Universal Human Rights and the Problem of Unbounded Cultural Meanings

IN A POWERFUL Anthropology Newsletter commentary, Gene Hammel asks, "By what principle short of imperialism do we insist on the application of civil or human rights in societies that have not come to these ideas through their own histories?" (1994:48).

Hammel intentionally asks the wrong question. To highlight his argument, he chose a provocative formulation that rests on a series of commonplace assumptions, most of which are invalid. To wit: "culture," understood as knowledge/mental constructions/symbols/meanings, is a "learned" phenomenon distinct from "biological," "psychological," and "sociological" phenomena, and it is coterminous with and owned by people who claim particular ethnic or national (read "cultural") identities, such as the Fon of West Africa, the Navaho of the U.S. Southwest, or the Nayar of India. Given this view, which objectifies "culture" and essentializes its "owners," different cultures cannot be other than different (see McGrane 1989). Cultural differences at one point in time merely constitute standards and meanings situated at specific places and times by different historical flows of events and concrete social interactions, which, because of differences in history and context, must be what is "best" for each. Hammel thus asks a rhetorical question. By ingenuously ignoring "internal" power differences and unquestioningly equating "different" with "best," we rule out the possibility of universal human rights. Consequently, we don't ask the pertinent question: Even if people do not call them by our words, do universal human rights exist?

This essay argues that certain human "rights" are universally perceived and experienced and take predictable expression. Another way to make the same claim is to say that all people, everywhere, evaluate specific experiences with essentially the same criteria.

Freedom from violence stands as an important candidate for a universal human right because, particularly when violence is experienced in childhood, it appears to generate a distinctive syndrome of self-destructive emotions and behavior which accounts for an extraordinary proportion of national health care budgets, pulls money out of health care and into criminal justice systems, and constrains economic productivity and growth (Handwerker 1993c).

Violence as Meaning That Arises from Social Interaction

Researchers in the social and behavioral sciences, medicine, and public health have barely begun the process of delineating the nature of violent events and processes. Accumulated neurological studies suggest that they may be mediated or expressed through variation in neurotransmitter levels that regulate fear, anger, depression, and their behavioral expression (e.g., Essman and Essman 1986; Valzelli et al. 1983), that a point mutation that alters pertinent neurotransmitter levels distinguishes individuals with a history of violence within at least one family line (Brunner et al. 1993), and that neurological damage may elicit violence (Elliott 1988). An incorrect inference is that violence has genetic "roots." Just as the theory of evolutionary ecology tells us that violence must reflect our evolutionary history, it also tells us that genes and the proteins they manufacture cannot function independently of their environment (e.g., Handwerker and Crosbie 1982; Tracy and Crawford 1992). Phenotypic expression, particularly as it bears on behavior, varies with specific historical and social contexts and cannot be understood independently of those contexts. Childhood experience of specific historical and social contexts may be particularly important for understanding the expression (or the absence of violence).

- W. PENN HANDWERKER is a professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269.
of expression) of violence in adulthood (e.g., Belsky et al. 1991).

The fact that violence can only be expressed as a social act within specific social relationships helps us understand why violence and violent events do not readily lend themselves to classification as a "disease." If social interaction generates the variable meanings that people use to think about and make sense of themselves and the world around them, the meaning— and, thus, both the sources and implications of "violence" and "abuse"—emerge from concrete social interaction in specific historical and social contexts. The socially constructed nature of violence and abuse also questions the accuracy of thinking of violence as a property of individuals. Violence may most usefully be thought of as an expression of particular kinds of social relationships that generate specific meanings. The units of analysis thus become specific individuals in specific social relationships or, perhaps, the social relationships themselves.

A shift in focus from individuals to social interaction and its emergent properties calls for a rethinking of what we have come to think of as a cycle of violence in which violence in one person is passed on to his or her children. Violent relationships in a parental generation have demonstrable effects on the sexual relationships and practices of the children raised in those circumstances which last at least through their mid-thirties (Handwerker 1993b; cf. Widom and Kuhns 1996). Thus children subjected to violence who grow up to subject others (and themselves) to violence may be embodied in a set of social relationships that can span generations.

Change in social relationships that generate violence may help to break the cycle of violence (Handwerker 1993b). This shift in focus also calls for a rethinking of the concept of resiliency, the failure of violence experienced by individuals as children to appear as violence directed either toward themselves or others in adult behavior. Resilience, like violence, may be less a property of individuals than an outcome of social interaction, particularly that experienced in childhood, which may shape the meaning of events and processes far into adulthood.

