Culture, Not Race, Explains Human Diversity

By Mark Nathan Cohen

We are not likely to convince students that racist views are wrong if we teach them only about biology and ignore culture. The basic facts about the broad patterns of human biological variation and “race” are fairly clear and well established: Individual human beings undeniably differ in myriad ways, and each specific difference may be important. Variation in skin color, for example, affects susceptibility to sunburn, skin cancer, and rickets. Variations in body build affect the ability to keep warm or cool; variations in the shape of the nose affect its ability in warm and moisten the air inhaled. Unseen genetic variations protect some people from (and predispose other people to) diseases ranging from malaria and smallpox to diabetes and cancer.

However, “races” as imagined by the public do not actually exist. Any definition of “race” that we attempt produces more exceptions than sound classifications. No matter what system we use, most people don’t fit.

As almost every introductory textbook in physical anthropology explains, the distinctions among human populations are generally graded, not abrupt. In other words, skin color comes in a spectrum from dark to light, not just in black or white; noses come in a range of shapes, not just broad or narrow. Furthermore, the various physical traits such as skin color and nose shape (plus the enormous number of invisible traits) come in an infinite number of combinations; one cannot predict other traits by knowing one trait that a person possesses. A person with dark skin can have any blood type and can have a broad nose (a combination common in West Africa), a narrow nose (as many East Africans do), or even blond hair (a combination seen in Australia and New Guinea).

Of the 50,000 to 100,000 pairs of genes needed to make a human being, perhaps 35,000 to 75,000 are the same in all people, and 15,000 to 25,000 may take different forms in different people, thus accounting for human variation. But only a tiny number of these genes affect what many people might consider to be racial traits. For example, geneticists believe that skin color is based on no more than 4 to 10 pairs of genes. The genes of black and white Americans probably are 99.9 percent alike.

In addition, studies of the human family tree based on detailed genetic analysis suggest that traits such as skin color are not even good indicators of who is related to whom, because the traits occur independently in several branches of the human family. When we consider the pairs of genes that may differ among humans, we see that, beyond the genes determining skin color, black people from Africa, Australia, and the south of India are not particularly closely related to each other genetically.

All of this means that variations among “races” cannot possibly explain the differences in behavior or intelligence that people think they see. Although black Americans on average receive lower scores on standardized tests than do white Americans, neither “race” is actually a biological group. Skin color alone cannot account for the differences in group averages. Although we know a great deal about the role of many of our genes—for instance, which ones cause sickle-cell anemia—no genes are known to control differences in specific behavior or in intelligence among human groups. Even if someone discovered such genes, we have no reason to assume that they would correlate with skin color any more than most other genes do.

Anthropologists and other academics must do a better job of communicating these facts to our students and to the public at large. But even if we make sure that everyone understands these facts, racism will persist—unless we convince people that a different explanation for variations in behavior makes more sense. The alternative that we need to emphasize is the concept of culture—but a concept of culture far deeper and more sophisticated than that taught by many multiculturalists.

The anthropological concept of culture can be explained best by an analogy with language. Just as language is more than vocabulary, culture is more than, say, art and music. Language has rules of grammar and sound that limit and give structure to communication, usually without conscious thought. In English, for example, we use word order to convey the relationship among the words in a sentence. Latin uses suffixes to show relationships; Swahili uses prefixes. Even languages as similar as French, Spanish, and Italian use different subsets.
of the many sounds the human mouth can make.

Equally, culture structures our behavior, thoughts, perceptions, values, goals, morals, and cognitive processes—also usually without conscious thought. Just as each language is a set of arbitrary conventions shared by those who speak the language, so each culture is made up of its own arbitrary conventions. Many languages work perfectly well; many cultures do, too.

Just as familiarity with the language of one’s childhood makes it harder to learn the sounds and grammar of another language, so one’s culture tends to blind one to alternatives. All of us—Americans as well as members of remote Amazonian tribes—are governed by culture. Our choices in life are circumscribed largely by arbitrary rules, and we have a hard time seeing the value of other people’s choices and the shortcomings of our own. For example, many societies exchange goods not for profit, but to foster social relationships, as most Americans do within their own families. Some peoples prefer to maintain their surrounding environment rather than to seek “progress.” Other groups have a very different sense than we do of the balance between individual freedom and responsibility to one’s community.

Besides teaching our students about the importance of culture, we need to revive the anthropological concept of cultural relativism—perhaps the most important concept that liberal education can teach. The enemies of relativism have claimed that the concept means that everything is equal—that no moral judgments are possible, that Americans must accept whatever other people do. But this is not what relativism means.

What it does mean is that we must look carefully at what other people are doing and try to understand their behavior in context before we judge it. It means that other people may not share our desires or our perceptions. It also means that we have to recognize the arbitrary nature of our own choices and be willing to reexamine them by learning about the choices that other people have made. In medicine, for example, many cultures have long tried to treat the whole patient, mind and body together, which some of our doctors are just beginning to focus on, having been trained instead to concentrate on treating a particular disease.

