

HUMAN CULTURES THROUGH THE SCIENTIFIC LENS



Essays in Evolutionary Cognitive Anthropology

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2. Institutions and Human Nature

Introductory Note

One of the most enduring and most damaging assumptions in the social sciences is the belief that it makes sense to talk about nature and culture, or to part the ‘innate’ from the ‘acquired’ in describing human behavior. Almost as misguided is the recommendation that we should describe behavior as some combination or mixture of these elements—an insipid counsel for moderation that only results in a stubborn incuriosity about what is being ‘mixed’ and how (Pinker, 2002).

Against all this, many biologists, anthropologists and psychologists have, for decades, tried to illustrate how these oppositions dissolve, when we consider human capacities and preferences from an evolutionary standpoint (Ridley, 2003; Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). It is part of mankind’s evolved nature that we can acquire from our conspecifics vast amounts of information that constitute our ecological niche (Tooby & DeVore, 1987). This is possible because genetic selection fashioned a whole suite of learning mechanisms that orient the growing mind’s attention to specific cues in the environment, and govern that mind’s inferences. That is how we can acquire detailed and valuable information about, e.g., the physical relations between solid objects, the invisible beliefs and intentions that explain agents’ behaviors, the nature of the social bonds between people around us, the syntax of the local language, the best ways to extract resources from the natural world or to establish cooperation and garner social support. All this requires extensive learning, which requires extensively prepared systems—for a survey, see Boyer (2018, pp. 1–30) and Tooby & Cosmides (1992).

How does this relate to the study of institutions? To be more specific, Michael Petersen and I were trying to address the very general

question, why do people adopt some institutions as quite 'natural', in the familiar sense, while others are much less compelling? Why is marriage apparently so self-evident, that in most cultures throughout history, no-one needed an explanation for it? Why would the rules of a deliberative democracy be a much more fragile construction?

We can describe institutions as the 'rules of the game' in complex social interaction (North, 1990). These rules can be very different, from time to time and place to place. From that diversity, many people would conclude that genetic evolution by natural selection is irrelevant. But historical or cultural differences are, just like commonalities, an outcome of our evolved dispositions (Sperber & Hirschfeld, 2004). That is what Michael Petersen and I tried to illustrate in this article, using the contrasted cases of marriage institutions, criminal justice, and commons management as our examples. These display vast cultural and historical differences, and in fact some institutions are only found in some human societies. But in these different cases and, we would argue, many more besides these, we can see highly intuitive specific expectations at play, which make some parts of the local, historically specific institutional arrangements very easy to acquire, which in turn makes it relatively easy for people to coordinate their behaviors around common rules. The intuitive expectations are shaped by evolved learning systems, and in turn they shape the various institutions.

An important consequence of this model is that explanations of institutions are, by necessity, domain-specific. For instance, cultural rules about marriage are strongly constrained by human intuitions about mating, about the ways humans combine sexual access, care for their offspring and economic cooperation. By contrast, judicial rules are influenced by our moral intuitions and expectations concerning cooperation. So, to explain two different domains of institutions, we need to investigate two separate mental systems, each of which has its own domain of application, its computational rules, and its associated emotions.

That is why general models or theories of institutions are, in our view, incomplete. True, political scientists and economists have put forward important models of, e.g., the conditions under which there is demand for and supply of institutional rules, especially in complex modern societies—in the article we discuss some of these, especially

from the neo-institutional economics literature. But institutions are not just systems of rules, they are also systems of rules mentally represented by individuals—in fact, in many cases they consist in individual mental representations about the mental representations of other individuals (Heintz, 2007). That is why, at some point in our explanations, we must consider the role of evolved domain-specific intuitions, which means that we leave aside a general theory of institutions and produce theories of particular kinds of institutions.

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