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Momentary Contentment A Modern Version of an Old Survival Culture

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Abstract

This is a classic grounded theory based in longitudinal data from everyday life in an environment in Northern Norway characterized by long distances, a harsh climate and people living close to nature and each other. The place has a history of poverty and isolation. Yet, old survival strategies prevail despite modernisation. The theory reveals a culture of momentary contentment with three dimensions: Doing safety, destiny readiness and middle consciousness. This momentary contentment culture explains how the participants resolve their main concern of enjoying life. Doing safety means that common and individual acts create stability. Destiny readiness illuminates a discourse of acceptance, a way of thinking that, with the aid of linguistic strategies, prepares for life changing events. Middle consciousness shows a way of handling difficulties by dividing and separating different phenomena.

Keywords: contentment, grounded theory, time, safety, happiness, altruism, hope.

Introduction

How is everyday life organized in an environment characterized by long distances, harsh climate and people being close to nature and each other? The first author had moved far away to such a place in Northern Norway and was struck by the special life approach of people living there. Before the Second World War this was an isolated place and the sea route was the only way to connect with other villages. Everyday life then included fishing boats perishing in the ocean storms as well as tuberculosis and other diseases on shore. This harsh environment called for different strategies for both physical and psychosocial survival. Isolation created a need for mutual help as well as functional relationships with both internal worries and external dangers. Eventually the fishing boats got safer, tuberculosis controlled and after the war a country road was built to connect with other villages (Bottolfsen, 1995; Rortveit, 2008). Accidents and deaths decreased significantly. Even so, our data suggests that to this day, much because of nature's capriciousness, life's natural course is seen as unpredictable. To find out what was going on in everyday life the authors chose to do a grounded theory based on years of observations—first unstructured and later more formalized. This article is based on a master thesis done by the first author.

Method and material

The data consists of interviews, conversations and notes from observations of everyday life

from 2010 to 2014. Before the study began, in December 2012, the notes were written in the form of diary entries and journalistic notes. The first author conducted a total of six focus groups and eight individual unstructured and semi-structured interviews that lasted between 2-6 hours each. In order to capture views of their everyday lives the informants were asked to freely talk about their experiences. In some of the later interviews, questions pertaining to the emerging theory were asked. The first author also gathered field notes from 15 conversations targeted towards the thesis and 50 informal, semi-structured conversations. In alignment with the classic grounded theory maxim "all is data" (Glaser, 2010) all research notes, diary entries and journalistic notes were discussed between the authors and included in the circular analytic process.

Theoretical Sampling

New decisions regarding data collection were made after each interview (Glaser, 1978). The first author started with interviewing elderly in groups of three with the only question "please tell me about your lives". This was a way to collect data from what they said, how they said it, and what they chose not to talk about. She then went on to interview people in working ages to collect a diversity of data and chose to collect new data in accordance with new questions arising based on the emerging theory. The first author did several interviews with the oldest individual, 97 years old, yielding more than 10 hours of historical data. Since the fishing culture turned out to be a historical base for modern society's contentment, at the very end we decided to make a semi-structured interview with a fisherman who comes from a family with generations of fishermen. This was to see if his life story and remembrances from his parents and grandparents attitudes differed or gave new data to the analysis, which it did not. Rather the analysis was confirmed.

Classic Grounded Theory Analysis

Notes from interviews and observations were written and theoretical memos were written and drawn in different shapes and forms in the comparative process. These memos have been sorted, coded, categorized, and compared to find relationships between categories and concepts using theoretical codes. After each interview or accrual observation the new material was coded, analysed, and compared with previous results. Data was thus collected and analyzed in stages until new data did not provide any new information, i.e., saturation was reached. At saturation the formulated theory was eventually slightly modified in light of existing literature (Glaser, 2010). All authors participated in the analysis. The concepts gradually emerged to explain the participant's attitude towards life. The core category emerged in May 2014. Thereafter, memos and field notes were written without discrimination, but interpretation and analysis was done selectively using the core category as a template. Eventually a grounded theory was generated, with the core category theoretically coded as a cultural manifestation—momentary contentment, explained through doing safety, destiny readiness, and middle consciousness. Grounded theory differs from many qualitative research methods in its focus on incidents and memos rather than persons

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and in this study the number of incidents coded and compared amounted to several hundred.

Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this study is the length of time during which the data collection was running, the large number of interviews and the extensive field notes taken. To our knowledge no prior classic grounded theory using ethnographic data of this longitudinal character has been conducted, thus we went into an unexplored methodological area. This can of course be a strength and a weakness. A limitation from a traditional qualitative data analysis perspective is researcher-induced bias. We dealt with this issue by credibility checks from discussing all data in between us as well as by collecting data until saturation was reached.

