The Impact of Postmodernization on Existential Health in Sweden: Psychology of Religion’s Function in Existential Public Health Analysis*

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Received: 21 May 2007; accepted: 8 December 2007

Summary
The article presents a portrait and analysis of the existential-psychocultural situation in postmodern Sweden. Drawing from recent research exploring psychology of religion and existential worldviews, and the Swedish findings from the international World Values Survey, an argument is made for thinking about existential function and dysfunction as public health issues. This is portrayed against the background of Sweden as one of the most secularized countries and simultaneously a country with one of the most encompassing welfare systems. Psychology of religion’s updated role here would be to take responsibility for identifying and assessing the categories of function and dysfunction for an existential public health system. This role would also include the planning of policy for societal existential wellbeing, as well as planning prevention and intervention efforts for avoiding existential epidemiology. This new role fits well with public health’s third revolution agenda focusing on health, wellbeing and quality of life.

Keywords
Existential epidemiology, cultural analysis, cultural epidemiology, diagnosis, existential health, existential public health, postmodern society, psychology of religion, Sweden, worldview analysis

This article, as any other, has not been prepared in a vacuum. This may seem an obvious fact. However, critical attention to a researcher’s approach set

*) Acknowledgement: Special appreciation is given for their generosity of time and wisdom to: Thorleif Pettersson (Uppsala University) on discussing all aspects related to the World Values Survey; and to Howard Schaeffer (Director, Division on Addictions, Cambridge Health Alliance and Harvard Medical School) on discussing meaning making and meaning-making processes as public health concerns.
in cultural context is far from being an established protocol in the writings of psychologists in general and of psychologists of religion in particular. Both attention to and the reasoning behind such interaction between cultural context and research approach will therefore be emphasized here. The article’s focus is not on a single research study, but can best be understood as an analysis of a cultural context in transition examined through interpretation of results from different research studies.

The article’s objective is two-fold: to present an existential-psychocultural portrait of Sweden in the first decade of the 21st century, and to articulate a few of the challenges and opportunities it raises for the psychology of religion, with special attention to existential public health issues. It begins from a working hypothesis that psychology of religion needs to be approached in cultural context not only for a better understanding of its object of research but also for its selection or development of theoretical and methodological models and tools.

**Approach to Psychology of Religion and Central Terms**

The approach to psychology of religion in this article is functional and evaluative. The author’s perspective is shaped by psychological research in healthcare and mental health contexts, and the object under study is how existential meaning is made and ritually expressed. The approach is functional in that its primary purpose is to understand how the forms of this kind of meaning and expression are developed in cultural perspective. This approach to existential meaning is not theological or ideologically based. In this way, very diverse expressions of existential meaning are included. To be included in an analysis does not indicate that all expressions have the same psychosocial effect for the individuals or groups involved. The nature of the cultural context in which these expressions are made will, to a large degree, determine the effects of the expression. Part of the reason for writing this article is to highlight the very real dangers associated with preconceived and untested assumptions about what psychosocial effect or effects particular kinds of existential meaning-making expression may have, especially when these assumptions are based on information from other cultural contexts. In an attempt to address this danger, an appropriate evaluation is necessary. Therefore the approach in this article is evaluative, being informed by a health psychology perspective (Nicasso, Meyerowitz & Kerns, 2004) and indicating that there is concern for how existential meaning impacts psychosocial and psychocultural health at the individual, group, and societal levels (DeMarnis, 1996). Although there is a considerable