**Anthropology 351 Office: 308 Asbury**

**Anthropology and Human Nature Office hours: TuTh 10-11:30**

**Professor D. La Lone Other times by arrangement**

**Spring 2014**

**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.”

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 be able to discuss evolution 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 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 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:**

**Thomas Suddendorf, The Gap**

**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. For five central course themes there will be a 4-5 page commentary. There will not be a final exam, but rather the official final date is for submitting your final paper on a topic you develop during the term---Agustin Fuentes’s *Evolution of Human Behavior* will be an invaluable guide to research topics and bibliography.

February 18, Commentary One, Starting Off Right

March 4, Commentary Two, On The Gap

March 18, Commentary Three, Language and Mind

April 8, Commentary Four, Human Minds

April 22, Commentary Five, On Culture and Sociality

May 15 Final Paper

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

Week 1:  **Backgrounds, assumptions, expectations**

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.

***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)***

For a start: **What Ain’t True: There are two sides to every issue**

Fallacies of dualism, false dichotomies.

A research continuum from ultimate to proximate causes. Tinbergen’s

questions.

**Read:**

Suddendorf, Chapter 1

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

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

Week 2: **The Nature vs. Nurture Fallacy**

**Read:**

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

Distant Past”

Week 3:  **Evolution and Behavior and Getting Evolution Right**

**More misunderstandings: “Survival of the fittest” and “For the good of the species”**

How evolution works through natural selection can be 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 further, thinking that selection

works “for the good of the species” is also a common reason for getting it wrong.

Some examples:

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

The trouble with lemmings.

Evolution is about changes of gene frequencies in *populations,* not “advancement” of species.

**Evolution of Behavior**

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

human behavioral evolution.

Understanding behavioral evolution.

**Read:**

Fuentes, Chapters 1 and 2 (note especially pp. 11-13 of Chapter 1 and pp. 24-26

of Chapter 2)

***Commentary One: Starting off right, (for February 18)***

Our explorations of sciences of human nature begin with avoiding some common

fallacies. One is that everything is a matter of nature or nurture, and many other

mistakes flow from misunderstandings about how evolution actually works. How does better understanding of these issues advance our explorations in human nature?

Week 4: **The Gap and the Central Importance of Primatology**

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.** This then takes us

to the “gap”: what is distinctively human?

**Read:**

Suddendorf, Chapter 2

Fuentes, pp. 64-68, and comments on primate plasticity on p. 108

Week 5: **Humans within the Web of Life, What the Stones and Bones Tell Us**

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 most enlightening fossil discoveries.

**Read:**

Suddendorf, Chapter 11

Fuentes, Chapter 4, noting especially the summary on pp. 232-237 and the

diagram on p. 236.

***Commentary Two: The Gap***, ***(for March 4)***

The “gap” is the central metaphor for our explorations. What does it mean? Why is

primatology central in our approach to what it means to be human? What do stones

and bones show us about how we became human?

Week 6: **Comparing Minds**

More that ain’t true: only humans have thoughts and emotions.

Comparing minds

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:**

Suddendorf, Chapter 3

Emotions----love and “affect hunger”

**Read:**

Goldschmidt, Chapters 4 and 5

Week 7: **Language**

Is it true that only humans have language? What about language is critical in making

humans distinctive?

**Read:**

Suddendorf, Chapter 4

Goldschmidt, Chapter 3

***Commentary Three: Language and Mind (for March 18)***

Why does language make a difference not simply in degree but in kind from any other

mode of communication and thought? Might we see language as a foundation of the

gap?

Week 8: **Where Language Takes Us**

Communication is everywhere among sentient beings, but what makes language central to being human? Time traveling and mind reading.

**Read:**

Suddendorf, Chapters 5 and 6

Week 9: **Why Intelligence?**

What is intelligence? What are the selective advantages of intelligence that made us

smarter apes?

**Read:**

Suddendorf, Chapter 7

***Commentary Four: Human Minds, (for April 8)***

Thoughts and emotions are not unique to humans, but the human mind is distinctive.

How does our brain and mind make us distinctly human?

Week 10: **Transmitting and Sharing Information: Culture**

Is culture distinctively human? If not, what is distinctive about human culture? The

power of cumulative knowledge. Ratchets.

**Read:**

Goldschmidt, Chapter 6

Suddendorf, Chapter 8

Tomasello, “The Human Adaptation for Culture”

Week 11: **Drive to Connect: Beyond Information to Sharing and Caring**

Altruism, pro-sociality, hypersociality

A 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”

But what about violence, sex (and grannies)?

**Read:**

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

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

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

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

Week 12: **Evolutionary Foundations of Morality**

Fairness, cheating and freeloading and “altruistic punishment”

Sympathy, empathy, compassion

Right and wrong.

**Read:**

Suddendorf, Chapter 9

**Highly recommended:**

Christopher Boehm, *Moral Origins*

Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy*

Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes*

***Commentary Five: Culture and Sociality (for April 22)***

Culture is the central force in human connectedness. Humans are strongly pro-social, to

the point of being hypersocial. Our connections reach far beyond ties of kinship, making

cooperation a powerful evolutionary force. This is central to a great deal of current

research on topics such as the evolutionary foundations of morality. As you discuss the

extraordinary extent of human sociality, keep in mind also that our cooperation and moral communities may also at times be dangerously exclusive.

Weeks 13-14: **The Gap and 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 your own research

papers).

Just as a few examples you may find in reviewing Fuentes:

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).

And many more questions will emerge throughout the term, but do start early in thinking about questions you would be particularly interested in following.