The Intuitive Anthropologist:

Why "Intuitive Psychology" Falls Short for Making Sense of Those Who Are Different

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We humans are not very good at understanding people who are different than ourselves. Academic psychology reflects this bias. Historically, most of our research has been on undergraduates at elite western universities. This bias has also influenced our concept of the "intuitive psychologist," which is the way we typically describe how one person understands the mental life of another. However, if we want to understand how people make sense of those who are different than themselves, it is perhaps worth noting that the field which is most invested in understanding people from different backgrounds is not psychology. It is anthropology. In this paper, I present the idea of the Intuitive Anthropologist. I argue that what is important for understanding people with different worldviews isn't a bunch of fancy mental gymnastics for mentalizing, theory of mind, or "putting yourself in their shoes." Rather, what matters is getting better data about other people's milieu and their experience of it. While a willingness for deep thinking is necessary, what really matters for this process is the motivation to gather and evaluate these data. While empathy works fine between people of similar demographics with a mostly shared worldview, if we want to be better at understanding people from a range of backgrounds we need to develop a broader theory of what it means to make sense of those who are different.

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1. The Intuitive Psychologist and Her Shortcomings

It is perhaps more than a bit curious that the term conventionally used in the psychological literature to describe the process by which one human goes about understanding the behavior of another is "intuitive psychology." What the rest of the humans are doing, so the idea goes, is more or less the same thing we academic psychologists are doing, just without the requisite training. It is one thing to find one's own interests reflected in the lives of others— what's the point of having conspecifics, after all, if you can't share a point of mutual concern every once in a while?—but it seems rather chauvinistic, or at least a bit self-centered, to stake out such a large piece of professional real estate to investigate such a possibility. What is most concerningly incongruous here is that so much of the field of social cognition consists in studying the notion of "intuitive psychology," yet psychology is only one of the many disciplines invested in understanding the nature of human behavior. It is also happens to be the one that *we* study. And so, its obvious and unmistakable superiority over the other human sciences aside, it seems possible that we have been studying the mirror just a little too closely. In their near infinite capacity for foolishness, perhaps the rest of the humans have taken a page or two from the textbooks of the other human sciences as well.

What exactly a psychologist is and what precisely she does has shifted rather a lot since the term "intuitive psychology" was first coined by Lee Ross (1977). Psychology has always endeavored to be an experimental science. But the idea of what constitutes a proper experiment has evolved. It has become increasingly apparently that the place for an informal psychology— one without preregistrations, robust statistics, and computational models—has grown smaller, if not disappeared altogether. The days of psychology's Wild West are over. Where once were only

settlements we now have civilizations, and with civilization comes new strictures for how things are to be done. The realization that we cannot be good professional psychologists without these modern trimmings does not bode well for the concept that we might be good intuitive psychologists without them either.

But neither is it damning. For the intuitive psychologist and the professional psychologists participate in different markets. The intuitive psychologist is in the business of forecasting the behavior of other human beings, and if that forecast happens to be off then, well, that just makes for better television. Because there is always a next episode, the replication is, in a sense, built in. The professional psychologist's stake on the other hand isn't in successfully describing human behavior. It is in publishing papers. The only behavior that needs to be predicted is how one's peers are going to respond in their reviews. That robust statistics are necessary for the latter doesn't mean they're required for the former.

Rather, the much more embarrassing revelation in the field—embarrassing because we have not yet quite made enough progress in figuring out how to deal with it—is who exactly we should be studying and how precisely we should be talking about them. This is the problem of studying WEIRD—Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic—populations (Henrich et al., 2010). It no longer feels appropriate to begin the Methods section with "Twenty-four undergraduates from the University of…" and the Discussion section with "These data suggest that people tend to…" And while the gist of how to address this problem seems easy enough to work out (let's just source participants from more diverse populations), the reason that it's not so straightforward to implement has to do with the core assumptions of how a psychological science ought to function. It is a fundamental tenet of psychology that the mind is everywhere the same.

This is not to say that everyone thinks the same thoughts, but that the basic mechanism by which those thoughts come about is present whether you're an American of an advantaged socioeconomic background, an American of a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, a member of the Chinese nouveau riche, or a polyandrous Tibetan. (This is also, for the record, why we can run an experiment on rats and expect to learn something about humans.) It's not that culture doesn't matter. Obviously, it does. It's that there should be something common to all *Homo sapiens* independent of the locale, language, or economic means into which they were born. We generally call that thing the mind, and discovering just what sort of thing it is is what psychology is well-suited to study. So while we can all admit that we're missing something important when we only study one demographic of human, it is not always easy to say exactly what it is.

This is a cause for blushing not only for the professional psychologist, but for the intuitive psychologist as well. Her goal, after all, is to intuit a theory of mind. And what such a theory—even if it is a statistically insignificant one, based on lousy designs—purports to describe is the noetic fundamentals by which human beings play the cognitive game. While us academic psychologists have at least read the WEIRD paper and are appropriately wary, the intuitive psychologist tends not to be epistemically humble in the face of generalizing from a biased sample. An intuitive theory of mind, in a sense, is a theory of rationality—"this is what reasonable people do"—and the inference tends to be that anyone who doesn't abide by those rules isn't simply playing a different game, but rather that they don't understand the rules. What a *true* theory of mind would entail—for both the professional and the intuitive psychologist—is not only a set of rules to describe how people play the game, but many sets of rules for many

different games. Maybe even, in the fullness of time, the performance stats for individual players.

