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From Homer to the 21st Century:
Charting the Emergence of the Structure of Interpersonal Meaning

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During the last quarter of the 20th century, cross-cultural research established that the meaning of interpersonal behavior can be described in terms of a universal structure that includes, among others, the notions of association (affiliation), superordination (dominance), and intimacy. While researchers generally agree on most of these universal dimensions, little is known about their origins –the whys and the wherefores of these structures. An approach designed to explain the emergence of the meaning of interpersonal behavior is the focus of this chapter. This approach is based on the assumption that social behavior involves the exchange of material and psychological resources, a process guided by a number of natural constraints operating on human interaction. The chapter outlines this theoretical system and discusses the emergence of the primary features of meaning over long periods of time. It reviews formal analyses of information gleaned from literary documents of different historical periods and cultures, including the works of Homer, Hesiod, and Theophrastus, as well as other sources (e.g., medieval European literature). It concludes with a discussion of how this approach can account for various social-psychological phenomena and can lead to the development of a useful theory of culture for psychology.

In keeping with the theme of the 2006 IACCP Congress in Greece, *"From Herodotus' Ethnographic Journeys to Cross-Cultural Research"* –a theme that looks for the roots of cross-cultural psychology by reaching back into the time of Herodotus around 500 B.C.E.– this chapter will present a summary of some 20 years of inquiry into the structure of social behavior as it unfolded through time. The work has been both fascinating and frustrating to this author. It has been fascinating because it has yielded a few glimpses of how human beings have understood their social world over a period of some 2,000 years. It has been frustrating because progress in this line of research is agonizingly slow, full of difficulties associated with ancient languages, translation, and the recording of behavior descriptions. Nevertheless, the possibility of understanding the emergence of social meaning through time is an exciting goal in the analysis of interpersonal interaction.

The chapter will begin with an introduction to the search for the basic elements of social meaning. It will then introduce the notion of psychological universals, and, in particular, universals that emerge over long periods of time. Next, it will summarize some research that utilizes historical and literary sources to explore such universals of social meaning, and will conclude with a brief description of a model that accounts for the emergence of the basic elements of social meaning over time.

Interpersonal Structure and Culture

The analysis of the structure of interpersonal behavior –the fundamental dimensions of meaning along which social behavior varies– has been a central theme in cross-cultural psychology for many years. The reason for this centrality is obvious: *interpersonal* behavior accounts for the vast majority of human daily activity. Thus, it is easy to think of human behavior and culture as constituting each other (e.g., Miller, 1997). For example, it is impossible to talk about conformity behavior without some reference to cultural norms just as much as it is impossible to talk about the cultural pattern of individualism without some notion of competitive interaction.

Early Research on the Dimensions of Social Behavior

        The search for the dimensions of social behavior was made a central psychological enterprise in the 1960s by Triandis and culminated in the landmark studies reported in the *Analysis of Subjective Culture* (Triandis, 1972). Work on the problem continued in a number of cultures over the following years. The typical –but by no means exclusive– methodology employed was some variant of Triandis' (1972) "behavioral differential" technique, which involved judgments by individual members of various cultures of the likelihood that they would perform various behaviors in different social contexts (e.g., Adamopoulos, 1982b). These judgments were analyzed using factor analytic techniques in order to extract underlying dimensions of meaning.

        By the 1980s a fairly large number of such cross-cultural studies were available, and cross-cultural psychologists felt confident enough to conclude that there exist a few pancultural dimensions of interpersonal meaning, which may possibly correspond in part to Osgood's factors of affective meaning (*EVALUATION, POTENCY,* and *ACTIVITY*; Osgood, May, & Miron, 1975). The dimensions, which capture much of the meaning of social interaction in different cultures, have been labeled: (a) *ASSOCIATION-DISSOCIATION* (affiliation); (b) *SUPERORDINATION-SUBORDINATION* (dominance); and (c) *INTIMACY-FORMALITY* (Triandis, 1994).

        These three dimensions are by no means the only ones to be found either within or across cultures. Rather, the contention is that much of the time, people around the world, regardless of cultural, linguistic, or educational background, understand social behavior as communicating primarily the presence or absence of affiliative needs, the desire to dominate another or to be submissive to another's authority, and the need for interpersonal closeness or distance. This assertion acquires even greater legitimacy when it is made in the context of similar research findings in other psychological domains –from the study of parent-child interactions to the interpersonal domain of personality (see Lonner, 1980).

