This is the English version of the paper:

2001 Universalien und Evolutionäre Psychologie. In Universalien und Konstruktivismus, pp. 126-138. Peter M. Hejl, Hg. Universalien und Konstruktivismus. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag. (Universals and Evolutionary Psychology. In Peter M. Hejl, ed. Universals and Constructivism, pp. 126-138.)

.. . .

UNIVERSALS AND EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

Jerome H. Barkow

Abstract

An explicit theory of sociocultural universals is essential for a nomothetic sociocultural anthropology. For lack of such a theory, social scientists in general and ethnographers in particular have little choice but to assume that home-host cultural similarities are universals requiring little analysis but that differences must be accounted for. Social scientists also cope with this theoretical lack by relying on a logically endless loop of social constructionism. Evolutionary psychology provides a way to buttress both the study of cultural differences and the approach of social constructionism. EP

> views the human brain as having evolved a complex psychology that both enables and constrains our construction of culture. It is this brain that is the real universal, though in interaction with various environments it also generates higher-level universals.

As a social scientist -- an anthropologist -- I need to understand universals for rather practical reasons. What is it about cultures and societies that I am supposed to explain? If I have no theory of universals, I may end up giving a particularistic explanation for what is actually a cross-cultural universal, so that I am explaining too much. Just as likely, I may not notice a unique feature of a culture I am studying and fail to analyze it, thus explaining too little. Perhaps I wish to do some cross-cultural comparisons. How can I do so without a theory of cross-cultural categories, that is, of universally applicable (or nearly so) categories? Clearly, a theory of sociocultural universals would appear to be essential for a nomothetic sociocultural anthropology, and probably for the human sciences as a whole.[1]

Oddly enough, however, most social scientists do not seem to share this view. They cope without any explicit theory of universals. How do they do this? Let us see.

In a recent article, the Israeli researcher Eyal Ben-Ari (1996) addresses the issue of why the Japanese are so comfortable in group settings. This is apparently something that needs to be accounted for. The answer, we are told, partly lies in the pre-schoolers' *nap time* at the day-care center. Group napping, Ben-Ari tells us (borrowing a term from the American anthropologist Sherry Ortner) is a "key scenario" in which a "culture's basic

means-end relationship in actable form" is formulated (Ben-Ari 1996:157). It is one of the many ways in which the "day-care centers effect the transfer of strong relations from the family dyad to the peer group. There is here a transfer--or an addition--of the warmth, the 'comfortableness,' and the commitment and involvement of children in the dyad at home to the wider group" (p. 159). Part of this process involves the readiness of the day-care personnel to touch and sooth the children, to lie down next to a child having difficulty falling asleep or getting up, the bodily contact and transfer of body heat between teachers and children. It includes the proximity of the nappers to one another and the sounds they make and share. The experience is described to us in terms of "embodiment," a rather protean concept that has to do with "experiences that involve the whole person, including the body" (p. 138).

Never mind whether we agree with Ben-Ari's theoretical framework here, and the eschewing of terms such as "internalization" or "socialization/enculturation" in favor of "embodiment," or the belief that the strong early bond with the mother should impede movement to the group rather than, as psychological researchers on attachment have found, make it easier: For us, the key issue here is *the assumption that people's ability to function comfortably in a human group requires explanation. This ability, Ben-Ari is assuming, is not a universal, it is a peculiarity of Japanese culture and society.* In other words, Ben-Ari **does** have a sort of theory of universals and non-universals, a theory in which the cultural trait of being comfortable as part of a group requires explanation. Unfortunately, this rather truncated theory is implicit, unlabelled, and undiscussed, although Ben-Ari's ethnographic account is actually quite sensitive and full of empathy. Ben Ari's lack of explicit attention to the universals problem is not idiosyncratic but typical of contemporary English-language ethnography.

