Reinstating Modernity in Social Science Research – or – The Status of Bullwinkle in a Post-Postmodern Era

Peter H. Kahn, Jr., a Orlando Lourenço b

aColby College, Waterville, Me. and The Mina Institute, Covelco, Calif., USA;
bUniversity of Lisbon, Portugal

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Abstract
In recent years, postmodern critiques have enlarged in scope, and increasingly confronted traditional social scientists with challenges: epistemic, methodological, and moral. In this article, we offer a two-pronged response. First, we speak to problems within postmodern theory itself. We argue that, when taken seriously, the theory leads to contradictions in epistemology, to fragmentation in knowledge, to opportunism in interpersonal relationships, and to nihilism in moral action and commitment. Second, we demonstrate how many of the legitimate concerns of postmodernists can and are addressed in current ‘modern’ research programs. It is our hope that postmodernity – for those who believe that that is where we are – will give way to the post-postmodern era: modernity itself, reinvigorated.

In recent years, postmodern critiques have enlarged in scope, and increasingly confronted traditional social scientists with challenges: epistemic, methodological and moral. While these challenges have, on the positive side, reinvigorated various lines of research, they have also often become excessive and unwarranted. Thus, in our view, more of a direct response to postmodernity is needed within the field of human development, and in this article we offer one. Our response is two-pronged.

In the first half of this article, we speak to our concerns with postmodern theory itself. To provide a sense of our concerns, consider a recently popularized spoof by the physicist Alan Sokal [1996] titled: ‘Transgressing the boundaries: Toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity.’ In this article, Sokal wrapped illogical and nonsensical ideas concerning physics in postmodern jargon and passed off the result as

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serious scholarship in a peer-reviewed journal. Sokal sought to show that the postmodern study of science was 'intellectually suspect and ignorant of the science it purports to study' [McMillen, 1996].

In a vehement postmodern response, Stanley Fish [1996] writes that Sokal misunderstands the postmodern position on objectivity and science. To develop his position, Fish draws on an analogy to baseball. Fish writes [p. A23]:

Are there balls and strikes in the world? Yes.
Are there balls and strikes in nature (if by nature you understand physical reality independent of human actors)? No.
Are balls and strikes socially constructed? Yes.
Are balls and strikes real? Yes.

In the same way, Fish [1996] says, scientific findings are real. And herein lies an example of our concern with postmodern theory. Even if the human apprehension of reality involves social constructions, different constructions — of, say, fictional characters and actual living people — can have different status, epistemic and moral. The cartoon character Bullwinkle, for example, can be pushed out of an airborne plane, and we can laugh at the absurdity of a cartoon character plummeting to the ground: not so when we learn that by this very means, the military in Argentina has killed political dissidents. More generally, we will argue that too often postmodern theory allows for and even leads to positions that most postmodernists themselves would abjure.

In the second half of this article, we demonstrate how many of the legitimate concerns of postmodernists can and are addressed in current 'modern' research programs. After all, how exactly do postmodernists engage in social-scientific research? Perhaps postmodern researchers focus on qualitative analyses over quantitative, and recognize that a researcher brings his or her own perspectives and concerns into a study. Perhaps such researchers are interested in narrative, or draw on interviews, participant observations, and multiple perspectives, or seek to integrate perspectives into a larger perspective (a coherent story). Perhaps postmodern researchers pay careful attention to culture and context, and to hierarchical systems of power. And so on. Our position, however, is that all of these methods and issues are compatible with modern social science research. This point is important. For in recent years, it is our sense that postmodernists have sought to privilege certain methods as their own, suggesting that when one draws, for example, on narrative and interpretative analyses one necessarily embraces postmodernity. That is not the case.

To substantiate our position, we examine three diverse research areas within the field of human development: multicultural education, moral development, and the human relationship with nature. The research we sketch is distinctly modern, as opposed to postmodern, and strengthened by taking seriously the study of not only human differences but commonalities.

**Postmodern Theory**

Given that some readers may have only a cursory knowledge of modernity and postmodernity, we first characterize what is quintessential to both [for more detail, see Burr, 1995; Chandler, 1997; Gross et al., 1996; Harris, 1992; Kvale, 1992; Santos, 1995; Steele, 1979; Wilson, 1998]. Then, in more depth, we discuss two forms of postmodern theory that can be distinguished based on their epistemic claims: deconstruction postmodernism and affirmative postmodernism.
Historically, modernity goes back a good ways, and its early forms can be found in the pre-enlightenment writing of Hume, Bacon, Galileo, and others. Hume (1746/1961), for example, wrote [p. 83]:

It is universally acknowledged there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions.... Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature.

Writers around that time were also 'convinced that they were emerging from centuries of darkness and ignorance into a new age enlightened by reason, science, and a respect for humanity.... People came to assume that through a judicious use of reason and education, unending progress would be possible' (Encarta, 1998). Thus modernity, as it has come down to us from the past, emphasizes grand theories that look for trans-historical truths and ethical absolutes, and appeals to hierarchy, progress, development, and reason.

