

# The Odd Couple: The Compatibility of Social Construction and Evolutionary Psychology\*

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Evolutionary psychology and social constructionism are widely regarded as fundamentally irreconcilable approaches to the social sciences. Focusing on the study of the emotions, we argue that this appearance is mistaken. Much of what appears to be an empirical disagreement between evolutionary psychologists and social constructionists over the universality or locality of emotional phenomena is actually generated by an implicit philosophical dispute resulting from the adoption of different theories of meaning and reference. We argue that once this philosophical dispute is recognized, it can be set aside. When this is done, it becomes clear that the two approaches to the emotions complement, rather than compete with, one another.

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**1. Introduction.** By all appearances there is a battle raging for the soul of the social sciences. On one side, and in some disciplines the prevailing establishment, are social constructionists and other advocates of what John Tooby and Leda Cosmides have dubbed the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM).<sup>1</sup> Social constructionists emphasize the enormous diversity

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1. Throughout we use 'social constructionist' as a label for those who advocate important parts of the Standard Social Science Model. This can be misleading in three different ways. First, social constructionism is sometimes identified (usually pejoratively) with a set of radical metaphysical theses that call into question the mind inde-

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of social and psychological phenomena to be found in cultures around the world and throughout history, and much of the research in this tradition has been devoted to describing that diversity—in emotions, moral and religious beliefs, sexual behavior, kinship systems, theories about nature, and much else besides.<sup>2</sup> Advocates of the SSSM are heirs to the empiricist conception of the mind as a blank tablet which experience writes upon. And while no serious social constructionist would deny that our innate mental endowment imposes *some* constraints on what we can learn and what we can do, they believe that most of these constraints are weak and uninteresting. Thus when it comes to explaining the diversity of psychological phenomena like emotions, beliefs, and preferences, differences in the surrounding culture loom large. Those cultural differences are in turn explained by differences in history and in local conditions.

On the other side are evolutionary psychologists who advocate a distinctly rationalist-inspired conception of the mind.<sup>3</sup> According to evolutionary psychologists, human minds have a rich, species-typical cognitive architecture composed of functionally distinct systems—“mental organs” as Steven Pinker has called them—that have been shaped by natural selection over millions of years. Many of these mental organs embody complex, domain-specific algorithms and theories (or stores of information) which play a major role in shaping and constraining beliefs, preferences, emotional reactions, sexual behavior, and interpersonal relationships. This evolved psychology also plays a major role in shaping and constraining social institutions. In studying social and psychological phenomena, evo-

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pendence of reality or the possibility of knowing it (e.g., Pinker 1997, 57). We use ‘social constructionism’ for the more limited and *prima facie* more plausible view that particular features of human psychology or social life are culturally caused and local in character. A second source of confusion is that ‘social constructionist’ as we use it includes theorists who do not characterize themselves as social constructionists, but nonetheless endorse the cultural locality of a given phenomenon. Finally, “social constructionism” thus characterized picks out only one portion of the more extensive doctrine Tooby and Cosmides call the Standard Social Sciences Model (1992, 31–32). Closely enough, then, all SSSM advocates are social constructionists in our sense, though not all social constructionists need endorse every aspect of SSSM as characterized by Tooby and Cosmides. Still, we take it that the examples of social constructionists we discuss and the doctrines they hold are paradigmatic examples of SSSM advocates.

2. See, e.g., Lutz 1988, Kessler and McKenna 1977, Oberoi 1994, Shweder 1985.

3. We use the term ‘evolutionary psychologist’ expansively to include a variety of naturalistic psychological approaches of the sort sketched below. The term has recently been used proprietarily to refer to evolutionary approaches of the sort favored by John Tooby, Leda Cosmides and Steven Pinker (Tooby and Cosmides 1992, Pinker 1997). This latter group is distinguished by its commitment to the thesis of “massive modularity”: the claim that a great many (perhaps even all) mental processes, including core cognitive processes, are subserved by domain-specific mechanisms.

lutionary psychologists focus on commonalties rather than differences, and in explaining these commonalties they emphasize the contributions of innate, information-rich mental mechanisms that were selected to be adaptive in the sorts of environments in which humans evolved.

Advocates of the SSSM have little sympathy with this quest for cross-cultural patterns and universal features of human psychology. The highly influential anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, apparently doubts that there are any substantive universals to be found. "There is," he writes, "a logical conflict between asserting that, say, 'religion', 'marriage', or 'property' are empirical universals and giving them very much in the way of specific content, for to say that they are empirical universals is to say that they have the same content, and to say they have the same content is to fly in the face of the undeniable fact that they do not" (Geertz 1973, 39).

Evolutionary psychologists are not much moved by this sort of skepticism, however. On their view the demand for exceptionless universals sets the standard too high. According to Tooby and Cosmides,

Whenever it is suggested that something is "innate" or "biological," the SSSM-oriented anthropologist or sociologist rifles through the ethnographic literature to find a report of a culture where the behavior (or whatever) varies. . . . Upon finding an instance of reported variation, the item is moved from the category of "innate," "biological," "genetically determined," or "hardwired" to the category of "learned," "cultural," or "socially constructed." . . . Because almost everything human is variable in one respect or another, nearly everything has been subtracted from the "biologically determined" column and moved to the "socially determined" column. The leftover residue of "human nature," after this process of subtraction has been completed, is weak tea indeed. (1992, 43)

On the face of it, the dispute between social constructionists and evolutionary psychologists has two major and interrelated components. First, there is an empirical disagreement about the extent to which all normal humans share innate, informationally-rich mental mechanisms that strongly constrain our psychology and our social interactions and institutions. Second, there is a strategic or methodological disagreement—a disagreement about the best way to make progress in understanding psychological and social phenomena. Evolutionary psychologists urge that we focus on what people have in common, while social constructionists think that it is more important to attend to the many ways in which people differ. We do not deny that there are real and important disagreements on both of these points. But it is our contention, and one of the central theses of this paper, that there is a third, much less obvious issue dividing social constructionists and evolutionary psychologists. This disagreement

is not an empirical dispute about the nature of the human mind nor is it a methodological dispute about the best way of studying minds and social phenomena. Rather, it is a *semantic* disagreement (or perhaps it is better described as a *philosophical* disagreement—we've never been very clear about how much of semantics counts as philosophy). What is at issue is the *meaning* and *reference* of many ordinary terms for mental states, and for other psychological and social phenomena—terms like 'anger', 'disgust', 'gender', and 'homosexuality'.

