

Does the concept of the person vary cross-culturally?

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Our concern in this essay is with other people's conceptions of the person and ideas about the self. Our aim is to interpret a widespread mode of social thought often referred to as concrete, undifferentiated, context-specific, or occasion-bound thinking, a mode of social thought culminating in the view that specific situations determine the moral character of a particular action, that the individual person *per se* is neither an object of importance nor inherently worthy of respect, that the individual as moral agent ought not be distinguished from the social status (s)he occupies; a view that, indeed, the individual as an abstract *ethical and normative* category is not to be acknowledged.

Our aim, we wish to emphasize, is to interpret an alien mode of social thought. Thus, before we look at the person concepts of such peoples as the Oryya, Chhaku-Chhama, and Halmese we feel obliged to consider a more fundamental question: In what terms should we understand the understandings of other peoples and compare those understandings with our own?

For over 100 years anthropologists have tried to make sense of alien idea systems. For over 80 years anthropologists have been confronted with all sorts of incredible and often unbelievable beliefs, as well as all sorts of incredible and often unbelievable accounts of other people's beliefs. A review of the history of the anthropological attempt to translate the meaning of oracles and witchcraft, wandering and reincarnated souls, magical "therapies," unusual ideas about procreation, and all the other exotic ideational formations that have come their way would reveal, we believe, a tendency to rely on one of three interpretive models for rendering intelligible the apparent diversity of human understandings. These three interpretive models can be referred to as *universalism, evolutionism, and relativism*.

There is a fourth model; perhaps it should be named *confusionism*. (Confusionism) calls for the honest confession that one fails to comprehend the ideas of another. We will not have much to say about confusionism) in this essay. We would, however, like to confess, right here, that not infrequently we are left in a muddled condition, especially when we are told, without exception, such incredible things as, e.g., the Hongo-Hongo believe that their sorcerers are bushrats, their minds are

located in their knees, and their father is a tree, or when we read, e.g., that the Gink-Chamu cannot distinguish between the products of their imagination and the objects of their perceptions.

Many anthropological accounts lack intelligibility. One does not know what to make of them; whether to treat them as accurate reports about the confused and/or erroneous beliefs of others or dismiss them as bad translations; whether to search for common understandings hidden behind superficial idiomatic differences; or whether, alternatively, to generously assume that the ideas of the other form a coherent system derived from premises, or related to purposes, that the anthropologist has failed to appreciate. Although we will not have much to say about confusionism) we would like to discuss, however briefly, the three other deeply entrenched models of anthropological interpretation: *universalism, evolutionism, and relativism*.

Universalists are committed to the view that intellectual diversity is more apparent than real, that exotic idea systems, alien at first blush, are really more like our own than they initially appear.

Evolutionists are committed to the view that alien idea systems not only are truly different from our own, but are different in a special way; viz., other people's systems of ideas are really incipient and less adequate stages in the development of our own understandings.

Relativists, in contrast, are committed to the view that alien idea systems, while fundamentally different from our own, display an internal coherency which, on the one hand, can be understood but, on the other hand, cannot be judged.

The universalist opts for homogeneity. "Apparently different but really the same" is his slogan. Diversity is sacrificed to equality; equal because not different! The evolutionist, however, opts for hierarchy. Diversity is not only tolerated, it is expected, and it is ranked. "Different but unequal" is the slogan of the evolutionist. The relativist, in contrast, is a pluralist. "Different but equal" is his slogan; equality and diversity his "democratic" aspiration.

Universalism, evolutionism, and relativism: interpretive rules of thumb

Universalists, evolutionists, and relativists all try to process information about alien idea systems following rules of thumb peculiar to their interpretive model of choice. Indeed, the universalist, evolutionist, and relativist each has his way of processing data to help him arrive at his desired interpretation.

UNIVERSALISM

Confronted with the apparent diversity of human understandings, there are two powerful ways to discover universals in one's data: (a) emphasize general likenesses and overlook specific difference ("the higher-order generality rule"); and/or (b) examine only a subset of the evidence ("the data attenuation rule").

1. *The higher-order generality rule.* Osgood's (1964) investigations of universals in connotative meaning illustrate the application of the "higher-order generality rule". Emphasizing the way things are alike, and ignoring the ways they are different, Osgood discovers that all peoples appraise objects and events in terms of three universal dimensions, viz. good vs. bad (evaluation), strong vs. weak (potency), and fast vs. slow (activity). The universals are discovered, in part, by moving to a level of discourse so general that "God" and "Ice Cream" are descriptively equivalent; both are perceived as good, strong, and active.

The tendency to overlook specific difference and emphasize general likeness is ubiquitous among universalists. In Levi-Strauss' mind (1963, 1966, 1969a, 1969b), for example, the distinction between, e.g., voiced/unvoiced (in phonetics), raw/cooked (in the culinary arts), and sexual reproduction/asexual reproduction (in the Oedipus Myth), and organy/endogamy (in marriage systems) are all rendered equivalent, each an example of a purported human tendency to think in terms of binary oppositions (is this a trivially true logical claim, or a false empirical claim?). For ethologists and sociobiologists it is "conversational" (in human primates) and "barking" (e.g., in canine folk) that are voiced in the same breath, each an example of a universal "signaling" function of communication systems [What does a cow say? Moo! What does a sheep say? Baal! What does a person say?], while for others it is "marriage" and "pair-bonding" whose general affinities are made much of at the expense of potentially significant grounds for divorce [whatever happened to the "sanctity" of marriage?].

