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Brief Report

Paul Ekman and the legacy of universals

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the legacy of Paul Ekman's classic work on the universality of emotions, describing the spirit of the man underlying the research, and what the findings have meant not only to subsequent research on emotion but to the field of psychology as well.

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1. Introduction

It is an honor and privilege to write on behalf of Paul Ekman, my teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend, on the occasion of his receipt of the Jack Block Award from the Association for Research in Personality. While Ekman has made numerous contributions over his career, he is probably best known for his work documenting the universality of facial expressions of emotion. In this paper I discuss the spirit of the man underlying that work, and their import not only to subsequent research on emotion but to all of psychology as a whole.

2. The original universality research

Ekman's work exploring and then documenting the universality of facial expressions of emotion has been well described in other sources (for the most recent review see Ekman, 2003). His original contributions in this area comprised four sources of evidence for universality: (1) judgments of posed expressions by literate cultures; (2)

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26 judgments of posed expressions by preliterate cultures; (3) judgments by literate cul-
27 tures of expressions posed by preliterate cultures; (4) spontaneous expressions across
28 cultures. Scientifically they are some of the classics in the history of psychology re-
29 search. Instead of repeating the findings, I will comment here on other aspects of that
30 work that have received less attention but are nonetheless noteworthy.

31 Ekman was no armchair researcher. His studies reflected a thirst for knowledge
32 and a commitment to obtain that knowledge that was rare then and even more so
33 now. He was not content with conducting *easy* studies; his seminal work in prelite-
34 rate tribes in New Guinea reflected the degree of sacrifice and courage Ekman was
35 willing to take in the pursuit of knowledge. Many of us cannot even fathom the pos-
36 sibility of leaving our comfortable lives to travel to lands half a world away inhabited
37 by peoples whose ways preserve aspects of Stone Age culture to pursue an academic
38 question. Some of the cultures were cannibalistic, others aggressive. Ekman literally
39 put his life on the line in order to gather evidence about their expressions. While the
40 science and its findings are surely classics in psychology, the stories behind the scenes
41 that underlie this science make it that much more fascinating (Ekman, 2003) and go
42 well beyond what most of us today would even dream of doing in conducting our
43 research.

44 Ekman was a pioneer not only in spirit but in method. His studies in New Guinea
45 bridged the gap between anthropological ethnography and psychological experimen-
46 tation. The care and precision with which he gathered evidence while balancing gain-
47 ing the trust and entrance into the culture and lives in order to place their expressions
48 in context are lessons that will stand for generations. While many cross-cultural sci-
49 entists today are content to deliver questionnaires via internet or to visit data collec-
50 tions sites essentially as tourists, Ekman lived among the tribes he studied, giving up
51 his own way of life, not once but multiple times, for his research.

52 Ekman's work on the universals were all the more impressive because, unlike so
53 many researchers, he started out with the exact opposite assumption—that emo-
54 tional expressions were *not* universal but instead culture specific, learned like a lan-
55 guage. Sylvan Tomkins (Tomkins, 1962, 1963), to whom Ekman himself attributes
56 much of the original impetus for studying facial emotion in the first place, was the
57 one who convinced Ekman to conduct the first systematic studies examining the uni-
58 versality of expression. Ekman's discoveries of universality, therefore, were not the
59 product of a self-fulfilling prophecy, but rather the fruits of a healthy skeptic.

60 Of course like many classic concepts in psychology, universality has had its de-
61 tractors over the years. For the most part they tend to forget that the findings from
62 Ekman's original universality studies converge with other sources of evidence, in-
63 cluding studies of the expressions of nonhuman primates (Ekman, 1973; Geen,
64 1992; Hauser, 1993), congenitally blind infants and children (Charlesworth & Kreut-
65 zer, 1973), and emotion languages (Romney, Boyd, Moore, Batchelder, & Brazill,
66 1996, 1997; Shaver, Murdaya, & Fraley, 2001, 1992). The universality of emotion
67 recognition has been replicated time and again across many studies and methodolo-
68 gies, not only in the face (Matsumoto, 2001) but also across other channels of com-
69 munication as well (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002). Thus arguments against
70 universality based on concerns of limited aspects of methodology about one type

71 of study cannot possibly begin to shake the universality tree because it is so firmly
72 rooted in multiple sources of evidence.

