



Mind

TANYA MARIE LUHRMANN, *Stanford University*

There is something phenomenologically basic about the human experience of awareness, or consciousness. All ethnographies describe people who think, feel, imagine, hope, and are aware. Yet anthropologists have shown that different social worlds understand mental life (we will call this 'mind') in different ways. Different cultures imagine mental life differently, both in what thought can do, and how one might draw the boundary between mind and world. These culturally different understandings have real social consequences. They affect the way that people imagine what it is to be a self, the way they understand time and history, the way they understand spirits and rituals, the way they experience illness and health. More recently, anthropologists have begun to use the phrase 'anthropology of mind' to describe the comparative exploration of specific dimensions in the way the mind-world boundary is imagined. For example, they have observed that in some social worlds, one finds mental 'opacity'. In those social worlds, people understand that one cannot know—or, should not presume to know—what someone else is thinking or intending. Another dimension is 'porosity'. In some social worlds, the mind-world boundary is imagined to be permeable, so that thoughts pass into the world directly, and are potent. Someone can feel vulnerable because a witch, for example, thinks envious thoughts—and those thoughts are understood to be powerful enough to enter someone else's body and harm it. They have different views about who or what has a mind. It turns out that the way we think about the mind in the West is culturally peculiar.

Introduction

The basic question of an anthropological approach to mind is whether there are culturally different representations of mental life, broadly construed, and if so, whether and how they matter. (There is another, related question, which is whether people in different social worlds have different cognitive orientations; that is a more psychological question and will not be discussed in detail here.) The question starts with the presumption that the experience of conscious awareness—thinking, feeling, reflecting, knowing, hoping, desiring and so forth—is [phenomenologically](#) basic for humans, but that different social worlds often represent this domain of experience differently. Some social worlds sharply distinguish mind from body; others do not. Some treat thoughts as potent, so that one person's angry private thought can hurt another person's body directly; others do not. Some treat the mind as the source of identity, so that what someone thinks defines who they are; others do not. Some believe that personal feelings should be [shared](#) widely and easily; others do not. For some, the mind is an epiphenomenon of the brain, and it is the brain that is more real; for others, the mind is part of a spiritual reality more real than the everyday world. The anthropological approach to mind sets out to understand what we can know about these cultural differences in the representation of mind, and how those differences affect those who hold them.

Conceptions of the mind in early ethnographies

The observation that different social worlds imagine mental life differently was one of the great achievements of early anthropology and the source of some of its most interesting debates, although these observations were not always made systematically or explicitly. The first point to be made was that different representations of mental life did exist. One of the most important essays here was by a Frenchman, Marcel Mauss. His 1938 essay, 'A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self' argued that across time and space, everywhere, something like a self is present, but it is not always expressed by the concepts 'me' or 'I', ('*moi*' or '*je*'). Everywhere, that is, humans are aware of themselves as individual beings: as Mauss writes, 'There has never existed a human being who has not been aware, not only of his body, but also at the same time of his individuality, both spiritual and physical' (1985 [1938]: 3). At the same time, they were not always aware of being aware. All humans, Mauss argued, had a sense of the *moi*, a sense of 'me-ness', but in different societies, with different systems of law, religion, customs, social structure, and mentality, they conceive of this *moi* in different ways. Among the Zuni, the Pueblo Indians in North America studied by Frank Cushing and Matilda Coxe Stevenson at the end of the nineteenth century, a person is first and foremost someone who occupies a role within the clan (Cushing 1896). A Zuni person's sense of individual uniqueness receded against their sense of prescribed status, the way an athlete in a team [sport](#) can find that their sense of self feels so much less important than who they are on their team. One is first and foremost a '*personage*', as Mauss put it: a name, a title, a placeholder for those who will come later. Among the Kwakiutl, another indigenous group in North America, studied in the early twentieth century by Franz Boas among others, every stage of life was named and designated, with many represented by masks used in sacred rituals (Boas 1921). Among communities like the Zuni and the Kwakiutl, people are imagined primarily through their definite location in the social whole—mother, [child](#), ancestor, and so forth, cycling through their roles like leaves on a forest floor. Mauss argued that the idea that a person's private, personal thoughts and feelings make them who they are is really quite recent. In fact, he claimed that even in the West, the psychological self—the person defined by personal thoughts and feelings—did not become of paramount importance until the nineteenth century.

