

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Capital logic, consumption, and anxiety: Rereading fromm in contemporary psychology

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits Erich Fromm's theory of social psychoanalysis to examine the persistence of psychological distress in contemporary societies shaped by capital logic and consumer culture. There is a fundamental difference between Fromm's theory of "social embedding" and Freud's paradigm of focusing on individuals, which shows that a full understanding of spiritual life must be placed in a broader historical and cultural context. Freud's psychoanalysis highlights the individual's inner conflicts, yet Fromm reminds us that such struggles are never merely private—they are conditioned by broader social structures. This study traces three interconnected concerns: the experience of alienation, the formation of social character, and the pursuit of a productive orientation. It argues that contemporary anxieties, burnout, and forms of emotional detachment cannot be reduced to individual weakness but must be understood as outcomes of alienated social arrangements. Drawing on cultural resources such as Confucian benevolence, Daoist naturalness, and Buddhist mindfulness, the paper suggests these traditions remain relevant counterforces, offering ethical foundations for a more human-centered psychology. Building on Fromm's legacy, we propose a threefold path that integrates structural reform, cultural renewal, and individual responsibility, aiming to reorient critical psychology toward the collective well-being.

Keywords: social psychoanalysis; capital logic; productive character; mental health; alienation

1. Introduction

1.1. The contemporary mental health crisis

In recent decades, the world has witnessed a growing recognition of mental health as a critical component of overall well-being, yet the prevalence of mental health disorders has reached alarming levels. The contemporary mental health crisis represents a complex and multifaceted public health challenge affecting individuals, families, and societies across all socio-economic and cultural contexts. According to the World Health Organization, one in eight people globally lives with a mental disorder, with depression and anxiety among the most common conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this situation,

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triggering widespread psychological distress, social isolation, uncertainty, and economic hardship that intensified existing vulnerabilities. The modern crisis is deeply intertwined with the pace and pressures of contemporary life. Factors such as rapid urbanization, digital overload, economic instability, and social disconnection have been found to contribute significantly to deteriorating mental health outcomes. The normalization of long working hours, academic competition, and the omnipresence of social media have also been linked to increased rates of stress, burnout, and loneliness, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Moreover, despite the growing awareness, persistent stigma, limited access to care, and unequal resource allocation continue to obstruct effective mental health interventions, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Another critical dimension of the contemporary crisis lies in the fragmentation of mental health services and the inadequate integration of psychological support within general healthcare systems. Many countries face shortages of trained professionals, insufficient policy implementation, and minimal investment in community-based care models. The gap between mental health needs and available services remains stark — often referred to as the “treatment gap” — leaving millions without appropriate or timely support.

Furthermore, the crisis has far-reaching social and economic consequences. Poor mental health contributes to decreased productivity, absenteeism, and rising healthcare costs, imposing a substantial burden on national economies. Beyond economics, untreated mental health issues erode social cohesion, strain interpersonal relationships, and increase vulnerability to substance abuse and suicide. In light of these developments, addressing the contemporary mental health crisis requires a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and inclusive approach. This includes advancing early intervention and prevention strategies, integrating mental health into primary care, expanding digital mental health solutions, and fostering environments that promote psychological resilience and social well-being. Understanding the scope and underlying causes of this crisis is essential to developing effective policies and interventions that safeguard mental well-being in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

In the opening decades of the twenty-first century, conditions such as anxiety, depression, and burnout have intensified to a degree that researchers and clinicians alike regard as without historical parallel. The World Health Organization has already recognized these conditions as an urgent public health challenge. They now stand alongside chronic physical diseases in terms of global significance. Importantly, the rising prevalence of such disorders is not limited to one country, class, or culture. Instead, it shows a cross-national and cross-cultural pattern, pointing to structural drivers that extend beyond the individual or the family unit [1].