73 There are many other ways in which Ekman's universality research was unique.
74 Who among us would consider sticking needles into our faces to innervate muscles
75 to see what they do and how they appear just to develop a way of measuring facial
76 expressions? This is exactly what Ekman did in the development of the Facial Action
77 Coding System (FACS) (Ekman & Friesen, 1978). It is not only the findings but the
78 stories about the person underlying the science and the pursuit of knowledge that
79 make Ekman's original work on universality an amazing part of the history of psy-
80 chology.

81 **3. What universality has meant to emotion research?**

82 Universality had an immense impact on the study of emotion. It meant that there
83 was an objective way for scientists to measure emotion that was not available before,
84 which was probably one of the single biggest factors that prohibited the study of
85 emotion to come to fruition earlier in the history of psychology, despite the enor-
86 mous importance placed on it by Freud, Piaget, Erikson, and many others. After
87 the universality studies Ekman turned his attention to the development of facial mea-
88 surement systems, resulting in the creation of the FACS (Ekman & Friesen, 1978),
89 which is widely acknowledged to be the most comprehensive and systematic method
90 of scoring facial behavior that exists today.

91 With FACS scientists had the tools with which they could study emotion objec-
92 tively and legitimately. The knowledge afforded by universality and the techniques
93 provided by FACS led to the burgeoning of research on emotion in all areas of psy-
94 chology we see today. Universality and FACS led to much of the research on infants
95 and children concerning the emergence of emotions and their expressions in develop-
96 ment. It helped to answer age old questions concerning the specificity of physiologi-
97 cal responses during emotions (Ekman, 1999) and to research documenting the
98 universality of emotion antecedents (Scherer, 1997a, 1997b), psychological themes
99 underlying antecedents (Ekman, 2003), and subjective experience (Scherer & Wall-
100 bott, 1994). Now there is also evidence for the universality of an additional expres-
101 sion, of contempt (Ekman & Friesen, 1986; Ekman & Heider, 1988; Matsumoto,
102 1992; Matsumoto & Ekman, 2003) and potentially that of embarrassment (Haidt
103 & Keltner, 1999) and pride (Tracy & Robins, in press). In fact emotion research
104 in all areas of psychology, including social, personality, neuroscience, health, and ab-
105 normal psychology have all blossomed after universality and FACS (Davidson,
106 Scherer, & Goldsmith, 2002).

107 Universality, FACS and emotion research have also had an impact on the teach-
108 ing of psychology and the training of scientists at all levels. Undergraduate and grad-
109 uate courses on emotion have emerged at many universities not only in the US but
110 around the world, and books for these courses have also appeared. The number of
111 books, chapters, and articles on emotion has increased tremendously over the past 30
112 years, as has the number of theses and dissertations, due in part to the legitimacy of

113 emotion research and the importance of emotion. Postdoctoral training programs
114 have been developed to train doctoral level researchers in the study of emotion. Sci-
115 entific journals like *Motivation and Emotion*, *Cognition and Emotion*, and most re-
116 cently the APA journal *Emotion* have all emerged as a result of the coming of age
117 of emotion research.

118 The last two decades have become the decades of affective science, and they owe a
119 huge debt of gratitude to universality and FACS, and to Paul Ekman.

120 4. What universality has meant to psychology?

121 When the universality research was conducted only a short 30–40 years ago, “cul-
122 ture” in psychology was synonymous with “differences.” Even afterwards, when cul-
123 ture was mentioned in introductory psychology textbooks, the discussion centered
124 on cultural biases in IQ testing and linguistic relativity (Lonner, 1989); the universal-
125 ity findings were often the only set of findings that were discussed in the framework
126 of similarities, not differences. This is especially interesting because psychologists
127 have known about the universality of other psychological processes, such as in ag-
128 gression or color perception. This bias in the field exists even today; when people talk
129 about culture the discussion centers on differences, not similarities.