Psychological Universals

        With such overwhelming empirical evidence from a relatively large number of studies, it was not difficult for psychologists to start calling these three dimensions of social meaning "psychological universals" (Triandis, 1978). Eventually, Lonner (1980) incorporated this label in the title of his contribution to the first edition of the *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology*.

        Exactly what *is* a psychological universal? A clear answer to this question cannot be easily provided. For example, it is exceptionally difficult to determine on the basis of any formal criteria how many cultures must be studied before a claim for universality can be made convincingly. Should some strict Popperian criterion of falsification be applied, such that finding even one culture where a particular meaning dimension cannot be established unambiguously challenges the universal status of that dimension?

        Unfortunately, the situation is even more complicated than that. It has been suggested elsewhere (e.g., Adamopoulos, 1988, 1991, 2009) that an additional criterion for universality is necessary: relative *continuity through time*. In other words, in order to claim that a particular dimension of social meaning is a human universal it must somehow be shown that it emerged and evolved through time. For example, the constructs "dominance" or "intimacy" may have changed considerably over the past 2,000 years, but some notion that humans had a need for control or interpersonal closeness must surely be evident in human records if we are to think of these constructs as "psychological universals," or, even more specifically, as "diachronic universals" (Adamopoulos & Bontempo, 1986; Lonner, 1980). Furthermore, to the extent that it would be desirable for this type of construct to be of some use to psychologists beyond the level of description, it needs to be *explained*: why has it been around for such a long time in human history? The remainder of this chapter will summarize efforts to address these two issues: (a) the

diachronic nature of potential "universals" of social behavior, and (b) the explanation of their emergence through long time periods.

The Search for Diachronic Universals

The method employed to explore diachronicity in the series of studies summarized in this chapter depends upon locating literary sources that describe interpersonal interaction in considerable detail in various cultures and historical periods. Such interaction is recorded –always taking note of the social context within which it happens– and the data are analyzed in the same fashion that responses to the behavioral differential are analyzed. In the typical case, the columns of the data matrix in these analyses consist of behaviors and the rows consist of social relationships or social situations in which the behaviors occur. The analyses yield dimensions of interpersonal meaning that reflect the notions available to people in a particular culture during a particular historical period. The findings summarized in this chapter come from a variety of literary sources described in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of Literary Sources of Interpersonal Interaction

LITERARY SOURCE	APPROXIMATE DATE	AUTHOR	CONTENT
Iliad	ca. 8th century B.C.E.	Homer	Epic poem about Trojan War
Odyssey	ca. 8th century B.C.E.	Homer	Epic poem about the long journey home of Odysseus, king of Ithaka, after the fall of Troy
Theogony	ca. 700 B.C.E.	Hesiod	Hymn detailing the origins of the Greek gods and their struggle to control the cosmos
Character Sketches	372-287 B.C.E.	Theophrastus	Negative and rather comic descriptions of the "typical" Athenian social behavior of various personality "types"
Beowulf	ca. 8th century C.E.		Old English poem about the monster-slaying hero Beowulf
Song of Roland	ca. 1100 C.E.		Oldest of the Old French epics about the adventures of the knight Roland and Charlemagne's rearguard when they were attacked by the Saracens
Red Badge of Courage	1895	Stephen Crane	Novel about the adventures of a young recruit during the American Civil War

Analyses of text samples from the sources listed in Table 1 revealed that, despite textual complexities and differences in emphases, historical periods, and culture and language, a number of consistencies in the basic meaning of social interaction are present (cf., Adamopoulos, 1982a, 1991, 2009; Adamopoulos & Bontempo, 1986). Table 2 below provides examples of the meaning of specific behaviors in these literary works.

