Intentionality in Human Evolution, Cognition and Behavior

Anthropology 220
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Winter Quarter, 2008
Tuesday 2-5, Haines Hall Room 350

Catalog listing

CURR PROB-BIOL ANTH
ANTHRO 220 - SEM 1
511-083-200
T 2:00 PM-4:50 PM
HAINES 350

Course overview

A growing body of literature suggests that much of human social life involves making inferences, either implicitly or explicitly, about the intentions of others. This is particularly intriguing because predicting and understanding behavior based on mental states, as opposed to purely “behaviorist” inference based only on observable cues, is thought to confer substantial predictive advantages. However, while some forms or precursors of intentional inference have been observed in taxa ranging from birds to social carnivores to non-human primates, humans seem to use intentional inference to a degree and scope not seen in other species. The questions of how and why intentional inference evolved in humans, and what is the nature of the underlying adaptations, are key evolutionary questions that have the potential to shed light on much about human nature.

In this class we will survey the state of the art of the literature on intentionality in human (and non-human) evolution, cognition and behavior. We will begin by examining the theoretical literature on intentionality and “theory of mind” (also known as mindreading, folk psychology, and intentional inference). We will ask how the difference between intentional and non-intentional causation is treated in the psychological and philosophical literatures, and what advantages there are thought to be of treating other organisms as if they have intentions. We will
consider the diverse array of theories of the cognitive capacities underlying intentional inference, including, for example, “simulation” theories and “theory theories.”

Then we will turn to the empirical literature to examine what is known about the phylogeny and ontogeny of mindreading skills. What is the phylogenetic distribution of these skills in primates, social carnivores, birds, and other animals? How do mindreading abilities develop? What factors influence their developmental trajectory within and across cultures?

Finally, we will ask how mindreading is deployed in actual behavior, and how it might interact with other psychological capacities. We will examine how intentionality plays a role in diverse behavioral contexts including social learning, language acquisition, imitation, communication, cooperation and coordination. We will ask what these literatures tell us both about the design of mindreading mechanisms and what the data tell us about how mindreading abilities evolved, what the selective advantages might have been in particular contexts, and why they seem particularly well-elaborated in humans.

After surveying the scope of the current literature we will consider how current models of intentional psychology might be improved, and what are promising directions for future research.

Format

The course will consist of weekly meetings in which the week’s readings will be discussed. Readings will be posted as PDFs online on the password-protected course website. Students are expected to complete each week’s readings before that week’s discussion. Each week, one student will serve as discussant, and will prepare a brief presentation and discussion questions on that week’s material.

Grading

Grading will be based on class participation (30%), each students’ presentation and performance as discussant (20%), and a final essay paper on a topic of the student’s choice to be agreed upon with the instructor (50%). Grading will be letter basis unless otherwise arranged with the instructor.

Readings

To be announced. Readings will be posted online as PDFs.