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ABSTRACT

This document defines suffering as the affective aspect of the pain experience while the cognitive aspect of the pain experience is the sensation of pain. It considers personal suffering, which means one's own suffering, and not the suffering of other people. It notes that a particular interpretation of suffering may be formulated in any number of perceptual statements and that a perception of suffering, an affective reaction to that interpretation, and the action tendency resulting from the perceptual and affective responses to suffering constitute the attitude toward suffering. Attitudinal components gathered from listening to reports of patients about their suffering, reading therapists' reports, and analyzing the literature on suffering are discussed and categorized into 11 attitudes toward personal suffering: (1) punitive; (2) testing; (3) bad luck; (4) submission to the laws of nature; (5) resignation to the will of God; (6) acceptance of the human condition; (7) personal growth; (8) defensive; (9) minimizing; (10) divine perspective; and (11) redemptive. This report explains how an attitude scale will be constructed to describe each of these 11 attitudes to measure individuals' attitudes toward suffering. Three research projects being designed to investigate the attitude, age, religion, sex, and group differentials are discussed. (ABL)

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Eleven Attitudes

ELEVEN INTERPRETATIONS OF
PERSONAL SUFFERING

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Abstract

Suffering was carefully defined in contrast to pain as the psychological experience being investigated. Under consideration, however, was only one's own suffering and not the suffering of other people. Interpretation was identified as the way of perceiving personal suffering. In a nine-sentence paragraph the statements described the perceptual, affective, and action-tendential components of an attitude. The implications of assuming a particular attitude were brought to light in summary fashion in another paragraph. Eleven attitudes toward personal suffering were thus described and critiqued. An attitude scale of 99 items was constructed from the descriptive statements of these 11 attitudes toward personal suffering. Plans for further research were indicated.

Eleven Interpretations of
Personal Suffering

As the title of the paper indicates, the psychological experience under consideration is suffering not pain. Suffering is the affective aspect of the pain experience while the cognitive aspect of the pain experience is the sensation of pain. The pain experience has also been broken down into its discriminative dimension (sensation of pain) and into its motivational-affective system (tendency for aversive behavior and suffering). Pain clinics reveal the distinction between pain and suffering both in the adjectives (shooting-terrifying) used to describe the two phenomena and in the methods of treatment (anesthetic-counseling) employed. Instances like being humiliated by an insulting remark or feeling rejected after being fired from one's job clearly show that suffering occurs in the total absence of the sensation of pain. Yet the sensation of pain ordinarily precedes suffering.

The suffering under study is limited to personal suffering, which means only one's own suffering will be investigated. The paper does not look at the

suffering of other people. By an interpretation of one's own affective experience of suffering is meant the perception of one's own suffering. This perception of interpretation may involve casting suffering in a meaningful context, organizing it into a gestalt, subsuming it into a comprehensive picture, viewing it from a specific point of view, relating it as an instance of a general principle, integrating it as a part of a story, and locating it in a particular frame of reference.

A particular interpretation of suffering may be formulated in any number of perceptual statements. This perception gives rise to any number of affective reactions, each of which may be embodied in an affective statement. A particular way of perceiving suffering and affective reactions to that interpretation generate, in turn, action-tendencies, and these action-tendencies may be verbalized in any number of action-tendential statements. A perception of suffering, an affective reaction to that interpretation, and the action-tendency resulting from the perceptual and affective responses to suffering constitute the attitude toward suffering. Every attitude has at

least one perceptual, affective, and action-tendential component, but most attitudes have several of these components.

These attitudinal components were gathered from listening to reports of patients about their suffering, from reading the reflections and clarifications of the therapist about a client's suffering, and from analyzing the literature on suffering authored by writers, philosophers, theologians, psychiatrists, psychologists, and even by the persons actually experiencing suffering. By categorizing each component the perceptual, affective, and action-tendential components were put together into 11 attitudes toward personal suffering.

Each of the 11 attitudes toward personal suffering will be described in a paragraph of nine statements, three statements about each component of the attitude. Any single statement shows that a person has the attitude while all nine statements may indicate the attitude of a particular person. Most people are aware that only some of the statements are true of their attitude.

After a description of each of the 11 attitudes a

short paragraph of critique will bring to light in summary form the implication of assuming a particular attitude toward personal suffering.

