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Brief Report

Paul Ekman and the legacy of universals

David Matsumoto*

Department of Psychology, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132, USA

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.

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)

* Fax: 1-510-217-9608.
E-mail address: dm@sfsu.edu.

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

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

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

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

Of course like many classic concepts in psychology, universality has had its detractors over the years. For the most part they tend to forget that the findings from Ekman's original universality studies converge with other sources of evidence, including studies of the expressions of nonhuman primates (Ekman, 1973; Geen, 1992; Hauser, 1993), congenitally blind infants and children (Charlesworth & Kreutzer, 1973), and emotion languages (Romney, Boyd, Moore, Batchelder, & Brazill, 1996, 1997; Shaver, Murdaya, & Fraley, 2001, 1992). The universality of emotion recognition has been replicated time and again across many studies and methodologies, not only in the face (Matsumoto, 2001) but also across other channels of communication as well (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002). Thus arguments against universality based on concerns of limited aspects of methodology about one type

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

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

3. What universality has meant to emotion research?

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

With FACS scientists had the tools with which they could study emotion objectively and legitimately. The knowledge afforded by universality and the techniques provided by FACS led to the burgeoning of research on emotion in all areas of psychology we see today. Universality and FACS led to much of the research on infants and children concerning the emergence of emotions and their expressions in development. It helped to answer age old questions concerning the specificity of physiological responses during emotions (Ekman, 1999) and to research documenting the universality of emotion antecedents (Scherer, 1997a, 1997b), psychological themes underlying antecedents (Ekman, 2003), and subjective experience (Scherer & Wallbott, 1994). Now there is also evidence for the universality of an additional expression, of contempt (Ekman & Friesen, 1986; Ekman & Heider, 1988; Matsumoto, 1992; Matsumoto & Ekman, 2003) and potentially that of embarrassment (Haidt & Keltner, 1999) and pride (Tracy & Robins, in press). In fact emotion research in all areas of psychology, including social, personality, neuroscience, health, and abnormal psychology have all blossomed after universality and FACS (Davidson, Scherer, & Goldsmith, 2002).

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

emotion research and the importance of emotion. Postdoctoral training programs have been developed to train doctoral level researchers in the study of emotion. Scientific journals like *Motivation and Emotion*, *Cognition and Emotion*, and most recently the APA journal *Emotion* have all emerged as a result of the coming of age of emotion research.

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

4. What universality has meant to psychology?

When the universality research was conducted only a short 30–40 years ago, ''culture'' in psychology was synonymous with ''differences.'' Even afterwards, when culture was mentioned in introductory psychology textbooks, the discussion centered on cultural biases in IQ testing and linguistic relativity (Lonner, 1989); the universality findings were often the only set of findings that were discussed in the framework of similarities, not differences. This is especially interesting because psychologists have known about the universality of other psychological processes, such as in aggression or color perception. This bias in the field exists even today; when people talk about culture the discussion centers on differences, not similarities.

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

The universality of emotion was not only important in its own right, but also because it opened the door to other researchers to study similarities across cultures and report them. It made it OK to say that ''while there are many ways in which we are all different from each other, there are many ways in which we are all the same, too.'' Since the work on the universality of emotion, we now know that there is universality in a host of psychological processes. There is universality in the structure of human values (Schwartz, 1994, 1999; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001) and in the mental organization of personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1989; McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae, Costa, del Pilar, Rolland, & Parker, 1998). There is universality in mate selection preferences (Buss, 1988, 1989) and in gender stereotypes across cultures (Williams & Best, 1982, 1990, 1994). There is universality in self-enhancement processes (Kurman, 2001; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997) and in the importance of happiness and subjective well-being in people's lives (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). For every difference in behavior there is probably something universal about the underlying psychological motive that is being addressed (MacDonald, 1998). Ekman's original work on the universality of emotion may not have directly influenced these lines of research, but it surely made it easier to conduct and report.

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

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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