

EVOLUTIONARY ANTHROPOLOGY SOCIETY

EAS and Interdisciplinary Collaborations

Adam Howell Boyette

The Culture and the Mind Project

Evolutionary anthropology is a diverse branch of the field, but many EAS members share a devotion to fieldwork and the use of rigorous, quantitative methods in their efforts to understand human behavior in context. These qualities lend themselves well to collaborative research into questions of cross-cultural variability and universality of interest to researchers outside of anthropology, and have led to the participation by EAS members in a number of large-scale inter-disciplinary projects over the years. One recent example of such fruitful collaboration is the Culture and the Mind project, led by Stephen Laurence of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield.

The Culture and the Mind project ([C+M](#)), funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council is a large-scale, and cross-cultural investigation of an array of subjects of interest to psychologists, philosophers, cognitive scientists and anthropologists, including development of theory of mind, folk epistemology, pedagogy, naïve mind/body dualism, prosociality, the relation between intentions and morality, norms of morality and punishment, material culture ownership, prestige goods, and functional fixedness in artifact use.

No fewer than fourteen members of EAS have been involved in the project at some level throughout its four-year history, in project design, data collection in the field, or both. The total number of participants is considerably larger. Laurence cites an earlier project he directed, the Innateness and the Structure of the Mind project, as a major influence on C+M. Participants in that earlier project impressed on him the need for collaboration with anthropologists. He notes, "for many questions regarding key aspects of human cognition, we currently have more by way of comparable quantitative data on other species in relation to humans than we have on how humans in diverse cultural groups compare. Clearly, there is a real need for such data, and seeking it out has been the cornerstone idea of the project from the start." He also cites Joseph Henrich's (U British Columbia) project on the Foundations of Human Sociality as a key impetus, and as an inspiration for the feasibility of such a large-scale project. A number of current and past EAS members were also key contributors to that landmark cross-cultural study of human cooperation.

Close collaboration with anthropologists with extensive field experience was key to the development of methods for the Cultural and Mind project, which by design are both comparable across sites and ethnographically grounded, involving innovative, locally-informed experimental paradigms and vignette-based questionnaires. According to Laurence, the greatest methodological challenges were in accommodating the diversity of cultures involved in the project:

"The project has run experiments at a total of nineteen field sites, working with traditional societies in rural settings all around the world. In the vast majority of cases, the field sites involved small-scale societies, but the cultures ranged from hunter-gatherer societies, to slash and burn horticultural societies, to fishing communities, to nomadic herding populations, and occupied a vast range of different ecological niches."

H Clark Barrett (UC Los Angeles), the C+M anthropology coordinator and EAS member, recounts that additional challenges stemmed from the diversity of perspectives among the researchers involved, for example in seeking consensus on how to implement experimental protocols across cultures. For example, in designing the project on the role of intentions in judgments of moral violations, the anthropologists agreed food taboos would be important to examine since people may find eating forbidden food morally wrong independent of the knowledge or intentions of the person who had broken the taboo. However, they also agreed on the culturally contextual nature of moral norms. Barrett notes:

“...every culture has foods that are not acceptable to eat, but because of the cross-cultural variation in how this is framed, it was difficult to find foods in each culture that would allow interpretation of the results to be comparable across sites. The resulting conversations were an interesting exercise in the micro-sociology of science.”

Views of culture and expectations as to its influence on psychological variation also varied among the project's members, leading to healthy theoretical debates within the project, according to Laurence. In regards to culture, Barrett says the only a priori hypothesis is that the participants in the research are humans who have grown up in a range of diverse cultures, including many that are typically underrepresented in psychological studies of the mind—non-Western, non-industrialized cultures. He observes: “This range of cultures gives us the opportunity to test hypotheses about human psychological universals, as well as human psychological variation, in an unprecedented way.”

Despite any challenges, C+M has already seen the publication of what will likely be a series of high-impact papers on the interaction of culture with the evolved human mind. The first, on early theory of mind development, was published in January's *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*. However, much of the analysis lies ahead. While Barrett does not want to spoil preliminary results before publication, he thinks, “it's safe to say that the project will, in some cases, provide new evidence in favor of existing theories of human psychology, and in other cases, may help to overturn some previously popular theories.”

Laurence shares high hopes that the project will contribute to our understanding of culture, cognition, and the mind across the range of domains tackled by the project. However, beyond the actual experimental results, he hopes, “the project will serve as inspiration to others to undertake similar cross-cultural studies that deliver comparable quantitative data while at the same time being ethnographically informed.”

Adam Howell Boyette is the EAS Section News contributing editor. He conducts research on childhood and human adaptation in the southwestern Central African Republic. He is interested in how social learning and child development relate to cultural transmission. He is currently a PhD candidate at Washington State University, Vancouver.

 [Like](#)  1   

This entry was posted in [April, Section News](#) and tagged [Evolutionary Anthropology Society](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). [Post a comment](#) or leave a [trackback](#): [Trackback URL](#).