But in the meantime, while we're still living in sin, it is worth taking a look at those among us who have taken a professional interest in finding the humans who are the most different from oneself and set about trying to discern the best way to make sense of whatever it is those unfamiliar individuals are up to. Theirs is not so much a theory of mind, but a theory of whatever isn't mind: the thing that's missing once you've accounted for what is everywhere the same. While we psychologists have been over here conducting studies on our locally-sourced sample of undergraduates, they've been throwing darts at the globe until they hit a spot with a name they've never heard of. The reason we might care about this dart-throwing group has been working on—particularly in a way that it wouldn't have occurred for us to do before—is that we no longer live in a world where it's acceptable to maintain the isolationist policy of constructing a theory of mind only of one's own nation, own religion, own culture, and own political party. We, as a society, need to be better at making sense of those who are different than ourselves. The group of professional scholars who have invested their intellectual resources in that project for the last century isn't psychologists. It is anthropologists.

2. So, What Have the Anthropologists Been Up To?

Before giving an account of what exactly the Intuitive Anthropologist does, it's worth going over, as a point of reference, what the professional anthropologists have been doing, since we tend to go to different conferences.

The origin story of the methods of fieldwork in cultural anthropology (the methodology, specifically, of ethnography) begins with the Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski washing up on the shores of Kiriwina, a remote island in the Trobriands of the South Pacific. Before Malinowski's expedition—recounted in his 1922 *Argonauts of the South Pacific*—the procedure for anthropological fieldwork consisted primarily in colonialists going on holiday. A troop of white men—always white; always men; always Christian, though they varied as to whether they were trying to impose that attribute on the locals—would head out into the bush for the day to observe a ritual or two before retiring to the veranda to enjoy an evening martini. Malinowski was the one who, more or less single-handedly, turned anthropology from a kind of safari into a kind of science. His *Argonauts* was for the study of non-western culture what Chomsky's (1959) critique of Skinner was for the study of mind.

The introductory chapter to *Argonauts* provided what has turned out to be a sort of mission statement for cultural anthropology (Geertz, 1983). The goal of anthropology is, as Malinowski saw it, "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world."[2] And while "grasping a point of view" sounds conspicuously like the kind of thing a psychologist might want to do, the final clause in Malinowski's statement reveals a crucial difference in approach. The statement "*his* world" admits that the native occupies a world that's very different than the one occupied by the anthropologist. And the statement "*his* vision" admits that even when the native and the anthropologist peer out at what is ostensibly the same cultural landscape, they see two different things. The world is a specific one, as is the person seeing it. And it is not just enough to describe the connection between person and world, the sensory

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[2] I'd ask you, please, to forgive the sexist language—though not too leniently, as it was, as any student of anthropology can tell you, not the worst thing Malinowski said; that, however, is a story for another time.

mediation between reality and the agent perceiving it. You have to describe the specific person (or at least the kind of person) *and* the specific world—that mapping from specific to specific matters. This is not necessarily an assumption in psychology.

Malinowski's opening to *Argonauts* not only set the vision for anthropology but it also gave a first pass over the how-to guide for achieving it. The crucial directive of "proper conditions for ethnographic work," according to Malinowski, was to cut "oneself off from the company of other white men." According to Anthony Forge (1967), Malinowski's innovations to this end were two-fold: the language and the tent. Malinowski was, in fact, the first anthropologist to take seriously the idea that it might be useful to learn the language of the people he was studying, allowing him to communicate directly instead through the mediation of a missionary or a well-traveled local. Previous "anthropologists," such as Edward Tylor—the it-was-his-idea father of British anthropology—realized that it was necessary to book a ticket to the place one was keen on learning about. But neither Tylor nor his contemporaries fully appreciated the utility of speaking with the locals. Before that, speculation was limited to characterizations such as Thomas Hobbes' (1651)—the natural state of man is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"—made while one's feet are set up on a study wooden desk in Oxford. In retrospect, it is unsurprising that the ability to talk to the people whose lives you intend to study is a useful tool in the ethnographic arsenal.

Malinowski's other invention is perhaps a bit more appreciable. To get a sense of the way one lives, it is not enough to be a part-time interloper. It requires, as the method became known post-Malinowski, serving as a participant-observant. In "participant-observation," one doesn't have the luxury of absconding from native society when the going gets tough (read: when the

mosquitos come out). Instead, the ethnographer is obliged to be there for the whole thing of native life—the good, the bad, and the mosquito-infested. In Malinowski's words, this meant that as he went on his morning walk through the village, "I could see intimate details of family life, of toilet, cooking, taking of meals; I could see the arrangements for the day's work, people starting on their errands, or groups of men and women busy at some manufacturing tasks. Quarrels, jokes, family scenes, events usually trivial, sometimes dramatic but always significant, formed the atmosphere of my daily life, as well as of theirs." To make room only for the rituals that don't impede happy hour is to see the obviously big stuff but to miss out on the weaved fabric of social existence.