Yet, the modern project encountered difficulties. As noted by Harris [1992], some of these difficulties arose due to the failure of the program of the positivists, the cultural diversity revealed by anthropology, and the rise of different cultures to the level of international respectability. In response, the postmodern intellectual movement emerged, first in such fields as literature, art, architecture, and cultural studies. For example, in biblical studies, renewed emphasis was placed on the Bible, not as literal truth, but as a literary text open to hermeneutic analyses wherein one allows for multiple, equally cogent interpretations. Such pluralism then permeated the social sciences. As Goodman [1972, p. 30] writes: 'There are very many different equally true descriptions of the world, and their truth is the only standard of their faithfulness. And when we say of them that they all involve conventionalizations, we are saying that no one of these different descriptions is exclusively true, since the others are also true.'

In turn, postmodernists within psychology, and elsewhere, have extended this perspective, and moved toward the following tenets: (a) anti-essentialism (that there are no essences to be discovered inside people or in the external world); (b) anti-realism (that there can be no such thing as an objective fact); (c) historical and cultural specificity of knowledge and values (that all forms of knowledge and values are historically and culturally specific); (d) language as a precondition for thought (that language does not reflect a preexisting social reality, but constitutes that reality for us); and (e) the primacy of interpersonal processes (that explanations are not to be found on the level of the individual mind or of social structures, but of the interpersonal processes in everyday life).

*Deconstruction Postmodern Theory*

Deconstruction postmodernists hold tightly to the above tenets [e.g., Culler, 1982; Derrida, 1978; Foucault, 1983; Morss, 1992; Norris, 1982; Scholes, 1989]. For example, deconstructionists claim that few if any aspects of either the social world (comprised of cultures, subcultures, and individual people) or the physical world are coherently unified or structured, but are rather held together by fragments of our language [Grant, 1997]. Accordingly, deconstructionists ask that we abandon such modern constructs as truth, objectivity, logic, and even rationality. For what is considered true, objective, logical, or
rational in one culture or subculture may not be so considered elsewhere because such constructs only arise out of and gain meaning through specific sociohistorical and cultural contexts. Morality, too, is jettisoned. As Grant [1997, p. 117] writes: according to deconstructionists, 'universal values are also deemed impossible since there is no ultimate reality but language, which, upon examination, is also undeserving of our acceptance'.

Toward assessing deconstructionist theory, it is first important to recognize three related forms of internal contradictions within the theory itself. First, deconstructionists argue against theory building, and yet themselves advance a theoretical position. Second, deconstructionists seek to deconstruct the tools of logic, reason, and rationality, and yet they seek to do so with those very tools. Third, deconstructionists argue against privileging any position. Yet, if their theory (that holds that no theory can be true for everyone) holds for everyone, even for the person who mistakenly believes deconstruction false, then the theory does what it says cannot be done. It privileges itself. It establishes some basis for truth that transcends its own confines. [For a discussion of these and related issues, see, e.g., Crews, 1986, 1989; Hoy, 1985; Kahn, 1991; Lourenço, 1996; Rosenau, 1992; Scarle, 1983; Turiel, 1989; Williams, 1985.]

It has been said, however, that deconstructionists are less concerned with putting forth a full-bodied coherent theory, and more interested in providing a theoretical platform by which to empower the disenfranchised and right injustices. But such an offering provides less than is first apparent. To illustrate this point, consider a recent controversy that involved Jacques Derrida, who is often credited with founding deconstruction. In 1987, Derrida provided an interview with a French newspaper in which he 'explained Heidegger's enthusiasm for Nazism as an outgrowth of Western metaphysics and engaged in a deconstruction of Nazism and "non-Nazism" in an attempt to show the "law of resemblance" between them' [McMillen, 1993, p. A8]. By some accounts, this interview tainted Derrida by associating his intellectual roots through Heidegger with Nazism, and by highlighting his attempt to minimize Nazi immorality. After this interview, Wolin edited a book published by Columbia University Press that sought to document Heidegger's intimate involvement with Nazism. In the process, Wolin obtained appropriate legal permission from the French newspaper, which holds the copyright to Derrida's article, to translate and publish the interview in his edited book. However, in granting Wolin permission to use Derrida's article, the newspaper never notified Derrida, and when Derrida came upon the published book, with his interview included, he was outraged. In response, Derrida threatened Columbia University Press with legal action unless they halted any further printing of the volume. As a courtesy, Wolin offered that further printings could exclude the Derrida interview. Wolin only required that he be able to include an additional preface that commented on Derrida's actions. Derrida still objected, and Columbia University Press let the book go out of print after several months. [For a detailed account of this episode, see Sheenan's 1993a article, Derrida's 1993 response, and Sheenan's 1993b rebuttal.]

Within this context, it is interesting to note the language Derrida [1993, p. 44] uses to argue his case in one of several bitter exchanges that appeared in The New York Review of Books.

