Absolutism, Relativism, and Universalism in the Study of Human Behavior

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Man is the measure of all things: of things that are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not. [Protagoras (ca. 480-411 B.C.), Fr. 1 (Trans., Wheelwright, 1960)]

There is a doctrine of Protagoras in which he said that man is the measure of all things. He was saying, in other words, that each individual’s private impression is absolutely true. But if that position is adopted, then it follows that the same thing is and is not, that it is both good and bad, and similarly for other contributions; because, after all, a given thing will seem beautiful to one group of people and ugly to another, and by the theory in question each of the conflicting appearances will be ‘the measure’ ” [Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), Metaphysica, 1062b 13 (Trans., Wheelwright, 1960)]

Vérité en-deçà des Pyrénées, erreur au-delà (There are truths on this side of the Pyrenees which are falsehoods on the other.) —BLAISE PASCAL, 1623-1662 (Translated by G. Hofstede in his book Culture’s consequences: International differences in work-related values)

De gustibus non disputandum (Latin: “There is no disputing about tastes.”)

(What is truly true (beautiful, good) within one intentional world . . . is not necessarily universally true (beautiful, good) in every intentional world; and, what is not necessarily true (beautiful, good) in every intentional world may be truly true (beautiful, good) in this one or in that one. (Shweder, 1990, p. 3).

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Few problems have received more attention, or have generated more controversy, in our intellectual history than the argument about which is the most appropriate perspective in the analysis of human nature: Can we, as observers of nature, detach ourselves from our surroundings, our own culture, and form some objective understanding of who we are and what we do (as Aristotle seems to suggest), or are the conceptions and explanations that we generate about ourselves inextricably bound by our own experiences (i.e., we are, in Protagoras’ terms, “the measure of all things”)?

This argument has been framed in different terms, and described with different labels over the centuries (e.g., objectivism and absolutism versus subjectivism and relativism), but certain basic ideas seem to underlie much of the discussion. In this chapter we will present briefly some of the ideas that are found at the core of this debate, and will attempt to show how this controversy may inform the investigation of sociopsychological phenomena from different theoretical perspectives.

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**TWO DIMENSIONS OF THE INQUIRY INTO HUMAN NATURE**

The process of examining and explaining our own nature is obviously an enormously complicated enterprise. However, there are two particular aspects of this enterprise that are especially relevant to the present discussion. The first aspect concerns the question of whether or not our attempts to explain psychological processes assume, and, even more important, emphasize the possibility that there are substantial commonalities in the psychological makeup, experience, and behavior of all human beings. We often refer to this general idea as the assumption of the *psychic unity* of humankind (e.g., Boas, 1911; Shweder, 1990), and to commonalities in human experience and behavior as *psychological universals*.

The second aspect of our inquiry concerns the extent to which we assume that human beings cannot be studied in a vacuum, and that behavior can only be understood in the context in which it occurs, within the framework of a certain social environment, and, more broadly, within a culture. Modern psychology generally favors research that attempts to extricate people from their social environment in order to get at the "core" of human nature—whatever that may be. Increasingly, however, this position, which is sometimes referred to as the "mainstream" view, has been criticized by advocates of alternative perspectives, some of which we will examine later in this chapter.

At first glance, it may appear that these two dimensions of the inquiry into human nature are similar. After all, it could be argued that if we assume the psychic unity of humankind, then we necessarily ignore the role of culture in psychological explanation. That is not necessarily so, however. Figure 1 shows that different positions on the two dimensions may lead to competing perspectives in psychological inquiry. In fact, the three dominant orientations in psychology today differ significantly from each other with respect to these dimensions.

Position 1 in the figure emerges if we assume that we should not look for universals in human behavior, and that the cultural context in which behavior occurs is irrelevant to our inquiry. This approach concentrates almost exclusively on the uniqueness of individuals, and leads to an orientation that is generally incompatible with scientific activity, which generally focuses on the systematic explanation of patterns of events or occurrences. For this reason, we will concentrate on the other three positions that emerge from this analysis.

**ABSOLUTISM**

Position 2 represents what we earlier called the "mainstream" orientation in modern psychology. It rests on the broad principle of psychic unity; in other words, it assumes that there is an underlying common ("true") nature to all human beings that can be identified, described, and used to explain the products of their activity. The fundamental assumption about the possibility of absolute truths is the reason why this position is occasionally referred to as "absolutism."

Scientists working from this position assume implicitly, and frequently explicitly, that there is a "true" psychological nature, which can be "discovered" if we manage to separate the participants in our research programs from the cultural and environmental forces that interact with their behavior. For this reason, much research in "mainstream" psychology aims at finding explanations for psychological phenomena by eliminating the environment or context within which they occur. An absolutist might view the colorful variations we call "cultures" as nothing more than a thin veneer that masks basic human truths that transcend both time...
and context. The idea here, of course, is that "true" human nature will emerge when external, "nuisance" variables, such as cultural norms and expectations, ideologies, and so on, are sufficiently removed. As a result, this approach favors laboratory studies that minimize context and are low in realism.