2. *The data attenuation rule.* Not infrequently, the discovery of a universal is the product of a sophisticated process of data restriction and data attenuation. Berlin and Kay (1969), for example, discover universal prototypes for the definition of color categories, and a universal sequence for the emergence of a color lexicon. Their study begins with two applications of the data attenuation rule. First, "color" classification is equated with the task of partitioning a perceptual space, pre-defined in terms of hue, saturation, and intensity (thus, attenuating the referential range of the "color" concept as understood by, at least, some cultures (Conklin 1955)). Secondly, all color categories whose linguistic expression fails to meet certain formal criteria (e.g., superordination, monolexic unity) are eliminated from consideration. The consequence of the application of these two data attenuation rules is that 95% of the world's expressions for color and most of the world's color categories are dropped from the investigation.

A second illustration of the data attenuation rule can be found in Nerlove and Romney's (1967) work on universal cognitive processes underlying the formation of "sibling" terminological systems. A major finding of their study is the universal disinclination of the human mind to process disjunctive categories (e.g., it is rare to have the same "sib-

ling" term apply distinctively to both a younger sister and an older brother). Yet Nerlove and Romney consider only one portion of the referential range of "sibling terms" (nuclear family referents). Secure in the conviction that nuclear family referents are expandable prototypes, they decide not to examine the application in many cultures of "sibling" terms to such (disjunctive?) kin types as "cousins," etc.

3. *Universalism's benefits and costs.* There are benefits and costs to the adoption of a universalist stance. A major benefit is the thrill of recognition [My (God! They're just like me after all!)] that comes with the identification of a significant point of resemblance. An Azande consults the chicken oracle (see Evans-Pritchard 1937). "Will I be killed on my journey to Z?" The chicken is administered a magical "poison". If the chicken dies it means "Yes"; if it lives, "No". The chicken lives. A second chicken is consulted. This time the chicken's survival is taken as a caution to stay at home. But, the chicken dies. Reassured, our Azande goes on the journey to Z. He is murdered en route! Do the Azande doubt the veracity of their oracle? Not! Instead they explain away the event in one of two ways. Counter-witchcraft was being practiced at the time of consultation, or perhaps women, standing too close, had polluted the consultation grounds. Should one fail to notice within these practices some of the methodological concepts of the Western applied scientist (?), viz., reliability checks (double consultations), interfering background variables (counter-witchcraft), and measurement error (pollution). The idioms differ, but they are easily overlooked in the light of the recognition that the Azande's search for truth relies on principles not unlike our own.

Universalism, however, has its difficulties. All too often the pursuit after a "higher-order generality" is like searching for the "real" article by divesting it of its leaves (Wittgenstein 1968, paragraph 64). The "higher-order" sphere is all too often a higher-order of vacuity, the air gets very thin.

Consider, for example, the concept of "justice" ("fairness" or "equity"). Stated as a higher-order generality ("treat like cases alike and different cases differently"), "justice" is a universal concept. Appropriate, however, the lauded emptiness of this higher-order formulation. As Hart (1961:155) remarks: the abstract concept of justice

cannot afford any definite guide to conduct . . . This is so because any set of human beings will resemble each other in some respects and differ from each other in others and, until it is established what resemblances and differences are relevant, 'treat like cases alike' must remain an empty form.

For example, Americans deny 10-year-olds the right to vote, enter into contracts, etc. This exclusion, however, does not violate our abstract concept of justice. Quite the contrary, it indicates that we subscribe to the belief that in certain crucial respects, children are different

from adults (e.g., they lack the information and judgment to make informed decisions, etc.). From a cross-cultural and historical perspective there have been many places in the world where, given received wisdom and without relinquishing the "higher-order" concept of justice, the difference between male and female, Jew and Christian, Brahman and untouchable, Black and White, has seemed as obvious to others as the difference between an adult and a child seems to us. Unfortunately, all these concrete, culture-rich ("thick" if you will; see Quertz 1973) variations in the way people treat each other get bleached out of focus in the "higher-order" description of "justice" as an abstract universal. Universality of agreement wanes as we move from higher-order abstract principles to substantive cases.

Application of the "data attenuation rule" has its costs, as well. These costs are clearly understood by Berlin and Kay (1969:160) who note:

... it has been argued, to our minds convincingly, that to appreciate the full cultural significance of color words it is necessary to appreciate the full range of meanings, both referential and cognitive, and not restrict oneself arbitrarily to hue, saturation, and brightness. We thus make no claim — in fact we specifically deny — that our treatment of the various color terminologies presented here is an ethnographically revealing one.

The path traveled by the universalist is rarely the one that leads to ethnographic illumination; only occasionally does it lead to a powerful, context-rich universal generalization. However, when it does it should not be scorned.

