

How can we go beyond the rhetorical dichotomy between nature and culture and avoid misunderstandings that repeatedly occur when social/cultural anthropologists and natural scientists try to co-operate? It shouldn't be all that difficult if we think, as I believe we should, of human cognition not as a state but as a single process where history and individual cognitive development interact.



Bronislaw Malinowski among Trobriand Islanders, 1918

One can put the matter over simply by saying that the theoretical starting point of, for example, a cognitive psychologist is "external" while the starting point of a social anthropologist is "internal". The analytical tools of the psychologist, the questions she ask, the categories of analysis she uses - categories such as "concepts" or "mind" - have all been defined in a discourse that is external to the subjects of the enquiry. On the other hand, an anthropologist tries to use as the ground from which to produce her analysis the cognitive tools of the subjects of her enquiry as they are available to them in the particular place and the particular time they are located. The significance of using this "internal" base line has been stressed by anthropologists again and again, perhaps most eloquently by Malinowski with his well known phrase "from the native's point of view".

With such different starting points, putting the two types of work together might appear as quixotic as grafting a human arm onto a cloud. However, although the metaphor may reflect the defeatism that often comes from both sides, it greatly exaggerates the difficulty.

This is, first of all, because the gulf between the "native's" point of view and that of the natural scientist is nowhere as great as much anthropology and cognitive science has pretended it is. Such a stance made anthropology forget that both the scientist and the people studied live in roughly the same world which is governed by the same laws of physics, biology, chemistry and sociology and that both have similar brains moulded by evolution in order to deal with this physical, biological chemical and social world. There is a sense in which both the scientist's and the people's points of view are "internal": they are internal not to any particular group or individual but to the human species as a whole. The misleading illusion of absolute distance between natural scientists and ethnographers is the product of the historically created opposition between nature and culture and

the anthropological fantasy of a "culture" that could exist outside "nature". My first conclusion is, therefore that anthropologists have, to a large extent, no other choice than to be "externalist" (that is, human internalist) when they think they are being internalist from the point of view of a particular group.

The other reason why the gulf is not as great as it might at first seem is the fact that a totally external stance, which the cognitive scientist may believe she is adopting, is impossible. (I am not here talking of the much debated issue of the degree of cultural construction of science.) The joint aim of all cognitive scientists, anthropologists as much as the other members of that coalition, is to understand the behaviour of actual humans as they exist in the world which they inhabit. This world only exists for them within the process of history because they have the distinctive characteristics of our species. As a result, even allowing for the powerful constraints put on it by the general human evolved brain, this world is not identical for all or any people. For example, the nature of the contact between a mother and her child an hour after it is born is not identical in Edinburgh, a Japanese city or a Malagasy village. This is what in large part explains the differences in behaviour of people in different places and times as well as the differences in the material and institutional environment within which they live.

Furthermore, the specificities brought about by human history should not be thought as merely creating an environment for people but also, to a significant extent, as creating the very people that the environment surrounds. This is most obvious in the cognitive field but in fact it also applies to all aspects of our selves even to the shape of our bones. There are thus no non-cultural bits of ourselves as there are no non-natural bits. We are made by a single but complex process that creates, inter alia, specificity. Differentiation produced by history, is one of the specific aspects of our species rather like the shape of our femur. Ignoring this crucial aspect of what it is to be a member of our species is as daft as would be studying human locomotion while pretending that we had femurs like those of baboons.

The fact of the continual process of historical construction of human beings has the methodological implication that if we want to explain human action, rather than merely describe it, we have no alternative but to remember that it is brought about by people from the inside. It is from the "inside" that people live their lives, though that does not mean that this inside is free of the implications of the neurological mechanisms of our brain or of the nature of the world (though both the brain and the world are changing). The reality is therefore that a psychologist studying cognition, like an anthropologist, has no alternative but to take also an "internal" inflected point of view if she want to study such things as human cognitive development, or irony. The psychological literature on such topics shows that this is in fact what is done. Similarly the anthropologist cannot for an instant imagine that this "inside" is free floating.

The reason why cooperation between scholars such as anthropologists and cognitive scientists is in fact much easier than it might seem is thus because neither side is quite what they believe they are. The externalism of natural science, as it applies to human cognition, is much more internalist than it makes out. The internalism of interpretative anthropology is much more externalist than it imagines. What has obscured this is the futility of the nature/culture dichotomy. The fact that the disciplines are closer than they believe they are does not, however, completely eliminate the epistemological problem but it greatly diminishes it.

And the ultimate reason why interpretative anthropologists and cognitive scientists are closer than they make out is not far to seek. The difficulty in working together is often attributed to the chasm between nature and culture, to different intellectual traditions or even to different criteria of truth, but it is above all due to the complex nature of the animal we are. It is because humans are within a single process where different types of driving forces produce a unified movement. It is very very

difficult for anthropologists and others to study our species, whatever the academic department we are affiliated to, but this is less because of epistemological incompatibilities and more because of the complex nature of the phenomena we are dealing with.