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PSDI 1000
Who Am I?
Exam #1

1. Becker – Denial of Death

Culture is a death denying system. Every day, we walk around denying our own mortality, living in a lifestyle based entirely upon illusions. Humans are unique animals in that we have the brain capacity and knowledge to realize and somewhat accept that we will inevitably die. Generally this thought gets buried into the subconscious and instead we strive for some form of symbolic immortality, in the hopes that when the inevitable happens there's some essence left to commemorate our existence. Death and the fear of death is a huge motivation in modern society. We are constantly working on safety mechanisms and techniques, researching health problems and creating cures, cooking up concoctions to increase life span. All these efforts have one main goal: to prolong death. I suppose it's worked quite well, by looking at statistics of the average lifespan of someone even just 100 years ago. Humans are living longer and leaving a mark in history; but we cannot deny that we're all doomed to die eventually.

I believe that William was sitting in his hotel room writing a paper for his "Who Am I?" psychology class. He heard the ambulance, and it reminded him of the downright depressing video he watched in said class and began to get paranoid that he'd never get his paper done because he'd be too busy analyzing the feelings he was experiencing from reacting to the ambulance siren in the first place. Realizing that it wasn't he himself that was profusely bleeding, convulsing, or some other extreme case that would cause the need for an ambulance, he said "screw it" to his paper, poured himself a few shots, and

proceeded to have a night out on the town because he always seems much smarter when he's had a few drinks and a nice hearty meal.

All right, I don't actually believe that. When William heard the ambulance siren, he was unconsciously reminded of his own death, despite the fact that he knew the ambulance was not coming for him. William became anxious, though he may not be dying at this moment in time, he *could* die at any given moment. To deal with his anxiety, he had a shot, that led to a few more, probably a slip of unconscious impulsive behavior. Now with the thought that he could die at any moment, William dressed in his best clothes and blew a Ben Franklin on an overpriced imitation meal to make himself feel better about his inevitable death and to enjoy a nice meal in the unfortunate event that the ambulance should come for him next. His reaction was sympathetic to whoever it was down the hall that was actually dying.

If I faced my mortality in a more direct way, I think I would be more open to people different than me and to "live life to the fullest". I'm given this one precious life, with one fragile body; one mistake could take it all away. But that doesn't mean I have to live in a plastic bubble. By avoiding my mortality, I'm basically saying I have all the time in the world to do something, so why do it now? Let's face it: we're all afraid to die. What's important is how I use that fear. I can take care of my body and take the necessary safety precautions, but despite all those steps I am still mortal. I wrote down in my class notes that "hope begins when all your calculations fail". It's true; just ask someone who is terminally ill. They've tried all the medicine, therapy and treatment. All they have left is hope.

3. Freud's Parapraxes

A parapraxis is the phenomenon often referred to as a “slip of the tongue”, whether verbally said or heard, or written or read. Other forms of parapraxes involve misplacing or losing items (29-30). These behaviors can initially be explained by indisposition, tiredness, excitement, and preoccupation (33). If a parapraxis is looked at from this point of view, it is assumed that the slip is due to physical and organic occurrences (34). It is also possible to provoke a slip in a person with the power of suggestion. Many people enjoy provoking as a joke, though for the most part it is considered a low hit (36).

Freud focuses his lectures on verbal slips. He references that in 1895 Meringer and Mayer conducted a study of parapraxes by documenting and describing the types of distortions of words. They classify the more common slips as transpositions, fusions, replacements, anticipations and perseverations (38). A transposition would be someone saying “Denmark, Prince of Hamlet” instead of the intended “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”. A fusion would be a combination of two words, like “groot” as a combination of great and cool. A replacement is generally the most common of slips where instead of saying one word, another very similar word is used (39). In instances like this, calling the word a slip seems a little silly because the same meaning comes across. Another form of replacement is when the opposite of the word intended is used instead. In other cases still, it is almost impossible to trace a slip “unless we take into account something that had been said, or even merely a thought, in an earlier sentence” (Freud 41).