EVOLUTIONISM

Confronted with the apparent diversity of human understandings, evolutionists rely on a powerful three-stage rule of thumb for ordering that variety into a sequence of lower to higher (Primitive to advanced, incipient to elaborated) forms; viz., (a) locate a normative model (e.g., the canons of propositional calculus, Bayes' rules of statistical inference, Newton's laws of motion, Rawls' theory of justice, Mill's rules for experimental reasoning, etc.); (b) treat the normative model as the endpoint of development; (c) describe diverse beliefs and understandings as steps on an ideational Jacob's ladder progressively moving in the direction of the normative endpoint (see, e.g., Pagel 1966; Kuhlberg 1969, 1971).

The normative model defines what it is to have an adequate understanding (e.g., given that $P \rightarrow Q$ it is more adequate to conclude $\sim Q \rightarrow \sim P$ than to conclude $\sim P \rightarrow \sim Q$). Variations in thought are ranked in terms of their degree of approximation to the endpoint. The range is one of subsumption, progress, and hierarchical inclusion. Some forms of understanding are described as though they were incipient forms of other understandings, and those other forms of understanding are described as though they can do everything the incipient forms can

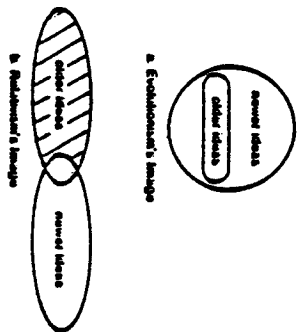


Figure 6.1. Evolutionism's and relativism's image of relationship between historically sequenced ideas (adapted from Feyerabend 1975:177-8)

do plus more (see Figure 6.1a); post-Copernican astronomy replaces pre-Copernican astronomy — experimental logic (Mill's laws of agreement and difference) replaces magical thinking (Frazer's laws of contagion and similarity). If the subsumed, less adequate form of understanding can also be time-dated, i.e., linked to early periods in history and/or childhood, so much the better.

Evolutionism has its appeal. For one thing, it permits the existence of variety. Instead of searching for "higher-order" equivalences it takes variety and difference at its face value (and tries to assign it a rank). Secondly, it does provide a yardstick (the normative model) for talking about progress. The vocabulary of the primitive vs. modern, adequate vs. inept, better vs. worse, adaptive vs. maladaptive, is highly "developed" in the evolutionist literature.

Evolutionism, however, has its pitfalls. There is no normative model for many domains of social thought — no way of saying whether one form of understanding is better or worse than another. Which is better? A kinship system where older and younger brothers are terminologically distinguished, or one where the distinction is not encoded? The mind boggles at the evolutionary presumption of the question. Which is better? A policy for allocating resources based on the principle "to each equal amounts" or one based on the principle "to each according to his work" (or "to each according to his needs"?). There seems to be no general answer (see Perelman 1963).

There is a second difficulty with the evolutionary model, viz., the problem of "presentism." "Presentism" is the tendency to perceive the ideas of others through the filter of one's own current concerns. This pattern of perception is diagrammed in Figure 6.1b (see Feyerabend 1975). It is all too easy to unwittingly rewrite (and distort) the historical and ontogenetic record on others' ideas, dropping out or overlooking those problems, ideas, and principles which are no longer of contemporary concern. This is especially true when one's search

through the ideas of others is guided by a contemporary normative model. But, consider the possibility that our ideas have succeeded the ideas of others, not through a process of subsumption, betterment, and advance, but rather, merely by "giving up" on the problems, principles, and concepts of our ancestors (see the hatched-in area of Figure 6.1b). "Presentism" obscures the historical record, making it appear our ideas can do everything the ideas of our predecessors could do, plus more, when all we may have done is shifted our field of interest and altered the questions to be answered.

RELATIVISM

Confronted with the apparent diversity of human understandings, relativists seek to preserve the integrity of the differences and establish the co-equality of the variegated "forms of life." Relativists typically process evidence according to two rules of thumb: (a) the "contextualization rule" and (b) the "principle of arbitrariness."

1. *The contextualization rule.* A primary goal of the relativist is to seek, and display, more and more information about the details of other peoples' objectives, premises, presuppositions, standards, knowledge, meanings, etc. [the famous "native's point of view"]; so much detail that the ideas and conduct of others come to make sense given the "context" (premises, standards, etc.). Thus, for example, Benedict (1946), in her classic analysis of Japanese culture, takes bits and pieces of Japanese conduct in World War II, their lack of respect for national sovereignty (e.g., the invasion of China and attack on Pearl Harbor), the suicide bombings, the "mistreatment" of American prisoners of war, etc., and places them in a conceptual framework (the Japanese understanding of the advantages and necessity of "taking one's proper place" in a domestic, national, and international hierarchy of individual, groups, and nations), a conceptual framework within which "imperialistic expansionism" is re-described as an obvious remedy for international anarchy and the "atrocities" of the camps are re-described as a valorous contempt for materialism and scorn of "damaged goods".

2. *The principle of arbitrariness.* A closely related goal of the relativist is to show that equally rational folk can look out on the "same" world and yet arrive at different understandings; the relativist must find a way for reason to leave us a free choice. To the extent that no rule of logic and no law of nature dictates what is proper or necessary for us to believe or value, that is, to the extent there is an element of "arbitrariness" or "free-choice" in our understandings, to that extent reason is consistent with relativism. Socrates may be right that the concept of "truth" implies "one" not many, but there are many points in a cognitive structure where questions of truth and falsity, validity, error, etc., are simply beside the point.