As is obvious to us moderns—and as Malinowski and every anthropologist since has appreciated—getting inside the native's own mind is, strictly speaking, an impossible task for the non-native. To suggest otherwise dramatically underestimates the task. The notion of participant-observation attempts at least to put the ball in play, if not smack it over the left field fence, in two ways. To "participate" is to experience the same set of events that the native experiences. There is, at the very least, a common ground. To "observe" is to appreciate those events beyond their immediate emotional value. That is, to take a step back and analyze them—in Malinowski's case, for the legitimate function they serve within the culture's purview. Participation is about investing oneself in local occasions: a subjective appreciation for what's going on. Observation implies that one divests oneself from those occasions enough to gain an objective perspective on them. A successful ethnographic account consists in striking the right balance between the two. And, for the most part, no one has disputed that basic tenet since the time of Malinowski's return from his voyage.

Participant-observation is what a cultural anthropologist does while among the natives. But what does she do when she gets back home and must summarize what she encountered to her colleagues? The general answer comes from Clifford Geertz: "thick description."

To give you an idea of the scope of influence of the notion of thick description (since you're unlikely to have encountered it in a psychology-based curriculum; I sure didn't): Geertz's (1973) collection of essays on the topic (*The Interpretation of Cultures*) has garnered, as of May 2020, 105,570 citations. In contrast, Kahneman & Tversky's (1979) *"Prospect Theory,"* perhaps the most influential psychological theory in a comparable time-frame, boasts a mere 59,405 citations. I only point that out to illustrate that "thick description" is not a little-known, backwater theory. It is a foundation stone of the qualitative social sciences.

What exactly thick description entails isn't all that easy to explain. What's easier to explain is its implied opposite: thin description. To describe something thinly is to capture only one aspect of it. A thin description of an economy would be its GDP. A thick description of an economy would also, at least, give a more robust description of its overall health, relate those measures the historical forces that produces them, and perhaps even provide some insight about what it is like to be a poor person or a rich person within it. A thick description of a culture would provide not only quantitative measurements but qualitative describes; not only an event's significance within a larger societal scope, but also the feeling of what it's like to participate in it; not only the specifics of what happened in a particular case, but the broad strokes of what happens in the general case. It is, undoubtedly, a high bar to reach.

Setting aside the question of what it means for a faculty member of a university anthropology department to perform a thick description of a culture—which would be a little bit

like asking a psychology faculty to provide a holistic theory of how the mind works; some would gladly offer one, but plenty of their colleagues would step up to contest its validity—what would it mean for the Intuitive Anthropologist to do something that resembles thickly describing a culture that is not her own? The answer from the anthropological perspective on what it takes to do thick description well is perhaps counterintuitive to the psychologist. It isn't a function of general intelligence (as many things are), or of conscientiousness (as everything else seems to be), or even of working memory capacity. Success in getting a feel for a foreign culture is a function of what many anthropologists, including Geertz (1988), called "being there."

While the point of thick description is that there is a lot to it, what it means to "be there" is readily apparent. It means being *there*, as opposed to being somewhere else. The only way to get to know a place—and its people—is by getting the stamp on your passport and checking it out for yourself. Provocative though Hobbes's theories have proved, the best place to grasp the nature of people living without the constraints of the modern state isn't the highly state-dependent, institutionalized microcosm of Oxford. It is among people who actually live without the constraints of a modern state. The difference between people who really get it versus those who don't is, more often than not, whether or not they've been there.

The good news is that "being there" is conceptually straightforward. While there is certain nuance to be had—Edward Tylor (1871), as we noted, got the passport stamp, but neglected to learn the native language; "baby steps," as they say—it's worthwhile to paint a black and white portrait of those who go versus those who stay home. The latter must always rely on postcards from the former. The bad news, however, is that "being there," for anthropologists—at least for anyone who, like Malinowski, does the necessary work of setting

up shop in the village—can be a daunting task. It requires not only a long trip (a very long boat ride in Malinowski's case to get from England to Australia), but a long stay. And a long stay among a group of people who—and this is the whole point—you don't quite have a lot in common with.

It helps in doing a solid ethnography to come with some good theories in your back pocket. It also helps to be smart. But all the smarts in the world ain't going to tell you about something you haven't seen. More than anything else, the competitive advantage that one anthropologist has over another—or anyone else, for that matter—in conducting an ethnography of a specific culture is that she was the one who put in the effort to go there and figure out what's going on. Everyone else was off somewhere else, concerned with other things.

3. Whence Our Modern Account of Perspective-Taking.

So if that gives us a feel, however cursory, for what the professional anthropologist does —providing a "thick description" of what it was like to "be there"—then what does the intuitive psychologist do? Having outlined the territory, we can get to concept of Intuitive Anthropology by triangulation. The purview of the intuitive psychologist is, depending on which side of the die you happen to be looking at, known variously as theory of mind, mentalizing, mind-reading, attribution, empathy, cognitive empathy, intersubjectivity, mental state inference, action understanding, perspective-taking, the intentional stance, and, perhaps most generally, putting oneself in another person's shoes. It is, at its core, a means of getting a look at an individual's private mental affairs through inspection of publicly available signals.

