

Most cultural phenomena are embedded in other cultural phenomena. For one thing, any cultural phenomenon takes place within a community that already has many traditions, cultural practices, rituals and beliefs of its own. The important point, however, is that embedding cultural phenomena are likely to have some effects on the embedded cultural phenomenon and to partially determine its evolution and the content of its constitutive representations. Religious beliefs can have effects on economic practices; economic practices can have effects on kinship relations; etc.

Let us call “cultural embedding” this aspect of cultural evolution. How does cultural epidemiology deal with it?

Cultural epidemiologists recognise cultural embedding, but...

In a previous post, I argued that cultural epidemiology does recognise that cultural phenomena can themselves be generative of other cultural phenomena. I took the case of enculturation, but Joeri Witteveen wrote a thought-provoking comment about the many other ways that make cultural phenomena dependent on other cultural phenomena. Joeri quoted Sperber (2006) providing examples of cultural phenomena that evolved on the basis of other cultural phenomena (e.g. forms of hunting evolve on the basis of the domestication of dogs).

Here is another quote, from Sperber and Claidière (2006):

Many constructive biases are shared in a population. This may be due to the fact that they are based on the common psychological makeup of the species, or to more local historical or ecological factors. (my emphasis) However, this statement is then illustrated by using universal properties of human visual cognition (as a psychological factor stabilizing the meaning of colour terms). Likewise, Bloch and Sperber (2002) insist on the role of local and historical factors generating kinship relations, but in fine attempt to specify the role of “general human disposition” to favour one’s relatives.

Looking for robust aspects of cognitive tracks

Why do cultural epidemiologists focus mostly on the role of little variable features of the mind rather than local factors generating cultural phenomena? There are several good reasons for that. Joeri mentions one: it allows tapping into relevant results from cognitive science.

Another reason may be found in the trade off between the scope and the specificity of one’s analysis of cultural phenomena. Cognitive tracks are more or less robust – i.e. more or less easily perturbed by contingent changes – and this depends on the cognitive mechanisms on which they rely. If the cognitive mechanisms are well ingrained and little variable, then the cognitive tracks will be more robust. Thus, evolved cognitive properties provide robustness to cognitive tracks, and the cultural phenomena that are thus issued are likely to be more stable and better distributed. This is the case for minimally counter-intuitive representations and the spread of religious beliefs. This is also the case for general human disposition to favour relatives and their effect on kinship traditions.

The advantage, when specifying universal psychological factors, is that the explanation is likely to encompass a wide range of cultural phenomena. Looking at more local psychological factors means restricting the scope of the explanation. There is however a drawback in that the gains in scope are counterbalanced by loss in specificity and precision. Local factors are eventually what lead to the specific aspects of the culture: believing in ghosts rather than zombies, or tolerating insults (BaThonga) rather than meant snatching (Lo Dagaba) from one’s sister’s son. Cognitive tracks are largely under-determined by evolved human dispositions.

Promiscuous causality

The recognition of this under-determination is spelled out by Bloch and Sperber (2002). They say: Actual cultural practices ... are embedded in socio-historical processes ... Each of these historical flows is unique. These processes are influenced by many type of factors, evolved psychological predisposition being only one of them. Mostly, cultural processes are influenced by other cultural processes In the paper cited above, Sperber and Claidière (2006), coin “promiscuous causality” for the fact that cultural phenomena originate in multiple causal factors. This grasp certainly what Joeri is saying when he notes that culture is “messy” and rely on “Co-evolving Connected Cultural Cognitive Causal Chains” (6C, which is as sexy as “promiscuous causality”, if one wants to enrich cultural epidemiology’s terminology)

Fleshing it out with more historical case studies

So, is cultural epidemiology condemned to study only evolved properties of the mind as causal factors and leave aside the messy promiscuity? Of course not! Certainly, for the science of culture to progress, there need to be both more general and more specific studies. Not just a trade-off between scope and specificity, but descriptions at different levels of analysis.

How do we get at the more local and fine-grained analysis? Showing that cultural epidemiology is equipped for it and adding to the theoretical toolkit surely helps. But it seems that more detailed case studies are what would flesh-out the aspect of cultural epidemiology we are discussing. My own strategy is to try recruiting cultural historians (see this [paper](#)). Cultural history could exemplify under which conditions and how cognitive tracks evolve. There is a certain stability of cultural phenomena, but this stability depends on contingent phenomena. When looking for the factors of cultural change, historians can point out which contingent phenomena played a role.

Conclusion

Cultural epidemiologists and Dan Sperber in particular have made clear statements recognising the embedding of cultural practices in other cultural phenomena. With this point, cultural epidemiology is closer to current views in social anthropology than any other evolutionary approaches. Yet, this one point of cultural epidemiology needs to be fleshed out with ethnographic and historical case studies.