

Review of: "Collective Guilt and the Search for Meaning in Post-Communist Albania: An Existential Perspective"

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Review: "Collective Guilt and the Search for Meaning in Post-Communist Albania: An Existential Perspective"

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The authors need to improve 4 elements of their study:

1. Focus of the Study
2. Analysis of the Variable "Guilt"
3. Analysis of the Variable "Meaning-Making"
4. Conclusions about the relationship between the variables "Guilt" and "Meaning-Making"

(1) THE ISSUES WITH THE FOCUS OF THE STUDY.

The authors need to specify better the focus of their study, their phenomenon of interests (dependent variable) and the influencing factors (independent variables).

A study, in general, focuses on a single phenomenon which constitutes what we call the "Dependent Variable". The reason for studying a phenomenon is the anomalies that accompany it. To explain anomalies accompanying the phenomenon we create a model containing a set of factors that we believe may account for the variance we observe in the behavior of the Dependent Variable. Thus, in a study, there are two types of analyses to be conducted: 1) analysis for Dependent Variable, and 2) analysis for the relationship between Dependent and Independent Variables.

The analysis of Dependent Variable is mostly "descriptive". Such an analysis tends to highlight:

1. the features of the variable, telling us whether the phenomenon is present or absent
2. the forms that it may take, telling us what are the main aspects of the phenomenon
3. the variance of the variable, which tells us about the dynamics characterizing the phenomenon

The analysis of the relationship between Dependent Variable and one or more Independent Variables that we suppose affect the behavior of the Dependent Variable, and may account for anomalies we observe, is more than descriptive. Such an analysis tends to highlight at least three elements:

1. the features characterizing each specific influencing factor, which help us see whether a factor is or it is not present, is or it is not in action;
2. the positive or negative character of the influence of each factor;
3. the contribution of each factor to the results observed in the phenomenon of interest.

In their study, the authors analyze “Guilt” and “Meaning-Making”, however, it is not clear which one is the phenomenon they are interested to explain. There is not a clear-cut focus and this is expressed in numerous statements. Authors say:

Abstract, quote:

- “the study explores the **experiences of individuals** who have lived through the post-communist transition in Albania focusing on their sense of collective guilt” and their coping mechanism through meaning-making processes”

Page 2, quote:

- “there hasn’t been much investigation into how the **search for meaning** and the existential **collective guilt** converge in post-communist Albania, nor have any studies shown what effects they may have on **people’s view of both past and present times**”

Page 3, quote:

- “we will explore the following research questions: 1) How do Albanians experience existential collective guilt? 2) How did Albanians search for the meaning? and 3) What are today’s implications of existential collective guilt and meaning-making for **well-being** and **reconciliation** in post-communist Albania?”
- “our purpose is to provide insights into **psychological** and **social movements** in post-communist Albania”

Page 4, quote:

-“collective guilt alongside meaning-making may have been prevalent factors affecting **people’s perception** surrounding their experiences throughout such transitions”

Page 8, quote:

- “The main focus of this study was to explore how individuals in Albania who lived through the communist era make sense of and come to terms with the collective guilt surrounding their past.....to understand how they **engage in meaning-making** processes....”

Given their statements, a couple of questions arise:

- **What is the phenomenon they are interested to explain?**

= is it “the Experiences of Individuals”?

= is it “Search for Meaning / Engagement in Meaning-Making”?

= is it “Collective Guilt”?

= is it “People’s View on past and present time”?

= is it “Well-Being”?

= is it “Reconciliation”?

= is it “Psychological Movement”?

= is it “Social Movement”?

= is it “People’s Perception of Transition”?

- **How is the variable Guilt analyzed?**

= is it analyzed as phenomenon (Dependent Variable)?

= is it analyzed as an influencing factor (Independent Variable)?

- **How is the variable Meaning-Making analyzed?**

= is it analyzed as phenomenon (Dependent Variable)?

= is it analyzed as an influencing factor (Independent Variable)?

(2) THE ISSUES WITH THE ANALYSIS OF THE VARIABLE “GUILT”.