Results

We found a potential well-being promoting cultural and behavioural strategy with a temporal aspect—momentary contentment. It explains how to deal with the main concern of enjoying life. It also explains how recycling processes of old survival strategies may induce well-being through contentment in modern society. The observed area has a pre-World-War-II history of poverty, dangerous occupations and isolation, confirmed in local historical tales and novels as well as in historical literature (Bottolfsen, 1995; Lauritzen, 2005; Rortveit, 2008). To survive this environment different balancing compensation strategies evolved that are explained by doing safety, destiny readiness, and middle consciousness.

Doing safety

Doing safety illuminates ways to act in order to create stability. Through stereotypes and a well-developed collective support system the participants shape their own safety. The ongoing actions of helpfulness and inclusion create stability and a sense of belonging. It includes practical structures such as a local store, day-care, school, several clubs and annual activities, as well as psychosocial patterns of shared norms, common identity traits and linguistic tools. By using well-known and accepted stereotypes an ongoing confirmatory communion is created.

Destiny readiness

Destiny readiness is a way of thinking. It is characterized by an acceptance of life and an ability to deal with what is at hand by the use of spoken and symbolic language. Both interviews and observations show a down to earth way of handling crisis.

One winter day my nearest neighbor came by. She was heavily pregnant and wondered if I would be willing to help her if she started to give birth during the approaching snowstorm. 'If we get snowed in, you will be the midwife'. She said it without any noticeable nervousness and ended up with explaining/calming me down 'that's just the way life is,' she said. (From memo)

In this context the theory "homeostasis of hope" fits to explain how people create instinctive

compensatory strategies to increase existential hope, including the denial of life-shortening clearance or by increasing the momentary enjoyment of life (Thulesius, 2003). Hope is often connected to some sort of worry and can evolve into demands, thus cognitively draw one from the present into thinking about the future (Sandén, 2006). However, hope is not commonly spoken of by the participants. Instead expressions like “what happens happens” and “one can’t worry about the future, life is here, now let’s live” are expressed. This means capturing the moment and dealing with what is at hand. These tools for acceptance and preparedness, in combination with a culture of helpfulness, open up for feelings of contentment in the moment.

Middle consciousness

Middle consciousness explains the link between opposite thought processes as a way of handling difficulties and of facilitating a presence in the moment. There are, as an example, ways of dealing with entry and exit from the communion. In short, when someone is absent he or she is moved into a stand-by mode and only sporadic contacts may occur. Local and historical literature describes the importance for women and men to let go of each other while the men were out fishing for months at a time. The present moment needed full attention, as it was crucial for survival. By letting the thoughts of the two lives, when the man was out fishing and when he was at home, be intermittently related, they can exist in one’s mind taking minimal energy from the present moment (Bottolfsen, 1995; Lauritzen, 2005).

Today this is not a necessity, but by putting thoughts of people that are not present in a standby mode, in a middle consciousness, feelings of missing and longing are decreased, feelings that otherwise contribute to thoughts that brings a person away from the moment. In a similar way, participants show an ability to separate sick from healthy, to see disability when help is needed, and to not see it when help is not needed or possible to give. Observations and interviews demonstrate how people at one point show great helpfulness and then, in another setting, treat the same person as fully fit. As a disabled person expressed it:

The same people that I talk to about my disabilities and who help me cope can three days later ask me to join in a tough physical activity. It’s like they haven’t heard, I don’t even think they are aware of doing this.

Observations show how participants separate illness from health, present from future to past, and what is possible to influence from what is not. By such separation, where parts are intermittently related, a connection through the middle consciousness is kept. This allows each part to be dealt with in its moment. In that moment there is always something to do, either attending the negative through helpfulness, humor, tenderness or the positive by doing safety through for example an activity.

Various combinations of doing safety, destiny readiness and middle consciousness show a structure and organisation of life that seems to retain social peace and stability. They are characterized by collective strategies for joy, safety feelings, inclusion and helpfulness; strategies working towards contentment in the moment.