For purposes of this essay, as in earlier ones (Handwerker 1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1996b), I take violence to encompass anything that an individual experiences as the illegitimate exercise of what may be variously described as coercion, force, control, or exploitation: power called by any name. I explicitly avoid identifying violence from the point of view of those who inflict it. Listening to and observing people in West Africa, the West Indies, and the United States, however, has led me to believe that people who experience being hit, battered, or beaten or being subject to other physically painful actions by others tend to equate these events using a common criterion: physical pain. People who have experienced acts (words as well as actions) that demean and denigrate the individual's worth and competence tend to equate those experiences on the basis of perceived emotional pain. Those who have experienced either physical or emotional pain consistently report that these experiences are not appropriate modes of interaction. By contrast, people consistently report that they experienced gentle and caressing touching and words as supportive and encouraging. I call this phenomenon affection.

It remains problematic whether there exists sufficient consistency in people's experiences to justify believing that labels such as violence and affection possess a phenomenal substance that extends beyond my imagination. The meaning, for example, of being hit, battered, or beaten or being subject to other physically painful actions can vary from moment to moment, from person to person, and from one social or historical context to another. But if there exists a single, coherent underlying phenomenon that we can legitimately label violence (or affection), our observations should exhibit some predictable properties. Most fundamentally, observations we make of the same phenomenon should cohere. The absence of coherence constitutes evidence that we were mistaken to believe, for example, that the experiences of being hit, battered, or beaten or being subject to other physically painful actions by other people can be legitimately taken as expressions of a single underlying phenomenon called violence.

I assessed this possibility by developing a set of questions consistent with my ethnographic observations and then testing them for their internal coherence and reliability. H. Russell Bernard (1994:297-307) reviews the general steps in the construction of single measures of multidimensional variables such as violence and affection. Elsewhere I have reported the specific steps involved in the development of the scales discussed here (Handwerker 1996a). I tested my interpersonal violence and affection scales in 1989 with a small sample of 97 Antiguan women aged 20 to 40. Findings of this preliminary work led to much more extensive work on Barbados in 1990, with an islandwide random sample of 407 individuals aged 20 to 40 (women) or 20 to 45 (men), with whom I measured eight different forms of violence and affection:

- Physical and Emotional Abuse of Mother by Her Partner (MABUS)
- Physical and Emotional Abuse of Woman by Her Partner (PABUS)
- Childhood Physical and Emotional Abuse by Mother (MDIS)
- Childhood Physical and Emotional Abuse by Father (FDIS)
• Affectionate and Emotionally Supportive Treatment of Mother by Her Partner (MAFFEC)
• Affectionate and Emotionally Supportive Treatment of Woman by Her Partner (PAFFEC)
• Affectionate and Emotionally Supportive Treatment of Child by Mother (MEMP)
• Affectionate and Emotionally Supportive Treatment of Child by Father (FEMP)

Construct Validity

Construct validity refers to the observed match between an empirical scale and the theoretical construct it purports to measure. Donald Campbell and Donald Fiske (1959) point out that items that measure the same theoretical construct should correlate highly. Items that measure a second construct should not correlate as highly with the items that measure the first. If the items I chose in order to measure these eight different forms of violence and affection constitute empirically real measures of violence or affection, items measuring any one of the eight constructs should correlate highly among themselves. Items that measure one construct should correlate less highly with items measuring the remaining seven constructs. Principal components analysis (e.g., Rummel 1970) provides a direct test of the hypothesis that each set of scale items constitutes an independent set of measurements of one and only one underlying variable. Factor solutions that yield one valid factor for each set of scale items demonstrate scale validity.

Tables 1 and 2 show principal-components analyses of data from Antigua and Barbados performed with SYSTAT software (Wilkinson 1992). High loadings on items used to construct each measure of empowerment and exploitation define each rotated factor and distinguish it from its neighbors. These observations of item coherence confirm that different forms of “violence” and “affection” possess a phenomenal existence independent of my imagination.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the extent to which two or more attempts to measure the same variable yield the same results. Each item used to construct a scale constitutes an attempt to measure a given variable. Thus, the issue of construct validity overlaps the issue of reliability. The preceding evidence of construct validity implies that the variables consist of reliable measurements.