Another French anthropologist, Maurice Leenhardt, provided an extended [ethnographic](#) example of a non-Western representation of inner mental life. Leenhardt had spent two decades among the Houailou speakers (he calls them the Canaque) who lived in the western Pacific archipelago known in English as New Caledonia, first as a missionary and then as an anthropologist, at the beginning of the twentieth century. In his classic ethnography, *Do Kamo*, Leenhardt argued that the Canaque avoid the kind of analytic categories that came easily to his French readership. For them, 'thought springs from viscera' (1979 [1947]: 7). What he seemed to mean by this was that they did not have many abstract words. Before the missionaries came, he wrote, the Canaque did not use words to refer to thought or to thinking. They didn't really have a term for the body either, nor did they talk as if anything happened 'inside' the body. 'Man and

world, the living and the dead, gods and totems, each plays its own role, but each lacks distinct boundaries', Leenhardt explained (1979 [1947]: 74). People have some sense of these distinctions, but their distinctness is not culturally meaningful. The Canaque did not have a sense that, for example, that time passes in a way that is the same for all. Nor did they clearly seem to separate myth from the empirical everyday. Leenhardt wrote that instead, the Canaque lived in 'a reality where the mythic forms of life are visible to the eye, and where [Canaque] verbal expressions have a mythic tone in which myth can be perceived as an experienced reality' (1979 [1947]: 19). Leenhardt told a now-famous story: that after decades of talking to the Canaque about Christianity, he asked them if he and his wife had brought the spirit to their way of thinking. No, they replied, we have always had the spirit: 'What you have brought us is the body' (1979: 164).

Yet another extended ethnographic example came from Godfrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and experience* (1961). That book set out to understand the religion of the Dinka of Southern Sudan, with whom Lienhardt had lived for around three years in the late 1940s. The Dinka are a pastoralist people who move between permanent and wet-season settlements as the Nile river valley swells with rain. Lienhardt was fascinated by what he calls 'symbolic action': that, for example, a man hurrying [home](#) later than he wished might tie a tuft of grass to delay the meal at the journey's end. Lienhardt's ethnographic goal was to explain that this is not a [magical](#) act: 'No Dinka thinks that by performing such an action he has actually assured the result he hopes for' (1961: 283). The symbolic action, he wrote, is not a substitute for practical action, but a preparation for it. The person tying the knot makes an external representation of a mental intention: a model, as the author put it, of their hopes and desires. Symbolic actions do not change [historical](#) events. They change the way we prepare for and react to them.

All well and good: this sounds like something [secular](#) Western readers might say. But Lienhardt also laid out a local understanding of mind that, he argued, would have made symbolic action feel more real. He held that the Dinka had no conception of a domain of thought and feeling inside of them which symbolic action might effect: 'The Dinka have no conception which at all closely corresponds to our popular modern conception of the "mind" as mediating and, as it were, storing up experiences of the self' (1961: 149). Dinka culture did not model the mind as separate from the world. Lienhardt writes:

So it seems that what we should call in some cases the 'memories' of experiences, and regard therefore as in some way intrinsic and interior to the remembering person and modified in their effect upon him by that interiority, appear to the Dinka as exteriorly acting upon him (1961: 149).

You could not say to a Dinka person that a [dream](#) was 'only' a dream, or that an experience was 'only' psychological. 'They do not make the kind of distinction between the psyche and the world which would make such interpretations significant for them' (1961: 149). For those who hold such representations, symbolic action is more powerful. The doer of the action has fewer resources with which he can dismiss its

efficacy as *only* a thought in the mind or *only* a dream.

Early anthropologists did not just show that representations of mental life were more or less abstract. They also argued that people in different social worlds thought differently about mental causation. One of the more forceful arguments was made by another French philosopher-anthropologist, Lucian Lévy-Bruhl. In *How natives think* (1979 [1926]), he argued that people who were not [literate](#), and who lived in small scale, traditional societies (he called them ‘primitive’) imagined thought as potent in its own right. Such people imagined themselves as participating in the external world, and the external world as participating in their minds and bodies. A man might believe, for example, that his enemies would have power over him if they simply knew his name; he might believe that his dream was a visitation by a real and external spirit. Lévy-Bruhl called such an orientation ‘mystical’ and he described it as governed by ‘the law of participation’ in which objects are ‘both themselves and other than themselves’ (1979 [1926]: 76). He also called it ‘prelogical’. In the modern West, he thought, people define reality as independent of what they think and feel: ‘Our perception is directed toward the apprehension of an objective reality, and this reality alone’ (1979 [1926]: 59). Non-modern people, he argued, imagined their thinking as more entangled in the world. At this point, Lévy-Bruhl was more focused on what he took to be the mistaken thinking of the pre-modern world, and confused ideas about what was real, than on a different representation of the mind. These days, readers might find his evolutionist language to be dated and inappropriate. The question he raised—whether non-literate people in small societies might think about thought differently—is still important.

At the end of his life, in the posthumous *Notebooks*, Lévy-Bruhl abandoned the claim that so-called primitive people thought differently than modern Westerners do. (He did so in part because he had struck up a close relationship with Maurice Leenhardt.) Instead, he began to write of ‘a mystical mentality which is more marked and more easily observable among “primitive peoples” than in our own societies, but it is present in every human mind’ (1975 [1949]: 100-1). The mystical mode of thought was both affective and conceptual, and had those features which he had attributed to ‘the law of participation’ all along: independence from ordinary space and time, logical contradictions (an object is both here and there), identity between objects and their arbitrary features (between hair cuttings and the person from whom they came, for example), and ‘the feeling of a contact, most often unforeseen, with a reality other than the reality given in the surrounding milieu’ (1975 [1949]: 108, 102). He thought that the mystical mode intermixed with everyday thought continually in our minds. He thought that the Kwakiutl switched back and forth between modes of thought as did the Catholic French. For him, the puzzle became, ‘How does it happen that these “mental habits” make themselves felt in certain circumstances and not in others?’ (1975 [1949]: 100).