I see two problems with their analysis of the variable “Guilt”:

1. the authors confuse Guilt’s features with Guilt’s effects
2. the analysis of the influence and effects of the variable “Guilt”

PROBLEM 1 – What do represent the feelings of “shame”, “powerlessness”, or “hopelessness”? Do they represent the “features” of variable Guilt? Or do they represent the “effects” of the action of the variable Guilt?

The authors need to correct, specify better, and distinguish between the features characterizing the variable Guilt and the effects and consequences deriving from the action of the variable Guilt.

How do we know when individuals experience the feeling of Guilt? We do so by observing the presence or absence of some features. Normally, a phenomenon possesses some “features” that make it different from other phenomena and help us understand when the phenomenon is or it is not present, is or it is not in action. Thus the phenomenon/variable “Guilt”, should have its own features.

When discussing the presence of the feeling of guilt, the authors identify at least **10 features** that help them to “see” that

individuals are experiencing the feeling of Guilt:

Page 2, quote:

- “....guilt..... depicts the notion of **responsibility, humiliation, and remorse....**”

Page 3, quote

- “....guilt is a mental phenomenon that refers to feelings of **obligation and sorrow....**”
- “The incidence of shared responsibility can produce damaging consequences....”

Page 6, quote:

- “Respondents felt **regretful....** The guilt extended beyond those who”
- “....guilt encompasses emotions like remorse and **shame** over past events as well as recognition of responsibility....”
- “.....those (who felt guilty) also experienced an intense feeling of **abandonment....**”

Page 6-7, quote:

- “People who participated in these guilty feelings felt **powerless and hopeless....**”

When discussing the effects of Guilt, the authors say that the feeling of guilt causes various effects and they identify at least **11 effects**. However, some of them are treated previously as features rather than effects of Guilt. They say:

Page 3, quote:

- “....shared responsibility can produce **high levels of anxiety** accompanied by **reduced self-esteem levels**”.

Page 6, quote:

- “.....the consequencesfrom experiencing guilt.....included emotions such as **shame, anxiety and depression**”

Page 7, quote:

- “..... others felt overburdened by the sense of guilt and found themselves **unable to proceed constructively forward**”

Page 8, quote:

- “The consequences of guilt were negative, including feelings of shame, anxiety, and **sadness**”
- “Participants noted their feelings of **powerlessness and hopelessness** when experiencing guilt”

Page 10, quote:

- “....guilttied to feelings of shame, regret, and a sense of responsibility..... led to predominantly adverse effects.....including feeling of **impotence and despair**”;

PROBLEM 2 - The discussion of the effects of variable “Guilt” shows two problems: 1) the discussion of the positive effects of variable Guilt is very shallow and dry compared to the discussion of negative effects, and 2) the discussion lacks the specification of the circumstances under which variable Guilt generates positive or negative effects.

The authors hold that the character of the influence of Variable “Guilt” is both, positive and negative. They say:

Abstract, quote:

- “.....guilt often acted as a **barrier** but also providing **motivation** for effective meaning-making”

Page 2, quote:

- “.....guilt.....can lead to either **favorable** or **unfavorable** outcomes”

Page 3, quote:

- “.....responsibility can produce damaging consequencesnevertheless.....this negative feeling toward one’s own group may also pave the way for positive outcomes”

Page 7, quote:

- “...guilt.... often created difficulty in reaching a profound meaning-making; however, in some cases it motivated participants to engage actively”

Page 8, quote:

- “The consequences of collective guilt were primarily negative,Nevertheless, we observed collective guilt as motivating individuals”

Page 9, quote:

- “.....guilt can block the effective creation of meaningguilt could also spur individuals to participate.....”

However, most of the analysis revolves more around the negative effects of variable guilt. They say:

Abstract, quote:

- “....guilt often acting as a **barrier** tomeaning-making”

Page 3, quote:

- “...responsibility can produce..... high levels of **anxiety**, accompanied by reduced **self esteem** levels”

Page 6, quote:

- “Respondents..... felt **regretful** for not demonstrating more opposition to it” (read opposition to the system they once

were part of)”

- “....the consequences from guilt included emotions such as **shame, anxiety, depression**”

Pages 6-7, quote:

- “People who participated in these guilty feelings felt **powerless** and **hopeless**, which ultimately led them to be **unable to partake in practical actions** that could lead to change or resolution of their guilt-ridden actions”.

