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Social Construction, Evolution and Cultural Universals

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Abstract

This paper discusses the connection between social constructionism and universals in the generation of mind. It proposes a new concept of Cultural Construction, distinct from social construction, and suggests that the latter succumbs to a Paradox of Sociality in which a socially constructed mind is non-social. Cultural construction avoids this paradox, and is best explained by an approach that roots learning in flexible evolutionary dispositions to possess culture. It also offers a novel perspective on traditional and more recent social constructionist accounts of psychological universals (e.g., omniculture) and has different implications for the prospects of reducing conflict in inter-cultural encounters.

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1 Introduction

The connections between culture and mind are central considerations for psychology, and a recent important turn has been to consider not only cross-cultural variations and cross-cultural universals separately, but together. It is, arguably, not possible to consider cross-cultural variation in mind without framing this against a context of what does not vary across cultures, and vice versa (see, e.g., Brown, 2000; Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010; Jahoda, 2012; Kappeler & Silk, 2010; Moghaddam, 2012; nor, indeed, what does and does not vary across humans and non-human primates: e.g., Uher, 2008). This paper seeks to further such parallel consideration, and to suggest some theoretical and practical consequences.

After making some preliminary clarifications of concepts, I sketch two different questions regarding the construction of mind. One concerns the traditional focus of social construction on how exposure to or engagement in specific qualities of social life leads to specific qualities of mind (such as particular beliefs, or tendencies to process

information in culturally-specific ways). The second concerns a less widely-discussed issue of ‘cultural construction’, regarding how exposure to and engagement with universal qualities of culture might construct pan-cultural qualities of mind (such as the capacity for culture, sharing intentions and action, norms and beliefs). I then suggest that focussing on the first question alone can generate a “paradox of sociality” for social construction – a mind that is fully socially constructed may turn out to be not social at all: it may lack sociality. That is, social construction, as widely understood, may lead to mental states and processes that do not intrinsically relate to, or depend on the mental states of other people. A solution to this paradox, I suggest, lies in locating answers to the question of social construction in the context of answers to the question of cultural construction of mind. I then consider some ways in which the relevant pan-cultural qualities have been understood.

One such understanding and its policy implications have recently been debated in *Culture & Psychology* – omniculture (see Moghaddam, 2012). Moghaddam makes the important suggestion that cross-cultural encounters, especially those historically connected to conflict, should begin with an emphasis on specific beliefs and values that can be directly tapped into in thought and behaviour and have been empirically demonstrated to be common to all cultures (omniculture), before contemplating differences between them. This, he argues, provides means for resolving entrenched

conflict. Whilst lauding this intent, others suggest that the empirical characterisation of omniculture faces significant challenges (Bilewicz & Bilewicz, 2012; Gillespie, Howarth & Cornish, 2012).

I argue that omniculture also succumbs to social constructionism's paradox of sociality. However, other ways of understanding pan-cultural qualities offer suggestions for resolving the paradox. These involve evolutionary explanations of the interdependent roles of the culturally specific and the culturally universal. The discussion thereby situates the debate concerning omniculture in a broader context of possibilities. Such evolutionarily-inspired explanations are not only compatible with, but depend on, an account of cultural learning that is compatible with cultural psychology. This leads to a focus on both the *content* of universals (i.e., what the universals are about or what they concern, for example whether they relate to specific beliefs or more general qualities) and their *psychological nature* (i.e., their origin, in terms of their relative dependence on innate and/or cultural influences; and their role in thought, in terms of whether they can be directly tapped into in thought and behaviour or are inferred as underlying them). These considerations have implications for policy regarding inter-cultural contact and conflict resolution.

2 Preliminaries

Before developing the argument, it will help to offer some preliminary characterisations of concepts, which will be developed in more detail below. The key terms in the discussion will be 'mind', 'sociality', 'social construction' and 'cultural construction'.

'Mind' here is taken here in a more or less pretheoretic sense to involve the set of processes and capacities that are engaged in processing information and supporting action. It covers affective, emotional and motivational states, perceptions of others and the self. Put another way, the intention is that the discussion does not depend on the details of any particular model of mind.

One of the central ideas discussed concerns the possible 'sociality' of mind. 'Sociality' is also here taken in a more or less pretheoretic sense to concern the knowledge and skills involved in interacting with other people qua social beings – including the intersection of qualities often ascribed to theory of mind and to theory of society/folk sociology. That is, the capacity to interact with people on the basis of presumptions, inferences and practices about their reasons, beliefs and other mental states, where the latter also connect with joint intentionality, relational inferences, group memberships, stereotypes and so on. This can be seen as a generalisation of Greenwood's (2004: p.20) suggestion that a mental state is constitutively social if it necessarily involves the representations of other people: 'a belief or attitude that is held by an individual (or

individuals) *socially*: that is, because and on condition that other members of a social group are represented as holding that belief or attitude'. It depends constitutively on the representation of others' representations. The same attitude could be held non-socially, if it was believed without regard to what other people believe. The sense of sociality employed here includes this, but is broadened to include any non-representational states in which we obtain information by detecting and responding to (information about) other people, without explicitly representing them or their representations (such as what have been called social or cultural affordances: e.g., Kitayama, Park, Sevincer, Karasawa & Uskul, 2009; Franks, 2011). Individual mind exhibits sociality - is intrinsically social - when its psychological processes (on the pre-theoretic approach assumed), representations and resultant actions engage with others in this way. The outcome is the implicit or explicit detection, recognition or representation of others (and their mental states and experiences), and the appropriate adjustment and calibration of action. Sociality, on this view, is a matter of having a broadly psychological orientation or directness towards others (and their psychology), which supports action and interaction on those bases.

