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Turning Tides: Prospects for More Diversity in Cognitive Science

Andrea Bender,^{a,b} Sieghard Beller,^{a,b} Douglas L. Medin^c

^a*Department of Psychology, University of Freiburg*

^b*Center for Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld University*

^c*Department of Psychology, Northwestern University*

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Abstract

This conclusion of the debate on anthropology's role in cognitive science provides some clarifications and an overview of emergent themes. It also lists, as cases of good practice, some examples of productive cross-disciplinary collaboration that evince a forward momentum in the relationship between anthropology and the other cognitive sciences.

Keywords: Anthropology; Cognitive science; Culture; Universals and diversity; Interdisciplinarity

What an interesting and challenging set of commentaries! Although our intention was to be provocative, we did not begin to anticipate the range and creativity of the responses. Our introductory essay, examining the prospects for a rapprochement between anthropology and the other cognitive sciences (Beller, Bender, & Medin, 2012), started with a brief (and subjective) sketch on how the relationship between anthropology and cognitive science got into trouble (see also **Gatewood, Shweder**¹), went on to identify some of the main challenges, and ended with the suggestion that a happy reunion may be too much to be hoped for. A range of scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, both junior and senior, were invited to respond to this essay. Each commentary provides a uniquely valuable contribution to this debate in its own right and should stand—and be read—for itself. Instead of responding to each of them, we aim for some clarifications and focus on a few emergent themes.

Correspondence should be sent to Andrea Bender, Department of Psychology, University of Freiburg, Engelbergerstr. 41, Freiburg, Germany, D-79085. E-mail: bender@psychologie.uni-freiburg.de

1. Clarifications and reframing

1.1. What is “cognitive science” in the rapprochement between cognitive science and anthropology?

Our essay was ambiguous concerning cognitive science as a field versus cognitive science as represented by the membership, journals, and practice associated with the Cognitive Science Society. **Astuti and Bloch, Barrett, Stich, and Laurence**, and **Boster** note that our challenge question is trivial in that, by definition, anthropology is part of cognitive science, the inter-disciplinary study of *Homo sapiens*. **Rothe** identifies some of the institutional barriers to cognitive anthropologists participating in cognitive science and offers a number of promising suggestions for overcoming these barriers. The specific case of the Cognitive Science Society will be taken up shortly.

1.2. What is “anthropology” in the rapprochement between cognitive science and anthropology?

Although our intention was to include anthropology in the broadest sense, our criticisms focused on cognitive and cultural anthropology. **Levinson** and **Whitehouse and Cohen** as well as **Barrett et al.** remind readers that a broader sense of anthropology is what is needed in current research and theory.

1.3. Did cognitive psychology take over cognitive science (cf. Challenge 1b)?

Anyone attending recent meetings of the Cognitive Science Society might agree with this sentiment, but **Shweder** directly and **Levinson** indirectly offer the perspective that cognitive psychology has been “left holding the bag” while other disciplines have gone off to more fertile territory. On this view, the Cognitive Science Society may be internally healthy at the moment, but nonetheless on an evolutionary path leading to a dead end and, at most, a cognitive science of college students (a more optimistic view will be described in the last section).

1.4. Is the content process distinction a thing of the past (cf. Challenge 3a)?

Our essay assumed that a consensus had emerged endorsing the view that culture and context affect not just the content of thought but also cognitive processes themselves. **Stenning** describes his own efforts to study content and context to develop theories of reasoning, and he observes that much of our field fails to recognize the experimental situation as a social context. Related perspectives are offered by **Kitayama, Shweder**, and **Unsworth**.

