Cognition and Social Development: Some Reflections on Factors Affecting Attitudes to Planned Progress

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ABSTRACT Based on ethological patterning and the length of biological time in which humans have lived under uncertain social and environmental conditions, they are conditioned to short-term cognition. Modern circumstances may have increased these uncertainties and make it even less likely that mankind will forego the present for future ecological benefits and survival.

INTRODUCTION

We are taking a tentative look at why the Western and Japanese democratic cultures have succeeded in economic development and continue to do so while many other states have failed to make progress although they have been exposed to the same theoretical opportunities. Such a vast topic entangled as it is in political, social, economic and environmental factors can only be approached tangentially and in part since historically states of great complexity in Egypt, Iran, Cambodia, Sri Lanka have risen and fallen with singular regularity. Does this success and failure have anything to do with the cultural patterns of thinking and the languages used?

There appear to be two common factors with all human beings except for the small number who are handicapped mentally and physically from a total or partial inability to speak, comprehend or memorise. Patient Kent who suffers from episodic amnesia does not remember a single event that has ever happened to him (Tulving, 2004). Those people with such defects will always be a small minority with insignificant social influence.

These common factors are firstly language; everyone grows up with a natal language which is learned from those with whom they are in social relationships and with a much larger range of people with whom they ultimately communicate. This is not a taught way of communicating but is absorbed by socialisation with no knowledge of its grammar. Secondly all humans are able to distinguish socially between the past, present and future.

THE LIMITATIONS OF ATTEMPTING TO FIND EXACTNESS IN SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Our main difficulty in assessing what we hope are the facts in social behaviour, is the insistence in the social sciences that whatever may or may not be happening, they have to start and finish with definitions; this is an uncommon aspect of human behaviour outside the requirements and limitations of literacy.

In the Western world following the Enlightenment and the hopes rather than the practicalities of Comte, we have consistently tied the social sciences to the ideological possibilities of exactness which come from experiments with inorganic materials.

Even if we accept that one event follows or precedes another, we are always tending to forget or indeed are forced to forget that in any activity which is organic and particularly so with human activities, the fact has become a fact by excluding from the calculations, any number of factors which those involved consider to be irrelevant for very good reasons at that time. The main one being that the social sciences have so far been unable to cope with a scientifically satisfactory methodology using multiple factors; methodology can process five factors but not five hundred.

This has usually resulted in some simplicity being attributable to human behaviour which has perhaps inevitably led to most facts about social behaviour being attributable to particular circumstances and therefore being of limited use. The moving staircase of human activity has rolled on while the researchers have been trying...
manfully to stop a part of this process just long enough for them to make an assessment on their terms.

So most assessments of human behaviour no matter how carefully done become extremely messy when they go beyond the simplest of interpersonal relationships. Messy because too much has been left out in the moments in which they attempt to rigidify; they have taken a still frame out of a long film which after all comes from a camera pointed in a particular direction at a particular time and place.

This constant searching for the will of the wisp of exactitude in human behaviour certainly provides enormous amounts of quantitative and indeed very satisfying data about what Professor Evans-Pritchard once referred to as history disguised as social science.

LANGUAGE AND THE CONTROL OF THOUGHT

It seems likely that to a limited extent language channels rather than controls thought. After all it would be surprising indeed if the habitual use of a particular way of speaking did not run in tandem with the social practices of its users. But the word tandem implies duality and it would be surprising indeed if we could find any evidence that saying one thing committed the speaker or writer to thinking exclusively in that particular way. Apocryphal or not the American Indian chiefs who were thought to have said that the white negotiators of treaties with them spoke with ‘forked tongues’, may have stated no more than a semantic fact.

A particular form of speech has multiple uses for including and excluding in social relationships and would not survive if it no longer had any social functions or sufficient numbers of speakers to keep it alive. Thus many languages have become extinct or kept alive in esoteric environments such as Pali and Sanskrit in the specialised confines of Buddhist and Hindu religious specialisation and Anglo-Saxon and dynastic Egyptian in university departments.

