Psychological Anthropology: Current Topics and Research

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Substance

The basic question in psychological anthropology—probably the fundamental question at the core of anthropology—is, “How does human nature result in cultural diversity?” In another words, how does our universally shared biology generate social arrangements, motives, beliefs, practices, technologies, religions and rituals that differ from community to community? No other species is so diverse—why are we? And just what is the nature of our diversity?

This course considers how the human mind shapes the world's cultures. Conversely, we consider how cultures affect thought, emotion, and action. We look at how natural selection has formed human minds to take advantage of—and depend on culture. Overall, we explore how human society and culture are products of the human mind, and how human minds are products of culture and society. The universal human nature that we all share is the basis for our cultural diversity; this course explores that paradox.

We will begin by considering the multiple ways in which people know and transmit culture, and the relation of culture to cognition, especially memory systems. We will consider the basic forms of social relationships and how they vary across cultures. We will see what ethnologic research shows about the universal aspects and cultural diversity of the modalities in which people constitute social relationships. We will study how emotions evolved to make it possible for people to construct adaptive social relationships; and we will consider how natural selection results in cultural diversity in social relationships and in emotions. We will look closely at how culture determines the way people make sense of suffering and seek moral meaning in misfortune and death. We will consider the rationality of beliefs and practices related to gods, witches, oracles, and spirit mediums. We will discuss cultural varieties of emotional responses to death, as well as social emotions arising in disasters everywhere, and several other aspects of the cultural shaping of emotions. We will analyze the similarities and differences between some forms of psychopathology and corresponding types of culturally meaningful practices. In particular, we will compare possession trance to dissociative identity disorder (multiple personalities); compare obsessive compulsive disorder to religious rituals; and compare anorexia to religious asceticism. We will briefly address the discovery that most violence is morally motivated to regulate relationships. Then we will consider how the language you speak shapes how you tend to perceive and think. We will conclude by reading about certain cultural meanings of menstruation in a West African society and mandatory homosexual practices in some New Guinea initiation
rituals. Lectures will often include material drawn from the instructor’s own West African fieldwork and experimental research.

Lectures will be connected to the readings and complement them, but will not be redundant with them. So completion of all the readings and attendance at (or listening to) all lectures is essential. (Reading someone else’s lecture notes won’t be enough.) Discussions sections will introduce new material, as well as new perspectives on the readings and lectures; attendance is mandatory. _You cannot do well in this course without attending all sections and hearing all lectures!_

**Mechanics: Assignments**

Course assignments consist of the submission of nine weekly sets of discussion questions, three 2-page essays and a take-home final. Each of these assignments will ask you to cogently develop or critique what you are learning in this class, to creatively integrate it with other concepts, or apply it insightfully to new phenomena. The goal of this course is to develop your capacity to think like a psychological anthropologist!

Students will turn in to their TA discussion questions on the readings every week from the second through the tenth week of the quarter. These questions will be based on the readings for the current week and must be submitted promptly, so you must keep up.

There will also be three short essays, due on January 30, February 20, and March 6 (see Calendar). The essays should be no more than 2 pages long (double spaced, 12-point type, 1-inch margins). Topics will be posted on the web page by Thursday evening, and the essays will be due the following Monday at the beginning of lecture. **No late papers will be accepted.**

There will be a take-home final exam, whose format will be similar to the essays, but somewhat longer (4–5 pages). The final will be posted on the web by late Thursday, June 8, and is due in the Anthropology Department Office (Haines 341) by 4:00 PM on Tuesday, March 20. **Late exams will not be accepted.**

_There will be no make-up work:_ to be fair to all, everyone will do the same assignments and exams and no one will be credited for additional work. (Allowing anyone to do make-up work essentially would add an extra assignment for _everyone_ who doesn’t have a solid A!)

The schedule provides a calendar of readings, lecture and section topics, and assignments for the quarter. Required books and articles are available at the ASUCLA bookstore.

This course requires a lot of reading, reading which must be done thoroughly and thoughtfully. You can only attain an anthropological perspective by a broad and deep reading of ethnographies and theoretical works. But I think you will find the readings intriguing, stimulating, and in some cases very moving. We will also watch two interesting videos in class, one about witchcraft and magical practices in Central Africa, the other
about possession trance in Bali. The required books will be on reserve at Powell Library; the videos will be on reserve, too, at the Powell Instructional Media Library, after being shown in class.

The class web page is an integral component of the course. There are a number of topical links from the Schedule page. Among these links are detailed descriptions of most of the cultures we discuss. The List of Links page also connects to organizations related to psychological anthropology and allied fields, and to other materials on the subjects we discuss.

Announcements will be posted on the web page when necessary. All students are encouraged to join the interchanges on the Discussion Board. This permits everyone to participate regularly in discussions about the ideas in this course, which would otherwise be difficult in a class of this size. The web page will evolve during the quarter, so watch out for new additions (and revisions). If you discover links that should be added or updated, please let us know immediately!

Evaluations and feedback in both directions

Grading will be based on

> participation in sections (including discussion questions submitted) -- 30%
> each of three essays -- 15%
> final – 25%

Grading is not on a curve: there is a limitless supply of As (and Bs and Cs and even Ds and . . .), so there is no reason to compete with your fellow students; quite the contrary: helping someone understand something is the best way to deepen and solidify your own understanding. Study together and help each other out! Of course, everything you submit must be your own original work; plagiarism or submission of another person’s work as your own will result in failing the course. Naturally, you should cite sources for any ideas you use; there generally won’t be space to use quotations, but if you use any sources you must cite the source (precisely).

The teaching assistants and I welcome comments and suggestions on this course. Let us know how we can improve what we are doing! Readings, lectures, discussions, the web page, and assignments evolve, based on your feedback. Please tell us what you find most exciting and intriguing, what you don’t, and why. (For example, one thread on the Discussion Board is a poll of votes for the worst reading of the course!)

Have fun with us exploring culture, social relations, the mind, and how they interact!