This was in fact the puzzle that the English anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard focused on in *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande* (1937) based on fieldwork in southern Sudan in the late 1920s.

Evans-Pritchard was quite struck by the social importance of ideas about witchcraft in the community in which he lived. The Azande spoke and acted as if some people had special abilities. The angry and envious thoughts of those people could make other people sick, hurt their crops, delay their travel, and in general cause bad things to happen in their lives. Ordinary people also used a variety of techniques to divine who was bewitching them and how to protect themselves magically against them. In his ethnography, Evans-Pritchard set out the conditions which he thought could help to explain why the Azande did not notice why witchcraft, as he put it, did not really exist—that envious and angry thoughts did not in fact have this supernatural power. He suggested many reasons for Azande failure to notice the futility of their magic, among them the failure to generalise across situations, the disinterest in experimental technique, and so forth. His work gave rise to extremely active debates about modes of thought, the difference between [science](#) and religion, the nature of rationality, and so forth. It also gave rise to active discussions about why witchcraft beliefs emerged in some social worlds rather than others. Mary Douglas's important edited volume, *Witchcraft: confessions and accusations* (1970) concluded that witchcraft beliefs were more often found in agricultural societies where social conflict cannot be easily resolved by moving, as it can be in [hunter-gathering](#) groups. The authors also found them to be more frequent in communities where the transition to power—such as being headman of the village—is unstructured, rather than being determined straightforwardly by being the headman's first born son, for example.

These and other classic texts share the basic intuition that human awareness is imagined differently in different settings—and thus, that there is something particular about the representation of mind in the modern West. This sense of mind as a thing, as the seat of the self, as the driver of action, as something inner which is separate from an outer world; these are Western preoccupations, not Kwatkiutl, Canaque, or Dinka preoccupations. And although the authors quoted above made their claims broad and thinly sketched, the basic point seems right. A remarkable collection published in 1981 by Paul Heelas and Andrew Lock, entitled *Indigenous psychology*, laid out clear comparative evidence of different representations of mental experience. One essay, by Signe Howell, demonstrated that the Malaysian Chewong had very few vocabulary words for inner states. The Chewong certainly experienced emotion—but their social concerns circled around suppressing those emotions, and around their fear that the person who did not suppress was vulnerable to ghosts, spirits, and malevolent forces. In 1998, a dense article by Angeline Lillard in *Psychological Bulletin* summarised decades of ethnographic work to argue that the model of mind most psychologists took for granted was in fact quite culturally peculiar. The time seemed ripe for a structured comparative exploration of representations of mind and their consequences.

And then the work stalled. Little was [written](#) about the anthropology of mind for some three decades. Work in the area likely stalled for two reasons. The first is the shift in the temper of the times. Post-1960s anthropology ushered in an intense guilt about replicating [colonial](#) power dynamics in scholarly practice, and psychologically-informed inquiry, focused as it was on the intimate and the private, seemed the most

egregious of unmerited intrusions. Michel Foucault began to dominate anthropology and anthropologists began to diagnose power asymmetries and to doubt their own capacity to observe. The second was the publication of a book that seemed to be undergirded with the new theoretical sophistication of cognitive science. C.R. Hallpike's *Foundations of primitive thought* (1979) reported an observation made repeatedly about adults not schooled with Western education: they fail the standard tasks that indicate advancement along the cognitive path to adulthood in the West. They systematically fail tasks devised by Western researchers (like Jean Piaget and Alexander Luria) to test whether a child has cognitively advanced from early [childhood](#) to middle childhood. For example, in one task, the person taking the test is shown a tall thin glass from which [water](#) is poured into a short, fat glass and then asked whether the second glass contains the same amount of water. Younger children say no; older ones say yes. Hallpike carried out his work in a Melanesian village. With apparent regret, he reported that his adult villagers failed most of these tasks. When water was poured from a tall thin glass into a short fat glass, they said that the amount of water had changed. Hallpike was careful, thorough, and, seemingly, knowledgeable. He concluded that his adult villagers had the cognitive abilities of a preschool Western child. Most anthropologists were horrified. Although his conclusions were roundly criticised (Shweder 1982, Hamill 1985, Cole 2013), many younger anthropologists backed away from the comparative study of mind altogether.

