Are There Universals and Why? A Reply to Minoura and Weisz et al.

Rolf Oerter

Culture Psychology 1996 2: 203
DOI: 10.1177/1354067X9600200204

Abstract In response to Minoura (1996) it is argued that a hypothesis-generating orientation has to be followed by a hypothesis-testing approach, a sequence which was also pursued with the structural levels of the concept of human nature. The role of culture in stimulating both universal levels of construction and culture-specific shaping of knowledge is discussed, and there is an attempt to answer Minoura's questions with regard to this issue. In response to the suggestions of Weisz, Eastman and McCarty (1996) it is proposed to extend the concept of control beyond the hitherto existing conceptualization in order to arrive at a universal construct of control.

Key Words hypothesis generation, identity, macro-/micro-linkage, primary and secondary control, universal categories

Rolf Oerter
Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich, Germany

Are There Universals and Why? A Reply to Minoura and Weisz et al.

A Hypothesis-Generating vs a Hypothesis-Testing Approach

Minoura's (1996) thought-provoking commentary on our paper (Oerter, Oerter, Agostiani, Kim, & Wibowo, 1996) makes the criticism that the levels of conceptualization of human nature might reflect only the authors' own concepts and theorizing. Instead, she proposes a hypothesis-generating orientation which can only take into consideration the multiplicity of factors involved in the formation of the individual's conceptions. From this perspective, she appreciates the methodological procedure chosen in the second part of the paper (Results II), where, among others, a parent–child dilemma presented to Indonesian subjects revealed six patterns of conflict treatment. Minoura suggests extending this procedure to other cultures and views it as more appropriate than mere dichotomies like 'individualistic' vs 'collectivistic' orientation. She is certainly right when she rejects oversimplification in cultural comparison and the usage of preformulated structures that are forced upon the data. But she has to

Culture & Psychology © 1996 SAGE
London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi
Vol 2: 203–209

realize that all scientific endeavour shows criteria that are criticized by her.

First, every approach ends up with an abstraction of the huge variety of phenomena. Parsimony and economy are principles in every empirical science. Second, each scientific form of ordering and structuring data is based on theoretical assumptions that are primarily constructions of the scientist and/or the scientific community. Of course, the five levels of conceptualization of human nature are originally the authors' constructions. However, they are not arbitrary constructions but controlled by systematic knowledge of developmental and social psychology. Minoura complains that these constructions are logical rather than emotional or 'empathetic', and suspects that other categorizations of the data would have resulted in different outcomes. This is true, but it is not an argument against our approach which assumes five distinct levels. Incidentally, the examples presented in 'Results I' show that the structures are not simply cognitive levels but include high involvement on the part of the subjects. The concept of human nature presented here is not a distinct cognitive knowledge but rather a knowledge structure that is embedded in emotional relations and connected with the subjects' identity.

Third, the structures according to which the data were categorized were developed on the basis of a hypothesis-generating orientation. We did not possess these structures at the beginning and seek to test their universality. Rather, we observed in different samples from different cultures similar patterns and successively developed the present system. It can be easily tested by the examples presented in the paper and by the rich material underlying those examples. Only if it turns out that the suggested structural levels seem inappropriate for the subjects' verbal descriptions should one reject the system as premature.

Therefore, Minoura's suggestion of using a hypothesis-generating procedure was realized at the beginning of our research. But empirical science cannot stop at this point. It must be followed up with a hypothesis-testing orientation and must be able to make predictions that can be proved right or wrong. At no point in her line of argument does Minoura try to show that the proposed structural levels do not fit the examples related to them.

How Can We Explain the Existence of Universals?

In her commentary, Minoura seems unhappy with the distinction between a vertical line of development and a horizontal line of culture-

specific influence. It is obvious from her arguments that there must be a misunderstanding of the suggested integrative approach because Minoura insists on demonstrating that the levels can also be a result of cultural influence and not a mere culture-free development. Of course, we do not believe that any development, much less cognitive development, occurs without cultural influence. We discussed two general mechanisms of cultural influence upon the evolution of universal cognitive levels, education and the experience of disequilibrium (Oerter et al., 1996: 26–27). Education unifies subjects from quite different cultures with regard to semantic memory (Tulving, 1972), to ways of context-free thinking (Scribner & Cole, 1973; Tulviste, 1979), and to knowledge about society and economy. Thus, Minoura is right when she recognizes that level IV is an 'academic level'. What is wrong with the notion that only subjects who know about processes and outcomes in culture and society and who are able to reflect those processes will construct level IV? It was found in different cultures in East and West, especially with university students. But not every university student produced level IV. Therefore, additional conditions must be at work in the culture.

