**Anthropology 351 Office: 308 Asbury**

**Anthropology and Human Nature Office hours: TuTh 11:30-12:00**

**Professor D. La Lone TuTh 1:15-2:30**

**Spring 2012 Wed 3:00-3:50**

**Anthropology and Human Nature**

*Human nature exists…human nature is real, definable, and to some extent predictable. It is also quite different from what the world’s cultures have thought it to be.*

*Melvin Konner (The Tangled Wing,2002:xiii, xvii)*

Human nature is an ageless and endless theme. Everyone has views on human nature, and any number of philosophers, theologians, artists, poets, playwrights, novelists (keep listing, if you are so inclined) have been judged to offer special insights into human nature. But these discussions have for the most part been evaluative (“is it good or is it bad?”) and normative (“how should we behave?”). But evaluative and normative arguments are endless and necessarily inconclusive as generalizations about humankind.

Sciences propose another way to advance understanding by attempting to set aside evaluative and normative positions about how things should be in order to explore what is. Science works from propositional statements subject to test and refutation. Everything must be justified not by opinion, belief or faith, but by evidence.

As an anthropologist, I would argue that **Anthropology** holds a distinctive position that should put it at the forefront. What makes anthropology distinctive in the study of humankind (and presumably human nature) is that anthropology is the only discipline that explores all of humankind. Anthropology is the study of all peoples in all times and all places. Valid generalizations about humankind and human nature must encompass no less.

Yet, ironically, twentieth century anthropologists took the lead in insisting that there is no such thing as human nature. That abdication opened the way for many other disciplines to claim preeminence in exploring and explaining human nature. And they are all wrong.

Purpose and Objectives

What is human nature? We have altogether too much speculative verbiage from a great many sources. We have vague and unsubstantiated claims of wisdom about human nature. From cultural anthropology we have a vast record of human diversity and, at the same time, biological anthropology has shown much about the seven million year hominid sequence, and how we do have commonalities as a single species.

Claiming that human diversity shows there is no such thing as human nature is an intellectual blind alley. So what might we learn if instead we approach the questions seriously?

Human nature exists---but it is not what people often think it is.

This course gets at the question by examining the Big Question: “why do humans do what they do?”. Our ideas and methods will not come from the special claims of any one discipline or department. But we do have solid frameworks for posing and researching hypotheses.

Some Objectives for the Course:

Students will be able to explore the question of why humans do what they do without the misconception that any single academic discipline, department, or major has “the answers.”

They will be able to do this with extensive study of the implications of Tinbergen’s observation that the “why question” actually refers to at least four interrelated questions.

As we explore how behavior is the outcome of multiple interactions from ultimate to proximate causes, students will gain some familiarity with many research areas, including evolution, the new genetics, development, endocrinology, neurobiology, psychology (and evolutionary psychology), culture, and why everything is in interaction with environments. This familiarity will be evidenced in ability to read and interpret science news and research articles perceptively.

Students will develop a deeper sense of who we are as humans by exploring our place in the world of living things. More specifically, studies in primatology will promote insights on commonalities as well as differences.

Primatology will reveal that much of what we think is uniquely human has deep evolutionary foundations. For example, students will be able to discuss the evolutionary foundations of empathy and compassion and the roots of morality.

Students will be able to discuss evolutionary theory with greater understanding and insight. This will be demonstrated, for example, in knowledge of the central points in evolution so that terms such as “survival of the fittest” and the notion of adaptations being “for the good of the species” will be discarded.

Students will see many of the cutting edge approaches in research on human behavior (at one point, we’ll examine no fewer than thirty-eight proposals!).

And, contrary to some common misconceptions about science, students may well discover a great deal about love, and happiness, and how what they learn may directly contribute to their own well-being.

**Required Texts**

**Common readings for the course:**

**Frans de Waal, The Age of Empathy**

**Agustin Fuentes, Evolution of Human Behavior**

**Walter Goldschmidt, The Bridge to Humanity**

These are the books everyone will read as foundations for discussion and writing. In addition, timely current research articles will be offered for discussion throughout the term.

**Written Work**

Everyone will develop and demonstrate understanding of the materials in a number of writing projects. Everyone will write a 1 page issues and discussion question commentary for each of the ten “What Ain’t True” issues. For each of the five main course units there will be a 3-4 page commentary. There will not be a final exam, but rather the official final date is for submitting your term paper on a topic you develop throughout the term.