To be clear, this apparent failure is deeply interesting. It suggests that the tasks embed assumptions about how children should respond to adults, what it means when adults question children, and so forth (see Greenfield 1997). It also suggests that there may be ways in which people in non-Western settings organise information differently than those in Western settings. In fact, this was the deep question raised by Claude Lévi-Strauss across his work (see especially *Tristes tropiques* [1955] and *Wild thought* [1962]). He argued that people without writing thought about [history](#) quite differently, and that they imagined that the world was limited to what they knew, rather than assuming that the world had many things which they did not yet know (imagining a 'closed' rather than an 'open' society). He compared the way Westerners thought to an engineer constructing large new buildings, and he compared 'wild' or 'savage' thought to the [work](#) of a *bricoleur*, a do-it-yourself handyman who solves problems with materials at hand. Lévi-Strauss was very clear that the cognitive capabilities of people living in small-scale and non-literate societies were as sharp as those of people in the West. In recent years, as cognitive science has emerged within the academy, some anthropologists (and psychologists) have begun to explore the question of how culture affects cognitive analysis (see overviews by D'Andrade 1995, Strauss & Quinn 1997, Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan 2010). They find that people in non-literate, small scale societies are equally cognitively capable as those in the modern West, but that their analytic styles can be quite different.

The anthropology of mind

In recent years, interest in culturally different models of mind has re-emerged as psychologically-inclined

anthropologists have encountered a mature cognitive science which is increasingly concerned with cultural diversity. These days the ‘anthropology of mind’ is an emerging field which studies the way different representations of thought, awareness, and the mental shape the way people move in their world. Rather than only looking at performances and tests and asking how culture shapes cognitive process, the anthropology of mind asks what leads to different conceptions about thought and thinking, and how those differences matter. Psychologists have used the phrase ‘theory of mind’ to refer to the ways that [children](#) learn to draw inferences about other people’s minds (Gopnik & Meltzoff 1996). The anthropology of mind tends to use the term ‘local theory of mind’ to describe the cultural ideas about the mind that shape the ways that they draw those inferences.

Current discussions tend to assume the following points. They assume that all humans make some kind of mind-body distinction, but map it differently in different social worlds. Anthropologists are sometimes tempted to use the work of Lienhardt, Leenhardt, Howell, and so forth as evidence that mind-body dualism is an aberration of Western society, and that in many other social worlds people simply do not make the distinction. Indeed, one anthropologist, Rita Astuti, has described the idea that non-Western people are free of dualistic thinking as ‘one of anthropology’s favorite claims about cognition’ (2001: 429). Here is an example: ‘Gahuku notions do not parallel, but collapse, Western mind/body categories. For them ... the body swallows and contains the mind’ (Strathern 1994: 45). And another: ‘Many (if not most) non-Western peoples ... simply do not recognize anything comparable to the social/biological distinction as articulated by Western discourse’ (Ingold 1991: 362).

In fact, they do. The Malagasy Vezo studied by Rita Astuti speak as if they do not distinguish between nature and nurture, what is inherited by the body and what is learned through the mind. They insist that birth parents do not have exclusive rights to, or authority over, a child, and that resemblance between parents and children arises out of rich social involvement. The adult who [cares](#) makes the child. And yet when adult Vezo were asked to reason about the characteristics of an [adopted](#) child—with a story about parents attacked by bandits, a child left alone in the bush, found by another couple and loved—they clearly distinguished between bodily characteristics and mental ones. Astuti showed that they thought that the body of the adopted child would surely resemble her birth parents, but her thought and opinions were more like to resemble those who had adopted her. In another study, the Vezo systematically attribute more thinking and feeling capacities to a dead man (does he miss his wife?) than bodily capacities (does he get hungry?), the more so if they were invited to think about religion (Astuti & Harris 2008). These observations are supported by systematic work in other groups (e.g. Bering 2004, Cohen *et al.* 2011; see Weisman *et al.* forthcoming). The evidence strongly suggests that most humans recognise the difference between mind (broadly conceived) and body (again, broadly conceived).

At the same time, the evidence suggests that in different social worlds people draw the distinction between mind and body in different ways. We now see efforts to understand systematically how this human terrain

is mapped differently by different cultures. Phillippe Descola's grand comparative study, *Beyond nature and culture* (2013), for example, seeks to show that the culturally different representations of the human-nature relationship shape basic mental schemas through which humans apprehend the world. Descola asks:

But what is the form of this structural subconscious? Is it present in each mind in the form of cognitive imperatives that remain tacit despite being culturally determined, or is it distributed among the properties of the institutions that reveal it to the observer? How is it internalized by each individual and by what means does it act in such a way that it may determine recurrent behavior patterns that can be translated into vernacular models? (2013: 96)

He answers, in effect, that we know that there are cognitive schemas common to all humans yet internalised differently through experience in a specific social and environmental setting (2013: 103). Some of these culturally shaped schemas, or models, are consciously available to those in the group, but some are not. 'Many cultural models are not transmitted as bodies of precepts but are internalized little by little, without any particular teaching, although this does not prevent them from being objectified quite schematically when circumstances demand it' (2013: 103). The models become 'the tacit frameworks and procedures of objectivization by means of which actors in the system themselves organize their [relations](#) to the world and to Others' (2013: 110). The rest of his book is an [ethnographic](#) argument that there are deep differences in representation that follow the logic he lays out. Descola describes his comparative account as explaining the way the nature-human relationship shifts around the world. One might as easily describe it as a comparison of who is held to have minds: no one but humans (the West); everything, including rocks (Amazonia and other [animist](#) societies); some plants and [animals](#) which represent humans, but not all (Australian indigenous peoples and other totemic groups); a more contingent, shifting relationship (in other settings).

