

Four Systems To Describe Human Motives

By Meg Sullivan

Anthropologist Alan Fiske's elegant but simple description of human behavior has spawned an interdisciplinary conversation that is shedding light on how the brain acquires, uses, and creates culture.



Alan Fiske

As a graduate student in anthropology, Alan Fiske should have been thrilled when he devised a way of neatly dividing all human interaction into four basic categories.

After all, it's unusual for a Ph.D. dissertation of even the most narrow scope to break important new ground. Fiske, meanwhile, had taken on a no less ambitious subject than the richness of human social life, and the work promptly drew comparisons to Marx and Freud for its breadth and elegance.

But for years afterward, he walked on pins and needles.

"Every time I gave a talk, I was convinced that people were going to stand up in the back of the room and say, 'But what about this fifth model and the sixth one and the seventh one that you've left out?'" Fiske, a UCLA professor of anthropology, recently recalled. "I was sure I was going to look like an idiot."

Nearly 20 years have passed since Fiske first suggested that relationships are either dictated by communal sharing, authority ranking, equity matching, or market pricing—and the other shoe has yet to drop. His 1991 book, *Structures of Social Life: The Four Elementary Forms of Human Relations*, a 480-page expansion of his dissertation as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, has become a classic of social science literature. Some 40 studies by 15 researchers have validated Fiske's "relational models."

"Alan is an integrative theorist of the first order," said Nick Haslam, editor of *Relational Models Theory: A Contemporary Overview* (Erlbaum Associates). "He's not afraid to go after big questions—such as the fundamental forms of social relationships—despite the increasing tendency for researchers to pursue highly specialized and narrow-focus topics."

Today, Fiske's models hold promise for illuminating dilemmas as complicated as ethnic tension and psychological maladies, yet the building blocks are strikingly simple:

- ◆ *Communal sharing* is the relational model in a romantic relationship or in a tightly knit team on the playing field or any other group of people who treat each other as socially equivalent in some respect.

- ◆ *Authority ranking* is the way a military command—or any other hierarchical organization—works.

- ◆ *Equity-matching* is the philosophy of turn-taking or even balance anywhere in society—on the playground, in baby-sitting co-ops, carpools, rotating credit associations, balloting—or even in vengeance.

◆ *Market pricing* is what people do when they buy and sell goods or services, when they allocate rewards in due proportion to contributions, or when they are concerned about efficiency or the ratio of benefits to costs.

“If you understand these four systems, you understand the basic human motives, emotions, judgments and ideas that govern social relations,” Fiske said. “They form the basis of every aspect of human social behavior—from the exchange of goods and services to the organization of work and the social meaning of objects, land and time. They organize ideas about social justice, moral judgment, political ideology, religious observance and social conflict.”

Different combinations of the four elementary types of relationships generate diverse cultures and complex social institutions in all domains of social life, Fiske contends.

“The point is that an incredible diversity of complex structures can be built out of a few elementary forms,” he said.

Now Fiske, a mild-mannered and affable father of five, is trying to foster the kind of interdisciplinary spirit behind his relational models at the university he joined seven years ago. He was the founding director of UCLA’s Center for Behavior, Evolution and Culture (BEC), which facilitates research and training on the interaction among natural selection, cultural transmission, social relations, and psychology.

Each Monday, the six-year-old center, now headed by UCLA anthropologist Joan Silk, attracts a standing-room only crowd with prominent speakers from anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, and communication. Scholars and students from more than two dozen departments across the campus participate. BEC also provides a framework for graduate training, but faculty dream of developing a more formal program and offering tuition support and seed grants for student research.

“The intellectual energy of BEC is unrivaled,” said Robert Boyd, a professor of anthropology who helped found BEC with Fiske and Daniel Fessler, an

assistant professor of anthropology.

Sitting in on a BEC seminar four years ago helped University of Washington honor student Katherine Hinde choose UCLA over the three other top ranking graduate programs to which she had been admitted.

“The other campuses I visited weren’t as good about getting people together from other disciplines to talk,” said the third-year graduate student. “But at BEC we get amazing dialogues going.”

Three years after BEC’s founding, Fiske began to collaborate with UCLA neuroscientists to design a brain-imaging study that has identified the specialized neural mechanisms used to understand relational models.

Today, he heads the Center for Culture, Brain and Development at UCLA (CBD), a similarly interdisciplinary group of scholars who are also interested in fostering innovative and interdisciplinary research and training. Rather than focusing primarily on evolution as BEC does, CBD explores the interplay between culture, child development and neurobiology. The goal, Fiske said, is to shed light on the nature of a developing human being and how the brain acquires, uses, and creates culture.

The rigorous, interdisciplinary graduate program that prepares students to conduct integrated collaborative research in social behavior connects five graduate programs: anthropology, psychology, applied linguistics, neuroscience, and education. With funding from the

Foundation for Psychosocial Research, CBD currently supports four post-doctoral fellows and provides scholarships for two of 12 graduate students affiliated with the program and provides a small amount of seed money for student research.

“If we had more money, we could admit more graduate students and the ones who come could spend less time in outside jobs and more time conducting research,” Fiske said.

If anybody can attest to the value of graduate research, it is Fiske. The son of a psychologist, he fondly remembers the summer he discovered a striking similarity in the analyses of pioneers in three disciplines. Sociologist Max Weber, developmental

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Andrew Shaner, clinical professor from the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute and the David Geffen School of Medicine, presents a program on schizophrenia in the weekly interdisciplinary lecture series hosted by the UCLA Center for Behavior, Evolution and Culture.



psychologist Jean Piaget and theologian Paul Ricoeur all saw human interaction in terms of the three categories Fiske would later call communal sharing, market pricing, and authority ranking. He had his first three elementary forms of social behavior.

Convinced that he needed to field test his theories, Fiske then set off for West Africa. In the highly ritualized threshing gatherings and multi-family cow slaughters of the traditional cultures in Burkina Faso, he witnessed a category of behavior for which he had failed to account: equity matching or turn-taking. He had identified his fourth category.

Returning to the U.S., he plunged into a review of research by more than 100 social scientists. “Surely,” he kept thinking, “someone’s already thought of this.”

But to his amazement, Fiske found researchers who had identified the equivalent of two or three of his relational models but not the rest. In the two cases where scholars identified the equivalent of all four models, they confined their theory to a small realm of human interaction—such as the workplace.

“It reminded me of the story about the blind men feeling the elephant,” Fiske said. “Everybody’s describing parts of this thing without realizing they’re all talking about connected parts of a whole.”

In fact, the relational models are so ingrained that people unconsciously use them to think about friends, family members, co-workers and acquaintances, research has shown.

Today research is showing that a wide range of stresses and strains in all kinds of social encounters may actually stem from unconscious differences in the way people employ Fiske’s models.

In a study of a Fortune 100 company, Debra Connelley, a Los Angeles scholar of business administration, found evidence that different assumptions about relational models explained long-simmering resentments and strife. Management, she discovered, entertained a communal view of employee relations. White women, meanwhile, had a very market-pricing ideal, wanting to be rewarded in proportion to their contribution. African-Americans wanted an equity matching relationship, and they were convinced that the company was not balanced and fair.

A growing body of research by Haslam, who is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Melbourne, shows that such personality disorders as paranoia, narcissism and obsessive-compulsion actually correspond with a tendency to over emphasize or under emphasize Fiske’s models. Narcissists, for instance, showed a low propensity for equity matching. Obsessive-compulsive people, on the other hand, showed a higher than normal reliance on authority ranking.

Fiske, meanwhile, is collaborating on a National Institutes of Mental Health-funded study to see whether relational model theory can help explain some of the problems schizophrenics encounter in living normal lives after medication has rid them of delusions and other symptoms.

“In order to function happily and to get along with people,” he added, “you have to coordinate with them by using the same relational models they’re using in the same ways. If you do, there’s going to be a lot of trust and strong relationships, and your social life can work very well.” 