Without an explicit theory of universals, ethnographic research foci have an arbitrary quality to them. For example, in his widely-respected ethnography of Fulani of Burkina-Faso, the late American anthropologist Paul Riesman asked what Fulani would consider the main goals of a person's life, and answered his question in this manner: ". . . the Fulani see the creation and maintenance of a family as both the main goal of life and expression of success" (Riesman 1991:41). Astutely, Riesman continues: "This would be so obvious as to go without saying by a Sicilian anthropologist, but for a middle-class American imbued with the ideal of individual achievement and independence, the point must be underlined" (pp. 41-2). Sicilians, Riesman assumes, would take for granted the importance of family in a person's life and would presumably not even notice the Fulani goal, let alone feel it required considerable discussion. For them, the desirability of family life would apparently be an unremarked universal. This is not true for Riesman, who attributes to his own American cultural background the fact that he, personally, finds the Fulani attitude towards family notable.

These two examples illuminate how, in fact, ethnographers cope without an explicit theory of universals: they merely keep their conceptions of universality and lack of it implicit and largely unexamined. Typically, ethnographers work by focusing on differences, most often on the differences between their home and their host cultures. As is typical in ethnographic "explanation," various perceived cultural differences are linked to one another and presented as related, as when early childhood experiences are assumed to cause or communicate or at least be continuous with later, equally culturally-ordered experiences. It is probably because most ethnographers have come from rather individual-centered western countries that we generally find, as with both Ben-Ari and Riesman, that it is not individual behavior but group or communal behavior

that appears most worthy of explanation. Obviously, this is a western cultural bias, and such cultural bias has frequently been condemned (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1991). But the corrective to the bias is not generally seen as a solid theory of universals to provide a framework for cultural comparison; instead, the response is usually to condemn past ethnographies for their ethnocentric depiction of the "other," and instead perhaps seek to "empower" the people studied by letting them speak with their "own voices;" and often enough the response is simply to forsake the pursuit of a "scientific," or at least nomothetic theory of culture, relegating ethnographic efforts to mere "texts" belonging to the humanities and not to the social sciences at all, contenting oneself with rich, "thick," but inescapably subjective description/interpretation.

If the absence of a theory of universals renders ethnographic accounts suspect and arbitrary in their range and explanations, why has this weakness not been noticed more frequently? The answer is that the theoretical vacuum resulting from lack of concern with universals has in fact been filled. It has been filled by social (or social-cultural) *constructionism*.

In the English-speaking world, it is sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) who are generally credited with the formative discussion of social constructionism. (While these authors give full credit to the German philosopher of phenomenology Alfred Schutz, Schutz himself is not widely read.) Their version of social constructionism chiefly differs from the "Radical Constructivism" of von Glaserfeld (1991) primarily in that it limits itself to the social rather than to how the individual constructs the world as a whole.[2] Social reality for Berger and Luckmann - and for most English-speaking social scientists, today - is consensual rather than

absolute, constructed and held in common by those who share a particular society, culture, institution, or set of vested interests.

Where do social constructions come from, what are they made of, how do we know them? Interestingly, Berger and Luckmann -- and perhaps most American social science as well -- deliberately avoid this problem of epistemology.[3] As Berger and Luckmann put it (p. 25): "To include epistemological questions concerning the validity of sociological knowledge in the sociology of knowledge is somewhat like trying to push a bus in which one is riding." They certainly understand why an epistemology is needed, for they go on to ask: "How can I be sure, say, of my sociological analysis of American middle-class *mores* in view of the fact that the categories I use for this analysis are conditioned by historically relative forms of thought, that I myself and everything I think is determined by my genes and by my ingrown hostility to my fellowmen, and that, to cap it all, I am myself a member of the American middle class?" (p. 25) But even while acknowledging that these are legitimate and serious problems, they justify their slighting of them by placing these questions in another specialization, in the study of methodology rather than as part of their own deliberately circumscribed field, the sociology of knowledge. Perhaps they were simply being wise, for these epistemological problems remain unresolved, even while social constructionism has become the backbone of much of postmodern/poststructuralist and feminist thought, in North American social science. Neither social constructionists nor their critics (e.g., Holstein and Miller 1993, Reynolds 1993, Turner 1994) have solved the problem of who constructs the brain that is doing the constructing.[4] Epistemologically, therefore, an unexamined social constructionism leads to an endless regression, one compatible with the interpretative goals of a Clifford Geertz, no doubt, and with the deconstructionism of Jacques

Derrida; but incompatible with the goals of those of us who yet have hope of a nomothetic social science.

