



Dear Readers,

It may be a remarkable twist of fate, but it was certainly no accident that science was quicker to discover and decipher the macrocosm of the external world than to explore the microcosm of its internal counterpart. In the earliest days, man's attention was focused on the sun, moon and stars. Then came the plant and animal kingdoms that populate the surface of our planet. Only then did science turn its attention to humankind and develop disciplines that investigate man's thoughts and actions using methods similar to those that proved effective in the study of nature, both animate and inanimate.

The history of the Max Planck Society has seen a similar change in the focus of attention. The early emphasis on chemistry, physics and astronomy when the foundations of the Society were first laid was followed by a strong expansion of the life sciences in the postwar era. Research in the cognitive sciences was a still later addition, with such disciplines as psychology, anthropology, ethology, linguistics and brain sciences. The emphasis here is on human cognition – both in comparison with and as distinct from the cognitive abilities of other mammals.

Cognitive science is a network of disciplines that lives from the variety of each individual one and from the interaction between them. What these individual disciplines have in common is their interest in the central focus of cognitive science research: the desire to understand what people do and think, what their actions and thoughts depend on, and what processes and mechanisms they are based on. What distinguishes these disciplines are the theoretical and methodological approaches they adopt and the explanations they regard as valid.

As a rule, the same phenomena are the subject of parallel study in multiple disciplines. Thus, for example, the elementary processes of social interaction are the

simultaneous focus of anthropological, psychological, ethological and neuroscience research. In conventional wisdom, such a convergence of interests is generally interpreted as competition – with the consequence that the adherents of different disciplines engage in debates as endless as they are fruitless as to the worth or worthlessness of their approaches. In the wisdom of shared networking, on the other hand, convergence is utilized as an aid to cooperation – with the result that the counterproductive question of who has the better explanation is replaced by the more productive question of how the explanations arrived at by individual disciplines can be related to one another.

The notable successes that cognitive science research has achieved in recent times undoubtedly owe, in part, to the exploitation of these multidisciplinary synergies. In addition, there is also an astonishing theoretical dynamic that distinguishes this research. However young the network that links these disciplines may be, it can already look back on a radical historic change in the bias of theory: the transition from individual to social cognition. In all of the cognitive science disciplines, the realization has gained acceptance in recent years that, while cognitive achievements may be performed by and through individuals, their bases arise and are formed in the social exchange between individuals.

The Focus topic selected for this issue reflects the social turn that this insight has brought to the cognitive sciences. Max Planck Society research groups have played a key role in shaping this development.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Wolfgang Prinz'.

Wolfgang Prinz
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for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences