researcher, Psychologist, Institute of Animals Systematics and Ecology SB RAS, Novosibirsk State University, Russia*

Jindřich Fiala, *Neurologist, Thomayer Teaching Hospital, Department of Neurology, Czech Republic*

Ana Paula Couceiro Figueira, *PhD Supervisor, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal*

Maria Luiza de Mattos Fiore, *MD PhD, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Brazil*

Simone Foster, *Professor, University of Windsor, Canada*

Laurie Freeman-Gibb, *Professor, University of Windsor, Canada*

Andrey Golubev, *Scientific Researcher, Psychologist, Novosibirsk State University, Russia*

Daphne Halkias, *Research Associate, The Institute for Social Sciences, Cornell University, New York and Institute of Coaching, McLean Hospital, Harvard Medical School, USA*

Cyril Höschl, *Doctoral Student, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic*

Irina A. Ivanova, *Assistant, Moscow State University, Russia*

Yi-Yin Ko, *Post-Doctoral Fellow, Tufts University, USA*

Jess G. Kohlert, *Associate Professor of Psychology, Kings College, USA*

Galina Kozhukhar, *Senior Lecturer, Moscow City University of Psychology and Education, Moscow, Russia*

Petr Kulišťák, *Neuropsychologist, Charles University, Faculty of Arts, Department of Psychology, and Thomayer Teaching Hospital, Department of Neurology, Czech Republic*

Alek Lačev, *Doctoral Student, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic*

Kathryn D. Lafreniere, *Professor, University of Windsor, Canada*

Fátima Leal, *Master Degree Student, University of Évora, Portugal*

Lex McDonald, *Head of Educational Psychology and Pedagogy School, Faculty of Education, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand*

Larisa Mishenina, *Psychologist, Center "Yours Psychologist", Russia*

Paul R. Nail, *Associate Professor, University of Central Arkansas, USA*

Rosimeire do Nascimento, *Psychologist, Department of Psychiatry, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Brazil*

Manuela Oliveira, *Professor, University of Évora, Portugal*

Selin Onaylı, *PhD Student, Middle East Technical University, Turkey*

Aspasia Papazanakis, *PhD Psychologist, Universidade Paulista (UNIP), Brazil*

Valérie Pennequin, *Professor, Université F. Rabelais, France*

Charlotte Radafshar-Faget, *Psychologist*

Mónica Rebocho, *PhD Student, University of Évora, Portugal*

Rosangela Kátia Sanches Mazzorana Ribeiro, *Psychologist, PhD, Department of Psychology, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso, Brazil*

Raffaella Romano, *Graduated Student in Psychology, University of Padua, Italy*

Craig Ross, *Professor, University of Windsor, Canada*

Robert Rusina, *Neurologist, Thomayer Teaching Hospital, Department of Neurology, Czech Republic*

Maria José Saragoça, *Master Degree Student, University of Évora, Portugal*

João Silva, *Master Degree Student, University of Évora, Portugal*

Joan B. Simon, *Associate Professor, University of Central Arkansas, USA*

Liuda Šinkariova, *Psychiatrist, Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania*

Iva Poláčková Šolcová, *Doctoral Student, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic*

Olivier Sorel, *Psychologist and Doctor in Psychology and Member of the Laboratory of Psychology, University of Tours, France*

Tomáš Srb, *Doctoral Student, Faculty of Arts Charles, University in Prague, Czech Republic*

Alfiya S. Sultanova, *PhD, Associate Professor, Russian Academy of Education, Russia*

Jaroslav Sýkora, *Retired*

Benjamin Unger, *Lawyer, Hildesheim, Germany*

Laura Valytė, *Psychologist, Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania*

Latife Yazigi, *PhD Full Professor, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Brazil*

Psychology and the Search for Certainty in Everyday Life: An Introduction

*Daphne Halkias, The Institute for Social Sciences,
Cornell University, New York and Institute of Coaching,
McLean Hospital, Harvard Medical School, USA*

Scholars who have written about John Pepper Clark's iconic play *The Raft* have told us that the story can be read as a metaphor for the helplessness of humankind and the uncertainty of life. It is a story of a raft, floating down the Niger River in the dark for much of the play. The characters on the raft face challenge after challenge (whirlpools, storms, fog, large ships, and the splitting of the raft), and at least three characters die. Yet the characters do not die passively, but hold out hope in the face of uncertainty. The fate of the fourth character, Olotu, is actually a positive uncertainty. Even some of the other characters in the play hold out hope for Olotu. In the end of the play, humankind's fate does not seem completely uncertain in a negative way. There are moments, rays of light, in what seems like total helplessness for the audience to hold on to. The characters do everything in their power to survive. These characters introduce us to a common thread that runs through all of us as human beings- the hope and strength to fight uncertainty for the hope of a positive outcome down the road (Petrusco, 2001).

Living with the uncertainty of life can be quite a strain if you want to look at the issue logically. We have been told this by philosophers (e.g., Kierkegaard, 1849), psychologists (e.g., Becker, 1973; Proulx & Heine, 2009), and other commentators of the human existence (e.g., Camus, 1942; Sartre, 1939). It could well be argued that most of us work too hard, spend too little time on the things that they truly love or following our dreams-- and then one day we get the summons from St. Peter or whoever it is that summons us to the next world. A more formal treatment of this issue involves absurdism, a philosophy espousing that the efforts of humans to find meaning in their lives will surely fail, because no such meaning exists (once again, Kierkegaard, 1849). According to absurdism, humans historically have attempted to find meaning in their lives. Traditionally this search follows one of two paths: either

concluding that life is meaningless, and that what we have is the here-and-now, or filling the void with a purpose (van den Bos, 2009) set forth by a higher power, our boss, our lover, our best friend, or, as Freud told us, our mother.

