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Reworking the Cognitive Bias – a Brainstorm

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Can we change the way that we think about thinking? Can we rework our thoughts about thought? If so, what would reworking thought open up, analytically and ethnographically? Those were the provocations we started with, [an invitation](#) to draw together early career researchers working on diverse ways of conceptualizing thinking and not-thinking, cognizing and not-cognizing.

Even asking these questions raises problems: the language we use to talk about thinking presumes thinking as a cognitive act, largely confined to the inner workings of our minds, wherever they may be located (Driessen 2018; Luhrmann 2000; Martin 2013; Mol 2008; Pols 2005). Muddling epistemology and ontology, any discussion of thinking and cognition necessarily begs questions about how we know what we know and how ‘we’ are constituted by this knowing (Brives et al. 2016; Reyes Foster 2016; Strathern 2011).

It is into this potential morass that we offer a series of ethnographic essays focused on reworking conceptions of cognition. Our use of “reworking” might be like metalworking, wherein a blacksmith reheats metal to reshape it; it might also be like a gardener, amending soil with last year’s compost to ensure a more bountiful harvest this year. Whatever the metaphor, reworking relies on labor to bring something into the world, even if it is a wrinkle of what it was previously.

Positioned within medical anthropology and science and technology studies, one of the underlying concerns of this series is how normative forms of thinking about thinking have naturalized cognition as the foundation for appropriate expression of the self and “culture,” thereby drawing limits around persons and their organizations and interactions. Our contributors point to how cognition holds too strong of a grip on personhood, shaping everything from personality categories, to clinical diagnoses and treatments, to ideas of ability and disability, to ethnographic orientations to knowledge.

The desire to rework a bias toward the cognitive in the series of posts that follows echoes sentiments articulated by activists since the 1990s in their use of “neurotypical” and “neurodivergent,” which were based on calls

for inclusive forms of “neurodiversity” (Hart 2014; Silverman 2013). These efforts were attempts to widen the scope of what might be considered desirable human variation (see also Hartblay 2020; McKearney 2018; Zoanni 2019). Following their lead, could we, as anthropologists and ethnographers find ways to situate nonnormative forms of cognition and thought – or noncognition and nonthought – that help to unsettle normative assumptions about the human? That question serves as an experimental basis for many of the ethnographic projects that this series highlights.

Ethnographic engagements with “the cognitive” show how discourses of cognition shape action across actors and institutions. There is a tautological problem here, one that makes tracking cognition like trapping an octopus: as an object, it’s always slipping out of one’s grasp (Bateson 1988; Haraway 2016). Our trick has been to embrace that slipperiness (see also Law & Lien 2012). Rather than the inchoate, prediscursive capacity that underpins attempts to capture “affect” (Rutherford 2016; Sedgwick 2003; Stewart 2007), the essays in this series demonstrate connectivity: connectivity between laboratory and clinical practice, activism and political organizing, processes of subjectivity, and the everyday life of non-normative ways of being in the world.

An often-unacknowledged bias toward biomedical and scientific framings of cognition lies at the heart of ethnography, which the contributors to this series address in implicit and explicit ways. That anthropologists have relied on individuals and their abilities to express themselves through language, ritual, the production and circulation of material culture, and everyday practice is predicated on the assumption that somewhere, somehow individuals are transparent to themselves and are able to make that transparency plain to others. This assumption is why anthropologists tend to interview people, why they observe their daily practices, and why they hold that “culture” is reflected in everything from holidays to foodways, medical practices to educational institutions, kinship to laboratory research. A cluster of cognition-based terms frames conventional ethnographic practice which has sought to capture beliefs, ideas, knowledges, understanding, recognition, sight, viewpoints, and perspectives.