Hence, the passionate interest among relativists in the types of ideas underlying non-rational action, ideas that fall beyond the scope of scientific evaluation, for example, *constitutive presuppositions* (Collingwood 1972) (e.g., "all behavior is motivated by a desire to maximize pleasure and minimize pain"; what could possibly count as a disproof?), *performative utterances* (Austin 1962) (e.g., "You're fired"; "I dub thee . . ."; in such cases the problem of getting one's words to correspond to, or match, reality does not seem to arise) and other *declarative speech acts* (Searle 1979) (e.g., various acts of "definition"), *categorical judgments of value* (e.g., Hempel 1965) (e.g., "Killing is evil" and other avowals or expressions of a commitment to a norm of conduct) and, of course, Pareto's "sentiments" (1935).

Hence, the rejection among relativists of both the "innocent eye" (i.e., "we classify things as we do because that's the way things are") and the "absolute given" (i.e., "we classify things the way we do because that's the way people are") (Goodman 1968; quoted phrases from Volney Steffre: personal communication). For the relativist, knowledge, at its limits, is without foundation; what is of value and importance is a matter of consensus; social "facts" are created not discovered. The world of the relativist is a world where objects and events are not classified together because they are more alike than other things; quite the contrary, the relativist argues, objects and events seem to be alike because they have been classified together (Goodman 1972). And why have those folk classified things together in that way? That, the relativist will retort, "depends on their purposes." And, why do those folk pursue the purposes they pursue? That, the relativist will say, is a question for the historian.

3. *Relativism's benefits and costs.* Relativism, like universalism and evolutionism, has its distinctive benefits and costs. Relativism is consistent with a kind of pluralism or cognitive egalitarianism, a definite benefit, at least for some observers. Relativists provide us with a charitable rendition of the ideas of others, placing those ideas in a framework that makes it easier to credit others, not with confusion, error, or ignorance, but rather with an alternative vision of the possibilities of social life.

Relativism, however, has its problems. Despite its egalitarian intentions, relativism ironically lends support to a world based on intellectual domination and power assertion. The relativist views the understandings of others as self-contained, incommensurate, idealized universes (i.e., "paradigms"); across these universes there is no comparability, no common standard for rational criticism (see, e.g., Rorty 1979). Consequently, if people change idealized worlds (as they do), it can only be explained, by the relativist, in terms of domination, force, or non-rational conversion. And, if two or more peoples should disagree, as they often do, the only means of adjudication is "force of arms" — there is nothing to discuss. When "consensus" is the final

arbitrator of what's real, numbers count, and the powerful and/or the masses have their way.

Kurt Vonnegut, in his novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, points to relativism's second name. Says Vonnegut:

I think of my education sometimes. I went to the University of Chicago for a while after the Second World War. I was a student in the department of anthropology. They taught me that nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting. Shortly before my father died he said to me — "You know you never wrote a story with a villain in it." I told him that was one of the things I learned in school after the war.

An alternative concept of the person: the phenomenon

Any observer of an apparently alien concept, belief, or value must address the question: in what terms shall this understanding be understood? How shall this idea be translated? In this section we describe an apparently alien concept of the person — we introduce the phenomenon of interest. In the next section we discuss universalist, evolutionary, and relativist interpretations of the phenomenon.

Many Western observers of *some* non-Western peoples have made note of a distinctive apprehensive style or mode of social thought; it goes under a variety of cognate descriptions — concrete, non-abstractive, non-generalizing, occasion-bound, context-specific, undifferentiated, situational.

Levy (1973:24) illustrates this "concrete style" of social thinking by reference to one of his Tahitian informants. Poria. Poria is asked to define the word *hau* which Levy glosses abstractly as "friend". Poria, however, responds by enumerating a list of restricted, context-dependent conditions:

A hau — we love each other — I come and get you to go to my house so that we may eat together. Sometimes we go and stroll together on the path. Sometimes I go to your house to eat. Sometimes I want you to help me with my work. Sometimes I go to help you. Sometimes we joke with the girls.

Levy notes that "much of village behavior having to do with personal and social description" is marked by an emphasis on "contexts and cases" (262), and is "oriented to richness of detail . . ." (268). He believes that Poria's thinking and the thinking of most Tahitian villagers involves "a calculus in which terms are understood on the basis of a huge number of contextual factors" (262). Numerous other observers in Africa, Central America, New Guinea, and Central Asia (e.g., Werner and Kaplan 1956; Humer et al. 1966; Pinget 1966; Horton 1967; Giczenfeld 1972; Luria 1976) concur in the observation that certain cultures perceive things (e.g., "an apple found in a store" and "an apple found on the ground") in terms of unique contextual features

(e.g., time, place, contemporaneous objects, co-occurrent events, etc.) while failing to generalize across cases or equate things in terms of cross-contextual invariances (e.g., they're both "apples"; see Price-Williams [1975:281] for an illuminating discussion of concrete thinking). Informants either respond to questions about how things are alike by enumerating the ways in which things are different, or else emphasize the way objects and events fit together in functional complexes or action sequences, without abstracting a common likeness.

This same style of concrete, contextualized, non-abstractive, apparently undifferentiated thinking is found in various cross-cultural reports about the concept of the "person." What is noted is a tendency *not* to abstract out a concept of the inviolate personality free of social role and social relationship — a tendency to not separate out, or distinguish, the individual from the social context.

