Cultural inheritance of mentalizing

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Abstract

Session: Cultural Learning and Cultural Evolution (Kim Sterelny, Matteo Mameli & Cecilia Heyes) Even those who emphasize the power of cultural evolution typically assume that 'cultural learning', the cognitive mechanisms underwriting cultural evolution, are genetically inherited. In contrast, I'll argue that it is not just the grist but also the mills that are cultural in origin; humans learn from others not just facts about the world and skills for dealing with it (grist), but also the cognitive processes that make 'fact inheritance' possible (mills). Literacy is a paradigmatic example of the cultural inheritance of cultural learning. Previously I have argued that social learning, imitation, and mirror neurons provide further examples. In this paper, I focus on mentalizing (aka 'theory of mind', 'folk psychology' and 'mindreading'). First, to clear the ground, I'll examine experimental work that has recently re-invigorated the nativist view of mentalizing. This work seems to show that infants and adults automatically represent what others see, intend and believe; that they engage in 'implicit mentalizing'. I'll argue that these results are due to 'sub-mentalizing' - domain-general cognitive processes that can simulate mentalizing in social contexts. In the second part of the paper, I'll suggest that learning to mentalize is a lot like learning to read. Both acquisition processes are typically guided by expert instruction, and involve the reconfiguration of cognitive parts into a new system. In the case of reading, the crucial parts include generic object recognition processes, attentional routines, and grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules. In the case of mindreading, they include generic inference processes, attentional routines, and behaviour rules.

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