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A Companion to  
Cognitive  
Anthropology



Edited by David B. Kronenfeld,  
Giovanni Bennardo,  
Victor C. de Munck,  
and Michael D. Fischer

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# A Companion to Cognitive Anthropology

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# A Companion to Cognitive Anthropology

Edited by  
David B. Kronenfeld,  
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# ***Introduction***

This Companion volume is aimed at providing an overview of where cognitive anthropology is today and at giving a sense of where the field is going. The overview necessarily entails some attention to what in the past shaped the field's current nature. Cognitive anthropology, while clearly a sub-field of cultural anthropology, is and has been closely related to linguistics and linguistic anthropology. Additionally cognitive anthropology was one of the important early constituents of cognitive sciences - a connection that we aim at revivifying. Thus we see this volume as speaking importantly to elements of mainstream anthropology, linguistics, and cognitive sciences, as well as more narrowly to the intersection of the three.

Cognitive anthropology is a diverse field, and that diversity is well reflected in this volume - as one can see both from the range of topics and from the range of citations in the various contributions. To give a fuller range of this diversity, later on in this introduction I will talk a little about what we were *not* able to include in the volume. But under this diversity lie some consistent elements: a concern with culturally shared and variable distributed complex cognitive systems, including how such systems work, how they are structured, how they differ from one culture to another, how they are learned and passed on, and how they are adapted by people to contexts. As we shall see, different researchers concentrate more on some of these concerns than on others. The focus on cultural (or collective) vs. individual knowledge distinguishes cognitive anthropology from cognitive psychology, though, obviously, the one builds on the other and the line between the two can be subtle.

The stuff of cognitive anthropology is the stuff of human societies and cultures, and thus ultimately entails all the

complexity that human groups can embody. And, to remind us of the obvious academic disciplines are human groups with specific social organizations and with specific shared and distributed cognitive systems. As anthropologists (or linguists or cognitive scientists) we are no different from the people we study or model; we have no privileged position beyond the power of the theories and models that we create to account for target phenomena. At the same time, as maybe particularly curious and rigorous people, we are in a position to call on all of the folk wisdom and folk insights that have been produced by our various cultural histories and by our interpersonal experience. Thus, at one extreme, anthropology includes the interpretative approach that Thomas treats (Chapter 22), while, at the other, we get the complex models such as that of Schank and Abelson (1977; see discussion in Chapter 12). In another direction, we get the kind of careful delineation of cognitive differences across cultures (Ross and Medin, Chapter 19).

The Companion is organized in parts. Part I – a “how we got here and where we are” section – treats the history of cognitive anthropology, the role of cognition and linguistic thought in cognitive anthropology, and the nature and types of collective cognitive structures. In Chapter 1 Benjamin Blount provides a broad and insightful overview of the history of cognitive anthropology. Naomi Quinn, in Chapter 2, provides a more personal perspective on the history of the important strand to which she has been central. Chapter 3, by Jürg Wassmann and his colleagues, describes – in a rich analytic overview – the cognitive context of cognitive anthropology. Janet Keller (Chapter 4) provides an extensive coverage of scholarship in anthropology and related fields pertaining to the relationship, in a cultural context, between language and thought. In Chapter 5 Giovanni Bennardo and David Kronenfeld discuss the types and range of collective representations that are important to cognitive

anthropology and related parts of linguistics. Part I concludes with Chapter 6, John Gatewood's use of three relatively prosaic topics to provide clear and insightful explication of what we mean by collective representations, and how these relate to personal knowledge.

Part II covers methodologies. In Chapter 7 Penn Handwerker leads off with data collection - not just the methods but also how to approach the enterprise. James Boster (Chapter 8) carefully examines the interpretation of data in cognitive anthropology, especially in contrast with cognitive psychology. Kateryna Maltseva and Roy D'Andrade, in Chapter 9, explore in depth the uses of one form of data (multi-item scales) and its analysis. Chapter 10, by Stephen Borgatti and Daniel Halgin, provides a very clear and understandable explanation of how consensus analysis works and what it can be used for. In Chapter 11 Benjamin Colby uses a discussion of narrative structures and their analysis to offer us, also, a neuroscience-based approach to mind and culture, including the role of narrative in these. And, finally, in Chapter 12 Michael Fischer and David Kronenfeld offer characterizations of a wide range of simulations, models, and simulation studies, with a view to showing the usefulness of these for enabling an experimental approach to the study of collective cognitive systems.

In Part III we turn to the cognitive structures of various specific domains. In Chapter 13 Dwight Read looks at the role of mathematic structure in the organization of cultural domains including Zapotec wedding ritual, kinship terminologies, "sidedness" in moiety systems, and so forth. F. K. L. Chit Hlaing focuses on the formal, mathematical analysis of kinterm systems in Chapter 14, relating the attributes of kinterms to the system by which they are defined, and while doing so provides a history of relevant kinship studies. Andrea Bender and Sieghard Beller (Chapter