Page 7, quote:

- “.... guilt that reflected shared responsibility often created difficulty in reaching to a profound meaning-making”
- “....others felt overburdened by the sense of guilt and found themselves **unable to proceed constructively forward**”

Page 8, quote:

- “.....most participants.....experienced..... shared responsibility. There were several causes leading up to these feelings such as deep regret and shame tied back to previous actions (or lack thereof) taken”
- “The consequences of collective guilt were primarily negative, including feelings of **shame, anxiety, and sadness**”
- “Participants noted their feelings of **powerlessness** and **hopelessness** when experiencing guilt”
- “Guilt stalled constructive behavior”

Page 9, quote:

- “.....guilt can block the effective creation of meaning”

Page 10, quote:

- “....guilt led to predominantly adverse effects on individuals including an overwhelming feeling of impotence and despair”

Page 11, quote:

- “.....guilt could be an obstacle to effective meaning-making”

But, when it comes to discuss the positive effects of Guilt, the discussion is very shallow and unconvincing. They identify “Motivation”, “Active Engagement” and “Coming face-to-face with Guilt” as some instances of positive effects. However, there is no explanation or specification why has this happened. Here is what they say:

Abstract, quote:

- “....guiltalso providing **motivation** for effective meaning-making”

Pages 3-4, quote:

-guilt.....may also pave the way for positive outcomes such as improved **empathy** or **readiness to act** toward reparation processes – **this finding is not theirs but comes from Wohl, Branscombe, and Klar 2006**);

Page 7, quote:

- “.....in some cases, it (guilt) motivated participants to **engage actively**,**coming face-to-face with guilt**”

Page 8, quote”

- “Nevertheless, we observed collective guilt as motivating individuals to participate in the process of meaning-making”

Page 9, quote:

- “....guilt could also spur individuals to participate in the process itself (read: meaning-making process)”

Page 11, quote:

- “...guilt..... also provided motivation for individuals to engage in this process (read: meaning-making process)”

(3) THE ISSUES WITH THE ANALYSIS OF THE VARIABLE “MEANING-MAKING”

I see three problems in their discussion of the variable “Meaning-Making”:

1. The features characterizing the presence of the variable “Meaning-Making”
2. The forms of activity of the variable “Meaning-Making”
3. The effects of the variable Meaning-Making

PROBLEM 1-The discussion of the main Features of the variable “Meaning-Making” is vague

How do authors know that the process of meaning-making is taking place??? What are the features that tell them, and us as well as readers, that meaning-making process is undergoing? Even though the authors bring up some features identified by other scholars, they do not shows whether or not they have found such features in Albanian context. The authors say:

Page 2, quote:

- “...the search for meaning represents 1) **desire for orderliness**, 2) **purpose**, and 3) **course in life**” (Frankl 1985)

Page 4, quote:

- “The process of meaning-making..... involves the **interpretation** and..... **personal experience**” (Park, 2010)
- “.....meaning-making is an essential component of **individual fulfillment** and **perseverance**”

Should 1) **desire for orderliness**, 2) **purpose**, 3) **course in life**, 4) **interpretation**, 5) **personal experience**, 6) **individual fulfillment**, and 7) **individual perseverance** represent the features of the variable “Meaning-Making”, than, one of the tasks of their research is to identify whether these features are found or not in Albanian context. They do not do such an analysis but take it for granted as if “Meaning-Making” as been a process taking place

well and alive!

PROBLEM 2-The discussion of Forms of the Variable “Meaning-Making” is vague and it shows a discrepancy with forms identified by other scholars

In their theoretical discussion about the forms of the variable “Meaning-Making, the authors say:

Page 4, quote:

- “Cognitive, emotional, and relational are different forms of meaning-making” (Janoff-Bulman, 2010)

Given their reference to the forms identified by Janoff-Bulman (2010), the authors is expected to search, and show, which forms of “meaning-making” have been operational in Albanian context. The authors say in Albanian context there have taken place three forms of Meaning-Making: 1) making sense of the past, 2) re-evaluating values, and 3) creating new narratives.