While these theories may explain a parapraxis in a person who is physically altered or provoked, it does not give reason for people who are otherwise healthy. It does

not explain why a slip occurs without an outside force influencing the person. Freud argues that behind every parapraxis is an unconscious motive surfacing from repressed feelings within the id. Perhaps, the slip has “a right to be regarded as a completely valid physical act” (Freud 42). In other words, while the person may not have consciously meant to say the slip, it still has an intention and should be considered as a significant statement with valid information behind it. The slip is a result of competing intentions within the mind, resulting in a surfacing of the unconscious. The slip, therefore, merely replaced the intended statement that was expected. Creative writers will purposely use slips in their writing to convey a trait of the character in their story. A slip can be used to suggest that, as explained earlier, a person is tired or distracted (43). Examples of this can be found in all types of literature, including Shakespeare.

There is a similar phenomenon to a parapraxis that can affect a person physically. Freud spoke of multiple “blind” patients that came to him as a last resort. He most often found that these patients had experienced something horrific, generally in their childhood, and as a result the body repressed the memory by shutting down the eyes. By talking with his patients and getting them to come to terms with their repressed memories, they regained the use of their eyes. A similar example would be a little boy whose right arm suddenly becomes paralyzed, and when he is taken to the doctor there is no feasible reason for the paralysis. The boy may have done something bad with his right arm, or may have a big test or sports game, and his unconscious voices itself subtly by shutting down the part of the body used for the event.

A necessary part of the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious is the art of repression. Without it, there is no force keeping the sexual impulses, the

“animal” part of our mind, at bay. The act of repression creates a balance within the mind, but also allows for the creation of parapraxes. The repression of memories can also be a form of censorship, in order to protect the mind from dangerous and harmful situations and sights. Repressing sexual impulses can play a role in mental illness because it puts pressure on the conscious mind, resulting in symptoms such as addiction, depression and obsession.

4. Participant-Observation Research

The phrase “participant observation” sounds quite contradictory, or like an oxymoron or paradox. An observer does not participate, and a participant is too busy participating to completely focus on observing. Yet the phrase is fitting for the work of an ethnographer, who collects data about a cultural group through participant observation (273). Cultural anthropology is the study of human culture. One of the most efficient methods of research in cultural anthropology is participant observation, more generally labeled fieldwork, where a researcher combines observation with formal and informal interviews, among much else. Ethnographic research uses the recordings of experiences and information collected from cultural observation and participation as well as behavioral analysis. In reality, all people are both participants and observers within their own culture, but what separates anthropologists is that they record their findings in various ways, the most common being field notes (259). Through participant observation, an anthropologist will be involved in the daily lives of a culture and learn to understand their point of view. An observer can live within the community, taking part in all sorts of activities, events and rituals; he interacts with the locals while consciously observing all the happenings and eventually writes down what he saw and experienced in his field

notes. This research method is the perfect way to collect data in a natural setting while still being able to participate. To each anthropologist, this method is quite unique; each person has his own approach, personal traits and characteristics, and an individual theoretical approach (260-261). A researcher uses personal experiences as data and must therefore be able to include his “pain and wounds in research and writing”, thus becoming vulnerable in his observation (Dewalt 263).

Recently, researchers have begun examining the degree of participation and observation within fieldwork. While observation implies a detached mindset, participation implies involvement on a more emotional level. In the case of pure observation, a researcher is able to remove himself from the situation in order to be uninfluenced and unbiased. Pure participation involves fully immersing oneself into the culture and often goes along the lines of “going native”. Dewalt and Dewalt have created their own personal categories to describe the degree of separation: nonparticipation, moderate participation, active participation, and complete participation. Watching television programs and reading are examples of nonparticipation. Information is learned through someone else’s research, but is still valid and useful information. A moderate participator is present within the culture, but chooses not to participate. With active participation the researcher is involved in most activities and events (262).

When an anthropologist becomes a member of the community, he has reached the level of complete participation. There has to be a certain level of emotional involvement when this level of participation is evident. Dewalt and Dewalt claim that this level is the best way to get thorough information. They talk about a “narrative ethnography” which involves both the standard scientific form of research as well as a memoir of sorts

focusing on the researcher. This level of involvement enhances the quality of research collected, as well as having two purposes by being both a collection of data and a tool for analysis. The collection, recording, and interpretation of data are more easily produced because the multiple angles provide information that is more difficult to explain with words (264). By actively participating in the community, a researcher discovers the unspoken, or tacit, part of a culture, such as understanding and anticipating certain responses and the nonverbal means of communication. This can positively change how a researcher interprets his observations and interactions with community members (265).

