Social Cognition, Culture and the Self

Albert Newen (albert.newen@rub.de)
Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Institut für Philosophie II
Gary Bente (bente@uni-koeln.de)
Universität Köln, Dept. of Psychology
Shinobu Kitayama
University of Michigan, Dept. of Psychology
Shihui Han
Peking University, Dept. of Psychology
Kai Vogeley
Clinic of Psychiatry, Universität Köln

Abstract

The processing of social information belongs to the most complex cognitive capacities of humans, enabling us to live together in social communities. The symposium will focus on the everyday competence to form social impressions and understand others. This capability includes 1. the understanding of oneself on the basis of an explicit self-construal, 2. the understanding of others by processing their mental and bodily characteristics and states 3. the understanding of social encounters by adequately interpreting actions, communicative signals and social roles. Human communication is essentially embedded in *cultural contexts* and is shaped by it; at the same time it constitutes the cultural background shared by the interactants. The main goal of this symposium is to investigate the role of cognitive and cultural factors influencing self-construal, person perception and understanding of others. Thus we deal with the following leading questions: How do we understand other human beings, what are the best theoretical perspectives, what can we learn from cognitive psychology and neurosciences and what is the role of culture in the process of understanding oneself and others? In the recent development of social cognition it has become clear that we not only have to account for the observational stance towards other people but that we also have to systematically consider situations of online interaction with other human beings (2nd person perspective). The main aim of the symposium is to present the state of the art of some key topics of social and cultural cognition from the perspectives of philosophy of mind, cross-cultural psychology and social-cognitive neuroscience as well as to outline some paradigmatic lines for future research.

Albert Newen: The Place of Culture and Self in Theories of Social Understanding

How do we make sense of the behaviour of other people? Theory-Theory and Simulation Theory both only account for an observational understanding of others. This motivated the development of the interaction theory (S. Gallagher/D. Hutto). I will shortly outline a main deficit of the latter before I develop an alternative approach: the *Person Model Theory*. Person models are the basis for our ability to register and evaluate behaviour. I argue that there are two kinds of person models we rely on, *nonconceptual person schemata* and *conceptual person images* (and both kinds are developed for groups and for individuals). This theoretical approach accounts for two levels of understanding: intuitive and inferential understanding. Furthermore, it has the advantage to account for the difference of understanding very familiar persons (relying on person models of individuals), on the one hand, and complete strangers (reyling on person model for groups and thus understanding a person by his social role as a student), on the other. The person model theory accounts for modelling myself by presupposing self-models in addition to models of others. The theory allows to spell out the interaction of relying on modelling oneself and others and finally it explicitly accounts for the role of culture as shaping the mind. (s. Newen/Schlicht 2009; de Bruin/Newen 2011).

Gary Bente & T. Dratsch: The Role of Tacit Cues and Social Order in Observing Others. Analyzing Nonverbal Behaviour and Impression Formation across Cultures

There is ample evidence that visual cues including physical appearance and nonverbal behaviour play a crucial role in person perception and impression formation. A short look at a face can lead to attributions of trustworthiness, a body posture or movement can be perceived as dominant and a smile can lead to warm feelings of connectedness. Humans are highly sensitive to nonverbal signals and our responses are fast and mostly beyond awareness and conscious control. There is also evidence supporting the notion that culture plays a prominent role in molding our nonverbal behaviors. In a series of studies we investigated the role of culture in the processing of nonverbal cues in conflict laden interactions, collaborative tasks as well as economic games focusing on the dimensions of liking, power/control and trust. The studies involving German, American, Chinese and Arab participants clearly point to cultural specificities indicating that distinct cultural values

as described for Westerners and Easterners are also implemented on the micro-level of social interactions.(see Bente et al. 2008, 2010; Goergescu et al. in press)

