

Workshop 40

Identity and Alterity from the Cognitive and Evolutionary Perspective

Convenors:

Chris S. Knight, University of East London

Chris.Knight@uel.ac.uk

Martin Kanovsky, Comenius University, Bratislava

kanovsky@fphil.uniba.sk

Papers and discussions during this workshop should address two important themes: (1) How do humans of various cultures acquire, represent, operate and communicate relevant information about themselves and others, and how do their minds, together with the cultural input, contribute to this process? (Cognitive dimension); (2) How, why and under which conditions did these abilities evolve? (Evolutionary dimension). It goes without saying that we cannot possibly understand the construction of the personal and social identity without the proper understanding of the underlying cognitive and cultural processes of representing and creating the idea of the self and others, of the own social group and other social groups. Our hypothesis is that these processes are not coincidental, singular and always particular, but that they are constrained by the human cognitive abilities on the one hand, and by cultural limits on the other. To know more about this is of the utmost importance for the assessing of many anthropological problems. It is clear that the vast majority of the above mentioned cognitive abilities (if not all of them) did evolve as the adaptations on the problems faced by our ancestors in the past environment. Making it clear how it happened could shed light on the problem of their present performance which can be applied under very different cultural conditions. The evolution of language and of human social competence are blatant examples here and they will be discussed extensively.

The Role of Ritual in the Evolution of Social Cognition: Some General Remarks

Chris S. Knight, University of East London

Chris.Knight@uel.ac.uk

Martin Kanovsky, Comenius University, Bratislava

Kanovsky@fphil.uniba.sk

In explaining the construction of personal and social identity, one requirement is to understand the underlying cognitive and cultural processes through which representations of self versus other or 'us' versus 'them' are constructed. Contributors to this symposium will examine the differential contributions of (a) innate cognitive constraints and (b) culturally variable ritual action in shaping these representations.

Recurrence of Symbolic Representations

Lynda D. McNeil, University of Colorado, Boulder
Lynda.McNeil@colorado.edu

My presentation concerns cognitive causes for the recurrence of symbolic representations in Siberian Evenk (Tungusic) and North Amerindian Ute (Numic) spring revival rites. I focus on the issue of the recurrence of symbolic representations in these different cultural environments. The solution to challenges in marginal environments was in large part social. One such strategy, periodic aggregations to enact spring revival rites, served several purposes: to facilitate efforts in food-sharing during late winter resource scarcity, exogamous mate-finding, and interclan alliance forming. While advantageous, adaptive strategies alone would not have guaranteed cultural survival. The success of hunter-gatherer social networks depended upon developing a complex of symbolic strategies, including ritual, myth, and rock art, that could be preserved and transmitted by the larger community intergenerationally. In this way, a complex of symbolic representations functioned to maintain social networks crucial to reproductive and somatic success, thereby increasing the probability of both cultural and individual survival.

Sociality, Cognition and Experience. Phylogeny and Ontogeny in a Comprehensive Theory of ‘Otherness’

Eugenia Ramirez-Goicoechea, University of Cambridge
eramirez@fsf.uned.es

The aim of this paper is to discuss the phylo-ontogenetic dimensions of ‘otherness’ as a multidimensional category for conceptualising others. Social ontologies are part and parcel of cognitive and social practices. My paper concentrates on the following issues: ‘Otherness’ and alterity mean practicing social distance and classifying people as different to oneself and one own group. Its phylogeny can be traced well back into animal ethology in ways of classifying, interacting, and monitoring predators, symbiotic partners and conspecifics in the organising of one’s own space and environment. As a category of and for experience, ‘Otherness’ has become increasingly complex during evolutionary history, related to other evolutionary processes and capacities. Propositional accounts and formal discourse as produced in narrativity, institutions and in public social practices, are ways of objectifying and structuring difference and identity through routinisation, ritualisation, and externalisation of memory linked with specific political and representational systems.

Stereotypes, Generalisations and Gender: The Case of Multicultural Youngsters in Rudenga, Oslo

Viggo Vestel, NOVA - Norwegian Social Research
Viggo.Vestel@nova.no

The paper seeks to analyse the phenomenology of stereotyping concerning the Other, as reflected in practices related to gender in

a multicultural context. Anchored in the semiotic tradition based on the theories of Charles Peirce, the phenomenon of stereotyping is seen as reflecting provisional interpretative conclusions based on various types of experience, within a context where Western liberalism and, for example, some Muslim families' demand for chastity are contrasting each other. As interpretative conclusions stereotypes may form habits, understood as dispositions to react to future events in certain ways, thus matching Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Understood within such a framework, stereotyping seems to activate basic cognitive mechanisms in the shape of association by iconicity and by indexicality, that both comprise core elements in what we may term the logics of practice. The relationship between stereotypes and the urge to revise them on the basis of new experience – including face-to-face relationships – are discussed.

The Inconsistencies of Trusting. Classification Models, Judgements and Interpersonal Relations in a Postsocialist Slovakian Village

Davide Torsello, Università degli Studi di Lecce

dtorsello@yahoo.it

The paper challenges one of the most widely accepted paradigms in the social sciences, the importance of trust for achieving high levels of collective actions, democracy and economic progress. The data collected through fieldwork in a Slovakian village suggests that trusting is not necessarily to be seen as a means for maintaining social order, because of the evident discrepancy between what people say and do. This is expressed in the need, felt by members of the community, to alternate trust with mistrust in order to keep open venues of social interaction and economic transactions when the instability of present events make trusting a risky option. Inconsistency in villagers' actions and opinions about the social world is therefore a strategic way to maintain control of the present. The process of alternating trust and mistrust is a cognitive one, which is underpinned by precise methods of classifying social relations. The paper demonstrates that these classifications are time-bounded, depending on the actors' interpretation of their history. On the other hand, because in the village relations between people and institutions are strongly characterised by face-to-face human interaction, in the case of trust towards institutions inconsistency is, similarly, a product of people's judgements and expectations.

Reward and Punishment in the Notions of Postmortal Life

Helena Tuzinska, Comenius University, Bratislava

helena.tuzinska@fphil.uniba.sk

The paper discusses the interrelatedness of the nature of specific religious beliefs and the level of social commitment. The concepts of purity and pollution are examined by the means of ethnographic evidence from a Slovak village. Not surprisingly,

there is a discrepancy between official Christian dogmas and folk ideology of Christians. The author explores how are the notions of postmortal life linked with the politics of maintaining the social structure. Why there is a group of those who believe in deserving reward and punishment in afterlife and a group of those who disregard thinking in terms of justice? Why those who wish solidarity for all make their story trustworthy by their own experience? These challenging questions are explained in the light of the Victor Turner's and Pierre Bourdieu's insights. The particular social competences are addressed on the example of acquisition, representation and communication of relevant religious beliefs.