

ONE



Why anthropologists cannot avoid cognitive issues and what they gain from these

Social and natural scientists have come to hate each other. They cannot understand each other's purpose. They consider each other's methods either sloppy or dangerous. They are repulsed by each other's style and mode of presentation. They even dress differently. They often come from different social and educational backgrounds. Yet it was not always so and what follows will show this need not be so in the future though the antipathy is not a simple matter of misunderstanding. It goes very deep.

This book attempts reconciliation, focussing on those benefits which some social scientists, especially anthropologists, can derive from taking into account the work of cognitive scientists for the kind of issues which are central to their disciplines. It starts by explaining the historical and philosophical root of the divorce between the two types of studies and how misleading this has been. But the central purpose will be to demonstrate that cognitive issues are not on the periphery of such social sciences as anthropology, history or sociology. Instead, it will be to show that they are relevant and helpful for the most central and familiar topics which, among others, cultural and social anthropologists deal with. Of course, natural scientists and especially cognitive scientists would also greatly benefit from a deeper understanding of what the social sciences have to say but this would be the subject of another book.

This book is particularly addressed to all those who are interested in social and cultural anthropology in general, whether specialists,

Why anthropologists cannot avoid cognitive issues

professionals, amateurs or students. Its point is to show why anthropologists cannot avoid many of the questions and findings which have recently concerned the various cognitive sciences. These topics have major implications for all the work anthropologists do, even though this might not be immediately obvious to them. This also is true for some other social scientists, for example, sociologists and historians, and so the argument will be relevant to them also. Whenever in this book I refer to social science it is to all these social sciences that I have in mind. However, the focus will remain with cultural and social anthropology. The book should also be of interest to cognitive scientists if only because it will explain to them the difficulties that their social scientist colleagues have in integrating their work with their practice and theories.

So that the relevant cognitive theories and findings alluded to can be easily comprehensible for those who have no previous acquaintance with the disciplines from which they originate, these will be presented in the type of language which is normally used by those who are more familiar with the vocabulary and the type of rhetoric common in the social sciences.

This book differs from typical introductions to cognitive anthropology. This is because it is addressed to *general* social and cultural anthropologists and other social scientists such as historians and sociologists, especially those who would normally not have a special interest in cognitive issues. Thus, it is not intended as an introduction to the sub-discipline: 'cognitive anthropology'. It is addressed to all, or any, scholars, students or members of the general public, who are concerned with the central issues of social and cultural anthropology and similar social sciences. It does not deal with *a certain class of phenomena*, as would be the case, for example, with a book on the anthropology of religion; instead it consists in a discussion of fundamental theoretical concerns which affect every aspect of social science.

Of course, some of the topics considered here are the same as those which have been discussed by those who identify themselves as 'cognitive

Why anthropologists cannot avoid cognitive issues

anthropologists' and who primarily seek to make a contribution to that sub-discipline, but the difference in the purpose of authors of such books and my intention here is that these scholars seek to carve out a specific field within the larger topic of anthropology. They have often done this by defining areas where the methods of psychological testing, or something like them, could be applied to questions of anthropological interest. Such work is of value and is often undervalued by other anthropologists, partly because the difficulty of the project means that cognitive anthropologists have to deal with limited questions which may appear slight and, partly because, as a result of these same difficulties which restrict the topics addressed, they rarely venture beyond their own culture (see D'Andrade 1995 for an excellent account of this tradition). By contrast with this type of approach, this book is intended as a very general theoretical critique and contribution to the way anthropology and other social sciences usually go about their business, whatever they are talking about and whatever part of the world they are studying. As a result, methodological issues, which so dominate the study of cognition, are not my main concern here, though I hope that the methodological implications of the discussion will be useful for those who want to take them up.

Many cultural and social anthropologists not only omit in their studies to take into account the workings of the mind, they are actively hostile to any attempt to do so. The most familiar, and in some ways superficial, expressed reasons for this distrust are two. Because these objections reappear in different forms, they will be considered more fully and in different ways throughout the book.

