Imagination

Valerie van Mulukom

Brain, Belief, and Behaviour Lab, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations,
Coventry University, Coventry, United Kingdom
e-mail: ac2492@coventry.ac.uk

Introduction

At its most basic, imagination is the ability to produce internal perception-like representations in the absence of corresponding sensory input (van Mulukom 2020), and can include mental representation experiences away from the here and now, whether experiences of other people, places, or times (van Mulukom 2019). These representations provide meaning and understanding, as we recognize patterns, connections, and configurations in the experiences (Wenger 1999). This capacity produces meaning and understanding not only on an individual level but also on a social level.

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van Mulukom, Valerie. 2019. "The Cognitive Science of Imagination and Religion." Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion 5 (1): 5–20. doi:10.1558/jcsr.39503.

Van Mulukom lays out the ways in which the cognitive science of imagination may be able to inform the cognitive science of religion, founded in the pivotal role of the capacity of imagination for religious beliefs, rituals, and experiences. She discusses developmental and social perspectives (including supernatural agents and mentalizing), links to narrative and fiction via absorption, and creativity and art. At the crux of her paper is the argument that while the imaginary is not real in the physical sense, it has real evolutionary consequences; as such, imagination may be considered a niche (Shantz 2018). Sharing beliefs or imaginings can induce bonding and affect, thus contributing to group formations and motivating behaviors, both of which can influence selection pressures.

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Wah, Alejandra. 2019. "Reflective Imagination via the Artistic Experience: Evolutionary Trajectory, Developmental Path, and Possible Functions." Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture 3 (2): 53–72. doi:10.26613/esic.3.2.143.

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Wah argues that pretend play and artistic experiences (such as music or dance) are supported and made possible by reflective imagination, a universal and uniquely human capacity. Reflective imagination is considered to be a tool to experience oneself or others in a story expressed through cultural artefacts, supported by capacities for perceptual/motor related mental imagery, recollective or intentionality processing, and generative or novel combinatorial processing (Abraham 2016). After constructing a developmental path and an evolutionary trajectory of reflective imagination, as well as considering comparative perspectives, she concludes that reflective imagination allows one to acquire or learn and transmit meaning systems explaining the world. It also maintains social systems, for example through mindreading (practiced developmentally through pretend play), using art as displays of group affiliation, and experiencing art together, which promotes social cohesion.

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Hawlina, Hana, Oliver Clifford Pedersen, and Tania Zittoun. 2020. "Imagination and Social Movements." Current Opinion in Psychology 35:31–35. doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.02.009.

Hawlina, Pedersen and Zittoun describe how imagination supports social movements in three broad ways: First, there is a dynamic between the imagined future and remembered past. Collective remembering of selected narratives of the past can create imagined futures (whether utopian or dystopian), and imagined collective futures can reconstruct the historical pasts. Imagined futures can ground and motivate political action in trying to approach utopian or avoid dystopian futures. Second, imagination enables individuals to create an image of a collective "Us," juxtaposed with a representation of "Others," for example through a narrative of shared suffering. These representations contribute to a collective identity, which can be mobilized to political ends. Third, imaginings (that is, visions) can be communicated and shared through cultural artefacts (art, novels, films, and so forth), through which the imagination of others may be influenced or even controlled, as in propaganda. In particular, utopian and dystopian fiction has been able to inspire social movements throughout history, and the current climate fiction is no exception.

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Fuist, Todd Nicholas. 2020. "Towards a Sociology of Imagination." Theory and Society: 1–24. doi:10.1007/s11186-020-09416-y.

Sociology has an increasing interest in how understandings (that is, imaginings) can shape social action. Fuist argues that sociology can add to this research by showing that imaginings can be collectively held, and that it is this sharedness with social actors that makes it so powerful and constructive. Collective or social imaginings allow people to imagine their social existence; how they are connected to others who share their beliefs and imaginings, potentially in other parts of the world or society. This in turn allows people to create to situate identities and coordinate social action. A future sociology of imagination is recommended to investigate (1) how imaginings can go beyond what is immediately knowable and be part of a disparate collective; (2) understand how cultural artefacts support such imaginings; and (3) show the connection between the individual process of imagination and larger collective imaginations.

Conclusions

Imagination allows people to envision the past and the future and to make new (recombinatory) connections (van Mulukom 2020). While in the cognitive science of imagination there traditionally has been an emphasis on the individualistic view of imagination, recent research presented here suggests that the social aspects of imagination may have been pivotal in their impact of human evolutionary trajectories: the authors of five articles have in their diverse fields formulated the theory that sharing imaginings—stories about people and their situations which constitute understandings of the world—can establish identities, induce group bonding, and motivate adaptive behaviors.

Works Cited

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