

**What's universal and what's culturally specific  
in the constitution of social relationships?**

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To understand human universals, we need to understand why cultural variation has natural limits, and to understand how and why cultures vary, we need to understand the universal foundations that generate the variation among cultures. Consider the constitution of social relationships. People use a distinctive semiotic system to constitute each one of the four elementary relational models; the correspondence between each relational model and its specific constitutive medium is universal. However, each culture develops unique ways of constituting relationships with each semiotic medium. For example, every culture uses physical dimensions to constitute Authority Ranking as ABOVE–BELOW, BIGGER–SMALLER, AHEAD–BEHIND, STRONGER–WEAKER, EARLIER–LATER. But there are innumerable culturally specific ways to place people ABOVE or EARLIER, and innumerable culturally specific ways combine these dimensions to mark social rank. Similarly, to constitute Equality Matching every culture uses concrete ostensive operations such as taking turns, reciprocating, drawing lots, balancing quantities, casting ballots, one-to-one correspondence and alignment. But each culture selects which of these concrete operations to use for which Equality Matching relationships, and each culture develops specific procedures for casting lots and taking turns and other one-to-one matching practices.