The first is that many believe, like the anthropologist Geertz for example, that public symbols and private mental knowledge are completely different phenomena (Geertz 1973: ch. 1). According to such writers, psychologists are concerned with individual phenomena while anthropologists are concerned with shared public cultural phenomena. Consequently, because such anthropologists draw a very sharp contrast between

Why anthropologists cannot avoid cognitive issues

their own subject and psychology, they assume that different methods and different theories are appropriate for the 'different' types of meaning different disciplines study (see Strauss and Quinn 1997: ch. 2). But, in fact, a moment's reflection will reveal that 'meaning' can only signify 'meaning for people'. To talk of, for example, 'the meaning of cultural symbols', as though this could be separated from what these symbols mean, for one or a number of individuals, can never be legitimate. This being so, an absolute distinction between public symbols and private thought becomes unsustainable. For example, if we say that a building like the wailing wall in Jerusalem is an object endowed with great cultural meaning, by such a statement we can only mean that, because of a common education shared by a number of people, this object has the potential to trigger reactions in certain people's minds and associated behaviour. It is important to note that the reactions so triggered are likely to be similar for many people and, indeed, the cause of this similarity is an important subject of study, but this in no way alters the fact that meaning remains simply a feature of individual human minds and is not, to use Durkheim's famous terms, a matter of 'a collective representation'. The representations triggered by the wall are most probably different for Palestinians and Jews, but this is because of the different education, social environment, memories, etc., of the members of the two groups, and, thus, it is not the wall, as such, which has meaning. What is more, it is probable that the reactions triggered by the wall also differ within the group of people who identify themselves as either Palestinians or Jews. In other words, meaning can, in the end, only be an attribute of individual minds; there are no such things as purely 'cultural meanings'. The distinction between psychology and anthropology proposed by certain anthropologists is not based on a distinction of the phenomena studied by the two disciplines. There cannot, therefore, be a legitimate claim that the methods and theories of the one or the other discipline are irrelevant for the understanding of what the other studies, nor that these can be protected from criticisms which come from either side.

Why anthropologists cannot avoid cognitive issues

The other reason why cultural and social anthropologists often dismiss cognitive considerations is more legitimate. It is because of a more or less explicit fear that in introducing cognitive considerations – which are usually in terms of ‘what people are like in general’ irrespective of particular historical or cultural contexts – they will fall into a type of error which has dogged the theoretical history of anthropology and which is often labelled *reductionism*. The type of reductionist explanation which anthropologists have in mind is of the kind sometimes employed by, for example, Malinowski when he explained the magical practices of the people of the Trobriand Islands, a culture of the South Pacific which he had so brilliantly studied, as being caused by the need for ‘reassurance’ (Malinowski 1925: pp. 107ff). What worries most modern anthropologists with this type of ‘explanation’ is that it is trivial. Trobriand magic may well reassure the Trobriand sailor as he sets out on a perilous expedition. This is quite likely to be the case, but it does not account for what Malinowski suggests it does: that it explains how it has come about that the Trobrianders hold the specific beliefs which lead them to speak the specific spells which Malinowski witnessed. Such a general cause as the need for reassurance cannot account for something as unique as the very particular Trobriand magical practices. At first, the explanation in terms of reassurance sounds very convincing, but this is probably due to an unintentional sleight of hand. In order to make his readers believe that his explanation ‘accounts’ for the phenomena, Malinowski has to make his readers forget about the particular character of what he is trying to explain, in this case specific Trobriand magical spells, reduce them to such generalities as ‘appeals to supernatural forces for protection’, a vague characterisation which in no way specifies what is at issue, and, in this way, avoids getting to grips with what he is apparently informing us about but giving us instead something which is an empty tautology. This is the type of reductionism which anthropologists have rightly learnt to beware of and they therefore are always prone to suspect it when they come across explanations of ethnographic data which are also in such

Why anthropologists cannot avoid cognitive issues

general terms as the ‘need for reassurance’. This is what makes many suspicious of explanations of anthropological phenomena in terms of general cognitive human dispositions or mechanisms. The reader of this book should not find cause to suspect the arguments presented here to be guilty of such reductionism.

