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The Elephant in the room: human nature and the sociology textbooks

Abstract

This article considers the approach to human nature implicit in four textbooks often used to introduce sociology. Human nature is seen as a set of drives and capacities, which play a key role in people’s actions in any social context. In the textbooks, a variety of arguments suggest the irrelevance of a concept of human nature to the discipline. Partly, this message is conveyed by opposing social to biological explanations. In addition, the discipline is framed to exclude the concept of human nature. Society, on the one hand, and the culturally unique individual on the other, exhaust the sociological arena. Accounts of socialization imply the transcendence of biology and with that, human nature. Refutations of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology are supported with broad ranging rejections of biological explanation, with a similar implication that human nature is not a necessary concept in sociological accounts. Nevertheless, human nature is the elephant in the room. The concept is required and assumed in the detail of these textbooks as they explain current sociological research and analysis. One impact of the denial of human nature is to misunderstand current disputes between sociology and evolutionary psychology.
Keywords

human nature, sociology, biology, evolutionary psychology, sociobiology, discourse analysis, the body

A longstanding tradition claims that social science does not need a concept of human nature (Pinker, 2002). Tooby and Cosmides (1992) see this as a consequence of the “Standard Social Science Model”, which assumes that culture is constructed without reference to underlying biological or psychological foundations. Despite this, some classics of sociology do consider human nature and its relevance to social science (O’Donnell, 2003; Shilling, 2007). Current sociological writing generally avoids the term ‘human nature’ and gets by without it. How is this absence managed?

To enable a discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001) of current sociology, I have selected four textbooks often used to introduce sociology in Australia and the UK (Bessant and Watts, 2002; Germov and Poole, 2011; Giddens, 2009; Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). Textbooks represent the canon to students, who later move on to become the professional academics of social science. Textbooks may simplify issues but also express the basic views of the discipline with ‘a degree of candour’ (Machalek and Martin, 2004: 457). These four textbooks are best sellers
because they represent the mainstream of UK and Australian university sociology departments (Platt, 2008b: 167). In a special issue of Current Sociology devoted to textbooks (2008, 56/2), three of these four texts are cited as typical (Harley, 2008: 290; Schrecker, 2008: 203). In that issue the most common characteristics of recent texts in the UK and Australia are established, all of which fit my chosen texts.

These four textbooks are relatively recent and give a sense of the discipline as it is now, having absorbed or responded to the impacts of feminism, sociobiology and poststructuralism. Politically, these texts show the continuing relevance of the insights of the New Left and feminist movements for sociology (Platt, 2008a: 151). They relate sociology to research in the real world, and to a structural analysis of social inequalities (Schrecker, 2008: 216). Qualitative and ethnographic research is frequently used to make sense of overall structural issues.

As with other recent sociology textbooks (Harley, 2008:295; Platt 2008b:174), the four chosen for this analysis present sociological research and theory as coming out of a number of perspectives. Sociology is not conceived as a unitary science, proceeding through an accumulation of consensual knowledge (Harley, 2008). Despite this, I shall show that there are in fact quite specific ideas about the place of social science shared in all four textbooks – a current consensus.
In mapping my discussion of the view of human nature that is apparent in these textbooks, I will refer to a paper by Tooby and Cosmides (1992) which contrasts the Standard Social Science Model with The Integrated Causal Model. This paper has been widely cited by those who would seek a more adequate recognition of human nature in the social sciences (for example Pinker, 2002). It makes sense at the present time to review their analysis of social science in the light of these textbooks, to establish the case that not that much has changed in the way human nature is presented and that the same problems remain.

The key aspect of the Integrated Causal Model is that ‘evolved psychological mechanisms’ or in other words, human nature, play a key part in constructing culture (Tooby and Cosmides, 1992: 24). As they argue, the Standard Social Science Model denies this, arguing that cultural life is created by culture itself. Aside from the capacity to be imprinted by culture, human nature is ‘an empty vessel’ (Tooby and Cosmides, 1992: 29). The impact is to separate social science radically from the other sciences – because the features of cultures are not ‘given specific shape or content by human biology’ (Tooby and Cosmides, 1992:32).
The basic strategy of the textbooks fits the Standard Social Science Model. The texts deploy the concept of ‘biology’ to argue against the relevance of human nature to the social sciences. They imply an ontological divide between the realm of biology and the realm of the social. The logic of the rejection of human nature is that anything we share as humans, across time and cultural difference, must be ‘biological’ or at least an emergent property of biology. Sociology has no need for biological explanations so the concept of human nature is not required. Against this, I will be arguing that biological and social concepts are used in different theoretical approaches, which may be applied variously to the same events and things in the world (Midgley, 2002).