February 2, Thoughts/questions/discussion points on “two sides”

February 14, Commentary on Nature/Nurture dualisms

Page on opening thoughts/questions/discussion points on what’s wrong with “survival

of the fittest” and “for the good of the species”

March 6, Commentary on getting evolution right

Page on opening thoughts/questions/discussion points on human exceptionalism

April 3, Commentary on humans in the animal kingdom

Page on opening thoughts/questions/discussion points on evolution of human

distinctiveness

April 24 Commentary on what makes humans human

Page on opening thoughts/questions/discussion points on human pro-sociality

May 10 (last day) Commentary on human sociality

May 17 Term Paper

**Topics for Contemplation, Reading, and Discussion**

***It ain’t so much the things we don’t know that get us into trouble---it’s the things we know***

***that just ain’t so.***

***Josh Billings (maybe, but also Twain and many others)***

Weeks 1-2:  **Backgrounds, assumptions, expectations**

***For February 2, bring in a page on your opening thoughts on Why It Ain’t True that***

***there are two sides to every question.***

Where do we come from? Situating perspectives.

Evaluative, normative, and science perspectives.

Ideology vs. science

Disciplinary parochialism and chauvinism.

Some popular clichés (and why “popular” is irrelevant!):

“It’s just human nature.”

“You can’t change human nature.”

“The artist/author (e.g. Euripides, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Swift---either

Jonathan or Taylor--) demonstrates a profound understanding of human

nature”

And a common cliché among anthropologists:

“There is just no such thing as human nature.”

How we’ll proceed----why this outline, and class, won’t specify day-by-day activities.

But yet…….for Thursday, bring your discussion comments for

1. *Science Daily*
2. **What Ain’t True #1: There are two sides to every issue**

**Dualistic Fallacies and an Explanatory Continuum**

Are we clear on what’s wrong with “two sides”? Then let’s move to

**What Ain’t True #2: Nature vs. Nurture**

Breaking free of a false dichotomy.

Ultimate and proximate causes, Tinbergen’s four questions, Sapolsky’s research

continuum.

**Read:**

Agustin Fuentes, pp. 28-29, on Tinbergen’s four questions.

Fuentes on the human behavioral phenome, pp. 104-105

Walter Goldschmidt, Chapter 1 “Nature and Nurture” and Chapter 2 “Heritage from the

Distant Past”

***For February 14, Commentary on Nature/Nurture and other false dualisms***

***Page on opening thoughts, questions/discussion points on what’s wrong with “survival***

***of the fittest” and “for the good of the species”***

Weeks 3-5: **Getting Evolution Right**

**What ain’t true #3: “Survival of the fittest”**

**What ain’t true #4: “For the good of the species”**

How evolution works through natural selection is explained in just a few clear and simple points. Nonetheless, a great many otherwise intelligent people get it seriously wrong. “Survival of the fittest” is mistaken because of common misunderstanding of the meaning of *fitness*. One philosophical consequence of this is spread of macho delusions about violence, greed, and selfishness.

And from another side, thinking that selection works “for the good of the species” is also a common reason for getting it wrong.

Why ripped body builders may be wildly inappropriate examples of “fitness.”

The trouble with lemmings.

Changes of gene frequencies in *populations.*

**Evolution of Behavior**

Exploration of human nature is not primarily about evolution of human anatomy, but

human behavioral evolution.

Understanding behavioral evolution.

**Central Issue: The Question of Altruism**

What altruism means in biology and why it poses crucial problems.

Kin selection, inclusive fitness, reciprocal altruism, and multi-level selection.

Cheaters, freeloaders, and “altruistic punishment”

Misunderstanding and misrepresenting “the selfish gene”

**Read:**

Fuentes, Chapters 1 and 2 (note especially pp. 24-26 of Chapter 2)

de Waal, Chapters 1 and 2

***For March 6, Commentary on “Getting Evolution Right”***

***Page on opening thoughts/questions/discussion points on human exceptionalism***

Weeks 6-8: **Humans within the Web of Life**

**What ain’t true #5: Humans stand apart from all other living things**

What kind of beings are we?

One of the great achievements in the history of science has been dramatic new work in

genetics. Contemporary knowledge of DNA demonstrates that in fact all life on earth is

interconnected. Yes, we are related even to sponges, but we can’t take on our

relationships with all living beings. So we start with our position in the animal kingdom

more specifically by considering what it means for us to be **primates**.

*Ape Genius*, VIV (Very Important Video)

**Read:**

Fuentes, Chapter 4 (ok, focus on pp. 64-68, note also p. 108 on primate

plasticity)

de Waal, Chapters 3

**Roots of Empathy, Sympathy (and does compassion follow?)**

**What ain’t true #6: Only humans have thoughts and emotions**

Animal intelligence, the kindness of mice, elephants, dolphins, self-awareness,

theory of mind, mirror neurons, shared attention, shared intention. Maybe

we’re not as special and noble as we claim when we insist we’re “better than

animals.”

