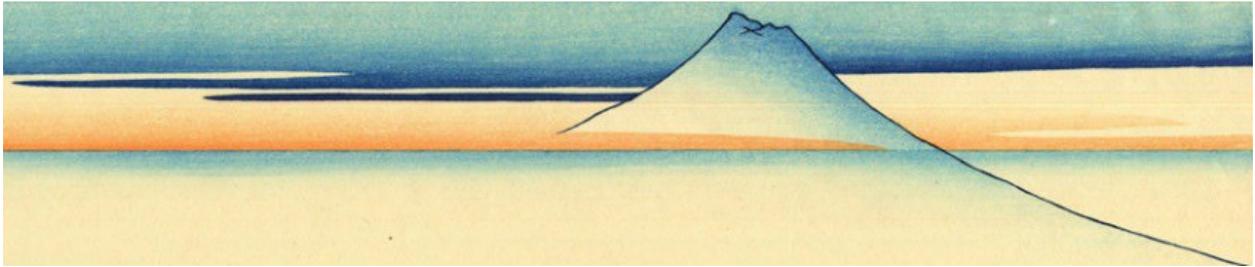


COGNITIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

ANTH 440

Fall Semester 2020



HONOUR'S UNDERGRADUATE SEMINAR

Professor:

Dr. Samuel Veissière,
Assistant Professor, Dept. of Psychiatry,
Co-Director, Culture, Mind, and Brain Program
McGill University samuel.veissiere@mcgill.ca

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| 2:35 - 03:55 PM | T-R | ARTS W120 |
|-----------------|-----|-----------|

Office:

Ludmer Research & Training in Psychiatry --- Room 136
1033 Pine Avenue
West (top of Peel/
corner Pine)

Prof office hours: by appointment, or as announced during paper-writing periods

KEY WORDS

Human intelligence; cultural intelligence; cultural stupidity; niche construction; cumulative cultural evolution; culture-gene co-evolution; dual inheritance theory; dual process theory; heuristics & biases; predictive-processing brain; reason & morality

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In recent years, a rapprochement between the disciplines of cultural anthropology, the philosophy of mind, developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, neuroscience and behavioural economics (to name but a few) has led to new insights on the arbitrary divide between nature and culture. On these recent views, human biology is inextricably cultural. But what is culture? What makes our species unique according to these models is the propensity to engage in coordinated cultural activity and continually adapt to environments of our own design.

In both phylogeny (evolution) and ontogeny (development), the capacity to become immersed in broader ecologies of patterned cultural practice gave us large brains, versatile bodies, and an iterative set of knowledge and skills outsourced to a collective, cumulative repertoire.

While our models of human cognitive evolution have shifted from a focus on *adaptedness* to a recognition of our *adaptability*, debates still rage on ways of identifying, measuring, and overcoming what many scholars understand as “design flaws” of the encultured brain.

After reviewing current debates on the evolution, development, and plasticity of the cognitive dimensions of culture and the cultural dimension of cognition, we will examine common promises and pitfalls of being an intrinsically social and political species. In particular, we will investigate how cognitive biases in cultural transmission and social influences on perception and motivation modulate the automaticity and variability of human behaviour. We will conclude with difficult questions on the nature and scope of reason, agency, and morality in a rapidly changing world.

REQUIRED READING

In addition to articles linked in the course schedule below, the following books will be available shortly at Paragraph bookstore. Each book will be assigned to a group by the professor, and will be required for all members of the group, and optional for the rest of the class. Articles linked in the course schedule are required reading for all students.

Please note that the most important, core readings are contained in the books, which will all be extensively discussed in class. Linked articles in the syllabus are

strongly recommended for background knowledge, but will not always be discussed in detail by the professor.

Tomasello, M. (2009). *Why we cooperate*. MIT press.

Hrdy, S. B. (2011). *Mothers and others*. Harvard University Press.

Henrich, J. (2015). *The secret of our success: how culture is driving human evolution, domesticating our species, and making us smarter*. Princeton University Press.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Macmillan.

Boyer, P. (2018). *Minds Make Societies: How Cognition Explains the World Humans Create*. Yale University Press.

Chua, A., & Rubinfeld, J. (2014). *The triple package: How three unlikely traits explain the rise and fall of cultural groups in America*. Penguin.

EVALUATION

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Intro questionnaire | 5% |
| Group presentation | 20% |
| Paper proposal | 10 % |
| Final paper | 55% |
| Self-evaluation and participation | 10% |

ASSIGNMENTS

Intro questionnaire

The professor will email a link to a short online introductory questionnaire. Data from the questionnaire will be used to sort students into 6 groups. Due online **September 08**.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Z8G2RGF>

Group presentation

Each group will read one of the assigned books (as determined by the professor) and give a 30min presentation followed by 25 min of structured discussion. Presentation formats are open. Students must introduce the book's general theoretical frameworks and arguments to a lay audience, identify debates or controversies pertaining to the book, and prepare discussion questions and/or activities for the class. Students are free to delegate tasks as they please. Students are encouraged (though not required) to read the books that are not assigned to their group.

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Final paper

Min 3000 words; short papers encouraged.