While contemporary psychological science has achieved considerable progress in developing refined diagnostic criteria, diversifying treatment methods, and integrating biological and behavioral insights, its dominant frameworks still lean heavily on the individual brain, the nuclear family, or isolated clinical symptoms. This focus, while valuable, risks narrowing the scope of explanation. The persistence and expansion of mental distress suggest that such models, if pursued in isolation, cannot adequately capture the social and historical forces that underpin contemporary pathology. To address the depth of the crisis, it is necessary to move beyond the conventional medicalization and individualization of psychological problems. As critical scholarship has emphasized, the analysis must extend to macro-level determinants: the institutional logics, cultural codes, and economic mechanisms that regulate everyday life and generate systemic suffering [2,3]. These determinants are not distant background conditions but active forces shaping work, intimacy, and aspiration, thereby directly influencing collective psychological well-being.

Rationale. **Table 1** consolidates macro-level levers that individual-centered models struggle to capture. This motivates our subsequent turn to Fromm's social psychoanalysis as a framework that systematically links institutional logics to psychic outcomes.

1.2. Fromm's relevance today

Within this broader horizon, the intellectual contribution of Erich Fromm regains renewed relevance. More than fifty years ago, Fromm advanced what

Table 1. Macro-level determinants of contemporary mental distress at a glance.

Determinant	Primary Psychological Outcomes	Indicative Evidence/Indices
Consumerism & marketization	Anxiety, status-Comparison stress, emptiness	Cross-national surveys of anxiety/depression in high-consumerism contexts [4, 5]
Instrumental rationality in work/education	Burnout, depersonalization, reduced meaning	Occupational health findings on overwork & efficiency regimes [6]
Platformized sociality (social media)	Performance anxiety, inadequacy, compulsive comparison	Cohort trends in anxiety/affect and social-media related stress [1]

He termed a social psychoanalysis, seeking to transform psychoanalysis from an intrapsychic and familial framework into a socially and historically situated one. His dual role as a Frankfurt School theorist and a trained psychoanalyst allowed him to both appreciate Freud's revolutionary discovery of the unconscious and identify its limits. Freud's focus on family dynamics and the Oedipal structure highlighted inner conflicts, but left unexplained the collective patterns of neurosis shaped by society at large [7,8].

Fromm's intervention reframed the psyche as deeply embedded in social contradictions. Social systems, cultural norms, and economic arrangements not only condition behavior but inscribe themselves into personality structures and emotional repertoires. In this way, the unconscious becomes a site where social contradictions are condensed and reproduced. His work provides theoretical tools to explain why specific societies systematically produce psychological pathologies such as anxiety and alienation. Fromm argued that capital logic life organized around accumulation, consumption, and instrumental rationality lies at the heart of psychic discontent.

This article pursues three objectives. First, to clarify the theoretical shift from Freud to Fromm, moving from a focus on individual drives to the embedding of psychic life in social structures. Second, to analyze how capital logic continues to generate collective psychological problems anxiety, meaninglessness, and exhaustion. Third, to situate Fromm's framework within contemporary psychology, highlighting the need to link structural critique, cultural analysis, and personal responsibility in mental health research. The article proceeds in three parts: Section 2 revisits the Freud-Fromm theoretical divide; Section 3 analyzes the psychic consequences of capital logic; and Section 4 outlines cultural and ethical counterforces.

2. From freud to fromm: Reframing social psychology

2.1. Freud's family-centered model

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis established the unconscious, repression, and libidinal conflict as fundamental concepts for understanding mental suffering [9]. Freud's theory revealed the creative and disruptive power of the subconscious, yet it confined psychological development largely to the family sphere. For him, the family was not merely one influence among many; it was the decisive arena where the basic patterns of desire, conflict, and authority were formed. The Oedipus complex, the repression of instincts, and the rise of the superego were all explained through family structure and relationships. Although Freud

recognized the demands of civilization, his analysis ultimately privileged intrapsychic dynamics over socio-structural determinants [10].

2.2. Fromm's social reframing

Fromm proposed a radical reconceptualization: human beings are not primarily biological organisms shaped by familial repression, but social beings whose psyches crystallize the contradictions of their socio-historical environment [7]. In contrast to Freud's libidinal economy, Fromm emphasized that social existence defines the horizon of psychological possibility. The family, in his view, is a miniature society, mirroring wider class relations, economic organization, and cultural values [8].

