Overview Module 4

In this module we study the relationships between the individual, biology, and culture and what it means when we say that humans are ***biocultural*** beings.

## **Assigned Readings**

* **Welsch and Vivanco**:  Chapter 3

Welsch, Robert L.,

Vivanco, Luis A. 2015 Cultural Anthropology: Asking Questions About

Humanity. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 978-0199925728

* **Lecture 4**

Brondo, K.V. 2017. Cultural

Anthropology: Contemporary, Public, and Critical Readings. New York: Oxford

University Press. ISBN: 978-0190253547

* **Turnbull**:  Chapters 2-7

Turnbull, C.

1987 The Forest People. Touchstone. ISBN:

978-0671640996 (any edition acceptable, and you can find a free PDF

version online here: The Forest People (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.)

* **Bourgois**:  Chapters 1-4

Bourgois, P. and J.

Schonberg 2009 Righteous Dopefiend. University of

California Press. ISBN: 978-0520254985

## **Learning Objectives**

* Understand the complex relationships between the individual, biology, and culture.
* Analyze what anthropologists mean when they say humans are “biocultural” beings.
* Identify what the biology of brain development can teach us about the importance of culture.
* Examine the relationship between culture, mind, and cognition.
* Understand biocultural variation in experiences of personhood, psychological processes, and mental disorders.
* Clarify and assess arguments about the role of evolution in human social life.
* Clarify and assess arguments for and against evolutionary psychology and other forms of biological determinism for explaining human social action.
* Analyze the social consequences of biotechnology and genetic testing.

Personality and the Life Cycle

The study of human development in cultural anthropology has been a particular interest of **psychological anthropologists**, a subfield of Cultural Anthropology.  Psychological anthropology is the comparative study of human behavior, experience, thought, and emotion from a dual cultural and psychological perspective. Anthropology is interested in the influence of culture on individual thinking, feeling, and behavior.

At first this may seem a contradiction in terms. Psychology focuses on the individual while anthropology emphasizes society and culture. Neither discipline (in fact, no discipline) is that narrow. An interest in the individual in anthropology began early in the 20th century with the work of Franz Boas and his students including Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Melville Herskovitz. Early psychological anthropology studies focused on two broad issues:

* **Enculturation**: how a person acquires information about and becomes a functioning member of his or her particular culture.
* **"Cultural personality types"**: variations in personality from one culture to another.

Both interests were subsumed under the title of **"culture and personality" studies**.

**Personality** is defined as those specific mental, emotional, and behavioral qualities that are characteristic of an individual. In the early and mid-1900s, it was naively assumed that personality is largely the product of one's cultural environment and, thus, individual variation within a culture will be minimal.

More recently, research has focused on variation within cultures in individual behavior, thought, experience, perception and emotion throughout the life cycle. This is referred to as **intracultural variation**.  This has led to the examination of what has been termed "abnormal behavior."  Anthropology used to focus largely on "normative" beliefs and behaviors, because this helped to provide an overall understanding and description of a people. It overlooked the range and diversity within a group; and there are always people in any given society who deviate from what is within the acceptable range. This focus on the "abnormal" has led to discussion of the cross-cultural variation in what is normal and what is abnormal.

Today, in anthropology in general, there is a greater interest in the individual and the life cycle.  For example, studies focus on the "self," "personhood," "emotions," and "the senses."  These are all examples of the deep interest in psychosocial and psychocultural issues.

# Enculturation

**Enculturation** is the process of learning how to become a member of one's own culture (this contrasts with **acculturation** which is the process of learning to become a member of another culture, as in what an immigrant must go through). Every human culture must teach its children the skills and knowledge they will need to function as adults. We depend on social, not biological, transmission of knowledge. This is related to our unusually long dependency period.

We are born completely helpless and must rely on the assistance of our parents or surrogate parents for survival for an unusually long time relative to other animals. Compared to other mammals, primate infants are vulnerable and dependent. They must stay near their mother, clinging to her and nursing until they develop the motor and cognitive skills that allow independent movement and survival. And among primates, humans are to the extreme. A human infant is virtually helpless at birth, not even able to cling to its mother. It takes usually 12 months before a human infant even has the ability to walk and years of learning before they can function on their own.