2. Relation between anthropology and the rest of the cognitive sciences: Ongoing issues

2.1. What is the division of labor between anthropology and the other cognitive sciences (cf. Challenges 3 and 4)?

Most commentators (see especially **Fryberg**, **Gatewood**, **Kitayama**, **Le Guen**, and **Unsworth**) see anthropology as complementary to other disciplines and perhaps having a proprietary interest in ethnographic methods. As emphasized by **Astuti and Bloch**, **Barrett et al.**, and **Whitehouse and Cohen**, anthropology also brings important theoretical questions to the table—even though **Levinson** and **Whitehouse and Cohen** express doubts about whether the subfield of (English-speaking) cognitive anthropology, as currently constituted, is equipped to be a player. But the division of labor is an ongoing negotiation. Philosopher **Stich** helps himself to experiments (**Barrett et al.**), and anthropologists **Boster**, **Gatewood**, and **Le Guen** agree that psychology does not have a corner on doing experiments. Contrary to our claim in the introduction, most commentators argued—and some proved by way of successful collaborations—that it is both possible and even imperative to integrate the different approaches.

2.2. Can cultural anthropology and cultural psychology get along (cf. Challenge 3d)?

Some of the commentators are perhaps more eager to reply to other commentators than to our original essay, and one subplot is certainly potential tension between cultural anthropology and cultural psychology. **Shweder** may have originated the term *cultural psychology*, but he does not weigh in on this debate. **Fryberg** sees cultural anthropology as limited by its aversion to experiments, and **Rothe** attributes to cultural psychology a propensity to dichotomize the world's cultures and focus on a single dimension (e.g., individualism vs. collectivism). **Unsworth** adroitly sidesteps this issue but also enriches it by suggesting some provocative new lines of inquiry.

2.3. A science of what's universal or a science of variation (cf. Challenges 1c and 3b)?

Before you read any further, of course we understand that one can study both cultural universals and cultural variability. The issue, however, is how one frames research, because framings may shape the way research is conducted and interpreted (e.g., whether tasks are selected to minimize vs. explore cultural variation). It is one thing to chide psychologists for acting as if their findings with undergraduates are universal (as **Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan**, 2010, so aptly critique), it is quite another to commit to the view that the central goal of cognitive science should be to understand diversity, as **Levinson** does. **Barrett et al.** and **Whitehouse and Cohen** appear to fall more on the universalist side, but that likely is a cartoon version of their positions. Even if one wishes to focus on the *general* aspects of human cognition, though, one cannot do without cross-cultural research and the input of anthropology (cf. **Barrett et al.**, **Levinson**, and **Unsworth**).

3. Prospects: A forward momentum

In perhaps overstressing **Levinson's** point to some extent, we offer the speculation that diversity within the Cognitive Science Society is as vital to its prospering as is variation and diversity in humans to the success and survival of humankind. In this debate, we have heard senior and junior voices from anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, and psychology. In many ways, their views vary greatly, but they also converge on central goals and claims. The contributions particularly by anthropologists and the younger generation evince forward momentum that justifies an optimistic view.

The tide seems to turn toward more integration and joint projects. This includes, among others, the cooperation between the LSE Anthropology Department and the Jean Nicod Institute resulting in the Internet-based *International Cognition and Culture Institute* (<http://www.cognitionandculture.net/>), the work done at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen and in the *MINDLab* in Aarhus, the *AHRC Culture and the Mind Project* in Sheffield (cf. **Barrett et al.**), and a research group funded by the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) at Bielefeld University that aims at re-integrating anthropology into the cognitive sciences (for other collaborative projects, e.g., in Belfast or Oxford, see also **Astuti and Bloch**).

At the same time, the role of culture and cultural diversity is increasingly recognized in cognitive science as of prime relevance for our understanding of human cognition (cf. Gelfand & Diener, 2010; Medin et al., 2010; Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). Concerns about prevailing psychological methods are increasingly expressed, even within psychology itself (Arnett, 2008; Henrich et al., 2010; Medin, Bennis, & Chandler, 2010). The Cognitive Science Society has always provided a platform for a range of different perspectives and has exhibited great integrative power in the past. It appears willing to create space for critical debates. If it is also willing to take seriously the cultural dimension of cognition—together with the discipline essential for grasping this dimension—we can all profit and prosper.

Note

1. In the following, all names of commentators to this debate are printed bold-faced; publication year is omitted as self-evident (but included in the full references, which are provided in the reference list).

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