1. The punitive attitude. When I experience suffering, I realize that God is giving me just punishment for the sins that I have committed in my life. I feel angry with myself for bringing this suffering into my life, and I also experience the same guilt feelings as in the past when things went wrong. I feel envious of other people who are not being singled out to be punished for their sins. When I observe innocent people suffering, I find it hard to believe in a just world. I tend to think that God is unjust because God has afflicted innocent people with suffering. In fact, I judge God to be irresponsible because he does not tell me which sins warrant punishment through suffering.

When the person adopts the punitive attitude, the victim at least triples his suffering: the actual suffering; the guilt feelings; social condemnation. A guilt trip is imposed on the innocent person and on the repentant sinner. God is perceived as unjust and irresponsible.

2. The testing attitude. I am inclined to exclaim "God is testing my loyalty to him" in sending suffering into my life. Yet I know that afterwards he will send blessings beyond the reward naturally accruing to my present suffering. On reflecting that my faith was the basis of God's selecting me for suffering, I regret being a person of strong faith. I feel ungrateful after passing God's testing, even though God sent no more suffering than I could bear either on my own or with his help. I have definite feelings of resentment toward God's inflicting suffering on me to make me know what he already knew, that I would be loyal to him. God's priorities are out of line because knowledge of one's own strength or bestowing extra rewards is not commensurate with a death in the family. Although he lavishes rewards on the person tested through suffering, I now think that God's power is absolute, unlimited by justice or love. I now question God's perfect knowledge since he has misjudged many people who have failed his loyalty test while suffering.

Without any evidence the notion of testing is brought to bear on one's suffering. This attitude regrets striving to be a person of strong virtue, and resents God's unjust

imposition of suffering on him and the unsolicited knowledge of his own loyalty at the price of death in his family. God's sense of justice is not restored by providing extra help to endure the suffering nor by lavishly rewarding the victim afterwards. This attitude shatters the idea that God has perfect knowledge since he has miscalculated people who have failed his test of loyalty.

3. The bad-luck attitude. Some things, like my suffering, happen by chance so, when it comes my way I say, "Just my luck." I feel confused about the reason for my unfortunate luck, and I feel defenseless about predicting such random events in my life. Furthermore, I feel victimized for I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. In the face of a future of occasional, random events, however, I remain calm. Just as I learned to live with the laws of nature in the past, now I am learning to live with some things happening beyond God's control. Because some pockets of reality are independent of him, my concept of almighty God is changing into a God of limited power.

This attitude mentally fashions reality to explain his bad luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The person makes himself a victim of suffering

and puts himself in a defenseless position since there is no way to predict random events. As a result, the person's concept of almighty God becomes a concept of a God of limited power. He also changes his concept of creation from the production of something out of nothing to putting order in the chaos of the world around him.

4. The submission-to-the-laws-of-nature attitude. I must passively submit to the laws of nature, since suffering is the automatic result of germs invading my body, of getting sick, or being injured in an automobile accident. I have to surrender during my suffering to letting nature take its course. During my recuperation I have a lot of patience while the natural healing processes of my body do their work. I feel humble in yielding to the inevitable working out of the laws of my human nature composed of body and spirit. I just grin and bear it until it is over because I feel helpless to avoid or escape from suffering. I resolve to respect the laws of my nature by taking better care of my health in order to prevent suffering returning to my life. I do have greater belief in the existence of God who is responsible for the regular operation of

the laws of nature, which sometimes bring suffering in their wake. I put aside the idea of praying for a miracle which would suspend the operation of natural laws, since God created natural laws precisely to operate the way they do.

When this attitude is present, a person is convinced that suffering immediately follows bodily injury, and that a person must passively submit to nature taking its course. One can only patiently wait until healing takes place. In submission a person feels very human and humble so must just grin and bear the suffering. Such a person has greater belief that God exists, but has some doubts about his being all-good and all-mighty when no miracle comes in answer to prayers for a cure or relief. The attitude draws the conclusion that God is not the cause of suffering.