Shinobu Kitayama: Error-Related Brain Activity Reveals Self-Centric Motivation

To secure the interest of the personal self (versus social others) is considered a fundamental human motive, but the nature of the motivation to secure self-interest is not well understood. To address this issue, we assessed electrocortical responses of European Americans and Asians as they performed a flanker task while instructed to earn as many reward points as possible either for the self or for their same-sex friend. For European Americans, error-related negativity (ERN) —an event-related-potential component contingent on error responses—was significantly greater in the self condition than in the friend condition. Moreover, post-error slowing—an index of cognitive control to reduce errors—was observed in the self condition but not in the friend condition. Neither of these self-centric effects was observed among Asians, consistent with prior cross-cultural behavioral evidence. Interdependent self-construal mediated the effect of culture on the ERN self-centric effect. Our findings provide the first evidence for a neural correlate of self-centric motivation, which becomes more salient outside of interdependent social relations (see Markus & Kitayama 1991; Kitayama et al. 2011).

Shihui Han: What constitutes the self? Cultural neuroscience studies of neurocognitive representation of the self

The self is a mixture of both biological and social construction. How is the self represented in the human brain? I'll present psychological and brain imaging studies of self-face recognition and self-concept published by our group during the last years. These studies investigated how neurocognitive processing of the self undergo cultural and biological influences. Our findings have implications for our understanding of the biosocial nature of the human brain and mental health. (see Han et al. 2008; Ma et al. in press).

Kai Vogeley: Person perception and culture. The perspective of neuroscience

Psychology and neuroscience have recently started to re-introduce culture as an independent factor into the experimental designs of empirical studies focusing on cognitive processes and neural mechanisms. On a conceptual level culture cannot be treated as a rigid body of generalized features of different cultural backgrounds as defined by nationality or language, but has to be conceptualized more adequately as a dialectic exchange between individual members and their collectives with respect to habits, practices and belief systems. However, experimental studies require operationalized approaches. We have recently used Asian-looking and European-looking virtual characters that expressed anger and happiness while gazing at the participant or another third invisible person in a Chinese and a German population. Overall, expressions are perceived more pronounced if the participant was looked at. Direct gaze emphasized the perceived emotion of ethnic out-group members, but not of ethnic in-group members. These results suggest that social interaction supervenes or is at least as influential as culture related differences in the perception of emotions. (see Vogeley et al. 2009; Han et al. 2013).

References

Bente, G., Senokozlieva, M., Pennig, S., Al-Issa, A., & Fischer, O. (2008). Deciphering the secret code. A New Methodology for the Cross-Cultural Analysis of Nonverbal Behavior. Behavior *Research Methods*, 40(1), 269-277.

Bente, G., Leuschner, H., Al-Issa, A., & Blascovich, J. J. (2010). The others: Universals and cultural specificities in the perception of status and dominance from nonverbal behavior. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 19(3), 762-777.

De Bruin, L. C., & Newen, A. (2012): An association account of false belief understanding. *Cognition doi:10.1016/j.cognition.2011.12.016*

Georgescu, A.L., Kuzmanovic, B., Santos, N.S., Tepest, R., Bente, G., Tittgemeyer, M. & Vogeley, K. (in press). Perceiving Nonverbal Behavior: Neural Correlates of Processing Movement Fluency and Contingency in Dyadic Interactions. *Human Brain Mapping.*

Han, S., Northoff, G. (2008). Culture-sensitive neural substrates of human cognition: A transcultural neuroimaging approach. *Nature Review Neuroscience*, 9, 646-654.

Han S, Northoff G, Vogeley K, Wexler BE, Kitayama S, Varnum MEW (2013): *Cultural Neuroscience Approach to the Biosocial Nature of Humans.* Ann Rev Psychol 64, 335-359.

Kitayama, S., & Uskul, A. K. (2011). Culture, mind, and the brain: Current evidence and future directions. *Annual Review of Psychology, 62, 419-449.*

Ma, Y., Bang, D., Wang, C., Allen, M., Frith, C., Roepstorff, A., Han, S.(in press).Sociocultural patterning of neural activity during self-reflection. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*.

Markus, H., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. Psychological Review, 98, 224-253.

Newen, A., Schlicht, T. (2009): Understanding Other Minds: A criticism of Goldman's simulation theory and an outline of the Person Model Theory. *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 79, 209-242

Vogeley K, Roepstorff A (2009): Contextualising Culture and Social Cognition. *Trends in Cognitive Science* 13, 511-516