Any psychological account that makes reference to anything smacking of empathy, shoe-swapping, and the like would be remiss not to start with Adam Smith's (1759) *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. What draws Smith's attention to the problem is that "we have no immediate experience of what other men feel." Our feelings are our own, and so any means we have of evaluating anyone else's must come from some sort of turning of the mental gears, and not direct perception. In particular, "imagination." Smith asks us to imagine that our brother is "upon the rack." We survey his predicament and cringe. But we know that he feels pain, but not because we directly feel the crunch of our own arm. So how do we know what he feels? By imagining what it would feel like if we were to find ourselves upon the rack. We're not so much reading our brother's feelings, as we are reading the feelings his situation is likely to inspire.

As Smith wrote:

"By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation; we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments; we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them."

Smith's position, in short, is that empathy "does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it."

Which is to say that he, like so many other ingenious minds of the past, claimed something sufficiently vague as to be easily reconciled with whatever is to be discovered later on. Nonetheless, there is something sympathetic to Malinowski's "*his* vision of *his* world" in Smith's account. Empathy is not an entering into true fellow-feeling with our fellow human, but an appreciation of the situation in which she finds herself. The situation is at least as important as

the experience of it, and the best we can do is to imagine how we would perceive it if it were, in fact, us that was experiencing it. If empathy cannot "carry us beyond our own person," as Smith wrote, it is important for our own person to be as close to "being there" for the situation as possible.

As scholars found this argument about the invisible hand of empathy less enthralling than Smith's arguments about the more sure-handed grasp of the free market, we can safely fast forward almost a century to John Stuart Mill. Mill's fascination with empathy came from just how little Jeremy Bentham had of it. Mill and Bentham are known for founding the school of thought of Utilitarianism. The chief principle of Utilitarianism—"the greatest good for the greatest number"—encourages us to take the God's-eye view, forsake the perspective of the biased individual, and consider all points of view as equivalent statistics. It was Bentham's brain-child; Mill brought about its apotheosis. But Mill (1838) also understood its limitations in a way Bentham did not. Bentham, Mill said, lacked what great fiction writers[3] have: the ability "to conceive the absent as if it were present, the imaginary as if it were real, and to clothe it in the feelings which, if it were indeed real, it would bring along with it. This is the power by which one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another."

Bentham was, in many senses, the ur-economist. Whereas Adam Smith at least prefaced the *Wealth of Nations* with his *Moral Sentiments*, Bentham could only follow the dollars, not the sentiments. As Mill described:

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[3] Speaking of great fictions writers, Bentham was caricatured by Charles Dickens, in *Hard Times*, as the character of Thomas Gradgrind. Dickens introduced Gradgrind as "A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over....With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic." His tagline was "Fact, fact, fact!"

"By this limits, accordingly, Bentham's knowledge of human nature is bounded. It is wholly empirical; and the empiricism of one who has had little experience." Elaborating that: "He never knew prosperity and adversity, passion nor satiety: he never had even the experiences which sickness gives; he lived from childhood to the age of eighty-five in boyish health. He knew no dejection, no heaviness of heart. He never felt life a sore and a weary burthen. He was a boy to the last."

Because it sounds like something that could've been written so recently, Mill's account is worth quoting at length:

"Other ages and other nations were a blank to [Bentham] for purposes of instruction. He measured them but by one standard; their knowledge of facts, and their capability to take correct views of utility, and merge all other objects in it… Knowing so little of human feelings, he knew still less of the influences by which those feelings are formed: all the more subtle workings both of the mind upon itself, and of external things upon the mind, escaped him; and no one, probably, who, in a highly instructed age, ever attempted to give a rule to all human conduct, set out with a more limited conception either of the agencies by which human conduct *is*, or of those by which it *should* be, influenced. " Mill concluded that "He was a man both of remarkable endowments for philosophy, and of remarkable deficiencies for it: fitted, beyond almost any man, for drawing from his premises, conclusions not only correct, but sufficiently precise and specific to be practical: but whose general conception of human nature and life, furnished him with an usually slender stock of premises."

What one gets if one describes everything that is mind and nothing that is not is, essentially, a portrait of Jeremy Bentham. Bentham's sense of how people worked—or should work—was unmuzdled by the complicated realities of how they actually do. It is unsurprising, then, that he contended the thing that was describing as "rationality." It is the narrow-minded

contention that everyone who does not do things in the way that seems best to me is doing it wrong. It is not an uncommon position to take in the history of psychology. Integral to the project of constructing a theory of mind is having, unlike Bentham, a robust stock of premises to work from.

The notion of empathy in its modern iterations—Smith called it "sympathy"; "empathy," as a term, appears beginning in the 1910s and catches on the 1950s—is a hard thread to follow from these first echos through the middle of the twentieth century. Our English term empathy was actually inspired by the German *einfühlung*—literally, "feeling in"—which is what aesthetic theorists thought was happening when a critic looks at a piece of art and intuits the subjective states of artist who produced it. Psychologists did not initially find much use for the idea. William James (1890)—whose table of contents for his *Principles of Psychology* might as well be the syllabus for a modern day Psych 101—didn't really broach the subject until Chapter 28, the final chapter of the second volume. Psychologists, evidently, needed time to get a grip on their own job description before telling others how to do it.