But we can adduce independent evidence for the reliability of these scales. Items of reliable scales should correlate highly with each other. So, too, sets of items should correlate highly with other item sets. Split-half coefficients measure the correlation between the items comprising each scale once they are divided into two sets. Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) (also called the Kuder-Richardson coefficient) estimates the average of all possible split-half reliability coefficients.

Table 3 reports Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) (see Cronbach and Meehl 1955) for each scale for both the Antiguan and Barbadian data, conducted with ANTHROPAC software (Borgatti 1994). Most coefficients exhibit excellent reliability (over .90). But even the lowest coefficient (.673) exhibits an acceptable level of reliability. Overall, the short scales for violence show equal or better reliability than the unwieldy and much longer Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus and Gelles 1990:40).

Measuring Violence and Affection to Find Cultural Boundaries

These scales for interpersonal violence and affection show face validity for North American and European populations, and preliminary studies carried out with small college population samples (not reported here) confirm scale validity and reliability. Whether these scales apply to people who grew up exposed to different cultural environments poses a far more challenging and interesting question. In 1992, Steve McNabb gave me the chance to test this possibility by participating in a joint Russian-American effort to study social, demographic, and epidemiological transition among native peoples in Alaska and the Russian Far East.

During an initial annual survey, the research team administered all eight of the scales used in Barbados. A major focus of the Arctic research consists of inter-ethnic relations. We extended the violence and affection scales to interaction between members of the same or different ethnic groups:

• Childhood Emotional Abuse of Ego by Natives (NABUS)
• Childhood Emotional Abuse of Ego by Nonnatives (NNABUS)
• Childhood Affectionate and Emotionally Supportive Treatment of Ego by Natives (NAFFEC)
• Childhood Affectionate and Emotionally Supportive Treatment of Ego by Nonnatives (NAFFEC)

At this point, data from the first year’s survey in Alaska and the Russian Far East have become available. Table 4 uses data generated by ANTHROPAC’s (Borgatti 1994) Likert-scaling procedures to compare findings for both the West Indian and Arctic populations. The Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) values for Antigua and Barbados appear in Table 3. The \( \alpha \) values for the Alaskan and Siberian data confirm the reliability of all scales. Rather than report full factor analyses like those that appear in Tables 1 and 2, Table 4 reports the eigenvalue of the first factor (principal component) and the size of that...
Table 1
Principal component analysis of violence and affection scale items, Barbados, 1990.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latent roots (eigenvalues)</td>
<td>11.564</td>
<td>5.871</td>
<td>3.941</td>
<td>3.046</td>
<td>2.052</td>
<td>1.784</td>
<td>1.636</td>
<td>1.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotated component eigenvalues</td>
<td>4.439</td>
<td>5.307</td>
<td>2.817</td>
<td>4.337</td>
<td>2.862</td>
<td>3.760</td>
<td>5.194</td>
<td>2.366</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MAFFEC(1)</td>
<td>.732</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFFEC(2)</td>
<td>.795</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFFEC(3)</td>
<td>.787</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFFEC(4)</td>
<td>.734</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFFEC(5)</td>
<td>.764</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFFEC(6)</td>
<td>.711</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFFEC(7)</td>
<td>.719</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFFEC(8)</td>
<td>.685</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAFFEC(1)</td>
<td>.754</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAFFEC(2)</td>
<td>.814</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAFFEC(3)</td>
<td>.791</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAFFEC(4)</td>
<td>.811</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAFFEC(5)</td>
<td>.850</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAFFEC(6)</td>
<td>.783</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAFFEC(7)</td>
<td>.801</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAFFEC(8)</td>
<td>.804</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MABUS(1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.870</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MABUS(2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.885</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MABUS(3)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.876</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MABUS(4)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.801</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PABUS(1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.813</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PABUS(2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.834</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PABUS(3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.728</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PABUS(4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.742</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEMP(4)</td>
<td>.842</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEMP(2)</td>
<td>.855</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEMP(3)</td>
<td>.873</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEMP(1)</td>
<td>.858</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEMP(5)</td>
<td>.794</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMP(1)</td>
<td>.729</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMP(2)</td>
<td>.781</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMP(3)</td>
<td>.830</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMP(4)</td>
<td>.849</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMP(5)</td>
<td>.846</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDIS(1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.729</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDIS(2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.813</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDIS(3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.766</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDIS(4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.431</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDIS(1)</td>
<td>.823</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDIS(2)</td>
<td>.860</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDIS(3)</td>
<td>.725</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDIS(4)</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

eigenvalue relative to that of the second factor. In all cases, the eigenvalue for the first factor is high, anywhere from nearly three times to more than 11 times larger than the eigenvalue for the second factor.