RELATIVISM

Absolutism has come under attack in recent years by many social and behavioral scientists, and by philosophers of science. These critics have argued that the search for absolute or fixed truths in the natural world is a futile endeavor, and is certainly unlikely to lead to any great insights about the human mind or human behavior. Instead, the critics suggest, it may be much more appropriate to concentrate on describing human beings as they exist and function within their sociocultural environment—an orientation that we may generally refer to as relativism.

This perspective has many faces, and has appeared in somewhat different forms in a variety of scientific disciplines. For example, work in American anthropology earlier in this century focused on the interpretation of the lives of various groups exclusively within the context of their own culture and modes of thought. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of this kind of thinking in an interdisciplinary field that is known as "cultural psychology" (Shweder, 1990).

Within psychology, "social constructionism" is a theoretical approach that has much in common with relativism. The general theme in this approach challenges the notion of fixed and universal truths in the explanation of human nature. Rather, it assumes that humans seek meaning, and construct, rather than discover, reality. Thus, explanations of human behavior are at least, in part, determined by the sociocultural and historical forces that impinge upon, interact with, and are invented by, the very people who formulate them (Gergen, 1982). Consequently, any attempt to generalize a particular psychological explanation to all human beings ultimately reflects only categories of thought that are indigenous to the scientists' own culture. One might even characterize this approach as "scientific isolationism," in the sense that what is scientifically valid in one culture is not at all intended to be valid elsewhere (although it may be valid elsewhere, either coincidentally or accidentally). Note that from a relativistic standpoint even what is considered to be good and proper "science" may vary widely. One culture's complete reliance on the type of science that includes nuclear physics and almost miraculous surgical procedures may be equivalent to another culture's "science" that includes tea-leaf reading and animal sacrifice.

UNIVERSALISM

Many psychologists interested in the dynamic interaction between human beings and their environment have, over the years, advocated yet another perspective—one that may be called universalism. This perspective assumes that it should, in theory, be possible to establish broad commonalities in human nature that reflect a deeper reality than the scientists' own conceptual categories. At the same time, advocates of this perspective agree with the relativists about the importance of culture, but insist that the search for psychological universals does not necessarily have to be conducted in a vacuum or out of context. In other words, they propose that it is possible to develop an approach to the study of human nature that emphasizes the importance of psychological universals, and is, at the same time, sensitive to cultural context. The universalist, like the absolutist, may view culture as a veneer that masks essential and eternal truths.
comparisons of various phenomena across cultures often assume that psychological universals take a variety of forms, depending upon the constraints, requirements, and specific attributes of different cultures (Lonner, 1980). For example, Lonner (and many others) considers aggression (i.e., behavior that is intended to harm another person) to be a universal, because war and violent conflict have been present throughout the recorded history of our species (at an approximate rate of 2.6 wars per year). However, aggression may appear in different forms and circumstances in various societies: as ritualistic dance in one, as barroom brawls in another, and as verbal shouting and jousting in yet another. Universalism is an approach that formally seeks convergences and similarities in various human phenomena across cultures, while at the same time avoiding the shortsighted assumption that any given phenomenon occurs in exactly the same form in every occasion in which it is observed.

An important recent book by an anthropologist, Donald E. Brown, tackles the topic of universals (Brown, 1991). This well-written and well-researched book gives an impressive amount of information about human universals and how scholars over the years have grappled with the problem of universalism versus relativism. For the student interested in studying the topic further, this is the book that is a “must read.”

As an illustration of the perspectives on human nature outlined above, we will present three different views of intimacy, which is generally considered to be one of the major forms of social interaction.

THE ANALYSIS OF INTIMACY

Intimacy cannot be understood as a single behavior. Rather, it is a psychological dimension (i.e., a dimension of meaning), along which may vary many particular forms of behavior and human communication. The three perspectives that we have been discussing, however, approach the study of intimacy in very different ways. What follows is a plausible theoretical analysis of intimacy from each perspective.

An Absolutist Perspective on Intimacy

The basic ingredient of this approach is, of course, reductionism, that is, an emphasis on reducing a natural phenomenon to its most basic, and, ideally, essential components. By observing many people in North America, with different personalities, interests, and value systems, researchers in this area have concluded that a key process in the experience of intimacy is mutually rewarding self-disclosure. That means that intimacy often involves, among other things, the closeness that people feel when they reveal very private thoughts to others, and learn what others feel and think about highly personal issues.

Once this key process is identified, scientists concentrate primarily on the causes and consequences of intimacy on very different people. For example, they ask questions such as, “How do people get others to self-disclose?” or, “Do we reveal more about ourselves after we hear another person self-disclose?” The particular identities of the persons involved in these exchanges—exactly who is disclosing personal information to whom, and in what circumstances—have little, if any, significance in this approach. Instead, it is generally assumed that if consistent answers to questions like the ones asked above are found for different people and circumstances, something about intimacy as a psychological process that applies to all human beings will have been discovered.

A Relativist Perspective on Intimacy

It is exactly questions about the identities of the participants in the process, their own ways of interpreting what happens during the interaction, that is of primary importance in a relativist analysis of this phenomenon. In other words, relativists object to the reductionism that is employed by researchers who believe that it is possible to isolate a psychological process from the particular circumstances that surround its occurrence.

