Epidemiological and Nativist Accounts in the Cognitive Study of Culture: A Commentary on Pyysiäinen’s Innate Fear of Bering’s Ghosts

JUSTIN L. BARRETT*

ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS

keyword 1, keyword 2

Jesse Bering’s article on how people understand the mental states of dead people makes an important contribution to the cognitive study of culture by tidily illustrating how commonly-occurring cognitive mechanisms might encourage the entertainment and spread of cultural concepts. His work, along with Ilkka Pyysiäinen’s learned concerns regarding Bering’s claims underscore a number of issues pertinent to cognition and culture generally as well as the cognitive science of religion more specifically. I will comment on two of these issues: the relationship between epidemiological and nativist approaches, and in what sense concepts might be said to arise without important cultural input.

*Justin L. Barrett, 170 Spring House Road, Goshen, VA 24439, USA; e-mail: justinlb@umich.edu
On Epidemiological and Nativist Accounts of Cultural Phenomena

When cognitivists attempt to explain recurrent cultural patterns, i.e., the recurrence of similar ideas and behaviors within and across people groups, one basic strategy unites their efforts. This strategy is to identify the commonly recurrent (sometimes called “universal”) cognitive architecture that makes cultural thought and behavior possible. Whether exploring racism (Hirschfeld 1996), stories and rhymes (Rubin 1995), religion (Atran 2002; Boyer 2001; Guthrie 1993), practical knowledge about plants and animals (Atran 1990), or ghosts (Bering 2002), describing how non-cultural features of human minds encourage the acquisition of concepts and behaviors has proven extremely fruitful.

Within this general strategy at least two emphases sometimes receive favor: epidemiological accounts and what I will call nativist accounts. Epidemiological accounts (e.g., Sperber 1996) bear the insight that the bulk of explaining any thought that might be called “cultural” requires explaining the recurrence of the concept across individuals. If a concept is not shared, it cannot be meaningfully labeled “cultural.” Thus, the epidemiologist of representations focuses on cognitive factors that allow for the successful transmission (including communication, memory, and retrieval) of ideas and resulting practices. Epidemiological accounts often read as selectionist accounts – many different ideas and behaviors come and go in the world, what we really want to know is what makes some survive (and spread) better than others. Like many selectionist accounts in biology, epidemiological accounts of culture eschew talk of “origins.” Where a trait (in biology) or idea (in culture) comes from doesn’t matter. What matters is why it persists.

Nativist accounts generally appeal to how the cognitive substrate in individuals – usually early developing mental machinery – produces particular ideas and resulting behaviors. I refer to these accounts as “nativist” because they rely on internal factors instead of environmental factors (such as the communication of ideas) for the bulk of their explanatory power. By calling these accounts nativist, I do not mean to imply that these theorists necessarily believe that the cognitive architecture they appeal to is wholly biologically determined or present at birth or universal. It may be that some epidemiological accounts claim hard-wired structures and na-