But these cognitive assumptions might not bear out, particularly when challenged with so-called “pathological” (read: nonnormative, nonwhite, noncismale; Bell 2012) forms of thinking. What if, rather than assume cognition as the basis of ethnography, we took cognition as worthy of analysis? That question lies implicit in the ethnographic approaches our contributors pursued as they interrogated the assumptions made about cognition on the part of clinicians, researchers, patients, and anthropologists. The series asks how we might recalibrate ethnographic senses to pay more attention to the noise of the noncognitive rather than

apparent signals baked into speech, gesture, ritual, and other seemingly deliberate forms of “culture.”

At stake here might be the old saw of demonstrating human variation, but, more importantly, it might also be exposing the discrimination — in and out of anthropology — that favors and produces certain kinds of personhood while dismissing others (Boisseron 2018; Chen 2018; Glabau 2016; Keeney Parks 2018). At its worst, this bias toward normative cognition leads ethnographers to focus only on persons who can make themselves known in conventionally legible ways, ways that seemingly translate their inner worlds into communicable action, and thereby communicate their “culture” into expressive forms too (de la Cadena 2015; Rozental 2016). When buttressed by sexism, racism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination, this prejudice toward particular kinds of cognition and its expression has meant that particular kinds of people are either bad informants or only worth pursuing because they were curious — in the racist history of the term — precisely because of their aberrant or irrational ways of thinking (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1976; Lindenbaum 1979; see Blackhawk and Lorado Wilner 2018; Munyikwa 2014).

The experiments with cognition and thinking that we’ve gathered together in this series take a different approach and represent a different kind of engagement with human and cultural diversity. What if, they ask, we invert expectations for thought and use that as the basis for conceptualizing a diverse set of human experiences that might otherwise be conceptualized as irrational, aberrant, or pathological? Dwelling in the noncognitive and nonthinking, the ethnographic pieces collected in this series help to show what is at stake in eliding cognition as a variable and more-than-human process.

In the opening essay for this series, [Beth Semel](#) unpacks how the field of computational psychiatry seeks to bypass culture-laden techniques for diagnosing mental illness through the use of (ostensibly pre-semiotic) psychiatric vocal biomarkers. She shows how methods that claim to be free from human bias function to propagate the voices of those with the power to code.

Chelsey Carter is concerned with how legacies of scientific racism make certain populations visible at the expense of others. Her essay illustrates how US racism prevents practitioners from diagnosing Black people in St. Louis with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), raising questions about how bias is coded into systems of medical education.

Emily Rogers describes the embodied state of thinking experienced by New Yorkers with chronic fatigue syndrome who must navigate the world with exhausted bodies and foggy minds. Their experiences, radically

multiplied by covid-19 today, defy conventional illness classifications and demand a conceptual reworking of activism, agency, and politics.

Angela Filipe's essay positions attention — held by many scientists and clinicians as the “mother of all cognitive functions” — as a moral value. Drawing on fieldwork in a pediatric lab in Portugal, she shows how ADHD emerges from care practices, such that the diagnosis is not only a response to the biological state of a brain but to modes of clinical relations.

Natassia Brenman and **Richard Milne** consider how thresholds for intervention are drawn and redrawn in experimental Alzheimer drug trials. They show “readiness” to be an often-political outcome of moving parts and changing scientific thresholds rather than primarily an individualized feeling.

Leonie Mol interrogates individualized notions of self in London-based eating disorder treatment philosophies. She points to flaws in the “wild/controlled” binaries that clinicians use to characterize the bulimic personality; it is not the bulimic who has failed, but the systems of description that structure their care.

Shruti Vaidya asks how care workers respond to patients' sexual desires in a psychiatric asylum in India while **Luke Kernan** raises a challenge about the limits of articulation and psychosis within arts-based workshops in Victoria. Their contributions to the series point to the peril of assuming communication must always take the form of speech, opening up spaces for anthropology to extend beyond its conventionally “graphic” form.

Together the essays articulate new ways of approaching methods, expert knowledge production, and subjectivity. Only by reworking the cognitive can we unsettle the prejudices at the heart of the anthropological project.

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