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“Our experience shows how important it is to choose appropriate methods and paradigms when doing cross-cultural research.” This quote from von Poser and Ubl (date missing:p. 320) nicely sums up Theory of Mind in the Pacific, an edited volume addressing the interaction of culture and theory of mind (ToM). Theory of mind is the ability to understand others’ behavior in terms of mental states and is widely thought to be a core human competency (e.g., Callaghan et al., 2005), but its cultural dimensions remain underexplored outside Western populations.

This volume presents five distinct research projects exploring children’s mental-state understanding in Pacific Islands cultures—Yap and Fais (Oberle & Resch); Tonga (Tietz & Völkel); Samoa (Meyer & Riese); Yupno (Hölzel & Keck); and Bosmun (von Poser & Ubl). The projects, introduction, and summary chapters are, without exception, collaborative efforts between psychologists and anthropologists. Their results contribute important empirical and ethnographic insights to the ToM literature, and point to the need for alternative perspectives on social cognition.

The very idea of psychologists and anthropologists working together seems unlikely on many grounds. Here is a simulated but typical description of the study population for a Western ToM study: “Participants were 120 preschool-age children (Mean age = 3 years, 11 months), sixty 3-year-olds (M = 3;8; 34 boys and 28 girls) and sixty 4-year-olds (M = 4;5; 17 boys and 28 girls). Children were recruited by telephoning parents included in a database derived from birth announcements. The sample was predominantly White, reflecting the demographics of the community from which it was drawn.” Such descriptions stand in stark contrast to those found in most anthropological studies. Each of the five empirical chapters in this book is an exemplary counter-example to the kind of skimpishness typical in psychology descriptions of study population background, selection, and recruitment.

Meanwhile, psychologists are most happy with experimental control and rigor, so the idea of adapting methods and procedures to local cultural circumstances would probably make many of them uncomfortable. Anthropologists, in turn, may worry that no matter how much care goes into cultural adaptation and translation, they still may be guilty of what Price (1967) called “imposed etic” research practices.

Nonetheless, five cross-disciplinary dyads did work together very effectively in Pacific Islands cultural communities that display a striking range of social
structures, attitudes about the opacity of others’ minds, and cultural practices. Researchers drew on their joint anthropological and psychological expertise to adapt standard false-belief tasks to each study community (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). These tasks are the core method in ToM research used to assess the understanding that people’s mental representations can diverge from reality, or in other words, that their beliefs can be false. In one such task, the child observes a character putting an object inside one of (at least) two containers. While the character is away, the object is moved to another container. At test, children are asked to predict where the ignorant character will look for their object. If the child correctly answers that the character will look in the first container, not knowing that the object has been moved to the second container, this is taken as evidence for false-belief understanding—a hallmark of ToM development. These tasks were adapted in almost every imaginable way for use with Pacific Islands children, ranging from culturally appropriate stimuli (e.g., betel nuts, soap) to interview location (e.g., public or private settings) and structure (e.g., whether the child is asked to trick another child or an experimenter).

The critical question was whether children in these diverse Pacific Islands communities would exhibit a transition in ToM understanding between the ages of three to five years, as do children in Western societies. Had the results in each case matched those obtained in the West, this would seem to represent evidence of a universal developmental phenomenon that would be nothing short of astonishing.

But of course, that is not what happened. Although Oberle and Resch find the classic Western pattern of 5-year olds “succeeding” at the false-belief task and 3-year olds “failing” among Micronesian Yapese and Fais children, the other four teams report much less predictable patterns of success, sometimes with 5-year olds performing above chance, sometimes not, and sometimes there is not even a reliable age effect.

Interpreting their results, the authors are careful to stress that these findings derive from standard Western tasks that, despite ethnographically informed adaptations, still pose challenges to cultural translation. For instance, although known answer probes from parents are common in Western middle-class families (“What does the cow say?” “Moo!” “Right!”), they may be rare in other cultures and the context of an adult asking young children questions may evoke nervousness, shyness, and confusion. These many performance factors may mask underlying competence. The five sets of researcher-authors do a fascinating and effective job of describing methodological considerations, situational factors and the like that might facilitate or undermine successful performance on the false belief tasks. Psychologists tend to assume that experimenters are invisible and irrelevant; these analyses are compelling evidence that this assumption cannot stand up to questioning.

So effective are these analyses that they might seem to work to undermine the entire project. The cynical view would be something like the following: “Well, either these scholars produce the classic pattern of 5-year old success and 3-year old failure, supporting universal theory of mind development, or they don’t observe it
and dismiss the significance of the findings by appealing to performance factors. They can't lose (or win)."

But one could just as easily argue that an important lesson from these studies is that the competence-performance distinction is itself too convenient. Factors inherent to Western psychological methods—such as individual interrogation in a private setting—are themselves cultural phenomena. Adapting methods to new cultural settings may not so much “correct for bias” as reveal cultural practices germane to social cognition. In this sense, the methodological insights from these Pacific Island studies double as a theoretical commentary on culture as a system of interdependent variables that both create and reflect social cognitive competencies.

They also confirm the axiom that method is theory. The ethnographic introductions to each Micronesian community raise questions concerning the relevance of mental-state attribution to other individuals in cultures where personhood is profoundly socially structured. Here people seem to focus more on observable behaviors and social relationships than private mentation. If mental-state understanding is indeed a core cognitive skill, these research projects successfully reposition it as one factor among many. Yet given their focus on individual mental states, false-belief tasks do not seem capable of revealing these forms of cultural variation. It is now important to consider alternative tasks focused on relational dimensions of social cognition. These researchers argue that ethnographic expertise is critical to designing research methods—and they could equally argue for its key role in (re)shaping research questions themselves.

The overall success of these projects may depend on the next steps taken. The present volume is a bold and successful first step, one that is rich in possibility for new directions. For example, the ethnographic descriptions note that children’s games are often important and a closer examination of them may uncover clear examples where instilling false belief in other players is desirable. Similarly, the study of children’s lying seems relevant to ToM. Even in the West the near monopoly of just a few paradigms for assessing ToM is being undermined by, for example, studies of false beliefs in infancy (Onishi & Baillargeon, 2005). It is also important to ask whether 3-year-olds’ ToM can be analyzed without assuming a deficit model—presumably 3-year-olds are trying to be successful 3-year-olds and not necessarily waiting to be 5-year-olds when their false belief insight will arrive.

Perhaps the best way to summarize this effort is to quote from the concluding chapter: “The cooperation of anthropology and psychology is not the division of the object of research but the joint developing—at best together in the field as presented in this volume—of a deep understanding of phenomena which occur in cross-cultural contexts. This kind of research takes its time, and it may be strenuous, but it pays off in the end.” (Wassman & Funke, p. 250). We agree. Here, the payoff is an engaging foray into culturally diverse theories of mind that will make excellent reading for students and scholars of cognitive and developmental psychology and
anthropology, as well as anyone interested in the methodological challenges and insights of comparative work.

References Cited:


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