The modern psychological account of intuitive psychology (i.e., what researchers often cite first in their papers on this kind of thing) begins with Heider & Simmel (1944). Their study was less an experiment than an optical illusion played out temporally. They showed participants a motion picture of shapes moving around on a plain background. The illusion was that the movement of the shapes presents itself as a narrative. Mental concepts could be attributed to entities unlikely to possess them. The big triangle was a bully. The small circle was meek. The trick of Heider and Simmel's demonstration was that it took imbuing clearly inanimate objects with animate characteristics to point out that this was something humans had a knack for. Like

the fish in water, the mentalistic creature is the last to notice how unique are the mentalistic capacities of its conspecifics.

Necessarily skipping around a bit, the likening of this capacity—inferring unobservable mental forces on evidence of observable behavior—to what psychologists do was formalized by Ross (1977). What Ross takes special care to point out is that people tend to attribute the causes of an individual's behavior to the individual herself. That is, at least, for others. The other car (itself an inanimate object, like a cutout triangle) cuts you off because being an asshole is a trait inherent to its driver's nature. We're willing to be more generous with our scope of attribution when it comes to our own behavior. We cut other people off, in short, because, *sorry*—I had to make the exit. This is the fundamental attribution error. The attribution is that *our* decisions are influenced by constraints; *other's* by dispositions. The error is that such an asymmetry doesn't hold up to scrutiny. It is fundamental because it's the most egregious one we tend to make about this sort of thing.

That most of the interesting stuff happens inside the head is a prejudice held not only by the intuitive psychologist but also by most professional ones. Thus the next major milestone in mentalizing scholarship was not the "situational stance" but the "intentional stance" (Dennett, 1989). Dennett's idea combined Heider and Simmel's insight that there are multiple ways of interpreting a scene with Ross's insight that the one we favor is mentalistic. Dennett contrasts the intentional stance with, for example, the "physical stance"—in which you'd predict what happens not on the basis of who wants what ("I have to make that exit") but on the basis of calculations of friction when rubber meets road at a particular angle. We are also, to some extent, intuitive physicists, but only when the blocks are obviously behaving according to the force of

gravity rather than forces of intention (Hamrick et al., 2011). Dennett's intuitive stance gave a useful sketch of what the intuitive psychologist does. Baker et al (2009; 2017) formalized it.

(I recognize that I'm skipping over rather a lot here. But the mechanisms of how we think about one another is nothing if not a multifarious beast, and I want something specific to take aim at. This simplification will, at least, leave everyone equally dissatisfied. For the purpose of this paper: What exactly we mean when we talk about the modern intuitive psychologist is an account of the means by which she infers another agent's mental states conditional upon some observed behavior.)

Baker and his colleagues give us a calculus by which this happens. It is that an observer interprets the actions of a target agent as a joint function of that agent's beliefs and goals. Observe the actions, then work out what must've been the underlying beliefs and goals—on the generous assumption that the agent in question was leveraging the beliefs rationally to achieve the goals. Beliefs are informed by what exists in the environment, specifically that part of it which is perceptually available to the agent. General world knowledge—which is exogenous to the situation, and generally taken to be shared between the observer and the target (everyone subscribes to the same consensus belief about which direction gravity flows)—also informs beliefs. General preferences (e.g., not being hungry) inform situation-specific goals (e.g., obtaining food). It is, so the theory goes, by spinning such a web of Bayesian dependency that the intuitive psychologist performs her duty.

The delightful capability of this model is that it successfully explains the entire range of behavior found on the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Students gather at particular food trucks. "Why?" asks the intuitive psychologist. To achieve certain ends according

to a rational calculation based on particular beliefs (Baker et al. 2017). In a similar manner, we expect student to attend class when the expected utility of doing so is higher than staying in bed. We believe patterns of human migration can be explained by considering the negative utility of residing in New England on balance with obtaining one's ideal faculty job. An agent's selection of a suboptimal pint of beer is accounted for by the visual occlusion of a more rewarding tap. Most behavior in Cambridge, Massachusetts, it turns out, can in fact be explained by recourse to the principle of rational action.

But in providing a comprehension explain of *how* all this happens, this model misdirects our attention from *what* we're making such sophisticated inferences about. It assumes that what is complex is contained within this particular situation. All other considerations are extraneous and get relegated to the catch-all of "world knowledge." The tacit implication is that, to the intuitive psychologist, the other person's worldview is either already known, or not important. This is where the intuitive psychologist and the intuitive anthropologist part ways.

The point of Malinowski's "being there" wasn't about having the right algorithm for inferring intentions from actions. Malinowski didn't come back with a diagram of Bayesian dependencies. The secret sauce isn't to have the right scheme of what's conditional on what. It's to have enough information for any sort of conditional inference in the first place. What, in short, Malinowski had that no anthropologist before him had wasn't perspicacity. It was data.