Table 2. Examples of Similarity and Variability in the Meaning of Social Behaviors Through Time

ILIAD	ODYSSEY	THEOGONY	CHARACTER SKETCHES	BEOWULF	SONG OF ROLAND	RED BADGE OF COURAGE
ASSOCIATION						
heal protect advise	request appeal greet	talk to help take care of	not make trivial remarks to	help accompany appeal	offer gift grant request inquire	help praise brag
DISSOCIATION						
attack threaten withdraw from	attack threaten insult	be angry with not honor lie to	show bad manners to insult, cheat	attack wound withdraw from	scorn kill insult	leave hit command
SUPERORDINATION						
advise reprimand help	advise encourage help	reward offer gift to command	insult show contempt express opinion	praise offer gift to promise	encourage offer gift to command	hit praise command
SUBORDINATION						
suggest justify self praise	serve greet obey	not tame not kill not defeat	compliment praise groom	appeal to greet pay homage to	request offer services to suggest	listen to answer obey
RITUALIZED INTERACTION (FORMALITY?)						
boast agree with appeal		glorify be angry with punish	boast show off		promise kiss accept honor	inform justify self greet
INTIMACY (?)						
	embrace recount sympathize with	make love with fight with tame	compliment praise groom			

Even this partial and rather cursory review of several investigations indicates a substantial and even impressive convergence of findings. It appears that, despite substantial differences in the meanings of *specific* behaviors, there is support for the proposal that the three dimensions identified earlier are psychological universals. The fact that there exist these basic similarities in human social meaning systems across cultures and historical periods can be both unimpressive

and intriguing at the same time. On the one hand, there is the possibility that little has changed in the basic structure of human interpersonal meaning systems in the course of the past 2,000-3,000 years. On the other hand, this seemingly unexciting finding raises the puzzling question of why these particular meaning systems emerged in the first place and have remained so remarkably stable over such a long period of time.

The convergence appears to be obvious in the case of the dimensions of association and dominance. Many of the specific behaviors that define these two factors in analyses of historical documents are the same that define the two dimensions in analyses of data from modern times. The case of intimacy is much more intriguing and puzzling (e.g., Adamopoulos, 1991, 2004). For example, personal and close interactions between individuals are plentiful in most ancient documents –even when war and destruction are the main themes– but a clear dimension of intimacy does not emerge in the analyses. Rather, intimacy appears entwined with other psychological dimensions, like dominance or association (for a more extensive discussion of these issues see Adamopoulos, 2002, and Adamopoulos & Lonner, 1994).

It is possible to challenge the meaningfulness of these results on methodological grounds. For example, some analyses relied primarily on translations instead of the original documents, and the labeling of the derived dimensions may ultimately allow the introduction of bias –in short, one may see similarities where one wants to see them. In order to examine the meaningfulness (reasonableness) of the results, seven behaviors that were common across four of the epics were selected. The dimensions were matched for content (e.g., "association," "superordination,") *a priori*. Congruence coefficients measuring factor similarity were then computed for matched factors (Adamopoulos, 1991). Mean coefficients for the four epics appear in Table 3. While by no means perfect, the relationships among factors matched conceptually in advance were stronger for epics that were written approximately in the same time period. In other words, the implication that social meanings emerged over time in some orderly fashion seems quite plausible considering these results. Furthermore, when we look at congruence for *specific* dimensions of meaning in the same set of data, we find the highest congruence for the association-dissociation dimension (.81), and lower congruence for superordination-subordination and ritualized interaction/formality (congruence coefficients of .51 and .56, respectively). A plausible explanation is that the notion of affiliation preceded historically the other meanings, and thus had more time to develop and emerge as a clear structure.

Table 3. Mean Congruence Coefficients for Pairs of Matched Factors in Four Epic Poems

Epic	Iliad	Odyssey	Beowulf
Odyssey	**.83**		
Beowulf	.73	.67	
Song of Roland	.39	.33	**.76**

Finally, the correlation of congruence coefficients for each pair of epics with the approximate time difference between the epics is $-.75$, $p<.05$ (Adamopoulos, 1991), suggesting that social meanings may indeed have evolved and changed over long periods of time.

The Diachronic Emergence of Interpersonal Structure

Once universality of constructs is established, it is important to ask why it is that the particular meanings emerged and became stable through human history. Osgood (1969) addressed a similar problem associated with the ubiquity of the dimensions of implicative meaning that he and his colleagues investigated over the years (i.e., Evaluation, Potency, and Activity). He argued in favor of an answer predicated upon the survival value of the three concepts. Osgood speculated that it must have been very important for early humans to be able to distinguish friend from foe, or a powerful and fast from a weak and slow adversary. A similar

assumption can be made in order to explain the universality of the dimensions of social behavior (e.g., Adamopoulos, 2002). However, it is also necessary to describe a more complex process of the evolution of interpersonal structure in order to account for such ideas as intimacy and interpersonal closeness, formal relationships, and social dominance, among others.

