

What is Culture?

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2 February 2005

What is Culture?

- How do we define it?
- How have social scientists developed a language to address it?
- How can cultural difference be explained?
- The problem of the “forbidden experiment” and the *enfant sauvage*
 - feral children
 - <http://www.feralchildren.com/en/index.php>

Cultural Difference

- Early social science equated racial difference with cultural difference
- "Independently of all political institutions, Nature herself has formed the human species into castes and ranks."
 - Scottish naturalist and obstetrician William Smellie (1698-1763), in *Philosophy of Natural History* (1790)

How to use science to study difference?

- If race is the same as culture...
- ...then you can study cultural difference by identifying physical, measurable racial differences
- ...and difference becomes the focus of the study of the human body
- Thus, the emergence of CRANIOLOGY (the study of skulls)

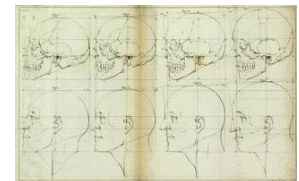
Petrus Camper (1722-1789)

- German Scientist
- Father of the science of craniology
- Sorted apes and humans by his newly devised *linea facialis* ("facial line")



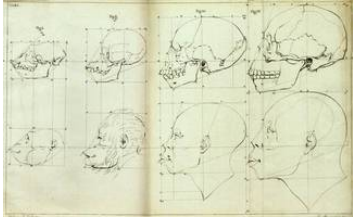
Petrus Camper's *linea facialis*

- the angle of "prognathism" or forward jutting of the jaw.
 - ideal = 100 degrees (doesn't happen in reality but used to portray gods and goddesses in Greek statuary)



Petrus Camper's *linea facialis*

- prognathism
 - apes = 42-50 degrees
 - Africans and Mongolians = 70 degrees
 - Europeans = 80 degrees



Samuel Morton (1799-1851)

- Philadelphia physician
- Collected Native American and Egyptian skulls
- *Crania Americana* (1839)
- *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844)



Samuel Morton (1799-1851)

- Races could be ranked by the size of the brain
- Races were different species, but hybrids could be produced
- Whites on top, Native Americans in middle, Blacks on bottom

Morton's Racial Rankings (based on brain size):

Category	Avg. Size (in inches)
Caucasian	87
Mongolian	83
Malay	81
Am. Indian	82
Ethiopian	78

Samuel Morton's Social Impact

- Morton's ideas were used to support slavery
- On Morton's death in 1851:
- "We of the south should consider him as our benefactor, for aiding most materially in giving the Negro his true position as an inferior race" – *Charleston [SC] Medical Journal*

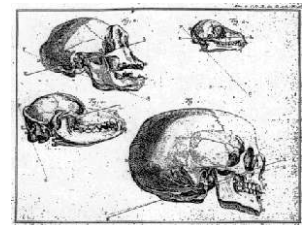
Paul Broca (1824 - 1880)

- Professor of clinical surgery
- Founder of the Anthropological Society of Paris
- Primary belief that brain size and intelligence are related



According to Broca...

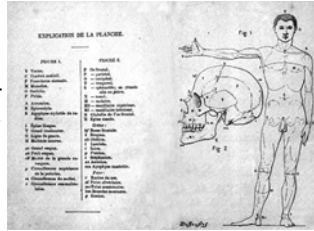
- Men had larger brains than women
- Talented people had larger brains than untalented people
- Superior races had larger brains than inferior races



Broca argued that no group with black skin, "woolly hair" and "prognathous faces" has ever "spontaneously raised itself to civilization."

Broca's methods

- Began with ratio of radius (thin bone in forearm) to humerus (upper arm)
- Longer radius (higher ratio) was more "ape-like"
- Assumed Africans would have higher ratio, but abandoned method when the opposite was true.



Broca's Craniology

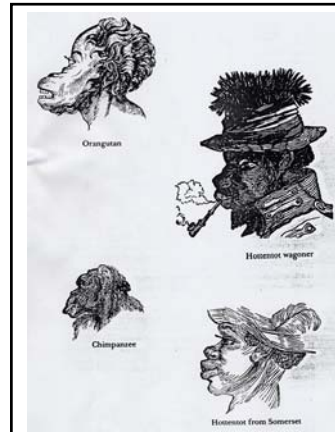
- According to Broca's theory, the "smartest" men should have the largest brains
 - Cuvier (1,830 g)
 - European average (1,350 g)
 - BUT Walt Whitman only 1,282 g
 - Gall, co-founder of phrenology (1,198 g)
 - Broca (1,424 g)



Antropologie française et néo-antropologie française (1872) p. 200. Musée de l'Homme, Paris, France.

