Anthropologists argue about the objectives of the discipline: what they are and should be. Even so, most anthropologists would agree that what we strive for is valid explanations of the extraordinary variety of human being. I use ‘human being’ in the singular here in order to emphasise that what we humans have in common is precisely our humanity; how that humanity evinces itself in the world, however, takes as many forms as there are people. This is no mere truism. It is important to stress both our common humanity and the uniqueness of any given human being in any time or place because how we characterise this conjunction is bound to structure our theory of learning. The unified model of human being that I describe briefly here is, I argue, good for anthropologists (and by the same token, good for other human scientists) because it entails an idea of learning as a microhistorical process and in so doing provides for the fact that our common humanity can only evince itself in and through the uniqueness of particular persons.

A unified model of human being

My unified model of human being is given in the following formulation: mind is a function of the whole person that is constituted over time in intersubjective relations with others in the environing world. In this view, mind cannot be a function merely of the brain, nor (more radically) of the embodied nervous system, because, as is evident throughout the corpus of world ethnography, intersubjective relations between human beings structure the conditions in and through which we constitute our understandings of these same conditions of the peopled world. Here, consciousness is understood to be that aspect of mind that posits the existence of the thinker and the conceptual self-evidentiality of the world as lived by the thinker. This process is grounded in human sociality and thus, inevitably, in a historically structured intersubjectivity.

Once we recognise that our entire being (of which our physical make-up is but one aspect) is the product of a long, long history of social relations, it becomes possible to realise that sociality is the fundamental condition of human autopoiesis – self-creation, self-organisation, self-regulation. In other words, our particular genetic inheritance cannot be properly understood outside the history of social relations that gave rise to us as the particular children of our particular parents, and so on back through the generations. Biologically speaking, autopoiesis is what characterises living things; it makes us different from, for example, a computer or a robot which, for all its apparently remarkable abilities, does not bring itself into being.
by virtue of differentiating its own substance. Moreover, this process of differentiation may be easily seen in respect both of the physical and psychological development of any given human being. Learning is thus a crucial dimension of human autopoiesis.

What Piaget called ‘genetic epistemology’ is a theory of learning as an autopoietic process. The key to this is first, that Piaget characterised his cognitive scheme as ‘a self-regulating transformational system’ which, through functioning, becomes over time ever more highly differentiated and, second, that he showed that what we take to be self-evident properties of the world (given, for example, in our categories for measuring space and time) are the conceptual outcome of a process of cognitive development over time (see Piaget 1971: esp. Chapter 2). (NB: despite what we now know of the remarkable abilities of babies, this is still the case.) Note, however, that, because all human learning, from birth onwards, is structured in and through the child’s relations with other humans, it makes sense to characterise learning as a micro-historical process. In other words, what and how the child learns is a function of the relations in which she is engaged and in which, by the same token, she engages the others by whom she is surrounded in the process of making her own, always unique, sense of the environing world. Or, to put it another way, genetic epistemology can be seen to be an inherently social process that gives rise over time to always emergent cognitive schemes that continue to differentiate themselves in use, even while, by virtue of this continuing differentiation, they become ever more refined.

In the simplest possible terms, on an everyday basis and throughout the course of our lives, we make sense of the world by making meaning out of meanings that others have already made or are making. Given the autonomy of each and every human being and the fact that each one of us has to make sense of the world for him- or herself, it follows that meanings are at once transformed and maintained by virtue of the selfsame constituting process and that our collective and personal histories are aspects of one another. A simple example will serve to demonstrate this. The following is taken verbatim from the Merriam Webster online dictionary. As you read it, bear in mind your own definition of the word ‘disinterested’ and the degree of your certainty that your definition is (was?) correct.

Definition of DISINTERESTED

1 a: not having the mind or feelings engaged: not interested <telling them in a disinterested voice – Tom Wicker> <disinterested in women – J. A. Brussel>

b: no longer interested <husband and wife become disinterested in each other – T. I. Rubin>

2: free from selfish motive or interest: unbiased <a disinterested decision> <disinterested intellectual curiosity is the lifeblood of real civilization – G. M. Trevelyan>

Usage Discussion of DISINTERESTED

Disinterested and uninterested have a tangled history. Uninterested originally meant impartial, but this sense fell into disuse during the 18th century. About the same time the original sense of disinterested also disappeared, with uninterested developing a new sense—the present meaning—to take its place. The original sense of uninterested is still out of use, but the original sense of disinterested revived in the early twentieth century. The revival has since been under frequent attack as an illiteracy and a blurring or loss of a useful distinction. Actual usage shows otherwise. Sense 2 of disinterested is still its most frequent sense, especially in edited prose; it shows no sign of vanishing. A careful writer may choose sense 1a of disinterested in preference to uninterested for emphasis <teaching the letters of the alphabet to her wiggling and supremely disinterested little daughter – C. L. Sulzberger>. Further, disinterested has developed a sense (1b), perhaps influenced by sense 1 of the prefix dis-, that contrasts with uninterested <when I grow tired or disinterested in anything, I experience a disgust – Jack London (letter, 1914)>.