The Mind and Spirit project, a Stanford-based comparative and interdisciplinary project under my direction, also set out to understand differences in models of mind across settings (Luhmann 2020a). This project drew on the expertise of anthropologists, psychologists, [historians](#), and philosophers to ask whether different understandings of 'mind', broadly construed, might shape or be related to the ways that people attend to and interpret experiences they deem spiritual or supernatural. We took a mixed-method, multiphase approach, combining participant observation, long-form semi-structured interviews, quantitative surveys among the general population and local undergraduates, and psychological experiments with children and adults. We worked in five different countries: China, Ghana, Thailand, Vanuatu and the US, with some work in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In each country, we included a focus on members of urban charismatic evangelical churches, with additional work in rural areas and in indigenous religious settings of local importance.

The Mind and Spirit Project showed systematically that there are local theories of mind by interviewing and

surveying people with similar probes about thinking and feeling. In Thailand, we found that many people held what could be described as a ‘kaleidoscopic’ mind. Felicity Aulino (2020) argued that her participants generally understood phenomenal experience as contingent on a host of factors, from personal habits to the influence of others. Here, sensory perceptions themselves were understood as in part a consequence of prior action (karma) and were shaped by their [moral](#) import. In Ghana, Vivian Dzokoto (2020; see also Dulin 2020a) identified four dimensions of an Akan theory of mind: that the central function of the mind is planning, not identity; that one of the most salient qualities of the mind is its moral valence (the ‘bad minds’ of others are an ever-present potential threat to social harmony and personal wellbeing); that the mind is porous in nature and vulnerable to supernatural influences; and in many ways, what English speakers would describe as mind are instead depicted as bodily. In China, Emily Ng (2020) found an urban Shanghai world in which many had adopted a Western-style bounded mind, which was seen as an obstacle in knowing God, while in rural settings the mind was represented as porous and God’s word carried immediate authority. Here, people deeply feared supernatural evil. In Vanuatu, Rachel Smith (2020) found what she called an ‘empowered imagination’. She thought that inferences about others’ intentions were not accorded a privileged role in social interaction. People thought about knowledge, creativity, meaning and intention not as confined to an inner mental domain, but as discoverable within the body, and in the world. Sensations on the left side of the body were taken as bad omens; sensations on the right side as good omens. The sight of a native kingfisher was a portent of [death](#). There was little sense of a boundary between mind and world. In this context, the US model of mind (see Brahinsky 2020, Luhmann 2012, Taylor 2007), did stand out: highly bounded in the sense that thought is supernaturally inert, and non-opaque (Robbins even calls it ‘transparent’) with a sense that the mind is a thing, the seat of the self, the driver of action, something inner which is separate from an outer world.

Dimensions of mind: porosity and opacity

Two dimensions along which different representations of the mind have emerged in the literature are opacity and porosity. Opacity (Rumsey & Robbins 2008, Robbins 2021) is the idea that one cannot know what someone else is thinking, feeling, or intending. Opacity statements are known to be common in many South Pacific societies—among them, the Yap (Throop 2010), the Korowai (Stasch 2008), the Urapmin (Robbins 2004), the Samoa (Duranti 1988), and others. In such places, anthropologists have been startled when they asked what seemed to be a routine question about someone not present, or drew a banal inference about such a person—was she walking to the store, or to visit her parents—and had been told that no one knew but her. These assertions are startling because in the anthropologist’s home setting, people often talk freely about other people’s intentions and motivations. Statements that one cannot know are at the least statements that one should not attempt to know, but an active debate centres on the question of whether these opacity doctrines can actually inhibit the human capacity to infer what others are thinking (Keane 2018).

Porosity is the idea that thought can seep from the mind and act with supernatural power in its own right, and that minds are vulnerable to the powerful thoughts of others, sometimes with the power to affect the entered mind. Many of us have some porosity intuitions. These include the idea that a [dream](#) carries information about the world that the dreamer could not have known, or that something of a dead person—particularly a murdered one—lives on in the [house](#) when they are gone. Porosity was introduced by Charles Taylor (2007) but has been developed and taken up by others (Luhmann 2020b, Dulin 2020b) to capture the observation that in many social worlds, gods speak into the mind, and someone’s anger and envy can be harmful to others. Porosity is about mental causation. One of the central questions here is about how deeply supernatural and religious claims are held in awareness: whether claims about the Holy Spirit entering the mind, or witchcraft envy affecting other bodies, are held with the same cognitive attitude as facts in the everyday world. At the moment, the answer seems to be that while these supernatural claims might be fervently believed, they are likely believed in differently (van Leeuwen 2014, Luhmann 2020). Another question is whether anger and envy are generally treated as more potent than love. At the moment, the answer appears to be yes (Legare & Gelman 2008).