This shift created the basis for social psychology as a mediating field between social existence (economic structures, institutions, cultural norms) and individual consciousness (thoughts, emotions, desires). Fromm identified social character as the key formation at this intersection. Whether authoritarian, receptive, or productive, such characters serve as the glue binding individuals to society, but they can also become explosive when contradictions between social demands and human needs intensify [11].

By reframing psychology in this way, Fromm addressed a central limitation of Freud's model: the inability to explain why entire groups share similar anxieties or neuroses. His social psychoanalysis highlighted alienation, conformity, and the internalization of social contradictions as central explanatory categories. In doing so, he anticipated later currents in cultural psychology, critical theory, and the sociology of emotions [12,13], showing the enduring relevance of embedding psychology within the broader social totality.

Table 2. From Freud to Fromm: A reframing of the psychological explanatory unit.

Dimension	Freud (family-centered)	Fromm (socially embedded)
Explanatory unit	Intrapsychic dynamics shaped in the family [9]	Social character at the nexus of institutions, norms, economy [8,11]
Key mechanism	Repression, Oedipal conflict	Alienation, conformity, internalization of social contradictions [7]
Why group-level similarity?	Secondary	Primary (shared institutions/culture shape shared neuroses)
Intervention focus	Clinical, family	Clinical <i>plus</i> structural/cultural re-orientation

3. Capital logic and collective mental pathologies

3.1. Capital logic and alienation

Fromm's critique of capital logic builds directly on Marx's theory of alienated labor [14]. Under capitalism, human activity is driven by accumulation and profit. In this process, people grow distant from their own abilities, from the things they create, and from their ties with others. Whereas Marx analyzed alienation primarily in terms of labor, Fromm extended this logic to the entire sphere of psychic life. In modern societies, individuals experience themselves as commodities, judged by exchange value, productivity, and competitiveness [7].

3.2. Consumer culture and instrumental rationality

The rise of consumer culture has further intensified alienation. Baudrillard showed how consumption no longer satisfies basic needs but generates endless cycles of desire and dissatisfaction—the “system of objects” [15].

Fromm already observed that capitalism thrives not by resolving anxiety but by stimulating it, creating “pseudo-satisfactions” that mask emptiness^[16].

Instrumental rationality, as Weber warned, risks trapping modern life in an “iron cage” of efficiency^[17]. Fromm deepened this critique, noting that rationalization colonizes the inner world, reducing relationships to transactions and values to mere utilities. The result is anxiety, insecurity, and a loss of meaning.

3.3. Empirical evidence and fromm's framework

Contemporary research corroborates these insights. Studies of occupational health show that burnout stems from organizational regimes of over-work and relentless efficiency^[6]. Social media further fuels cycles of comparison, performance anxiety, and inadequacy, amplified by algorithmic competition^[18]. Epidemiological surveys reveal higher anxiety and depression in societies shaped by consumerism and neoliberal policies^[3,19]. These findings confirm that economic rationalities extend into the affective and cognitive spheres of life.

Fromm had already pointed toward such a diagnosis. He maintained that the logic of capital reshapes inner life, tying self-worth to productivity and linking recognition to patterns of consumption. In this light, alienation, anxiety, and exhaustion appear less as private troubles than as symptoms of structural pathologies^[7].

For clarity, **Table 3** sets out the core elements in parallel: the workings of capital logic, the pathologies it generates, Fromm's interpretations, and their current implications. **Figure 1** extends this comparison by offering a visual map. It illustrates how capital logic feeds social distress, how Fromm's framework provides diagnostic leverage, and how three possible responses—structural critique, cultural resources, and individual responsibility—interact with one another.

Testable propositions (Frommian frame)..

•**P1 (structural):** In sectors with stronger efficiency regimes, burnout prevalence and depersonalization scores will be higher, controlling for demographics^[6].

•**P2 (cultural-consumerism):** Individual differences in consumerist value endorsement predict higher anxiety/emptiness, partially mediated by comparison intensity^[1,4].

Table 3. Fromm's framework: Linking capital logic, collective pathologies, theoretical explanations, and contemporary implications.

