

Borrowing authority or insight? – the relevance of the neurosciences in the social sciences

Petri Ylikoski

In this paper I will analyze the use of the neurosciences in the social sciences. My examples will come from economics and political science. I will start by noticing the rhetorical appeal of neuroscientific evidence that is based on its image as 'hard' natural science and the easy conflation between its current achievements and its future promise. I will then move to analyze the incentives that drive neuroscientists and social scientists to make use of these rhetorical opportunities. The philosophical part of the paper will focus on the role of implicit background assumptions in the interpretation of neuroscientific data. I will argue that much of the perceived direct social scientific relevance of the neuroscientific findings vanishes when the role of these assumptions is made explicit. I argue that the explanatory and evidential relevance of the neurosciences is mediated: the neurosciences provide (crucial) source of evidence for psychology which in turn is a source of explanatory insight for the social sciences. For this reason I argue that the roadmap of the disciplinary integration that underlies many of the recent attempts to integrate 'biological' and 'social' sciences is misguided.