Note From The Chair

Marion Blute
University of Toronto at Mississauga

I hope you had a good year and hope to see as many of you as possible in Seattle. Our section has two packed sessions with a variety of papers as well as a reception and a business meeting so it should be interesting. If you haven’t met myself or Colter Mitchell, our chair elect, do come up and introduce yourselves at the reception.

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I would like to briefly share an experience I had this year with you. I was contacted by a young sociologist, a member of our section, who had had an article rejected by a journal in a substantive area of sociology by the editor without review. After reading the article, the editor’s comments, the author’s reply to those, and the editor’s reply to that, I was in agreement with the author that it was a good paper which had been rejected for no very good reason other than that the editor did not like that (i.e. our!) kind of work. I consulted with a couple of colleagues and while we did not completely agree, I ended up advising the author that for his or her own sake, it would be better to just get on with it and send it somewhere else.

But it pained me to do that. It is likely that not a few of the senior members of the section have had similar experiences, especially when younger, (I know I did) and often ended up publishing much of our work outside of sociology. It pains me to think that another generation of sociological scholars and scientists might have to go through the same thing. I don’t know what the answer is - as you know, Rosemary Hopcroft has taken the initiative in founding a new journal. However, one thing that might help would be if sociologists who do our kind of work became more active on the editorial boards of journals in substantive areas of sociology. If you have other ideas - feel free to send them to me and if I receive some, eventually I will circulate them in the form of an e-mail.

On a more cheerful note - have a good and productive summer!

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ASA 2016 Annual Meeting

Plan now to attend and participate in the Evolution, Biology and Society Program at the 2016 ASA meetings in Seattle!

I. Section Paper Session: Rethinking Evolution, Biology and Society (Tue, August 23, 10:30am to 12:10pm, TBA)
Organizer and Presider: Marion Blute, University of Toronto.

Defining the Genetic Correlation by Environment (rGxE) Interaction Model - Robbee Wedow, University of Colorado; Brooke Huibregtse, Institute for Behavioral Genetics; Jason D. Boardman, University of Colorado.

Skin Deep: Racial Disparities in Type 2 Diabetes and Prediabetes - Celia C. Lo, Texas Woman’s University; Joanna Lara, Texas Woman’s University; Tyrone Chiwai Cheng, University of Alabama.


Using Neurosociology and Evolutionary Sociology to Explain the Origin and Evolution of Religions - Alexandra Maryanski, University of California-Riverside; Jonathan H. Turner, University of California-Riverside.

Discussant: Colter Mitchell, University of Michigan.

II. Section Invited Session: New Research on Evolution, Biology, and Society (Tue, August 23, 2:30 to 4:10pm, TBA)
Organizer: Francois Nielsen, University of North Carolina.

Presider: Jeremy Freese, Northwestern University.


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The Evolutionary Origins of Social Stratification and Inequality - Kenneth Hudson, University of South Alabama.

Social Geometry and the Evolution of Mimicry - Jason Manning, West Virginia University.


On the Subsistence of Moral Emotions in Culture and Politics - Benjamin Lamb-Books

III. SECTION ON EVOLUTION, BIOLOGY AND SOCIETY COUNCIL AND BUSINESS MEETING
(Tue, August 23, 12:30 to 2:10pm, TBA)

IV. JOINT RECEPTION: SECTION ON EVOLUTION, BIOLOGY AND SOCIETY; SECTION ON MATHEMATICAL SOCIOLOGY, SECTION ON RATIONALITY AND SOCIETY
(Mon, August 22, 6:30 to 8:00pm, TBA)

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Please send EB&S Newsletter submissions to Ben Lamb-Books:
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Newsletter and Webpage Update

Hello, I’m the new EB&S Newsletter Editor and Webmaster. Please send your publication updates, research news, and reflective contributions to me at Benjamin.Lamb@colorado.edu for the future Fall 2016 issue. When doing so, please just call me Ben. A bit about me: I recently obtained the PhD in Sociology from University of Colorado, and I’m currently staying in the Boulder area to do research. My own interests in evolutionary sociology and biosociology can be blamed upon my dissertation on the moral emotions in collective behavior, which leaned heavily on Jonathan Turner’s human emotions theory, among others (a revised version of the dissertation is being published as a book by Palgrave Macmillan).

Improvements to the EB&S Section webpage are in progress. The ASA Committee on Sections informs me that the entire ASA website will be soon changing dramatically as well as how Section information and webpages are managed (more easily, hopefully). If you have ideas or suggestions for how to improve the clearly out-of-date EB&S Section webpage, please send them to me. Or, if you have a new course syllabus that the Section can add to the online archive, please share it.

On a personal note, I’ve been enjoying reading old EB&S Section newsletters going back to the very start in 2004. The diverse theoretical content contained in them is truly top-notch, and the initial struggle for the establishment and legitimacy of the section is kind of thrilling. A collective lesson of ‘big-tent’ inclusiveness was learned back then that seems vital to sustain. No promises that I can bring back some of that honeymoon magic to the newsletter; I definitely cannot do so without your reflective (and/or retrospective) contributions in preparation for the next Fall 2016 newsletter. If nothing pours forth, then just a warning, I may tap some of you to see if you are willing to write up a musing on a topic of your choice in around 1000-1500 words.