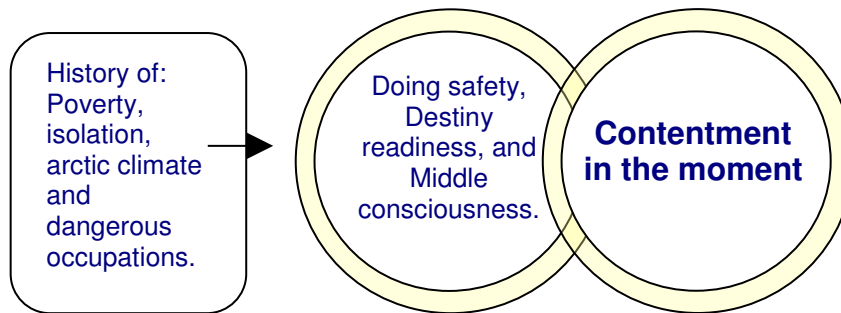


Figure 1. Outline of the development of Momentary contentment theory. The history of hardship and early deaths work as a foundation for the three balancing categories of contentment; doing safety, destiny readiness, middle consciousness; which in their interaction explains momentary contentment.

Momentary Contentment Theory

History shows an unfortunate and weather-beaten society that despite its vulnerability, historically as well as to date, found a way of life that creates contentment. Yesterday's proximity to death has due to climate, distances and nature-related accidents to some extent remained. Interviews and observations show that the balancing mechanisms that existed as a necessity before the Second World War still in large are present in modern life. As a consequence the degree of hardship has been reduced, but the power of balancing the hardship through doing safety, destiny readiness, and middle consciousness has not been reduced to the same extent.

The psychosocial survival culture shows an analogy with literature regarding what creates happiness, joy and satisfaction, linguistically as well as cognitively and behaviorally. People's subjective life experiences may be more important than the actual life situation itself (Haller & Hadler, 2006). Today the culture of helpfulness is not necessary for survival, but it still exists, nourished by accidents and rough weather. Altruism is central in interviews and observations, in the past as well as today. In groups altruism creates a common pride based on partially unconscious internal processes where it is hard to see one's own role. On the societal level, altruism works through well-developed voluntary work and a preparedness to fight for survival.

By including newcomers a base for confirmative communion is created. Contentment is achieved by doing safety in a collective support system that includes momentary helpful and altruistic inclusive attitudes. Simultaneously the language is characterized by adaptability and euphemistic expressions.

The spirit of accepting everyone as a participant in parties and clubs requires a certain form of preparedness that lessens worries of being alone and thus creates a feeling of safety. Together with linguistic strategies and communicative symbols thought processes are transmitted to enhance contentment in the moment. Expressions like "we know where

we live" symbolize a destiny readiness for the harsh climate and its challenges. But in order to protect the preparedness from worries, expressions like "heldig" (lucky) are often heard at the same time. Such expressions create an opportunity to separate a moment of "heldig" from a danger that might come or that used to be in the past, leaving a contentment in the moment.

The separation of those who are present from those who are absent creates a focus on the moment. In combination with inclusion processes no one has to be afraid of not being allowed back in the community when returning from being away. A woman who had been gone for a few months said it was like they hadn't even noticed that she had been gone. This separation phenomenon, a part of the middle consciousness, shows how different aspects are intermittently related by reciprocating in consciousness, thus not leaving issues neither repressed nor fully conscious.

By not expecting life to be easy in combination with a culture of always helping, an accident or hardship is not met alone. When no more help is needed or possible to give the ability to temporarily disconnect from the suffering of a friend or family member creates an opportunity to focus on the positive which includes health. Dark humor helps carrying the person in need through laughter and an activity together with linguistic tools keep bringing people back to the present. And, in the moment there is always something to do to make life a little bit better. If not for oneself, for a friend or a neighbor, thus in its altruistic manner creating contentment.

Four Manifestations of Momentary Contentment

Momentary contentment is specifically manifested in inclusion processes, nature's capriciousness, communication strategies, and in a culture of helpfulness.

Inclusion processes yielding contentment

The inclusion process is characterized by a combination of activity, openness, and individuality. In combination with a culture of helpfulness and altruism, safety and contentment are created. In order for individuality to spire in a culture where everyone is welcome the separation phenomena of the middle consciousness is used to disregard negative individual traits.

Shore et al. (2011) present the following definition of inclusion: "the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness" (p. 1265). Inclusion is thus established when individuals have a sense of belonging to the group and, at the same time, perceive themselves to be a distinct and unique member, combined with the group responsibility to include the individual, rather than the individual connecting to the group (Jansen et al., 2014). Through a combination of linguistic and separation phenomena inclusion is enhanced:

The expression 'him NN, that's just how he is' is common when someone breaks the norm. Instead of

trying to change the person or exclude him/her from the fellowship an exception for the behaviour is created, in other words a way to keep both belonging and authenticity. (From memo)

Shore et al. (2011) and Jansen et al.'s (2014) view on inclusion, with the combination of individual authenticity and group solidarity, is apparent in the term "the Swede".

First I believed it was a way to distance me from the others but I soon found out it was just the opposite, 'the Swede' allowed me to break the norms and still be part of the communion. Every time I did something they thought was weird I just said 'I'm from Sweden' and it was accepted. If someone asked one of my friends 'what's she doing' he/she would say "never mind, she's a Swede". Now that they know me, after three years, they don't use 'the Swede' anymore, now they say 'that's just how she US is'. (From memo)

It doesn't logically work to say "she NN, that's just how she is" of a newcomer. Instead the new expression "the Swede" was created. It worked as an explanatory model in "she's from Sweden" and the odd behavior could thereby be separated from the norms without the need to change neither the norms nor the person challenging them. Space was created to allow norms to be broken without a person losing uniqueness, behaviour that otherwise would have put inclusion at risk.

Nature's capriciousness and contentment

Nature and the scenery have a central position as it draws people towards the present. Nature is characterized by unpredictability, beauty and the support it gives to the people. Some see it as a source of joy, some as a necessity for mental survival, while others relate to it as something to rest your eyes on. All refer to nature as something that generates energy and internal strength, thus creates a sense of belonging and pride, contributing to the stereotype description of the area. As a mentally ill participant expressed it: "Three hours walk here means I'm way up on a mountain top. Three hours walk in flat land is only three hours walk."

Alas, nature in combination with the rough climate is also a source of accidents and deaths. But in that hazardous environment the old culture of helpfulness and readiness is preserved which yet furthers contentment. The unpredictability is described as something natural and dealt with through a destiny readiness in where people put the danger in a stand by mode, in a middle consciousness. Through the middle consciousness they create a momentary space where they neither have to think about the danger nor repressing it. Thus they are allowing contentment through the scenery and are still ready to help as soon as help is needed which is yet another source of contentment.

Communicative manifestations – contentment talk

Many expressions and other communicative tools help the separation of positive from negative, thus supporting the middle consciousness maintenance. The tools also support a destiny readiness without reducing contentment in the moment. Symbols of tenderness, humor, and listening bring people back to the moment, away from straying minds of future and history. One characteristic of contentment talk is that hardships often are described by their solutions. This allows problems to exist on one level, leaving a preparedness that negative things can happen, but without giving unnecessary negative thoughts space in the

present moment.

The elderly discussed how warm the cow pee and poop was, no-one during the discussion mentioned the coldness in chasing cows bare feet in the fall even though that was the issue at hand. Focus is on the solution and the problem seems to be a secondary variable which I find in between the lines. (From memo)

Another characteristic of contentment talk is contentment and safety enhancing expressions. The term "heldig" (in English that one can count oneself lucky) is frequently used in relation to being heldig (lucky) to live there; who has the best friends; who got to see the sun today. It thereby contributes to the general notion of contentment. It also functions as a way to describe and confirm the preparedness that hides behind being lucky. "Lucky me to have good friends" implies knowledge of possibilities of life to be otherwise. Another expression, "done with it," is used as a temporal linguistic tool to move on from negative thinking. It is a way to leave the past and return to the present moment. Observations and interviews have confirmed this phenomenon to linguistically put things aside and describe negative incidents with positive expressions.

A third characteristic of contentment talk is to give confirmation through humor: the worse the accident, the darker the humor. This opens up possibilities to create confirmation and joy in a bad situation. The confirmation appears as laughter and contributes to intersubjectivity and contentment in hard times.

Humor is often seen together with a fourth communicative characteristic, active listening. When nothing is possible in a situation, such as a serious disease, one can listen and laugh. Active listening provides no feedback on anxiety nor is the person interrupted. When an anxious person finishes talking, not seldomly with a "done with it" expression, the situation turns into an activity or plan for an activity. Confirmation is given through a combination of active listening, humor, and activity.

Every society has its linguistic ideology, which emerges in interactions and shared experiences. Studies of communicative evolution show that it is impossible to distinguish the understanding of language from its cultural context. Language creates feelings and experiences as much as senses create language (Wilce, 2014). Through the combination of different communicative tools, activities and stereotypes Doing safety, Destiny readiness and Middle consciousness are reinforced in a confirmatory communicative momentum.