Page 7, quote:

- “....participants engaged in various forms of meaning-making.....”
-These (read “meaning-making” forms) included:

1. making sense of the past. This form consisted of the following efforts on the part of participants:

- + to comprehend motives behind the communist government and the personal part (role) within the communist government
- + to investigate historical, political social elements that contributed to establishing the communist regime and the elements that contributed to abolishing the regime
- + to introspect and reflect on their individual experiences and motivations

1. re-evaluating values. This form consisted of the following efforts on the part of participants:

- + to inquire the morals and doctrines enforced during the communist regime
- + to form a new moral and doctrine more relevant to their individual principles
- + to reflect values and beliefs absorbed during communist regime
- + to investigate different outlooks and ethical systems pertaining post-communist period

1. creating new narratives. This form consisted of the following efforts on the part of participants:

+ to formulate new meanings and analysis of their past experience

+ to alter how they perceived guilt and responsibility

Page 8, quote:

- “The meaning-making processes included making sense of the past, re-evaluating values, and creating new narratives. These processes were consistent with Janoff-Bulman (1992)”

I’m not sure to what extent the forms identified by the authors (making sense of the past, re-evaluating values, creating new narratives) are consistent with 2010 Janoff-Bulman’s cognitive, emotional, and relational forms of meaning-making. In other words, the authors should have made a better job at clarifying:

- which form of meaning-making as identified by Janoff-Bulman (1992) is “making sense of the past” consistent with? Is it with cognitive, emotional, or relational form?
- which form of meaning-making as identified by Janoff-Bulman (1992) is “re-evaluating values” consistent with? Is it with cognitive, emotional, or relational form?
- which form of meaning-making as identified by Janoff-Bulman (1992) is “creating new narratives” consistent with? Is it with cognitive, emotional, or relational form?

PROBLEM 3-The discussion of the effects generated by the activity of the variable “Meaning-Making” in Albanian context needs to fit better with the effects identified by other scholars discussed in the context of literature review

In their analysis of the variable “Meaning-Making” the authors identify a number of effects /consequences generated by the process of “meaning-making”. However, the effects identified by authors in Albanian context are different from the effects identified by other scholars.

In the discussion of the contribution of other scholars, the authors bring up a number of effects generated by the action and influence of the variable “Meaning-Making”. In pages 2-9, they mention several effects:

Page 2, quote:

- “...finding meaningcan stimulate**resilience** as well as general **wellness** (Yalom, 2020)”

Page 4, quote:

- “...meaning-making forms.....promote resilience and **coping with adversity** (Janoff-Bulman, 2010)”
- “...meaning-making is positively linked to **mental health** and **well-being**,**reduction of depressive** symptoms and **anxiety** (Park et.al. 2010)”

However, when the authors discuss the effects of “Meaning-Making” in Albanian context, they identify other effects. They say:

Page 8, quote:

- “Making sense of the past allowed participants to **understand the reasons** behind the communist regime”

Pages 8-9, quote:

- “Re-evaluating values allowed participants to **question the values and beliefs** that had been imposed by the regime and **establish new ones** that were more aligned with their own values”

Page 9, quote:

- “Creating new narrative helped participants **makes sense of their experiences** and **cope with the changes** brought about by the transition”

Given the existing differences between the effects identified by other scholars and the effects identified by the authors in Albanian context, the questions that arise are:

- To what extent, the effects identified by authors are similar in their nature with the effects identified by previous scholars?
- Which of the effects identified by scholars fits with the effect “understand the reasons”, as identified by authors in Albanian context?
- Which of the effects identified by scholars fits with the effect “question valued and beliefs” and “establish new ones”, as identified by authors in Albanian context?
- Which of the effects identified by scholars fits with the effect “make sense of their experiences” and “cope with the changes”, as identified by authors in Albanian context?