Capital Logic	Pathologies	Fromm's Explanation	Contemporary Implications
Consumerism; pursuit of accumulation	Anxiety, alienation, loss of meaning	Estrangement from self; false comfort in compulsive consumption	Policy changes to curb overconsumption; emphasis on lasting well-being
Efficiency-first mentality	Burnout, alienation	Utilitarian reduction of values	Reassertion of humanistic values
Performance competition	Exhaustion, “involution,” withdrawal (“lying flat”)	Conformist orientation; failure to cultivate productive character	Promotion of autonomy, creativity, and responsibility in interventions

•**P3 (character-level):** Interventions that foster autonomy/meaning (productive orientation proxies) yield larger reductions in anxiety than purely symptom-focused protocols^[20, 21].

To clarify this argument, **Table 3** summarizes the core logic.

While the table offers a structured overview, **Figure 1** provides a schematic representation.

Taken together, the table and figure show how Fromm's social psycho-analysis works as an explanatory model: it does more than list anxiety or alienation; it traces their roots to systemic mechanisms. This sets up the next section, which examines how cultural counterforces can furnish value orientations strong enough to resist the corrosive pull of capital logic.

4. Cultural counterforces and value orientations

4.1. Debunking false neutrality

Fromm sharply criticized the false neutrality claimed by psychology. He warned that if psychoanalysis isolates itself from historical and social critique, it becomes a tool to adapt individuals to distorted norms rather than to challenge them^[8]. Mainstream psychology often presents itself as objective,

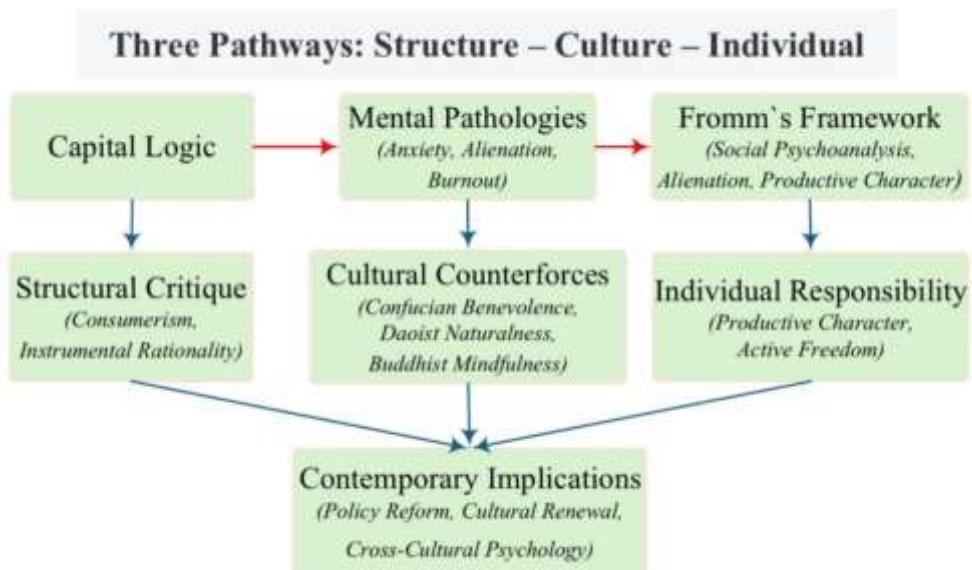


Figure 1. Capital logic and collective pathologies through Fromm's framework: Structural critique, cultural counterforces, and personal responsibility as three integrated coping paths.

Yet it unconsciously reproduces dominant values such as consumerism, individualism, and instrumental rationality. If this deep rootedness is ignored, psychology cannot heal the wounds of the age. Instead, it risks legitimizing the very anxiety and alienation it aims to treat.

4.2. Cultural hegemony and value orientation

Critical theorists such as Gramsci have shown that cultural hegemony operates not only through political and economic power, but also through its shaping of subjectivity. Fromm echoed this insight, insisting that psychology must adopt an explicit value orientation. Seemingly neutral categories such as health, productive, or well-adapted carry hidden cultural assumptions. Later critiques of the collusion between positive psychology and neoliberal individualism confirmed his concern^[22]. For Fromm, mental health should not be reduced to resilience under systemic pressures but should serve as a call to re-examine cultural values themselves.