We think it is crucially important to bring this covert component of the dispute out into the open. When we have a clear view of the role that this third component of the dispute is playing, it will also become clear that this philosophical dispute can easily be bracketed and set aside. Evolutionary psychologists could easily accept the semantic assumptions made by social constructionists—if only for argument's sake—without changing in the least the claims they want to make about minds, evolution, and social interactions. Moreover, and this is the other central thesis of this paper, once the philosophical dispute has been set aside, the remaining empirical and methodological disagreements between social constructionists and evolutionary psychologists look much less serious. When the fog that the philosophical dispute engenders has been cleared, social constructionists and evolutionary psychologists look less like adversaries and more like natural partners.

In this paper our focus will be on the dispute between evolutionary psychology and social constructionist approaches to the emotions, though we think that much of what we say is more generally applicable. The emotions are a crucial case, both because they play a central role in discussions of other social and psychological phenomena like violence, sexual behavior, religious practices, and moral beliefs, and also because there has been extensive research on the emotions within both an evolutionary psychology paradigm and a social constructionist paradigm. In fact, when reading this literature, it is easy to get the feeling that each side considers the emotions one of its success stories.

Here is how we will proceed. In Section 2, we will give a brief overview of the social constructionist approach by sketching a few details from Catherine Lutz's (1988) widely admired study of the emotions of the Ifaluk, inhabitants of a Micronesian atoll. In Section 3, we will provide a quick review of work on emotions in the evolutionary psychology tradition and set out a model of the psychological mechanisms underlying the emotions drawn from recent work in that tradition. Though there are lots of disagreements over how the details are to be filled in, there is a growing consensus among evolutionary psychologists on the broad outlines of the sort of model we will describe. At the core of this model is an innate, evolved system for triggering and sequencing emotional responses, present

in all normal humans. Another important feature of the model is that it allows for quite extensive cross-cultural variation both in the circumstances that provoke various emotions and in the patterns of behavior that the emotions produce. Since this sort of variation is a central theme in social constructionist accounts of the emotions, one might well wonder whether social constructionists and evolutionary psychologists have anything left to disagree about.

The answer, as we will demonstrate in Section 4, is *yes*. For while evolutionary psychologists agree that emotions can be provoked by different situations in different cultures, and that they can give rise to quite different patterns of behavior, they maintain that the emotions themselves are cross-cultural universals. Fear, anger, sadness, and other emotions can be found in all cultures. And this is a claim that many social constructionists vigorously dispute. Must social constructionists then reject the sort of nativistic, evolutionary psychological model of the emotions set out in Section 3? Here, we think, the answer is *no*. For, as we will argue in Section 5, social constructionists can maintain that emotions like fear and anger are not cross-cultural universals and *still* accept the evolutionary psychologists' account of the mechanisms underlying the emotions, provided that they accept what we will call a *thick description* account of the meaning and reference of ordinary language emotion terms. And, it is our contention that, either explicitly or tacitly, most social constructionists do indeed assume that a thick description account is correct. But we will also note that the thick description account of meaning and reference is not the only game in town. There are numerous alternative accounts of meaning and reference to choose from, some of which will not sustain the social constructionists' claim that emotions are culturally-local.

In Section 6, we will begin by asking which account of the meaning and reference of emotion terms is correct, and go on to suggest that no one really knows and that the question itself may not be clear enough to *have* a determinate answer. But we will also argue that *it really doesn't matter* which side is right since it is easy to see how this dispute can be bracketed and set aside. Moreover, and this is the essential point, once we set aside this dispute over the reference of emotion terms, it is far from clear that any deep disagreements between social constructionist and evolutionary psychological accounts remain. The philosophically motivated controversy about universality is little more than a distraction which obscures the fact that the findings and theories produced on both sides of the divide, far from being in competition with one another, are actually complementary. Many people will find our conclusion quite startling since it is widely believed that the battle between social constructionists and evolutionary psychologists is driven by radically different views about the nature of minds, social institutions and human kinds. If we are right, there is rela-

tively little fundamental disagreement about any of these matters. What drives the dispute is a covert philosophical disagreement whose resolution is of little moment to those on either side.

**2. The Social Constructionist Approach to the Emotions.** When studying the emotions, as when studying other social and psychological phenomena, social constructionists are primarily concerned to describe the rich, multifaceted, culturally-local network in which the phenomena are embedded. Since many social constructionists concerned with the emotions are anthropologists, problems of translation are a major concern. Thus their inquiry often begins by focusing on the *words* for emotions that are used in the culture they are studying and the problem of how those words should be translated. In order to accomplish this task, social constructionists pay careful attention to a number of interrelated aspects of emotion discourse and behavior in the target culture, including:

- i) the often very complex circumstances in which people in that culture claim that they or others experience the emotions picked out by various emotion words
- ii) the pattern of inferences that are drawn when someone is believed to be experiencing the emotion
- iii) the patterns of interaction that exist (and/or that people in the culture *believe* to exist) among the emotions and also among emotions and other mental states and among emotions and various sorts of behavior; some of these interactions will be within a single person while others involve two or more people
- iv) the ways in which both emotions and discourse about emotions interact with the moral, political and economic lives of the people in the culture.