130 Perhaps there is an inherent bias among people to see the uniqueness in them-
131 selves and to see other groups of people as different. Psychology as a discipline does
132 not help because it is biased to search for and report differences, not similarities. In
133 research statistically significant differences get published, but nonsignificant differ-
134 ences do not.

135 The universality of emotion was not only important in its own right, but also be-
136 cause it opened the door to other researchers to study similarities across cultures and
137 report them. It made it OK to say that “while there are many ways in which we are
138 all different from each other, there are many ways in which we are all the same, too.”
139 Since the work on the universality of emotion, we now know that there is universal-
140 ity in a host of psychological processes. There is universality in the structure of hu-
141 man values (Schwartz, 1994, 1999; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001) and in the mental
142 organization of personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1989; McCrae & Costa, 1997;
143 McCrae, Costa, del Pilar, Rolland, & Parker, 1998). There is universality in mate se-
144 lection preferences (Buss, 1988, 1989) and in gender stereotypes across cultures (Wil-
145 liams & Best, 1982, 1990, 1994). There is universality in self-enhancement processes
146 (Kurman, 2001; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997) and in the importance of hap-
147 piness and subjective well-being in people’s lives (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis,
148 1998). For every difference in behavior there is probably something universal about
149 the underlying psychological motive that is being addressed (MacDonald, 1998). Ek-
150 man’s original work on the universality of emotion may not have directly influenced
151 these lines of research, but it surely made it easier to conduct and report.

152 The universality of emotion also gave us a theoretical framework by which we
153 could understand and incorporate both pancultural similarities and cross-cultural
154 differences simultaneously. Ekman’s neurocultural theory of emotional expression

155 (Ekman, 1972), which posited not only the existence of universals in expression but
156 also cultural display rules (Ekman & Friesen, 1969), was one of the first theories to
157 explain how a psychological process could be both universal and culture-specific. To-
158 day a dominant view of cultural universals in psychological processes is that of evo-
159 lutionary psychology (Buss, 1991, 2000, 2001), which suggests that all people share
160 common universal, biological needs for reproduction, eating, sleeping, and elimina-
161 tion, and that these needs are associated with universal social motives. People adapt
162 the ways by which they address these universal biological needs and social motives to
163 the specific contexts in which they live, and cultures are therefore created from this
164 process of adaptation and the interaction of universal needs, motives, and context.
165 One cannot help but notice the similarities underlying Ekman's neurocultural model
166 and the perspective afforded by evolutionary psychology. Ekman is, in fact, one of
167 the world's leading scholars on Darwin (1872/1998).

168 Through the perspective of evolutionary psychology the concept of universality
169 has helped us to understand culture better. Universality has influenced anthropol-
170 ogists—a field devoted to cultural differences—in their understanding of culture
171 and human nature, and in their questioning of previous classics in their own field
172 (Brown, 1991). For several decades scholars have also been concerned with creat-
173 ing a taxonomy of universals, such as strong vs. weak universals (Van de Vijver
174 & Poortinga, 1982) or true vs. variform universals (Lonner, 1980), and it is an
175 effort to which we should pay more attention. The extent to which we can
176 now easily study and discuss how people are similar as well as different in all ar-
177 eas of psychology is one of the most important legacies of Ekman's work on uni-
178 versals in emotion.

179 5. Conclusion

180 Culture is one of the most important topics in psychology today, and everyone
181 agrees that psychology needs to develop theories that are inclusive of a diverse range
182 of people across many different cultures. Yet when culture is incorporated in research
183 and theory more often than not the focus is on differences, not similarities. If we are
184 truly to achieve the goal of creating a psychology of all we need to understand how
185 people around the world are similar as well as different. Differences may lead to un-
186 derstanding and tolerance, but similarities will bring us all together a little easier.
187 They give us a common base from which mutual understanding and benefit can oc-
188 cur. Paul Ekman's work on the universality of emotion, such a central process in all
189 people's lives, certainly has played the major role in doing so.

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