The argument I have been making here is that both the problems of the arbitrariness of ethnographic focus and the fuzzy regressions of social constructionism are due to a lack of a theory of universals. Let us now cut to the chase: There is a potentially worthy theory of universals (some might term it a privileged "metanarrative"), and it is that of biological evolution. Both the study of cultural differences and the approach of social constructionism are obviously immensely powerful approaches. They are tools, like levers, and like levers require fulcrums. These fulcrums are the universals provided by evolutionary psychology.

Evolutionary psychology sees the human brain as the product of Darwinian evolution. Our psychological traits -- the way we process information, the way we remember some kinds of information better than other kinds, the way we acquire language and other types of socially transmitted information -- are understandable in terms of evolutionary biology, the same framework that biologists apply to all species of plants and animals. Evolutionary psychology contrasts sharply with the simplified version of 1930s learning theory that constitutes the underlying psychological assumptions of the social sciences.[5] Tooby and Cosmides (1992) have argued that the social sciences are underpinned by a "standard model" of largely untrue psychological assumptions. Perhaps the assumption most relevant (to universals and social constructionism) is the very dated idea of the brain as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which "culture" (learning, the environment, experience) can write anything at all. This standard model sees no constraints on learning, which itself is seen as an unproblematic, unitary process. In contrast, evolutionary psychology sees the brain as a

sort of complex kit of tools, of fairly specialized cognitive and emotional adaptations evolved to solve the problems faced by our ancestors. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, the ultimate universals are those of the evolved, adapted brain (Brown 1991, Hejl 1995:297; cf. Talmy 1995:81).

Evolutionary psychology is not a substitute for or rival to social constructionism: it is its justification, its completion, the answer to the questions of what the socially constructed is constructed *of* and *by*. Let us take a beautiful example. Sorry. Let us take the example of beauty.

For most social scientists, beauty and attractiveness are utterly socially constructed. When I mentioned to one of my undergraduate students that I was writing a paper in which I would argue that beauty was a cross-cultural universal, her mouth quite literally dropped open. After all, she had read Naomi Wolf's (1991) popular book, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. She was aware that standards of beauty, even in our own society, have frequently changed historically and that the current craze for extreme thinness is quite recent. She was aware that the same corporations that have whole laboratories dedicated to formulating calorie-dense foodstuffs designed to tempt us to overeat may also be making huge profits selling us weight-loss products and programs. She was aware that, cross-culturally and historically, for women, shaven heads and long hair, artificially elongated necks and ordinary necks, crippled, bound feet and unbound feet, tattooed and scarified faces and clear complexions, have all at one time and place or another been considered "beautiful." The idea of beauty as a universal struck her as preposterous. Obviously, beauty is socially/culturally constructed. This assumption, which permeates the social science literature, is

commonsensical.[6]

From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, however, beauty is indeed a universal. A very extensive literature on mate selection is based on the premiss that we have been selected to prefer partners who provide phenotypic evidence of a good genotype and of ability to provide parental investment. To the extent that we succeed in mating with such partners, we obviously pair our gametes with those carrying "good" genes and increase the likelihood of increasing our genetic representation in the gene pool. What we call "beauty" is largely the product of selection for finding attractive the phenotypic indicators of superior genes and health (see Buss [1999:139-145], Geary [1998: 121-134] for reviews and discussion of the relevant literature). Gangestad and Buss (1993), for example, find that the more a human population is subject to pathogens, the more emphasis it is likely to place on physical attractiveness. Clear skin, regular, symmetrical features, graceful movement and good coordination are universally attractive. For men, a mate's age is crucial -- too young or too old and she is infertile, and so men tend to find women at the most likely age for successful child-bearing and rearing to be the most attractive. For women, parental investment from males is especially important, and women should find indicators of ability to provide such investment -- prestige, social position, wealth, power, strength -- attractive. The literature supporting these claims is powerful and extensive (e.g., Buss 1994, 1999; Geary 1998; Kenrick and Keefe 1992; Manning 1995; Miller 1997; Symons 1995; Townsend 1998) though not undisputed (e.g., Angier 1999).

