

## Critical neuroscience and anthropological engagement

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By

This past week I attended the Critical Neuroscience workshop held here at McGill. Daniel Lende – who came up for the workshop – has written about it at [Neuroanthropology](#). In particular, he's posted a very nice summary he gave on the final day of the event on different approaches to studying and thinking about the ["cultural brain."](#)

The event was organized by [Neuroscience in Context](#), a group of philosophers, social scientists and neuroscientists—most of them based in Germany. Suparna Choudhury, a postdoc in Social and Transcultural Psychiatry here at McGill, did a great job of putting together a very productive workshop.

As I understand it, the general idea of [critical neuroscience](#) is to focus on two broad areas of work: 1) to investigate the culture of neuroscience—from the production of knowledge in the lab to its circulation out in the rest of the world; and 2) to study how the wide range of phenomena that get called "culture" are encoded in the brain. These two projects—you could call them "the brain in culture" and "culture in the brain"—are meant to be linked. The first—which draws on a lot of work already being carried out in anthropology, sociology and STS—is partly a critique of neuroscience research as it is currently carried out, partly a self-reflexive attempt to situate neuroscience knowledge epistemologically. The idea behind the second approach is to use theoretically sophisticated concepts from the social sciences to design neuroscience experiments which will hopefully tell us something about "culture in the brain." Bringing these two projects together is what could potentially separate critical neuroscience from current work in STS or social neuroscience.

My description is probably a caricature of what Suparna and her colleagues have in mind, but at the moment I just want to make one point and use critical neuroscience as an example. I think that one of the most intriguing and promising aspects of this project is that it attempts to bring ideas from the social and biological sciences—and specifically neurobiology—into serious engagement. Interestingly, it seems that this may be part of a broader trend of such emerging interdisciplinary conversations or attempts at conversation.

While we might expect these kinds of links to be made by cultural psychiatrists, anthropologists who frame their work as biocultural or who have been trained in a four-field oriented anthropology, what I find more intriguing is the conversations taking place between anthropologists and sociologists of science and neuroscientists. In addition to the critical neuroscience effort, Nikolas Rose's BIOS center has been trying to foster such engagements. For instance, under the aegis of the European Neuroscience and Society Network, they've organized a NeuroSchool workshop which is meant to be an interdisciplinary encounter in which participants learn about the brain sciences.

Obviously both critical neuroscience and the BIOS group want to question any easy claims to scientific authority made by scientists; they both frame themselves as "critical" in one way or another. However, I would argue that their stance is much more open to engagement and perhaps somewhat less skeptical of scientific claims than was the case with most STS scholars in the 80s and 90s.

One question that intrigues me is why this interest in engagement is happening now. My initial hunch is that it has to do with a number of developments in neuroscience, anthropology and academia at large:

- 1) In academia: a general shift away from the 1990s rhetoric of the "science wars";
- 2) In neuroscience: The increasing prominence of ideas of:
  - a. The brain as [plastic](#) rather than static and fixed;
  - b. and of [social relationships](#) and interactions with others as central to human evolution, development and brain function.
  - c. Not only do these ideas from neuroscience postulate that social relationships and culture shape brain function—thus seeming to confirm some central assumptions made by social scientists—neuroscience as a discipline also doesn't come with the same historical baggage as genetics, for instance.
- 3) In anthropology:
  - a. The relative prominence of anthro of science since the late 90s, and its increasing role in shaping questions central to sociocultural anthropology in general;
  - b. The shift (taken by some) to framing the ethnographic encounter as a partnership or [collaboration](#) rather than some form of observation, however participatory.

In any case, these are just a few thoughts. Perhaps I'm over-generalizing and seeing more activity in this direction than there actually is?

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