



Behavioural Modernity: Reframing the Idea, or Past its Use-By Date?

July 3rd and 4th, 2024

Lectorial 2, RSSS Building, ANU

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July 3

- 9:30 Locating Normativity in the Archaeological Record: A Comparative Perspective
Anton Killin and Ross Pain
- 10:50 Coffee break & other independent foraging
- 11:20 The Fate of “Behavioral Modernity”
Andra Meneganzin
- 12:40 Break for independently foraged lunches
- 2:00 On the Importance of Phylogenetic Thinking and a Focus on Cognitive Capacities in Archaeological Research on Behavioural Modernity
Mark Collard
- 3:30 Behavioral Modernity is Dead, What Now?
Dietrich Stout
- 5:00 End of day drinks at Symposium
- 7:00 Self-funded conference dinner at venue to be determined (conference attendees will need to sign up; will attempt to secure funding for those presenting)

July 4

- 9:30 What About the Origins of Non-Modern Human Behavior?
Steven Kuhn
- 10:50 Coffee break & other independent foraging
- 11:20 On Archaeological Measures of Behavioral Complexity in Human Evolution
Mary Stiner
- 12:40 Break for independently foraged lunches
- 2:00 Material Symbols and the Archaeological Record
Peter Hiscock and Kim Sterelny
- 3:30 Symbolism and Common Knowledge
Ron Planer
- 5:00 End of day drinks at Symposium

Mark Collard

On the importance of phylogenetic thinking and a focus on cognitive capacities in archaeological research on behavioural modernity

Over the last 35 years there has been considerable debate about behavioural modernity among archaeologists. The discussion has, for the most part, concentrated on the timing of the appearance of behaviourally modern traits and whether such traits are unique to *Homo sapiens* or shared with other hominin species, especially the Neanderthals. But recently there has also been some discussion of the validity of the concept of behavioural modernity itself. In this paper, I want to suggest this debate has been clouded by two things. One is a paucity of phylogenetic thinking. Such thinking has been embraced by hominin palaeontologists since the mid-1970s but remains largely alien to archaeologists. An important consequence of this for the debate about behavioural modernity is that there is a lack of clarity about what we should expect regarding the behaviour of *H. sapiens* compared to the Neanderthals and other extinct hominin species. The other thing that has clouded the debate about behavioural modernity, in my view, is a widespread failure to recognise that we are trying to trace the evolution of cognitive capacities rather than the evolution of behaviour. This has led to researchers talking past each other, and to insufficient attention being paid to the epistemological challenges of inferring cognitive capacities from Palaeolithic artefacts and sites. If archaeologists were to act on these criticisms, there would, I contend, be a reduction in the amount of confusion about behavioural modernity and a clearer understanding of the steps necessary to advance understanding of the topic.

Mary Stiner

On Archaeological Measures of Behavioral Complexity in Human Evolution

Arguments for greater behavioral complexity in hominin populations—almost always early *Homo sapiens*—are so widespread in the paleoanthropological literature that they have become almost meaningless. Some claims seem well founded, but many more sidestep the evidence and/or the large gaps in our understanding of the variables themselves. New scientific techniques may reveal fascinating details about what was going on in an archaeological site or region. These additive observations can be helpful, but whether they are evidence of greater behavioral complexity in hominins is a separate and more difficult question. A related problem is the reliance on trait list comparisons in behavioral research because multiple traits can be (and often are) expressions of the same underlying behavior or strategy. Archaeological signatures that are separable in the record are bound to be “autocorrelated” to a particular behavior such as diet diversification. As the scope of problematization in paleoanthropology gets narrower and more normative—as often happens in scientific disciplines—the risk of entering conceptual grooves that suppress innovation increases. Concerted efforts to sort out the behavioral bases of archaeological variables can help us to refresh the analytical process.

Anton Killin and Ross Pain

Locating normativity in the archaeological record: a comparative perspective

Is normative behaviour a uniquely human trait, or does it have wider phylogenetic distribution? Recent work by Andrews, Fitzpatrick and Westra (2024) argues the latter, and provides a 6-dimensional model for gauging different grades of normative behaviour. Our aim in this paper is to apply this framework in the context of cognitive archaeology. We examine the archaeological signatures of hominins, chimpanzees and capuchins, using the framework to locate various elements of normative behaviour. We outline the virtues of the comparative perspective, and argue it helps guard against key methodological pitfalls. Finally, we link our findings to debates about behavioural modernity, and in particular the idea that normative behaviour may be part of this human-specific package. We add our voices to the sceptical choir.

Steven Kuhn

What About the Origins of Non-Modern Human Behavior?

The concept of a “modern human behavior” package (MHB) has been critiqued from many different angles. Nonetheless, it remains strongly entrenched in the Paleoanthropological literature. Most critiques of the MHB concept center on the empirical validity of the package, or specific elements of it. A deeper issue is the concept’s implications about orthogenesis. Orienting research toward a set of supposedly modern behavioral traits promotes a progressive view of evolution. Simultaneously, it diverts attention from unique behavioral and cognitive developments among “pre-modern” hominins, diminishing Paleoanthropology’s potential contributions to the study of behavioral and cognitive evolution. A much more difficult, but ultimately more rewarding, objective is the identification of non-analogue modes of cognition among past hominins.

Andra Meneganzin

The Fate of “Behavioral Modernity”

Over the past twenty years, empirical and theoretical advances have reshaped the research agenda on ‘behavioral modernity’ and its conceptualization. Major shifts involve the traits that should be taken as signatures of the phenomenon, the general archaeological pattern, the mechanisms of change, and species authorship. In light of these changes, some researchers have called for an abandonment of the concept. In this paper, I will articulate what it means to assess whether conceptual retirement or abandonment of the notion of ‘behavioral modernity’ is desirable or, conversely, whether it is possible to retain the concept without running into a problematic “Ship of Theseus” paradox. Drawing on philosophical work on scientific concept revision, I will argue that this lies in understanding (i) what is intrinsic to the notion of behavioral modernity, (ii) whether conceptual housekeeping suffices in dealing with potential miscommunications of today’s empirical results, and (iii) whether the concept, no matter how revised, fosters fruitless research programs. From this, I will show that proposals in the archaeological literature to move away from ‘behavioral modernity’ have not met yet the criteria for conceptual abandonment.

Peter Hiscock and Kim Sterelny

Material Symbols and the Archaeological Record

A class of phenomena known as “material symbols” (ochre as a visual technology, burials, personal adornment, rock and portable art) begin to appear in the archaeological record somewhat earlier than 100,000 thousand years ago, and then become increasingly common through the the peak of the last glaciation. In the eyes of many, this is a signature of profound changes in human cognition, changes which ramified through human social life, which were the root cause of the sapiens expansion out of Africa and of increases in richness and complexity of human technical repertoires. These changes may even have been indirectly responsible for the extinction of the other hominins with whom we shared the earth 100,000 years ago. This paper develops a sceptical and deflationary view of material symbols, outlining an alternative perspective on changes in human lifeways in the Late Pleistocene.

Ron Planer

Symbolism and Common Knowledge

Symbolism is widely seen by cognitive archaeologists as the crowing feature of the behaviourally modern package. Notwithstanding this, it remains poorly understood from a theoretical standpoint. The most common approach by far has been to understand symbolism through an application of Pierce's theory of signs. In this talk, I discuss the limitations of that approach and recommend a fresh one. The alternative approach I propose instead takes its lead from some work in economics and political science. The main idea I shall develop in this talk is that material symbols played a crucial role in facilitating social coordination through the promotion of common knowledge among agents. I will conclude by exploring how this novel perspective on symbolism and symbolic behaviour might inform the archaeology of symbolism.

Dietrich Stout

Behavioral modernity is dead, what now?

The concept of behavioural modernity has been repeatedly and compellingly critiqued as an historical artifact of colonialist archaeology that is arbitrary, poorly defined, theoretically unmotivated, essentialist, unilineal, teleological, and analytically sterile. Yet we continue to use it. Perhaps one reason is that no coherent alternative framework has emerged to take its place. This essay does not propose to establish such a framework but will begin to consider what its desired features might be and what resources, both theoretical and empirical, exist to build it. This discussion will be grounded in a reconsideration of the identification and implications of archaeological evidence of material symbolism.

Coffee and Lunch Locations