Any discussion of the influence of language on thought has to contend with immensely varied linguistic structures of which many are only verbally known and used. The arguments around the question of which came first the thought or the ability to express the thought verbally is a puerile one because it is tied to the sequential logic of ‘official’ Western patterns of thinking. Thinking and its formulation in words almost certainly grew up in tandem over the millennia of evolution, each nudging the other into minor incremental changing; it could not be otherwise.

It has been proved that the words for different colours in a language control the perception of certain colours, but at best this is a fringe activity of no great social significance since the colours of plants, soils, skies, dyes an skins are probably identifiable by other characteristics than isolatable colours. The Sukuma of Tanzania do not distinguish blue from black cloth except in their ability to hide dirt and reducing the need for laundering; they refer to relative darkness of the material. Much the same would apply to the identification of tools and just as specifically symbols. It is a conjunctive development of function rather than that words controls thoughts.

If there is such a close connection between thought and language then translation would be difficult, but there is the assumption that something that is said in one language can always be translated into another. It probably cannot be in the sense that a word or phrase can be used in direct communication between two people with different language backgrounds but what is said in one language can be explained in another.

In Gertrude Stein ‘s poem ‘a rose is a rose is a rose’ and indeed so is an arrow, but to go beyond the commonalities of language, direct transcription is impossible. KiSukuma has nineteen tenses, a complex system which cannot go directly into the crudities of the English tense system. A Tanzanian priest (Mkenda, 2005) who has translated the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius into kiSwahili found that. It was necessary to explain the use of certain words with the result that the explanations ended up longer than the text which was being translated.

Thus the nature of a language and the culture in which it is spoken go together in tandem but to suggest that language in its entirety controls thought and blanks out alternatives must remain unproven and likely to remain so. Indeed Whorf with his principle of linguistic relativity never suggested any such thing (Alford,1980).

It seems ridiculous to suggest that since the Hopi Indians had no words for past, present and future (Whorf, 1956: 65-86), so that they had no sense of the passage of time, only that they have
a different view of time to the clock-work frameworks of Western thinking. It has also be suggested that the Kenyan Kamba because they have no tense to cope with the indefinite future (Mbiti, 1969) have no sense of the more indefinite future beyond their tense which fixes the future to about a year ahead.

Without exception every culture and community whether assessed as simple or complex, is aware of ageing, descendants and of their personal and collective past in the form of ancestors. Similarly every one aims to be successful and tries to organise their lives to this end to improve their status and to insure a reasonable old age.

So everyone can think about the future but to what extent does such thinking relate to their needs and likely to activate behaviour; is there not some likelihood that future thinking and future needs are correlated in terms of their usefulness to the thinkers. Pie in the sky thinking may be related to having the time and seeing a value in abstract thought.

**LANGUAGE AND SUBSISTENCE CULTURES**

What use is thinking about the distant future in human societies which as far back as we can surmise have lived by hunting and gathering in which the need to eat and the action to reduce hunger are closely related.

Organised and static societies in terms of human evolution are a recent development and for most of this time they have lived in subsistence communities tied to an annual agricultural cycle. Those who are independent of subsistence considerations in urban and industrial environments are a small and recent minority which certainly excludes the enormous numbers of urban poor whether in London, Lobito or Lima who have a pattern of thinking even shorter than of that of hunters and gatherers.

The absence of an indefinite tense in some languages does not go any way to proving that they have no idea of distant futures and might well mean that in the general course of events they have had no particular need to create such tenses apart from the fact that they can always think in such terms by the circumlocutions of their everyday language; ‘coming the day when my farm is home to hundreds of cows’ is a common way round such syntactical difficulties.

After all they have children for long-term reasons and the subsistence farming Sukuma of Tanzania have insurance against famine by planting cassava which remains in the ground independent of rain for several years. Bengali peasants with small land-holdings have worked out that the return on the costs of bringing up children is not paid for by their farming work as adolescents is not enough to justify large families.