Of course, there are other ways to cope with the potential absurdity of life. Enter psychology and its offspring, psychologists: people that have made science out of helping us deal with uncertainty and the threats, real and imagined that we encounter in our daily their lives. Psychologists work towards helping us make sense of the uncertainty and chaos trailing us in every moment of our life- no matter what our age, occupation or life circumstances. Personal uncertainty is a cognitive socio-psychological process (Kunda, 1999), involving a combination of both our heads and our hearts. We look to psychology and its related sciences to translate these processes to logical theorems on how to live a balanced life. And for psychology, these theories grew out of research. Yes, psychology is not a philosophy or a feel-good pop culture ode to how to find the instant cure, right weight, perfect partner or pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Psychology is a science based on decades of scientific study whose purpose is to extend existing theories, form conceptual models for better living and then translate it to us as tools and techniques we can live by on a daily basis: paths we walk down to learn how to cope with the personal uncertainty that awaits us around every corner. And, do it well.

In the '60s, the world social order went through a remarkable and democratic change due to the passive resistance movement-propelled by Gandhi in mid-20th century India as a way for seeking social justice for his oppressed people- followed by hundreds of thousands of young social protesters around the world. In the following generation, in the 80s, the greatest change agents were young university students disenfranchised by an aging academic system that abandoned their classrooms to start companies that changed our lives forever with the advent of technology. Today the most amazing people are you and me. We are everyone who lives in a frightfully uncertain world cloaked with anxiety, stress, with no room for long-term planning, knowing our life as we have tirelessly built and imagined can fall apart with the next bell in the New York Stock Exchange.

And, yet, even here psychology tells us there is another way to fight our eternal Sisyphus: focus on what we *can* do to battle uncertainty; open up new fields of research linking the balance of human mind and behavior to economics, technology, diplomacy and cross-cultural relationships. On the coattails of

such innovative psychological research and knowledge we see new breeds of people with purpose arise from the ashes of human uncertainty such as social entrepreneurs- a phrase we had never heard of ten years ago. Social entrepreneurs have become a new metaphor in the struggle to find certainty - they see a problem in society, use social media and new technology to find like-minded change agents, create socially innovative solutions, then roll up their sleeves and get to work. These young people known as social entrepreneurs, as those of previous generations, want to see a *change* on their planet- it is research that has told them there is a blueprint to find a way to challenge uncertainty and find hope and meaning in everyday life.

Yet, true change and finding meaning in everyday life is neither the result of a singular idea or of a charismatic leader. Sometimes, not even hard work can change a society. What psychologists have discovered through research in the 21st century is that hope and meaning and sense and certainty in our lives can be found when strong alliances unite to build networks, on the ground and through technology and work consistency to sustain a lasting change. Along the way, psychological research has also swung in a different direction from the 20th century “me”, navel-gazing analysis of our unconscious to a new world order growing as an interface between local communities and the world around them. For psychology and its research can truly come of age in the 21st century, it must look to serving people’s needs through agents of community change- health personnel, leaders, schools, homes for the young and homes for the aged, to name a few. Today we live in a more interdependent and highly-interconnected world than ever before. Research tell us that in those connections lies our sense of hope and certainly—and our ability to make sense of everyday life.

As scholars we must study and shape new, emerging fields of psychological research. Perhaps the best way to do so is to come together across the disciplines and share ideas for how humans can lead more balanced lives in the 21st century, while making sure these ideas are well-grounded in high quality research contributing to theory and creating knowledge. Having high-quality research as their launch pad, psychologists can become one of the most powerful change agents for society: creating opportunities to redesign social systems using their knowledge of human development, social sciences, education, technology and cross-cultural issues. Scholars can support these initiatives by

designing innovative research methods to disseminate data creating sustainability and value. And scholars can do this is through a gathering of the minds to work in unison towards these goals.

The volume you are holding contains such ideas. These ideas have been nurtured and cultivated through the long-standing scholarly activities of the Athens Institute of Education and Research based in Athens, Greece. ATINER is an interdisciplinary research initiative bringing together academics, researchers, policy makers, students, change agents and thought leaders committed to developing research to measure and deliver social change and value using the long-held principle of challenging human uncertainty. ATINER opens its doors to scholarly, peer-reviewed scientific papers from colleagues working in all the functional areas of management, social sciences, public administration, NGOs, technology, medical science, law and education, and practitioners. The purpose of change agents such as ATINER is to disseminate information and scientific knowledge as a result of quantitative and qualitative research on complex social challenges. In this volume psychology finds itself interfacing with areas such as education and literacy, cross-cultural issues, global/local social issues, medicine and other challenges facing a diverse group of our fellow humans- all on their own “raft”, barreling down a mighty river of uncertainty in the search to illuminate meaning and hope into their lives and those in their communities.

The scholarly papers in this volume have specifically grown out of two professional psychology forums supported by ATINER: The 5th Annual International Conference on Psychology, 30-31 May 2011 & 1-2 June 2011, Athens, Greece and The 4th Annual International Conference on Psychology, 27-30 May 2010, Athens, Greece. Although still lots of work has to be done, the scholars whose work can be found in this volume have furthered the call of psychology researchers everywhere: look for scientific evidence to support and help other’s quest of making sense of life and the challenges provoking their personal uncertainty. Through these scholarly works, one more helping hand has been extended on those looking for answers to uncertainty through research and through the hope that in the years to come, cross-disciplinary research in psychology can stretch itself to find answers to as yet unknown questions that will surely arise for all of us.

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