Geertz (1975:48), for example, asserts that the Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however inerrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.

There is, he notes, in Bali

. . . a persistent and systematic attempt to stylize all aspects of personal existence to the point where anything idiosyncratic, anything characteristic of the individual merely because he is who he is physically, psychologically or biographically, is muted in favor of his assigned place in the continuing, and, so it is thought, never-changing pageant that is Balinese life. It is dramatist personae, not actors, that endure; indeed it is dramatist personae, not actors, that in the proper sense really exist. Physically men come and go — mere incidents in a happen-stance history of no genuine importance, even to themselves. But the masks they wear, the stage they occupy, the parts they play, and most important, the spectacle they mount remain and constitute not the facade but the substance of things, not least the self (Geertz 1975:50).

Twenty years earlier, in a brilliant discussion of morality and personhood, Reid (1955) spoke in similar terms about the Gahuku-Gama of New Guinea. "The Gahuku-Gama conception of man 'does not allow for any clearly recognized distinction between the individual and the status which he occupies'" (255). The Gahuku-Gama do not distinguish an *ethical* category of the person. They fail

. . . to separate the individual from the social context and, ethically speaking, to grant him an intrinsic moral value apart from that which attaches to him as the occupant of a particular status (257).

The Gahuku-Gama recognize "no common measure of ethical content which would serve as a guide for the moral agent in whatever situation he finds himself" (260). For the Gahuku-Gama, people

are not conceived to be equidistant in a moral sense; their value does not reside in themselves as individuals or persons; it is dependent on the position they occupy within a system of inter-personal and inter-group relationships (259).

What this means is that for the Gahuku-Gama being human *per se* "does not necessarily establish a moral bond between individuals, nor does it provide an abstract standard against which all action can be judged... (261). Rather, the "specific context", the particular occasion, "determines the moral character of a particular action" (260). For example, the Gahuku-Gama believe it is wrong to kill members of their own tribe

but it is commendable to kill members of opposed tribes, always provided they are not related to him. Thus, a man is expected to avoid his maternal kinsmen in battle though other members of his own clan have no such moral obligation to these individuals (262).

Dumont's (1970:1, 9) observations on India almost sound redundant. He warns us against "indadvertently attributing the presence of the individual to societies in which he is not recognized", and he points to a relational, contextualized "logic" in which justice consists primarily in "ensuring that the proportions between social functions [and social roles] are adapted to the whole [i.e., society as a primary, not derivative, object]".

Geertz, Read, and Dumont contrast Bali, New Guinea, and India with a Western mode of social thought in which the "individual" is abstracted from the social role, and the moral responsibilities of this abstracted, inviolate individual are distinguished from his/her social responsibilities and duties. Read (1955:280) puts it this way: In the West the moral duties of the person are greater than any of the duties which the individual possesses as a member of society. His moral responsibilities, both to himself and others, transcend the given social context, are conceived to be independent of the social ties which link him to his fellows.

In the West, as Trilling (1972:24) so aptly remarks, the person, in violate in his self-image, supposes that he is an object of interest to his fellow man [and worthy of respect?] not for the reason that he had achieved something notable or been witness to great events but simply because as an individual he is of consequence.

How are we to interpret this widespread mode of social thought in which the individual is not differentiated from the role, and where the person achieves no abstract, context-independent recognition?

The person in context: evolutionary, universalistic, and relativistic interpretations

THE EVOLUTIONARY ACCOUNT

In keeping with their respect for intellectual variety and their desire to rank diverse forms along a scale of progress, evolutionary theorists argue that concrete, occasion-bound thinking (in both the social and non-social domain) is unequally distributed across cultures and can be explained by reference to one of four types of cognitive "deficits," viz., the absence of (a) cognitive skills; (b) intellectual motivation; (c) pertinent information; or (d) linguistic tools.

1. *Deficit 1: Cognitive skills.* Luria's (1976) work illustrates the evolutionary emphasis on the absence of cognitive skills. He argues that "for some people abstract classification is a wholly alien procedure" (60), and he suggests that illiterate, unschooled peasants in the Uzbekistan and Kirghistan regions of Central Asia lack the skill to "isolate (abstract) a common feature" of things "as a basis for comparison" (80-81). Luria credits schools with fostering the ability to abstract, to generalize and to think scientifically (also see Bruner et al. [1966] on schooling effects and Greenfield [1972] and Geudy [1977] on literacy effects).

Kohlberg (1969, 1971) adopts a similar approach. His evolutionary scheme for the ethical category of the person would account for the occasion-bound, socially contextualized person concept of the Balinese, Gahuku-Gama, and Hindu by locating it as a stage in the evolution of an adequate moral orientation in which respect for the abstract person transcends social roles. Thus, for example, the Gahuku-Gama view that the moral value of life cannot be separated from the social status of a person, and the cogent view that in a "catastrophe" important people, people of status should be saved first, would be interpreted by Kohlberg as an early childlike form of understanding, an initial step on the ladder ascending to the more mature recognition of universal respect for the value of life *per se*. For Kohlberg, movement through the stages of his evolutionary scheme is ultimately explained by reference to the development of certain cognitive processing skills, e.g., the ability to differentiate, take the perspective of another, and generalize.