Still, use of senses 1a and 1b will incur the disapproval of some who may not fully appreciate the history of this word or the subtleties of its present use.
Examples of DISINTERESTED
- the disinterested pursuit of truth
- the city’s philistines, naturally disinterested in art, voted to cut the museum’s budget

First Known Use of DISINTERESTED
circa 1612

My point here is that, for all that speakers of a given language understand one another and communicate effectively, we know that language transforms in use over time and that this is a function of the subtleties that are a product of the very process through which we acquire and use our native language or learn another language in later life, to say nothing of the new language terms we need in order to talk about new objects and processes. Of course we rely on our common understanding and we communicate in and through our assumptions concerning the commonality of experience between ourselves and others. Nevertheless, I have to stress that the autonomy of human beings, which is given by autopoiesis, means that we have to be careful not to assume too much. Often enough, assumptions about the common ground of intersubjectivity are too crude. Yes, we all know what it means to feel hot and cold, to be hungry or thirsty, to love or to loathe and so on, but this assumption is just a beginning. To understand what the other person is telling us (and this goes for those closest to us as well as for those whom we might consider to be most exotic) we have to understand the history out of which they speak. Collective and personal history are aspects of one another, however, which is why, for all that we may have a tremendous amount in common with the sister with whom we grew up, we can’t say with justice even here that we have had ‘the same’ experience.

A brief ethnographic example may serve to demonstrate why this observation is so important for the human scientist in general and for theorists of learning in particular. I would ask the reader to bear in mind the idea, taken for granted by most theories in the human sciences, that we humans are self-evidently ‘individuals’. Compare this notion with the following, rather different, idea of the person which, as will become plain, structures relations between ethnic Fijians.

If I am a young man in my teens whose history took me, at age 12 or so, from the small island in Fiji where I was born to attend high school in the country’s capital city, I will, for all the transforming impact on me of my urban life and my education, continue to hold an idea of the person as a locus of relationship. I understand myself and my relations to others in terms of what I am given to be by particular others in any given case: if I call a man father, then I relate to him as son; if I call him younger brother I expect him to listen to what I say and do as I tell him; if I call another boy cross-cousin I can expect the same mocking and challenging behaviour from him that he expects from me, we are peers; if I call a man mother’s brother (maternal uncle), then I must show him extreme respect, remaining silent or even removing myself from his presence on those occasions where we coincide.

All ethnic Fijians are ideally kin to one another; it follows that one can always find a way of reckoning relationship that provides for the use of kinship terms, even where any genealogical connection is, in the view of an outsider, tenuous. As elsewhere in Melanesia and the Pacific, Fijian kinship is not so much a matter of genealogical reckoning (what those of us with a European history think of as ‘biological’ or ‘natural’ kinship) as of constituting connections with others; in the Fijian case, kinship is constituted through mutual caring – veilomani (compassion for one another or mutual familial love). These kinship relations are themselves an aspect of social relations at large in a polity conceived of in terms of veiqanavi (attendance on one another), whereby people are obligated to one another as members of particular clans to which belong certain duties and rights and which have their origin in particular places. Ethnic Fijians manifest in their own persons their places of origin and relate as such to other ethnic Fijians and other Pacific islanders. None of this precludes any given Fijian person’s awareness of their own uniqueness and autonomy, the difference being that here any given person’s autonomy is understood to reside in, and be the product of, their relations with others. Thus, if the young man of my imagined account goes on to university and later enters one of the professions or a good job in the civil service, he is likely to continue...
to hold to the idea of the person as a locus of relationship. This is because, for all the transformations in understanding effected through his continued lived experience, what is happening here is the continuing differentiation of an idea that was already highly developed by the time he was 12. Moreover, for all that he feels he can appreciate the idea of an Australian male friend that individuality is important and for this reason he should be choosing for himself without reference to his senior kin, he cannot escape his knowledge that his relations ‘according to kinship’ (vakavewekani) are of primary importance.