Fortunately, evolutionary psychology permits us to develop a theory in which beauty is *both* a universal *and* socially constructed. It is true that we are universally concerned with beauty, for evolutionary reasons. It is true

that cultural variation in standards of beauty is constrained by our adapted brains, so that we have a strong tendency to prefer indicators of health; for women's perceptions of male beauty, status is of specific importance; for men's perception of female beauty, it is appropriate age that stands out. As Symons (1979) points out, in no culture are post-menopausal women considered more attractive than pre-menopausal women; in no culture are wrinkles and sags considered as attractive as a smooth, youthful body (Symons 1995). But within rather broad parameters, beauty *is* socially constructed. Our conceptions of beauty are strongly influenced by the appearance of those around us. These conceptions do change over time because they are socially constructed by our evolved brains in interaction with our experience, which in turn is influenced by a host of other factors. Thus, de Garine and Pollock (1995) point out that in cultures in which food is often in short supply, obesity is likely to be considered beautiful; in western society, where food is relatively plentiful and cheap, prestige is accorded to those who resist an obesity that is all too readily acquired. As status is also a factor in our evolved assessments of beauty, it is not surprising that when a society moves from food shortage to food surplus and its elites move from fat to thin, standards of beauty with regard to body shape may also alter.

If time and patience were unlimited, we could discuss other examples of how evolutionary psychology gives rise to a theory both of universals and of social construction. For example, and very briefly, concern with relative standing is a cross-cultural universal because, not just in our own species but across the primate order, higher standing is associated with preferential access to resources (by definition, for some theorists). Primates have therefore been selected to seek higher relative standing. In our own species the pursuit of standing -- of rank and prestige -- are

universals. But how one pursues prestige, how it is conveyed behaviorally and symbolically, are socially constructed and vary widely with time and place and may have considerable consequences for socioeconomic development (Barkow 1989). We could easily make similar arguments for envy, for aggression, for children's play, for the mother-infant relationship, for kinship, and so forth. A host of traits are at once universals and socially constructed.

We might wish to distinguish between universals directly associated with the human brain, that is, universals having to do with the shared cognitive and emotional characteristics of our species; and universals of a higher order that almost invariably are generated by the interaction of human beings with our species-specific psychology. For example, marriage and kinship systems are universals of the second order -- they depend on but do not reduce to emotional/cognitive universals.

The ideas presented here are merely a preliminary sketch. What would we have, were they to be developed into a full-fledged theory of universals and social constructionism? Why, we would have a theory of human nature and culture. Such a theory would vastly simplify the business of ethnography and of cultural comparison. Already the young field of evolutionary psychology has given us the beginnings of such a theory, one able at least to help us understand the nature of universals. Ultimately, it may provide the framework that permits the unification of the human sciences.

ENDNOTES

1. Many anthropologists have simply given up on the idea of a social *science*, that is, of a predictable and lawful discipline. For some, almost any category, particularly one involving a claim to universality, would involve the "modernist" sin of "essentialism." For discussion, see the contributors to Clifford and Marcus (1986), or see Whittaker (1992:112). For anthropologists who take an extreme cultural relativist position, ethnography can only achieve rich and detailed description and interpretation (see Geertz, 1973, 1983). Similarly, for Rosaldo (1984), "objective" knowledge is impossible because the ethnographer's understanding can only reflect his or her *position* in terms of background and life experience. For discussion and criticism of the extreme relativist position, see Edgerton (1992:26-29) or Spiro (1984).

2. Though Berger and Luckmann (1991:113) do discuss "symbolic universes" that encompass other symbolic, constructed domains of understanding in a "symbolic totality", they are concerned with these chiefly insofar as they help to legitimate more social domains.

3. Many researchers believe that social constructions tend to reflect the interests of the powerful.

4. This problem has not been entirely ignored. See, for example, the interesting work by psychologist Bradd Shore (1996).

5. Basic texts on evolutionary psychology include Barkow (1989), Barkow, Tooby, and Cosmides (1992), Buss (1999), Dennett (1995), and Geary (1998).

6. The social sciences are now lagging behind popular culture in their unswerving adherence to social constructionism. A recent popular book addresses approximately the same readership as did the *Beauty Myth* but from the perspective of evolutionary psychology. Nancy Etcoff's (1999) *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty*, accepts evolutionary psychology's data and theory regarding female sexual attractiveness. She argues that this attractiveness is a form of power which should be prized rather than denigrated by feminists.