2. *Deficit 2: Intellectual motivation.* Levy's (1973:269-270) work illustrates the evolutionary emphasis on intellectual motivation instead of cognitive skill. Levy interprets concrete thinking as an adaptation to life in a "cultural cocoon." Tahitian villagers, he argues, are deeply "embedded" in their own mundane daily contexts. They are not motivated to reflect upon the alternative cultural practices that surround them (e.g., the Chinese) nor do they have any need to conceptually locate their own customs in a more general comparative framework. Consequently, much of Tahitian village behavior "having to do with

personal and social description" is marked by an emphasis on "contexts and cases" (262) and is "oriented to richness of detail . . ." (268). Levy speculates that such contextual embeddedness is "not conducive to science [and abstraction]" (269-270).

3. *Deficit 3: Pertinent information.* Horton's (1967) evolutionary interpretation explains concrete thinking by reference to informational limitations. Context-embeddedness, he argues, is primarily a cognitive concomitant of living in a "closed intellectual predicament", one too limited in opportunities to become aware of alternative visions of reality. Informational opportunities wax with the development of external trade, literacy, and urbanization, and thus these three conditions, Horton argues, are conducive to the development of abstract modes of thought. Also see Super et al. (1977) for a discussion of the informational conditions favoring abstract thought. They conclude that cultures that are "materially simple will rarely require [abstract] categorical organization . . ."

4. *Deficit 4: Linguistic tools.* It is occasionally suggested that concrete thinkers are speakers of impoverished languages, viz. languages lacking *general terms* as a symbolic resource (e.g., Jespersen 1934). Thus, e.g., in Tasmanian each variety of gum-tree and wattle-tree has a name but there is no equivalent for the expression "a tree", while in Bororo (the classic illustration) each parrot has its special name but the general lexical entry "parrot" is absent. Deficient in their symbolic resources, lacking general terms, speakers of such languages are said to be prone to overlook the likenesses between things; hence the failure to abstract.

THE UNIVERSALIST ACCOUNT

Evolutionary theorists, as we have just seen, argue that some people's are distinctively concrete in their thinking; this distinctive mode of thought is explained by reference to deficits in cognitive processing skills, intellectual motivation, pertinent information, or requisite tools. Universalists, in contrast, are skeptical of the claim that some people's are concrete thinkers, others abstract thinkers. From the perspective of the universalist, *attributions of differential concreteness* (or abstractness) by one people about another are illusory and amount to little more than an indication that the category system of the observer fails to align with the category system of the people observed.

There are three claims implicit in the universalist interpretation of concrete and/or abstract thinking. First, it is argued that apparent evidence of concrete and abstract thinking is *equally* present in all cultures (concrete vs. abstract thinking is not a *variable* that can be used to distinguish one culture from another). Secondly, it is argued, the attribution of concreteness or abstractness to other people's thinking is the inevitable result of the confrontation between uncalibrated conceptual systems. More specifically, the universalist argues, we describe

other people's thinking as concrete when they overlook likenesses or truths that we emphasize; we describe their thinking as abstract where they emphasize likenesses or truths that we overlook. Finally, it is argued, since no one conceptual system can take note of, or encode, all possible likenesses, or record all possible truths, where conceptual systems clash there will always be areas of both apparent concreteness and apparent abstractness. The works of Kroeber (1949) and Frake (1962) illustrate the universalist interpretation.

Frake's (1962) universalist argument is advanced against the evolutionary view of Jespersen (1934) that the mind of the "primitive" is concrete (overlook's likenesses) in its classification of flora and fauna (remember those "parrots"! Ironically, Kroeber's (1949) universalist argument is advanced against the opposite evolutionary view (Morgan 1871) that the mind of the "primitive" is excessively abstract (overlook's differences) in its classification of kinsmen (e.g., a "father-in-law" and a "grandfather" are similarly labeled in the Dakota language).

It would be a mistake to conclude from this irony that primitive technological systems are concrete when it comes to plants and animals yet abstract for kinsmen. Rather, the main point of the universalist interpretation is that the contrast between concrete and abstract systems of classification is an *illusion* that:

. . . has its origin in the point of view of investigators, who, on approaching foreign languages, have been impressed with their failure to discriminate certain relationships (e.g., father-in-law and grandfather) between which the languages of civilized Europe distinguish, and who, in the enthusiasm of formulating general [evolutionary] theories from such facts, have forgotten that their own languages are filled with entirely analogous groupings or classifications which custom has made so familiar and natural that they are not felt as such (e.g., overlooking the difference between cousins older and younger than oneself and denoting them both with the same term). (Kroeber 1949:77)

Frake (1962:75) makes a similar point. He remarks that there is "no necessary reason" that other people should heed those particular attributes which, for the English-speaker, make equivalent all the diverse individual organisms he labels "parrots" [see Findley 1979 for an example of the way attribute selection can radically influence which organisms get categorized together]. As Frake notes, any comparison of undesignated category systems will reveal cases where the other's thought seems quite concrete (they overlook likenesses that we emphasize) as well as cases where their thought seems quite abstract (they emphasize likenesses that we overlook).