Option 1: Cultural Consonance research proposal

Option 2: Evolutionary hypothesis theory paper
(Rubrics on MyCourses – Assignments section)

Paper should be of publishable quality, and cover a topic of the students' choice related to cognition and culture, making references to class material. Due **November 24** on MyCourses

Paper proposal

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1-2 pager with tentative title, topic, research questions, and min. 6 references from outside the syllabus. Due **October 29** on MyCourses

Self-evaluation and participation

One-page (min) first-person essay reflecting on commitment, interest, learning curve, and levels of engagements .

Rubric found in myCourses

Due **November 24** on MyCourses

Participation in class discussions, debate, and respectful, productive disagreements is a key aspect of this seminar. Think about your approach to discussion along the following scale of levels of engagement. .

Level 1: Waiting. We basically don't really hear what others are saying, our mind is wandering and we just 'wait' to speak – sometimes with dread (“oh boy, I don't want to be put on the spot and have to talk”)

Level 2: One-sided debating. We only selectively listen, often feverishly, to what we already disagree with, with the explicit intent of crafting a rebuttal, which we start internally rehearsing while others speak. We wait for that pause in our interlocutor's speech to be able to jump in and say: “yeah, sure, but basically, you're wrong, and here's why”.

Level 3: Empathy. We actually listen to what the other is saying, try to suspend judgment, and genuinely ask ourselves where they are coming from, what their experience was and is like, and why their position makes sense to them.

Level 4: Change. We are ready to emerge from the conversation as a changed person; being ready to adopt a new position, perhaps a transformed worldview from engaging with others.

The general idea is that most conversations, particularly on moral and ideological topics, never go past Levels 1-2. The general premise is that we should strive to achieve Level 3 at the very least, and aim for Level 4.

A good way to gauge our willingness to reach Level 4 is to sincerely examine our intentions. What do I intend to achieve by joining this conversation? Do I intend to learn something new? Do I intend to convince others of my position?

Another good way to aim for good engagement is to aim for something Talmudic:

The Talmudic tradition often gets described as overly rigid and orthodox. As a pedagogy, we may also find that it captures and honours two fundamental and seemingly paradoxical truths about the human experience. 1) the need to preserve a sacred tradition of collective memory and ritual prescriptions for being good humans elaborated over long cumulative cultural histories ; 2) the importance of putting these prescriptions to test through ongoing scrutiny, debate, and interpretation. The Talmud thus embodies unresolved questions of tradition and change – questions which by definition cannot be resolved – and offers a pedagogical avenue for continued elaboration.

Consider the story of the “sparring sessions” between Rabbi Yohannan and Resh Lakish.

In his youth in Roman Palestine in the 3rd century C.E. Resh Lakish was reported to have been in a bandit and a gladiator.

“Resh Lakish was Rabbi Yohanan’s hevruta, his ‘sparring partner’ in the yeshiva. They were said to be perfectly matched. “Each time Rabbi Yohanan argued a point, Resh Lakish challenged him twenty-four times. Yohanan answered each challenge with his own, until the matter became clear to both of them. After Resh Lakish’s death, Rabbi Yohanan was inconsolable, realizing that he could not find truth without someone willing to challenge him, to sharpen his thinking (Bava Metzia 84)”

(On another note, The Institution™ demands that the below be included in all course outlines)

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).(approved by Senate on 29 January 2003)

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/)."

“In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.” (approved by Senate on 21 January 2009 --- see also the section in this document on Assignments and evaluation.)

The FRENCH TRANSLATION about this right may also be used on your course outlines: *"Conformément à la Charte des droits de l'étudiant de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue)."*

http://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/university_student_assessment_policy_4.pdf

CLASS SCHEDULE AND LINK TO READINGS

R Sept 3 — First week

Introductions – class overview

T Sept 8 — Why cognitive anthropology?

Overview of pedagogical expectations – professor's personal journey from political to cognitive anthropology.

Clarification of learning goals for class conversations

Veissière, S. (2018) [Statement of disillusionist pedagogy](#).
Unpublished class document.

Sperber, D. (1985). [Anthropology and psychology: Towards an epidemiology of representations](#). *Man*, 73-89.

Online questionnaire due at the latest

R Sept 10— The Puzzle of Culture

Henrich, J., Boyd, R., & Richerson, P. J. (2008). [Five misunderstandings about cultural evolution](#). *Human Nature*, 19(2), 119-137.

T Sept 15 — Cultural Consonance

Why culture matters: lecture, and overview of final essay, option 1

Dressler, William W., Mauro C. Balieiro, and José E. dos Santos. "[What you know, what you do, and how you feel: Cultural competence, cultural consonance, and psychological distress](#)." *Frontiers in psychology* 8 (2018): 2355.

R Sept 17 — Cultural Affordances 1

Veissière, S. P., Constant, A., Ramstead, M. J., Friston, K. J., & Kirmayer, L. J. (2020). [Thinking through other minds: A variational approach to cognition and culture](#). *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 43.