The issue to be addressed, then, concerns the connection between the possible sociality of mind and forms of construction – social and cultural construction. Social construction is the well-established perspective that argues that all specific contents of mind (beliefs,

attitudes, self-perceptions, reasoning processes, etc.) are wholly contingent on specific aspects of social life and interaction that occur in a particular time and place. That is, social construction principally addresses the first question noted below, of how different specific social and cultural circumstances give rise to different specific ways of thinking and behaving. Cultural construction, by contrast, will be understood as the possibility that more generic contents of mind (ways of thinking, templates for thought, heuristics for learning about the self and others, etc., that hold across locations and times) are partially contingent on qualities of social and cultural settings that are not tied to a specific time or location, and partially contingent on biological underpinnings. It therefore addresses the second question noted below, of how the fact of being cultural or of having cultural capacities, gives rise to pan-cultural qualities of mind.

We can now briefly prefigure the argument. The first part of the over-all argument will be that social construction's commitment to contingency and specificity means that all qualities of mind – including sociality – are contingent. This generates the possible outcome that mental capacities may simply lack sociality. This is what I refer to as social construction's paradox of sociality. The second part of the argument will be that cultural construction circumvents this paradox by making sociality in general an intrinsic part of mind (as a result of its evolutionary grounding), even if the expression and acquisition of specific forms of sociality depend on specific locations.

3 Social and Cultural Construction: Two Questions About Making Minds

Social construction is a fundamental theoretical tenet in social and cultural psychology, whose qualities have been widely, though too often, polemically, debated (Boghossian, 2006; Burr, 1995; Gergen, 2009; Franks, 2011, 2013ab, Mallon, 2008). Recent views have, however, argued for reconciling social construction with evolutionarily inspired approaches, without compromising insights from both (Franks, 2011, 2013ab; Mallon & Stich, 2000). This paper is in that spirit.

3.1. Question 1: Mind and the Cross-Cultural

Social constructionism is a broad church, but at its heart is a set of answers to Question 1: *(how) do different specific societies and cultures create the specific qualities of mind and behaviour in those particular settings?* Recurrent answers contend that many psychological capacities depend for their form on local contingencies of society and history (e.g., Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1973; 2009). Without those social and historical circumstances, particular mental phenomena could not have arisen, and under different circumstances different mental phenomena would have arisen.

‘Specificity’ here, concerns both the originating social circumstances and the resulting aspects of mind. The social circumstances relate to, for example, interaction rituals, social practices, institutions, and so on, whose particular qualities generate the specific contents of thought, ways of thinking about and with them, and relevant normative and value-related stances. They arise from and remain applicable to or appropriate ways of responding to, specific contexts. This connection between social practices and beliefs, is confirmed by commitment to the inseparability of process and content: social processes are intertwined with representations that have socially-derived content. Specificity thus suggests that a socially constructed way of thinking has direct application to a context because of the meshing of its details with that context; the less similarity between the original context and any new contexts that are encountered, the less applicable is the way of thinking. This suggests that moving to a different context where there were massive differences in specific beliefs and ways of behaving might generate a catastrophic ‘culture shock’, because there is (by assumption) no foundation for commonality other than those beliefs and ways of behaving. Social construction, then, expresses the important role of specific and contingent social influences that result in specific qualities of mind with specific contents.

‘Contingency’ here can be highlighted by contrast with what Boghossian (2006) calls ‘mandated construction’, where mental capacities would be constructed according to

factors that are not wholly contingent on present or recent historical and social circumstances. A mandated construction seems the hallmark of some evolutionary approaches to mind, where evolved adaptations provide the driving force for mental capacities (e.g., Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Such views argue that adaptations are expressed as (one or more) mental modules, special-purpose devices that apply to their own domains from which they process information according to dedicated procedures. Although the details of the resulting capacities are culture-dependent, the fact that people possess those capacities, with their generic qualities, is mandated by the adaptation (e.g., Sperber, 2004; Sperber & Hirschfeld, 2004). Hence, evolutionary psychology proposes that mental capacities are partly contingent not on short-term historical and cultural variations, but on very long-term evolutionary-historical contingencies.

By contrast, 'contingency' for social construction connotes the idea that at different points in history, different social pressures arise and give rise to different ways of thinking. As Hacking (1999) puts it, social construction of a social fact suggests that it "was brought into existence or shaped by social events, forces, history, all of which could well have been different" (Hacking 1999: p.7). The impact of such a notion in relation to social psychology is perhaps best expressed by Gergen's classic argument regarding 'social psychology as history' (1973: p. 310): "it deals with facts that are

largely nonrepeatable and which fluctuate markedly over time. Principles of human interaction cannot readily be developed over time because the facts on which they are based do not generally remain stable.” And if the social facts and the forms of social interaction are contingent and nonrepeatable, the mental facts that depend on them are also nonrepeatable.

The specificity of social construction is highlighted by contrast with a further element of evolutionary psychology: what Sperber (1996) calls a ‘meta-template’. A meta-template is understood as a representation of generic information about a domain of knowledge or action, whose content is innately predisposed as part of an adaptation regarding that domain. Such generic content is universal, whilst the specific attributes that instantiate, demarcate, add to or otherwise specify or refine it arise from culture (see also Bergesen, 2012; Peterson, 2012). For example, the meta-template for an hypothesised capacity for commonsense understanding of biological or social ‘kinds’ might indicate that a category has presumed essential properties – an essence ‘place holder’ which does not specify what the essence is, but does indicate that it is responsible for category membership, connects to reproduction, to surface appearance and behavioural properties. The particular properties represented as essences (that ‘fill’ the place holder), and which categories are essentialised, depends on culture. The resulting capacity therefore combines generic, mandated construction from the adaptation with the

specific, social construction from the cultural input. Hence, evolutionary psychology proposes mandated constructions of generic content *plus* contingent constructions of specific content.

The contrast with social construction is evident: not only does traditional social construction emphasise the *contingency* and *specificity* of social influences that result in specific qualities of mind, it also proposes that those influences are *social* influences. There is no obvious role for any features – including specific or contingent features - that may be biological in origin (e.g., Gergen, 2003); Diaz Leon, 2013). We take this up later on.