Zigua women in a discussion on birth-control saw no reason for restricting the number of children they might produce until they worked out for themselves through question and answer what might be the minimum costs of bringing up a child to social adulthood; they had no difficulty at all in the concept of future planning which went beyond the thinking required for an annual cycle of subsistence farming. The fact that this particular aspect of the future had not previously occurred to them was a social rather than linguistic restriction.

Does the comparative rigidity of any language and its tenses have some relevance to the possibility that they can or cannot conceive of practices outside their current social usages. Does the fact that kiKamba has no indefinite future tense have any restrictions on their daily life except making for theological difficulties when ‘Christ is coming’ has to be translated in a language that does not have an indefinite future tense.

Even if the Hopi can only speak in terms of now and not now, they live in tight hill-top communities dependent on rain, this seems a somewhat ridiculous possibility that they cannot distinguish the passage of time in their daily lives.

The most that can be suggested is that all mentally undamaged people have the capacity to remember the past including the higher apes. A troop of chimpanzees in open savanna a long way from their forest habitat and moving towards another forest which they cannot see or smell, is showing a well developed memory (Itani and Suzuki, 1867). Some people have better memories than others just as thinking about the future is better developed in some people than in others.

We can agree that the ability of humans to time-travel in their minds, episodic memory, played a critical role in the evolution of human cultures (Tulving, 2002). This seems to us to be obvious and not really worthy of having the specialised identifying phrase of ‘prosoponic chronesthesia’ attached to it.
What interests us is that despite the capacity to know about the past and to plan for the future in their individual and primary group lives it has not gone much beyond this in many societies. There are widely known plans for global and national social and economic development combining a little known past with a partially known or guessed at future. Some nations appear unable to develop despite the knowledge of the process and substantial international assistance.

THINKING BACKWARDS; FAMINE AND EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

It can be assumed that amoeba have no memories and that humans do unless they are psychologically or physiologically handicapped. There are those who are clinically unable to think backwards; their brains may be damaged or psychologically incapacitated to remember what has happened in their personal pasts. The fact that chimpanzees studied in captivity showed that they have very short term memories is no doubt a valid condition for those circumstances just as studies of imprisoned criminals are of doubtful relevance to their behaviour in freedom or of people who have never been imprisoned.

In memory we are dealing with thought processes which have no automatic relevance to the current social environments of the memory holders. 'The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there' (Hartley, 1953: xvi) is a pertinent comment as to the accuracy of a memory which is dependent on its stimulus by more contemporary objects and events; it has no existence except in terms of need.

The need to look for food requires memory however much we may be physiologically and culturally able to identify and discriminate edible from inedible objects, so in this respect most memory is short-term from one bag of chips to the next one. So we have no particular need to stretch our minds backwards in time except for specific purposes; it is useful to be able to recognise faces and objects which are socially valuable.

It may be true that most chimpanzees have short-term memories of about five minutes for the irrelevancies of experiments but apparently goldfish have memories which can go back twenty-four hours, but then we have the difficulty over distinguishing memories from conditioned reflexes with Western children and junk food.

The ability to memorize competently may not be related to non-literacy but both literates and non-literate remember large quantities of specialised facts and vocabularies which have relevance only in specialised circumstances; lawyers, plumbers and indeed the ordinary Sukuma who might remember by name and sight as many as five hundred plants useful to him or her.

So it would seem that only on the fringes of cognition are human capacities tied to exactness. The fact that humans have successfully evolved must surely mean that their particular aptitudes are not so much exact as highly adaptable. Whether it is from culture which adapts reasonably quickly or from the more slowly moving language, man has exceptional flexibility because their environment however defined, is always unstable and food has to be secured. Every society whether it is based in fields, valleys, plains or cities has variability for which the people in these societies consciously or unconsciously plan. This basic structure of variability in which frequency, duration, spatial scale, severity and regularity can often be predicted. A forward looking function of the brain based on its backward looking efficiency (Halstead and O'Shea, 1989: 2).

