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Hadley Cantril: The Pattern of Human Concerns Study Guide

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Cantril, Hadley. The Pattern of Human Concerns. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1965. 427 pp.

The bulk of this volume contains the results of a 12-nation survey of personal and national aspirations. The sample was meant to represent the concerns--both hopes and fears--of 863 million people around the world. Various tables derived from the coded responses are scattered throughout the book.

The survey technique used by the author and his assistants is what Cantril called the "Self-Anchoring Striving Scale." It uses a ladder device with steps from one to ten. The respondent would be asked to define wishes and hopes, which would be placed on the top rung. Worries and fears were then put on the bottom. Each respondent was asked to define the best possible life--personal and then national--and, on a scale from 1 to 10, decide his (and then his nation's) overall standing on this value satisfaction scale. Likewise for the worst possible life. The scale was supposed to be a "self-defined continuum" which was later codified according to standardized categories, such as health, peace, and social justice. The results were subjected to a cross-national comparison, although the author admitted that the resulting values were relative and that a '6' in one country wouldn't mean the same as a '6' in another.

Individual chapters are devoted to identifying who are the satisfied and characterizing the strivings and satisfactions of the political elite as compared with the general public. A total of almost 24,000 people were interviewed in the early 1960s for this survey.

The theoretical foundations are particularly revealing. The author appears to be engaged in an early form of existential psychology. His chapter on the genesis of aspiration uses some of the philosophical categories of Aristotle and Michael Polanyi plus references to neurophysiology. He recommends an organismic approach which takes into account the total person. He then describes four levels of experience, quoting Polanyi to the effect that the laws that govern the lower level of an organism are included by the higher but don't explain it. The study focuses on the higher and, accordingly, requires a different set of tools of analysis than orthodox methods best suited to describe behavior of parts or segments.

Cantril wants to get at the effect of discontinuity in societies moving through rapid technological advances. Implicit in his model is that quantitative changes are translated by people as changes in the quality of life. He concludes that human nature is plastic and oriented toward hope rather than despair. His cognitive theory is worth quoting: "The world any individual experiences is in part the creation of his perception and not the whole cause of it." (10-11) "What we apparently do...is to create for ourselves reality worlds which will more effectively further our basic purposes as human beings. We do this by using value satisfaction rather than consistency as our guiding standard for revision." (18)