I merely demanded that my interview be withdrawn from any subsequent printings or editions ... Do I not have the right to protest when a text of mine is published without my authorization, in a bad translation, and in what I think is a bad book? As I have since written to him, Mr. Wolin seems to be more eager to give lessons in political morality than to try to respect the authors he writes about and publishes, in a greater hurry to accuse than to understand difficult texts and thinking ...
Derrida here is not being entirely unreasonable. True, he did not hold a legal claim to his interview. But, still, one can argue that, legality aside, morality requires that an author’s permission be given to include the author’s interview in a volume that casts him unfavorably. But Derrida’s own theory of deconstruction seems to disallow the very claims he wants to make. Specifically, how is it possible for Derrida—who seeks to undermine the very notion of authorship—to claim that he has been mistranslated? Such a claim would seem to imply that there are criteria or standards that transcend culture and context by which to judge the merits of a translation, the antithesis of what deconstruction embodies. Derrida also asks that Wolin respect the authors he writes about. But whose notion of respect are we to respect? Or does Derrida want to suggest that there is a fundamental core to the idea of ‘respect for author’ that transcends culture and context? Finally, Derrida talks about his ‘right to protest’. But are not ‘rights’ part of the baggage of modernity that Derrida seeks to jettison?

Because deconstructionists propose that no position, idea, or action can be privileged—that is, judged better, or more adequate, more intellectually sound, more comprehensive, or more moral than something else—they ultimately have few recourses when injustices occur. True, deconstructionists can do all the things other people do. In a democratic society, for instance, deconstructionists can write and speak publicly, help draft legislation, use the legal system to press their claims, and run for public office. But such actions are somewhat disingenuous. The deconstructionist might run for public office, for example, not because there is a commitment to the democratic process (after all, democracy cannot be privileged over fascism), but because that is the way within a democratic government by which to gain power. Power is primary. The added twist to this scenario is that once deconstructionists gain power it is very easy for them to fall prey to perpetrating the same injustices that they rebelled against. After all, other groups are the ‘other’, are different, and thus potentially not deserving of the same moral considerations as those of one’s own group.

The implications of deconstruction are difficult for many people to accept. Consider, for example, the following description [also discussed in Kahn, 1995]:

[Chinese] guards in Gutsa Prison [in Tibet] raped nuns who were political prisoners and sexually violated them with electric cattle prods. In another prison, the chief administrator said to me, ‘I will give you Tibetan independence’ Then he rammed the cattle prod into my mouth. When I regained consciousness, I found myself in a pool of blood and excrement and I had lost most of my teeth [Rosenthal, 1995, p. A25].

In response to such situations, it is difficult to say ‘live and let live’, especially since that very idea is being violated by others.

Granted, such abuses of power can arise within any political system. But some political systems, however imperfectly, oppose such abuses on moral grounds, and seek to prohibit such abuses through legal sanctions. Other political systems do not. In turn, while deconstruction does not force a person, or a society, toward such abuses, there is nothing in the theory that acts as a check. In other words, the statement ‘torture is immoral’ has no more normative force in deconstruction than the statement: ‘I don’t like sushi and I don’t eat it.’ In such ways, deconstruction opens itself to totalitarian political systems, and to such abuses of power as noted above.
Affirmative Postmodern Theory

Many postmodern theorists have been troubled by at least some of the above concerns about deconstruction, in theory and practice. In response, they have put forth modified positions which Rosenau [1992] and others have labeled as 'affirmative' postmodern theories. Affirmative postmodernists [e.g., Giroux, 1990; Hammer and McLaren, 1991; Hassan, 1985; Murphy, 1987, 1988; Richardson, 1988; Weiler and Mitchell, 1992; Wyschogrod, 1990] still argue for the plurality of value systems but do not maintain that such plurality necessarily leads to the relativism that is so troubling in deconstruction. As noted by Rosenau [1992, p. 136]: 'Affirmative post-modernists frequently employ terms such as oppression, exploitation, domination, liberation, freedom, insubordination, and resistance—all of which imply judgment or at least a normative frame of reference in which some definitive preferences are expressed.' Moreover, in contrast to nihilism that often pervades deconstructionist political theory, affirmatives often favor forms of democracy that empower individuals and especially underrepresented groups. At the same time, affirmatives usually embrace a deconstruction-like epistemology wherein it is maintained that all knowledge is socially constructed.

It is easy to applaud much of the affirmative's agenda. But can affirmatives maintain their nonrelativistic views in light of their deconstruction-like epistemology? Affirmatives think they can, though are often circumspect in articulating exactly how. As we understand their position, however, the skeleton of their response looks something like this. They maintain that knowledge is not objective. At the same time they maintain that neither is knowledge subjective because knowledge is grounded in socially constituted relations, bounded by community. As Murphy [1988, pp. 181-182] says: 'Anarchy is not necessarily the outcome of postmodernism, because public discourse can culminate in the promulgation of social rules'. Thus like deconstructionists they deconstruct the objective/subjective polarity; but as affirmatives they maintain that not anything goes. QED: postmodernism without relativism.

The problem here lies in believing that majority opinion or community beliefs solve the problem of relativism. when it does little more than raise the problem from an individual to a group level. As an analogy, imagine that people inside a house without windows are listening to a slight pitter patter on the roof. After much discussion and factional power struggles, they all agree that it is raining outside. Then a person from outside their community, and literally from outside their house, walks into their house and asserts that it is sunny outside: 'A bit windy,' she says, with acorns falling on the roof, but otherwise a glorious sunny day.' Now, presumably there are real occurrences of 'raining' and 'not raining'. Presumably in this case the people inside the house are simply mistaken in believing it is raining outside. Thus, one can agree that the people inside the house have socially shared knowledge, and that that knowledge goes beyond the mere subjectivity of each member. But that is not to say such shared knowledge ipso facto validates that knowledge. And the same holds true for ethical knowledge. A community can agree to discriminate against (or torture or slaughter) members from outside their community, but such agreements do not establish ethical validity.

Affirmative postmodernists might respond to this analogy in at least one of these ways, and it is important to examine each to understand better the limitations of the affirmative position. First, affirmatives (and others) might argue that the analogy falters insofar as people inside the house could presumably walk outside to verify the truth or falsity of the proposition that it is raining, but in the moral life there is no equivalent
place to go for objective verification. Such a counterargument rightly points out that epistemologically physical knowledge is not identical to moral knowledge. But that position in itself and particularly the first part of the counterargument (that people inside the house could step outside for verification) contradicts postmodern epistemology. After all, recall (from the introduction) Fish’s rebuttal to Sokal’s spoof. Fish, as an affirmative postmodernist, argued that all forms of knowledge (including physical, moral, and even fictional knowledge) are socially constructed and equally real. Thus for affirmative postmodernists there is never an ocular proof, never an external objective reality, to which one can authoritatively appeal.

Second, affirmatives might say that for a community to have valid ethical knowledge, not only must members within its community agree to it (thus protecting their own members from oppression), but similarly any time norms are applied to outside members, then those outside members must agree as well. Perhaps affirmatives would thereby establish the following principle: Membership in a democratic community is accorded to those who are affected by its norms, and, in addition, certain norms must protect the minority from majority oppression. A move like this then begins to bound the ethical by establishing universal criteria and a conception of what constitutes oppression in a principled and privileged, if not objective, sense. It is a good move. But, in making it, affirmatives have begun to embrace a modern epistemology.

Third, affirmatives might press their case for a postmodern epistemology based on an analogy to literature. Surely you will agree (affirmatives will say) that a novel or play lends itself to multiple interpretations. *King Lear*, after all, cannot be reduced to a single meaning. Rather the play’s rich and varied tapestry is precisely what allows person after person, generation after generation, to provide fresh and meaningful interpretations. Moreover, if one community says that a piece of fiction is good literature, and another community disagrees, is there not room for differing value judgments as well as differing interpretations? If so, then because our human lives are rich and varied, like a text, more so, ‘facts’ and statements of ‘truth’ need to give way to multiple interpretations and differing value judgments.

We appreciate the sensitivity that literary analysis can bring to the study of human nature. But life is not literature, and mischief occurs when postmodernists think it so. For instance, postmodern architects can theorize that the laws of physics are a cultural or linguistic convention. But try saying that when building a house — in any culture. ‘One [postmodern] architect is said to have “built an officers’ club, and the roof caved in during the dedication ceremonies.” In other cases postmodern designs are abandoned because “they simply can’t be built” [Seabrook 1991: p. 127, 129] [Rosenau, 1992, p. 127].

Facts and truths do not stop with physics. Over the last decade, for instance, it has been increasingly clear that child sexual abuse actually happens far more often than previously thought [Bass and Davis, 1988; Masson, 1984]. But think about what is implied from an affirmative postmodern epistemology. It would be something like: ‘You as the woman have your interpretation, and that’s important, and it’s valid, and you should give voice to it, and become empowered through it.’ It would also follow, though, that the perpetrator ‘has his own contrary interpretation, and that’s as valid for him as the woman’s is for her’. Here we do not want to discount the incredible complexity that arises in such remembrances, and that in some cases women may actually remember incorrectly, and levy unjust accusations [California Monthly, 1994; Tavris, 1993]. But in each case the claim is that either childhood sexual abuse such as penetration happened or did not, and that one can with validity universalize a judgment that
such abuse is morally wrong. As Rosenau [1992, p. 168] writes: 'Modern time, space, and history can be dispensed within post-modern literature, and the results are entertaining. But this is not always the case in the social sciences'.

Indeed, earlier in the introduction, that was our point with Bullwinkle. There we in effect took on a version of 'If a tree falls in a forest, does it make a sound?' And we would say if an Argentinean dissident is forced to jump from an airplane, and if we never know about it, he still dies. In turn, if a person had never imagined Bullwinkle, then that cartoon character would never have existed. In other words, while all of our understandings of reality involve a construction, some of our constructions create that reality and other constructions do not.

**The Post-Postmodern Era – or – Modernity Itself, Reinvigorated**

If modernity has had its faults, and if it has, and if we should not harness ourselves to postmodernity – and we have argued that we should not – then what next? The answer we believe is to embrace modernity in its principles but seek to reinvigorate their application. In what follows, we show how this is possible by offering brief sketches of modern research across three diverse content areas. The first involves multicultural education; the second, moral development; and the third, the human relationship with nature.

**Multicultural Education**

In his anthropological research on multicultural education, Ogbru [e.g., 1977, 1990, 1992, 1993] has distinguished voluntary (or immigrant) minorities from involuntary (or caste-like) minorities. Voluntary minorities have moved to a country more or less voluntarily, and tend to bring a sense of who they are from their homeland. In contrast, involuntary minorities are people who were originally brought into a country against their will, or colonized against their will. Thereafter, these minorities are often relegated to menial positions and denied true assimilation into the mainstream society.

Ogbru's research suggests that involuntary minorities experience more difficulties than voluntary minorities in school learning partly because of the relationship between their cultures and the mainstream culture. For example, voluntary minorities expect to have to cross over cultural boundaries to succeed, and compare their standard of success (however meager) to worse conditions in their home country. When voluntary minorities do succeed, they often remain visible members of their community, which show other community members that (a) with hard work success is possible, and (b) that one can retain one's cultural community affiliations and still be successful in the mainstream culture. In contrast, involuntary minorities, such as Black Americans, have no actual 'back home' to compare their condition to, unless it is to an earlier time when Whites had enslaved them. Thus Black students often face a great deal of peer pressure not to be successful academically, for such an achievement would mean that one has become an 'Uncle Tom' and joined the 'enemy'. Moreover, when individual Blacks do achieve success, they are perceived to have escaped their cultural community, and rarely reaffiliate with it. Thus Black youths face a powerful dilemma which they cannot easily resolve; either they must give up their cultural affiliation and succeed academical-
ly (and only possibly be assured success in the White culture), or retain their cultural affiliation and fail academically. All too often, Black youths choose the latter, consciously or unconsciously.

While Ogbu’s research has spanned several decades, and has a richness and depth that escapes easy summary, the point here is that Ogbu has investigated culture and context within a theoretical framework that seeks to understand not only differences but commonalities between peoples. In the United States, Blacks, Native Americans, early Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and native Hawaiians (while different on important dimensions) all share a similar feature of being involuntary or caste-like immigrants. In turn, Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and Punjabi Indians, among other peoples (while also different on important dimensions) share the similar feature of being voluntary immigrants. Such common ground between some peoples, and differences between others, help us understand the differential success in learning between various cultural constituencies in the United States. Moreover, immigrant standing is not fixed, but can change over time as cultures change, or even change for a people across context. For example, while Koreans are a voluntary minority in the United States, they are an involuntary minority in Japan. Thus a focus on differences and commonalities allows Ogbu the room he needs to develop a dynamic theory of multicultural education.

It is important to notice that for the most part, postmodernist anthropologists have rejected Ogbu’s research by arguing against modern anthropological methods and assumptions. In response, Ogbu articulates a version of the very arguments we have made earlier. Specifically, Ogbu argues that when anthropologists give up on the struggle to interpret data, they are mostly left with the activity of reporting it. In the process, anthropologists become like uncritical journalists, at best giving voice to an informant’s position, yet ironically privileging it, trusting it as the clearest (and perhaps only) means of explicating a situation. Yet if it is true that an informant’s perspective cannot always be taken at face value, then interpretation is unavoidable and the task becomes how to provide reasonable, meaningful, good, and increasingly adequate and better interpretations. Thus Ogbu seeks to reinstate the importance of modern ethnographic methods—which include the triangulation of data and the confirmation of hypothesis from multiple sources—such that extensive qualitative analyses of complex social phenomena can be interpreted systematically, and presented to the larger scientific community for validation.

Judging from the ongoing discussions on the issue of “Science in Anthropology” [see Anthropology Newsletter, 1995, 1996]. Ogbu is not alone. In Levine’s [1996, p. 19] words:

Anthropologists have been cross-checking informants accounts for a long time, and have extended the strategy of bias diversification by using a multiplicity of methods, sampling different communities and conducting fieldwork at different times. As they do so, judgments, interpretations and generalizations gain validity, and scientific progress is made. Knowledge remains provisional, but it grows as we know more from different perspectives... There are thus no grounds for despair about the possibility of anthropological science.

In short, there need not be a contradiction between anthropology as science and anthropology as sensitive to variations within and across cultures.
Moral Development

One important tenet of the modern project is that valid social-scientific characterizations can transcend person and culture. Yet perhaps nowhere has this tenet engendered more controversy than in discussions about morality, and in particular moral and cultural relativism, of whether people of one culture can legitimately critique the practices and values of another culture. As Hershovits [1972, p. 31] writes:

Cultural relativism is a philosophy that recognizes the values set up by every society to guide its own life and that understands their worth to those who live by them, though they may differ from one’s own. Instead of underscoring differences from absolute norms that, however objectively arrived at, are nonetheless the product of a given time or place, the relativistic point of view brings into relief the validity of every set of norms for the people who have them, and the values these represent.