The idea of the person held by my imagined Fijian’s imagined Australian friend is that of the ‘individual in society’ or, more radically, that of the ‘individual as the artifact of his or her own choices’. This is no more nor less a historical product than any other idea. Its historical development is one dimension of the form of political economy called capitalism and, as such, it has a self-evident purchase on the world for those of us who assert ourselves to be individuals responsible at once for our own choices and, in the final analysis, for who we are as particular persons. In other words, if you hold yourself and other people to be individuals, your relations with others are going to be, for you at least, structured in these terms. A student of mainstream human sciences is likely to hold it to be self-evident that we are all individuals, that our individuality is biologically given, and that it follows that sociality is just one aspect of who we are, rather than the fundamental condition of what it is to be human; here the relegation of the social to a separable domain allows for other domains of human nature that are ideally uncontaminated by history (‘perception’, for example). As an anthropologist, I cannot hold this view because, if I am to credit others with the same humanity that I allow to myself, then I have to realise that my own ideas of the world and what it is to be human are, like theirs, through and through artifacts of a history of intersubjective relations with others. This being so, I have likewise to realise that literally everything about human beings – from our genes to our most private and secret thoughts – evinces our historical nature, that is to say, the continuing history that has informed who we are from conception onwards.

How is it that intersubjectivity is able, as it were, so readily to demonstrate our historical nature? In the simplest terms, it is because we bring to every single encounter with any and every other our understanding of the environing world, which includes, of course, our idea of the relations between ourselves and that particular other (see Toren, 2009 for an extended ethnographic example of how this process structures our reasoning about events). These ideas are themselves the transforming products of an ontogeny that continues throughout our lives, that is to say of learning, considered as a fundamental form taken by human sociality (see Ingold, 2007 for a related argument from the perspective of ‘the social child’).

**Intersubjectivity is a historical process**

So, given that intersubjectivity is a historical process, it follows that learning is too, because, analytically speaking, intersubjectivity is always prior. Take yourself, for example. As a baby and infant and young child, you constituted over time an idea of yourself as the conscious subject of your own thoughts and actions – an idea that was itself a function of the intersubjective relations with others that informed the continuing development of all your ideas about yourself and the environing world. It follows that these same ideas are always emergent, never quite fixed, for all they may be highly differentiated. Depending on where you grew up and the relations within whose terms you arrived at your own ideas of self and world, you may take for granted that the world is made up of persons who are the incarnations of ancestors, one of whom is reborn in you; indeed as others often enough point out, your characteristics are just the same as a particular man who died in living memory (see Gottlieb, 2003). Or, you may take for granted that, while life takes manifold animal (including human) forms, these life forms have in common the same cultural attributes or, to put it another way, that the animal (including human) world has the character of a single culture differentiated by the perspectives on the world that are provided for by differentiated bodies (see Howell, 1984; and Viveiros de Castro, 1992, 1996). Or, you may take for granted that the world is made up of individuals and that you
are one such, a view that you may take to be guaranteed by biology and/or, if you are a Christian, by a personal relation to God.

Subjectivity is bound to be the product of intersubjectivity, which is always prior, whether considered in developmental or analytical terms. Before proceeding any further with this, however, I want to emphasise the fact that, like other social animals, humans are social through and through. Literally every aspect of who and what we are and what we do and say, up to and including the present moment, is the product of the history of our intersubjective relations with others in a world whose properties are structured by virtue of these same relations. To take the most immediate example, I as the writer of this chapter am addressing you, the imagined reader, and in doing so I am constituting an idea of the relation between us – one in which we have in common at the very least a language and a certain kind of education. And in reading, you are constituting an idea of me as writer and that idea is informing the sense you are making of what I write. I write out of the lived history of my relations with others in the world as I know it and you, likewise, are making sense of what you are reading as a function of your lived history in the world as you know it.

So far I have explained my unified model of human being in the most general terms. It is easy enough, however, to think about the psychological dimension of its operations using the model of ontogeny offered by Michael Tomasello for how children constitute over time their ‘native language’. In Constructing a Language Tomasello argues convincingly for the infant’s development of joint attention, gestural skills (especially pointing) and the ability to learn the intentional acts of others; these abilities taken together with early-developing pattern-finding skills make it possible for children:

to find patterns in the way adults use linguistic symbols across different utterances, and so to construct the grammatical (abstract) dimensions of human linguistic competence.

(Tomasello, 2003: 4)

Likewise, the more recent work of Susan Goldin-Meadow shows that

‘[t]he phenomenon of language creation in deaf children tells us that an individual child can reinvent the linguistic wheel, or at least its rudimentary aspects – as long as the child can interact with humans who behave humanely.