Human thought is riddled with ambiguities which can mean this or that according to the social and physical environment in which it finds itself. This means that humans can think backwards or forwards when there is some reason for doing so; it is a latent ability which is programmed to usefulness.

THINKING FORWARDS; FAMINE AND EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

Thinking forwards in anticipation must surely be related to needs and this capacity cannot have been created on the evolutionary grounds that it might be useful latter on for humans to have this capacity. So it seems likely that it is related to the needs of individuals of the social situations in which they find themselves able to foresee.

The individual Sukuma has the ability shared with most Western mortgage holders to estimate in very pragmatic terms what would be the profit and loss in certain social actions. They loan out their cows in order to create networks of reciprocities as bulwarks against possible misfortune. An unmarried man gave as his
reasons for becoming a Christian that it would insure school places for his children yet unborn. When the Ugandan government raised the price for maize, farmers changed their planting preferences almost immediately which must have involved forward planning.

The stages through which subsistence farmers go in anticipation of famine which in the cultivation steppe of Eastern Africa is likely to occur in one year in five, involve austerity, temporary migration, divestment and dispersal of assets and finally exhaustion and dispersal which are all reactions to what has happened in the past (Crow, 1992: 20).

On the other hand most subsistence farmers in so far as they are able have developed ways in which to hold and command access to food; they plant different crops at different times on different soils and never in the one off swathes of European and American commercial farmers. They develop assets which are not static accumulations but which are used in negotiations to extend reciprocities and personal influence; food in a store has little value but it has in someone else’s stomach. Then there are the future related entitlements established through trade, direct production, the sale of labour power in their contributions to the projects of others and marital relationships. The possession of food always provides social power and it has planned usages (Sen, 1981).

It would seem that memory whatever its antecedents has for most people in subsistence existences a usual range of a year but much less for the urban poor and those who are substance or football addicts. There is no useful purpose in going beyond such a time span for most of mankind.

Perhaps the mistake is assessing memory in the context of some unattainable standard of exactness. It may coincide with facts when we have some known ones with which to authenticate it but this is rare in contrast to the sheer quantity of memories which may have no basis in fact at all.

Memory is largely composed of useful myths or ones which have become useful in providing socially authenticated solutions to current and difficult situations. Myth-cum-memory makes explicit the dangers of coping inappropriately with newly found problems. In cultures myths are an ideas storage facility for social memory and often its sacred character ensures that it will be persevered with and transmitted (Cove, 1978: 243). It is one of the ways in which memory becomes depersonalised and in the process becomes more valuable socially.

**THOUGHT AND THE HIERARCHY OF NEEDS**

We have concluded that language and culture run in tandem and we have no reason to suppose that one precedes or controls the other in any overriding and coercive way. Similarly we have reason to suppose that the reasoning powers of humans involving memory and foresight does have a very long and indeed ethological history.

However it seems likely that this pattern of thinking is predominantly short-term and confined to day to day matters as man since he became bipedal have continued to be hunters and gatherers and has only recently become subsistence farmers, herders and daily paid workers in urban-industrial environments.

The hunting and gathering pattern of thinking and behaving is duplicated in that of the contemporary urban poor and in their employment as daily workers; recently in Beijing daily workers could be seen gathered in one place carrying the tools of their trade waiting to be employed just as flower sellers in Mombasa, Kenya were dependent on the overnight train from Nairobi.

Thus as far back in evolution as we can guess man has required a predominantly daily foresight and only more recently perhaps for ten millennia has started to function on a yearly time span and perhaps their language use as in the short-term future tenses of kiKamba reflects this.

But of course having a type of thinking of type A does not necessarily and indeed cannot exclude patterns of thinking of types B, C and D. All known societies have dreamers of dreams whether from deviant psychological, substance use or religious involvements and indeed herdsmen have much time on their hands in which to think.