(4) THE ISSUES WITH THE CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GUILT AND MEANING-MAKING

I see two problems in their discussion of the relationship between “Guilt” and “Meaning-Making”:

1. the conditions under which Guilt causes positive effects on Meaning-Making
2. the correlation between Guilt and Meaning-Making

PROBLEM 1: The authors do not specify the conditions under which the independent variable Guilt causes positive effects on the dependent variable Meaning-Making.

In their analysis of the relationship between Guilt and Meaning-Making the authors treat Guilt as independent variable and Meaning-Making as Dependent Variable where Guilt’s effects on Meaning-Making are twofold, negative and positive

. Authors say:

Abstract, quote:

- “The interplay between collective guilt and meaning-making mechanisms was observed as complex, with collective guilt

often acting **as a barrier** but also providing **motivation for effective meaning-making.**"

Page 3, quote:

- ".....in this study, we aim..... to examine **the role of collective guilt** in the process of search **for meaning**....."

Page 7, quote:

- "Our analysis revealed a complex relationship between collective guilt and meaning-making".
- ".....**guilt**..... often **created difficulty** in reaching a profound meaning-making, however, in some cases it **motivated** participants to engage actively."

Page 9, quote:

- "The relationship between collective guilt and meaning-making is complex."
- ".... guilt can block creation of meaning guilt could also spur individuals to participate in the process of meaning-making".

While the authors do a better job in specifying the conditions under which the Guilt generates negative effects, they are too vague in specifying the conditions under which the Guilt causes positive effects on Meaning-Making. Among the conditions making Guilt generate negative effects on Meaning-making they identify four such situations: 1) high level of feeling of guilt, 2) guilt feeling in the form of "collective responsibility", 3) guilt feeling in the form of "powerlessness", and 4) guilt feeling in the form of "hopelessness." They say:

Page 7, quote:

- "However, others **felt overburdened by the sense of guilt** and found themselves unable to proceed constructively forward....."
- "In such cases where **guilt proves too heavy**,...."
- "The guilt that reflected **shared responsibility**, often created difficulty in reaching a profound meaning-making"

Page 8, quote:

- "Participants noted their feeling of **powerlessness** and **hopelessness** when experiencing guilt, often stalled constructive behavior"

When it comes to specifying the conditions under which Guilt causes positive effects on Meaning-Making, the authors either contradict themselves, or fail to identify such conditions. They say:

Page 7, quote:

- ".....collective guilt that reflected **shared responsibility** often **created difficulty** in reaching a profound meaning-making; however, in some cases, it **motivated** participants **to engage actively.**"
- "Various individuals believed that **coming face-to-face** with guilt was vital for progression....."

- “.....**psychological interventions** may still be necessary so that effective meaning making processes can take place”

Page 8, quote:

- “Nevertheless we observed **collective guilt as motivating** individuals to participate in the process of meaning-making past experiences”.

Page 9, quote:

- “A large number of participants believed in **confronting their own feelings of being guilty as a crucial step** towards progress and bettering conditions.....”

PROBLEM 2: Do authors prove there is a correlation between “Guilt” and “Meaning-Making”?

While the authors claim there is a strong and twofold relationship between Guilt and Meaning-Making, they need to do a better job before reaching in the conclusion that Guilt does affect Meaning-Making, especially when it comes to “positive effects” of Guilt on Meaning-Making. Some of the problems regarding the analysis and conclusions about the relationship between Guilt and Meaning-making include:

- the type of variance in Dependent Variable “Meaning-Making” – the issue here is whether the variance of the variable analyzed in quantitative form (high-medium-low level) or categorical form (positive vs. negative effects);
- the congruence of indicators measuring the dynamics in both variables, Guilt as Independent Variable, and Meaning-making as Dependent Variable – the issue here is which indicator describing the action in Independent Variable Guilt is associated with which indicator describing the effect on the Dependent Variable “Meaning-Making”.
- the role of other factors other than Guilt and Meaning-Making – the issue here is that authors not only repeat that “Interplay Guilt–Meaning-Making is complex” (abstract, pages 7-11), but they also admit that the effects observed on Meaning-making may be result of the role and influence of other factors such as “Societal influences rooted in historical foundations”, and “Cultural differences” (page 2, reference of Baumeister, 1991)