The key point is that what we see as “racial” differences in behavior may reflect the fact that people have different values, make different choices, operate within different cultural “grammars,” and categorize things (and therefore think) in different ways. Over the years, we have learned that culture shapes many things we once thought were determined by biology, including sexuality, aggression, perception, and susceptibility to disease. But many people still confuse the effects of biology and those of culture.

For example, we still use analogy problems to test students’ skill in logic, which we then define as innate, genetically driven intelligence, which, some argue, differs by “race.” But solving the problems depends on putting items into categories, and the categories we use are cultural, not universal. Giving the correct answer depends less on inherent intelligence than it does on knowing the classification rules used by those who created the test. Most U.S. students would flunk analogy problems put to them by Mesoamerican peasants, who divide things into “hot” and “cold”—categories that, in their usage, go far beyond physical temperature.

To communicate the importance of culture to students, we have to make some adjustments in our teaching. First, we have to stop teaching world and American history in ways that deny the contributions of others and prevent thoughtful analysis of our own actions. Teaching along these lines has improved, but it can be better yet. For instance, how many students are taught that George Washington and Benjamin Franklin were speculators who wanted to enrich themselves with land on the Western frontier—land the British had intended to reserve for Native American use?

We also have to stop teaching or accepting the idea that humans are divided into three races—Caucasian, Negroid, and Mongoloid—an idea that is at least 50 years out of date. I constantly face students who have been taught the concept of three races in the 1990s by high-school and college teachers in other social sciences.

In addition, psychologists, in particular, must stop assuming that only one pattern exists for human cognition, perception, formation of categories, and so forth. All too many psychologists believe that standardized I.Q. tests are equally valid for assessing individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Operating from that mistaken assumption, they teach a narrow view of “correct” human behavior, which promotes racism.

We must realize that students from some minority groups are likely to do badly on I.Q. tests for a variety of reasons beyond the poor health, nutrition, and education that many of them have experienced because of poverty. The content of the tests is biased toward students in the mainstream, both in terms of the subject matter of the questions and in more-subtle ways, such as expectations about what is important in a problem.

And some minority students see no reason to try to do well on I.Q. tests. They may not expect to go to college. Their sense of self-worth may depend on their lack of interest in the mainstream culture, which they feel has rejected them. Many scholars of colonialism have described how members of oppressed minorities create a sense of community by choosing to ignore their colonizers’ culture. John Ogbu, an anthropologist at the University of California at Berkeley, has shown that the same phenomenon occurs in U.S. schools.

Thus, scores on I.Q. tests depend not only on how “smart” one is, but also on familiarity with middleclass, white American culture. Different cultural groups are likely to pay more attention to different parts of test questions, not even noticing what someone from another group would consider crucial. A student who did not grow up in the middle class might well believe that to appear smart, one should give a slow, thoughtful answer—not a snap answer or sound bite. Such a student will probably be put off by the idea of
compititiveness and individual ranking, and thus by the whole experience of the I.Q. test.

Anthropologists must do a better job of communicating these and other important facts about human biological and cultural variation to their students and to the public at large. Rather than revel in the details of obscure populations, our courses in cultural anthropology should focus on interpretations of significant contemporary events. We have to demonstrate to students that not all events outside—and even within—the United States can be understood from the single cultural perspective that other social sciences tend to teach.

We can be more outspoken in the media about alternative perspectives on international events, seeking opportunities to explain cultural practices and conventions in other countries that may lead to their different decisions or priorities. Indeed, anthropologists have to be more confident about the significance of their discipline and more willing to assert the importance of their knowledge. We need to find ways to work both with faculty members in other disciplines and with policy makers to convey our awareness that, in virtually every contemporary problem, different participants not only speak differently but also think differently.

For example, we could attempt to understand the behavior of Iranians in the United States' 20-year-old confrontation with Iran by looking objectively at their culture and history, and at ours. One of the most obvious points is that traditional Iranian leadership involves a blend of religious and secular power that is foreign to Americans. The result is that leaders of the two countries have very different agendas. And many Iranians have a different sense of the proper balance among business, profit, family, community, and spirituality.

We must show our students that they, just as much as our adversaries or "primitive peoples" in isolated cultures, are bound by the arbitrary rules of their own culture. If we don't teach these points, we are failing to show that racist assumptions about why people behave as they do are not legitimate.

We also have to stop focusing on details of the human fossil record in our introductory physical-anthropology courses. Basic courses should deal instead with human variation in a variety of populations, by looking at such issues as fertility, mortality, growth, nutrition, adaptation to the environment, and disease. It would be productive to teach, for example, that hypertension and diabetes are not simply natural results of individual genetic endowment or the aging process but, in fact, rarely occur among people whose food does not go through the commercial processing that is customary in the West.

Finally, administrators and professors across the disciplines need to recognize that it is crucial for all students to understand the concepts of culture and cultural relativism—not the inaccurate caricatures of these concepts that have been bandied about in the culture wars, but the sophisticated, carefully defined and nuanced versions that anthropologists have evolved over decades of work. Cultural relativism is the only road to tolerance and real freedom of thought, because it lets us get outside the blinders imposed by our own culture. It must be built into courses taught in core curricula—not taught only as an elective frill if a student happens to sign up for an anthropology course.

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