To this point we have described the "logic" of universalist, evolutionary and relativist understandings of other people's understandings, and we have characterized the evolutionary and universalist interpretations of concrete, context-dependent, occasion-bound

thinking. We now focus our attention on one specific example of concrete thinking, that is, occasion-bound *social* thinking, more particularly, the concept of the context-dependent person. In presenting the results of a cross-cultural study of person description in India and the United States, we display our reasons for rejecting the evolutionary and universalist interpretations of the Hindu, Balinese, and Chakrabarti-Gunn context-dependent person concept. Finally, we construct an alternative, relativist interpretation which argues that the context-dependent concept of the person is one aspect of a broader socio-centric "organic" (or holistic) conception of the relationship of the individual to society. It is a feature of holistic thinking that "units" (organs, body parts, groups, individuals, etc.) are believed to be necessarily altered by the *relations* into which they enter (Phillips 1976). We argue that concrete thinking (as a general phenomenon) is a by-product of the commitment to a holistic world view, and we discuss the implications of the socio-centric organic conception of the individual-social relationship for the developing ego's view of its "self".

Contexts and cases: a study of person description in India and the United States

It is by reference to "contexts and cases" that Oriyas in the old town of Bhubaneswar (Orissa, India) describe the personalities of their friends, neighbors, and workmates. These personal accounts of Oriyas are concrete and relational. They tell you what someone has done; behavioral instances are often mentioned. They tell you where it was done. They tell you to whom or with whom it was done. The descriptive attention of Oriyas is directed towards the behavioral context in which particular behavioral instances occurred, e.g., "whoever becomes his friend, he remembers him forever, and will always help him out of his troubles" (*Jaha sange thare sanga huichanti, tanku sabudina pain mane rakthihanti o tankara jati kichhi subidha hue, tanku dabaku esta karanti*), "has no cultivatable land, but likes to cultivate the land of others" (*Case jani nahi, ahahe para jani case karibaku bhala paniti*), "when a quarrel arises, cannot resist the temptation of saying a word" (*Gandogolotae hele pade nakchi rahi paranti nahi*), "will talk right in the face of even a British Governor" (*ham saheb hele madhaya muhe muhe jabab diyanti*), "comes forward whenever there is an occasion to address a public meeting" (*Sabha samitiire kalibaku agun*), "behaves properly with guests but feels sorry if money is spent on them" (*Bandhu handhaha asile bhala hyabaha dekhanti, kintu tanka paisa khareo hele dukha koranti*).

This concrete-relational way of thinking about other persons differs from the abstract style of our American informants. Americans tell you what is true of a person's behavior (e.g., he's friendly, arrogant, and intelligent) while tending to overlook behavioral context. Below we discuss the results of a comparison of Oriya and American personality

descriptions. As we shall see, the striking tendency of Oriyas to be more concrete and relational than Americans does not readily lend itself to evolutionary interpretation in terms of either (a) relative amounts of formal schooling; (b) relative degrees of literacy; (c) relative socio-economic status; (d) the presence or absence of abstract terms in one's language; (e) the absence of skills of abstraction among Oriyas; or (f) relative awareness of alternative behavioral contexts or variations in behavior.

The concrete-relational style of Oriya social thought seems unrelated to variations in cognitive skill, intellectual motivation, available information, and linguistic resources. By elimination, we are led to consider the way a culture's world view and master metaphors *per se* influence the relationship between what one thinks about and how one thinks. We consider differences in Indian and American conceptualizations of the relationship of the individual and society with special reference to the socio-centric organic vs. egocentric reductionist view of "man-in-society".

METHODOLOGY

1. Informants. The 17 informants in the American sample came from three separate groups: (1) counselling psychologists (3 women, 2 men); (2) a college fraternity (6 men), and (3) nursery school teachers (6 women). In each group they had known each other for at least one year. Their ages ranged from 19 to 47, and they all had received or were about to complete a college education. They all lived in or around Chicago, Illinois. Socio-economically they were predominantly middle-class.

The 70 Indian informants resided in the old town... of Bhubaneswar, Orissa. They were selected on the basis of caste criteria as part of a general enquiry into household composition and caste interaction patterns. Thus, the full range of the local caste hierarchy was represented. With two exceptions the Oriyas were all males and spanned a wider age range (18-70) than the Americans. Educational variability among them was also greater, ranging from no formal education to the attainment of the M.A. degree. Seventeen informants had no education at all. Eighteen informants were illiterate.

Caste, formal schooling, and literacy are not orthogonal in the Indian sample. Informants from the lower castes tend to be less educated and illiterate, although there are a number of informants from the upper castes who are literate but relatively uneducated. The confounding of caste, literacy, and schooling in the sample is less worrisome than it might at first appear. The cultural differences in concrete-relational thinking, to be reported below, are stable across the entire Indian sample and do not vary by caste, education, or literacy. Uneducated, illiterate untouchables and highly educated, literate Brahmins differ from Americans in the same way and do not significantly differ from each other.