The point is that what it takes to understand people that are different than oneself—what the intuitive anthropologist does well that the intuitive psychologist does not—is not fancy mental gymnastics. It is a willingness to engage a world different than one's own. Understanding people from a different cultural milieu—be it from a separate social group, religion, country,

economic stratum, or political affiliation—isn't a problem of theory of mind, per se. It is a problem of motivation. Whether or not one "goes there" to collect the proper data, as opposed to sitting at home and conducting an arm-chair analysis of what is going on out in the world, is a function of whether or not one is sufficiently motivated to get out of one's chair. A Democrat doesn't understand a Republican's position by retweeting a clip from Fox News, but by—and what else should an academic really expect here?—reading a book by a Republican senator written for a Republican voter base and asking those Republicans what they made of it. Anything short of that is refusing to pitch a tent and speak the language.

What it takes, then, to understand points of view outside of our own isn't perspective-taking. You can think as hard as you want about what it's like to be in the other person's shoes. There is no algorithm, no inference mechanism that will get you from here to there. So, how should we go about making sense of perspectives which aren't our own? Answer: get better data. And while describing the mechanics of this algorithm won't be flashy enough to grace the pages of *Nature Human Behavior,* this implies a very simple solution. The best way to understand the perspective of someone from a different social background isn't to sit there and think real hard about what it must be like being them. The best way is simply to go and ask them.

4. What We Should Do Instead: Perspective-Getting.

That the best way to get someone's take on something is to ask them for it has been proposed by Nicholas Epley and his colleagues in an idea they call "perspective-getting" (Eyal et al., 2018). It is, to be sure, a tough idea to get traction with. It is either too good to be true, a tautology, or both. It is a puzzle that comes already solved. If there's nothing more to the

question "What do you think about X" than what the person says, then what job is there left for the psychologist, intuitive or professional? All of the interesting stuff happens when one mind tries to reconstruct the contents of another. Like the magician producing an effect, it wouldn't be as fun to watch if it were obvious what was going on.

There is also something *a priori* untrustworthy about the idea. Nothing makes psychologists bristle quite so much as self-report data. Evidence based on self-report is dangerous enough in the hands of professionals. When everyone else starts to treat self-report as real data, mayhem ensues. It would be difficult to get research into a peer-reviewed psychology journal solely relying on the report of a participant about their own cognition, however *theirs* those cognitions may be. Even Wundt's experiments based on introspection were predicated on the introspecters having many, many hours of practice. The idea of perspective-getting seems flawed from the get-go on the basis that introspection is almost as unreliable of a source of information on how cognition works as the comments sections of a YouTube video would be for understanding the principles of cinematography.

But this is based on a misapprehension of what self-report is good for and what it is not. There are, in general, two things that we are bad at providing self-reports about. The first is the *processes* by which thoughts are produced (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). The workspace of consciousness is not filled with cognitions-in-progress. It is instead scattered with the products of some underlying process to which we do not have direct access. We can see what's there. But we can't immediately know where it came from. We don't have any more access to the processes of our own minds than we do to the minds of others. They must be reverse-engineered indirectly, not from looking at the thing itself. The second thing we're bad at self-reporting is appearances

in consciousness that are abstract or multi-dimensional (Lieberman et al., 2007). Self-reporting in this case is highly dependent upon linguistic ability. Even some computer scientists can label their feelings on a scale of positive to negative. It becomes more difficult when one is trying to discern between being in a state of arousal inspired by nerves rather than amorous inclinations.

The point of self-report in this case is neither to relate underlying processes nor to paint with a fine brush. The reason that perspective-getting is a crucial tool for the Intuitive Anthropologist is that it narrows down the hypothesis space. In a world where you know the causal structure mapping events to actions, and the conventional explanations for how one accounts for one's feelings within the framework, you may well know which parameters are relevant. But in a foreign world of unfamiliar structure, you don't. This is the problem with "putting yourself in the other person's shoes." When you pass the homeless person on the street, your initial empathic reaction is to imagine what it's like to go without food and shelter. But that's only what is salient about their situation to *you*. Not to say that those things aren't issues worth considering, but there's no reason to believe that they are an accurate account of the content of the other person's current mental state. When we engage in perspective-taking we don't see, as the anthropologist should, *her* view of *her* world. We see *our* view of her world. At best, we may have taken a few limping steps over toward where she's standing.

Adam Smith suggested that when we see our brother on the rack and imagine his pain. But we don't actually imagine what our brother would feel; we imagine what *we* would feel. The answer is obvious in black-and-white cases such as the valence of affective responses to torture. But it's inadequate for more complicated cases. Empathy, and by extension perspective-taking, is simply introspection into another person's mind.

Suppose, instead, the would-be intuitive psychology were to employ a modicum of epistemic humility and instead to approach the homeless person and ask her about what is actually on her mind. She might tell you that it was a fight with an estranged family member. The point is not that she's able to provide a psychoanalytical account of her interpersonal tribulations. The point is that she's narrowed down what's on her mind from the set of all possible human concerns to one in particular. If there's one thing that self-report is useful for, it's to give those around us a sense of what's currently taking up our mental space.

And this is exactly the kind of detail that's useful for reconstructing someone else's worldview. For evidence that people who see the world differently than you concern themselves with an entirely foreign array of issues, just go ask someone in your local Chemistry department what it is they're working on. Your ability to address this inquiry through perspective-taking is, to say the least, totally inadequate. The only way you can know is by asking. The Intuitive Anthropologist, like Malinowski visiting Kiriwina, goes there to get the perspective straight from the source.

