

The Epidemiology of Religious Representations: Dan Sperber and Cognitive Theories of Religion and Culture

Claude Lévi-Strauss once opined that anthropology is psychology, and surely he is incorrect. However, as the later pages of Chapter One illustrate, psychological or cognitive concerns have come to dominate a large part of the anthropological thinking about religion, as well as that of other related disciplines. It is impossible to understand this cognitive turn in anthropology without an appreciation of the work of Dan Sperber, who directly influenced Pascal Boyer and indirectly influence much if not all of the contemporary cognitive-anthropology theorizing on religion.

Sperber's crucial work is a 1985 paper titled "Anthropology and Psychology: Towards an Epidemiology of Representations." In this essay he argued that a culture essentially is a distribution "of representations in a human population," a sort of "ecological pattern of psychological things" (73). We can roughly define "representations" as ideas. Culture, as learned and shared ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, is only possible in the first place because the "human mind is susceptible to cultural representations, in the way the human organism is susceptible to diseases" (74). If we ignore the analogy of culture to a disease, Sperber's point is that people "catch" ideas from each other, and these ideas lodge in our mind and then affect (become?) our thought and behavior.

Now, any human society hosts a very large number of representations, not all permanent and not all universally or even widely held.

Some of these representations are entertained by only one individual for but a few seconds. Other representations inhabit the whole group over several generations. Between these two extremes, one finds representations with narrower or wider distributions. Widely distributed, long-lasting representations are what we are primarily referring to when we talk of culture (74).

From this perspective, the question obviously becomes, Which representations are most widely distributed and why?

This question launches Sperber's "epidemiology of representations," a model of why and how mental representations are transmitted from person to person and of *why some representations "stick" more than others*. The epidemiology of representations is then

a study of the causal chains in which these mental and public representations are involved: the construction or retrieval of mental representations may cause individuals to modify their physical environment, for instance to produce a public representation. These modifications of the environment may cause other individuals to construct mental representations of their own; these new representations may be stored and later retrieved, and, in turn, cause the individuals who hold them to modify the environment, and so on (77).

To construct this epidemiology of representations requires us to analyze a number of variables. One is the quality of the representations themselves. Just like bacteria or viruses, some find a welcoming home in humans and some do not; some “fit” us better than others. A second variable is the nature of the human mind; this entails an understanding of processes such as attention, motivation, and memory (of the sort noted in the chapter discussion of Harvey Whitehouse and the upcoming discussion of McCauley and Lawson’s theory of ritual). A third variable is the process of transmission, that is, the environments or occasions in which representations are encountered, the institutions in which they are embedded and conveyed, and the interactions between people in which they are performed and exchanged, including linguistic interactions (discourse and talk) as well as rituals.

Sperber then offered his Law of the Epidemiology of Representations, which stated, “In an oral tradition, all cultural representations are easily remembered ones; hard to remember representations are forgotten, or transformed into more easily remembered ones, before reaching a cultural level of distribution” (86). Literate societies have an advantage, since they can rely on writing to help preserve memory; however, in the end, the individual human can only remember *so much* and *certain kinds of things*, so literacy does not completely change the basic evolved and inherited mental capacities and limitations of humans. We are simply “prone to” certain ideas, and, as Pascal Boyer and others have extrapolated from Sperber’s thinking, “religious ideas” are particularly “sticky,” since they grab our attention, stay in our memory, and motivate us in uniquely forceful ways. Much of the anthropology of religion has since become a search for the cognitive characteristics that make religion appealing, along with the features of religious ideas that most effectively activate those cognitive processes.

Reference

Sperber, Dan. 1985. “Anthropology and Psychology: Towards an Epidemiology of Representations.” *Man* (n.s.) 20 (1): 73-89.