5. The resignation-to-the-will-of-God attitude. Since everything that happens is willed by God, suffering in my life is the will of God. I can neither avoid nor escape from my suffering because I am convinced that whatever God wills necessarily happens. I am bewildered, however, because I have no idea why God wills my suffering; in fact, I feel that I am

incapable of ever understanding God's reasons. Since my suffering is God's will, I despair of gaining any control over it. Why should I pray for an end to my suffering which God is sending into my life for some purpose? I am beginning to suspect that God, in repeatedly willing suffering, must sadistically find pleasure in people suffering. My outlook on life therefore, has become fatalistic, for whatever God wants you to have, blessings or suffering, you have; what God does not want you to have, you do not have.

While this passive resignation has grounds for declaring one's suffering to be the will of God, the person feels totally incapable of ever penetrating the purpose or the reasons why God sends suffering. A person despairs over suffering and feels defeated since nothing can be done to avoid or escape it. Prayer to end the suffering is not possible since there is a fatalistic outlook on life. God who wills suffering over and over again seems to be sadistic.

6. The acceptance-of-the-human-condition attitude. In accepting suffering as part of the human condition I firmly believe that I should keep working despite the limitations suffering has imposed on what I

can accomplish. I squarely face up to my suffering without feeling that I am bound by it, because I optimistically reach for what is beyond my suffering. In great eagerness I direct my attention to worthwhile objectives and strive for their realization. I hope, however, both for an end of my suffering and also for the reward coming to me in actively accepting suffering in my life. I continually try to reach all the goals my suffering permits me to achieve. In trying to live as full a life as possible I do not dwell on present or future suffering. Sometimes, however, I say a prayer for a miracle which I am quite willing to accept in my life.

The accepting person in contrast to the person who is resigned to his suffering is active (passive) working (waiting), striving (stagnant), surpasses (surrenders), willing (weathering), hoping (despairing), engages in life (withdraws from), takes risk in the future (finds security in the past), does pray for a miracle (can't), and acknowledges suffering to the maximum (only the minimum amount), and has days full of activities (empty days).

7. The personal-growth attitude. I am convinced that I will grow into a better person through this

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suffering in my life, for some good can be drawn out of evil, no matter what amount or type of suffering is involved. But since I have to guess the direction of my growth, I am uncertain about what good is to come out of my suffering. I have feelings of resentment toward God in as much as he has failed to show me in what way I am to change. When some people, ignoring my suffering, presume to indicate the good outcome coming from it, I become angry at their explanation of the lesson God is teaching me. I am disposed, however, to turn to prayer to discover how I am to grow through my suffering. In praying for the strength to bear my suffering I find myself almost bribing God by promising to stop sinning and to start some good project. I have a tendency to hide my suffering since it isolates me and makes me feel lonely, and, besides, nobody can tell me but myself what good I should draw out of my suffering.

This attitude relies on a false principle that good can be drawn out of evil in perceiving suffering as a means of personal growth. It generates resentment toward God who makes people guess the direction of their growth. People who are suffering become angry

at people who presume to teach them the connection between suffering and their growth. Suffering people promise God to do something good if they put up with their suffering (this is a bribe). They create their own loneliness by keeping their suffering to themselves.

8. The defensive attitude. I make use of an old proverb, "Out of mind, out of heart," in handling suffering. In this way I promptly banish from consciousness the first appearance of suffering, so I will not experience its full impact. I do carry into my life of work and play, however, a vague anxiety stemming from the unconscious where I have repressed suffering from my mind. A strong fear of God's punishment keeps out of my mind my anger at him and at other people for causing suffering in my life. When I direct anger over my suffering away from God and other people toward myself, I am an acceptable target but feelings of depression are the result. I withdraw from my suffering by not looking for its causes, nor seeking help to get rid of it, nor planning how to avoid it in the future. I tend to deny my suffering and all negative emotions to such an extent that I even tend to disregard positive feelings. I find

myself denying more and more the unpleasant in my life, overlooking the ugly side of life, and avoiding suffering before I encounter it.

The sufferer who assumes the defensive attitude may rely on some or all of the following defense mechanisms, denial, displacement, hysterical reaction, perceptual defense, repression and withdrawal. His/her affective life will be stunted at best.

