Our Bodies, Ourselves: Biology, Psychology, and the Strong Argument for Culture

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Abstract

Since Durkheim, cultural sociologists have generally treated research from the biological sciences as antithetical to cultural arguments. However, since the 1990s research in several fields, including neurophysiology, the study of emotions, cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, and psychology, has taken something of a cultural turn. In this paper I argue that research in these areas is converging on a picture of the relations between the body, cognition, and language in which bodily and psychological processes shape and are also shaped by culture in specific and nonintuitive ways. These fields offer sociologists fresh insights into concepts including cultural repertoires, the distinction between the sacred and the profane, and emotions in social movements. Familiarity with this research may also allow cultural sociologists to reposition their field with respect to other disciplines, absorbing insights from these disciplines while more compellingly insisting on the autonomy of culture.