



Why Anthropology Remains Integral to Cognitive Science

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The key justification Beller, Bender, and Medin (2012) invoke in questioning the place of anthropology in cognitive science—and whether the former should remain in the latter—is that the presence and influence of anthropology has continuously decreased since the cognitive revolution. The implication is that anthropology must either contribute more to cognitive science or accept an inevitable divorce from it.

Despite serving as a catalyst for debate, the above justification is unsound. It not only relies upon dubious assumptions but also ignores the presence of anthropology in the cognitive science of religion (CSR) and the influence of cognitive anthropology (CA) in understanding social cognition. Each of these points is briefly addressed in turn.

First, it is said that anthropology has faded into the background of cognitive science ever since the cognitive revolution. This claim is based on the following assumptions. Because anthropologists are generally absent from the Cognitive Science Society, hostile to collaborative research, and publish fewer articles than cognitive psychologists in cognitive science journals, they are turning anthropology into the “missing discipline” (pp. 342–46). Yet these observations neither entail the lack of anthropological contribution nor its impending divorce from cognitive science. After all, attendance at the meeting of an academic society is not an accurate measure of cross-disciplinary contribution; the interdisciplinary hostility of a few scientists does not constitute interdisciplinary incompatibility; and advancements in cognitive psychology do not entail losses for anthropology.

Second, the presence of anthropology may not be evident in all areas of cognitive science, but that is certainly not the case for CSR (see Whitehouse & Cohen, 2012). Whether it concerns the Neolithic mind, the biogenic foundations of shamanism, or the cognitive and evolutionary roots of religion, anthropologists have made an unmistakable impression on the field. In fact, the standard model of religion in CSR—that religion is the unintended product of brain function—is largely attributable to anthropologists

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(e.g., Atran, 2002; Boyer, 2001; Whitehouse, 2004). Furthermore, while the bulk of cultural anthropologists discuss globalization, ethnicity, and the like, anthropologists in CSR discuss topics that bear directly on cognitive science (e.g., agency detection, social cognition, etc.). It would therefore be a mistake to generalize about the interdisciplinary presence of anthropology by overlooking CSR.

Third, the cross-disciplinary influence of CA may not be as apparent as it was in the 1960s, but it continues to provide constructive means for studying social cognition. For instance, consensus analysis (e.g., Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986) and cultural models theory (e.g., Quinn, 2011) are developments that came after the cognitive revolution and provide two of the most robust frameworks for measuring and evaluating cultural beliefs or norms (see Gatewood, 2012). Within cultural psychology, they also yield the soundest methods for examining collective cognition in truly ecological settings (i.e., not based entirely on data concerning the cognition of students in foreign universities). Of course, consensus analysis and cultural models theory are separated from other cognitive subdisciplines by focusing on mental content, not processes. But the manner in which they do so makes them arguably more akin to cognitive science than cultural anthropology. Where the latter employs participant observation to examine cultural variation, the former employs experimental methods to examine knowledge and perceptual variation. Hence, it is inaccurate to say that anthropology has contributed little to understanding cognition when CA has persistently yielded methods that parallel those in cognitive science and also influential perspectives on social cognition.

To close, the observations made by Beller, Bender, and Medin are indeed grave. However, they render an outlook that prevents researchers from seeing the true opportunities for the two disciplines. The first step is recognizing that anthropology has been—and remains—an asset to cognitive science.

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