2. *The task.* Informants in both populations responded to the task of describing a close acquaintance. However, in the Indian group each informant described up to three friends, neighbors, or workmates, whereas in the American group each described the other four or five members of his/her group. There were also slight differences in the instructions and format of the descriptive task between the two cultures, an inevitable consequence of the fact that they had originally been associated with independent studies. Indian informants were presented with the instructions: "Thinker cetera, prakriti, o byachara bisyare male bhahabhare khamnu" (Tell me in depth about so-and-so's character, nature (personality) and behavior), whereas Americans were asked: "How would you characterize so-and-so's personality?" Indians could respond in as many or few ways as they chose (they averaged between seven and eight descriptive phrases), whereas Americans were asked to provide 20 descriptive sentences or phrases. Finally, Indians responded orally while Americans wrote out their description.

Because these procedural differences could have interacted with the cultural difference observed on the various dependent variables (see results section), the following "ex-post-facto" study was done with a sample of 10 Americans. Informants were divided into two groups and given one or the other of the two instructions mentioned above. In each of these groups some informants were permitted to make as many responses as they wished, the others told to give 20 responses. All responses were given orally. While the different instructions had a slight, statistically nonsignificant effect on the tendency of informants to give concrete or abstract descriptions, this effect was nominal in comparison with that associated with cultural differences, as reported in the results section.

3. *The coding of descriptions.* To facilitate coding, all descriptions were broken down into constituent sentences. Where a sentence was compound or complex, it was further broken down into units, each of which contained no more than one subject-predicate-object sequence. These units were subsequently referred to as "descriptive phrases." Each descriptive phrase was typed on a 3 x 5 card. In this fashion a total of 3,451 descriptive phrases for both cultures was obtained.

A coding system was developed to enable judges to decide on the presence or absence of a number of features related to concrete thinking, in particular (a) descriptive reference to abstract traits; (b) descriptive reference to concrete action; (c) descriptive incorporation of contextual qualifications.

An abstract trait reference (abbreviated "7") was operationally defined as any attribute that answered the question "What kind of person is the rater?" The judgment was made independently of the presence or absence of contextual qualifications in the descriptive phrase. Thus "she is stubborn" and "she is stubborn about family matters" would

both be coded "7", although the final coding for the two phrases would differ in the specification of additional contextual qualifiers.

An action reference ("A") answered the question "Is this something the rater does?" This judgment also was made independently of the presence or absence of contextual qualifiers. Thus, "she uses dirty language" and "she uses dirty language when her friends give her advice about family matters" would both be coded "A," though they differ in the specification of additional contextual qualifiers.

Pure emotive-evaluative terms ("7E") such as "he is a good man" were not considered traits ("7") in our final analysis. One reason for drawing the distinction was the reference to (moral) "character" (cetera) in the Oriya instructions. This tended to elicit a ritualized initial response from most informants. They would first say "he is a good man" or "he is not a good man" and then go on with their description. "7E" phrases in both the American and Oriya descriptions were dropped from the analysis discussed below. The total number of descriptive phrases actually analyzed numbered 3,209 (1,524 Oriya, 1,685 American).

Contextual qualifications were coded under the following categories:

Personal Reference: (a) reference to a specific individual, often denoted by a proper or common noun (e.g., "he gets angry with his father"), coded "P1"; (b) reference to a specific group of others (e.g., "he makes fun of his family") coded "P2"; (c) reference to people or others in general (e.g., "he is honest with others") coded "P3"; (d) reference to the person described himself (e.g., he gets angry with himself") coded "SR"; (e) reference to the rater (e.g., "he gets angry with me") coded "RR".

Qualification: (a) temporal: statement of when or how frequently the attribute occurs (e.g., "last year he did favors frequently"); coded "time"; (b) locale: statement of where or in what location the attribute occurs (e.g., "At school she puts on a frown") coded "place"; (c) general qualification: any statement of the conditions under which an attribute occurs or obtains (e.g., "He gets irritated if provoked") coded "qual"; (d) inferential qualification: statement of the conditions under which the rater makes the attribution (e.g., "judging from what others say, he is reserved") coded "inf"; (e) any phrase which states an action, trait, etc. without qualification is coded "No qualification" (Noqual).

A coding category called *Miscellaneous Types* allowed us to make more refined judgments about the presence or absence of references to traits or actions:

Miscellaneous Types: (a) a reference to what the rater likes (*L* or *LA*), (b) wants, seeks, or desires (*D* or *DA*), (c) experiences (*E* or *EA*), (d) feels (*F* or *FA*), (e) is interested in (*I* or *IA*), (f) is capable of or able to do (*C* or *CA*), (g) values (*V* or *VA*), (h) a reference to what type of person the rater is (e.g., "he's a joker, a

both be coded "P", although the final coding for the two phrases would differ in the specification of additional contextual qualifiers.

An action reference ("A") answered the question "Is this something the ratee does?" This judgment also was made independently of the presence or absence of contextual qualifiers. Thus, "she uses dirty language" and "she uses dirty language when her friends give her advice about family matters" would both be coded "A," though they differ in the specification of additional contextual qualifiers.

Pure emotive-evaluative terms ("TE") such as "he is a good man" were not considered traits ("T") in our final analysis. One reason for drawing the distinction was the reference to (moral) "character" (*caritra*) in the Oriya instructions. This tended to elicit a ritualized initial response from most informants. They would first say "he is a good man" or "he is not a good man" and then go on with their description. "TE" phrases in both the American and Oriya descriptions were dropped from the analysis discussed below. The total number of descriptive phrases actually analyzed numbered 3,209 (1,524 Oriya, 1,685 American).

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