(Goldin-Meadow, 2006: 354)

It is notable that the model of child language acquisition thus proposed does not require mediation by a ‘theory of mind’ module, an idea that has come to dominate much of the literature on child development. This is important because of the entailments of the idea of a ‘theory of mind module’ which is understood by many a cognitive anthropologist and psychologist to be given at birth, though it may be more, or less, innately structured. Fodor, who came up with the modularity idea, argued that modularity was given only for what he called ‘input systems’ – limited in number and primarily linguistic and perceptual.

[4][4] all the cases of massive neural structuring to which a content-specific cognitive function can confidently be assigned appear to be associated with language or with perception. … the key to modularity is informational encapsulation … hardwired connections indicate privileged paths of informational access.

(Fodor, 1983: 98, see also Fodor, 1988)

In his view, the outputs of these modular perceptual systems fed into central cognitive systems, which functioned to integrate the information into more complex, problem-solving, forms of central cognition. Interestingly enough, a key idea on which Fodor’s theory rested – the ‘language acquisition device’ as a modular input system – has since been demonstrated to be unnecessary by the findings of Tomasello and
his colleagues referred to above. I have argued elsewhere that neither do we need the idea of an innate ‘theory of mind’ module, precisely because it is entirely possible for such a module to be the outcome of development.

‘Necessity’ is the key to parsimonious theorising and, insofar as we are concerned to develop a valid theory of human being, necessity is surely all-important here. Piaget’s driving interest was to understand how the necessity that seems to be given in our categories of space, time, number and so on could be the outcome of a process of cognitive construction, rather than an innate function of mind, as Kant had argued. Likewise, the neo-Piagetian theorist Annette Karmiloff-Smith and her biological connectionist colleagues have argued that development itself is the key to understanding how cognitive processes become structured in specific ways.

[A] mechanism starts out as somewhat more relevant to one kind of input over others, but it is usable … for other types of processing too. This allows for compensatory processing and makes development channelled but far less predetermined than the nativist view. Once a domain-relevant mechanism is repeatedly used to process a certain type of input, it becomes domain-specific as a result of its developmental history.

(Karmiloff-Smith, 1998: referencing Elman et al., 1996; and Karmiloff-Smith, 1995)

Insofar as neuroconstructivists accept the idea of innate modules, these can be nothing more than minimally specified transformational structures. Cognitive development is understood ‘in terms of self-organising emergent structures arising from the complex interactions between both organism and environment’ (Elman et al., 1996: 113). Moreover, the careful experimental work that justifies the model comes to grips with the dynamism of organism and environment. Various problems remain, however: primarily that the neuroconstructivist model is founded in a representational theory of the mind/brain, that is to say, in the view that mind/brain mirrors objectively given properties of the world. Concomitant with the representational model is an idea of the person in which sociality is one among numerous emergent developmental structures, rather than inherent in every aspect of human being in the world; it follows that there is no awareness here that development is a historical process – that is to say, one that is embedded in historically constituted intersubjectivity.

This said, it is easy enough to import the ‘constructing’ or, in my terms, ‘constituting’ or ‘differentiating’ (that is, autopoietic) function of the neuroconstructivist model of cognitive development over time into the unified model of human being and to investigate how ontogeny is structured by intersubjectivity as a historical process. To do this requires, however, an ethnographic approach because, as I showed at the outset with my brief ethnographic example, the ideas of sociality and personhood that are structuring intersubjectivity in any given case are not to be taken for granted.

I have been arguing for 20 years now that learning is a microhistorical process (see Toren, 1990), but it took me some time to realise that, if my model was to capture how Fijians make sense of the environing world, it had to be able to show the lived validity of Fijian ideas, their purchase on the world (see Toren, 1999, 2009). Given my own experience, however, I think this is not only a difficult endeavour, but that it is difficult to grasp the justice of the argument that other people’s ideas about the world of people and things have in principle to be granted the same order of validity that one grants to one’s own ideas. My point here is that, even if we are prepared to accept that people can live perfectly well-ordered and sane lives in terms of ideas that we ourselves hold to be highly questionable, if not downright wrong-headed, we generally cannot help but feel that they would be much better off to accept the manifest rightness of our own ideas. After all, we can call on the authority of science, or perhaps on a rationalist moral philosophy, or the statutes of international law, or what have you. In other words, we cannot help but take as self-evident the fundamental rightness of our own understandings, even where we may have to admit that they are as open to question as the next person’s.
This appearance of manifest ‘rightness’, of the self-evident correctness of our ideas of the world is, however, the outcome of learning as an intersubjective, microhistorical process in which I constituted for myself both a complex set of understandings concerning the world and what is in it (an ontology) and concomitantly a theory of how we come to know what we know (an epistemology). It is worth drawing attention here to the fact that epistemology and ontology always implicate one another, the relation between them, however, being rather like the alternately shifting faces of the optical illusion that is a Necker cube: when ontology is to the fore, epistemology becomes the ground against which we can assert that the world is such-and-such for us and, likewise, when epistemology is at stake, it is the environing world and its properties that we are inclined to take for granted.