Culture of helpfulness and contentment

Our data reveal a norm of helping when help is needed as if it is the most natural thing to do. The contentment inducing helpfulness culture has different levels of helping characterized by interactions between getting help, helping and altruism. The widespread culture of helpfulness creates a certainty of help being there independent of friendships and other relationships. It promotes feelings of safety and a readiness for what life has to bring. Participants talk about helping others, but not in an abstract way, only very concrete situational and as something obvious; like brushing one's teeth.

The obvious and non-reflected help brings an altruistic dimension to helpfulness.

Within happiness research there is something called the hedonic paradox where a pursuit for happiness decreases wellbeing otherwise connected to helping others (Bauman, 2008; Egonsson, 2011; Norman, 1998). Post (2005) finds a strong link between altruism and wellbeing, happiness, health and longevity—as long as a person is not overwhelmed from helping others. He describes how altruism results in positive social inclusion, in distraction from personal problems and self-centred anxiety, in increased wellbeing combined with experiencing meaning and purpose and in a more active lifestyle. Observations show engagement into each other's helpfulness. By assisting each other in giving aid one is not left alone in a commitment to help. By sharing the burden an extra level of safety feeling is created. In a culture where helpfulness is norm, there is no need to diminish the helpfulness, like "I owe you a favor" or paying back for given help, which would put the altruistic motion at stake.

Discussion and Further Research

Momentary contentment theory explains how people in a rough environment enjoy life by doing safety, destiny readiness, and middle consciousness. Momentary contentment might be found also in structural organizations, collective support systems, inclusion processes, and in individual thinking and communication. Momentary contentment is characterized by feelings of safety, inclusion and helpfulness where the present moment is emphasized due to nature's capriciousness and isolation.

When comparing with previous research Antonovsky's studies on health-promoting factors among concentration camp survivors emerged as relevant to study. Antonovsky (1996) generated the salutogenic theory, which connects cognition, behavior and motivation and indicates a sense of coherence (SOC) as the single most important aspect to mentally cope with hardship. SOC consists of three parts: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. It is not bound by cultural context, but may be designed to fit various cultural settings (Antonovsky 1996). Both SOC and the momentary contentment theory have evolved from empirical studies of different forms of hardship.

Antonovsky examined healthy-sick as opposing forces in a scale of what makes a person move towards health. But our field studies led us to focus on contentment, feelings of safety and the ability to live in the present. We have neither in interviews nor observations recognized what the salutogenic theory was promoting; none of the elderly expressed any meaning or sense of coherence in their hardships. Quite the opposite. They demonstrated a genuine ability to place uncontrollable difficulties in a middle consciousness, reformulating problems into solutions and use of laughter as therapeutic confirmations. In other words, they expressed adequate ways of not having to reflect on purpose and meaning.

The sense of coherence we found was focused on interactions with nature and others, but not in what happens. With symbolic statements like "done with it" and "this is just the way it is" participants move on without context and meaning. This differentiation in results can, at least partly, be explained by the different contexts in which the theories

evolved. Antonovsky's studies of survivors indicate a history of hardship that still influences one's mind and health. Our study involves ongoing hardship, thus the need to find solutions in the moment are of greater importance than finding meaningfulness in what has happened.

The grounded theory of momentary contentment presented in this article reveals a psychosocial capacity where accidents and deaths are apparent in every moment. In future research we wish to explore the possibilities to implement this psychosocial survival knowledge, tools and strategies into modern healthcare. We suggest that strategies and techniques yielding contentment presented in this article are modified and re-designed to help people living close to death and worries. The importance of patient participation and self-action in both diagnostic and treatment processes has been shown in patient testimonies and research (deBronkart, 2011; McDonald et al., 2013). The different ways of finding intersubjectivity, contentment and a momentary view on life by altruism, activities, hope, inclusion strategies, symbolic tools for differentiating between sick and healthy, active listening, and humor could eventually be tried in different contexts.

Conclusion

Momentary contentment theory is explained through its three categories: doing safety, destiny readiness, and middle consciousness, all strengthened by linguistic tools. Through old survival cultural manifestations, today's society found a culture that embraces people's capacity to live in the moment, taking each day as it comes, to act on the things that are possible to influence and to let go of that which cannot be simultaneously influenced. In the combination of doing, thinking and separating momentary contentment theory explains a hidden but present flow of less worrying, strengthened feelings of safety and enhanced satisfaction. By recycling and modifying identified tools and strategies for contentment in everyday life, we believe there is an opportunity to design a new way to approach psychosocial hardship. Interesting to address for future research would be to connect new studies on the safety and contentment of the patient-related care with Antonovsky's (1996) research on health and SOC to see how and if these two approaches can complement each other.

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