These numbers address the question of scale validity. Factor solutions that yield one valid factor for each set of scale items demonstrate scale validity. These short scales thus constitute valid, as well as reliable, measures of interpersonal violence and affection among people who grew up in the culture found among descendants of former plantation slaves in the West Indies and the culture found among people who continue to hunt,
gather, and herd in the Alaskan and Siberian Arctic, and whose lives now exhibit dramatic difference.

**Cultural Boundaries Aren’t Social Boundaries**

These findings raise some intriguing possibilities. For example, they suggest that violence and affection constitute distinct, internally coherent behavioral domains. The finding that violence and affection exist as distinct phenomena means that they do not constitute the endpoints of a single continuum but exist as distinct variables. Thus, violence and affection may influence the expression of one another and may change in response to different determinants. The finding that violence and affection exhibit internal coherence suggests that all the different expressions of violence or affection have a common origin and may exhibit common effects. The common view that emotional violence exerts less damage than physical violence misconstrues what actually happens. Both forms of violence occur together; beyond the obvious physical damage that may accompany physical violence, we may have great difficulty distinguishing the effects of physical violence from the effects of emotional violence.

**Interpretation and Understanding in Anthropology**

More importantly, these findings raise important questions about the nature of culture and the means we have taken for understanding it. Hammers Anthropology Newsletter commentary assumes that rights, like other forms of meaning, are socially constructed. One way to construe the social construction of meaning (see, for example, Rabinow and Sullivan 1987:6) holds that:

1. Meaning defines human existence and distinguishes it from the existence of other forms of life.
2. Meaning arises out of interpersonal interaction and cannot be reduced to more fundamental elements.
3. Individuals are born into and participate in a world of shared meaning that defines their existence.
4. The socially constituted actions and meanings of culture cannot be identified independently of the vocabulary used to describe them.
5. Since humans cannot function independently of the meanings that give them identity and purpose, they can’t do anything except interpret the meanings of others.

With regard to this last point, Clifford Geertz disagrees:

The perception that meaning, in the form of interpretable signs—sounds, images, feelings, artifacts, gestures—comes to exist only within language games, communities of discourse, intersubjective systems of reference, ways of worldmaking; that it arises within the frame of concrete social interaction in which something is a something for a you and a me, and not in some secret grotto in the head; and that it is through and through historical, hammered out in the flow of events, is read to imply (as, in my opinion, neither Malinowski nor Wittgenstein—nor for that matter
## Table 4
Summary of validity and reliability of violence and affection scales for West Indian and Arctic populations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Antigua</th>
<th>Barbados</th>
<th>Alaska and Russian Far East</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Cronbach's $\alpha$</td>
<td>Eigenvalue of factor 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFFEC</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>3.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MABUS</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>4.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAFFEC</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PABUS</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMP</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>4.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDIS</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEMP</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDIS</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>2.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAFFEC</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NABUS</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNAPFEC</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNABUS</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kuhn or Foucault meant it to imply) that human communities are, or should be semantic monads, nearly windowless. [1994:469]

At issue is the appropriate inference to draw. One inference is that it is impossible for one person to understand another. This can be interpreted to mean that what we come to believe about cultures not our own must tell us about ourselves but can tell us little, if anything, about people other than ourselves. Another inference is that it is impossible for one person to understand another perfectly. This can be understood as an elementary finding of cognitive science (see Bloch 1994; Strauss and Quinn 1994).

Each individual's life history defines a unique set of experiences that contributes to what he or she thinks, feels, and does at any given time and place. These experiences include macrolevel local, regional, and global histories of people, events, and social interaction into which the individual was born, in which he or she grew up, and which constrain choices. Whatever people think, feel, or do thus must be a function of the information that has been available to them up to the point in their lives when one talks with and/or observes them. It follows that variability in meaning is a function of variability in experience.