While Tooby and Cosmides demonstrate the Standard Social Science Model in the writings of Durkheim and anthropologists, such as Boas, Kroeber, Sahlins, Geertz, I will suggest that in the sociology textbook these positions are often not stated clearly but instead implied by the structure of other arguments. I will also argue that within these texts a key part of the SSSM described by Tooby and Cosmides is missing. The sociology textbooks do not argue that the individual actor is merely a cultural artefact. On the contrary, the individual agent is seen as a key to the creation of culture as a human invention.
What I will also be considering is an implication of the position taken by Tooby and Cosmides that they do not fully explore. There is actually no way of explaining cultural events without invoking human nature (Tooby and Cosmides 1992: 34). Textbooks, and other writing in the social sciences work with an implied theory of human nature which is never collected together in any explicit way. While the recognition and systematic investigation of human nature is a task still to be carried out by sociologists, the use of ideas about human nature has a long history. The explanations of cultural events undertaken by sociologists (and anthropologists) are in fact littered with assumptions about human nature, through which we make sense of these accounts. The premise that ‘the design of the human psychological architecture structures the nature of the social interactions humans can enter into’ is presented by Tooby and Cosmides (1992: 48) as a wake up call to sociology to consider human nature in relation to new evolutionary science, animal ethology, DNA mapping, cross cultural anthropology and controlled psychological experiments. While much of this may be new to sociologists, the basic idea that human nature structures social interactions is in fact assumed within all social science, ranging from Durkheim, Marx and Weber right through to these recent textbooks. Statements that this is not the case, that human nature is created historically and that the mind merely acts as a processor of culture, are in fact belied by the practice of social science across endless explanations of social events.
So what is human nature?

In my experience, sociologists are confused about the concept. The following account is informed by systematic investigations of this topic by anthropologists, philosophers and psychologists (Konner, 2002; Midgley, 1996, 2002; Pinker, 2002; Tooby and Cosmides, 1992). But it also reflects an understanding of the concept of human nature as it is in practice used by sociologists. For a somewhat similar analysis of human nature to the one explained here, see Maslow (1987).

A basic definition is that human nature consists of drives and capacities common to humans (Geras, 1983; O’Donnell, 2003) – ‘evolved psychological mechanisms’ which are ‘functionally specialized’ (Tooby and Cosmides 1992: 24). On the one hand are fundamental desires which take a large part in shaping human behaviour. These are causal ‘powers’ (Ademoyo, 2009; Molnar, 2003). On the other hand, human nature is made up of tools, which enable desires to be realized. Views of human nature are based in centuries of social science investigation. They have become common sense and with that, can safely be assumed, and accordingly, disavowed.

There is no overarching unifying motive for human conduct (Midgley, 1996). The basic desires of human nature are the desires for food, health and physical comfort, sexual
pleasure, social pleasures, creative expression, and autonomy. The satisfaction of these
desires is what gives people pleasure and is the root of most conduct. All of these
elements are profoundly shaped by culture – what is considered a good meal, what
kinds of activities get social approval (and give you a social pleasure as their reward),
what it is in detail that people want (and accordingly what it is to be autonomous). The
expression and development of the capacities and drives which make up human nature
‘is stimulated, shaped and limited by society’ (O’Donnell, 2003: 754). Undoubtedly,
there are aspects of our biological nature which require a social context to blossom – for
example our capacity to enjoy music. More broadly, all the capacities of the human
mind have evolved to take into account the likely behaviour and intentions of other
people – there is a fit between human nature and its social context (Tooby and
Cosmides, 1992).

The ‘tools’ of human nature are the things that we use to realize these desires, our
inbuilt, biologically based abilities. Most obviously things like limbs and a nervous
system. But also tools like our capacity for language, or our ability to discern pitch and
rhythm (Chomsky, 1986; Pinker, 2002). The assumption of most sociological writing is
that there is no basic desire to harm other people. Instead, the capacity for anger and
violent aggression is considered to be a tool of human nature, enabling people to pursue
a range of desires through conflict. Particular patriarchal constructions of masculinity
also encourage men to enjoy violence (Chodorow, 1974; Konner, 2002). The status of aggression in human nature has been the topic of considerable debate (Barash, 2011; Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2000; Konner, 2002; Midgley, 2002; Pinker, 2002; Ryan and Jetha, 2010; Wrangham and Peterson, 1997), but the above formula seems to fit with most sociological writing.

**Bringing the body back**

The dominant theme of the sociology textbooks is the rejection of theories of human nature as ‘biological’. Despite this, a shift of thinking is apparent between the 1996 and 2008 versions of ‘Sociology: Themes and Perspectives’ (Haralambos and Holborn). The 2008 version reports a new view that biology impinges on the social and vice versa – often identified with the project of ‘bringing the body back’ into the social sciences.

Yet this retreat from the Standard Social Science Model can be quite partial. Bringing the body back is identified with the recognition of the bodily aspects of human nature as (at least partly) biological, while the mental aspects of human nature are still treated as ‘social’ and historically contingent (for example in Turner, 1996).
This manifestation of mind/body dualism (Witz, 2000) founds itself on an obvious fact about the desires we call ‘bodily’. They are human motivations which have as their goals, specific and characteristic bodily activities and manifestations. By contrast other drives, such as the drive for social connection or creative expression, have a great multiplicity of bodily manifestations. Yet both sets of motivations are experienced as drives by the human agent (Midgley, 1996). They are both properly regarded as being at once ‘innate’, a part of human nature, and at the same time socially constructed in their historical and personal particularity. These drives are also equivalent as biological objects of investigation. All the basic desires of human nature operate from the brain, animate conduct and work through the senses. From the biological perspective, the pleasure of watching an entertaining television show is no less bodily than the pleasure of a good meal (Dennett, 1993). Again, there is no sense in splitting ‘bodily’ desires from other aspects of human nature.

**Social variability and the centrality of culture**

Textbook introductions to sociology emphasize the fact that people’s thoughts, actions and intentions shape a variety of social situations, suggesting an ‘infinite plasticity of human behaviour’ (Bone, 2009:1185). A cursory sociological glance at the great variety of human societies should dispel any illusion that they could possibly be created by
something as universal as human nature. As Tooby and Cosmides point out, this has always been one of the key arguments for the Standard Social Science Model.

Because, it is reasoned, a "constant" (the human biological endowment observable in infants) cannot explain a "variable" (intergroup differences in complex adult mental or social organization) the SSSM concludes that "human nature" (the evolved structure of the human mind) cannot be the cause of the mental organization of adult humans, their social systems, their culture, historical change, and so on (1992: 25-6).

For example in ‘Sociology: Themes and Perspectives’ (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008), we are introduced to this variation with the following statement:

To a large degree, culture determines how members of society think and feel: it directs their actions and defines their outlook on life … Such definitions vary from society to society. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 2)

This is followed by some examples of culture that the student reader may well find unexpected. Even things we imagine to be constant are actually constructed by the same variable forces:
Once we understand better how the apparently natural, inevitable, immutable, eternal aspects of our lives have been brought into being through the exercise of human power and resources, we shall find it much harder to accept that they are immune and impenetrable to subsequent actions, including our own. (Germov and Poole, 2011:5)

As Tooby and Cosmides point out (1992:45), this argument is not particularly convincing. An alternative account is that the variety of human cultures comes about through interactions between beings whose nature is basically the same, working in historical time on the outcomes of previous interactions. The actions of individuals are not just governed by one basic desire but by a range, acting differently on different occasions. No wonder the outcome is complex variety. By analogy, atomic particles, operating in their unvarying sameness are taken as the basis for the complex physical world.

The term ‘instinct’ is frequently used in arguments against biological explanation. For example when Haralambos and Holborn consider the racist view that differences in culture have a biological basis they write:

Social explanations of behavioural and cultural differences between human groups are far more convincing than biological ones. Biology is much less important in shaping human behaviour than it is in shaping animal behaviour. Richardson and Lambert say:
‘Unlike animals, human beings are not so rigidly bound to inbuilt instincts or innate biological triggers; on the contrary, human survival and progress is enhanced if cultural flexibility prevails.’ (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 147)

A perfectly sensible rebuttal of one biological explanation of cultural difference is generalized to conclude that it is always *culture* which is most important in shaping human societies. If biology was more important, humans would be governed by ‘inbuilt instincts’, biological programs linked to defined actions. This is the argument from variety in a new guise. If the hallmark signature of cultural influence is variety, then the signature of biological influence must be sameness – something which could only come about if biology operated through instinct. It *is* absurd to think that humans are governed by instincts, conceived in this way. Instead we can think of the genetic elements of human nature as having a ‘wide norm of reaction’, a lot wider than is implied by the term ‘instinct’ (Machalek and Martin, 2004: 456-461; Midgley, 2002; Tooby and Cosmides, 1992).

The argument from instincts is sometimes backed by biological science. Haralambos and Holborn cite Rose, Kamin and Lewontin. In contrast to other animals

… the human infant is born with relatively few of its neural pathways already committed. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 95)
The impression is that humans really can think about and desire anything at all, a completely random, culturally variable, historically determined process. This is extremely unlikely (Bone, 2009: 1184; Pinker, 2002).

**How humans become social by transcending biology**

Textbooks almost always suggest that socialization so massively alters the biologically directed newborn infant that it becomes sensible to treat the socialized human being as a creature who is not moved by any biologically based nature. In ‘Sociology: Themes and Perspectives’ this theme is announced very early on:

> To all intents and purposes a newborn human baby is helpless. Not only is it physically dependent on older members of the species but it also lacks the behaviour patterns necessary for living in human society. It relies primarily on certain biological drives, such as hunger and on the charity of its elders to satisfy those drives. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 2)

It is a baby *before* socialization which is ruled by biological drives like hunger. These drives are Marx’s ‘animal’ nature (Marx, 1967). The statement suggests that we
abandon these animal drives as we become socialized. Unlike babies, we adults do not rely upon biological drives, we have developed ‘the behaviour patterns necessary for living in human society’. This demarcates two distinct fields. Chronologically, there is the pre-social baby and the socialized infant. Epistemologically, there is the field of investigation of biological drives like hunger – that is biological science. And the field of investigation of society and culture – sociology.

Giddens’ mammoth textbook ‘Sociology’ (2009) considers Mead’s theory of the social self. Socialization is actually necessary for us to become truly human – that is, self aware:

Mead insisted that a sociological perspective was necessary if we are to understand how the self emerges and develops … The ‘I’ is the unsocialized infant, a bundle of spontaneous wants and desires. The ‘me’, as Mead used the term, is the social self. Individuals develop self-consciousness, Mead argued, by coming to see themselves as others see them, which allows for an ‘internal conversation’ between the individual ‘I’ and the social ‘me’. (Giddens, 2009: 285)

Giddens interprets this investigation to reach the same conclusions considered above. The unsocialized infant is the one ruled by biology, the socialized human being has transcended this. He explains why Mead’s theory is genuinely sociological:
His was the first genuinely sociological theory of self formation and development, which insisted that if we are properly to understand ourselves, then we must start with the social process of interaction. In this way he showed that the self is not an innate part of our biology, nor does it emerge simply with the developing human brain. (Giddens, 2009: 286)

So the self is not ‘an innate part of our biology’ because it can only come about through a social process; the process in which we take the viewpoint of the other.

Yet we could equally construe Mead’s position in this manner. Humans have a capacity for self awareness. However this capacity is not expressed in early infancy but gradually develops as infants are exposed to social interaction. Its development is an example of ‘prepared learning’ (Machalek and Martin, 2004: 462). We are genetically prepared to find it easy to learn self awareness as we are exposed to social experience: ‘the fact that some aspect of adult mental organization is absent at birth has no bearing on whether it is part of our evolved architecture’ (Tooby and Cosmides 1992:33).

Reflecting the new (and partial) acknowledgment of the relevance of biology, there are a few instances in which socialization is acknowledged to have some biological component. What is almost always emphasized is the way that social forces can
transform biology. For example in ‘Sociology: Themes and Perspectives’ Haralambos and Holborn consider the arguments of Fausto-Sterling that ‘gender differences become embodied’ (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 100). In a similar discussion, Giddens refers to a ‘growing number of sociologists’ who argue that we shape our bodies to fit the social meanings of gender. Accordingly, ‘… the human body and biology are not “givens”, but are subject to human agency and personal choice’. (Giddens, 2009: 608). What such statements suggest is that the social sciences have no need of explanations based on our ‘biological’ natures, but instead the boot is really on the other foot – culture can even change biology.

The structure/agency dilemma

In the opening pages of ‘Public Sociology’ we are told that sociology is:

… the study of the relationship between the individual and society, investigating how human thought, action, and interaction shape and are shaped by society. (Germov and Poole, 2011: 4)

In this, it is assumed that these two elements are sufficient for sociology. On the one hand you have the variable thoughts and actions of individuals. On the other hand you
have society. How society might be shaped by human nature is not an issue. Implied is the ‘study of social phenomena via only the explanatory power of other – biophysically dis-embedded – social variables’ (Carolan, 2005: 5). This structure of thought is also implicit in the structure/agency dilemma.

Haralambos and Holborn refer to Giddens who they say considered:

… the dispute between determinists – who believe that human behaviour is entirely determined by outside forces – and voluntarists – who believe that humans possess free will, and can act as they wish. Giddens believes neither theory to be true, but he sees both as having some element of truth. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 889; see also for example Bessant and Watts, 2002: 124-132)

A third alternative is left out. To what extent do inside forces, present in us whether we like it or not, shape a very large part of what we may desire and want? In practice, this third alternative (the operation of aspects of human nature) is very frequently resorted to despite its absence in these framing statements.

**Dealing with racists and evolutionary psychologists**
Discussing the perspectives of racists, sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists, authors of sociology textbooks are called upon to answer theories of (biologically differentiated) human nature. For example, sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists argue that gender differences as they are culturally manifested are based in evolved differences between men and women (for example Pinker, 2002; Konner, 2002). There are also arguments that relate racial, class, and intellectual differences to supposedly innate differences between people (for example Herrnstein and Murray, 1996).

The most general way in which these arguments are treated is to pose the following dilemma:

Either:

1. Genetic differences cause differences in social condition.

OR

2. Socially determined differences cause different social conditions.
The second point of view is defended as representing the more adequate insights of sociology. There is a missing third option, that genetically similar traits in humans (human nature) may explain differences in social condition as they arise in particular social contexts. In all of these discussions the second view is defended by making broad claims about the irrelevance of biology to social life.

Haralambos and his co-authors give a typical treatment of the relationship between race, as a cultural phenomenon, and biological difference:

There is no clear connection between biological differences and differences in behaviour and culture in groups of humans. Richardson and Lambert do not deny that biology has some bearing on social and cultural behaviour, but they claim that any links are ‘remote and indirect’. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 147)

The claim that there is no connection between biological differences between people and cultural differences between people makes perfect sense. Yet to go on to say that biology, while it has some bearing, has only a remote and indirect link to culture is far fetched. Why do humans make such an effort to secure food and why is execution a sanction? What is absent is any discussion of whether there might be a biological basis to social inequality, including racism, coming out of the similar human nature of those involved. This is clearly a part of the Marxist tradition in sociology, which suggests that
stratification is driven by material interests which all humans share. The impression given in these textbooks is that sociology can prove that biological explanations of race are false without itself resorting to a biological explanation.

Sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists have argued that men and women have a different, genetically based, gender and sexuality. For Haralambos and Holborn, the first argument against the sociobiological position is the most general one possible and implies there can be no such thing as human nature:

Sociobiologists assume a direct link between patterns of genetic inheritance and behaviour in humans. However, there is no scientific evidence that such a link exists. In contrast to animals, human behaviour is shaped by environment rather than instinct.

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 95)

I am not entirely sure what is meant by the term ‘direct’ here. Do Haralambos and Holborn mean that if there was a ‘direct’ link between genetic inheritance and behaviour, all those with the same genetic inheritance would behave in exactly the same way? On this view there could be no direct link between our genetic inheritance and our predisposition to eat. We all have the same genetic inheritance as humans but our eating behaviour is quite different. That there is some link between behaviour and genetic inheritance is the basic assumption of any view of human nature. What follows this is
the statement that ‘the human infant is born with relatively few of its neural pathways already committed’ (2008: 95). The implication is that we can explain all social activity without the need to refer to those things which humans share as their nature – human ‘instincts’ as they are called here.

Giddens’ textbook also looks at the argument that women are programmed for monogamy and men for promiscuity. A biological program of this kind cannot be possible – as human behaviour is never simply the product of biology:

… sexual activity is much more than biological. It is symbolic, reflecting who we are and the emotions we are experiencing. As we shall see, sexuality is far too complicated to be wholly attributable to biological traits. It must be understood in terms of the social meanings which humans ascribe to it. (Giddens, 2009: 579)

So the fact that it cannot be wholly attributed to biological traits would suggest that biological inheritance is at least part of what determines sexuality, as Giddens himself suggests in other passages (see below for a discussion of this). Yet here, what is symbolic, and our emotions must be more than ‘biology’. Sociobiology is seen as mistaking the mental and social aspects of sexuality for biological traits, as though they have stepped between two worlds. So, while there may be a biological component to sexuality, we must go beyond this into another realm when thoughts and emotions are
involved. This programme is untenable. Any passing, socially located, sexual thought is just as biological as the supposedly ‘biological’ part of our sexuality. Conversely, the human desire for sex, which Giddens treats as a biological trait, is just as ‘mental’ as any passing sexual thought. Explanations from biology and those using concepts like intention, desire, agency and meaning are better conceived as working from different theoretical frameworks for understanding the same events, rather than as referring to different realms, operating without any connection to each other (for a related approach see Midgley, 1996).