T Sept 22 — the building blocks of social reality II

[WHOLE BOOK] Michael Tomasello, [Why We Cooperate](#) --- Group Presentation 1

R Sept 24 — Cultural Affordances 2

Veissière, S. P., Constant, A., Ramstead, M. J., Friston, K. J., & Kirmayer, L. J. (2020). [TTOM in action: Refining the variational approach to cognition and culture](#). *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 43.

T Sept 29 — Social Reality

Searle, J. R. (2006). [Social ontology: Some basic principles](#). *Anthropological theory*, 6(1), 12-29.

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Csibra, G., & Gergely, G. (January 01, 2009). Natural pedagogy. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 13, 4, 148-5

R Oct 1 — perspective-taking and empathy in phylogeny and ontogeny I

[WHOLE BOOK] Hrdy, S. B. (2011). *Mothers and others*. Harvard University Press.

Group Presentation 2

T Oct 6 — perspective-taking and empathy in phylogeny and ontogeny II

Young, A. (2012). The social brain and the myth of empathy. *Science in Context*, 25(3), 401-424.

Hrdy, Sarah. '[Development plus Social Selection in the Emergence of Emotionally Modern Humans](#)' In. Meehan, Courtney L., in Alyssa N. Crittenden. 2016. *Childhood: origins, evolution, and implications*. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research. pp12-44

Sterelny, K. (2016). Cumulative cultural evolution and the origins of language. *Biological Theory*, 11(3), 173-186.

R Oct 8 — social brains, social intelligence and culture-gene co-evolution I

[WHOLE BOOK] **Henrich**, J. (2015). *The secret of our success: how culture is driving human evolution, domesticating our species, and making us smarter*. Princeton University Press.

Group Presentation 3

T Oct 13 — social brains, social intelligence and culture-gene co-evolution II

Fuentes, A. (2016). The extended evolutionary synthesis, ethnography, and the human niche: toward an integrated anthropology. *Current Anthropology*, 57(S13), S13-S26

Kendal, J. R. (2011). Cultural niche construction and human learning environments: Investigating sociocultural perspectives. *Biological Theory*, 6(3), 241-250.

Kim Sterelny, [Social Intelligence, Human Intelligence, and Niche Construction](#), *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* (2007) 362, 719-730

R Oct 15 — the limits of human reasoning, part 1: heuristics I

[WHOLE BOOK] **Kahneman**, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Macmillan.
Group Presentation 4

T Oct 20 — the limits of human reasoning, part 1: heuristics II

Henrich, J. (2002). Decision-making, cultural transmission and adaptation in economic anthropology. *Theory in economic anthropology*, 251-295.

R Oct 22 — the limits of human reasoning, part 2: social influences I

Cialdini, R. B., & Goldstein, N. J. (2004). Social influence: Compliance and conformity. *Annu. Rev. Psychol.*, 55, 591–621.

T Oct 27 — the limits of human reasoning, part 2: social influences II

Henrich, J., & Gil-White, F. J. (2001). [The evolution of prestige: freely conferred deference as a mechanism for enhancing the benefits of cultural transmission](#). *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 22, 3, 165–196.

R Oct 29 — the automaticity of culture? I

Proposal due on MyCourses

Alter, A. L., & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2009). Uniting the tribes of fluency to form a metacognitive nation. *Personality and social psychology review*, 13(3), 219–235.

T Nov 3 — the automaticity of culture? II

Ramstead M, Veissière S, and, Kirmayer L (2016) [Cultural Affordances: Scaffolding Local Worlds Through Shared Intentionality and Regimes of Attention](#). *Front. Psychol.* 7:1090.

R Nov 5 — Social minds or mental societies???

[WHOLE BOOK] Boyer, P. (2018). [Minds Make Societies: How Cognition Explains the World Humans Create](#). Yale University Press.
Group Presentation 5

T Nov 10 — Social minds or mental societies???

Sperber, Dan et al (2010). [Epistemic Vigilance](#). *Mind & Language*, 25, 4, 359–393.

R Nov 12 — morality revised I

TBA

T Nov 17 — morality revised II

Astuti, R., & Bloch, M. (2015). [The causal cognition of wrong doing: incest, intentionality, and morality](#). *Frontiers in psychology*, 6.

Haidt, J. (2008). Morality. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3, 1, 65-72.

Haidt, J., & Björklund, F. (2008). Social intuitionists answer six questions about moral psychology. *Moral psychology (Vol 2). The cognitive science of morality: Intuition and diversity*, 181-217.

Lilienfeld, S. O., Ammirati, R., & Landfield, K. (2009). Giving Debiasing Away: Can Psychological Research on Correcting Cognitive Errors Promote Human Welfare? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4, 4, 390-398.

R Nov 19 — Good and bad cultures????

Chua, A., & Rubenfeld, J. (2014). *The triple package: How three unlikely traits explain the rise and fall of cultural groups in America*. Penguin

Mahr, J., & Csibra, G. (2017). Why do we remember? The communicative function of episodic memory. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 2017, 1-93.

Veissière, S. & St-Onge, J. *Remembering the Future in the Age of Trauma*,

T Nov 24 – Final projects presentations

Final essay and self-evaluation due on MyCourses

