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# Are psychology's tribes ready to form a nation?

Daniel Gilbert

**Collaboration between social psychologists and cognitive neuroscientists is giving rise to a new approach that its practitioners call 'social cognitive neuroscience'. Scientists from each discipline are using the theories and techniques of the other to generate new answers to fundamental questions about attitudes, beliefs, the self, moral judgment, and other issues. Is this interdisciplinary endeavor an exercise in wishful thinking and good intentions, or is it a preview of psychology's future?**

Several decades ago, an eminent psychologist defined the field of psychology as 'a bunch of men standing on piles of their own crap, waving their hands and yelling "Look at me, look at me!"' Fortunately, things have changed quite a bit over the years, and the field is no longer composed entirely of men. The criticism is overstated, of course, but it does highlight one of psychology's most troubling shortcomings, namely, that psychologists often ignore work outside their own laboratories, usually ignore work outside their own sub-specialties, and almost always ignore work outside their own discipline. This parochialism is especially pronounced during transitional moments in the field's evolution, when the excitement generated by new ideas and new technologies seems to justify the sweeping away of history.

The emergence of cognitive neuroscience was one of the signal events in 20th century psychology, and psychologists have good reason to be optimistic about its future. How brains make minds is the critical missing piece in psychology's analysis of human behavior, and during the next few decades, cognitive neuroscience is sure to produce many useful insights and perhaps a few stunning ones. Alas, if this new enterprise is anything like its ancestors, its early impulse will be to invent itself by ignoring as much of the rest

of psychology as it can get away with, and there is already some evidence of this. Descartes made many errors, but failing to read his peers was not among them.

Given psychology's tendency to start each revolution from scratch, it is heartening to note that some researchers are making a concerted effort to ensure that cognitive neuroscience does not make the same mistake. In a recent article, Kevin Ochsner (a cognitive neuroscientist at Stanford University, CA, USA) and Matthew Lieberman (a social psychologist at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, USA) have issued a clarion call for the integration of the neurological, cognitive and social levels of analysis [1]. Like most clarion calls, theirs is full of good intentions. Unlike most clarion calls, it is also full of good ideas about how to carry out that mission, and full of evidence that the integration is already underway. Ochsner and Lieberman review several problems on which cognitive neuroscientists and social psychologists are now working together, for example, the role of amygdala activation in stereotyping, hemispheric asymmetries and self-knowledge, amnesia and attitude change, and the role of the lateral fusiform gyrus in dispositional attribution. In each instance, Ochsner and Lieberman demonstrate how the two fields are collaborating, converging, and informing one another. The reason for this mutual attraction is obvious: cognitive neuroscience offers a new set of tools with which to examine enduring problems and holds out the prospect of grounding behavior in biology, whilst social psychology offers a treasure trove of theory and data about the kinds of problems our social brains were evolved to solve, and the kinds of solutions they have actually generated. The fruits of this social-cognitive neuroscience approach are already clear: Articles have appeared

in leading journals, conferences on social cognitive neuroscience (most notably those sponsored by Dartmouth University and UCLA) have attracted bright young people and well-established leaders from both disciplines, and federal granting agencies are paying the kind of attention that counts.

As with any marriage of true minds, this one admits of impediments, and these have mainly to do with the misgivings and misunderstandings that naturally arise whenever different tribes meet at the watering hole. In the privacy of their laboratories, social psychologists often marvel at the naïveté of neuroscientific research on 'social cognition', which all too often assumes that anything that hasn't been studied in a scanner hasn't been studied at all. Cognitive neuroscientists are similarly likely to roll their eyes at the naïveté of social psychologists, who happily (or haplessly) develop mentalistic theories without stopping to ask whether the 'machine' is actually capable of running the software. All of this may be true, but Ochsner and Lieberman have shown that some scientists have set aside their tribal prejudices long enough to recognize that although both disciplines can get along just fine without the other, both are enhanced when they do what they do best in each other's company. If Ochsner and Lieberman are right, psychologists might someday find themselves standing atop one giant heap, yelling 'Look at us! Look at us!'

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