

Evolutionary Anthropology Society

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[This is the sixth column in a series on graduate programs where training can be obtained in the many theoretical approaches of interest to the members of the Evolutionary Anthropology Society. Please contact me if you have information about an appropriate graduate program or if you would like to submit a piece for the series.]

Biological Anthropology program, University of California—Los Angeles

Members of the UCLA Department of Anthropology have had a longstanding interest in ecological anthropology and the linkages between subdisciplines. In the past, however, the Biological Anthropology program (BA program) focused on such traditional topics as human and primate paleontology, anatomy, and physiology. However, since the early 1980's the program has increasingly emphasized evolutionary approaches to human and primate *behavior*, especially an adaptationist perspective on behavior, becoming one of the first programs in the U.S. to move in this direction.

The current BA program faculty includes Dwight Read, a mathematical anthropologist, and Gail Kennedy, a paleoanthropologist, who have both been at UCLA since the 1970s. Robert Boyd, a theorist focusing on cultural evolution, and Joan Silk, a primate behavioral ecologist, were hired in the 1980s. Joseph Manson and Susan Perry, both primate behavioral ecologists, came to UCLA in the early 1990s. Finally, Daniel Fessler and then Clark Barrett came to UCLA in the last decade, bringing the perspective of evolutionary psychology to the program. In addition, Emeritus professor Nicholas Blurton-Jones also played a key role in defining the behavioral orientation of the modern BA program as well as its focus on adaptation.

The BA program webpage lists four official areas of concentration: evolutionary theory, primate behavior, hominid evolution, and evolutionary psychology and ecology. However, close discussion with faculty makes it obvious that the study of these topics is less strongly bounded at UCLA than it might be elsewhere. "One of the major strengths of our program is the linkages between theory and behavior, and our ability to integrate knowledge across taxa," says Dr. Silk.

For example, one of the broad theoretical elements that UCLA is best known for is its focus on culture as a key element of human behavioral evolution. "At UCLA we take culture seriously", says Dr. Fessler, "we place a strong emphasis on socially transmitted knowledge and behavior as part of human adaptation." Faculty from many traditions apply this paradigm. For instance, Robert Boyd has published very influential mathematical models of cultural evolution, Susan Perry has argued that differing capuchin behavioral 'traditions' are not necessarily related to ecology, Clark Barrett has maintained that natural selection creates categories and predispositions for learning which are reliant on locally relevant information, and Dan Fessler has explored the evolved psychology related to cultural pre- and proscriptions such as food taboos.

In fact, culture is so important a focal point for many members of the BA program that the weekly seminar series hosted by the Center for Behavior, Evolution, and Culture (BEC) has become the center of departmental life. BEC began as a result of conversations between several UCLA anthropology faculty members who had the idea to start a discussion group on topics related to behavior and evolution. Over time, their idea became a weekly seminar and then a formal Center, the purpose of which is to “provide a framework to facilitate research and training on the interaction among natural selection, cultural transmission, social relations, and psychology” (BEC website).

Though biological anthropologists play a dominant role, BEC incorporates students, faculty, and speakers from a variety of disciplines including archaeology, cultural anthropology, psychology, economics, communications, linguistics, and neuroscience. For example, two key BEC participants are Alan Fiske, a psychological anthropologist interested in evolutionary issues, and P. Jeffrey Brantingham, an archaeologist with a strong interest in Upper Paleolithic hunter-gatherers and evolutionary theory.

Other UCLA resources of interest to evolutionary anthropologists include (1) the Center for Culture, Brain, and Development (CBD), an interdisciplinary group which focuses on “how culture and social relations inform brain development, how the brain organizes cultural and social development, and how development gives rise to a cultural brain” (CBD website) and offers a training program, lecture series, and both postdoc and predoctoral funding for BA students and others; (2) the Animal Behavior Program, which offers interdisciplinary and comparative training to graduate students in many disciplines; (3) the Center for Society and Genetics, which offers a colloquium, an annual symposium, graduate student funding, and faculty positions; (4) the California Social Science Experimental Laboratory (CASSEL), which provides the infrastructure for experiments on bargaining, public goods, social networks, and conformism; (5) the Center for the Study of Evolution and the Origin of Life (CSEOL), a broad-based group focused on both physical and biological evolution rooted in the UCLA geology department; and (6) the Experimental Biological Anthropology lab group which meets weekly and attracts psychology students and faculty as well as those from the BA program.

The UCLA BA program has a competitive admissions process and is small in size, both because the department does not accept graduate students that they are unable to support. Funding packages offered to incoming students vary from year to year, but typically include two years of support with no strings attached and two years of support with TA responsibilities. In addition, continuing graduate students are often able to obtain additional support through NSF graduate fellowships, research assistantships, teaching assistantships, and fellowships offered by various UCLA centers and programs.

UCLA is still a four-fields department with strong linguistic, cultural, and archaeology programs and all graduate students are required to take a set of introductory core courses in each of the four fields. In their area of specialization, however, “BA program students get real, rigorous theory courses as well as training in a variety of traditions in empirical work—including both experimental and observational research” says Dr. Silk. “We use

an apprentice model for teaching the research process: students are involved in a variety of projects, some of which are related to their own focus and some of which are not,” says Dr. Fessler, and, regarding dissertation topics, “faculty give suggestions, but do not direct—as a consequence, there is a lot of variety among students in the topics they choose to study.” Recent graduates have a good record of obtaining academic employment; around two-thirds hold tenure-track positions at institutions such as Harvard, Pennsylvania, UC Davis, and Emory, while most of the remainder hold research fellowships.

The faculty I spoke with all agree that one of the best things about UCLA’s BA program is its collegiality. To begin with, there are cordial relations between biological and other types of anthropologists, meaning, as Dr. Barrett points out that “evolutionary people don’t feel like pariahs in their own department.” Furthermore, centers such as BEC and CBD foster active collaboration between both students and faculty from different subdisciplines. On the level of the BA program, due to their small numbers all of the BA program graduate students form a single social and intellectual unit. Moreover, everyone in the BA program, both faculty and grad students, has lunch together on a regular basis. “We talk theory and argue; it’s a lot of fun. This business requires a lot of passion and dedication and this atmosphere feeds it” says Dr. Silk. Overall, the BA program forms a cohesive community which remains so even as faculty and students come and go, a fact which has become, in Dr. Barrett’s words, “a big selling point for prospective UCLA students.” Finally, on the university level, the widespread interest in evolutionary approaches to behavior has resulted in a “large critical mass of students and faculty interested in evolutionary social science” which, says Dr. Fessler, “became self-generating, and now aids in the recruitment of faculty as well as grad students.”

Contributions to this column are welcomed and may be sent to Mary Shenk, Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology, University of Washington, 206 Raitt Hall, Box 353412, Seattle, WA 98195-3412 or to mshenk@u.washington.edu. Suggestions of or details on graduate programs related to the interests of the Evolutionary Anthropology Society are especially requested.