

Roy D'Andrade: A folk model of the mind.

As far as is known, all normal humans in all societies think about the minds of others. Most cognitive scientists believe this “theory of mind” to be an important cognitive adaptation in the development of our species. Cultural models that belong to everyday life are called ‘folk models’ to distinguish them from scientific models. In this paper, the famous cognitive anthropologist, Roy D’Andrade, sets out to answer some interesting questions about the folk model of the mind held by ordinary Americans. Precisely what is the content of the model of the mind? Are the contents of models of mind in different cultures the same or different? How do folk models of mind relate to scientific models of mind? Has the American model of the mind changed in recent history?

Summary of the article:

D’Andrade begins by describing what was known and believed about mental models at the time he wrote his paper (1987). He then used the work of linguistic philosophers to rough out an initial sketch of a model of the mind. He used the initial sketch of the folk model of the mind to generate a large number of specific questions about the operation of the mind. He posed those questions in interviews with five high school and college students. He recorded their responses to the questions and used those responses to refine his description of the model. He briefly notes that the model of the mind derived from Americans seems to be quite stable because it fits quite well with discussions of mind as presented in English novels such as Jane Austen’s *Emma* published over 200 years ago. He shows that the models of mind present in academic psychology blend elements of the folk model with other terms and concepts. For example, the folk model puts much more reliance on conscious processes than the scientific models do. Finally, D’Andrade compares the American folk model of the mind to the model of the mind used by the people of Ifaluk atoll in the Western Pacific. While the models are similar, the Ifaluk model does not draw such a sharp distinction between thought and emotion as we do. As in most of the Pacific cultures, on Ifaluk the mind is thought to be located in the gut – not the head.

At the end of the article D’Andrade poses a really interesting question: “If these models are models of private experience, how are they ever learned, either here or on Ifaluk?”

D’Andrade observes that all models of mind use “external, public events as identifying marks in their definitions of internal states.” For example, “...thinking is like speech and speech is public.” In fact, major categories of mental events correspond very nicely with observable classes of speech acts (wishes = requests and commands; beliefs = declarations; intentions = promises and threats). It might be that the model of the mind is not really about unobservable mental events at all. How could it be about that which cannot be observed? D’Andrade speculates that it might really be about observable speech acts and displays of emotion.

Questions to keep in mind while reading:

What is a cultural schema?

What are the parts of a cultural schema?

You should be able to provide an example of a schema from your own everyday experience (not one described in the readings) and illustrate how it is used in everyday discourse.

What is intersubjective sharing?

How does this reading relate to the arguments made by Sterelny (as reported by Clark in *Supersizing the Mind*)?

Emotions can blend, but thoughts do not. Why do you suppose that is the case?

How does D'Andrade's discussion of the relation between the folk model of the mind and the scientific (psychological) model of the mind, relate to Neisser's claims about the psychology of memory?

If people in a different culture have a different model of mind, does this mean that minds are different in different cultures?