Both opacity and porosity have real-world consequences. The degree of the social commitment to opacity shapes whether and how much one person [shares](#) with another. Middle-class Americans, for example, often believe that they should share everything with others—that nothing, not even anger or envy, should be held secret. That tends to be a central commitment of psychotherapeutic thinking, which is not oriented to opacity. Emotions not expressed will fester and cause harm. Opacity also appears to affect the way [children](#) respond to classic theory of mind tasks which ask them to draw inferences about what another person will think. In these tasks, the child is shown something that a third person does not know—that a toy, which is hidden, has been moved, or that a crayon box contains candy. Then the child is asked whether that third person knows where the toy is, or what is in the box. The child ‘passes’ when the child say no. Most children do pass theory of mind questions, everywhere, at some point. But in the South Pacific, children tend to pass later than children in the US, and some adults never pass at all (Wassman, Träuble & Funke 2013). More subtle analyses lay out the way children draw inferences about other people—learning that other people can have different desires, different beliefs, different knowledge access, false belief, and hidden emotion. In different social worlds, children grasp these possibilities in different orders. In worlds which [value](#) opacity, children are slower in passing standard theory of mind tasks, but far quicker than US children in learning that people can feel things they do not show on their faces (Wellman 2013, Dixon *et al.* 2017).

Porosity, meanwhile, undergirds religion and [magic](#), but is not the same as either. One can be religious without believing in prophecy, the healing power of prayer, and so forth. Both magical and religious systems have a host of specific limitations: the magician or priest must use particular words, be trained in particular ways, and so forth. But the core idea of magic is that the magician’s intention acts in the world.

That is why Stanley Tambiah (1973) could call magic ‘performative’: the act entails its consequence. Porosity, too, has more specific real-world consequences. The Mind and Spirit Project (Luhrmann 2020, Luhrmann *et al.* 2021, Dulin 2020) found that the more people endorse porosity ideas, the more vivid their spiritual experiences will be. The more they endorse porosity ideas, the more they report [voices](#), visions, unusual presences—a range of sensorially vivid events. It is as if the commitment to the supernatural power of thought allows immaterial events to be felt as more substantial. A specific model of the mind seems to alter our visceral sense of what is real.

Recent anthropological work also offers evidence that local thinking about thinking has an impact on human experience that seems fundamental, although for the most part, anthropologists have not yet systematically organised these and other efforts around the question of how models of the mind might be related to human experience. Let us consider two.

First, medical anthropologists have shown that different models of mental action alter the symptoms of disease. Those who struggle with despair but do not imagine sadness as a legitimate cause of illness (as, for example, in China) are more likely to focus on joint pains and to experience them more intensely than those who take the mind’s action to be central (Kleinman 1986; Kirmayer 2001; Kitanaka 2011). Those with psychosis may not experience the symptom of thought insertion—the sense that a thought has been placed in one’s mind by another being—if, like the Iban people of Borneo, they do not imagine the mind as a container but as an action of the body (Barrett 2004). If the mind is a place where feelings can be held down like a [monster](#) under a trap door, then you should help someone who is unhappy by talking with them: you need to help them see that they are the keeper of the keys. If the mind is the emergent epiphenomenon of a pulsating brain, unhappiness is best treated by a chemical that alter those neural connections (Luhrmann 2000; Lakoff 2005; Makari 2015).

Second, anthropologists and [historians](#) have shown that Christianity’s doctrine of ‘inner assent’, or the emphasis on the importance of belief, contributed to a new individualism, although they argue about when the new individualism became apparent. The famous sociologist Max Weber (1930) located one shift at the birth of Protestantism, with what he called its unprecedented inner loneliness. Anthropologist Webb Keane (2007) follows his lead in focusing on Reformation efforts to purify the relationship between human and God so that it was not tainted by people, practices, and even words. Louis Dumont (1980) saw individualism in early Christianity but then emphasised the Enlightenment and its aftermath as the point at which individualism became socially salient. Medieval historians identify a shift from more collective notions of personhood to modern individualism in the tenth and twelfth centuries, with the new emphasis on the inner propelled both by theology and by the emergence of guilds and other groups (Morris 1972, Bynum 1982). But the source of the idea of [moral](#) person as an individual lies in the Christian text itself: Romans 10:10 states, ‘For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified’. The main point is that the idea that inner thought is more important than outward behaviour—in conjunction with some other changes—may

have changed the way people thought about who they were. Notions of the mind may thus be of great importance for understandings of personhood.

Conclusion: the understanding of mind in the West is peculiar

One important point that emerges from anthropological studies of the mind is that Western, post-Enlightenment ideas about the mind are unusual in the context of world cultures. By this I mean the idea that the mind is bounded (thoughts do not have supernatural power, and they do not leak of their own accord into the world and into someone else's body) and that the mind is non-opaque (people think it is appropriate, even healthy, to ask about and seek to know what other people are thinking) are unusual when considered against ideas about the mind in other social worlds. I also mean that the idea that mind is sharply distinguished from the body and greatly important as a source of personal identity—that what you think and feel makes you 'you'—is unusual. In psychology and medicine, these expectations about mental life are often taken to be straightforwardly natural, as the way mental life is experienced by all (see D'Andrade 1987). To be sure, some scholars have noted its historical specificity. They have explained the peculiarity of this Western model of the mind in different ways: as the effect of capitalism (Dumont 1992, Macfarlane 1993), Protestantism (Weber 1905, Keane 2008), [secularism](#) (Taylor 2007), and the idiosyncratic individualistic family structure of the West (Goody 1983, Henrich 2020). It is also clear that these ideas have political consequences. To count as fully human, a person has had to demonstrate full rationality—a goal thought for many years to be unachievable by persons with a different skin colour, and by women, among others. These matters deserve our attention. They are of profound social relevance.