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Franks, David has completed a Chapter on Sex differences in the Human Brain for a handbook on gender edited by Rosemary Hopcroft.

Franks, David continues to work on updating his 2010 book, Neurosociology: the Nexus Between Neurosociology and Social Psychology. He hopes to have it completed by the 2016 ASA meeting.


Hopcroft, Rosemary L. published an essay in the on-line newsletter This View of Life entitled "How WEIRD is Donald Trump?" The essay will be of interest to EB&S section members. Here is the link: https://evolution-institute.org/article/how-weird-is-donald-trump/


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Along with the great advances of neuroscience and new brain-scanning technologies in past decades has been the emergence of a subfield of research that practitioners now call ‘contemplative neuroscience.’ No, this isn’t a 1960s throwback involving VW buses and psychedelic drugs. This is the new brain science of meditation, mostly consisting of fMRI laboratory experiments (and sometimes EEG and MEG) and resultant observations of the brain activity of meditators relative to their own baseline or to some control group of either novice meditators or non-meditators when fed a variety of stimuli. Richard J. Davidson (and colleagues) is perhaps the main pioneer neuroscientist leading the charge in this area and who has done the most to transform contemplative neuroscience from its fringe status to being a legitimate and exciting frontier of neurobiological research today. Not coincidentally, Davidson is also one of the main psychologists responsible for the rise of affective neuroscience through his research into brain laterality and positive/negative emotion and the role of the prefrontal cortex in emotional processes (as opposed to the limbic-system research of the Panksepp on his brain-damaged rats). Our very own neurosociologist David Franks has favorably discussed Davidson’s theory of emotional styles and related research into the laterality of positive/negative emotion in one of his many recent publications (Franks 2014). Currently,
Davidson devotes most his attention, and grant budget, to meditation, compassion, well-being, and mindfulness-based research. So what does this interesting literature have to add to our fields of neurosociology, biosociology, and evolutionary sociology?

Two additional contributions, one more philosophical and one more practical, also make helpful conversation partners. Evan Thompson is a philosopher and past protégé of the famous French neuroscientist Francisco Varela (who also was part of one of Davidson’s preliminary projects in the 1990s). In his latest book, Waking, Dreaming, Being, Thompson pursues a grand “neurophenomenology” synthesis of neuroscience and the philosophy of consciousness (heavily informed by, but not dictated by, ancient Indian philosophy and Buddhism). The third selection, The Mind Illuminated, is in fact a ‘user-friendly meditation manual’ interspersed with theoretical reflections upon basic neuroscience. At times it may lean too heavily upon a simplistic ‘modules’ approach to brain functions. Yet its authors are no strangers to academia and scientific inquiry: Culadasa John Yates is a retired professor of physiology and Matthew Immegut is a professor of sociology at SUNY-Purchase College who has also written on charisma and new religious movements.

Contemplative neuroscience may offer sociologists a new vantage point for utilizing brain research, though not without a particular slant to be aware of. I will merely highlight a few main themes from the literature. The first is neuroplasticity, or a growing recognition of socioenvironmental inputs that may heighten neuroplasticity with possible clinical applications to focus, mood, emotion regulation, and social connection. Davidson and colleagues have demonstrated that even non-intensive short courses in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction can produce “a significant shift toward greater left-side frontal activation” of the prefrontal cortex, a locus of both rational goal-planning and positive emotion. Davidson proves that a person’s emotional style— their observed brain-patterned, automatic way of emotionally responding to situations and stressors— can be altered substantially even by a beginner’s level of meditation. He also has findings that show how mindwandering (poor attention— one thing meditation tries to reduce) is associated with increased levels of negative emotions like anxiety and depression (via right prefrontal activation). This makes good reason for including attention as a core part of emotional style even though we don’t usually think of attention as emotional. If mindful focus increases attention abilities, in doing so it can also raise positive outlook and resilience (these being three of the six dimensions of emotional style— the other three are social intuition, self-awareness, and context-sensitivity). Such changes involve real neuroplastic shifts in the “neuronal pathways” and connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and other subcortical areas, including the amygdala.

Neuroplasticity is typically defined as changes in brain activity and structure (qua hard neurophysiology) that are produced by the mind (qua consciousness, intentionality, and volition) and by the environment’s influence upon the mind. So it is not surprising that another running theme in this literature is the so-called ‘hard problem of consciousness.’ So far, at least, neuroscientific knowledge does not translate into any easy mind-brain reduction given the realities of mind-induced neuroplasticity, qualia, global modalities of consciousness, and their multiple realizability. Contemplative neuroscience is distinctively situated in being quite amenable to discussions of emergence, higher-order levels, and downward mental causation. This sort of thinking may be productive for a scientific-realist sociology. Thompson travels the furthest in this direction in outlining a nondualist emergentism to understand the relations between biology and consciousness. The intentional and unified-field qualities of consciousness, for Thompson, support an enactive theory of mind in which the substrate of the mind is an “embodied, embedded, and relational network, not the brain as an isolated system.” Like I said, Thompson is the philosopher among the bunch. If he (and, indirectly, the others) are right, it would be an invitation for biosociologists to not forget about the mind proper when incorporating brain and body research. Or, perhaps we could interpret it as a call to keep one foot firmly in the history of action theory in sociology, and its voluntarism, while keeping open the bidirectional channels between brain and mind.

Reference