But no two people can live precisely identical life histories, and no one person can experience all things. The internal mental processes by which individuals perceive, store, and manipulate information, and so create meaning, make it physically impossible for any two people to hold identical meanings. These processes also make it physically impossible for any one person to hold identical meanings at any two points in time. It follows that finding a consensus about meaning, or equivalent behavior from one person to another, or over time or space, requires just as much explanation as finding different meanings or behavior from one person to another, or from one point in time or space to another. When meanings and behavior do not vary appreciably over time or from one person to another, commonalities in experience might explain why.

It does not follow that we cannot understand anyone. It does follow that we cannot understand anyone perfectly. More importantly, it does not follow that we cannot create useful understandings of other people, understandings that allow us to predict or anticipate what others will feel, believe, and do, and to understand what they felt, believed, and did in the past. Indeed, one way to think about what we distinguish as shared meaning, or a consensus about meaning, is merely that it is another way to talk about the useful understandings of each other that we create through social interaction.

Meaning, as I understand the term, refers to the emotions and mental constructions (labeled phenomenal boundaries) that individuals come to associate with or are evoked by specific experiences, that they use to experience, understand, and interact with themselves and the world around them. Social interaction, as I understand it, refers to processes by which individuals use meaning to interpret sensory input from the world of experience and use internal mental processes (see Handwerker 1988; Strauss and Quinn 1994) to alter both meaning and behavior in ways that reflect variation in sensory input. Culture understood as meaning thus cannot be a thing; cultural variability occurs between individuals, and cultural consensus emerges as a necessary consequence of social interaction among people who participate in common social fields, among those who engage in common social discourse (see Handwerker and Wozniak in press).

Searching for Cultural Boundaries and Explaining Social Identities

Ethnography, as I understand it, entails becoming part of that discourse and entails identifying the social field of interactions and the pertinent emergent properties of social relations through which individuals create varying degrees of consensus about the meaning of specific events, processes, and things in the world of experience. Finding agreement over the meaning of violence among Arctic foragers and West Indians operating tourist economies suggests that our search for the boundaries of these interaction fields exhibits a degree of myopia. Andrew Vayda (1994) argues that what listening to and observing particular people reveals more forcefully than anything else is diversity from one person to another, together with an ambiguity in (if not the complete absence of) the cultural boundaries suggested by the metaphors that reify culture. Roger Keesing, having just returned from "a Solomon Islands where dreadlocks in the style of Bob Marley and Kung Fu videos are the stuff of contemporary 'culture'" (1994:302), writes with irony of the gulf between the world of our experience and our predilection for reifying and essentializing culture and the Other. He suggests (and I agree) that we need to take "the production and reproduction of cultural forms as problematic" and that a useful starting point is the observation that we make no a priori assumptions about "closed boundaries within which cultural meanings hold sway" (Keesing 1994:309–310). The question then becomes one of locating boundaries, if they exist, and searching for the historical flow of events and concrete social interactions that may give rise both to the boundaries and to the meanings we seek to understand, to construct a "political economy of knowledge," in Keesing's terms (1994:309).

Reification, by contrast, entails what Richard Shweder (1977) calls magical thinking: confusing propositions
about meaning with propositions about empirical co-occurrences and so (as Bidney 1953 and Murdock 1971 pointed out many years previously) mistakenly equating cultural boundaries with social identities and presuming an undemonstrable coherence in the history of lives, meanings, and social interaction. Consequently, we have been slow to recognize that social entities may be best understood as labeled forms of social identity which form various midlevel sections of a human taxonomic hierarchy, the highest level of which may distinguish "real" humans from others "not-human" or "not-quite-human" and the lowest level of which may be the "self" (see Moerman 1965:1225). Rather than taking the existence of social entities and identities for granted, perhaps we need to devote more attention to the questions of how and why they form and change, paying particular attention to the social interactions through which people coconstruct identities.

Cultural boundaries, in contrast, are definable only by reference to the meaning of specific events, processes, and identities (e.g., see Handwerker and Wozniak in press). These may or may not be cotermous with identities at a variety of hierarchic levels in the taxonomy we use to orient ourselves in the social world. Thus cultural meanings and the historical flow of events and concrete social interactions which generate them are not bounded in the ways we have, until recently, taken for granted. Indeed, we must consider the possibility that the boundaries of cultural meanings and the historical flow of events and concrete social interactions which give rise to them are not accurately definable by reference to fixed time, space, and population coordinates.