Dewalt and Dewalt compare the process of performing participation observation to the learning process in infants up through adulthood. As children, we watch those around us to learn acceptable and unacceptable behavior, expressing emotions and types of gestures. A similar situation happens with participation observation as we learn the rights and wrongs of a new culture. At the same time, because a researcher has already gone through this process in his respective culture, he can bring certain disadvantages with him such as biases and preconceptions (266). There are a few things to keep in mind when beginning a participation observation that Dewalt and Dewalt outline in seven major key points. As a researcher goes through the daily schedule of the community, he should make sure to react with discretion and sensitivity, but show a genuine interest and enthusiasm to learn more. Almost everyone has some kind of culture shock when traveling to a foreign country, so it's always important to remember that by listening, watching, and learning one will continue to grow more confident and comfortable. It is especially important to remember that everyone makes mistakes and that time will overcome any errors. A researcher should always be a thorough and careful observer and a

good listener. At first, all the new sensations can be overwhelming and the instinct is to withdraw, but it's important to be open to new learning experiences and the unexpected surprises (266-267).

One difficulty anyone will find while being thrown into a new culture is that the people will be resistant to open up. Having a good, open relationship with the people, or creating a sense of rapport, is key to gaining the vital information for data collection. Rapport is most easily achieved when both the community and the researcher share similar goals and commit to helping each other. It is especially important for the researcher to approach all interaction with respect to allow people to freely tell their stories. People may appear suspicious at first, so it is best to earn their trust. Depending on the situation, this can take up to a year or more. Often, a researcher remembers a single moment or event when all his work paid off and a true connection was created. For example, a couple in Bali was observing an illegal cockfight and when the police were called, rather than pulling out their passports they ran away with the rest of the crowd. After that, the couple was able to openly discuss anything with the people and they were eagerly invited into the community. In another example, a man was living with a Gypsy family and became part of the group when he was called to the stand to defend them. From that moment on, he was viewed with high opinion.

“Field notes are the primary method of capturing data from participant observation” (Dewalt 270). Most anthropologists live by the rule that if something is never written down, it did not happen and cannot be available for data analysis. Observations cannot be data unless they have been recorded in some way. According to *Notes and Queries* by Seligman, there are three types of field notes, all of which are still

used today. First, there are the records of information, including interviews, and the observed events and activities. Second are the records of extended activities and important ceremonies. Finally, there is the more personal, and more modern, journal of the ethnographer, which chronologically follows each day (270). As for taking notes in public, it is best to take cues from the surrounding people. Some may become suspicious and less open to answering questions, whereas some people just regard note taking as a “European habit”. Researchers may find that some people will get offended when notes are not taken, as if to say that their story is not worth writing down (272). The discretion of taking field notes should be thought about with care, but remembering to write down observations each day is a must. Writing field notes on a daily basis is extremely important because as much as we want to trust the memory, the particulars of a conversation or observation will leave the mind too quickly, removing the real experience vague and not as powerful (271).

Extra Credit. “Terror Management Theory”

In the movie *Flight from Death*, one speaker discusses the four ways we most often respond to people who are different: derogation, assimilation, accommodation and annihilation. Anyone who challenges the system is a threat to our fabricated death-denying culture, and therefore must be dealt with. Disregarding an outsider is the initial response. It is amazing how far a society can go by pretending there is no problem, assuming that problem never grows or tries to gain more control. The next step up is assimilation. As the outsider continues to be a problem, the answer is to try to bring him into the system and teach him the ways of our culture. If the outsider refuses to come to his senses, all we can do is accommodate his differences with the hope that we can

coexist with this outsider. Finally, when all else fails, there is annihilation: total destruction, obliteration, eradication, or in a word, death. When we are faced with “evil” in the world, rather than dealing with it directly we lash out of outsiders, looking for a scapegoat to blame and attack. Time after time the powers that be have chosen annihilation to deal with an imaginary problem instead of embracing cultural differences and celebrating diversity. From the crucifixion of Jesus Christ to Hitler and the eradication of the Jews, Japanese internment camps during WWII, conflicts in Rwanda and so many other countries in Africa and the Middle East.