9. The minimizing attitude. After suffering has happened to me, I sigh, "It could have been much worse." I always compare my suffering with the suffering of other people; for, then, it does not seem so bad. In noticing that my suffering is not as intense as it could be, I have a sense of relief, and a heart full of gratitude. But I feel uneasy in adjusting to my suffering in this way, since comparing it to the suffering of other people is not really an objective interpretation. I am always looking for new comparisons to minimize my suffering, like this example I found, - that death would not seem so bad if it occurred after a person had resolved a crisis in her/his life. Since I was spared, protected, and sometimes even saved from worse suffering, I have a stronger belief in divine

providence. At the same time, however, I tend to place less trust in God, since other people, quite arbitrarily, seem to get worse suffering while I was singled out for God's special care.

All comparisons create the illusion of suffering not being as bad as it is in reality. While he/she may sense relief, the person feels uneasy in adjusting to his/her subjective picture of suffering. The person may actually feel grateful for getting such a small amount of suffering. The minimizing illusion is the foundation for greater belief in divine providence, yet it is also the reason for less trust in God on account of his arbitrary selection of who will or will not suffer.

10. Divine-perspective attitude. Upon close examination I find my suffering is meaningless but, when I turn it over to see it from God's perspective, I get a glimpse of its meaning. I have discovered that the seeming evil of suffering is only surface, and that a scrutiny on a deeper level shows suffering is a blessing in disguise. I feel more satisfied in attributing suffering not to God's willing it but to his having a meaning for it, even though I have yet to

discover that meaning. I feel it is futile to search for the meaning by focusing in on my suffering, for, then, I perceive it from a narrow point of view, not as it really is. I distrust my perceptions of suffering in my life in as much as its meaning can only be grasped in a broad frame of reference. When I try to perceive suffering as contributing to something greater than itself, I am aware of distorting reality in transforming pain into the privilege of suffering. At first glance I might label God's action criminal (afflicting a child at birth with blindness), but after reflection I have come to accept God's action of permitting suffering. I am inclined to perceive nothing as really evil, including suffering, because evil is no longer thought of as a privation of something good but as a minimal amount of that good.

More profound intellectual activity is required to move from the human to the divine perspective of suffering, from present suffering to its future outcome, from a narrow point of view to a broad frame of reference, from the surface evil of suffering to its being a blessing in disguise, from perceiving the loss of suffering to perceiving the gain of suffering, from

focusing on suffering as it really is to perceiving it as a means to an end and so contributing to something greater than itself. When one attributes suffering not to God's willing it but to his having a meaning for it, that meaning still remains unknown. This attitude harbors a suspicion of distorting reality when the pain of suffering is transformed into the privilege of suffering. The concept of evil as privation of something good must be changed into a minimal amount of that good.

11. The redemptive attitude. I know that I can join my suffering to the sufferings of Christ. By offering it up to him I perceive my suffering as contributing to the work of redemption. In that offering I feel some spiritual fulfillment, because I make up in my body what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ. I feel uplifted by my offering because my suffering has been raised to the redemptive level of Christ's sufferings. By participating in Christ's redemptive sufferings I am hopeful of some real benefit coming to myself or to others. I rejoice in my suffering because in sharing in Christ's sufferings I may also share in his resurrection from the dead. In

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sharing my suffering with Christ I feel closer to him. I make my suffering useful by offering it as a prayer that God might grant me some favor.

This attitude could have been named for any of its many facets. As one facet moved into the foreground, the others recede into the background. Thus the redemptive attitude from time to time may be called oblation, unitive, participative, altruistic, penitential, reparative, Christian, sacrificial, assimilative, intercessory, or identifying.

From the paragraphs describing each of the 11 attitudes toward personal suffering an attitude scale will be constructed. This attitude scale will be used to measure the attitudes toward personal suffering which people have. The number of items endorsed will indicate the extent of a respondent's participation in the 11 attitudes. After administering the 99-item scale to a sufficient number of respondents, the scale will be shortened to a 55-item scale by an item analysis.

At least three research projects are being designed to investigate the attitude differential, the age differential, the religion differential, the sex differential, and the group differential. Does a

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constellation of attitudes exist in the minds of people who are suffering? Retired people will be the respondents in this study on the assumption that they have been exposed to suffering in their lives. Does this constellation of attitudes change with age? Does being religious make a difference in the attitudes people have toward personal suffering? When people become members of special groups like a resident in a hospice, a patient in a hospital, a permanently handicapped person, do certain attitudes toward personal suffering shift into the foreground?

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