This extreme dependence is related to our upright walking. As hominids, the group of primates that includes humans and our now extinct relatives, we evolved bipedal (upright on two limbs) locomotion. This bipedal locomotion resulted in a change in pelvic architecture. The pelvis must be narrower and the tail bone must curve in for bipedal locomotion. This change in pelvic architecture meant that babies had to twist and bend in a torturous journey (for baby and mother) through the birth canal.

Initially, this did not have a significant effect upon birthing (except an increase in pain), because the early hominids, known as australopithecines, had rather small brains, one-third the size of present human brains. However, about 1.5 million years ago, hominid brain size began to increase, presenting a problem at birth. It would be impossible for such a large brain to fit through the birth canal. Human babies, with vastly larger brains, have to be born before the skull grows too big to exit the birth canal. Thus, the human infant is born at a much earlier stage of neurological development than our primate relatives and other mammals, meaning that a tremendous amount of growth and development occurs outside the womb.

The significance of this is that our brain develops in a social environment with enormous potential for social learning and for environmental influences on brain development. Thus, we depend far more than any other species on social learning.

# How Do We Enculturate?

All cultures nurture infants and children so that they grow into acceptable adults. How cultures nurture their young varies tremendously, though.

The most obvious means is through our childrearing practices. How we raise our young reflects and perpetuates cultural values and norms. For example, American sleeping arrangements reflect and reinforce the core American value of independence. American babies are often put in their own beds and in their own rooms within the first months of life. Other cultures, where the group is valued over the individual, would deem this abusive and cruel.

The observation of family and community social behaviors and interactions is also a significant means of enculturation. Through observation, we learn how we are to act. For example, in an imaginary "childcare" guide on how to raise your Beng baby (an ethnic group of the Ivory Coast of West Africa), anthropologist Alma Gottlieb writes about how to teach your child appropriate communication with relatives:

You will probably talk to your baby from the first day of life in this world. When your baby cries, as you offer a breast, you will look into the little one's eyes and say, "Shush! What's the matter? I'm sorry!" or other such phrases. Doubtless you have seen many mothers talk like this from their babies' first days in this world.

When your baby is a little older, it's important to teach the words for all the relatives. Your baby won't be able to say or elaborate greetings properly until learning this, since we always address each other as Uncle, Big Sister, Little Mama, and so on when we greet anyone. And you know how important it is to say hello to almost everyone in the village every morning and evening to show that we are all part of the community.

After learning to greet politely, the next thing your baby must learn is how to tease certain relatives by tossing dirty names at them. Anyone your little one calls Grandma or Grandpa - not just your parents and your husband's parents, but all their sisters and brothers as well - will tease your baby son by calling him jokingly, "Shit prick!" "Red prick!" "Raw shit scrotum!" or your daughter, "Shit cunt!" "Black cunt!" "Tiny cunt!" Your child will soon learn that this is all in good fun, and you should teach the little one to engage in the repartee by laughingly shouting back dirty insults. There is nothing cuter than a one-and-a-half-year-old shrieking out with delight, "You red balls!" to her doddering grandfather or "You black asshole!" to his old grandmother. Later, when you become much stricter with your children, it will be a comfort to them to have such a relaxed and teasing relationship with their grandparents. They may even seek refuge with them if you chastise or punish them too severely one day. (from DeLoche and Gottlieb, 2000, A World of Babies, Cambridge University Press).

In larger, complex societies, where social institutions have taken over functions once left to the family or smaller community, these institutions play major roles in enculturation.

Rites of Passage

Enculturation is a lifelong process, for we must continually learn what is expected of us throughout each stage of the life cycle. Often, transitions from one life stage to another are marked by a **rite of passage**.  A rite of passage is any activity marked in some way which is used to teach cultural values and beliefs (Your text, Welsch and Vivanco 2016, discuss rites of passage on page 360).

