Bio-Cultural Seminar (ANT 520R)

Fall, 2005  TH 3:00 – 6:00 PM  775 Woodruff Library
Instructors:  Joseph Henrich, 218 D Geosciences, 727-5248, jhenric@emory.edu
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Office Hours: Henrich: Tuesday 2 - 4pm or by appointment
             Rilling: Tuesday 10am – noon or by appointment

Course description: This course will utilize a biocultural perspective to inform our understanding of cross-cultural variation and similarity in human social life. It will draw on comparative ethnography, primatology and human biology. Various theoretical perspectives will be considered, such as cultural models, life history theory, evolutionary psychology, and cultural evolutionary theory. Topics will include: (1) human universals, (2) kinship, (3) pair-bonding and marriage, (4) incest and the incest taboo, (5) homosexuality, (6) emotions, (7) reciprocity, (8) cooperation and social norms, (9) social status, (10) patriarchy, matriarchy and sexual inequity, (11) social inequality, egalitarianism, and within-group violence, (12) Intergroup violence and war, (13) infanticide and suicide.

Prerequisites: No prior training in cultural transmission, comparative ethnography or human biology is required.

Reading and books: The following texts are required reading. You may purchase them from the Emory Bookstore.


The remainder of our course readings are posted on Blackboard. http://classes.emory.edu/webapps/login

Grades and Evaluations

Grades will be based on (1) weekly participation (20%), (2) 7 reaction papers (20%), (3) 1 or 2 weeks of discussion leadership (10%) and (4) a final paper (50%). For weekly participation, students should engage the readings, ask questions, defend a position, and challenge those they disagree with. For the reaction papers, students will pick 7 weeks over the course of the semester in which they will write a 2 page reaction paper to the assigned readings. Paper should be turned in at the end of class. If student misses a class they must write a reaction paper for the missed class (one of their seven). For Discussion leadership, the 14 weeks will be divided as evenly as possible, with 2 students assigned as discussion leaders for each week (after the first). Discussion leaders should be...
prepared to clarify difficult material, provide some background, pose open ended
questions to fertilize discussion, and prevent the dominance of the discussion by overly
enthusiastic participants.

Final Paper: Students will be asked to write a 15-20 page paper due on December 12. The
topic can be anything under the general heading of biocultural approaches to human
behavior, but must be approved by one of the instructors. Outlines and rough drafts can
(optionally) be turned in for comments from either professor up to a week ahead of time.

**Weekly topics and readings**

**Week 1 (Thursday, September 8): Background for Human Biology and Culture.**

Themes: Is culture a part of human biology? Can we reconcile what we know
about human brains and biology with the concepts of culture and history that have
traditionally dominated anthropology?


Optional reading:
Hariri, A.R., et al., A susceptibility gene for affective disorders and the response

**Week 2 (Thursday, September 15): No Class**

**Week 3 (Thursday, September 22): Cross-cultural Variation and Universals**

Themes: Are there any human universals? How have people explained human
universals? How does one know if one has found a human universal? Can a
human universal explain cultural variation? Is all behavioral variation also
cultural variation? (If not, what kind of variation is it?) What are the possible
explanations for behavioral variation?

2. Cavalli-Sforza, L.L. and M.W. Feldman, The application of molecular genetic
Week 4 (Thursday, September 29): **Kinship**

Themes: Can evolutionary theory explain aspects of human kinship? What can’t evolutionary theory explain about human kinship? Why do kinship structures vary across societies? What can’t evolutionary theory explain about kinship?


Optional reading:


Week 5 (Thursday, October 6): **Pair Bonding, and Marriage**

Themes: Do humans pair bond? Is marriage universal? What can evolutionary theory explain about marriage, and what can it not explain? How might variation in marriage patterns be explained? What, if anything, can non-primates teach us about pairing and/or marriage?


Week 6 (Thursday, October 13): **Incest and Incest Taboo**

Themes: What’s the difference between incest aversion and an incest taboo? How universal is the incest taboo? What aspects of incest are the most difficult to explain? How might the constants and variations in incest prohibitions be explained?


Week 7 (Thursday, October 20): **Homosexuality**

Themes: Why is homosexuality a conundrum for evolutionary theory? How does the evidence from non-humans inform our understanding of Homosexuality? What are some of the proximate mechanisms? Might these vary from society to society?


Optional reading:


Week 8 (Thursday, October 27): **Emotions**

*Choose topic for Final paper and discuss with an instructor by Week 9.*

Themes: What is the nature of emotions? Do they vary from society to society? What varies (if anything)? How can we integrate research on emotions based on brain and hormone studies with cross-cultural ethnographic work on emotions?


Optional reading:


Week 9 (Thursday, November 3): **Reciprocity**

Themes: ultimate perspectives; neurobiology of reciprocal altruism


Optional readings:


Week 10 (Thursday, November 10): **Cooperation and Social Norms**

Themes: How is human cooperation different from other animals? How might the cultural nature of humans help explain this?


3. Joan B. Silk, Sarah F. Brosnan, Jennifer Vonk, Joseph Henrich, Daniel J. Povinelli, Amanda S. Richardson, Susan P. Lambeth, Jenny Mascaro, & Steven J. Shapiro. Chimpanzees are indifferent to the welfare of unrelated group members

Optional reading:


Week 11 (Thursday, November 17): **Status, Prestige and Dominance**

Themes: What are the phylogenetic foundations of human status? How does human status differ from non-human status? Why is ethology so important? Why are so many people preoccupied with social status? What are the reproductive and endocrine correlates of status.


2. Goffman, E., To be announced.


Optional reading:

Week 12 (Monday, November 21 from 6-9 PM): **Patriarchy, Matriarchy and Sexual Inequity**

Themes: dominance in chimpanzees, bonobos and humans compared and contrasted; cross-cultural perspectives


Week 13 (Thursday, December 1): **Inequality, Egalitarianism and within-group Violence**

Themes: Are human societies naturally unequal? How can be explain the relative egalitarian nature of foraging societies?


Optional readings:

Week 14 (Thursday, December 8): **Intergroup violence and warfare**

Themes: Is warfare part of human nature? Are modern societies more violent than the small-scale societies? Are humans a particularly violent species?


Week 15 (Tuesday, December 13 from 4-7 PM): **Infanticide and Suicide**

Themes: How can an understanding of human biology, evolution, and culture assist us in understanding infanticide and suicide? How can evolutionary theory possibility explain killing one’s child? Is suicide cultural?


Optional reading:


**Final papers due Friday, December 16**