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## An anthropological approach to the role of social intelligence in the emergence of institutional forms



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The opportunity of a year at the Wissenschaftskolleg has enabled me to work in an area of interest unrelated to teaching commitments: the implications for human social forms of a social origin of intelligence.

In 1978 I published two papers addressing the question of how socio-cultural forms and social interaction shape each other. *Towards a Theory of Questions* looks at questioning as a speech act in which the nature of the interrogative form both elicits information and provides a vehicle for control over others. Using Gonja ethnography it demonstrates that social roles heavily constrain the possible meanings of questions asked. The theoretical introduction to *Questions and Politeness* broadens this to consider the ways in which social roles shape not only interactions themselves, but also the meanings we attribute to others' actions. Since then I have become interested in the problem of how roles themselves emerge. This turns out to require a much better understanding of what is coming to be called 'social intelligence', and it is this on which I have concentrated during this year at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

The seminal paper for the concept of social intelligence was written by an ethologist, Nicholas Humphrey, and pointed out that ape intelligence, while less than that of humans, is far greater than can be easily accounted for by the problems of living in their natural environment. He proposed that the challenge to which this was a response was their social life, the 'solving' of other apes' behaviour. The very interesting work on primate

behaviour to which this suggestion has led still leaves unresolved the question of what was the further challenge which resulted in sapienization. Current anthropological thinking continues to favor such emerging skills as tool use and new forms of hunting. One of my tasks for this year has been to consider how the ability to use language might have influenced the relatively complex intelligence of apes. For the first few months this meant extending my reading in psycholinguistics, ethology and 'cognitive science'. A parallel task was to begin to work out formally an outline of implications of adding language to primate intelligence. For this purpose ape intelligence is characterized as the capacity to mentally model the contingency of others' responses to the individual's own acts; this can be termed *anticipatory interactive planning* or *AIP*. Homo sapiens' cognition is then characterized by AIP plus language. This work has resulted in two papers, *Homo sapiens is Homo socialis plus ... ?* and *A model for the emergence of roles and rules in language-using hominids*.

More work has also been done on two substantive papers related to the emergence of roles and rules. One addresses the influence of language in the emergence of roles (*The emergence of the sexual division of labour: Why humans had to invent culture.*) The other looks at a perennial anthropological problem, the ubiquity of the incest taboo, in relation to the impact of language on patterns of incest avoidance.

One implication of this approach is that human intelligence is in a profound way dyadic. There is, as it were, a 'slot' for modelling the responses of others, and our thinking uses a template in which we seek to fill this slot with information about how others' responses will effect our own goal-oriented action. A major problem with such a view of course is what kind of evidence there might conceivably be; what would evidence look like? I have for a long time been fascinated by the ubiquity of prayer in human societies at every level of complexity. Obviously prayer takes very different forms among gatherer-hunters and in literate societies with monotheistic religions-of-theology. But always there is a way of speaking to the deities. Even in religions like Buddhism which originally denied the validity of prayer it has reemerged. One way of understanding this continual reinvention of prayer is to see it as a human device for seeking to communicate with an ill-understood power above and outside of human society. When we cannot understand or control our world we tend to believe that there is a powerful being somewhere who does control and understand it; we seek to fill the 'other' slot in order to have 'someone' with whom to negotiate. And then we use language to negotiate with this being. The paper presented to the Kolleg colloquium, *Prayer as dialogue*, examines prayer as an expression of social dyadic intelligence.

These papers will be the core of a book on the implications of social in-

telligence for understanding the emergence of social forms. However they all need re-working before a book takes final shape. Like all of my colleagues at the Kolleg, I feel I really need another year here!

During the winter I took time out to write a paper for a collection being edited by Robert Hinde on the learning of pro-social behaviour and trust ("The learning of pro-social behaviour in small-scale egalitarian societies: an anthropological view"). There is an important developmental dimension to social intelligence to which this paper relates. However further work on this dimension will have to wait until the papers on social intelligence in relation to emergent institutional forms are completed.

The other major project has been a small workshop on *Some implications of a social origin of human intelligence* which was funded by the Wissenschaftskolleg. This was held in May and made possible the bringing together of scholars from Germany, England, the United States and Israel from the fields of ethology, linguistics, anthropology and sociology. This proved very stimulating, and was especially valuable as a forum for critical discussion of these ideas across disciplines. The participants have decided to publish the papers, and I have agreed to edit the volume.

It is an understatement to say that none of these things would have happened without the luxury of the peace of a year at the Kolleg, the anticipation of every possible need for books, secretarial help, administrative assistance for the workshop, and the warm friendship of staff and colleagues.