We are thus led to think that the inability to socially and economically develop on such a wide scale in Africa, Latin-America particularly as well as in the Middle East may be due in individual cases to religion, civil war and natural disasters, but more likely to another common factor, psychological and social uncertainty. A type of thinking shown in the common Arabic phrase ‘nshallah’ if God wills it.
Maslow has suggested (Maslow, 1987) a hierarchy of needs, one of prepotency in the sequence of physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem and self-realization. In this scale the higher needs are less imperative, have greater ecological efficiency, less urgency subjectively, produce more desirable subjective results, greater health-ward trends, more preconditions requiring better outside conditions, a wider circle of love identifications, desirable civil and social consequences, are closer to self-actualisation and greater individualism. A contemporary pyramid of social environments with a very wide base of immediacy which rapidly closes to a long thin apex.

The world’s population at all levels of individuality is well aware of the standards of living reached by a few western societies and the elite in their own. Their aspirations are directed there even if Christian and Muslim fundamentalism endeavours to force their social behaviour back into the practices of past centuries and distant societies. They are also well aware of the national political processes and rhetoric which are ostensibly directed towards raising the standards of living of the entire populations and indeed have been aimed at this ever since they obtained political independence and their continuing poverty became a matter of international concern. Nevertheless over the decades of much publicised efforts no such improvement has occurred for the majority of these people. Whatever the political and social structure, the majority of these populations have had to maintain a subsistence way of living and thinking within an ideology of social and political optimism. There are no current reasons for these people to change their thinking and physical efforts into the pursuit of distant goals of social and economic development when their survival can rarely go beyond the annual thinking patterns of past millennia. This may be clear enough when we see prolonged droughts in Africa, flooding in Bangladesh, genocide in Darfur and continued internecine hostility in Palestine, Sri Lanka and the Indian sub-continent.

Even the most stable of these societies has not been able to offset poverty and the redistribution of wealth with sufficient success to develop a bond of responsive support which might have started to ease their citizens out of their short-term pastern of subsistence thinking. But why have the power elites in these countries with their often Western education and cultural understandings ostensibly living quite high up on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, not been able to achieve some of the developmental goals provide by the models shown by some Western societies and accepted as goals by the generality of mankind.

It seems likely that the habits of mind based on memory and some form of ideology about ideal systems of behaviour which are associated with subsistence farming last some two generations if individuals and their communities are overtaken by stabilising modernisation or they emigrate to urban-industrial environments (Levy, 1996). That has to last two generations if and only if the change-over is successful in providing for such regularities of employment and income that they no longer have to worry about the immediacies of subsistence. This may take two forms firstly the long-term stability of employment which is perhaps a tenuous hope in view of the constant ups and downs of national and global economies. Secondly and more particularly the institutionalisation of systems of democratic elected governments providing alternative party dominances but which all maintain comprehensive support against unemployment, famine, disease and old age. When this has existed nationally for two generations, then the framework of thinking based on subsistence related memory and possibly restrictive language forms may start to evaporate.

However in these new states under the control of their own nationals with adult suffrage and a developing sense of national pride, one of the most distinguishing features of political life is the corruption of the elected or coup d’état leadership. Their obvious enrichment, nepotism and grossly egocentric patterns of social and political behaviour is public knowledge to their own citizens. Whereas political life in Western democracies may not be quite so uncertain, it has the backup of assured pensions and alternative careers but in these new nations this is not so. These politicians often from subsistence communities, retain a subsistence framework of thinking; to make what they can within the anticipated uncertain time span of office holding, a year by year crop of opportunities for self-aggrandisement.

The political system has not had two
generations of stability for any possible change in the pattern of thinking and the politicians know this and so do their fellow citizens. There is little in their contemporary lives to suggest that their ways of thinking and behaving based on ancient subsistence patterns is just as applicable as it has always been and even more so in the uncertainties of urban-cum-industrial life. As Churchill said ‘a day is long time in politics’ and so it is for the livelihoods of most of the contemporary world. Indeed in most current social environments, the time span of certainty may be shorter than that of the few remaining hunters and gatherers in Botswana and Tanzania.

REFERENCES