Christina Toren (1993) was one of the first to call for a comparative anthropology of mind. Only once we grasp the degree to which our fundamental concepts of the mental shape our understanding can we appreciate that all humans are not only creatures with bodies but also with history, and that this history shapes us so deeply that, like a fish surrounded by water, we forget that it is there.

References

- Astuti, R. 2001. Are we all natural dualists? A cognitive developmental approach. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7(3), 429-47.
- Astuti, R. & P. Harris 2008. Understanding mortality and the life and the ancestors in rural Madagascar. *Cognitive Science* 32, 713-40.
- Aulino, F. 2020. From karma to sin: a kaleidoscopic theory of mind and Christian experience in northern Thailand. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 26(S1), 28-44.
- Barrett, R. 2004. Kurt Schneider in Borneo. In *Schizophrenia, culture and subjectivity* (eds) J. Jenkins & R.

Barrett, 87-110.

Bering, J.M. & D.F. Bjorklund 2004. The natural emergence of reasoning about the afterlife as a developmental regularity. *Developmental Psychology* **40**, 217-33.

Boas, F. 1921. Ethnography of the Kwakiutl based on data collected by George Hunt. *35th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution 1913-4: Part 1*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

Brahinsky, J. 2020. Crossing the buffer: ontological anxiety among US evangelicals and an anthropological theory of mind. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **26**(4), 45-60.

Bynum, C.W. 1982. *Jesus as mother*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cohen, E., E. Burdett, N. Knight & J. Barrett 2011. Cross-cultural similarities and differences in person-body reasoning: experimental evidence from the United Kingdom and Brazilian Amazon. *Cognitive Science* **35**, 1282-1304.

Cole, M. 2013. Cognitive development and formal schooling. In *Learning relationships in the classroom* (eds) D. Faulkner, K. Littleton & M. Woodhead, 31-53. London: Routledge.

Cushing, F.H. 1896. Outlines of Zuni creation myths. *13th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution 1891-2*, 321-447. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

D'Andrade, R. 1987. A folk theory of the mind. In *Cultural models in language and thought* (eds) N. Quinn & D. Holland. Cambridge: University Press.

Descola, P. 2013. *Beyond nature and culture* (trans. J. Lloyd). Chicago: University Press.

Dixson, H.G.W., A.F. Komugabe-Dixson, J. Low & B.J. Dixson 2017. Scaling theory of mind in a small-scale society: a case study from Vanuatu. *Child Development* **89**(6), 2157-75.

Douglas, M. (ed.) 1970. *Witchcraft: confessions and accusations*. London: Routledge.

Dulin, J. 2020a. Vulnerable minds, bodily thoughts, and sensory spirits: local theory of mind and spiritual experience in Ghana. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **26**(S1), 61-76.

Dulin, J. forthcoming. Charismatic Christianity's hard cultural forms and the local patterning of the divine voice in Ghana. *American Anthropologist*.

Dumont, L. 1992. *Essays on individualism*. Chicago: University Press.

- Duranti, A. 1988. Intentions, language, and social action in a Samoan context. *Journal of Pragmatics* **12**, 13-33.
- Dzokoto, V. 2020. *Adwenhoasem*: an Akan theory of mind. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **26**(S1), 77-94.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1937. *Witchcraft, magic and oracles among the Azande*. Oxford: University Press.
- Goody, J. 1983. *The development of the family and marriage in Europe*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Gopnik, A. & A. Meltzoff 1997. *Words, thoughts and theories*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Greenfield, P. 1997. You can't take it with you: why ability assessments don't cross cultures. *American Psychologist* **52**(10), 1115-24.
- Hamill, J. 1985. Theory in ethno-logic. *Symbolic Interaction* **8**(1), 85-102.
- Heelas, P. & A. Lock (eds) 1981. *Indigenous psychologies*. New York: Academic Press.
- Howell, S. 1981. Rules not words. In *Indigenous psychologies* (eds) P. Heelas & A. Lock, 133-44. New York: Academic Press.
- Ingold, T. 1991. Becoming persons: consciousness and sociality in human evolution. *Cultural Dynamics* **4**, 355-78.
- Keane, W. 2007. *Christian moderns*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 2018. Perspectives on affordances, or the anthropologically real. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* **8**(1/2), 27-38.
- Kirmayer, L.J. 2001. Cultural variation in the clinical presentation of depression and anxiety: Implications for diagnosis and treatment. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* **62** (13), 22-30.
- Kitanaka, J. 2011. *Depression in Japan*. Princeton: University Press.
- Kleinman, A. 1986. *Social origins of disease and distress*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lakoff, A. 2005. *Pharmaceutical reason*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Leenhardt, M. 1979 [1947]. *Do Kamo*. Chicago: University Press.
- Legare, C.H. & S.A. Gelman 2008. Bewitchment, biology, or both: the co-existence of natural and supernatural explanatory frameworks across development. *Cognitive Science* **32**(4), 607-42.
- Lévy-Bruhl, L. 1978. *Notebooks*. New York: Harper Collins.

