



# Human Universals

*By Donald Brown*

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## **Human Universals** By Donald Brown

This book explores physical and behavioral characteristics that can be considered universal among all cultures, all people. It presents cases demonstrating universals, looks at the history of the study of universals, and presents an interesting study of a hypothetical tribe, The Universal People.

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## **Human Universals By Donald Brown Bibliography**

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## **Editorial Review**

### **From the Author**

In the course of co-teaching a seminar on primate and human sexuality with my colleague Donald Symons he presented a proposed list of pan-cultural human sex differences. I bet him on the spot that I could find an ethnographically-described society in which all those traits were reversed. I lost that bet. At about the same time I noted a few studies published in a short period of time that each overthrew some classic anthropological account of a society that purportedly exhibited the opposite of what westerners might assume to be universal. All this led me to question the strong cultural-relativist position that I (and the majority of anthropologists) had largely taken for granted.

I decided to look into the evidence and reasoning that might support more attention to human universals than they were then receiving. The result was this book and a few papers that expand on one or another facets of the matter.

### **From the Inside Flap**

Challenging dominant assumptions of cultural relativism, Donald E. Brown contends that certain behavioral traits are common to human beings everywhere. In *Human Universals* he addresses the problems posed for anthropology by the topic of universals, discusses studies that have caused anthropologists to rethink their position, and provided an ethnography of "The Universal People."

Although human universals were of considerable importance to early anthropologists, a later emphasis on sociocultural determinants of behavior produced an ambivalence toward both universals and the concept of human nature. This ambivalence toward universals has persisted since the 1920s; however, six important case studies involving the classification of basic colors, facial expressions of emotion, sex roles, time, adolescent stress, and the Oedipus Complex have reopened discussion of this nearly taboo topic.

After discussing the distinctions between the various kinds of universals, the history of attempts to study universals, and the means by which universality may be demonstrated and explained, Brown presents a list of some four hundred human universals in the form of an ethnography that describes any and all peoples known to anthropologists. In his conclusion the author charges that, in making universals and human nature virtual non-subjects, anthropology has not adequately performed its major task. While the field has demonstrated well how people vary, it has not provided a sense of the ways in which they are all alike.

### **About the Author**

Donald E. Brown is Professor Emeritus of social and cultural anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He received his B.A. and M.A. in anthropology at UCLA and the PhD at Cornell. His principal field research was in Brunei, an Islamic sultanate in northwest Borneo.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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