A family of models that describe the emergence of social meanings has been proposed (Adamopoulos, 1984, 1991, 1999). These models are based on the fundamental notion that all human interpersonal interaction is a process involving the exchange of physical and psychological resources essential to survival. There are a number of basic assumptions behind these models:

1. The purpose of all human exchange is to secure resources necessary for survival within a particular ecological niche.

2. Several classes of constraints (and/or affordances) operate on this exchange process.

3. Constraints become differentiated over time into elements.

4. The elements become integrated into psychological constructs that represent meanings people attribute to the world around them.

In the early versions of these models, it was assumed that the basic constraints that operate on any interpersonal exchange are:

1. *Exchange Mode*: A resource is either given to or denied (withheld from) another person.

2. *Interpersonal Orientation*: A resource is offered to or withheld from a person whose identity and relationship to the actor is either critical or unimportant to the satisfactory completion of the exchange. Thus, the orientation of the exchange is either target-specific or target-general. For example, love and commitment cannot be communicated very easily to a stranger; the specific relationship between the actor and the recipient of the action is essential to their expression. On the other hand, the particular relationship between a customer and a bank teller is presumably of little significance to the successful completion of a monetary transaction.

3. *Resource Type*: Resources exchanged during interpersonal interaction can be either material (concrete) or symbolic (abstract). A considerable amount of cross-cultural research has found that most human exchanges involve a limited number of resource classes. Foa and Foa (1974, 1980) have proposed that *material* resources include goods and services, whereas *symbolic* resources include information and status. Money and love are two classes of resources often characterized by a combination of *both* symbolic and material attributes.

Over long periods of time, the integration of the elements of the constraints described above results in the formation of particular social meanings, which are typically identified as interpersonal dimensions in relevant research. For example, the denying of symbolic resources (e.g., denying a person the resource of status) in an exchange where the orientation is target-specific results in the emergence of the meaning of *SUPERORDINATION* or dominance. Giving someone a material resource (e.g., touching) also in the context of a target-specific relationship involves the concept *of INTIMACY*.

One of the early versions of the model appears in Figure 1. It defines theoretically most social meanings usually identified as universal, including *ASSOCIATION* (giving of resources to another person), *SUBORDINATION* (giving symbolic resources within a target-specific relationship), and *FORMALITY* (exchanging symbolic resources in the context of target-general relationships). The model also identifies and brings to prominence the concept of *TRADING* (the exchange of material resources within a target-general relationship). This concept was frequently neglected or not identified in empirical studies of interpersonal structure, presumably because trading exchanges became a specialized class of behaviors in recent human history and are the focus of a limited number of psychological investigations.

Exchange Mode	GIVING				DENYING			
Interpersonal Orientation	TARGET SPECIFIC		TARGET GENERAL		TARGET GENERAL		TARGET SPECIFIC	
Resource Type	MATERIAL	SYMBOLIC	SYMBOLIC	MATERIAL	MATERIAL	SYMBOLIC	SYMBOLIC	MATERIAL
INTERPERSONAL MEANING	INTIMACY	SUB-ORDINATION	FORMALITY	TRADING	TRADING	FORMALITY	SUPER-ORDINATION	INTIMACY
	ASSOCIATION				DISSOCIATION			

Figure 1. The emergence of interpersonal meaning (adapted from Adamopoulos, 1991).