4.3. Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism as counterforces

Indigenous traditions provide alternative orientations. - **Confucian ethics:** The principle of *Ren* (benevolence) emphasizes compassion, relational re-

sponsibility, and moral self-cultivation. Research shows its correlation with prosocial behavior and resilience [23,24]. - **Daoist philosophy:** Stressing *zi-ran* (naturalness) and *wuwei* (non-coercive action), Daoism challenges instrumental rationality by affirming balance and harmony with natural rhythms. Daoist-informed practices have shown therapeutic potential in reducing anxiety and fostering calmness [25,26]. - **Buddhist mindfulness:** Fromm drew inspiration from Buddhist thought and its link to productive orientation [27]. Modern mindfulness-based interventions reduce stress and depression [28,29], though in Western contexts mindfulness often becomes commodified as a tool for efficiency [30,31].

4.4. Toward a humanistic psychology

Together, Confucian benevolence, Daoist naturalism, and Buddhist mindfulness form a cultural counterweight to the anxious tendencies of consumer capitalism. Their importance today is not nostalgic but practical: they provide living wisdom for building a plural and healthy psychological ecology. Anchoring psychology in these traditions helps it resist the pressures of commodification and instrumental use, and at the same time opens space for forms of subjectivity that are more humane and better balanced [31,30].

Table 4. Cultural counterforces mapped to capital-logic pressures and expected psychological effects.

Tradition	Countered pressure	Expected effects	Illustrative
Confucian <i>Ren</i> (benevolence)	Competitive individualism, status anxiety	Prosociality, relatedness, resilience	[23,24]
Daoist <i>Zi-ran/Wuwei</i>	Instrumental rationality, overcontrol	Calm, balance, reduced anxiety	[25,26]
Buddhist mindfulness	Compulsive desire/rumination	Stress/depression reduction, compassion	[28,29]

Taken together, **Table 4** clarifies how cultural resources target distinct facets of capital logic and points directly to the next step: The role of *individual agency*, embodied in Fromm's productive character.

5. Individual responsibility and the productive character

5.1. The productive character and active freedom

Fromm described the *productive character* as the opposite of both passive conformity and compulsive patterns of consumption. By productive, he did not mean economic output, but rather an engaged way of living one that approaches the world with love, creativity, and a sense of ethical responsibility [16]. He later tied this orientation to what he called active freedom. The emphasis here is crucial: freedom is not simply the absence of external restraint but the capacity to actualize one's own genuine potentials [7].

5.2. Contemporary challenges and empirical support

The relevance of this idea is sharpened when viewed against recent trends in East Asian societies, notably involution (*neijuan*) and lying flat (*tangping*) [28]. Each term captures a distinct response to relentless competition and the perceived futility of striving within zero-sum conditions: the first through exhausting cycles of effort with little reward, the second through deliberate withdrawal. In psychological terms, both are marked by resignation, burnout, and a sense of meaning drained away from classic expressions of alienation under the logic of capital.

In contrast, Fromm's notion of the productive character gestures toward another route: it reframes withdrawal as commitment and transforms passivity into engaged living. Research on self-determination theory supports this claim: intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence foster well-being and resilience more effectively than extrinsic or competitive goals [20]. Existential psychology also shows that cultivating purpose and responsibility reduces anxiety and depression [21,32]. These findings confirm Fromm's insight that

mental health depends not only on external structures but also on the growth of inner freedom and responsibility [7,33].

This micro-level orientation completes the ecological picture with structure and culture, preparing the ground for implications that are not merely philosophical but operational.

5.3. Responsibility, self-cultivation, and freedom

Fromm did not romanticize individual agency apart from social conditions. He stressed that productive freedom requires supportive environments that secure basic needs and reduce structural alienation [8]. Otherwise, calls for resilience risk turning into moral imperatives that fuel guilt and self-blame.

