This course explores the extremely contentious area of the intersection between biology and culture, the old “nature vs. nurture” debate. Your professor has a very critical view about claims that human beings are genetically predisposed to act in specific ways. We will begin with general discussions about human nature, introducing some of the main positions and controversies. The next unit surveys recent research on genes, neurotransmitters, and hormones that go against simple “biological determinism.” Unit 3 considers our “cousins,” chimpanzees and bonobos, as models for humanity; followed in Unit 4 by overviews of current perspectives on human evolution. Unit 5 asks whether humanity is divided into biologically distinctive races, leading into Unit 6 discussions of population differences in IQ. Unit 7 explores theory and criticisms of evolutionary psychology. Unit 8 compares different views on the organization of the human brain and mind. Unit 9 presents general positions on evolved differences in male and female thinking and behavior, with specific aspects of those differences scrutinized in Unit 10. The focus of Unit 11 is violence, and Unit 12 closes the course by considering a range of other theories on crime, politics, aesthetics and religion.

Required readings

Culture and Biology, Books I and II are available from Affordable Copies, 55 Halsey St., (973) 802-1007. If you do not go immediately, call ahead to make sure that they have a copy ready for you.

Course requirements

This class aims for discussion structured around readings. You are expected to have completed the readings by the assigned class date, and to be ready to comment on them. Be forewarned: this class requires a substantial amount of reading, on varied and sometimes difficult topics. Each of the two-class units has approximately 45 standard-size pages. (For instance, some articles have pages with two columns of text, which I count as 2 standard pages)

Your course grade will be determined by a series of weekly tests. These are five-question "quizlets,” of multiple choice and true-false questions. All tests will be based on the assigned readings for that week, but also contain one question about the previous week's lectures. The questions are not about fine points, or even deep comprehension of the articles, but are intended to make students do the reading. They will concern major points and topics taken up in individual articles. If you read the articles, you should be able to answer the questions. Here are two examples of the type of questions you can expect, based on the first unit.
Multiple Choice. In Allen Miller’s “Ten Politically Incorrect Truths About Human Nature,” which of the following is not one of the claimed “truths”?

a) Men who obtain power are naturally inclined to have sex with multiple women.
b) The supposed male “midlife crisis” is due to their wives becoming too old to reproduce.
c) Different racial groups have genetically based differences in intelligence.
d) Both high creative expression and criminal behavior are linked to young men competing for women.

True/False. David Brooks’ editorial piece “Human Nature Today” concludes that evolutionary psychology has been supported by so many scientific discoveries that there is no longer any reasonable ground for questioning its validity.

Over the course of the semester, there will be twelve quizlets. I will drop the lowest two of the twelve. Your course grade will be the total of your ten highest scores times two, producing a percentage based on 100%, plus consideration of class participation.

KEEP TRACK OF YOUR QUIZLET SCORES HERE.

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* 18 points total for quizlets 1-5 would just reach a C grade—so if you are below that, pull up!

You may take a maximum of three quizlet make-ups. More than that requires a serious note. Beyond those three, missed quizlets will count as zero. Plan to take any make-up during the next class period. After the first couple of times, you will be given about five minutes to complete a five-question quizlet. If you arrive at class too late to take the quizlet with the others, you can take it at the end of that same class. You can take a maximum of two such late quizlets. Over that, any more A lates @ will count as make-ups.

Class participation is very important. This is a large class, but it should have open discussion mixed with lecture. Class participation can have an appreciable impact on your course grade, up to an entire letter grade. Credit for class participation is especially important if your quizlet scores put you just below the cut-off point for a letter grade.

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    Thursday 1:30-2:30-4:00-5:00
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