We proposed a mechanism derived from a general developmental theoretical perspective offered by Piaget (1977) and Riegel (1975), who assumed that cognitive development is enhanced through the experience of contradictions and conflicts (disequilibrium). Societies in which subjects can recognize and reflect such conflicts provide more stimulation for higher levels than societies with less conscious and/or overtly discussed conflicts. Since disequilibrium is higher for females than males in Japan, this would explain the superiority of females against males in Japan and Korea because females experience a strong discrepancy between traditional role definition and opportunities for females in modern society. In this respect, our interpretation of the genesis of different levels in different cultures is quite in accordance with Minoura's line of argument.

A more general answer why human universals exist across cultures was not given in our paper because this was not our main concern. But an answer can be offered for both the individual and the culture. Individuals across cultures are equal with regard to basic human characteristics provided by bio-neurological 'hardware'. Constructive activity as an instrument for understanding oneself and the world must therefore have some commonalities. Human environment, on the other hand, forces individuals and cultural groups to construct reality in a way such that they can survive. In spite of a huge variety of cultural and individual constructions, in each culture physical and

psychological concepts and knowledge are acquired that are shared by the whole of humankind.

Transactions between Culture and Individual

Minoura also raises the difficult problem of how the individual world of meaning and cultural meaning systems on the macro-level are linked. From this background, she poses the question of transactional processes between culture and individual during human development. She misses an answer to this question in our paper and admonishes that an approach which claims to introduce a developmental perspective into cultural psychology should include in its research paradigm a profound analysis of the culture under investigation and the study of individual development within the culture. Needless to say, this demand could not be met in our paper. We tried to show the connection between culture and development only by some selected examples. To fulfil such a claim for the concept of human nature across cultures would demand the space of a book not of a paper. But I agree with Minoura that this work is still ahead of us and has to be done in the near future. The core task of research in my view (and Minoura might agree here) is the investigation of transactional processes between culture and individual. I have tried to follow this line of thinking in another field of research: children's play (Oerter, 1993).

Is Control a Useful Etic Category?

The commentary of Weisz, Eastman and McCarty (1996) on our article is very stimulating and helpful for the clarification of the concept of control in cultural research. I shall first comment on some methodological issues raised by Weisz et al., then examine the suggestions made in the commentary, and finally raise the question of how to use the concept of control in cultural comparison.

Beginning with the methodological issue, one has to keep in mind that this study about the concept of human nature was not primarily conceived to consider control concepts. This goal has a value in its own right and should be pursued systematically. On the other hand, the broader approach to naïve understanding of human nature reveals the opportunity to discover new facets of control. Maybe this aspect is our only contribution to the distinction of primary and secondary control introduced by Rothbaum, Weisz and Snyder (1982). If so, it is worthwhile recognizing and discussing those new aspects. An important critical point made by Weisz et al. is the methodological procedure that

was chosen for the investigation of different cultures. We adapted the dilemma stories to the culture under investigation, which might have been influenced by the outcome. This is a general problem in cross-cultural research. Identical methods do not guarantee validity for each cultural sample. On the contrary, the usage of the same methodological instrument, for example a questionnaire, does not provide any proof that it assesses the same thing (construct, trait or whatever it may be). Therefore, we chose methodological procedures which stimulate the subjects to produce ideas and arguments about their knowledge.

The authors also argue that the interviewer's questions might have influenced control-related aspects of the subjects' responses. This is certainly true, but it holds also for every other investigation. In each case, the method has an impact on the outcome. Since the main questions were identical for each cultural sample, it is not important whether a question may have inclined subjects towards primary control, but rather whether under these same conditions cultural differences can be observed. The question is only whether the descriptions of our subjects fit the primary–secondary distinction. Therefore, we suggested taking the subjects' statements as descriptions of their understanding of control, being reluctant to classify them all in terms of the Rothbaum et al. distinction.

