

1. Introduction

In a recent essay about culture and psychology, Jerome Bruner states: “At the heart of every coherent system of cultural beliefs, there lies a conception of man, of his perfectibility and weakness and what conditions limit and promote these. Living in a culture predisposes us to search for and even to find empirical confirmations of these deep beliefs” (Bruner, 1999, p. 231-232).

In his *Lettres à un ami allemand*, the French philosopher Albert Camus resumes his standpoint on the purpose of human existence: “I continue to believe that this world has no supernatural meaning. But I know that something in the world has meaning – man – because he is the only being who demands meaning for himself. This world at least contains the truth of man, and our task is to justify him in the face of destiny itself” (Camus, 1942, p. 72-73, translation J. Cruickshank).

These quotations reflect the two main aims of the present thesis, which analyzes data from 306 interviews with people from two cultures, namely Germany and Peru. Firstly, it attempts to identify universal and culture-specific characteristics in the concept of human nature, which reflects Bruner’s search for a system of beliefs. Secondly, it explores Camus’ conviction that it is a basic human necessity to create meaning, and examines ways in which happiness and meaning might be interconnected.

The theoretical part is divided into five sections. Since the conceptualization of human nature is invariably linked with social constructivism, it begins with an overview of social constructions. The main focus is on the distinction between individualism and collectivism (e.g. Triandis, 1995), since Germany is regarded as an individualistic and Peru as a collectivistic culture. Secondly, different research approaches on the concept of human nature will be presented. These include sociological, anthropological, and psychological concepts and models. The third chapter deals with meaning in life and happiness. It summarizes some of the main psychological empirical approaches for assessing meaning and happiness, and introduces the system of categories developed by the American psychologist Peter Ebersole and his research group (e.g. Ebersole, 1998), which will be used to analyze the German and Peruvian data. In the fourth chapter, basic topics and problems of cross-cultural studies will be discussed. A central theme within this section will be the *emic-etic-dilemma* (e.g. Berry, 1989), since it became obvious that both of these approaches had to be followed to deal adequately with the present data. The last chapter gives a brief overview on Peruvian culture, since most readers will not be familiar with it. After describing the samples and their daily context, explaining the procedure of data analysis, and presenting the hypotheses in the

methodological part, the results of the analyses are presented in the empirical part and reviewed in the Discussion.

The theoretical approach I have chosen as a frame for this thesis must be understood as only one amongst a variety of equally sensible approaches. My main interest was to contrast two sets of social representations in German and Peruvian cultures: human nature on the one hand, and meaning of life and happiness on the other. The thesis neglects theoretical approaches of motivation and action and focuses on social constructs (e.g. Mosovici, 1995; Flick, 1995) in different cultural contexts.

Another prime matter was the integration of the results into Oerter's stage model of human nature (e.g. Oerter, 1999). The present data were collected between 1996 and 1999 in Germany and Peru as part of a bigger project initiated and supervised by Rolf Oerter, aimed at exploring the conceptualization of human nature in various nations. The stage model was adapted to the new results which the data produced.

Finally, this thesis is embedded in the historical search for universals and specifics amongst cultures (e.g. Kagitcibasi & Poortinga, 2000). It deals with the same methodological challenges widely discussed in cross-cultural psychology (for an overview see van de Vijver & Leung, 2000; Kim, Park & Park, 2000), which are described in the fourth chapter and reviewed in the Discussion.