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Can There be Cognitive Science Without Anthropology?

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We are contributing to the debate on the role of anthropology in and for cognitive science (see *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 4(3), 2012). Although the conceptual distancing by some anthropologists from linguistics, psychology, and cognition diminished the holism of anthropology, the recent trend that reduces culture, a very complex phenomenon, to biological fitness and/or phenotypic transmission has deformed and derailed the anthropological project (El Guindi & Read, 2012; Read 2012). Culture is a coherent web of shared knowledge about all aspects of life and death—sacred, secular, spatial, temporal, political, social, and religious—integrated as a whole.

Anthropological cognitive research never ceased. At times it is not visible to cognitive scientists due to labeling or publishing venues. In the 1960s, cognitive anthropology was known as Ethnoscience and has been part of the historical development of anthropological knowledge. The structural approach has taken anthropology beyond method, elicitation, and segmented cultural domains to holistic structures that reveal underlying cognitive dimensions.

Knowledge about how human minds work has increased dramatically, utilizing different modes of inquiry. Anthropology has contributed much to this enterprise, both with respect to cognitive science (Wexler, 2006) and even physics (Capra, 1996). We see this in the shared culture that is part of humanness and whose expression has cognitive underpinnings determined by the size of working memory, thereby precluding the non-human primates from having anything but a superficial analogue of human culture (Read 2012).

In our research we are not merely interested in how “people construe their world by the way they talk about it,” but in how human knowledge is expressed through complex, universal cognitive processes of categorizing and re-categorizing, as revealed concretely (explicitly) in various human domains such as kinship activity (El Guindi 2006, 2010, 2011, 2012) and terminology (Read 2001, 2007), myth, ritual, space, time, etc. (El Guindi 1973, 1977a,b, 1982; El Guindi & Read 1979). These creative processes of structuring

and restructuring occur within and across social-cultural domains. Our analytic formulations reveal their cognitive basis.

There is an inherent, anthropological (not simply cultural) aspect to cognitive science. We ask: “Can there be cognitive science without anthropology?” We argue there cannot.

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