Holland and Skinner: Prestige and Intimacy

This article appeared in a very influential book called Cultural Models in Language and Thought (1987). This book collected articles by anthropologists and psychologists who shared two goals: 1) an interest in replacing feature-based theories of meaning with "mental models", and 2) a desire to make it clear that for humans virtually all "mental models" are cultural in the sense that they are not just properties of individuals, but are properties of interacting social groups.

Holland and Skinner wanted to understand the how women think about men. They described patterns that were observable in the things women said when they talked about their relationships with men. At the time, it was common practice to assume that the observed patterns were surface manifestations of underlying "mental models". Mental models were thought to be mental templates for the creation of mental representations of states of affairs in the world.

H&S used their study to highlight the weaknesses of feature models and the strengths of the cultural models approach. They did this by first conducting a study that assumed a feature-based approach. They collected a list of terms for men used by women. They asked women to sort the terms into piles. Sorting generated similarity scores and similarity scores were used to plot a graphic that put similar terms close in space and dissimilar terms far apart. This graphic suggested some ‘underlying’ dimensions of judgment. For example, endearments were gathered together and were far apart from insults. They showed that some things could be learned from this, but that a lot of really important stuff was missing. It could not explain why some terms were insults and others were not. It did not have any relation to the strong emotions experienced by the women while talking about the terms.

They then did a “cultural models” study on the same domain (women’s relationships with men). They showed that all of the women assumed a similar taken for granted model of the ideal development of a female-male relationship. They then showed that the types of men identified by the first study could be seen to label particular roles in the ideal relationship; ways of fulfilling or violating the expectations of the cultural model of the relationship.