When done well, the detailed “ethnopsychological” accounts that result from studies of this sort—“thick descriptions” as Geertz would call them—can be fascinating. Part of what makes them so interesting is that many of the patterns described are wonderfully exotic, differing in surprising and unexpected ways from the patterns of interaction in which our own emotions and emotion language are embedded.

To see how all this works in practice, let us briefly review Lutz’s account of the emotion that the Ifaluk people call ‘*song*’. *Song* is an emotion akin to the one that we call ‘anger’, though in contrast with anger, there is a strong moral component to *song*. In order to count as being or feeling *song*, an Ifaluk must be *justifiably* angry at another person who has engaged in morally inappropriate behavior. The Ifaluk have an array of other terms for types of anger that do not involve this moral dimension: ‘*tipmochmoch*’ for the irritability that often accompanies sickness, ‘*linger-*

*inger*' for anger that builds up slowly when one is confronted with a series of minor annoyances, etc. (1988, 157). But they have no generic term that picks out all and only these various sorts of anger (Lutz, pers. comm.).

There are various sorts of moral transgression that can provoke *song*. Lutz's account of these reasons or triggering conditions for the emotion make it clear how the emotion is woven into the fabric of Ifaluk society, and also how very different that society is from ours. One important category of events that can provoke *song* is the violation of a taboo, and among the Ifaluk taboos are not in short supply. There are taboos that apply only to women (they are forbidden to enter the canoe houses or to work in the taro gardens when they are menstruating) and others that apply only to men (they are not to enter birth houses). Other taboos apply to everyone. Violation of these taboos provokes *song* among the chiefs who may impose fines or other punishments. On a less public level, *song* is often provoked when people fail to live up to their obligation to share (160) or when they are lazy, loud, or disrespectful. (165) From a Western perspective, one of the stranger features of *song* is that it can be provoked by a sort of excited happiness that the Ifaluk call '*ker*'. "Happiness/excitement," Lutz reports, "is an emotion people see as pleasant but amoral. It is often, in fact, *immoral* because someone who is happy/excited is more likely to be unafraid of other people. While this lack of fear may lead them to laugh and talk with other people, it may also make them misbehave or walk around showing off" (167).

Just as the circumstances that can provoke *song* are different from those that can provoke anger in our culture, so too is the pattern of behavior that a *song* person may display. In the West, anger often leads to physical confrontation and sometimes to violence. But among the Ifaluk, according to Lutz, "it is expected that those who are justifiably angry [*song*] will *not* physically aggress against another. And in fact, interpersonal violence is virtually nonexistent on the island." (176) Some of the behavior that the Ifaluk exhibit when they are *song* is familiar enough. They may refuse to speak or eat with the offending party or produce a facial expression indicative of disapproval. But other *song*-induced behavior is rather more exotic. People often react to *song* by gossiping about the offending person so that he or she may learn indirectly that someone claims to be justifiably angry with them (175). In extreme cases they may threaten to burn down the offending person's house (171) or fast or threaten suicide (174).

When people learn that they are the object of another person's *song*, the typical reaction is to experience the emotion that the Ifaluk call '*metagu*' which Lutz characterizes as a sort of fear or anxiety. *Metagu* can be brought on by circumstances other than the *song* of another—strange situations is one that Lutz mentions (186)—but the term is not used for the sort of fear produced by sudden and unexpected events like the falling of

a coconut nearby (202), nor is it used for the fearful emotion produced by events like the erratic behavior of a drunk. (203) When offenders experience *metagu*, it leads them to behave more calmly and appropriately and it also often leads them to take some corrective action like apologizing, paying a fine levied by the chiefs, or sending some object of value to the aggrieved parties or their families. This causes those experiencing *song* to “forget their justifiable anger” (175). Figure 1 is Lutz’s sketch of some of the relationships among *song*, *metagu*, and *ker*.

As noted earlier, the Ifaluk concept of *song*, in contrast with the Western notion of anger, is intrinsically tied to moral concerns. One *cannot* be *song* unless one’s anger is justified. And, according to the prevailing moral views, if two people are involved in a dispute, only one can *really* be *song*, regardless of what the other person may think about the emotion he or she is experiencing. (173) Not surprisingly, “daily negotiations over who is *song* and over the proper reasons for that anger lie at the heart of the politics of everyday life” (170). It would, of course, be quite bizarre for two people in our culture to assume that only one could be genuinely angry with the other and to argue about which one it was. In this way, our conception of anger seems quite different from the Ifaluk conception of *song*. Nor is it clear that we have *any* notion that corresponds all that closely to *song*, since even our notion of justifiable anger can be and often

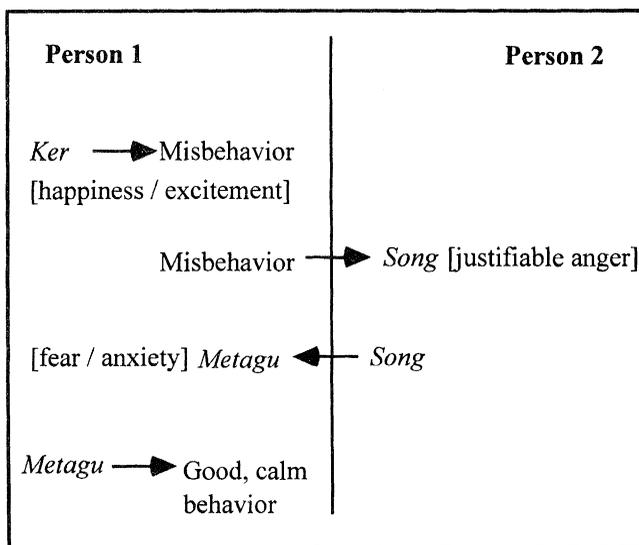


Figure 1. Lutz’s account of the interrelationships among *song*, *metagu*, and *ker*. (Lutz 1988 168)

is applicable to *both* parties to a dispute. *Metagu* also has a role to play in the moral and political life of the Ifaluk community, since people who describe themselves as *metagu* declare themselves to be harmless and in accord with the moral code of the island (201–202).

