Genes, Mind, and Culture

Human Evolutionary Biology 1290

Spring 2024

Humans are a cultural species. Unlike other animals, we are heavily reliant on learning from others to acquire many important aspects of our behavior, and this capacity for cultural transmission has given rise to a second system of inheritance--culture--that not only explains much of our contemporary behavior but has driven our speciesâ€™ genetic evolution over hundreds of thousands or even millions of years. Humans are products of culture-gene coevolution. In addition to having shaped our speciesâ€™ anatomy and physiology, cultural evolution has important implications for understanding human nature, and for tackling basic problems and questions in psychology, economics and anthropology. The first half of this course will develop the basic principles and lines of empirical inquiry in the field of cultural evolution, while the remainder will apply, hone and refine them by examining the origins of global inequality, the emergence of modern institutions, and the emergence of psychological differences among populations.

This is an advanced course that requires Human Nature (GENED 1056) or the instructor's permission to enroll. Students should have an understanding of evolution by natural selection and a familiarity with The Secret of Our Success (Princeton UP, 2016). Course readings will include scientific journal article, trade books and both videos and films.

The course is a mix of seminar-style discussions and lectures as well as a weekly discussion section. In section, the Teaching Fellow (Amar Sarkar) will present additional material relevant to the course, and students will have further opportunities to ask questions, fill in any missing background information, review evaluations, and engage in learning tasks.

Instructors and Teaching Fellows

Instructor: Joe Henrich
Department of Human Evolutionary Biology
26 Oxford Street
Office: MCZ 533D
Email: henrich@fas.harvard.edu
Office Hours: Monday 1pm -2pm (in person only)
Zoom Office:
https://harvard.zoom.us/j/9026425222

Teaching Fellow: Amar Sarkar
Department of Human Evolutionary Biology
Email: amarsarkar@g.harvard.edu
Office Hours: Via email.

Lecture and Lab Schedule

Lecture: Tuesdays, 9:00 am -12:00 pm (Peabody Museum, 52H - 11 Divinity Avenue)

Discussion: Fridays, 1:45 pm - 2:45 pm (MCZ, 529 - 26 Oxford Street)

Course Materials and Resources

This course aims to integrate online resources, novel teaching technologies, broadly accessible texts, state-of-the-art research papers, multimedia class lectures, films, and contemporary popular media on relevant issues. Here, we provide the primary written texts, but youâ€™ll be find links to films and video lectures in the modules.

Major course texts:

Background: Henrich, Joseph (2015) *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

Henrich, Joseph (2020) *The WEIRDest People in the World: How Westerners became psychologically*

peculiarly and particularly prosperous. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

A sampling of journal articles used in the course

Blasi, D.E., Moran, S., Moisik, S.R., Widmer, P., Dediu, D. and Bickel, B., 2019. Human sound systems are shaped by post-Neolithic changes in bite configuration. *Science*, *363*(6432).

Derex, Maxime, Jean-FranÃ§ois Bonnefon, Robert Boyd, and Alex Mesoudi. 2019. â€œCausal Understanding Is Not Necessary for the Improvement of Culturally Evolving Technology.â€ *Nature Human Behaviour* 3(5): 446â€“52.

Course requirements and grading

Your course grade will be based on six different components: in-class participation, Perusall annotations, a mid-term discussion leading, a presentation and a final take-home evaluation. The relative weighting in grading breaks down as in Table 1.

1. *In-class participation:* Students will be graded based on their class attendance and participation, which will include both the quantity and quality of their engagement during class and lab discussions. Comments and questions that demonstrate an understanding of the assigned readings will be important. To provide flexibility, students are permitted to miss two classes with no penalty. Some sections are optional (students will be notified in advance which sections are optional and which are required).
2. *Perusall Annotations*. Students are expected to do the assigned readings and annotate them on Perusall. Persusall annotations are due by **8:00am on the day of the class**. Pedagogically, this allows students to highlight areas of interest, pose questions, request clarifications, open larger discussions and engage with their fellow studentsâ€”annotations will be visible to all students as well as the teaching team. The Perusall system automatically grades the quantity and quality of annotations. For flexibility, the second week of reading will be considered just practice, and students will be given time in their first section to make sure they understand Perusall. If you get 80% or more of the possible points, we bump you to 100%. If you get less, you get what you get.
3. *Discussion Leading: over the course of the semester students will be in charge of leading the discussion of particular papers. These papers will be assigned two weeks before class.* These presentations will involve a short presentation of 5-10 minutes followed by discussion leading (posing questions and highlighting questions). Students may meet with Amar (TF) or Professor Henrich while preparing their presentations, though this is not required.
4. *Presentation: in groups of two or three, students will do a 15-minute presentation on a topic of interest to them related to the course. The presentations will occur during the final two weeks of the course. A list of suggested topics will be provided (here), though students can also propose (and have approved) their own topics.*
5. *Midterm Examination: the mid-term will be 1 hour, in-class. It will include both multiple-choice questions and short-answer responses.*
6. *Final Evaluation:* the final take-home evaluation will involve a series of medium and long essay questions covering the entire course. The examination is open book, internet, lectures and notes, but each student must write their own final examination without input from others. Students may use Generative AI, but beware, the available AIs tend to do roughly C-level work on these questions.

#	Grading Instruments	Percentage contribution
1	In-class participation	20%
2	Perusall Annotations	20%
3	Discussion leading	10%
4	In-class Mid-term	15%
5	Presentation	15%
6	Takehome Final Examination	20%

Lab/Section

Students will attend one TF-led lab meeting per week. Lab meetings will generally consist of:

- Review of recent course content
- Breakout groups to work on the above-described presentations
- Activities to learn about research methods in social sciences
- Critical discussion of assigned journal articles
- Preparation for and review of quizzes

Buckle Up

The goal of this course is to apply a broad evolutionary framework to understand human behavior, psychology and diversity both across history and into the modern world. This investigation will take us through topics and themes related to human nature, genetic evolution, genetic differences among populations, war, religion, psychological diversity, sex differences, economic outcomes and much more. An exploration of these topics may make some students uncomfortable. Any students who choose to take this course should be prepared to engage scientifically on potentially controversial topics. If you do feel uncomfortable, you are always invited to discuss any concerns with Professor Henrich or the Teaching Fellow, Amar Sarkar.

For a class-by-class course plan follow the modules, beginning with Class 1 (Sept 2): Introduction.

Diversity Statement

Genes, Minds and Culture is an exploration of the origins of both human nature and our species' diversity. As part of this, we'll examine the roots of ethnic differences and the psychology of racism. We'll look at the evidence for genetic differences among populations and see how this undercuts classical notions of "race". We'll study how Western ways of thinking and feeling, including the very scientific epistemologies we'll be applying, are products of one peculiar pathway of cultural evolution. Not only will we get a glimpse of different cultural psychologies from around the world, but we'll see how they have shaped and been shaped by ecology, historical events, religious ideas and political institutions. You'll see, for example, how differences in gender equality and attitudes can be traced back to a population's particular history of farming and herding. We'll discuss how this approach counters simplistic racist ideologies and undermines Enlightenment triumphalism. You'll come to understand how the collective brains of societies, which are responsible for the rapid innovation of these last two centuries, are fueled by diversity--by the sharing of different perspectives, experiences, insights and approaches.

Please read the Academic Integrity Policy.