It should be noted that, according to this model, *ASSOCIATION* and *DISSOCIATION* are the simplest of interpersonal meanings, involving the giving or denying of any resource, respectively. Findings reported earlier, which indicate that these two concepts have the clearest structure in ancient literary sources, support the idea that the notion of affiliation emerged fairly early in human history. The dimension of *INTIMACY* has both negative and positive components, according to the model. This is also supported by research findings. For example, in Hesiod's *Theogony* the behaviors "make love with" and "fight with" have similar meanings as they occur in very similar contexts (e.g., in close relationships). In Homer's *Odyssey* the behaviors "embrace" and "command" have similar, though not identical, meanings because they occur in the context of close relationships (e.g., father-to-son or husband-to-wife; Adamopoulos & Bontempo, 1986). Finally, in Theophrastus' *Character Sketches* "groom" and "be frightened by" appear in the same behavioral dimension (Adamopoulos, 2009). Similar findings regarding the dual (positive and negative) aspect of *INTIMACY* have been obtained with other research paradigms. For example, Adamopoulos (1982b) found that "hitting" had connotations of intimacy and proximity in analyses of behavior likelihood ratings obtained from American college students (for a related argument see Benjamin, 1974). Finally, both *SUPERORDINATION* and *SUBORDINATION* involve highly symbolic exchanges of status but are distinguishable from each other in that the former involves resource denial whereas the latter involves the giving of status. This theoretical distinction has also been supported by research findings that show a relationship between dominant and dissociative behaviors. For example, both analyses of respondents' behavior likelihood ratings and literary text analyses have found that behaviors like "criticize," "advise," "shout at," and "quarrel with" are often correlated (e.g., Adamopoulos, 1982a, 1982b).

The above discussion of the relationships among behavioral dimensions provides strong empirical support for another major feature of the model depicted in Figure 1. As the structure clearly indicates, complex relationships exist among various behavioral dimensions, even though

in the past they have been conceptualized at times as orthogonal. To summarize the most significant of these relationships, *SUBORDINATION* and *ASSOCIATION* are correlated dimensions, as are *SUPERORDINATION* and *DISSOCIATION*. *INTIMACY* can be correlated with both *ASSOCIATION* and *DISSOCIATION* because it can be characterized by both positive (affiliative) and negative (dissociative) features.

Recent extensions of the model

Variations of this model can be used to account for a number of related phenomena of interest to cross-cultural psychologists. For example, the process of constructing behavior in any given context is controlled by who the beneficiary of the behavior is –the *self* or the *other* (Adamopoulos, 1999). The model can then be used to provide a way of representing the meaning of any interpersonal behavior. Thus, "telling your partner that you love him/her" may be represented as "giving material and target-specific resources for the benefit of the other." Similarly, "seeking sexual gratification from your partner" may be represented as "giving a material and target-specific resource for the benefit of the self." What emerges ultimately is a kind of "grammar" of interpersonal meaning features that can be used to understand a variety of cross-cultural processes and systems. For example, individualism and collectivism can be understood as cultural syndromes that involve the construction of behavior emphasizing the self or the other, respectively, as its beneficiaries. Specifically, horizontal individualism (e.g., Triandis, 1995) can be thought of as a cultural pattern involving self-focused exchanges with generalized others, whereas vertical individualism involves specific others. Similarly, horizontal collectivism involves other-focused exchanges with generalized others, whereas vertical collectivism can be conceptualized as involving other-focused exchanges with specific others (Adamopoulos, 1999).

Conceptual convergences among a number of other cross-cultural theories and this family of models (e.g., the theory of sociality by Fiske, 1990 or the values theory of Schwartz, 1992) have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Adamopoulos, 1999). Briefly, Fiske's four elemental forms of exchange can be easily mapped onto the model. Thus, "equality matching" is characterized by self-focused and target-general exchanges, "market pricing" is characterized primarily by self-focused and target-specific exchanges, "authority ranking" can be described as involving other-focused and target-specific exchanges, and "communal sharing" as involving other-focused and target-general exchanges. Schwartz's values system can also be mapped onto extensions of the model described earlier. For example, values like "hedonism" and "achievement" involve self-focused exchanges of symbolic resources, whereas the values of "benevolence" and "universalism" involve other-focused exchanges toward generalized others. Unfortunately, there exists no systematic effort to explore the extent to which these conceptual convergences are supported by empirical observation. Such an effort would greatly facilitate the development of a theory of culture for psychology that is widely shared, has broad appeal, and can facilitate the prediction and explanation of a range of psychological phenomena.

Conclusion

The approach outlined in this chapter constitutes an attempt to build a culturally sensitive theory of interpersonal meaning systems with universal aspirations. The universal character of the theory is theoretically evident in its assumptions about the emergence of social meaning over long periods of time and across different cultures, and empirically supported by the finding of impressive convergence in interpersonal structures across cultures and historical periods. The theory is culturally sensitive in that it is responsive to the fact that different types of resources may be available or emphasized in various cultures. Resources can guide the emergence of particular meaning structures in specific cultural contexts and can be critical in the utilization of the model to form different predictions about meaning systems for different cultures.

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