**Read:**

de Waal, Chapters 4 and 5

***For April 3, Commentary on humans in the animal kingdom***

***Page on opening thoughts/questions/discussion points on evolution of human***

***distinctiveness***

Weeks 9-11: **Becoming Human, Ancestral Branches**

Stories of the bones and stones.

Hominids, hominins, humans.

The human ancestral sequence extends seven millions years into the past, and whatever

we have as human nature did not arise last week. We can begin with a year-by-year

discussion of the last seven million years. Or maybe not. In slightly less time, we can

discuss some of the highlights in Chapter 4 of Fuentes, but first look more closely at the

summary on pages 232-237, and especially the diagram on p. 236.

**Read:**

Fuentes 232-237,

Fuentes, Chapter 4

**Research on Human Behavioral Evolution**

We continue with some of the intriguing questions in human behavioral

evolution in the research literature. This should encourage you to reflect and report on

research questions that interest you (and provide material for research papers).

For example:

Why are males more inclined than females to do stupid and dangerous things? [example: Kristen Hawkes and Rebecca Blige Bird’s work on showing off and signaling, briefly summarized in Fuentes 121).

Are males demonic monsters? (Wrangham and Peterson, summarized in Fuentes 101).

Were our earliest ancestors less likely to be invincible hunters than to be lunch for predators? (Hart and Sussman, summarized in Fuentes 123).

Human bonding, cooperation and violence. And what about pair bonding---are we monogamous? (Pederson, Lovejoy, summarized in Fuentes 124).

Why is the nuclear family not “the way it should be”? Why are grannies important? (Hawkes et. al., summarized in Fuentes 119).

**What Makes Humans Distinctive?**

Although my brain wiring sometimes makes it difficult for me to recognize people I

know, I am quite confident that not even once, from the beginning of the term to the

present, have I mistaken anyone in class for a chimpanzee, and I’m also quite sure that if

a bonobo were to walk into the classroom I would notice pretty quickly. What enables

this remarkable talent?

**What ain’t true #7: Animal languages**

**and**

**What ain’t true (or is it?) #8: Culture is unique to humans**

Although we (or at least some of us) may be so insufferably vain as to believe we are prettier than the average gorilla (though I’m sure gorillas would dispute this), our differences go beyond surface appearances. Perhaps the most dramatic evolutionary changes have been in the organization of our brain. So we’ll look at some of what neurosciences have revealed about how our brain works.

How have these evolutionary changes opened the way to **language**, and to **culture**?

**Read:**

Goldschmidt, Chapters 3 and 6

Tomasello, “The Human Adaptation for Culture”

***For April 24, Commentary on what makes humans human***

***Page on opening thoughts/questions/discussion points on human pro-sociality***

Weeks 12-14: **Human Hyper-Sociality**

**What ain’t true #9: “Rugged Individualism”**

The cowboy ethos of “rugged individualism” promotes toughness, macho self-interest,

indifference to others’ suffering, violent “solutions” to conflict, violence as

entertainment, unfairness, and the current notion of some in power that “greed is

good.”

But none of this is justifiable by claiming it is just “human nature.”

So let’s start by looking at violence, sex, and grannies.

**Read:**

Fuentes, “It’s Not All Sex and Violence”

Nell, “Cruelty’s Rewards,” (summary in Fuentes 102)

Hawkes et. al. “Grandmothering………” (summarized in Fuentes 119)

But then we may ask the question raised by the twentieth century philosopher Tina

Turner: “what’s love got to do with it?”

Nurturance and “affect hunger”

**Read:**

Goldschmidt, Chapters 4 and 5

**Fairness and Cooperation**

One of the most important contributions to modern evolutionary theory comes from

the work of David Sloan Wilson. Professor Wilson shows that the common

interpretation of “survival of the fittest” has resulted in an almost exclusive

preoccupation with competition. His work has been tremendously influential in

redirecting research on evolution toward the realization that cooperation has a

powerful impact in evolution.

**Read:**

DSW

D.S.Wilson and E.O.Wilson, “Survival of the Selfless”

Primate studies on fairness

Egalitarianism (Boehm) and tribal solidarities

**Evolutionary Foundations of Morality**

**What ain’t true #10: Morality is a uniquely human quality**

**Read:**

de Waal, Chapters 6 and 7

***For May 10 (last day), Commentary on human sociality***

***May 17------Term Paper***