The insider-outsider distinction (see Cerroni-Long 1995) dissolves, once we cease reifying culture. Of course, social interaction may create the emergent properties that we recognize as social groups of varying dimensions, each with more or less explicit membership criteria. Group members (insiders) may exhibit consensus on the meaning of a few or many specific events, processes, and identities and so exhibit cultural distinctiveness, but only with regard to the events, processes, and identities for which they and no others exhibit consensus. Insiders and outsiders relative to the socially constructed group may agree on the meaning of other events, processes, and identities. People inside and outside the social group thus may exhibit more cultural commonalities than cultural differences. Two sources of information go into the creation of cultural commonalities and cultural differences: sensory inputs and the means of handling sensory inputs built into us at conception, which come to us as a legacy of our evolutionary history (Geertz 1973; Handwerker 1989).

Experience and Processes That Generate Human Universals

Hammel's question, "By what principle short of imperialism do we insist on the application of civil or human rights in societies that have not come to these ideas through their own histories?", assumes that civil or human rights exist exclusively as cultural constructions. He thus evokes the assumption Tylor bequeathed to us: that culture is, first and foremost, learned. Noam Chomsky's (1957) proposal that language learning assumed the existence of a specific neural structure challenged the Tylorian distinction between learned and other human phenomena. But our ability to appreciate the significance of this challenge has been slow in coming.

Geertz, for example, rightly pointed out that classical understandings of humanity rested on reifications:

They endeavor to construct an image of man as a model, an archetype, a Platonic idea or an Aristotelian form, with respect to which actual men—you, me, Churchill, Hitler, and the Bornean headhunter—are but reflections, distortions, approximations ... [in which] living detail is drowned in dead stereotype. [1973(1963):51]

In proposing that culture be viewed as a set of control mechanisms for the governing of behavior, Geertz encouraged us to look beyond concrete behavior patterns to the processes that generate meaning and behavior. He helped us look more closely at the specifics that make our lives distinctly human and opened the way for us to see more clearly how meaning permeates what had been treated formerly as distinct psychological and sociological phenomena.

Over the succeeding decades, Geertz and other cultural anthropologists focused on social processes, which generate sensory input. But Geertz also pointed to the second source of information. In arguing the impossibility of substantive human universals and proposing a view of culture as meaning, Geertz (1973) eloquently critiqued what he called the "stratigraphic" view of culture: the view that culture is distinct from and superimposed over biological, psychological, and sociological phenomena. He also explicitly pointed out the interdependencies and coevolution of our biology and our dependence on meaning for understanding and interacting with the world of experience. Geertz thus firmly situated "culture and biology" as a unitary phenomenon:

As our central nervous system—and most particularly its crowning curse and glory, the neocortex—grew up in great part in interaction with culture, it is incapable of directing our behavior or organizing our experience without the guidance provided by systems of significant symbols. [1973:49]
Geertz thus suggests that our evolved central nervous system makes it impossible for us not to use meaning to interpret sensory input from the world of experience. Geertz concluded his early essay by noting that

the road to the general, to the revelatory simplicities of science, lies through a concern with the particular, the circumstantial, the concrete, but a concern organized and directed in terms of the sort of theoretical analysis that I have touched upon—analyses of physical evolution, of the functioning of the nervous system, of social organization, of psychological process, of cultural patterning, and so on—and, most especially, in terms of the interplay among them. That is to say, the road lies, like any genuine Quest, through a terrifying complexity. [1973:54]

It is time to pay more attention to Chomsky’s challenge to the Tylorian assumption that culture is learned and to Geertz’s suggestion that culture is built into us, that we cannot do otherwise than use meaning to experience, understand, and interact with ourselves and the world around us. What, exactly, does saying that something is learned mean, and how does it take place? How, exactly, does our evolved central nervous system make it impossible for us not to function in the world independently of meaning?