There are, however, much more vague and general reasons for the aversion to the introduction of a consideration of a subject such as cognitive science within social and cultural anthropology. This hostility is part of the general mistrust of social scientists and natural scientists noted in the first paragraph of this chapter but it is particularly intense in anthropology. Some of these objections have to do with a fear that a naturalist approach to anthropology will lead to unacceptable racist and sexist political positions. That this is not the case will be explained in chapter 2. More fundamental, however, is the fact that the history of the subject has led to a fundamental epistemological revolution concerning what kind of study anthropology is. This history will be considered in chapters 3 and 4 but a few lines are necessary by way of introduction.

Anthropology started off as a natural science and ever since has tried to distance itself from this position. It has moved away from its beginning with ever greater horror as though it was fleeing from a disgraceful yet haunting past. This transformation has been represented in terms of a spurious confrontation between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ in which social and cultural anthropology has declared itself the champion of ‘culture’ against a ‘nature’ which includes a consideration of the working of the mind. Social anthropologists have, as a result, seen themselves as studying a self-contained phenomenon, ‘culture’ or the ‘social’, which is somehow imagined as existing independently of the human organism.

Such a background is unwelcoming for the reception of an argument such as the one this book will propose. However, what will be argued is that anthropology needs to exorcise its old ghosts by re-examining its history and that, then, the absolute need for a central consideration of cognitive issues will once again become evident.

Why anthropologists cannot avoid cognitive issues

A claim that the consideration of the working of the mind is necessary for all practitioners of a subject such as anthropology has come to seem bizarre if not dangerous. Even if not categorically opposed to the idea, most anthropologists, sociologists or historians have been quite happy to proceed in their studies without acquainting themselves with such disciplines as cognitive psychology or neurology, if only because these are natural sciences. They may, in the best of cases, recognise that these have a connection with their concerns but they consider this connection none of their business. In any case why, they ask, should they be bullied into acquainting themselves with this area of knowledge when there is so much apparently more relevant work with which they are hardly able to keep up? They will argue that there are many other more 'cultural' disciplines, such as literary studies, traditional philosophy or history, which, because they are more similar in rhetoric, have more genuine claims to be relevant to what anthropologists study. They simply do not have enough time for all of them. Why should the study of cognition have a more imperative claim?

The reason is that cognition *is* different because it is *always* central to what is at issue. This centrality is due to the fact that anthropologists are forced, by the very nature of their subject matter, to 'do cognitive anthropology' all the time. They, like many other social scientists, are 'doing cognitive anthropology' as soon as they claim to represent the knowledge of those they study, as soon as they try to explain the actions of people in terms of that knowledge, as soon as they warn the general public, or each other, of the dangers of ethnocentrism, as soon as they discuss the extent, or the limits, of cultural variability. This is so when, for example, they claim, with writers like Foucault, that there is no such thing as 'human nature' outside a particular historical context, or when they try to explain the mechanisms of social and cultural change as a result of processes such as globalisation, or of the domination of one group of people by others. They involve themselves in cognitive studies when they tell us what people 'are like' through the use of the techniques of ethnographic

Why anthropologists cannot avoid cognitive issues

description and interpretation. All anthropologists and similar social scientists, inevitably, in all their writings, are continually and centrally handling issues concerned with cognition and they are continually using cognitive theories to build the very core of their arguments. However, because anthropologists usually do their ‘cognitive anthropology’ in an unexamined and unselfconscious fashion, the cognitive theories they actually use are the hazy cognitive theories of folk wisdom, their own and those of the people they study; precisely the kind of theories which the cognitive sciences have so often shown to be misleading. This is why it is necessary for anthropologists to learn to criticise and re-examine these tools which they use with such misleading ease, especially when they are unaware that they are doing any such thing.