Traditionally, a rite of passage has been defined as limited to public events with high degrees of ritual. I prefer to view a rite of passage more broadly so as to encompass transitions that are not so publicly and ritually marked but that definitely result in a transition to another status or stage are are meaningful to the individual and family. For example, in the United States, menarche (the onset of menstruation) marks a transition to a new stage in a girl's life. However, for most American girls this is not marked by ritual nor publicly acknowledged. It does, though, bring about changes in the girl's life. Likewise, in Cambodia, the onset of menopause (the cessation of menstruation) marks a change in status and behavior for women. It is not marked by any ritual or public acknowledgment (except that post-menopausal women shave their heads), but post-menopausal women are allowed much greater freedom in behavior such as drinking alcohol, dancing, and making vulgar jokes.

Rites of passage typically have three stages:

* **Separation**: detaches a person or group from a former status.
* **Liminality**: a state of limbo in which the person or group is not fully detached from the old status but is not yet attached to a new one.
* **Reincorporation**: passage to the new status is symbolically completed.

All of you have experienced a rite of passage in your life.  It may have been an obvious transition marked by public rituals in some cultures (e.g., wedding ceremony, quinceanera, graduation, military boot camp, sorority or fraternity initiation, bat mitzvah, bar mitzvah, male or female circumcision, baptism, etc.).  Or it may have been a transition that is not marked by a specific public ritual but is nonetheless a significant transition in your status (e.g., childbirth, obtaining a driver's license, ear piercing, first day of school, etc.). This dichotomy between publicly acknowledged and privately acknowledged rites of passage, of course, varies by culture. For example, menarche (first menstruation) is publicly and elaborately marked by ritual in some cultures and not in other cultures, though it is a rite of passage in all.

Think about the rites of passage you have experienced. Can you define and describe each stage in your rite of passage--separation, liminality, and reincorporation? Why was this rite significant in your culture?  How did your sense of self change? How did your roles and expectations change?

An Example of a Rite of Passage: Genital Cutting

Gender roles are often taught and marked by a rite of passage involving genital cutting or circumcision. These initiations express important social ideas symbolically. Genital cutting is performed on both males and females in a range of cultures, though the age at which it is performed and the reasons for its performance varies.

For boys, genital cutting is performed anywhere from birth to adolescence. For males, the most common form of genital cutting is the removal of the foreskin. However, subincision is performed in at least one cultural group, the Arunta of Australia (see below for an explanation of subincision).

For females, genital cutting is also performed anywhere from birth to adolescence. The three forms of genital cutting observed in various cultures are:

* **Clitorodectomy**: the clitoral hood and some or all of the clitoris are cut off.
* **Excision**: the clitoris and part or all of the labia minora (the inner vaginal lips) are cut off.
* **Infibulation** or "**pharaonic circumcision**": the clitoris and all of the labia minora are removed and then the labia majora (the outer lips of the vagina) are stitched together to cover the urethral and vaginal openings. A very small hole is left to allow the passage of urine and menstrual blood.

Genital cutting in both males and females is done for several reasons:

* In some cultures, genital cutting is performed to accentuate differences between males and females. For example, among the Dogon of Mali it is believed that at birth a person embodies both feminine and masculine characteristics. Circumcision is performed at puberty to remove the masculine from females and the feminine from males.
* In some cultures, it is performed to unite the genders. The Arunta of Australia circumcise boys and then a few days later perform subincision. In subincision, the boys penis is cut on the underside from the tip to base. The blood is believed to be analogous to menstrual blood and the wound is referred to as a vulva. This is believed to provide males a better understanding of what it means to be a woman.
* Various religions prescribe genital cutting as necessary for the proper observance of the faith.
* Genital cutting is used to teach and reinforce appropriate behavior.
* Genital cutting is done for supposed medical reasons. In the United States, it is common for male babies to be circumcised shortly after birth because of the belief that males will not keep themselves properly clean and thus risk higher rates of certain types of cancer (both for themselves and their sexual partners). Likewise, in the United States female genital cutting was advocated for various medical conditions.
* Genital cutting is also used to control female sexuality. In the United States up until the 1940s, genital cutting (excision of the clitoris) was performed to prevent "lesbian tendencies" and masturbation, believed to be the cause of numerous mental illnesses. Various forms of genital cutting are still practiced in Africa and in parts of Southeast Asia where the practice ensures the bride's virginity.