The commentary is certainly right in questioning whether the examples presented for Japan and Korea really are a proof of secondary control. In further content analysis of the verbal data concepts of control should be identified more carefully. In the long run, it seems fruitful to look for alternative types of control which better fit the subject's understanding of control in a specific cultural context. An example was presented with Indonesian subjects, who show a specific combination of primary and secondary control when they argue, first, that one should try one's best in order to reach one's goal, but, second, in case of failure, one should 'give in' (*pasrah*). Weisz et al. argue that *pasrah* can mean both relinquished control and secondary control. For Javanese culture, as long as it is influential for subjects, such a distinction is not meaningful.

Taking a more general point of view, Weisz et al. suggest that one should also analyse control orientation at higher levels of the conceptualization of human nature. This very stimulating idea is theoretically already conceived within the logic of the levels but not analysed in detail. From the developmental logic of level IIIb (mutual identity), both primary and secondary control are possible. The examples chosen by Weisz et al. demonstrate forms of control at level IIIb. Indeed we found typical descriptions of control at the level of mutual identity

which cannot be described in detail here but show that primary control was preferred among American subjects whereas forms of secondary control were described by subjects from eastern cultures.

At level IV, examples presented in our paper also demonstrate different forms of control including exactly those examples invented by Weisz et al. However, level IV action theory takes a systemic perspective which means that control in a one-way sense—be it primary or secondary—is no longer operational. Nevertheless, primary control through group pressure and secondary control through following society's rules were reported by the subjects, but from the viewpoint of their efficiency within the system.

From a more general point of view, the concept of control is located within the action theory of each level. It describes goal, action and outcome, thus also providing the basic elements of control as described by Rothbaum et al. (1982) and Weisz et al. (1996).

Reading Weisz et al.'s commentary again and relating it to our paper raises an intriguing question: is the concept of control feasible as an etic category or as a human universal? There is no doubt that the introduction of an extended concept of control as presented by Rothbaum et al. (1982) was very helpful for understanding other cultures. It still encourages the further search for various forms of control in different cultures. However, from the present state of affairs it seems necessary to extend the understanding of control again. If one agrees that control might be a general anthropological construct, one should collect broad samples of descriptions of control in various cultures, examining how control is conceived as a specific form of interaction between individual and environment. What is still missing thus far is a profound analysis of the cultural conditions in which an individual lives. Those conditions must become basic elements of a general theory of control. Only then will we be able to use the concept of control as a universal (etic) category.

References

Minoura, Y. (1996). A plea for the hypothesis-generating approach to link the individual's world of meaning and society's cultural orientation: A commentary on Oerter et al. (1996). *Culture & Psychology*, 2(1), 53–61.

Oerter, R. (1993). *Psychologie des Spiels*. Munich: Quintessenz.

Oerter, R., Oerter, R.M., Agostiani, H., Kim, H-O., & Wibowo, S. (1996). The concept of human nature in East Asia: Etic and emic characteristics. *Culture & Psychology* 2(1), 9–51.

Piaget, J. (1977). *The development of thought: Equilibrium of cognitive structures*. New York: Viking.

Riegel, K.F. (1975). Toward a dialectical theory of development. *Human Development*, *18*, 50–64.
Rothbaum, F., Weisz, J.R., & Snyder, S.S. (1982). Changing the world and changing the self: A two-process model of perceived control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *42*, 5–37.
Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1973). The cognitive consequences of formal and informal education. *Science*, *182*, 553–559.
Tulving, E. (1972). Episodic and semantic memory. In E. Tulving & W. Donaldson (Eds.), *Organization of memory* (pp. 382–404). New York: Academic Press.
Tulviste, P. (1979). On the origins of theoretic syllogistic reasoning in culture and the child. *Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition*, *1*, 73–80.
Weisz, J.R., Eastman, K., & McCarty, C. (1996). Primary and secondary control in East Asia: Comments on Oerter et al. (1996). *Culture & Psychology*, *2*(1), 63–76.

Biography

ROLF OERTER continues to study the concept of human nature, in many countries all over the world. In general, he is interested in the cultural organization of persons' self-understanding and reasoning. ADDRESS: Professor Dr Rolf Oerter, Fakultät für Psychologie und Pädagogik, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Leopoldstr. 13, D-80802 München, Germany. [email: Oerter@mip.paed.uni-muenchen.de]