A relativist account of this process might, for example, point to various cultures where intimate relationships (e.g., marriages) are arranged by the families of the people involved, and where the interaction of the two persons is constantly guided by convention and cultural norms that prohibit a great deal of disclosure of deep feelings between mates. In the Western world, such interaction may appear to lack spontaneity, and even intimacy, considering the description provided earlier. Yet, are we prepared to say that people in cultures that restrict self-disclosure are not capable of experiencing intimacy?
A relativist analysis of intimacy might also argue that even in situations and cultures where all the key ingredients appear to be present, what people often experience may in fact be very different from what "objective" science believes they do. Consider, for example, the relationship between Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, and his wife Penelope, in the great epic poem by Homer, The Odyssey (ca. 8th century B.C.). Following the fall of Troy, Odysseus overcame some 20 years of incredible hardship to join his wife. Both husband and wife showed remarkable patience and commitment to each other. When they finally reunited, they engaged in a great deal of self-disclosure and sexual intimacy. By our modern standards, Penelope and Odysseus seem to have experienced intimacy and love. Yet, one may well ask if what these two people felt in their own time, within the context of their own culture, could possibly be the same as what modern mates experience in even vaguely similar circumstances. In fact, there is considerable historical evidence suggesting that feelings toward a member of one’s family, in Homer’s time, were not as personalized as they are today in the Western world. Instead, people often experienced a more "collective" love, that incorporated feelings toward a particular person, and feelings toward one’s whole household (or oikos, in Ancient Greek). In other words, an analysis of intimacy from a relativist perspective would emphasize the need to understand how people construct and give meaning to this psychological experience in their own cultural and historical context.

A Universalist Perspective on Intimacy

Many psychologists who are interested in the search for universal processes, yet are sensitive to the importance of cultural context, would begin by noting that the notion of intimacy appears in many cultures in one form or another. For example, most cultures have some concept of friendship, interpersonal closeness, and love. While acknowledging that the context in which these notions appear is crucial, a universalist approach would attempt to identify common elements associated with the experience of intimacy.

This approach can also address some of the concerns expressed by social constructionism, reviewed earlier, regarding the historical and cultural limitations of psychological explanation. For example, while there may be many culturally-shaped ways of thinking about how people behave toward each other, there is not necessarily an infinite number of such ways. In addition, the particular ways in which people interact, and interpret interaction, in any given culture may not be haphazard.

Adamopoulos (1988), for example, has proposed that all behavior among people (interpersonal behavior) may ultimately, and in a very general way, be understood as the exchange of resources (see also Foa & Foa, 1980). Thus, when a person kisses another, she may be offering a resource of love to the other. In exchange, the other person may also offer love, in the form of, say, the statement "I love you." The particular behaviors, or forms of exchanging the resource of love, may differ significantly from culture to culture (e.g., a person may respond by offering flowers in one culture, while in another culture a person may respond by smashing one hundred dishes and dancing for two hours without a break!). The important thing is that in all these cases people are exchanging resources.

In the course of such exchanges, people may sometimes pay special attention to the identity and particular characteristics of the other person. Furthermore, the interaction may occasionally involve exchanges that are relatively concrete or material (as opposed to abstract or symbolic); for example, acts involving physical contact, or financial, material, or emotional support. In such cases, human beings may be experiencing intimacy. The specific forms that these exchanges take may be extremely different—even unrecognizable—across cultures. What is important is that human beings will develop the concept of intimacy, broadly defined, under certain conditions. The specification of these conditions is one of the major goals of the universalist perspective.

A CONCLUDING COMMENT

This chapter has introduced a number of philosophical concepts that have frequently been the source of much discussion and argument by scholars who study human behavior. We have briefly summarized three viable positions that have been adopted by those who seek to understand why humans behave the way they do:

1. The absolutist position, which treats cultural variation as a "nuisance" in attempts to establish iron-clad “laws” of human behavior.
2. The relativist position, which gives highest priority to the context in which behavior takes place, and which rejects reductionism.

3. The universalist position, which respects the relativists' views, but which also makes room for both culture-common phenomena and some underlying principles that may govern human behavior.

Two of these positions are somewhat related to the discussion of the "culture-general" versus "culture-specific" dichotomy described in the introductory chapter. There are complications in taking one side or the other; life isn't that simple. The absolutist position was also mentioned in the introductory chapter as a position that we think is untenable, or at least shortsighted. Readers, especially those who enjoy dabbling with interesting philosophy of science concepts, may find it helpful at this time to review the introductory chapter.

We also want to point out that limited space restricted a discussion of these ideas in the form of many concrete examples. We chose to show how one concept, intimacy, can be analyzed from the perspectives of absolutism, relativism, and universalism. However, any psychological concept that implies human variation (and that includes just about everything psychologists study) can be analyzed from these three perspectives. In fact, probably every topic in this book can be discussed along the lines presented in this chapter. Certainly an understanding of all the topics in the chapters to follow in this section could be aided by a review of the basic perspectives we have discussed in this brief chapter.

REFERENCES