What we have presented in this section is only a fragment of the complex cultural web into which the emotional life of the Ifaluk is woven. Our goal has been to illustrate the social constructionist approach to the study of emotion and to provide a few examples of the sort of culturally-local facts that play a central role in the ethnopsychological descriptions of those who adopt this approach.

**3. The Evolutionary Psychology Account of the Emotions.** The account of the emotions on which we believe contemporary evolutionary psychologists are converging had its beginnings in Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872 [1998]). Darwin pioneered a technique in which subjects are shown photographs of emotionally expressive faces and asked to identify the emotion that the person is experiencing. Using this test Darwin demonstrated that people are capable of identifying emotions from facial displays with considerable reliability. However, Darwin used the technique only on English test subjects. To learn about other cultures, he relied on an extensive correspondence with missionaries, traders, and others. Unfortunately, the questionnaires he used included some rather leading questions, rendering his cross-cultural findings suspect.

In part because of these methodological problems, Darwin's work on facial expressions made relatively little impact until, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of researchers, including Paul Ekman, Wallace Friesen, and Carol Izard began using Darwin's experimental strategy with subjects from non-Western cultures. The results of this work have become quite famous and have made a major impact on subsequent research on the emotions. In one series of experiments, members of the preliterate Fore language group in Papua New Guinea, who had rarely if ever seen Western faces before Ekman and his colleagues arrived, succeeded in picking out photos of Western faces that expressed the emotions involved in various emotionally charged stories. The Fore were also asked to show how their own faces would look if the events in the stories happened to them. American university students who were shown video tapes of the faces that the Fore produced were comparably successful matching the faces with the intended emotion (Ekman and Friesen 1971). These results, along with much other cross-cultural work on the facial expression of emotion, have convinced many investigators that there do indeed exist *universal* facial expressions for some emotions including happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust. In later work Ekman and others have also accumulated evi-

dence indicating that some of these emotions are accompanied by characteristic patterns of autonomic nervous system activity (Ekman, Levenson, and Friesen 1983; Levenson 1992).

To explain these findings, Ekman and his colleagues posited the existence of *affect programs* associated with each emotion. Affect programs can be thought of as universal and largely automated or involuntary suites of coordinated emotional responses that are subserved by evolved, innate mental and physiological mechanisms present in all normal members of the species.

While the immediate consequences of the initiation of an affect program are taken to be universal, Ekman and his colleagues recognized early on that behaviors further along in the causal stream may be strongly influenced by culture. One of the most dramatic examples of this was Ekman's demonstration that when Japanese subjects were shown unpleasant films in the presence of an authority figure they would begin the muscle contractions required to produce the facial expressions of negative emotions, but then immediately mask these expressions with a polite smile. American subjects, by contrast, made no attempt to mask the expression of negative emotions, nor did Japanese subjects when they viewed the distressing films alone. Ekman and his colleagues explained these findings by positing the existence of culturally-local "display rules" which can override or radically alter the pattern of emotional expression after an affect program has begun to unfold (Ekman 1972). In subsequent work, other researchers in the evolutionary psychology tradition have expanded and elaborated upon this idea, positing display rules and other sorts of culturally-local mental representations that affect not only facial expressions but also tone of voice, posture, self reports about one's emotional experience, and other cognitive and behavioral patterns that follow after the initiation of an affect program (Hochschild 1979, Mesquita and Frijda 1992, Levenson 1994).

What is it that initiates or "triggers" an affect program? What gets it going? In the mid-1970s Ekman proposed that the system of affect programs was linked to an innate "appraisal mechanism" which selectively attends to those stimuli (external or internal) that are the occasion for one or another emotion. Once it is triggered by appropriate stimuli, the appraisal mechanism operates automatically and initiates the appropriate affect program. It is not clear whether Ekman ever thought that there are some stimuli which the appraisal mechanism is built to respond to directly, without the mediation of other cognitive states and processes. But by the mid-1990s he had come to believe that just about all the activity of the appraisal mechanism was affected by culturally-local factors (Ekman 1994, 16).

Similar proposals have been developed by a number of other research-

ers. One sophisticated example of these is found in the work of Richard Lazarus who considers the problem of “reconciling biological universals with cultural sources of variability” to be among the most important issues that a theory of emotion must resolve. (1994, 163) On Lazarus’ theory, each emotion is innately linked to an abstractly characterized set of conditions specifying the circumstances under which it is appropriate to have the emotion. Since these conditions specify relations in which a person may stand to some aspect of the physical or social environment, Lazarus calls them “core relational themes” (1994, 164). Some examples of the core relational themes Lazarus proposes are:

- Anger*     A demeaning offense against me and mine
- Fright*     An immediate, concrete, and overwhelming physical danger
- Sadness*   Having experienced an irrevocable loss (1994, 164)

Lazarus thinks of the link between core relational themes and emotions as a sort of innate “if-then form of reasoning.” “[I]f a person appraises his or her relationship to the environment in a particular way, then a specific emotion—which is tied to the appraisal pattern—always follows. . . . The ‘if-then’ formula is, in effect, a *psychobiological principle*, which helps us understand universals in the antecedents of emotions” (1994, 165). But, of course, it will typically require *lots* of cognitive activity for a person to determine that a situation specified in one of the core relational themes obtains. And this cognitive activity, which must occur before the appraisal mechanism triggers the emotion, will be very much dependent on culturally-local beliefs, values, and expectations. What counts as a demeaning offense in one culture may be no offense at all in another, and one often must know a great deal about both a culture and its environment to realize that one is in great physical danger.