- 1979 [1926]. *How natives think*. New York: Knopf.
- Levi-Strauss, C. 1961 [1955]. *Tristes tropiques*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- 2021 [1962]. *Wild thought*. Chicago: University Press.
- Lienhardt, G. 1961. *Divinity and experience*. Oxford: University Press.
- Lillard, A. 1998. Ethnopsychologies: cultural variations in theory of mind. *Psychological Bulletin* **123**(1), 3-32.
- Luhmann, T.M. 2000. *Of two minds*. New York: Knopf.
- 2011. Towards an anthropological theory of mind: position papers from the Lemelson Conference. Introduction. *Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Association* **36**(4), 5-69.
- 2012. A hyperreal god and modern belief toward an anthropological theory of mind. *Current Anthropology* **53**(4), 371-95.
- 2020a. Mind and Spirit: a comparative theory about representation of mind and the experience of spirit. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **26**(S1), 9-27.
- 2020b. Thinking about thinking: the mind's porosity and the presence of the gods. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **26**(S1), 148-62.
- , K.G. Weisman, F. Aulino, J. D. Brahinsky, J. C. Dulin, V. A. Dzokoto, C. H. Legare, M. Lifshitz, E. Ng, N. Ross-Zehnder & R.E. Smith 2021. Sensing the presence of gods and spirits across cultures and faiths. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* **118** (5), e2016649118.
- Makari, G. 2015. *Soul machine*. New York: Norton.
- Mauss, M. 1985 [1938]. A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self. In *The category of the person* (eds) M. Carrithers, S. Collins & S. Lukes, 1-25. Cambridge: University Press.
- Morris, C. 1972. *The discovery of the individual 1050-1200*. Toronto: University Press.
- Ng, E. 2020. The mind and the devil: porosity and discernment in two Chinese charismatic-style churches. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **26**(S1), 95-113.
- Robbins, J. 2004. *Becoming sinners*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 2008. On not knowing other minds: confession, intention, and linguistic exchange in a Papua New Guinea community. *Anthropological Quarterly* **81**(2), 421-9.

- 2021. Mental opacity. In *International encyclopedia of linguistic anthropology* (ed.) J. Stanlaw.
- & A. Rumsey 2008. Introduction: cultural and linguistic anthropology and the opacity of other minds. *Anthropological Quarterly* **81**(2), 407-20.
- Shweder, R. 1982. On savages and other children: review of *The foundations of primitive thought* by C.R. Hallpike. *American Anthropologist* **84**(2), 354-66.
- Smith, R. 2020. Empowered imagination and mental vulnerability: local theory of mind and spiritual experience in Vanuatu. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **26**, 114-30.
- Stasch, R. 2009. *Society of others*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Strathern, A. 1994. Keeping the body in mind. *Social Anthropology* **2**, 43-53.
- Strauss, C. & N. Quinn 1998. *A cognitive theory of cultural meaning*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Tambiah, S.J. 2017 [1973]. Form and meaning of magical acts. *HAU: Journal of Anthropological Theory* **7**(3), 451-73.
- Taylor, C. 2007. *A secular age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Throop, J. 2010. *Suffering and sentiment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Toren, C. 1993. Making history: the significance of childhood cognition for a comparative anthropology of mind. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **28**(3), 461-78.
- Van Leeuwen, N. 2014. Religious credence is not factual belief. *Cognition* **133**(3), 698-715.
- Wassman, J., B. Träuble & J. Funke 2013. *Theory of mind in the Pacific: reasoning across cultures*. Heidelberg: University Press.
- Weber, M. 1930 [1905]. *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (trans. T. Parsons). London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Weisman, K., C. Deck & E. Markman 2017. Rethinking people's conceptions of mental life. *Proceedings of the National Academy* **114**(43), 11374-9
- Weisman, K., C.H. Legare, R.E. Smith, V.A. Dzokoto, F. Aulino, E. Ng, J.C. Dulin, N. Ross-Zehnder, J.D. Brahinsky, T.M. Luhrmann. Forthcoming. Concepts of mental life among adults and children in five cultures. *Nature Human Behavior*.
- Wellman, H. 2013. Universal social cognition. In *Navigating the social world: a developmental perspective* (eds) M. Banaji & S. Gelman, 69-74. Oxford: University Press.

Note on contributor

Tanya Marie Luhmann is the Albert Ray Lang Professor at Stanford University, in the Stanford Anthropology Department (and Psychology, by courtesy). She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2003 and received a John Guggenheim Fellowship award in 2007. She is the author of *When God talks back* (2012, Knopf) and *How God becomes real* (2020, Princeton University Press) and is currently at work on a book entitled *Voices*.