Genital cutting is obviously very controversial, especially female genital cutting where control of sexuality is often a more explicit reason for its existence and where the health consequences may be very dangerous. Yet, infibulation is still widely practiced and many of its greatest proponents are elderly women.

The painful consequences are not always directly associated with genital cutting because they may occur well after the cutting and because they are so common among women that the suffering is deemed normal. It is impossible for many to conceive of a woman not being infibulated. The actual physical appearance of an infibulated woman's vulva is obviously dramatically different from a woman who has not been cut. For many, an uncut woman is perceived to be ugly, dirty, or disgusting. And many have the belief that an uncut woman's clitoris will grow to the size of a penis. Elderly women insist on continuing the tradition because it is a prerequisite for a woman to marry and marriage is a necessity for achieving adult status. An uncut woman faces tremendous social ostracism.

This issue is controversial within anthropology and has been seen as a challenge to cultural relativism. Although many people in countries practicing female genital cutting actively protest the practice, they resent outsider, mainly Western, efforts to end the practice. They are sensitive to Western intrusion into their lives because of the history and legacy of colonialism. For many in Africa, Western opposition to the practice seems misplaced. In a continent where millions of people do not have access to the basic necessities of life such as safe water and food, genital cutting is low on their list of priorities.

Within the United States, there have been three broad responses to female genital cutting:

1. **Active Opposition**: Active opposition has its roots in global feminism. In the 1970s, with the rise of feminism, the clitoris was "rediscovered" as an important part of female sexual pleasure. The discovery that some women in the world were having their clitoris cut off was enough to mobilize active opposition to the practice. Active opponents also view all women as connected and having common experiences of oppression--a "global sisterhood."
2. **Passive Opposition, but None of Our Business**: For some, active opposition is inappropriate for precisely the reasons African activists are uncomfortable with Western opposition. Active opposition is viewed as part of the larger political power dynamics between the Western world and the third world.
3. **Passive Opposition, but Stick to Our Own Back Yard**: For others, active opposition is inappropriate because we have our own problems regarding the status of women such as eating disorders, untenable standards of physical beauty, domestic violence, sexual violence, inequities in compensation for work, and objectification in the media, which should be dealt with before we preach to others about the appropriate treatment of women.

Assignment 4：

Why can’t mental illness be understood only in biological/biomedical ways?

For the assignment, answer the question(s) with one to two paragraphs. Your answer should draw upon the course material and you should cite your sources.  For the discussion, your contribution should also draw upon the course material as well as give your own insight/thoughts.  Please use proper grammar and spelling.

Note that in the Assignment area, in order to bring up the window where you type your answer, you need to click on the blue Submit Assignment button in the top right.  I know it is confusing!

# Discussion 4

Considering what we know about human brain development, at what age should people be classified as legal adults—16? 18? 21? 25? What factors affect how cultures define the rights and responsibilities of adulthood?

Sample:“Culture majorly affects what the of age a legal adult is because culture plays a key role in growth and development of neurons in the brain that allows for cognition (as said in the textbook). Although all humans have similar outer limits, the character of cognitive process changes from one culture to the next because of external influences. It's difficult to determine a legal age for all cultures because all brains are at a different level of cognition. Also, different cultures have different rights and responsibilities at different ages. For example, in many cultures around the world, women marry at a very young age (younger than 18) and have the responsibility of a mother while women in other cultures marry and have children after the age of 18 or late in their life.

There is no solid way to define a legal age for across cultures. Even in the United States we have legal ages for separate things. At age 16 one can legally drive, at age 18 one can be legally considered an adult, at age 21 one can legally partake in drinking, and at age 25 one can legally rent cars. No matter how big or small these are, these rights and responsibilities would differ among all cultures. For the sake of the question, I believe 25 should be classified as the legal age because most, if not all, cultures are capable of logical reasoning and have cognitive brains by this age. ”