Yet self-cultivation remains vital. Practices such as mindfulness, journaling, artistic expression, and community participation help individuals enact productive orientations in daily life [28,34]. While these practices cannot by themselves erase structural problems, they provide concrete psychological tools to resist alienation and rediscover meaning. Fromm's deeper lesson is that freedom and responsibility belong together: freedom is not the absence of limits, but the creative use of one's capacities to build a life grounded in love, creativity, and solidarity. In this sense, individual responsibility completes the ecological picture alongside structural critique and cultural renewal, preparing the ground for the operational implications to be discussed in the following section.

Table 5. From resignation to productive orientation: Individual-level pathway.

Phenomenon	Psychological profile	Frommian re-frame	Intervention anchors
Involution / "lying flat"	Exhaustion, meaning loss, withdrawal	Alienation under logic	Autonomy/meaning-building (SDT), existential meaning work [20, 21]
Productive character	Love, creativity, responsibility	<i>Active freedom</i> (capacity to realize potentials)	Self-cultivation practices; community participation [28, 34]

6. Implications for psychology and society

Fromm's criticism of capital logic and his vision of social psychoanalysis still have a profound impact on psychology and society. These influences can be understood across four dimensions: theoretical dialogue, practical intervention, cross-cultural development, and the triple path of reform.

6.1. Theoretical implications: Psychology and philosophy in dialogue

Fromm's works show that psychology cannot fully explain mental troubles if it isolates itself from philosophy. By bringing Marx's critique of alienation into conversation with Freud's account of repression, he outlined why psychology needs a dialectical framework. This helps reveal the normative assumptions hidden in seemingly neutral concepts such as happiness, resilience, or adaptability [35].

In this sense, Fromm anticipated the revival of critical psychology, which has challenged mainstream assumptions of neutrality, individualism, and pathology [36]. He reminded us that if psychology seeks to clarify the conditions of human flourishing, dialogue with philosophy is not optional but essential.

6.2. Practical implications: Collective mental health and cultural resources

Fromm's framework urges both psychologists and policymakers to consider structural and cultural factors in mental health interventions. Clinical therapy alone cannot secure collective well-being; institutions must also reduce alienation and create supportive environments. Workplace reforms that address overwork

and burnout^[6], or educational reforms that encourage creativity and cooperation, embody this vision of social responsibility.

Equally important are cultural resources. As discussed in Section 4, Confucian ethics, Daoist naturalness, and Buddhist mindfulness continue to offer counterbalances to consumerism and instrumental logic. These traditions remain alive in communities and, when integrated into public health programs, have shown positive results in lowering anxiety and fostering resilience^[37]. For Fromm, such efforts are not decorative supplements but central to building collective mental health.

6.3. Cross-cultural development: Towards a plural psychology

Fromm also foresaw the direction of cross-cultural psychology. As global research has shown, treatment models cannot simply be transplanted across contexts; what works in one society may fail in another. This recognition challenges Western dominance in psychological discourse and calls for a genuine dialogue across traditions. For Fromm, cultural values are never museum pieces; they function as living resources that continue to shape practice and deepen understanding.

On this view, the future of mental health cannot be singular but must draw on multiple sources and seek integration. Structural critique, cultural sustenance, and individual initiative each have a part to play, and their interplay is essential. Psychology, in this framework, belongs at the crossroads of social critique and therapeutic care remaining at once critical, humane, and responsive to global realities.

6.4. The Triple path: Structure, culture, and individual

The enduring contribution of Fromm's social psychoanalysis can be traced along three interconnected routes:

- **Structure:** pursuing institutional reforms and public health initiatives that tackle alienation at its roots.
- **Culture:** drawing on traditions that preserve human warmth and balance against the pressures of consumerism.
- **Individual:** fostering productive orientations of character that cultivate resilience, creativity, and a sense of responsibility.

Seen together, these strands do more than list remedies; they weave a bridge between philosophical critique and applied psychology. In this sense, Fromm's approach functions not only as a framework for reflection but also as a practical orientation for reimagining the future of psychological practice. By bridging critique and intervention, it offers a pathway toward more humane and context-sensitive approaches to mental health. We therefore conclude by restating the triple path and outlining a research agenda that can carry this framework forward.