However there is a second argument used against sociobiology in the textbooks in discussing this topic. As Haralambos and Holborn put it, sociobiologists imagine that all human societies are the same as those in the ‘white capitalist world’ but this is in fact not the case (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 95). As Oakley shows, there are societies where women take the initiative in sexual relationships and are promiscuous. The argument being put here is that cross cultural comparison does not back up the hypothesis of sexually divided human nature (for a more thorough exploration of this topic see Ryan and Jetha, 2009). In fact, these methods of cross cultural comparison are shared by sociologists and evolutionary psychologists. Although evolutionary accounts, studies of other primates’ social lives and sexual anatomy are also taken to be relevant, ethnographic comparison is always a central element even in a ‘biological’ investigation
of this topic (Pinker, 2002; Ryan and Jetha, 2010; Tooby and Cosmides, 1992). So this second argument from the Harlambos and Holborn textbook does not make any sweeping claims that rule out the relevance of a theory of human nature to the social sciences, it merely makes an empirical case against one particular theory of human nature (sexually divided human nature). This second argument suggests a much more useful approach to the claims of sociobiology.

**Human nature by the back door**

It is unlikely that you can actually *do* social science without using the concept of human nature. You have to have some way of explaining what people are doing, beyond describing it as a cultural practice. An account of the meaning, rationale or basis for any cultural practice – which will make sense to a reader from another culture – inevitably makes reference to human nature. To explain why a cultural practice has been changed, you are also thrown back to human nature, since the culture before cannot explain *in itself* why the culture after has now been adopted (see also Midgely, 2002; Tooby and Cosmides, 1992).

The introductory chapter of ‘Public Sociology’, states that Arlie Hochschild’s work ‘explores the outward manifestations of emotions such as shame and embarrassment’
In this, shame and embarrassment are assumed to be cross cultural aspects of human emotional life. Humans can feel ashamed or embarrassed. A tree could not, a dog might and humans certainly will experience these emotions.

In ‘Sociology: Themes and Perspectives’, Marx’s theory of the origin of social class is explicated by assuming other aspects of human nature:

Classes emerge when the productive capacity of society expands beyond the level required for subsistence … only a section of society is needed to produce the food requirements of the whole society. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 27)

The universal desire for food is assumed. With agriculture, all could be fed while some were freed from food production. Class comes out of the options available with this surplus:

Some people are able to acquire the means of production, and others are therefore obliged to work for them. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 27)

Here the universal need for food is assumed as the reader makes sense of why it is that people were ‘forced’ to work for the owners of the means of production. These means
of production included the means to produce food, so people had to work for the owners to satisfy their need for food.

The same textbook explains why girls interviewed in recent years are less likely to nominate marriage as their main priority compared to girls interviewed in the seventies. The rising divorce rate of the 1980s and 1990s meant that:

… they had seen adult relationships breaking up around them. They had also seen women standing on their own two feet rather than depending on financial support from a man. Paid employment and financial independence were now major concerns.

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 646)

So girls used to believe that marriage provided economic security. The rising divorce rate undermines this confidence in marriage. The example of independent women shows girls a safer option. The explanation assumes a desire for a secure income. That can be related to a whole host of human needs in a society where the commodity form is ubiquitous. The phrase ‘standing on their own two feet’ explains their action in relation to the desire for autonomy, another aspect of human nature.

Another explanation given for this change is that parents ‘increasingly expect exam success, and in some cases can make their daughters feel that they could “never be good
enough” (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 646). Daughters seek the approval of their parents and adjust their ambitions accordingly. Desire for the approval of significant others is often invoked to explain social practices, it is also assumed to be an aspect of human nature. For example, it is argued that young men engage in violence to gain peer approval (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 93).

Giddens’ concept of ontological security is explained in a way that comes very close to talking directly about human nature (see also O’Donnell, 2003):

Giddens seems to think that humans have a basic desire for some degree of predictability in social life … this may be a natural concern with the physical survival of the body. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 889)

Giddens anchors his hypothesis about the need for ontological security, as a part of human nature, in another need which is clearly part of human nature – our desire for physical survival.

Giddens’ own textbook makes a number of reasonably explicit statements about human nature. For example, he refers to ‘a biological imperative to reproduce’. He maintains that there must be such, because without it ‘the human species would become extinct’ (Giddens, 2009: 579). Later Giddens claims most people in all societies are
heterosexual – ‘they look to the other sex for emotional involvement and sexual 
pleasure’ (Giddens, 2009: 579). This is a statement that exclusive heterosexual desire is 
a human universal. The intention here is not to accept the validity of these claims but 
merely to make the point that they are quite inconsistent with aspects of the Standard 
Social Science model defended by the textbooks as central tenets of sociology.