How, then, do modern moral-developmental theorists respond to such perspectives? One initial response is not to confound the philosophical with the psychological enterprise [Kahn, 1991]. Namely, even if tremendous moral variation exists between cultures, it does not logically follow that each culture’s practice is equally valid. To assert that proposition is to commit a version of the naturalistic fallacy, that ‘is implies ought’; that because cultural variation is, we ought to respect it. Rather, to establish moral relativism (or objectivity) requires philosophical work.

The second response, the psychological one, is to question the extent to which moral variation exists cross-culturally, and how best to characterize it. A case in point. Shweder et al. [1987] report on findings from their research in India that seemingly show discrepant if not incommensurable moral world views. For example, Shweder et al. report that devout Hindus believe it is immoral for a widow to eat fish or for a menstruating woman to sleep in the same bed as her husband. At first glance, for Western eyes, at least, such moral beliefs do seem different. However, such data were reanalyzed by Turiel et al. [1987], and they showed bases for not only difference but moral commonality. In their reanalysis, for example, Turiel et al. found that devout Hindus believed that harmful consequences would follow from a widow who ate fish (the act would offend her husband’s spirit and cause the widow to suffer greatly), and from a menstruating woman who sleeps in the same bed with her husband (the menstrual blood is believed poisonous and can hurt the husband). While such beliefs, themselves, differ from those in Western culture, the underlying concern for the welfare of others is congruent with it. More generally, the claim of Turiel et al. is that when researchers differentiate information and metaphysical assumptions about the world from moral judgments based on those assumptions then the moral life often takes on a greater universal cast [Friedman, 1997; Laupa, 1991; Madden, 1992; Turiel, 1998; Turiel et al. 1991; Wainryb, 1991, 1993, 1997].

Here is another example of how different moral practices can be structured by similar moral concerns. In describing the Bushman of the Kalahari desert, van der Post [1958/1986] reports, for example, that the Bushman leave their elderly to die alone in the desert. That practice may sound rather cruel to a Western sensibility. But when van der Post fills out the account of the Bushman's reasons, the practice seems far from strange. The Bushman are a nomadic people that depend on physical movement for their survival. The elderly are only left behind when they are no longer able to keep stride with the nomadic pace. When forced to leave a member behind, the tribe conducts ritual dances and ceremonies, builds the person a token hut, and leaves a token
amount of food: all apparently to convey honor and respect and feel loss at their impending death – an unavoidable death should the tribe as a whole be able to survive. When understood in this context, the Bushman practice becomes largely understandable. Indeed, some may find it more humane and compassionate than the way the elderly are sometimes treated in the United States: shunted off to nursing homes, isolated, and largely ignored.

To be clear, we are not saying that only postmodernists embrace moral relativism. After all, Shweder et al. believe [1987] that a greater amount of moral diversity exists than Western modern psychologists usually recognize, and he is skeptical of claims for moral objectivity. Yet Shweder et al. employ modern research methods. What we are saying is that, among others, all postmodernists embrace some form of moral relativism by virtue of their theory which argues (a) for the existence of moral diversity, and (b) against privileging any culture’s moral practices, beliefs, and knowledge. Earlier we showed the implications of (b): that, especially with deconstruction, one is left with no basis beyond the first-person voice (e.g., ‘I don’t like it’) by which to argue against the injustices and brutality of the world. In turn, we have now pointed to an alternative means by which to understand moral diversity. When employed, we believe that a lesser amount of moral diversity exists than is accepted within many academic disciplines, including anthropology and cultural psychology.

Moreover, it is important to understand that when moral differences do occur between peoples it is not necessarily the case that the practices are believed legitimate by the victims. Hatch [1983, p. 91], for example, reports that women in the Yanomano tribe in Brazil were ‘occasionally beaten [by men], shot with barbed arrows, chopped with machetes or axes, and burned with firebrands’. Hatch also reports that the Yanomano women did not appear to enjoy such physically abusive treatment, and were seen running in apparent fear from such assaults. Psychological data of a similar kind can be found in a recent study by Turiel and Waimryb [1994] on the Druze population in Israel. The Druze largely live in segregated villages, are of Islamic religious orientation, and organized socially around patriarchal relationships. The father, as well as brothers, uncles, and other male relatives – and eventually a woman’s husband – exercise considerable authority over women and girls in the family, and restrict their activities to a large degree. However, when these women were interviewed, ‘a majority of them (78%) unequivocally stated that the husband’s or father’s demands and restrictions were unfair’ [p. 44]. Similarly, consider a true-life narrative of a princess in Saudi Arabia. She writes:

This intimate view of my beloved sister’s predicament [that she was married to a 62-year-old man who tortured her sexually] filled me with a new resolve: It was my thought that we women should have a voice in the final decision on issues that would alter our lives forever. From this time, I began to live, breathe, and plot for the rights of women in my country so that we could live with the dignity and personal fulfillment that are the birthright of men [Sasson, 1992, p. 60].

Thus Yanomano, Druze, and Saudi women – like many women in Western societies – are often unwilling victims within what they themselves perceive to be an uncaring or unjust society. In such situations, it is less the case that societies differ morally, and more that some societies (ours included) are involved explicitly in immoral practices.
The Human Relationship with Nature

We have argued that postmodern theory, and particularly deconstruction, opens the door wide to totalitarian political systems wherein might defines right, at least as well as anything defines it. Similarly, postmodern theory, and particularly deconstruction, leads to undoing moral obligations to nature not only because morality does not really exist, but neither does nature. As Soule [1995, p. 149] writes: deconstructionists are "claiming that living nature and wilderness are illusory - just some biologists’ narrative, banal." The implications are as startling as they are troubling: that nature can be pillaged and destroyed [see responses by Grant, 1997; Hayles, 1995; Kellert, 1995; Nabhan, 1995]; and that a virtual reality of nature is more desirable than nature itself because virtual nature lends itself more readily to manipulation through our language and imagination [see Shepard’s 1995 response].

Such excesses aside, two questions motivated by a postmodern agenda are worth asking. First, can modern knowledge of the natural environment be in substantive accord with native and aboriginal knowledge? If so, then counter to what postmodernists claim [Cheney, 1989; Haraway, 1991; Smith, 1993], modernity may not be the privileged domain of Western culture. Second, can a modern research agenda studying the human relationship with nature provide particularistic and textured analyses, and give voice to the disenfranchised, or to achieve these goals must we rely on postmodern theory?

Toward answering these questions, consider the story of Ernst Mayr who traveled in 1928 to the Arafak Mountains of New Guinea to make that area’s first thorough collection of birds. Before departing, Mayr studied specimens previously gathered from New Guinea, and based on a modern taxonomic methodology estimated that he would find a little more than one hundred bird species in the Arafak Mountains.

As Wilson [1992, p. 42] continues:

Once settled in a camp, after a long and hazardous trek, Mayr hired native hunters to help collect all the birds of the region. As the hunters brought in each specimen, he recorded the name they used in their own classification. In the end he found that the Arafak people recognized 136 bird species, no more, no less, and that their species matched almost perfectly those distinguished by the European museum biologists.

Such cross-cultural comparisons have begun to be explored formally under the title Folkbiology [Coley, 1995; Coley et al., 1997; López et al., 1997; Medin and Atran, in press; Medin et al., 1997]. In one set of studies, for example, López et al. [1997] used modern experimental psychological methods to compare the taxonomies and resulting inductions between two groups: Itzaj Maya (who inhabit the Petén rainforest region of Guatemala) and university undergraduates in the United States. Results showed consensus between both groups in (a) their taxonomies of local mammal species, (b) how their taxonomies differed from a corresponding scientific taxonomy, and (c) their ability to use taxonomies in folkbiological inductions. The results also delineated aspects of cultural variation. For example, the university students produced more scientific knowledge and the Itzaj produced more ecological knowledge. Still, such cultural differences did not appear to influence the underlying structure of reasoning of both groups. Notice that this conceptualization is similar to the one we offered in the previous section. There we suggested that while some cultural beliefs and informational assumptions can differ, the underlying structure of moral reasoning may be universal.
Along complementary lines, structural-developmental methods have been recently applied to understanding the development of the human relationship with nature [Howe et al., 1996; Kahn, 1997a–c, in press; Kahn and Friedman, 1995, 1998]. In two studies, for example, the environmental perspectives were examined of children [Kahn and Friedman, 1995] and parents [Kahn and Friedman, 1998] in an economically impoverished Black community of Houston, Tex. In these studies, children and parents spoke of the harsh living of urban poverty, while articulating, sometimes eloquently, their environmental awareness, values, and sensibilities, and guarded hopefulness for their future. From such results, Kahn and Friedman [1998] argued that it is important to ask two overarching questions: ‘How is this Black community’s relationship with nature to be understood within the context of their social and physical environment?’ and ‘How can educators build on such relationships to foster in their community a healthier and more life-affirming connection with the natural world?’

Such particularistic questions were based on these researchers’ modern methods, involving the systematic coding of interview data, and the subsequent quantification of the data. But – contrary to the postmodern agenda – such particularistic effects should not be seen in opposition to universal characterizations, but complementary. In another study, for example, Howe et al. [1996] explored whether important aspects of the results from the Houston child study might reflect universal features of children’s development. Howe et al. chose two locations of particular interest: Manaus, the largest Brazilian city within the vast Amazon rain forest, and Novo Ayrão, a small village with approximately 4,000 inhabitants that could only be reached by means of an eight-hour boat ride up the Rio Negro from Manaus. In contrast to their expectations, across 26 questions (which formed a large body of both studies), Howe et al. found only two statistical differences between the Black children in Houston and the Brazilian children in urban and rural parts of the Amazon. Moreover, in a comparative analysis of the data from both studies, there was no statistical difference across cultures in children’s environmental orientation, as measured by a composite score. In addition, as described in detail elsewhere [Howe, et al., 1996; Kahn, 1997c; cf. Nevers et al., 1997], the structure of children’s reasoning across cultures often appeared identical.

Other research programs have uncovered similarly surprising commonalities in the human relationship with nature. In a compelling research project, for example, Kempston et al. [1995] investigated the environmental values of diverse constituencies in the United States by first conducting 46 semi-structured interviews. Then they abstracted pivotal and prototypic responses from their interviews to include in a fixed-form national survey. Thus, they aimed to get the richer, textured insights that arise through interviews, and the better generalizability that arise through surveys. Through these modern methods, they found that in the United States there were more commonly shared environmental perspectives and values among diverse constituencies (loggers, environmental groups, and the general public) than previously recognized.

Finally, hundreds of other studies on the human relationship with nature have been brought together under the rubric of ‘biophilia’ – a term coined by Wilson [1984] to refer to what he and his colleagues hypothesize is a fundamental human need and propensity to affiliate with life and life-like processes [Kellert, 1996, 1997; Kellert and Wilson, 1993]. Such studies have been conducted in a wide range of countries, including the United States, Japan, Nepal, Sweden, Brazil, India and Nigeria. Based on such studies, biophilia emerges, according to Wilson [1984, p. 85] in our cognition, emotions, art, and ethics, and unfolds ‘in the predictable fantasies and responses of individuals from...
early childhood onward. It cascades into repetitive patterns of culture across most or all societies’. Wilson [1992, p. 350] points out that people crowd national parks to experience natural landscapes, and ‘travel long distances to stroll along the seashore, for reasons they can’t put into words’. For empirical support [see Kahn, 1997b, and Ulrich, 1993, for reviews] note that recent studies have shown that even minimal connection with nature – such as looking at it through a window – increases productivity and health in the work place, promotes healing of patients in hospitals, and reduces the frequency of sickness in prisons. Other studies have begun to show that when given the option, humans often prefer natural environments more than built environments, and built environments with water, trees, and other vegetation more than built environments without such features. Direct contact with animals has been shown to greatly benefit a wide range of clinical patients: from adults with Alzheimer’s disease to autistic children. Moreover, according to Katcher and Wilkins [1993, pp. 180–181], ‘all the desirable responses to animals in therapeutic situations reflect the influence of interaction with companion animals within the general population’.

Taken together, the research suggests that nature is not a mere cultural convention or artifact, as some postmodernists maintain, but part of a physical and biological reality that bounds the development of human cognition. This fact will not change, no matter how many times we take a linguistic turn or walk a hermeneutic circle.

**Conclusion**

With the increasing focus on issues pertaining, for example, to ethnicity, class, and gender, researchers have increasingly relied on postmodern theory. Perhaps this is because postmodernism highlights differences, and thus can give a voice to the disenfranchised. But postmodernism also assumes that fundamentally there is little of importance that people share psychologically, and that epistemologically there is little that transcends culture and context by which we can judge the intellectual or moral merits of such difference. This view seems to us not only empirically wrong and philosophically inadequate, but politically unworthy in that it increasingly fragments people from one another, and promotes a view that power itself is the only legitimate regulator. In other words, when postmodern theory – and particularly deconstruction – is taken seriously, it leads to contradictions in epistemology, to fragmentation in knowledge, to opportunism in interpersonal relationships, and to nihilism in moral action and commitment.

These are strong words, and we say them at the risk of alienating people whose work we otherwise admire. But the words need saying.

At the same time, we agree with postmodernists that there are substantive problems within the social sciences in general, and psychology in particular. An account of some of these problems is developed elsewhere [Machado et al., 1998]. But these problems are not problems with modern principles per se, but in their application. Thus the goal is to reinvigorate the modern project. Accordingly, in this paper we have sketched a range of research on such diverse topics as multicultural education, moral development, and the human relationship with nature. Through these sketches, we have highlighted how some modern research programs have embraced methods and issues which postmodernists have sought to privilege as their own, including a focus on qualitative analyses, multiple perspectives, participant observations, narrative, literature, culture, and
context. We have also suggested that analyses of the universal and the particular go
together, and are well served by modernity.

While contemplating his intent to murder the king, Shakespeare’s Macbeth says:
‘I have no spur/To prick the sides of my intent, but only/Vaulting ambition, which
o’erleaps itself’ And falls on th’ other – ’ (I, vii, 25–28). And there the soliloquy ends,
with Shakespeare, like postmodernists, playing with language. Where would postmodern
ity land if it could but vault forward and overlap itself? Would that it could land in the
post-postmodern era: Modernity itself, reinvigorated.

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