An ethnographic example of ontogeny as a historical process

A recent ethnographic analysis of Fijian village children’s ideas about the future (na gauna mai muri), as evinced in 75 essays written by children aged between 7 and 15 years old, shows their constitution over time of a spatio-temporal orientation towards a view of generations to come (Toren, 2011). The paper uses this example of spatio-temporal orientation to show how, seen through the perspective derived from long-term participant observer fieldwork, data such as these enable an ethnographic analysis of meaning-making as a transformational, historical process.

The analysis shows how the age of the child is associated with a shift in focus of the essays: from the writer of the essay, to the writer and his or her close kin, to the writer as part of the collectivity at large to which he or she has obligations, to the writer as part of the collectivity of generations that replace one another through time.1 I refer to this as a changing spatio-temporal orientation towards the future because the children’s shift in focus is predicated on a transformation in understanding of the future as an imagined space-time of social relations that gives rise, as it were, to a particular future self.2 The reader is referred to this publication for the details of the data and the argument they provide for. Here, I want just to draw out a few points.

In the Fijian language the future is not conceived of as up ahead and facing us (as it is in English usage). A literal translation of ‘the past’ – na gauna eliu – is ‘the time ahead’; likewise ‘the future’ – na gauna mai muri is ‘the time behind’. One’s life trajectory leads one ever deeper into the past as the future unfolds behind one. This makes good sense of the succession of generations: the old move ever further forward into the past and the youngest, who are perhaps three generations behind them on this same trajectory, have at their own backs the generations to come. Note, too, that by and large everything that the children wrote about, everything that they said they will do or be in the future, was right there on the horizon of possibility because all the children either knew directly, or knew of, young men and women and older, adult, men and women from their own villages who had arrived at the particular status in life they envisioned for themselves.

The association between age and the focus of the essay is by no means hard and fast, however: what it indicates is better characterised as a likelihood than as a developmental necessity. Even so, I would argue that, if a village child is to grow up to be an adult who holds as principle and who practises ‘the Fijian way of life’, then he or she has to become one for whom obligations to kin at large and/or the succession of generations vakavanua – according to the land – become taken-for-granted understandings of the tenor of village life.

Finally, what an ethnographic analysis of ontogeny is likely to uncover is, as in this case, a demonstrable figure-ground relation between children’s and adults’ ideas: at any given point a child’s ideas throw into relief – that is to say, as figure – ideas that are present as ground in adult descriptions of the peopled world. In this case, for children across the age range, the essays suggested the apparent predictability of the future as the ground for their ideas. For the youngest children the figure is the desires one has for oneself; for yet older children the figure has become the self that is the locus of relationship, who requires the others in
order to be his or her self, while the oldest children see themselves as implicated in the historical succession of generations. Understanding these figure-ground reversals is crucial to understanding how children make sense intersubjectively of their relations with others in the world. Fijian children do not start out with an individualist orientation, only to become somehow more social over time; from birth, sociality is inherent to us, no-one becomes more social over time; what happens, rather, is that sociality evinces itself according to the social relations that it engages. Elsewhere I have described how, in Fiji historically and till today, one’s effectiveness in the world has everything to do with what others provide one with as a function of particular forms of relationship – an awareness that evinces itself in the youngest children in their focus on the desires of the self and what they might obtain, and in the oldest children in a concern for the succession vakavanua, according to the land, of generations that will follow them.

I trust I have given enough detail here to show that understanding learning as a life-long dimension of human being requires that we come to grips with its microhistorical nature. To the extent that we do so, we can, I argue, explain precisely the processes through which what we characterise as ‘human nature’ goes on and on giving rise to the manifold variety of human beings who are at once united and divided by history.

Notes

1 The essays were written in April 2005. What follows is a translation from my Fijian instructions: ‘You have two tasks to do today. The first one is a story. I am asking each of you please to write a story. Imagine the time in the future when you are a man or a woman. Write a story about your way of life in that future time and try to show the details of your life when you are grown up. It’s easy. Just think about that future time and write about it – anything about that future time. Another thing: don’t worry about this task – it’s not an examination. It’s just a small task you’re doing for me. Is that OK? Good. Please each of you write down your thoughts.’

2 For an appreciation of the profound importance of our spatio-temporal orientation to others, the reader is referred to Nancy Munn’s superb 1986 monograph.

References

Christina Toren

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