REFERENCES CITED

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1991. "Writing Against Culture." Pp. 137-62 in Recapturing Anthropology. Working in the Present, edited by R. G. Fox. Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press.

Angier, Nancy. 1999. Woman: An Intimate Geography. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Barkow, Jerome H. 1989. Darwin, Sex, and Status: Biological Approaches to Mind and Culture. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Barkow,Jerome H., Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby (Eds.). 1992. The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture. Oxford University
Press, New York.

Ben-Ari, Eyal. 1996. "From Mothering to Othering: Organization, Culture, and Nap Time in a Japanese Day-Care Center." Ethos 24:136-64.

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. The Social Construction of Reality. London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press.

Brown, Donald E. 1991. Human Universals. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Buss, David. 1994. The Evolution of Desire. New York: Basic Books.

Buss, David M. 1999. Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Clifford, J., and G.E. Marcus (Eds.). 1986. Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. Berkeley: University of California Press.

de Garine, Igor, and Nancy J. Pollock, eds. 1995. Social Aspects of Obesity. Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers.

Dennett, Daniel C. 1995. Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Edgerton, Robert B. 1992. Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony. New York: The Free Press.

Etcoff, Nancy L. 1999. Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty. New York: Doubleday.

Gangestad, Steven W., and David M. Buss. 1993. "Pathogen Prevalence and Human Mate Preferences." Ethology and Sociobiology 14 (2):89-96.

Geary, David C. 1998. Male, Female: The Evolution of Human Sex Differences. Washington, DC.: American Psychological Association.
Geertz, Clifford. 1973. The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays. New York: Basic Books.

Geertz, Clifford. 1983. Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology. New York: Basic Books.

Hejl, Peter M. 1995. "Autopoiesis or Co-Evolution? Reconceptualizing the Relationship Between Individuals and Societies." Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropogie 4:294-314.

Holstein, James A., and Gale Miller, eds. 1993. Reconsidering Social Constructionism: Debates in Social Problems Theory. Hawthorne, New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Manning, J. T. 1995. "Fluctuating Asymmetry and Body Weight in Men and Women: Implications for Sexual Selection." Ethology and Sociobiology 16:145-54.

Miller, Geoffrey. 1997. "How mate choice shaped human nature: A review of sexual selection and human evolution." Pp. 87-130 in Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology, edited by C. Crawford, and D. Krebs. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Rosaldo, Renato. 1984. "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage: On the Cultural Force of Emotions." Pp. 175-185 in Text, Play and Story, edited by E. Branner. Washington, DC: Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society.

Reynolds, Lawrence T. 1993. Interactionism: Exposition and Critique. Dix Hills, N.Y.: General Hall.

Riesman, Paul. 1992. First, Find Your Child a Good Mother. Rutgers, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

Shore, B. 1996. Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Spiro, Melford. 1984. Some Reflections on Cultural Determinism and Relativism. Pp. 323-346 in Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and

Emotion, edited by R. A. LeVine, and R. Shweder. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press.

Symons, Donald. 1979. The Evolution of Human Sexuality. New York: Oxford University Press.

---. 1995. "Beauty Is in the Adaptations of the Beholder: The Evolutionary Psychology of Human Female Sexual Attractiveness." Pp. 80-118 in Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture, edited by Paul R. Abramson, and Steven D. Pinkerton. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Talmy, Leonard. 1995. "The Cognitive Culture System." The Monist 78:80-114.

Tooby, J., and L. Cosmides. 1992. "The Psychological Foundations of Culture." Pp. 19-136 in The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture, edited by Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby. New York: Oxford University Press.

Townsend, John Marshall. 1998. What Women Want-- What Men Want: Why the Sexes Still See Love and Commitment so Differently. New York: Oxford University.

Turner, Stephen. 1994. The Social Theory of Practices: Tradition, Tacit Knowledge, and Presuppositions. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.

von Glasersfeld, Ernst. 1991. "Knowing Without Metaphysics: Aspects of the Radical Constructivist Position." Pp. 12-29 in Research and

Reflexivity, edited by Frederick Steier. London: Sage.

Whittaker, Elvi. 1992. Culture: The reification under siege. Studies in Symbolic Interaction 13, 107-117.

Wolf, Naomi. 1991. The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women. New York: W. Morrow.