Still, this isn't a slam dunk argument. After all, who cares what the chemists are up to? The general case of which this is an instance is the process of understanding someone else's worldview across social groups. Perspective-taking works fine when the worldview, or at least its relevant aspects, are shared. Perspective-getting becomes necessary in an intergroup context. To get an intuition for this, try convincing one of your white friends to announce on Twitter that they've comprehended the point of view of a person of color simply by sheer power of perspective-taking. They know that this claim wouldn't just be wrong but catastrophically so.

Perspective-taking is fundamentally an egocentric activity (Epley et al., 2014). Perspective-getting, at the very least, puts the ball back in the other person's court.

So the reason that perspective-taking has been a more productive program of research than perspective-getting is not only that it requires a much more sophisticated experimental inquiry to figure out, but that it works quite well when it's safe to assume that, as in the Baker et al. model, "world knowledge" is shared between individuals. Perspective-getting is crucial—and Epley and his colleagues seemed not quite to pick up on this—in an intergroup context. That is, when the assumption of shared world knowledge doesn't hold. In their paper on perspective-mistaking (Eyal et al., 2018), they provide twenty-six different experiments in which one might vaguely expect perspective-taking to be useful if one sort of blurs one's vision while looking at the precise experimental paradigms. They find no effect of a perspective-taking condition versus a control condition. What they're pointing to is the fact that perspective-taking is an introspective process, and therefore of limited generalizability. It's an observation well worth making. What they missed, however, was the circumstances in which perspective-taking is dramatically inadequate for the job. It isn't in running ever more inquiries into what's on the minds of undergrads or MTurk workers. Intuitive psychology is up for that task. Perspective-getting is only really crucially needed for the job of the Intuitive Anthropologist.

5. Three Issues to Focus On.

And so if this is true, this changes the kinds of questions we should be asking as experimental psychologists. I can think of three things:

Motivation.

The first is that the question becomes less about *how* we go about understanding the minds of others than *when* we motivated to do so. Under what conditions would we actually be willing to go to the Chemistry department and suffer through a handful of conversations, filled mostly with exchanges of meaningless strings of numbers and digits, just to take the pulse of the place? Under what conditions would a Democrat read a book by a Republican—or vice versa?

Theory of mind, per se, isn't effortful. To attribute mental states to other agents is precisely the kind of thing that comes naturally to us. Which is why it has proved so difficult to show that theory of mind is indeed effortful. Most of our theory of mind tasks take of the form of attributing minimal mentality to an agent. We do this automatically. But still, there must be *something* that's difficult about understanding other people's mind—right? If that were an easy thing to do, every psychology professor would be out of a job. The discrepancy here is that discerning an individual mental state is, in the general case, easy for us to do. What's effortful is contextualizing that belief or mental within a larger worldview, especially one that is alien to our own.

To take a concrete instance of this, I submit as a world-class "other understander" the journalist Jon Ronson. In Ronson's (2002) book *Them: Adventures with Extremists*, he insinuates himself into the lives of a sample of various extremists—Islamic terrorists, American neo-Nazis, the usual suspects—and does the hard work of setting aside what's obviously wrong about these individuals' worldviews and sets to the task of figuring out why they've come up with these confounded beliefs and whether there are aspects of reality that they've legitimately discerned. What this looks like, pragmatically speaking, is to follow around company that the rest of would

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probably rather not keep for *years*. The result is a great book and a sympathetic yet realistic account of where these people are coming from. But talk about your costly social cognition—who else wants to spend an hour with that species of human, let alone hitch yourself to their wagon for years? It's more or less the same project as an anthropologist's fieldwork. The trouble that Ronson and other extended fieldworkers[4] go to is not in attributing *Them* mental states—no one contends that the problem with terrorists is that they don't have beliefs—but in situating those mental states into the legitimate, self-consistent worldview of the individual who they belong to. Slotted into our own view of things, these beliefs make no sense. The trick is to observe them in the wild: as a part of their own nature worldview. It's not an easy thing to do.

This is sympathetic to Cameron et al.'s (2017) argument that empathy is hard work—at least in the suspicion that something in the vicinity is difficult. Empathy is hard, in one sense, because it is impossible. We have to guess at others mental states. However, it is something we are generally pretty happy to do. Contreras-Huerta et al. (in prep) likewise have taken a look at the role effort plays in social cognition. I agree in that what's important for understanding others isn't mainly something like capacity limits or general intelligence. It is about the effort to do it. Nonetheless, what's effortful isn't doing social cognition, per se, but doing social cognition well. We attribute mental states to one another as easily as we do anything else. There's no shortage of casual opinion-pieces exchanged on the lives of others. Full ethnographies are harder to come by. Much of this was, it is worth saying, were recorded by Lin et al (2010). Their assertion that people are "reflexively mindblind" is incorrect in any number of ways. But the overall thrust is nonetheless in the right direction.

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[4] See also, if you're interested in this sort of thing, Daryl Davis.

Dimensionality.