Cognitive and neurological studies provide a starting point. They now indicate that information people use for thinking at particular moments in their lives may come through their senses or that it may preexist. Preexisting information comes in two forms. One consists of memory traces created by the interaction of perceptual and neural processes at an earlier point in a person’s life trajectory. The second consists of the relative availability, location, characteristics, and structural networks of different kinds of nerve cells and the relative availability of transmitter chemicals that move information from one nerve cell to another. This second form of preexisting information emerges from the interaction of genome and environment over the course of an individual’s life trajectory, from conception to death. The emergent property we often call intelligence, which integrates perceptions and memories of sensory input in ways unrestricted by experiential cues, may generate an unceasing source of new meanings: ways to think about and respond to the world of experience (Handwerker 1989). A mounting body of evidence also suggests the existence of specific, evolved neural architectures without which it would be impossible to construct any intelligible meanings through social interaction (Tooby and Cosmides 1992). These architectures channel sensory inputs in specific ways and thus may lead to an observable consensus about the meaning of specific events, processes, and identities quite independently of participation in specific fields of social discourse.

Keesing’s “political economy of knowledge” thus may be global and apply to all times and places. We may find, as Keesing (1994) suspects, that we can effectively define cultural boundaries and the processes that generate them only by reference to processes common to all people. In short, we do not (as Hammel does not) have to treat as rhetorical the question “By what principle short of imperialism do we insist on the application of civil or human rights in societies that have not come to these ideas through their own histories?” Universal human rights necessarily bear on the fundamentals of human existence, indeed, on living itself. If violence and affection can each be distinguished, internally coherent behavioral domains independent of what we might treat as difference, violence and affection, when they occur, may exert equivalent effects independently of what we have treated, a priori, as difference. Violence and affection thus may constitute key historical processes and concrete social interactions which, when and where they occur, shape meanings in predictable ways.

Notes

Acknowledgments. West Indian research reported on here was funded by National Science Foundation grants BNS 8507605, 8520445, and 8804719, and an American Republics Senior Scholar Research Grant from the Fulbright-Hayes program. Arctic research was funded by National Science Foundation grant OPP-9213137 and was carried out as a team effort with Steve McNabb, Bill Richards, Alexander Pika, and Dmitry Bogoyavlensky. I gratefully acknowledge this support, but note that the opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this article are my own. They do not necessarily reflect the view of either funding agency or other members of the joint Russian-American team. Danielle Wozniak provided insights that proved essential for my argument, for which I am immensely grateful. This article also benefited significantly from instructive comments by anonymous referees.

1. Hammel and I agree both on the substance of his AN commentary (which agrees with the argument developed here) and, as he pointed out in a personal communication (1994), we agree that the real human rights problem is creating the agreements that would actuate rights for all people.

2. For example, Broderick and Bridger 1984; Maier et al. 1969; Mawson and Jacobs 1978; Randall 1992.

3. For example, Luthar and Zigler 1991; Mrazek and Mrazek 1987; Rutter 1987.

References Cited


Handwerker, W. Penn

Handwerker, W. Penn, and Danielle F. Wozniak

Handwerker, W. Penn, and Danielle F. Wozniak

Handwerker, W. Penn, and P. V. Crosbie

Handwerker, W. Penn, and Danielle F. Wozniak

Handwerker, W. Penn, and P. V. Crosbie

Handwerker, W. Penn, and Danielle F. Wozniak

Keesing, Roger

Keesing, Roger

Keesing, Roger

Keesing, Roger

Luthar, S. S., and E. Zigler

Maunder, R. J.

Maunder, R. J.

Moerman, Michael

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Moerman, Michael

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek

Mrazek, P. J., and D. A. Mrazek
Shweder, Richard A.
Straus, Murray A., and Richard J. Gelles
Strauss, Claudia, and Naomi Quinn
Tooby, John, and Leda Cosmides
Tracy, K. K., and C. B. Crawford
Valzelli, L., S. Bernasconi, and M. Dalessandro
Vayda, Andrew P.
Widom, C. S., and J. B. Kuhns
Wilkinson, Leland
1992 SYSTAT. Evanston, IL: SYSTAT.

"Kritoboulos achieved great renown for having extracted the arrow from the eye of King Philip . . . ." PLINY, NATURAL HISTORY

Making Faces
USING FORENSIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

John Prag
Richard Neave

In this book, an archaeologist and a medical artist describe their efforts to re-create the faces of ancient peoples on casts of fragmented skulls. They provide historical background for the figures, both famous (King Midas and King Philip of Macedon) and forgotten (the Yde Girl), whose remains they studied and discuss the implications of the faces they reconstructed.

288 pp. 20 color, 116 b&w photos. $39.95
North American rights only

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY PRESS
http://www.tamupress.com • College Station, TX 77843 • 800-826-8911 • fax: 888-617-2421