Table 6. Operationalizing the threefold pathway: actors, actions, and evaluation.

Actor	Action (aligned with pathway)	Evaluation (examples)
Policy makers	Limit overwork; regulate predatory consumer practices (structure)	Burnout prevalence; consumer-debt indices [6, 5]
Clinicians/ educators	Integrate mindfulness/values education; autonomy-supportive pedagogy (culture/individual)	Anxiety/stress scales; autonomy/meaning measures [28, 20]
Communities	Prosocial programs; arts/participation (culture/individual)	Prosocial behavior, belonging, local well-being indices

7. Revisiting Fromm's social psychoanalysis

7.1. Fromm's critical standpoint

This paper revisits Erich Fromm's social psychoanalysis, treating it as a crucial lens for interpreting the contemporary mental health crisis shaped by capital logic. In contrast to Freud who centered his analysis on instinct and the unconscious drive, Fromm consistently redirected attention to the social terrain. He insisted that inner life is never insulated within the individual but emerges, and at times collapses, amid social and historical contradictions. Read in this way, his reflections on social character, alienation, and capital logic sound less like abstract theory than a warning: anxiety, burnout, and estrangement are not accidental private troubles but structural outcomes of consumer capitalism, entrenched further by institutionalized ways of living.

7.2. Cultural resources as counterforces

Fromm did not leave his work at the level of critique. He looked outward, drawing on cultural traditions that could act as counterweights to the crises of modern life. Globalization and commercialization have indeed reshaped everyday existence, yet older streams of thought still move quietly beneath the surface. Confucian ethics, for example, continues to foreground benevolence and the weave of relational care. Daoist philosophy points back to the way of nature, reminding us that balance and flow resist reduction to the cold calculus of efficiency. Buddhist mindfulness, in turn, invites a release from restless desire while cultivating compassion in the texture of ordinary routines. These inheritances are not relics under glass; they are lived, reinterpreted, and practiced in communities today. Brought into conversation with Fromm's idea of the productive personality, they sketch a composite path: one that resists alienation through structural change, renews values through cultural memory, and fosters resilience and responsibility at the level of individual life.

7.3. The triple path

The lasting significance of Fromm's social psychoanalysis can be expressed through a triple path:

- **Structural reform:** confronting alienation at its roots through transformations in labor, institutions, and the broader economic order.
- **Cultural renewal:** revitalizing traditions that sustain warmth and balance, setting them against the impersonal logic of consumerism.
- **Individual cultivation:** encouraging productive orientations of character that nurture creativity, responsibility, and meaning-making amid change.

This threefold vision is not meant to displace clinical practice, but to enlarge psychology's horizon. It reframes the discipline's mission: not only how to alleviate symptoms, but also how to help human beings sustain flourishing lives under the weight of social pressures and historical transitions.

7.4. Contemporary relevance

In a world where anxiety and alienation are no longer rare but woven into everyday life, Fromm's voice carries an undiminished resonance. He cautioned that freedom is not a hollow banner waved in the name of indulgence; it is a lived practice that demands responsibility. To speak of mental health, then, is not to imagine a life scrubbed clean of suffering. It is to ask how one might shape a meaningful existence within the fabric of a shared human world. For this reason, his reflections crossing the distance of a century still echo in contemporary debates, challenging psychology to remain critical and urging social thought to stay humane.

Methodologically, future work can subject the propositions in Section 3 to multi-level modeling across sectors and cultures, testing whether structural, cultural, and character-level indices jointly predict distress and recovery trajectories. Such designs would translate the Frommian framework into a cumulative research program.

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Highlights

- An analysis of the ideological turn from Freud to Fromm: psychology has expanded from internal conflict analysis to social structure criticism.
- It is proved that anxiety, alienation and burnout are structural diseases produced by capital logic and consumer culture, rather than personal disability.
- Explore Confucian benevolence, Taoist nature and Buddhist mindfulness as cultural reaction, and provide contemporary resources for collective psychological resilience.
- Put forward the triple practical path of integrating social structure reform, cultural value revival and productive personality cultivation.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Graphical abstract

