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Class #26: Cultural determinism and sociobiology

Study questions: Alcock ch 7

1. What is the error of the false dichotomy that has often been used by persons arguing against the relevance of biology to an understanding of human behavior? (Such arguments have been common in writings of sociologists, cultural anthropologists, some feminists, and also some educators.) p 130
2. Summarize Derek Freeman's critique of the writing of Margaret Mead, the cultural anthropologist whose ideas presented in her 1928 book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, became so popular in the 20th century. p 132-133
3. Contrast the "blank slate" view of human nature with sociobiological views. p 134 - 136
4. Attributes that determine men's attraction to young women (on the average) have shown considerable consistency, even across cultures. ("Beauty" is not a myth or a politically determined creation, as claimed by Naomi Wolf.) What is the major, general signal value of these attributes, fitting the expectations of sociobiologists? p 137-139
5. Give a sociobiological interpretation of the finding that Yomybato men tend to prefer females with a figure that is heavier and with a larger waist-to-hip ratio than preferred by most men in more advanced cultures. p 141-142
6. (Not discussed in Alcock's chapter 7) What attributes determine preferences shown by females in choosing males? How would you expect such preferences to differ from those of males for females?
7. Humans everywhere have a strong tendency to stay and act within groups, and these groups may compete with each other, sometimes violently. Try to specify a list of evolutionary fitness benefits of "groupism" feelings. p 143-147
8. From the appendix, ch 7, Q3: What misunderstanding(s) are embodied in the following statement from a sociology textbook published in 1999. "In our view, the theory that there is actually a biological basis for reciprocity [among humans] remains unproven; general self-interest and an ability to see beyond the short term may be all that is required to generate such ... behavior."

9. From the appendix, ch 7, Q2 (quoting Alcock): Languages vary greatly among human societies. If someone claims that this fact clearly demonstrates the greater importance of culture than biology in the control of human behavior, what would a sociobiologist say in response?

10. Stephan Jay Gould has written a critique of evolutionary psychology in which he claims, “Men are not programmed by genes to maximize matings, nor are women devoted to monogomy by unalterable nature. We can speak only of capacities, not requirements or even determining propensities. Therefore, our biology does not make us do it” (1996). **Analyze this criticism of sociobiology in the context of the culture versus biology dichotomy.** (We have dealt with such questions previously.)

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