Putting all of these ideas together, Robert Levenson has offered the “biocultural model” of the emotions, depicted in Figure 2, which “reflects a confluence between innate and learned influences” (Levenson 1994, 125). The “innate hardwired” parts of the model—corresponding roughly to Ekman’s appraisal and affect program mechanisms—are in the center of the diagram, between the black panels. Those panels are “the primary loci of cultural influences” and can include local knowledge and belief, local values, and display rules of various sorts.

While those who study emotion in the evolutionary psychology tradition disagree, often quite vigorously, about lots of the details, we think that most of them would concede that a model like Levenson’s is on the right track—that *something* along those lines will be needed to explain both the innate and universal aspects of the emotions and the enormous cultural variability in the circumstances that elicit emotions and in the behavioral and cognitive consequences that emotions produce.

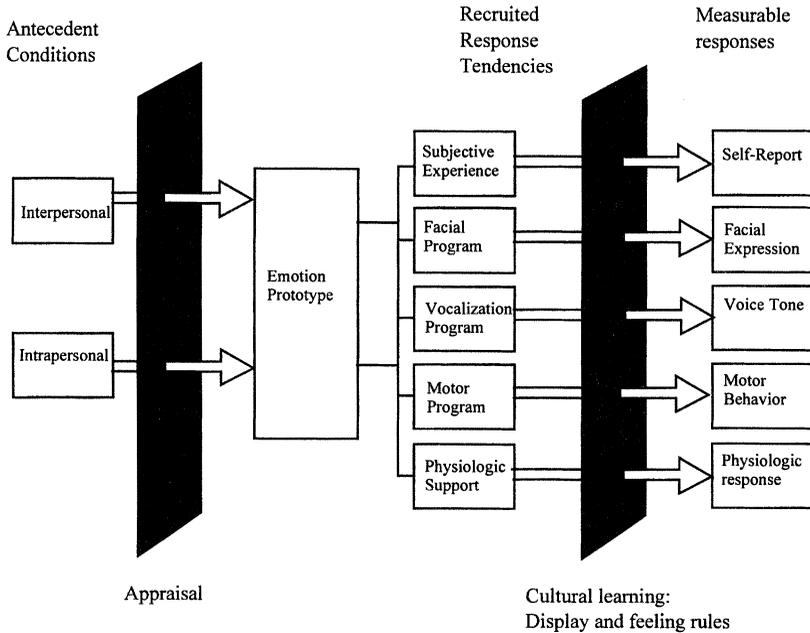


Figure 2. Levenson's Biocultural Model (1994, 126).

**4. The Debate Over Universality.** From what we have said so far about social constructionist and evolutionary psychological approaches to the emotions, the reader might well wonder where evolutionary psychologists and social constructionists *disagree*? There is no obvious logical incompatibility in the two accounts that we have presented. Quite the opposite. An evolutionary psychologist might well take on board much of Lutz's detailed ethnopsychology as an illustration of one of the ways in which the black panels in Levenson's model can be filled in. Lutz describes local knowledge, beliefs, and values among the Ifaluk that determine such things as what sorts of behavior is offensive and how one is expected to behave when angered by an offense of that sort, or what sorts of situations are dangerous and how best to deal with that kind of danger, and so on. And this is just the sort of information needed for "appraisal" of the situation and for determining a culturally appropriate response. Social constructionists, for their part, could embrace a model like Levenson's as providing a framework for a theory about the psychological mechanisms underlying many of the phenomena that Lutz and other anthropologists have described, a framework that would explain how innate mechanisms interact with culturally-local beliefs and values. But if the two research

programs fit together so nicely, why does it often seem that the two sides are at war? What is all the fighting about?

The answer, or at least one important part of the answer, is that evolutionary psychologists and social constructionists are inclined to make very different claims about the *universality* of emotions. For theorists like Ekman and Lazarus, the psychological mechanisms between the black panels in Levenson's diagram are innate adaptations, present in all normal humans. Moreover, when the appraisal system (whose innate components are housed in the box labeled "Emotion prototype" in Levenson's model) determines that the abstract conditions (or the "core relational theme") appropriate to fear or anger or sadness have been satisfied, *fear or anger or sadness ensues*. Since situations that satisfy the abstract conditions are present in all cultures (though these situations may be quite different in different cultures), people in all cultures will experience these emotions. Indeed, since evolutionary psychologists maintain that some of the mechanisms in models like Levenson's are homologous to mechanisms in other species, they are not at all uncomfortable about attributing some emotions to members of other species (Lazarus 1994, 170).

Social constructionists, for the most part, will have none of this. For them, emotions are culturally-local phenomena, and thus people in very different cultures typically have very different emotions. *Song* and *metagu* are Ifaluk emotions which outsiders do not experience. *Amae* is a Japanese emotion that is unknown (or at least unrecognized) in the West.<sup>4</sup> And *accidie* is an emotion that once was widespread in the West but now has disappeared.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is not just exotic emotions like *metagu* or *amae* that social constructionists have claimed to be culturally-local. They make much the same claim for emotions that are commonplace in our own culture. So, for example, Jean Briggs (1970) claims that anger is unknown among the Inuit, and Averill agrees that "anger as a *specific emotion*" is not "universal across all cultures" (1994, 143; italics in original). Robert Levy (1984) suggests that sadness is unknown amongst Tahitians. And, perhaps most radically of all, Richard Shweder (1994) maintains not only that there are no universal emotions, but also that there may well be some cultures in which there are no emotions at all!

4. Harré maintains that "The Japanese . . . create and sustain an emotion, *amae*, quite distinct from anything found in the adult repertoire of Western cultures" (1986, 10). The Japanese psychiatrist Doi characterizes *amae* as "a sense of helplessness and the desire to be loved." (Quoted in Morsbach and Tyler 1986, 290.)