Accounts of socialization imply human nature. Poole in ‘Public Sociology’ describes 
socialization as a system driven by ‘reward and punishment’ (Poole, 2011: 92). 
Socializers encourage conduct by rewarding desires that are already part of human 
nature and discourage conduct by imposing sanctions that are already biologically 
programmed to be unpleasant. The specifics make this point even more obvious. In 
‘Sociology: Themes and Perspectives’ we are told that the newborn baby:

… relies primarily on certain biological drives, such as hunger and on the charity of its 
elders to satisfy those drives. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 2)

So these biological drives are the bedrock which motivates baby conduct. They go on to 
explain how socialization takes place:
By responding to the approval and disapproval of its parents and copying their example, the child learns the language and many of the basic behaviour patterns of society. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008: 3)

So the baby has a biological need to seek approval and to avoid disapproval. Alternatively, they could mean that the parents reward other biological desires to indicate approval – for example by feeding the baby.

Accounts of the socialization of adults also imply the relevance of human nature. Giddens explains the constraint of social facts:

Social facts can constrain human action in a variety of ways, ranging from outright punishment (in the case of a crime, for example) to social rejection (in the case of unacceptable behaviour) to simple misunderstanding (in the case of the misuse of language). (Giddens, 2009: 14)

That we can survey societies and determine what are punishments itself depends on a theory of human nature. Looking at things as varied as executions, writing out the same sentence a hundred times, standing with a dunce’s cap in the corner of the class, imprisonment, being speared in the thigh, how do we know that these are all punishments? They are all experienced as unpleasant in relation to aspects of human
nature – the desire to live, the dislike of boredom, the stigma of social disapproval, the restriction of free movement, the pain of a wound.

Tooby and Cosmides (1992) make the point that such accounts massively understate the specificity of evolved mechanisms that enable social learning to take place. My point is that even these fairly vague accounts of socialisation actually make assumptions about how human nature interacts with the environment.

**The elephant in the room**

In this article I have been looking at the ways in which sociology textbooks present a case for sociology. In doing this they constantly reaffirm the view that social science does not need a theory of human nature. The great variety of human societies supposedly shows us that nothing so invariable as human nature could possibly explain society. What we may think of as natural and unchanging in society is not. While babies may be driven by biological urges, the theory of socialisation shows us that beyond this early stage, humans fall under the influence of society, varied as it is. The structure agency debate is set up to exclude human nature. People behave as they do either because they are influenced by society or because their individual will and agency determine their conduct. Human nature plays no part.
The textbooks conduct a critique of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. They argue that sociobiologists and other sociologically uninformed parties try to explain different social conditions by saying that they come out of biological differences. The textbooks say that all these variations in social condition can be better explained by reference to social differences. What is more, they argue that nothing as complex as the cultural behaviour of real people could possibly be explained by biology. These programmatic statements suggest that sociology has no need of any view of human nature.

Despite this, statements about human nature do crop up and ideas about human nature are assumed. Whether these are ‘biological’ explanations depends on what you mean by biology. People’s desire for survival, to eat or to avoid pain are assumed, as well as less obviously ‘biological’ urges, such as the desire for social approval. There are also more or less explicit discussions about the nature of human beings. For example the desire for ‘ontological security’. These are conducted as though there is no contradiction between such discussions and very categorical dismissals of the influence of ‘biology’ on human action.
My view is that sociology does not need to develop a theory of human nature because it already has one. It is the elephant in the room. We do not need to ‘manufacture our own “grand narrative”’ to counter the assertion of human universals’ (Jackson and Rees, 2007: 924) because we already operate with a theory of human universals. When there is a conflict between evolutionary psychology and sociology, it is not in fact a dispute between biological and social explanations of conduct. Sociologists are opposing specific theories about how human ‘biological’ nature operates – by using yet another set of theories about how it operates.

Deep seated conflicts are usually about institutions of gender, stratification or violent conflict. The conflict of views can be mobilized over a particular institution, such as the stay-at-home housewife, social class, racist riots in Australia, heterosexism, women’s participation in engineering or the Yanomamo axe fight. There is no general solution to such disputes; clarifying the position usually taken by sociologists is my aim here.

In such a dispute over a particular institution, evolutionary psychologists might explain the institution in question as a particular example of behaviour in its ‘most general’ form (Wilson, 1979:4) – to show that what is happening is an example of something that is biologically determined. Further, they would be looking at it as something which cannot readily be explained as a rational means of consciously pursuing ends which
actors *themselves* understand (Wilson, 1979: 4). It is something that can *only* be explained when we look at the way it must have evolved to maximize genetic fitness (see Tooby and Cosmides, 1992: 75, 111 for similar descriptions of what is involved in such arguments).

Sociologists are likely to question such an account in terms of the supposed universality that is implied. Instead, they will give a historically informed account of its origin in a specific social context. Yet the alternative sociological explanation itself makes assumptions about human nature, which we take for granted as we read the account. To understand the institution in question we need to see how human nature is operating in a context coming from a chain of events. The particularity of that chain of events is what sociologists are alluding to when they claim that they do not explain this institution biologically – they do not believe this particular institution is an instance of a pattern of human action which is always *the same*, coming from the biological foundation proposed by evolutionary psychologists.