3.2. Question 2: Mind and the Cultural

We now turn to Question 2: *(how) do society and culture in general, per se create general qualities of mind and behaviour in any setting?* This is the question of ‘cultural construction’ – whether *the fact of being cultural*, or having the capacity to have socio-cultural experience, contributes to our mental capacities.

In contrast to social construction, this concerns not *specific* qualities of social life contributing to specific details of attitudes, beliefs and so on, but instead relatively *generic* or widely-applicable qualities of cultural life contributing to generic qualities of (social) mental life – such as the fact of sharing intentions and beliefs, or of entering into and sharing joint arrangements for action based on shared beliefs and norms. These results are portable qualities of mind and belief – they do not depend on specific aspects of the context for their application or their generation. Whilst they may enable, support or give rise to specific ways of thinking in specific contexts, their own application is not tied to those contexts. And whilst they may be manifest as part of specific, detailed ways of thinking in everyday life, their importance to cultural construction lies in their generic qualities. The contrast with the implications of social constructionism's specificity is clear. It would mean that moving to contexts where people possessed radically different specific beliefs and ways of interacting would be a challenge, but not catastrophic – precisely because of sharing the common underpinning of being cultural in this way. Moreover, cultural construction concerns not the highly contingent detailed qualities of cultural items, but rather the *relatively non-contingent* qualities of (possessing) culture (or more accurately, those which are only contingent on longer-term, perhaps evolutionary-historical processes). The possibility being canvassed here is that it is their cultural nature *per se* that allows such features to contribute to non-specific, generic qualities of mental life; and the resulting qualities of mind are

applicable across multiple contexts beyond the contingencies of acquisition. We canvass some proposals for this below, noting that they require an integral role for evolution.

Before this, however, note something of the relations between Question 1 and Question 2. Answering ‘Yes’ to Question 1 does not entail ‘Yes’ to Question 2: social construction does not entail cultural construction – if specific aspects of mind vary cross-culturally, this does not entail that core qualities of mind in general are created by culture. For example, as noted above for evolutionary psychology, the role of culture is to ‘fill in the details’ of a capacity whose foundations are constituted by a non-cultural (biological) capacity, with different results in different settings. Reciprocally, answering ‘Yes’ to Question 2 does not entail ‘Yes’ to Question 1: cultural construction does not entail social construction – if generic qualities of mind are created by culture, this does not entail cross-cultural variation in specific aspects of mind. The qualities of culture that constitute mind may be common across all cultures, and could generate a common outcome. So answers to the two questions may be, to a degree, independent.

4 Social Construction’s Sociality Paradox

We now turn to how these forms of construction connect to the sociality of mind. It may seem strange to even raise this issue – surely, social and/or cultural construction would by definition *guarantee* that the mind is intrinsically social? I think there are reasons to at least cast doubt on this, because of what can be called Social Construction’s Sociality Paradox: social construction, as widely formulated, need not generate mental capacities that are intrinsically social in the broad sense noted above (see also Greenwood, 2004: p. 242, for an argument that traditional social construction leads to an impoverished conception of the social and its relation to mind).

4.1 Social Construction’s Sociality Paradox and its Origins

This arises from the three conditions of social construction – its contingency, specificity and the fact that neither contingency nor specificity are understood to have any significant constraint or direction from biology. First, note that the force that constructs a capacity – its origin – is no indicator of the content or focus of the outcome capacity. The nature of a cause does not determine the nature of a consequence. If a mental capacity is primarily constructed by social or cultural forces (e.g. if it arises as a consequence of interaction or of the flow of cultural information), this does not mean that it concerns, involves in its process, is about or directly represents that or any other social or cultural force. A socially constructed capacity could be about biological or

natural phenomena, and a naturalistically constructed capacity could be about social or cultural phenomena. Put another way, the fact that a belief arises or a way of thinking takes place in the presence of other people, does not vouchsafe its sociality: on the broad definition noted above, such a belief or way of thinking may still lack the intrinsic reference to or dependence on the beliefs or other mental states of those other people. Whilst a straightforward point, this implies that we cannot look for a guarantee of the social *nature* of the operation of mind – its sociality - in the social *origin* of mind. This general point is reinforced in particular by social constructionism's commitment to the local contingency of construction. A capacity that is socially constructed and has social content or process in one context or at one time, may not have that content or process in another. More generally, socially constructed social capacities present in one context may not be present in another: there is no guarantee of pan-cultural sociality.

Lest this seem rather abstract, consider Rosaldo's (1982) analysis of speech acts.

Speech act theory concerns people performing social actions by using forms of language with conventional force – for example, making promises or requests (Austin, 1976).

The social conventions often require the speaker and hearer to be in appropriate mental states for the acts to be properly executed. Rosaldo (1982) reports ethnographic work with the Ilongots tribe of the Phillipines, suggesting they have no speech act corresponding to promising. Their culture, she suggests, de-emphasises individual

intentions and sincerity, and emphasises social roles and public undertakings, which are not characterised by relatively informal promises, but instead by formal, public oaths and proclamations. She therefore claims that speech act theory does not provide a universal account of the types of speech acts used by cultures, since it places too great an “emphasis on the speaker’s psychological state” (Rosaldo, 1982: p. 227). Regarding our discussion, the culture is taken to direct the psychological states that are available to its members, and therefore those which can be communicated through speech acts.

What matters here is not that a specific socio-historical location might possess a unique way of thinking that adds to those possessed by all other locations. Rather, what matters is that it may not possess one or more ways of thinking that other locations do possess. The generalisation is that it may possess none of them. The paradox is thus that the social creates the non-social.

Social constructionism might respond to this paradox in various ways. Before we look at some possible responses, it might be worthwhile to tease out two different variants of this paradox – a weak and a strong variant.

4.2 Weak and Strong Variants of Social Construction's Sociality Paradox

A weak sociality paradox would suggest that locally socially constructed sociality would not be global sociality. This weak variant would be broadly epistemological in its force: people from some locations in time and space may well have differently constituted forms of sociality (for all we can tell) but they would not be recognised as sociality by people from other locations, who would therefore be unable to interact successfully with them. It may possess a form of sociality, but not terms that could be understood or recognised by those from other locations or times. This is, in a way, a generalisation of the empirical evidence of the experience of strong cultural differences in interaction, of 'culture shock', to go beyond differences in specific values, attitudes or practices, and to encompass differences in sociality *in toto*. The paradox arises because there are no specific and/or contingent social means to prevent this generalisation. The strong sociality paradox might be glossed as ontological: people from some locations in time and space may simply not have sociality of any kind. This strong variant then suggests that a locally socially constructed mentality would not comprise sociality at all. Our main focus will be on the weak variant.

As suggested, this paradox arises from the traditional framing of social construction: *if* the *specific* qualities of core mental capacities are contingent on historically and

culturally local social experiences *and* neither specificity nor contingency involve evolutionary direction or constraint, *then* the paradox arises. However, if social construction were able to embrace non-contingency, or the construction of non-specific (generic) mental capacities, then arguably it could avoid the sociality paradox.

Embracing non-contingency would allow the possibility of mandated constructions towards sociality; and embracing the construction of generic capacities would allow that the variation in detailed psychological competences could be underwritten by a generic sociality. Both of these possibilities are available to social psychology that integrates evolutionary and cultural pressures in the construction of mind in a search for ways of balancing the pan-cultural with the culturally-specific (see e.g., Keller, 2002, and Vygotsky for general developmental perspectives; and Uher, 2013 for a discussion that also takes in important issues concerned with personality measurement and conceptualisation). So it may be that cultural construction can tread where social construction cannot, since the usual formulation of social construction leads to problematic outcomes; we return to this below.

To sum up, the sociality paradox is can be seen as a derivation or generalisation of the relativism or near-relativism to which social construction is a standing invitation: *if* socially constructed mental capacities can vary more or less arbitrarily with cultural

setting, *then* they may vary so as to preclude sociality in general or sociality that would be recognised by those from other locations in particular.

4.3 Responses to the Sociality Paradox: Causal and Constitutive Social Construction

Social constructionism could, of course, offer a comeback to this allegation of a sociality paradox. This might say that the way the paradox is framed presupposes the very thing which social construction would deny – the separability of the social and the mind. To see this, we need to differentiate between two variants of social construction (see also Diaz-Leon, 2013; Franks, 2013a; Mallon, 2008), which share the commitment to specificity and contingency but offer different general views of the relation between social context and – *causal social construction* (in which the social context is extrinsic to mental processes and causes variations in how they operate), and *constitutive social construction* (in which the social context is not separate but is an intrinsic part of mental processes). Social constructionism has often argued that many views treat the social as somehow superficial or extrinsic to the essential functioning of the mind. For example, by taking culture as a context that elicits or activates relevant knowledge (as in views arising from social cognition: Jahoda, 2012), the social is taken to function as an independent variable, separate and separable from mind. The mind would not be intrinsically social, since the social is an extraneous context or influence, which mental

processes could (at least in principle) function without. This kind of variation in specific qualities of mind arising from the causal impact of a separate social influence expresses causal social construction (see Diaz Leon, 2013; Mallon, 2008, Franks, 2011; Hacking, 1999; Searle, 1996). As Diaz Leon (2013: p. 5) puts it, something “is *causally* socially constructed when social factors or social agents are causally responsible for the existence of the object or the instantiation of the corresponding properties.” The operation of the qualities of mind that are produced in this way would be separable from the social conditions that produce them: remove those conditions and, once the qualities of mind are produced, they could still (in principle) continue to operate.

The alternative, constitutive social constructionist view is the ‘stronger’ version of social construction – that the social and historical location is somehow *constitutive of* the psychological capacity. There is no simple way of separating out the capacity and the context that constructs it, because that context itself provides the process of social construction, which just is (part of) the process of social interaction, and part of the process of thought. Again, Diaz- Leon (2013: pp. 5-6): something “is *constitutively* socially constructed when it is part of the definition of what it is for someone to be an F, or part of the nature of being an F (i.e. what makes someone an F), that Fs stand in some relation to social agents or social factors”. To use a socially constructed quality of mind, on this view, is to be directly connected to the social factors that constitute or

define it. Remove those factors and the quality itself (in principle) can no longer be operational. Using a socially constructed capacity is, on such a view, *by definition* ‘dialogical’, in that it *necessarily* involves other people as sources of content and of interlocking, mediating and interpretive or semiotic processes (e.g., Markova, 2002; Jovchelovitch, 2006; Markus & Hamedani, 2007; Valsiner, 2001). Process and content are thus inseparable.

Treating the social as such a constitutive aspect of thought is a *prima facie* plausible way of sidestepping the paradox, but it has costs. The main cost is of denying the contingency and presumably also specificity that are hallmarks of social constructionism. This is because the processes of constitutive social construction *always* entail the sociality of mind, because social construction is mandated to involve sociality in cause and consequence, via the integral role of social interaction and allied processes. This response does not appeal to socially constructed specific qualities in specific settings – its solution to the sociality paradox is not to list all specific forms of social interaction and show empirically how they connect to thought; rather, it is to make the *in principle* argument that all significant thinking intrinsically involves sociality. Of course, this claim might be softened to become one that the sociality of thought *is* contingent and only appears to be mandated, because it happens to apply to all significant forms of thinking in all cultures. But this seems like empirical camouflage for an in principle assumption. The generic

quality of thought which is constitutively based on social interaction thus ensures an effective mandate of pan-cultural sociality of (important aspects of) thought.

This solution to the paradox also seems to elide the distinction between social and cultural construction – the sociality of thought is ensured by mandated construction of *generic* aspects of thought, rather than contingent construction of specific aspects. Without the mandate –without demurring from contingency – sociality is not guaranteed. And this solution also seems to bring back the separation between generic processes of sociality or dialogicality, on the one hand, and specific contents and situations to which they apply on the other. In sum, this solution seems ill at ease with some fundamental aspects of social construction.

Social construction may thus be on the horns of a dilemma: either retain full contingency, and accept that sociality is not intrinsic (and so allow the Sociality Paradox to arise), or argue that sociality is intrinsic but deny contingency (and so undermine the Sociality Paradox but deny a central aspect of social construction).

5 Cultural Construction: the Pan-Cultural in Mind

If we take the non-contingency horn of social construction's sociality dilemma, then a further question arises: where does a pan-cultural mandate to sociality originate? What constructs cultural construction?

5.1 Social Construction and the Pan-Cultural

Taking the social constructionist response to the paradox, why might social interaction or dialogicality be fundamental to thought? A traditional social constructionist answer might be that, since past culture generates current culture, the mandate to current sociality is a cultural mandate (see, e.g., Kitayama, Park, Sevincer, Karasawa, Uskul (2009) for an account of cultural mandates that has this flavour). This displaces the explanation to more distant history and past cultures, and presumably requires some point at which the contingent transmuted (perhaps by degrees) into the non-contingent. There is no doubt that particular cultures or cultural patterns are dependent on their past for qualities that seem mandatory in those cultures in the present; but generalising this to a cultural explanation for generic qualities that are mandated for all cultures – where culture *per se* alone would explain cultural mandates *per se* – is a large step.

5.2 Omniculture and the Pan-Cultural

Such a view contrasts with Moghaddam's concept of omniculture, as becomes clear when we see that omniculture concerns *specific* qualities of culture which happen to be shared (see Moghaddam, 2012: p. 318). Moghaddam is concerned not with generic qualities of being social or cultural, but with commonalities of specific cultural norms, values and practices. Omniculture arises, presumably, as a consequence of inter-cultural contact and transmission, or of facing common historical, social and ecological challenges which generate requisite patterns of interaction; that is, traditional social construction emerging from shared contingencies. As a policy practice, omniculture places a premium on universals or commonalities that can be observed or recognised by people in their everyday interaction with people from different social and cultural origins – they are 'surface' or 'emic' universals. Indeed, Moghaddam (2012: p. 318) calls this the 'omnicultural imperative': "During interactions with others, under all conditions, first give priority to the characteristics you share with other people as members of the human group." The central role in omniculture for the everyday recognition of shared sociality raises the possibility that it is subject to the weak sociality paradox.

It certainly seems evident that the sociality paradox is not resolved by an appeal to omniculture. This is because omniculture itself seems to arise from the aggregation over particular social constructions – the piecing together of empirical patterns of commonality in observable social thought and behaviour, which are to be recognised in interaction. The weak sociality paradox – which was, as we saw, connected to a recognition-failure regarding the sociality that arises in times and locations different from one's own – thus generates a problem for omniculture in practice. Even if omniculture existed we would not be able to recognise it as such, since we could not be guaranteed to recognise commonality regarding social qualities of mind.

There is, however, a hint of an equivocation in Mogghadam's formulation – on the one hand omniculture should, as noted, embrace qualities which people can *recognise* as shared across all social groups in everyday interactions; on the other hand, he also repeatedly stresses that these are qualities that have been established by 'scientific research' (e.g., p. 306, p. 319). This seems to locate the notion of an omnicultural universal at the level of what Chomsky (1965) called a 'substantive' universal – a directly observable commonality in the content of thought or behaviour; in this way, it can be recognised in everyday interaction. This contrasts with 'formal' universals, whose presence is not directly observed in the content of thought or behaviour, but which is

inferred or postulated as an underlying cause or origin of substantive universals or variations. To sharpen this a little more: formal universals explain surface universals (and differences), whereas substantive universals describe them. In the ideas from evolutionary psychology outlined above, a generic ‘metatemplate’ for a natural kind would be a formal universal, and any common but specific qualities of representations of natural kinds would be substantive universals. More generally, the set of universals canvassed by Brown (1991, 2000) covers both kinds.

5.3 Evolutionary Psychology and the Pan-Cultural

This picture gives rise to a different possible origin for generic qualities, drawing upon evolutionary constraints to ground the mandate. One – called ‘metaculture’ by Tooby & Cosmides (1992) – is connected to the evolutionary psychology view noted above. They suggest that, “All humans tend to impose on the world a common encompassing conceptual organization, made possible by universal mechanisms operating on the recurrent features of human life” (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992: p. 91). Metaculture encompasses the generic and universal qualities of thought, activity and artefact that derive from the intersection of evolved modular dispositions with cross-culturally common social and ecological challenges. Although they are not ‘designed’ to create

culture, generic qualities of mind generate recurrent cultural patterns by responding to (relatively) non-contingent generic aspects of the environment. The generic qualities of culture then serve as foundation for cultural learning of specifics. Metaculture is thus grounded in the intersection of past culture and history and current ecological and social challenges with evolved dispositions. Culture *per se* explains culture *per se*, but only via the intermediary of evolved mind. Evolutionary psychology has proposed mental modules specifically adapted to social functions (e.g., theory of mind, folk sociology). These psychological capacities are located in individuals, but ‘designed’ to process social inputs, so that the individual level is not individualistic – for biological reasons. They are *constitutively social, but not constitutively socially constructed* – the social qualities of mind are, rather, mandated by evolved adaptations. There is a sense in which causal social construction precedes cultural construction, in that the capacity to engage in joint actions and joint intentions depends on a prior capacity to conceive of others as separate, thinking social beings. Indeed, some have argued that culture is a spandrel or byproduct of adaptations that were designed for non-cultural reasons, but which respond to domains outside that original design (Sperber & Hirschfeld, 2004). The outcome is evolved capacities that by ‘design’ or accident support cultural construction of generic qualities, and these support causal social construction of specific details based on those generic qualities.