The second change is that we ought to think more expansively about the type of data structures we are using to understand one another. It's safe to say that we've just about exhausted what can be learned about how one person discerns whether another person entertains a given propositional attitude. And while binary classification no doubt had a certain sheen to it when George Boole first started to play around with it in his 1854 *Laws of Thought*, today we have more sophisticated means of describing how knowledge is stored. A positive example of this is the idea of a "generative model" in the Bayesian cognition literature. Adherents of this position have a clear notion of the kind of data structure they're expecting to find when they examine cognition. The fault that they are perhaps looking a little overzealously for this particular data structure lies as much with the rest of ours for not coming up with enough viable competing hypotheses as it does with them.

But without adopting a narrowly computational view of cognition, there are still a number of ways to go about this. The most direct way to begin doing this is to start looking at things in terms of dimensionality. Specifically, dimensionality where N>1.

One useful framework here is Conway et al.'s (2019) framework of "Mindspace." The idea is that what we're doing when we think about another mind is placing them within a space —be it of traits, tendencies, cultural milieus; the authors aren't married to what exactly they are —and that people can be good at doing this to differing extents. Some of us are better at placing minds in mind-space than others, just as some of us are better at placing faces in face-space. This is a step in the right direction—beyond the 1D theory of mind tasks—though it probably matters

more what exactly the dimensions under consideration are. The authors illustrate the idea with mind properties like "suspiciousness." This probably isn't the crucial dimension along which humans are locating each others noetic properties.

Beautiful work is also being done in this area by Mark Thornton and his colleagues. For example, Thornton & Tamir's (2020) 3D mind model does make specific claims about the dimensionality into which we situate other minds. As stated in the title: "People represent mental states in terms of rationality, social impact, and valence." The problem with both Thornton's and Conway's work is that it doesn't fully grasp the significance of intergroup contexts. They both elide the idea that understanding how a person from one culture thinks is a fundamentally different task than understanding a person from another culture. That omission is consistent with the classical assumptions of how intuitive psychology works. It is why we need a concept like the Intuitive Anthropologist.

Thick Description.

The third thing is that we need to think less in terms of instantaneous understanding. In most theory of mind paradigms, the participant either gets what the other person is thinking or they don't. The outcome is binary, and it occurs as a momentary insight. But if we take the metaphor of the Intuitive Anthropologist seriously, it suggests that what a successful other-understander should do is construct something closer to an ethnography. For our purposes, that is a more story-like format of what they believe, how it manifests, and what it looks like.

In some respects, this is a combination of the previous two points. This conception of other understanding requires the motivation to put in effort precisely because it isn't

instantaneous. It may not require you to follow a Klan organizer around for a year. But does require something more than your immediate reaction to a circumscribed set of data. It suggests that when we successfully engage in something resembling Intuitive Anthropology, it requires a massively multi-dimensional representation. We're familiar with the concept of dehumanization and its reducing of an outgroup member's identity to a single axis. But we've spent far less time characterizing what it would look like to develop a more robust, long-term strategy for characterizing beliefs not our own.

Thick description doesn't seem like a bad place to start for what this more robust, long-term strategy might look like. It is, after all, what the anthropologists have found worthwhile.

6. Beliefs You Should Henceforth Adopt as Your Own.

In conclusion,

- Our standard framework of intuitive psychology works best when the target and the agent share common world knowledge. In intergroup contexts, a different strategy is required.

- Intuitive psychology relies on the use of the right algorithm (i.e., doing a sufficiently good job of putting yourself in the other person's shoes). Intuitive Anthropology relies on better data (i.e., actually putting in the work to gather more information and spend the time thinking through it critically).

- Perspective-taking is fundamentally an introspective process. Even worse, it is introspection into a mind that is not your own.

- Combining the above two points, the closest extant proposal in the psychological literature is "perspective-getting" from Eyal et al. (2018).

- Constructing a truly robust theory of mind and human behavior requires—in opposite vein of Jeremy Bentham—having a sufficiently large number of premises to work from.

- What matters most for other-understanding is motivation. The advantage one anthropologist has over another in describing a group is not intellect, but having gone there and seen for oneself what those people are like. Analogously, the intuitive anthropologist has to do the hard work of actually engaging with people they don't know rather than relying on nth-hand information.

- What is effortful about social cognition is not attributing mental states to other agents (that comes naturally to us). It is reconstructing the worldview—*their* view of *their* world, as Malinowski proposed—which they inhabit that is fundamentally an effortful, deliberative process.

- Our theory of mind literature relies too heavily on binary outcomes: you either successfully attribute the correct mental state or you don't. It's time to move beyond this. Good work is being done (e.g., Conway et al., 2019; Thornton et al. 2020), though the most important dimensions are going to be along the social boundaries that delineate differences in worldview.

- "Thick description" is one of the most influential concepts in the qualitative social sciences, but is largely absent from psychology. It is essentially a theory—developed by philosophers and anthropologists; primarily Clifford Geertz (1973)—about what it means to describe another person, from a disparate milieu, in full breadth, clarity, and sympathy. We in psychology would do well to explore this concept as it pertains to how we go about understanding other people who are different than ourselves—i.e., Intuitive Anthropology.

Acknowledgements

Among those who have helped clarify the arguments in this manuscript, however unclear they remain, are Momchil Tomov and Maja Friedemann. They did what they could.

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