An inevitable result of this way of going about things will be that some parts of this book will be negative and cautionary. This will be particularly true of chapters 2 to 5 and parts of chapter 6. Thus, such things will be said as ‘beware and be suspicious of anthropologists who, in the very manner with which they write, imply unproblematically that the presence of a way of saying things among a particular group of people means that this is how *those people think* about this matter’; or, as will be discussed in chapter 8, when an anthropologist is talking about ‘memory’ it is uncertain whether she is referring to what people actually remember or, like the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1950), she is indicating what they can, and do, say about the past when socially suitable occasions crop up.

The negative side of the book

There are three reasons for the negative side of the book. The first is because it is the philosophical and psychological sides of cognitive science that are most useful as a continual criticism of the normal practice of anthropology. The same applies to such disciplines as sociology or history. The point of the book is not to make anthropologists and these other

The negative side of the book

social scientists do different types of things to what they already do, in other words, to make them, as some would have it, into a kind of cognitive psychologist in the field. Rather, it is to make them add a new dimension of caution and awareness to the way they proceed with the tasks they are doing anyway.

The second reason for the cautionary side of the book is that examining critically the history of a discipline such as anthropology enables us to understand why and when certain misleading steers have occurred. As a result of such examination, we can reconsider and possibly free ourselves of directions which have swept us along but which, on reflection, we may realise have been misleading.

The third reason for the critical tone is that we must recognise that the study of cognition is in its infancy and that, as is typical of this stage in the development of a discipline, its greatest successes have consisted in casting doubt on folk wisdom; folk wisdom which is often the indirect product of long abandoned scientific theories. As a result, the cognitive sciences are more certain when telling us what things are not like, than when telling us how things are. This stance may be disappointing, but it is a familiar state of affairs; indeed, it is one in which anthropology often finds itself. After all, what most anthropologists are still most confident about, and most united in claiming, are negative propositions concerning the folk anthropological assumptions which surround us, whether these are found in the press, in everyday conversation, or elsewhere. On the basis of their expertise, anthropologists rightly feel justified in contradicting such commonplace propositions, and the very terms these use, as: 'people with simple technology make less use of abstract concepts', 'the reason for a belief in witchcraft is due to lack of scientific knowledge' or 'primitive people worship mother goddesses'. By contrast, anthropologists are much more tentative than non-anthropologists in offering explanations why certain people have made certain technological advances and others have not, whether the world is becoming more unified culturally, whether all people distinguish between body and mind, whether traditional cultures

Why anthropologists cannot avoid cognitive issues

are more ecologically minded, or why the ancient Jews forbade the eating of pork. This predominantly negative or tentative stance is not a shameful fact that anthropologists and other social scientists have to admit to; it merely shows that the advances in the subject have often consisted in invalidating erroneous folk assumptions and accepting that we know less than we thought we did. The same is true for cognition.

Thus, in the same way, and for the same reason, that anthropologists believe, given the doubts they have been able to cast on what many people think is obvious, it is not acceptable for other disciplines, or practitioners of activities such as politics or the media, to ignore anthropological questionings and blithely proceed on the basis of folk anthropological assumptions about such things as ‘a specifically African type of rationality’, or primitive ‘intuitive feelings for nature’, or on ‘the instinctive basis of the incest taboo’, or the ‘impending unification of all human cultures’. It is equally not acceptable for anthropologists to talk about cognition, whether implicitly or explicitly, and ignore cognitive findings, for example, by assuming that words and concepts are equivalent (see chapter 7), or that knowledge can be ‘embodied’ elsewhere than in the nervous system (see chapter 8), or that our understanding of time was something we obtain entirely from other people around us during early childhood and which can, therefore, vary absolutely from place to place (see chapter 5).

One effect of this book may therefore, in the end, be to make the reader feel that we know even less than we thought we did, that it is even more difficult to explain people’s actions than we previously believed, a state of affairs which may be, from a certain point of view, disappointing, but which should also be salutary and constructive.

The constructive side of the book

The more constructive side of the book will be found in parts of chapter 6 to 8. This should be seen as an attempt to understand the