5.3 Evolutionary Learning Approaches and the Pan-Cultural

A second evolutionarily inspired way of addressing cultural construction arises from more explicit attempts to connect cultural learning with biology. This emphasises the idea that evolved mental capacities are not modular, but are ‘designed’ as more flexible learning devices. One possibility is that major social and cognitive capacities evolved via something like ‘variability adaptation’, resulting in the capacity to respond to major environmental changes (as opposed to the adaptation to environmental constancies assumed by modularity; see Potts, 1998; Franks, 2011, 2013a; Chiappe & Gardner, 2012). This arguably generated a suite of less special-purpose and more flexible heuristics for social learning (e.g., Boyd, Richerson & Henrich, 2012; Levinson, 2006). These depend on distinctly human capacities for co-operation (e.g., Tomasello, 1999, 2008), whose expression is interleaved, according to context and task, with a disposition towards competition. Such cultural learning is highly attuned to acquiring knowledge and skills from normatively-valued role models that have adaptive significance to a child’s community even where, for example, the results contrast with more easily available parental modelling (e.g., Hirschfeld, 2008). A variety of such learning heuristics has been discussed, as has their connection with imitation and related co-operative capacities: all relate to the development of capacities that revolve around sociality. Such learning is cultural *because* it is biological – it arises because of the need to acquire complex

ecological and cultural adaptations (including ways of thinking, tools and artefacts) using relatively simple, evolved learning processes. These processes are attuned to cultural information in selecting role models and appropriate artefacts and tools. Such evolutionary drives also motivate successive changes and refinements to cultural artefacts and ideas, across generations.

The overarching suggestion is that learning thereby occurs in an environment that is already ‘culturally engineered’ by previous generations (e.g., Cole, 1996; Sterelny, 2004), and the cultural accumulation of learning can generate biologically adaptive outcomes (Baldwin, 1896). This possibility has been discussed in terms of ‘Baldwinian’ effects in evolution: that cultural learning may be a constraint on adaptations, in which a trait becomes innate as a result of first being learned and disseminated throughout a population. How this might come about in a way that avoids Lamarckism has been a matter of some debate (e.g., Watkins, 1999; Papineau, 2005). Perhaps the most widely mooted option is one that emerges from Baldwin’s own conception that the specific developmental socio-cultural environment or set of contexts into which a child is born are as ‘unavoidable’ as both the ecological environment and their genetic inheritance (Baldwin, 1897: Chapter II). Niche construction (e.g., Lalande, Odling-Smee & Feldman, 2000) suggests that such a recurrent aspect of the environment may be constructed by a population of agents, which thereby generates a set of problems to which genetic

adaptation might then be made over subsequent generations. What begins as social learning directed by the social environment culminates in genetic inheritance and a preparedness to learn about that and similar environments.

The scope for flexibility on such an evolutionary learning account is greater than in massive modularity, since culture can not only modulate but also transform the innate starting point, in a manner that echoes Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978; see Franks, 2013b), and was substantially prefigured by Baldwin (Baldwin, 1896; 1897: Chapter II; see also Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000: Chapter 4). The innate starting point is viewed less as a ‘ballistic’ cause of later outcomes, and more as part of an ongoing developmental process (Baldwin, 1906; Franks, 2013b). Such an approach leads to an emphasis on the emergence of mental capacities in specific cultural and ecological niches. The extent to which it is able to offer explanatory generalisations beyond micro-level descriptions of those niches (a problem that has been argued to arise from Baldwinian approaches: Valsiner & van der Veer, *op cit*) depends both on accounts of how niches operate in social psychological terms, and the extent of structure in the evolved social psychological capacities proposed. It is the latter that concerns us here. Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne & Moll (2005), suggest that cognitive capacities that result from such learning may thus be dialogical and co-operative for biological reasons, arising from evolved capacities for engaging in joint intentionality. Cultural construction precedes social construction, in

the sense that the capacity for joint intentionality precedes the capacity for thinking about others as separate psycho-social beings, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically (Moll & Tomasello, 2007). Thinking that involves such joint intentions involves content and processes that are dialogical, which bear the stamp of the biological adaptation throughout their development and use. The social foundation for learning is thus a constitutive aspect of the use of the resulting capacity, which suggests an extended or situated cognition (Franks, 2011). Here, the capacity for culture is part of humans' biological endowment (e.g., Henrich, 2008). That is, the evolutionary learning approach proposes that the innately mandated generic capacity to be cultural supports constitutive sociality; but that generic capacity is only ever expressed in the form of specific qualities of sociality that depend on specific historical and local circumstances for their expression. Different accounts of how a specific culture would be constructed by the convergence of the innate sociality faculty and the specific socio-cultural context are offered by the authors above. This underpins specific forms of thought which are subject to *constitutive social construction*.

Notice that the broad concept of metaculture is equally consistent with the modular and the evolutionary learning views, even though it first emerged from the former.

Metaculture expresses commonalities of culture that arise from the intersection of innate dispositions (whether the very specific ones proposed by modularity, or the more generic

ones proposed by evolutionary learning) with recurrent environmental challenges. The nature of the predicted qualities of metaculture might differ, but the general view is similar.

We have thus suggested two evolutionarily-inspired ways in which the mind could be understood to be intrinsically social. One concerns a modular mental capacity comprising or being directly derived from an adaptation that is biologically ‘designed’ for social thinking or action. A second concerns the ongoing social environment and social interaction in particular constituting aspects of the mental processes and representations as connected to learning.

The modular view suggests that the social is intrinsic to mind on the first reading, as a result of hypothesised adaptations for social thinking and acting. However, other aspects of the mind, whose specific adaptive purposes are not concerned with social thought and action, are therefore not intrinsically social. The view also construes the interface between mind and context in a way that reflects the causal social construction, and so thereby (problematically) rules out the second form of intrinsic sociality based on constitutive social construction.