These ideas together are called "Scientific Racism"

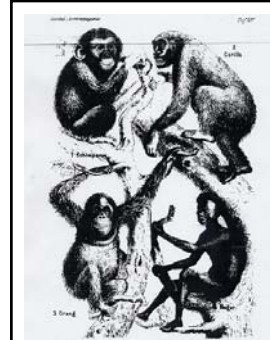
- Belief that science supported argument that peoples with darker skin were biologically inferior
- Use of (flawed) science to prove social differences resulted from biological ones
- The appeal of these ideas was that they justified conquest, empire, and European expansion
- "Scientific racism" went along with a more social scientific theory of "cultural evolution"



In "Scientific Racism," theories of evolution are used (incorrectly) and distorted to make the argument that Africans and other peoples of colonized areas were evolutionarily "closer" to apes.

Cultural Evolution

- Inspired by Darwin's theories of evolution
- Transferred Darwin's theories to a social setting
- Marks an attempt to replace the theological argument that "primitives" had "fallen from grace" with a "scientific" one that "primitives" had failed to evolve and/or advance.



The 1874 edition of Ernst Haeckel's *Anthropogenie* contains this racist illustration of evolution. (Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History)

Although Darwin's *Origin of the Species* never argued that humans had evolved from apes, this misconception became a common misreading of his theories of evolution.

Once the "descent from apes" myth had been absorbed, it was a small step to conclude that so-called "primitive peoples" had evolved less and were, therefore, "closer" to the apes.

Edward B. Tylor (1832 - 1917)

- British anthropologist
- Created a timeline of cultural development
- human cultures developed through three basic stages:
 - Savagery
 - Barbarism
 - Civilization



Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881)

- American anthropologist
- Ethnographic work on the Iroquois of New York State
- Delineates and describes Tylor's stages of cultural development



Savagery (Morgan)

- Nomadic settlements
- hunting and gathering
- discovery of fire, use of bow and arrow
- totemism and animism
- anarchy
- raiding economies, direct trade
- matriarchy
- fertility cults and sexual magic

Barbarism (Morgan)

- seasonal relocation
- slash and burn agriculture
- pottery and smelting of iron
- polytheism and "magic"
- tribalism
- bartering, simple currency
- polygamy and polyandry, emerging patriarchy (warrior cults)
- informal marriage, harems, promiscuity

Civilization (Morgan)

- urban settlement
- industrialization
- writing and the phonetic alphabet
- Christianity (preferably Protestant Christianity)
- nation-states (preferably constitutional governments)
- abstract economies (credit)
- patriarchy
- chastity unions

Cultural Difference Explained by Cultural Evolution

- Cultural difference resulted from differing levels of cultural evolution
- "Primitive" cultures had failed to advance
- They were arrested in their development
- They had become stuck at the stage of either savagery or barbarism

Cultural Evolution and the Fate of “Primitive” peoples

- “Primitive” cultures had failed to advance.
- They must be civilized (through slavery, empire, or occupation).
- They had failed to advance because their bodies were unable to advance (scientific racism).
- If they were unable to advance, they must be isolated, not allowed to increase (eugenics)... perhaps even “removed” (genocide)

Challenges to Cultural Evolution and Scientific Racism

- Diffusionists
 - (W. H. R. Rivers, Leo Frobenius)
- Functionalists
 - (A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski)
- Boasians
 - (Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead)

Diffusionists and Cultural Difference

- All cultures developed from a mother culture, called an “Ur-Culture,” most probably located in Egypt or in Asia
- Cultures diffused and altered as they expanded to other parts of the world.
- Differences are not result of differing stages of progress along some shared straight line of cultural evolutionary development.
- Difference results from dispersion of populations, which then adapt to new homes in various ways, creating distinctive cultures where they developed.

Functionalists and Cultural Difference

- Cultural differences result from the development of differing needs and desires created by the interaction of populations and their environments.
- Each element of any culture has a meaning which relates to what need or desire the element fulfills.

Franz Boas (1858–1942)

- German-born U.S. anthropologist
- Cultural Difference resulted from environmental adaptations
- Cultural Difference is NOT the result of lack of “fitness” or inferiority



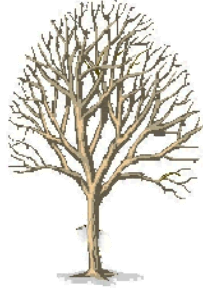
Franz Boas

- Culture is “not an expression of innate mental qualities” but instead “a result of varied external conditions acting upon general human characteristics.” – Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911)



Boas on Cultural Evolution

- The history of humans is represented by a "tree of culture," with fantastically complex branching, intertwining, and budding off.



Boas and the "Civilizing Project"

- Boas challenges the "progressive" idea that development (making people adhere to Morgan's model of "civilization") is the same as real progress or betterment
- The only way to judge a culture is within its own cultural context.
- Cultures are neither "good" nor "bad."
- Cultural behaviors are neither "good" nor "bad."
- The only "good" culture is one which fits its surroundings; the only bad one is one which does not fit its surroundings.

Boas and the "Civilizing Project"

- Boas's perspective is called **CULTURAL RELATIVISM**
- Boas calls the civilizing project a "progressive fallacy"

Boas argues that some kinds of cultural change are cultural **LOSS**.

