

# The Evolutionary Nature of Experience

Derek P. Brereton

Meetings of the American Anthropological Association  
New Orleans, Saturday, November 20 • Poster Session: “New Directions in Evolutionary Anthropology”

## Why Theorize Experience?

1. If there are creatures rightly called “human,” there must be something describable as “humanness” by which they can be known.
2. Because humans are an evolved species, humanness will be a product, at least in part, of natural selection.
3. Selection operates at the juncture of organism and environment.
4. For humans (and other sentient beings), the organism/environment juncture is called “experience.”
5. In mammals, basal experience has been supplemented by awareness (of experience); in humans, awareness, in turn, has been supplemented by consciousness (the awareness of being aware of experience).
6. Therefore, the nature of human experience can and must be modeled.
7. Because experience is fundamental to humanness, a viable model of experience must be central to anthropology.
8. Conversely, anthropology without a viable model of experience remains theoretically ungrounded.

## What is the Nature of Experience?

### I Orders of Experience

1. All animals can move in response to the relation between their needs and environmental conditions.
2. From this we can infer that all animals experience the relation between needs and conditions.
3. Humans, as evolved animals, have this capacity for basal experience. Call this **E<sub>1</sub>**.
4. In mammals, emotionality centered in the limbic system evolved. This enables mammals to monitor internal states relative to impinging conditions. Call this emotionality the awareness of experience. This is second order experience, or **E<sub>2</sub>**.
5. In humans, awareness further evolved into third order experience, the ability to recall and anticipate based on the apprehension and appreciation of patterned regularity in nature and society. Call this consciousness, third order experience, or **E<sub>3</sub>**.

**So:** Human experience has an evolved, tripartite structure consisting of:

**E<sub>1</sub>** Experience in its basal form;

**E<sub>2</sub>** Awareness of having experience (emotionality);

**E<sub>3</sub>** Consciousness, the awareness<sub>3</sub> of being aware<sub>2</sub> of experience<sub>1</sub>.

Call these the **Orders of Experience**.

These orders of experience can be loosely associated with the hindbrain, midbrain, and forebrain. They are deeply integrated and mutually interactive. Phenomenologically, in the experiential moment, they are not separable. But the three orders of experience can and must be separated analytically. (cf. Margaret Archer: Morphogenesis, i.e., the dialectics of structure and agency)

### II Levels of Experience

There are also three Levels of experience deriving from the fact that humans are individual members of a social species. Human experience, therefore, registers at each level: personal, social, and species.

**Experience registers as:**

1. Personal: the human as an embodied self;
2. Sociocultural: the human as enculturated;
3. Species: humans as members of an evolved species.

**Example:** Someone shakes my hand. The nerves in my skin register being touched (species); I recognize I am in a sociocultural relation with another human (sociocultural); it is my developed personhood that is engaged in that relation (personal).

Like the orders of experience, these levels of experience are not separable phenomenologically. In the experiential moment, they are realized cybernetically and contemporaneously. But for experience to be duly theorized, these levels can and must be separated analytically. (Margaret Archer)

### III Features of Experience

At the species level, there are twelve Features of human experience. Any and every experience by any and all humans is necessarily informed by all twelve of these features. The culturalization of experience is only one of these features. It is a mistake, therefore, to vaunt culture as the exclusive explanation of humanness. Rather, a complex experiential commonality underwrites our species adaptation (cf. E.B. Tylor).

**Human experience is:**

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|------------------|---|
| 1. Temporalized  | 7. Affective  |
| 2. Localized     | 8. Eventualized (embedded in events)  |
| 3. Materialized  | 9. Rhythmic (experiences have onset, duration, and cessation)                     |
| 4. Energized     | 10. Proleptic (anticipates, or “reaches into,” the future; in expectation of...)  |
| 5. Personalized  | 11. Absential (experience entails absence; what does not happen can have effects) |
| 6. Sensorialized | 12. Culturalized  |

**SO:** A minimally adequate model of human experience recognizes its three orders, three levels, and twelve features.

### IV So What?

**This model has several implications:**

1. Culture per se, is not the foundation of either humanness or human adaptation.
2. The foundation of humanness and human adaptation is experience, analyzable into three orders, three levels, and twelve features.
3. Just as life evolved from non-life, but is not reducible to it, so consciousness emerged from experience, and is not reducible to it.
4. Still, both experience (John Dewey) and consciousness (Derek Brereton) are natural. They evolved in and because of the world, and so provide our means of “tunneling in” to reality in order to adapt to it.
5. This evolutionary model of humanness is grounded in realism. Realism duly recognizes that human knowing has effects, through behavior, on the social and natural world; but once those effects have been realized, they, as well as the social and natural conditions that gave rise to them, exist independently from human knowing (Roy Bhaskar).
6. Experience must be fully theorized as a condition of describing and explaining humanness.
7. Through such a model of experience, anthropology can account for the pre-cultural commonality that underwrites humanness in all its sociocultural forms through time and space (E.B. Tylor).

#### Key Sources:

Charles Darwin *Origin of Species*  
*Descent of Man*

John Dewey *Experience and Nature*

Roy Bhaskar *The Possibility of Naturalism*  
*Plato, Etc.*  
*Reclaiming Reality*  
*A Realist Theory of Science*

Margaret Archer *Realist Social Theory and the Morphogenic Approach*  
*Being Human*  
*Structure, Agency, and the Internal Conversation*

Derek Brereton *Camptending: Family, Place, and Experience at Squam Lake, New Hampshire*