The sociologists are are arguing that we do not *need* to suppose that this institution is a product of the operation of the aspect of human nature specified by evolutionary psychology to explain it. Instead, the operation of aspects of human nature which are a lot more widely understood are quite sufficient to account for what is going on
(Midgley, 1996). Yet as we sociologists go ahead pointing this out we seem compelled to proclaim: ‘This shows that we can understand society without resorting to biological accounts’. This is Quixotic in its unreality. It does not represent our own practice of the true nature of our dispute with some of the viewpoints coming out of evolutionary psychology.

Tooby and Cosmides believe that acceptance of the Integrated Causal Model will mark a revolutionary change in social science as the findings of biology and psychology will be brought into sociology to allow ‘a robust combination of logical coherence, causal description, explanatory power, and testability’ (Tooby and Cosmides, 1992: 19, 23) such as we see in the other sciences. This seems to me to be unlikely, partly because social science has been operating for centuries with theories of human nature, even if this has not been acknowledged. One cannot rule out the relevance of new discoveries about human nature from evolutionary psychology. Yet my hunch is that aspects of human nature which are far more obvious, and which are already being covertly made use of by sociologists, will maintain their salience in accounting for most social action.

Like Midgley (2002), Tooby and Cosmides oppose a reductionist understanding of the relationships between biological, psychological and sociological approaches. In theory, at any rate, they agree with Midgley’s view that different ways of looking at reality in
different sciences are like the different views we get of a swiss roll, depending on how
we cut it up. She argues that different views of reality have to be compatible even if
they are not reducible. However, in practice Tooby and Cosmides favour the approach
of information theory to understand human nature and reject the theory we may describe
as mentalist – a theoretical standpoint working with concepts such as intention,
understanding, drive and purpose. They aim to purge social science of ‘ vague
portrayals employing terms such as "capacity," "predisposition," "urge," "potential," and
so on – things too murky to be helpful’ (1992:64).

This is yet another attempt to remove ‘powers’ from scientific analysis (Molnar, 2003).
Yet whenever Tooby and Cosmides move away from the technical language of
information processing their account falls back on mentalist concepts, for example,
when they assert that humans ‘seek’ food (Tooby and Cosmides, 1992: 89). The
position taken in this paper is in line with that of Midgley. This mentalist understanding
is a credible scientific approach that exists alongside other approaches. In relation to
human nature, this approach has a long history, dating back to Aristotle.

The *practical* impossibility of the reduction of human intentions and thoughts to
biological entities, or to information processing language, for that matter, means that
this mentalist language will inevitably continue. Part of the reason, as Midgley points
out, is that we have some direct access to our own thoughts and desires, and build a
more general theory with that starting point. In this paper, what is simply asserted
against the sociology textbooks is that biological and mentalist ways of framing social
events are equally valid and that the question of whether human nature is relevant to
social science cannot be solved by carving off a realm of social (mentally described)
events, separated from biological events.

The position taken by Tooby and Cosmides (1992) and others (for example Pinker,
2002) has another feature that has mitigated against the acceptance of their general
framework within social science. Associated with their claims for the relevance of
human nature, biology and evolution are a quite specific set of theories about human
nature. These are generally treated as ‘the findings’ of rigorous science and something
that we in the social sciences should take on board. For example Tooby and Cosmides
list the following as aspects of human nature: a language acquisition device, mate
preference mechanisms, sexual jealousy mechanisms, mother-infant emotion
communication signals, social contract algorithms (Cosmides and Tooby 1992: 39).

At the present time, to treat the existence of all of these aspects of human nature as
‘findings’ convincingly established by rigorous science is naïve. Some of the claims
made in these studies are also contested by scientists working in these fields from a
variety of perspectives (Fausto-Sterling, 1992; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Gowaty, 1997; Haraway, 1989; Ryan and Jetha, 2010). Yet, while some of the ‘findings’ of evolutionary psychology may be unpalatable for sociologists and could also be far from proven within their own scientific domains, this is not a reason to maintain an incoherent understanding of social science. My suggestion in this paper is that the Standard Social Science Model should be rejected by sociologists for its own flaws. Instead, we should critically engage with relevant perspectives from other sciences and examine them on their own merits in relation to the logic, methodology and accuracy of their arguments. A clear recognition that human nature is an essential concept in sociology and a part of sociology as it already exists may not lead to the massive improvement in understanding that Tooby and Cosmides anticipate. But it may allow us to move forward slowly on a more assured footing.

References:


