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A model for thinking about how culture has changed across time

Dr Ivan Kroupin

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Summary by Frank Kelley



Ivan Kroupin is a post-doctoral researcher at LSE and Harvard. His main focus is on how the shift from life in subsistence villages to increasingly technology-saturated metropolises is reshaping our minds and our wellbeing, as well as the evolutionary dynamics driving this cultural-cognitive transformation.

His talk outlined a model for thinking about how culture has changed across time, and how this is changing, what demands people experience and, potentially, what mental health challenges they are likely to face.

Ivan's goal was to zoom out and give some context to how unusual the world is we live in today. With reference to the standards of most humans throughout history and engage in dialogue with our seminar group about what ramifications this may have at the level of individual wellbeing.

For three hundred thousand years humans lived in small scale societies. Ivan's research was into the intersection of three tribal societies in Namibia and Angola. They live in a traditional way but will go to the nearby town and its schools. There is low level ownership of cell phones and motorcycles. This is an arid land so the population is spread out.

Their use of the local towns brings contact with a larger and more hierarchical society. Although the villagers, unlike the townspeople, will use technology in an instrumental way. These changes have taken a few hundred years, and so are trivial in evolutionary terms. The villagers used to live in natural buildings and any learning had been more like an apprenticeship. These changes are associated with poorer mental health for the rural people.

How are our minds different?

Ivan talked about standardisation. Unlike villagers production, many of the objects in the town are standardised. One tin of beans is exactly like another tin of beans and will be used in a standardised way. In earlier societies every object demands individual attention. In the modern world we have abstract categories which generalise quickly and both objects and context require less attention. We also need to pay less attention to individuals.

When asked to play sorting games rural people find it hard to hard to switch from one category to another. For example from sorting by colour to sorting by shape. However this is not necessarily a deficit issue. Even young children can move herds long distances. However it can foster an illusion that rural people are not overly intelligent. All this enforced abstract thinking is a common source of mental health stress. This is partly balanced by traditional ways being very grounded and not prone to being overwhelmed by frequent change.

From this different perspective us modern urbanites must seem like we are living in an ADHD environment.

Thank you to Dr Ivan Kroupin. He managed to convey a fundamental change in human societies with great clarity. In the manner of the people he talked about this was both an abstract perspective and also grounded in the particular.