5. Harré and Finlay-Jones 1986. Harré writes: "I offer *accidie* as an example of an obsolete emotion, since I think modern people do not associate any specific emotion with laziness or procrastination in the carrying out of tasks that duty demands. . . . The basic idea of *accidie* was boredom, dejection or even disgust with fulfilling one's religious duty" (221).

**5. The Philosophical Origin of the Dispute.** What is going on here? How could researchers whose theories appear to complement each other so nicely disagree so sharply about the universality of emotions? Since they have no fundamental disagreements about the psychological mechanisms underlying the emotions<sup>6</sup> or about the important role that culturally-local beliefs, preferences, and values play in people's emotional lives, why are they at loggerheads about the cultural locality of emotions? The answer, we maintain, or at least one very important part of the answer, is that social constructionists and evolutionary psychologists have a deep though largely hidden *philosophical* disagreement—a disagreement about the meaning and the reference of the emotion terms that ordinary folk use, words like 'anger', 'metagu', 'fear', and 'song'. To make the point, we will begin by sketching one version of what is perhaps the most widely held view, among philosophers, about the meaning and reference of terms about mental states. We will then argue that if one held this view one might agree that Levenson's model (or something very like it) was the correct account of the psychological mechanisms underlying the emotions, *and still insist that emotions are culturally-local*.

The account of the meaning of mental state terms that we will present is a version of what is sometimes called *analytic functionalism*, though for reasons that will soon be obvious, we prefer to call it *the description theory*. Views like it have been endorsed by many philosophers, most notably David Lewis. As we view the description theory, it makes three interrelated claims. The first is that the mental state terms of ordinary language can be treated as *theoretical* terms. The second is that theoretical terms are implicitly defined by the theory in which they are embedded. Building on a strategy first proposed by Ramsey, Lewis showed how the implicit definition that a theory provides for its theoretical terms can be turned into an explicit definition in the form of a *definite description* of the theoretical entities being defined.<sup>7</sup> There is an important sense in which the implicit definitions provided by a theory are *holistic* since the theory implicitly defines *all* its theoretical terms in one fell swoop, and in the definite descriptions that explicitly define each theoretical term, the entire theory plays a role in determining the content of the description. The third claim of the description theory is that the theory which implicitly defines ordinary mental state terms is commonsense (or "folk") psychology, which Lewis characterizes as our "extensive, shared understanding of how we work mentally"—an understanding that "is common knowledge among

6. Indeed, social constructionists rarely say *anything at all* about the psychological and physiological mechanisms that subserve emotions, though they do not deny the existence of such mechanisms (see, e.g., Lutz 1988, 210).

7. For further details, see Lewis 1970, 1972, or Stich 1996, 74ff.

us" (1994, 416). On Lewis's view, our commonsense psychological theory implicitly defines *all* of our ordinary language mental state terms, including terms for the basic propositional attitudes (like 'belief' and 'desire'), terms for qualitative states (like 'pain'), and terms for the emotions. Thus mental state concepts are, to use David Armstrong's memorable phrase, "package deal concepts" (1968, 253). If Lewis's description theory, or something close to it, is the correct theory about the meaning of ordinary mental state terms, then a culture's folk psychological theory implicitly defines their emotion terms, and to fully understand the meaning of one ordinary language emotion term in a culture requires knowing the meanings of all the others.

The ethnopsychological accounts provided by researchers like Lutz are intended *inter alia* to describe part of the folk psychology of the culture being studied. The beliefs about the causes, effects, and moral implications of emotions that Lutz reports are common knowledge (or at least common *belief*) among the Ifaluk. But how much of this belief structure are we to count as part of the Ifaluk's commonsense *psychology*, and thus as contributing to the meaning of their emotion terms? Lewis offers little guidance here, and opinions may differ. Those who would include within the purview of commonsense psychology only a relatively small part of an ethnopsychology like the one Lutz offers adopt what we propose to call an *austere* account of folk psychology, while those who would include much more of a Lutz-style ethnopsychology within folk psychology advocate what we shall call an *opulent* view of folk psychology.<sup>8</sup> This terminology can be extended, in an obvious way, to apply to description theories of meaning as well. An *opulent description theory* is one that maintains that a great deal of ethnopsychology contributes to the meaning of mental state terms, while an *austere description theory* holds that only a much smaller part of ethnopsychology is relevant to the meaning of these terms.

So much for the *meaning* of mental state terms. Now what about their *reference*? To what things in the world do these terms refer? Since the explicit definitions of mental state terms, on a theory like Lewis's, take the form of definite descriptions, the most obvious proposal is that the terms refer to those things in the world that satisfy the descriptions—the things the descriptions are true of. But, as Lewis noted long ago (1972, 210ff.), this would be a rather extreme doctrine, since if any aspect of a folk psychological theory turned out to be mistaken, then *all* the mental state terms that the theory implicitly defined would end up referring to

8. The terms 'opulent' and 'austere' are borrowed from Horgan and Graham 1990, though the meanings we have assigned them are not quite the ones that Horgan and Graham propose.

nothing at all. The remedy, Lewis proposed, is to require that the referents of mental state terms *more or less* satisfy the descriptions provided by folk theory. But how much is that, exactly? The answer, of course, is that Lewis's proposal is vague, and different theorists may wish to diminish the vagueness by insisting on a more or less stringent standard. On what we will call the *high accuracy* end of the spectrum are those who insist that a mental state term refers to a state only if *most* of what folk psychology says about states of that kind is true of the state in question. On the *low accuracy* end of the spectrum are those who will allow much more error in folk psychology before concluding that the terms of folk psychology do not refer. One final bit of terminology: We shall use the term *thick description theory* for accounts that combine an *opulent* description theory of the meaning of mental state terms with a *high accuracy* theory of reference for those terms.

What does all of this have to do with the dispute between social constructionists and evolutionary psychologists? To see the connection, let's assume that a theorist has adopted a thick description theory for the meaning and reference of emotion terms. What might such a theorist conclude about the universality or cultural locality of emotions? Lutz and her fellow ethnopsychologists tell us a great deal about the common knowledge about mental states that people in a culture share. Among the Ifaluk, for example, it is common knowledge that if a man comes into the birthing house, or if a woman works in the taro gardens when she is menstruating, it will provoke *song* in those who know about it. And it is common knowledge that when one realizes one is the object of someone's *song*, one typically experiences *metagu*. On an opulent description theory, these and many other similar claims are part of the folk psychological knowledge of the Ifaluk and thus they contribute to the meaning of '*song*' and '*metagu*'. Moreover, on a thick description account of reference, which requires high accuracy, most of these claims must be true of a mental state if it is to count as an instance of *song* or *metagu*. But, of course, in our culture there is no mental state that satisfies (or comes close to satisfying) the thick description that Lutz provides for *song* and *metagu*. If we learn that someone we know has worked in a taro garden while menstruating, it provokes no emotion at all. So there is no mental state in *our* culture that counts as an instance of *song*. *Song* does not exist here.

Much the same applies in the opposite direction. It is common knowledge in our culture that if someone burns the national flag, shouts racial epithets, reaches out and touches a stranger, or gives someone "the finger," it is likely to provoke anger in those around him, and that that anger will often lead to a heated exchange of words and occasionally to physical confrontation and violence. On an opulent account, these and many similar commonly-known facts are part of *our* folk psychological theory and

thus part of the meaning of our term ‘anger’. For a thick description theorist, most of them must be true of a mental state if that state is to count as an instance of anger. But situations like these would not provoke any emotion among the Ifaluk, and (if Lutz is right) no mental state there is likely to lead to violence. So, if one accepts a thick description account of the reference of emotion terms, it follows that among the Ifaluk, *anger does not exist*.

It is important to note that the argument leading to these conclusions is quite independent of any views one might have about the psychological mechanisms underlying the emotions. All that matters is that emotion terms get their meaning from the relevant folk psychological theory, that folk theories are construed opulently and differ substantially in different cultures, and that most of what the folk theory says about a state must be true if the state is to count as an instance of the emotion in question.

What we have argued so far is that *if* one accepted a thick description account of the meaning and reference of emotion terms, then in light of the facts that Lutz and others report one should conclude that the emotions denoted by commonsense emotion terms are culturally-local. But is this what leads social constructionists to this conclusion? Do *they* accept a thick description theory? Here, we must admit, the answer is less than clear cut. The social constructionist anthropologists and psychologists who study the emotions rarely set out and defend their semantic views in any systematic way, nor do they pay careful attention to the distinctions between meaning and reference or use and mention that are so central to philosophical discussion. Still, we think there is good reason to suspect that something somewhere in the vicinity of the thick description theory is indeed playing an important role in the thinking of many social constructionists. Consider, for example, the following passage from Shweder:

Across languages, the range of implications, suggestions, and connotations of psychological state terms do not easily map, at least not *lexically*; and to adequately understand the meaning of the terms in either language is to understand a good deal about different local systems of values and particular ways of life. Under such circumstances of hazardous lexical mapping, any strong claim about the distribution around the world of the “emotions,” as we define them, is bound to be controversial. (1994, 33–34; italics and quotation marks in the original)

Since Shweder thinks that understanding the meaning of psychological state terms requires understanding a good deal about local values and ways of life, and since he takes this to be relevant to the distribution of the emotions themselves, we don’t think it is too much of a stretch to see something like a thick description theory hovering in the wings. This impression is re-

inforced by another passage in which Shweder invokes the same “package deal” metaphor that Armstrong used in one of the earliest formulations of the description theory (or “analytic functionalism”) (1994, 36).

Similar ideas about meaning can be found in Lutz:

Emotion words are treated here as coalescences of complex ethno-theoretical ideas about the nature of self and social interaction. . . . To understand the meaning of an emotion word is to be able to envisage (and perhaps to find oneself able to participate in) a complicated scene with actors, actions, interpersonal relationships in a particular state of repair, moral points of view, facial expressions, personal and social goals, and sequences of events. (1988, 10)

Here again we think it is plausible to think that if Lutz were to recast these ideas in the vocabulary favored by analytic philosophers, the result would bear more than a passing resemblance to the thick description theory.

Now what about those on the other side—the evolutionary psychologists who champion a “biosocial” model—what account of meaning and reference do they accept? It is impossible to give a positive answer to this question, since the evolutionary psychologists who study emotions say little about semantics. However, it is possible to give a negative answer. Since theorists in this tradition insist that emotions like fear and anger are to be found in *all* human cultures and probably in many other species as well, and since they recognize that there are significant cross-cultural differences in the situations which provoke these emotions and the behaviors they lead to, they *cannot* accept a thick description account of the reference of emotion terms. For ‘fear’ and ‘anger’ are terms in English and, as we saw earlier, the thick description theory entails that if a mental state does not share most of the causes and effects of anger that are commonly known among English speakers, then that state does not count as an instance of anger. Also, though the point is less important for our purposes, since evolutionary psychologists sometimes claim that there are terms synonymous with English emotion terms in languages whose speakers have folk psychological theories that are significantly different from ours, they cannot accept an opulent description theory of the meaning of emotion terms. Being unable to accept thick description theories of meaning and reference is hardly a major embarrassment for evolutionary psychologists, since those theories are far from the only games in town. And among the alternatives available, there are some—most notably *causal/historical* theories of reference (Putnam 1975, Devitt and Sterelny 1987)—that would enable evolutionary psychologists to say what they want to say about the universality of emotions while not in the least contesting that Lutz and others have demonstrated that ethnopsychologies differ quite substantially from one culture to another.