By contrast, evolved learning approaches offer scope for mind to be intrinsically social in both ways. First, the hypothesised learning capacities are intrinsically attuned to social relations, being ‘designed’ to seek out and learn from culturally appropriate role models. Second, the ongoing functioning of many of the mental capacities acquired in this way involve dialogical relations between a person and their social and cultural environment, so that thought reaches out to, constitutively extends into that environment: it is constitutively socially constructed.

So these evolutionary accounts not only offer ways of solving the sociality paradox, but do so in ways that *require* the integration of social construction and cultural construction. They offer different evolutionary proposals for such integration. The form of social construction they endorse, and the nature of intrinsic sociality, varies between those evolutionary accounts. Both take the social as intrinsic to mind, in no way superficial or optional to its workings; but they also offer ways in which this intrinsic sociality must nevertheless be context-dependent.

The contrasts with traditional social constructionism's account of universals also now become clearer. Traditional social constructionism – including omniculture - is concerned with specific details of mental content and process, often interwoven; any universals arise adventitiously. Evolutionary approaches gloss universals somewhat differently: they concern generic contents and processes, as opposed to specific ones; they are non-contingent (except insofar as evolved adaptations are contingent), as opposed to amalgamations of the locally contingent; and they concern not just amalgamations of contents and processes, but also the culture-dependent learning devices that construct generic and specific contents and processes. They express not merely *commonality of thoughts* across cultures, but also *commonality of processes for acquiring and developing new and specific thoughts*. They have a different *role* in mind and social relations from the universals suggested by, for example, omniculture. Put differently, they are not merely descriptive or substantive universals, they are more clearly explanatory or formal universals that *give rise to* or generate surface qualities.

5.4 Evolutionary Developmental Systems Theory and the Pan-Cultural

There is, however, a more radical view of the intersection of evolved and cultural influences on mind, which seems to result in a constitutively social constructionist picture

but where there is no role for cultural construction. This kind of view arises from ideas in developmental systems theory (e.g., Oyama, Griffiths & Gray, 2001), which add in further dynamics to the Baldwinian or Vygotskian picture offered by evolutionary learning theory, and lead to a view of mind as even more dependent on the specifics of the local situation than that proposed by evolutionary learning theory (e.g., Griffiths, 2003; see also, Laland, Sterelny, Odling-Smee, Hoppitt & Uller, 2011; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000: Chapter 4). Such a view has many facets, but crucial for our purposes is the idea that inheritance is not simply a matter of a relatively fixed genetic material combining with a relatively static environmental input, with the result being a more or less direct phenotypic expression of genotype. Rather, the dynamic process involves shifting environmental processes and multiple levels of inheritance. This view would likely deny the possibility of genetic bases that directly lead to specific mental content and process (including specific qualities of sociality, as in modularity) or to more flexible mental content and processes (including generic sociality, as in evolved learning). It would, rather, suggest a dynamic, incremental developmental process of interaction between specific learning environments and open-ended learning dispositions. This picture would not only contradict the ‘biological’ side of the evolutionary views sketched above. It would also likely contradict the ‘environmental’ side of the modularity views. In particular, the idea of mental adaptations as arising as solutions to recurrent features of the environment is challenged by the idea of organisms (including humans) actively changing

their environments to which they then adapt. And if there are no constant or generic aspects to the environment, this then challenges the possibility of metaculture as a foundation for cultural commonality and cultural construction. For example, Ingold's concept of a 'taskscape' (Ingold, 1993, 2011) would suggest a dynamic, processual view of the interrelations of a person and the environment in which the specific and shifting properties of both are essential to explain the situated actions that arise. Such a view is in clear opposition to the modularity accounts noted above. Whilst its emphasis on a dynamic environment, situatedness and flexible learning bear similarity with the evolved learning approaches, it would nonetheless likely deny the possibility of innate dispositions to generic sociality or to being cultural.

As a consequence, this more radical vision would seem to deny the distinction between social and cultural construction, in part because it denies the very possibility of cultural construction. To debate this position would take us beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems likely that it would return us to the paradox of sociality, which itself arose from the very kinds of specificity and contingency that this position endorses.

The broad conclusion is therefore that evolution *per se* does not circumvent the sociality paradox. Some circumvent it, and some reinforce it. Precisely which evolutionary

approach is the most plausible, remains empirically clear. Of course, if the more radical evolutionary view turned out to be the correct one, then this itself would suggest that the sociality paradox is here to stay.

6 Social and Cultural Construction and the Challenge of Intergroup Conflict

The issues thus far are theoretical in nature. But they also contribute to the debate regarding intercultural contact and conflict. As noted, Mogghadam proposes omniculture as the starting point of intergroup contact, appealing to what is common to all humans and so raising the prospect of reducing conflict. Bilewicz & Bilewicz (2012) and Gillespie, Howarth & Cornish (2012) rightly indicate, however, that deciding what is common across humanity – ‘human nature’ – is complicated by political and theoretical questions. It may be that some of these complications arise from those authors’ focussing on specific, socially constructed qualities as opposed to generic, culturally constructed ones. Taking cultural construction and the resultant metaculture as more central may allow us to reframe some of those issues.

6.1 Essentialism, Intergroup Relations and Forms of Construction

For example, Gillespie, Howarth & Cornish (2012) argue that omniculture presupposes the categorical distinctions between people that it seeks to combat, and that those categories are not fixed, but depend on perspective and history, such that the social activities connected to those categories are constitutive of them. This is grist to my mill, fully consistent at least with the evolutionary learning view above. They go on to suggest that policy should emphasise the contingency of social categories and advocate a critical analysis of essentialised and naturalised social categories. This is also congenial, but it is also a point at which the distinction between social construction and cultural construction bites. To see this, note the quote from James with which their paper opens and closes begins as follows: “What shall we call a thing anyhow? It seems quite arbitrary, for we carve out everything, just as we carve out constellations, to suit our human purposes” (James, 1907: p. 106). This suggests the contingency and specificity – more, the arbitrariness – of social categorisations, which seems to follow straightforwardly only if one takes the ‘human purposes’ to comprise socially constructed purposes alone. However, if such purposes and the resultant categorisations are in part guided or constrained by evolutionary dispositions, along the lines of cultural construction and evolutionary learning theory, a quite different picture emerges.

One recurrent finding regarding social categorisation is that commonsense thinking tends to demarcate groups according to their supposed possession of essential properties (e.g., Haslam, 1998, 2011; Hirschfeld, 1997; Mahalingam, 2003; McIntosh, 1998; Prentice & Miller, 1999). To take this commonsense essentialism as *only* a social construction suggests that it could be eradicated under appropriate contingencies – essentialism would merely depend on perspective. But to take it, instead, to be part of culturally constructed metaculture – arising from qualities that are intrinsic to categorical thinking - may suggest that essentialisation *per se* is rather more resistant to change. What might be challenged is the perspectival nature of specifically *which categories are essentialised*, and specifically *which properties are understood to be essences*. If anything, this increases the motivation for critical vigilance, since successfully challenging the claim that one set of properties comprises a category's essence in no way prevents a different set of properties subsequently being recruited to fill that category's essence 'place holder'. Essentialism would simply return under another guise to re-essentialise thought about that category, especially given the presence of essentialising rhetoric in much public and private debate. Perhaps it is a further paradox for social construction that the social change that it inspires may be as specific and contingent - and therefore limited and temporary - in its effect as the processes of social construction themselves.

Holz & Wagner (2012) discuss the related possibility that violent derogation of outgroups may depend on the ‘naturalisation by essentialisation’ of group identities. Why do those who perpetrate acts of inhumanity to others – war crimes, genocide, and other forms of individual and collective violence - appear to feel little compunction in doing so, and little pity towards their victims? Drawing a line between themselves and the victims according to the supposed possession and non-possession of essences is one foundation for not perceiving the victims as human beings. Once this step has been taken, then the moral obligations owed to another human being no longer apply. Holz & Wagner suggest that the near-impossibility of successfully countering essentialism *per se* should give rise to a different strategy. Rather than challenging essentialism *per se*, they suggest that greater common attention should be paid to providing “insight into language use and the often illegitimate inferences drawn from labels and names” (2012: p. 7). That is, on the terms discussed here, a focus less on observed substantive universals and more on underlying formal universals that connect to them - on the linguistic and cognitive practices that draw on and support the cultural construction of essentialisation (see also, Wagner, Holz & Kashima, 2009).

6.2 Cultural Construction and Omniculture

Omniculture's approach of aggregating over and finding similarities amongst specific beliefs, is only one way of seeking the pan-cultural, and depends on prioritising social construction over cultural construction. Cultural construction shifts the focus to generic psychological capacities that give rise to everyday social interaction, thereby producing specific beliefs. Glossing cultural construction in terms of the evolutionary learning approach, and not massive modularity, also has particular implications for intercultural engagement.

One implication is stressing the potentially co-operative nature of central aspects of human social thought: a common disposition towards co-operating and engaging in joint actions and projects, regardless of surface differences. This disposition to co-operation is intertwined with one to competition, and the relative preponderance of each is sensitive to real resource and power relations between individuals and groups.

Another is stressing the idea that specific beliefs and surface differences are intrinsically bound up with our social life, so that differences may not be elided by mere contact alone, but by more structured engagement related to mutually understanding the different social and cultural conditions under which those surface differences arose, and understanding the linguistic and cognitive capacities that interpret those conditions in such a way as to maintain intergroup conflict. These suggestions are in the spirit of

omniculture, since Mogghadam rightly focuses on empirically demonstrated similarities.

However, cultural construction calls attention not only to specific 'surface' contents of mind and their similarities (minds as repositories of contents), but also to generic, culture-sensitive representations and the processes through which minds acquire those specific contents. Structured intercultural engagement, then, would not only involve articulating surface similarities, but also framing them in appropriately nuanced social psychological explanatory terms. It may be that social change inspired by attention to cultural construction, in paying attention to underlying, generic and recurrent qualities of mind, would be more enduring than that inspired by social construction.

A final caveat, however. For analytic purposes, I have drawn relatively sharp distinctions between cultural construction and social construction, universals and local qualities of mind, non-contingent and contingent, and generic and specific qualities of mind; each of these may be better considered as dimensional rather than categorical. All these distinctions are merely theoretical lenses, and they have been given only a first framing here; there is no assumption that empirical social and psychological phenomena come neatly packaged along these lines. Rather, each phenomenon likely involves all

sides of the distinctions, to different degrees. And this means that practical applications will also draw on all sides, perhaps inadvertently.

7 Conclusions

Drawing a distinction between contingent social construction of specific qualities of mind and non-contingent cultural construction of generic qualities of mind, has led to a suggestion that the latter is able to resolve a paradox of sociality that seems to emerge from traditional social construction. But cultural construction itself requires explanation, and it was suggested that evolutionary accounts offer promising directions. One such – the evolutionary learning view – not only grounds cultural construction in evolved dispositions towards co-operation and cultural learning, but does so in conjunction with the ‘strongest’, constitutive variant of social construction. This outcome has implications for the roles of omniculture and other possible psychological universals, in supporting conflict reduction in inter-cultural contact. Framing contact not only in terms of the content of universals and differences, but also their differing mental roles, may be a further promising, empirically well-founded step in policy in this area. Over-all, the distinction between cultural construction and social construction, though only lightly sketched here, appears to have theoretical and practical resonance, which suggests that it is a promising line for future inquiry.

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