**6. Who's Right, and Why It Doesn't Matter.** What we have argued in the previous section is that the dispute between social constructionists and evolutionary psychologists over the universality of the emotions *could be* generated by a philosophical (or semantic) disagreement about the meaning and reference of ordinary language emotion terms. We also suggested, albeit more tentatively, that this philosophical disagreement *is* largely responsible for the dispute, though the point has gone almost entirely unnoticed by partisans on both sides. If we are correct, then the next obvious question to ask is: Who's right? Does the thick description theory give the correct account of the meaning and reference of commonsense mental state terms, or is the correct account to be found among one of the competing theories on which an emotion term may refer to a mental state even if much of what the relevant folk psychological theory claims about the state is not true? These are questions that are being hotly debated in the philosophical literature, and we will not even *try* to answer them here.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one of us has argued at some length that there is an important sense in which the questions *cannot* be answered until those debating them get a lot clearer than they are now on what facts a theory of reference must answer to and thus what counts as getting a theory of reference right (Stich 1996, Ch. 1).

This might sound like bad news, since if we cannot determine who's right about reference we cannot settle the debate about the universality of the emotions. But we are inclined to be rather more optimistic since, for two rather different reasons, *it really doesn't much matter who's right*. The first reason why it really doesn't matter is that if the debate about the universality of the emotions is indeed driven by disagreements about meaning and reference, then the debate is largely isolated from the rich bodies of empirical and theoretical work done by social constructionists and evolutionary psychologists. As we saw earlier, the social constructionist argument for the cultural locality of the emotions is *entirely independent* of any claims about the psychological mechanisms underlying the emotions. Thus a social constructionist who accepts a thick description theory of meaning and reference could perfectly well remain agnostic about, *or even endorse*, a model like Levenson's and *still* conclude that the emotions are culturally-local. All that's needed is the premise that ethnopscyhologies vary significantly from culture to culture. And this, as we have seen, is not a premise that evolutionary psychologists are in the least inclined to dispute. Quite the opposite; biosocial models like Levenson's are built to accommodate such diversity. But this is no impediment at all to evolutionary psychologists who want to insist on the universality of emotions. For they can simply adopt an account of meaning and reference

9. E.g. Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson 1996, Lycan 1988, Griffiths 1997, Recanati 1993.

on which an emotion term in English can refer to mental states in some other culture even if the ethnopsychology in that culture is significantly different from our own. If we are correct, it is the implicit adoption of a thick description theory on one side and an implicit rejection of it on the other which has given rise to the widespread perception that there is a substantial empirical dispute. On our view, this gives rise to the situation depicted in Figure 3.

The second reason why we think it doesn't much matter who's right is that, even on the contested issue of universality, no matter who is right about meaning and reference each side could perfectly well say what it wants to say, with the help of a bit of technical terminology. So, for example, if it turns out that a thick description theory gives the correct account of the reference of ordinary language emotion terms, then evolutionary psychologists must concede that fear and other emotions are not universal. Rather, there is a whole family of distinct emotions which are subserved by the same innate emotion prototype and affect program that subserve fear in us. But if we introduce a technical term to refer to *all* of these emotions—*core-fear*, perhaps—then the evolutionary psychologists

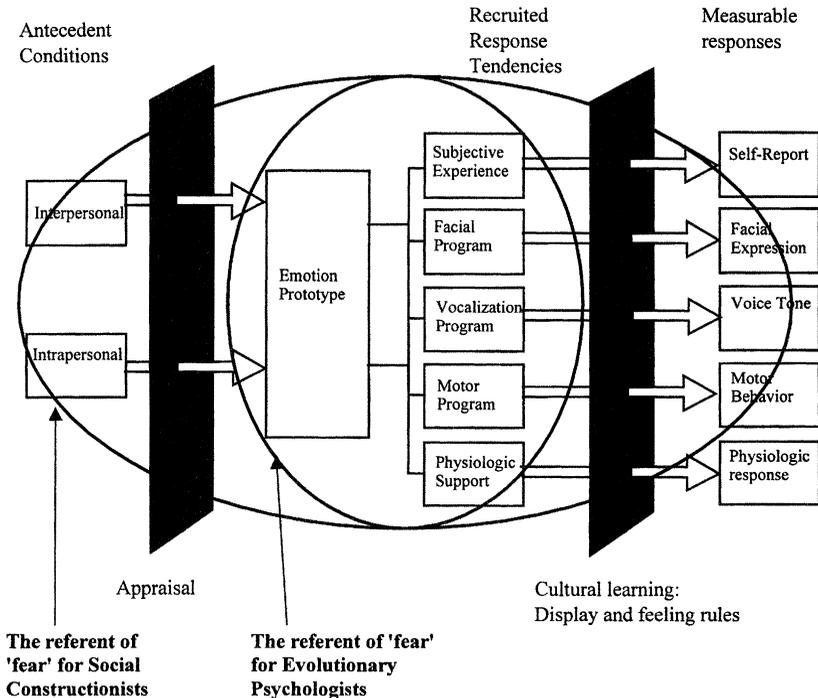


Figure 3. Will the *real* fear please stand up?

who have conceded that fear is *not* universal can go on to claim that core-fear is universal. And that, surely, is all they ever wanted to claim.

Once it is seen how the debate over the universality of the emotions is rooted in a dispute about the meaning and reference of emotion terms, and how little it matters who is right in *that* dispute, it may be much easier for evolutionary psychologists and social constructionists to stop seeing each other as adversaries and start seeing each other as natural allies in the attempt to understand the emotions. We believe it is time for this odd couple to stop the philosophical quarreling and to recognize how compatible their theories are and how nicely they complement each other.

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