ANTHROPOLOGY IN HIGH SCHOOL: A MISSION TO EQUIP YOUNG STUDENTS WITH THE TOOLS AND KNOWLEDGE TO NAVIGATE SOCIAL JUSTICE INITIATIVES

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Abstract
Anthropology as a field of study teaches many important concepts essential to understanding the human condition and accepting all forms of diversity. Unfortunately, most students only begin to encounter anthropological ideas at the collegiate level. In this commentary, I argue that teaching the concepts of cultural relativity and ethnocentrism, two foundational components of anthropological understanding, at the high school level can better equip our younger generation with empathy, understanding, and respect. These three capacities are especially crucial when reacting to today’s political and social upheavals, like the Black Lives Matter Movement. Anthropology encourages students to unlearn any prejudices by reflecting on the internalized biases that limit their acceptance of human difference. I assert that this necessary introspection extends to the discipline itself, as anthropologists recognize (and make students aware of) the role early anthropology played in perpetuating the racial biases still present today. Despite (and, indeed, because of) this weighted history, Anthropology and the awareness and appreciation of human diversity it inspires must be used as a tool to teach future generations in American secondary education to recognize and embrace the beauty of difference.

Keywords
Anthropology education, ethnocentrism, cultural relativity.

Introduction
If you had to define anthropology, what would you say? After my three years as an undergraduate anthropology major, I’ve come to create a definition of my own, one that encapsulates all the dimensions of anthropology taught to me: anthropology is the holistic study of the human experience, from our biological evolution and our cultural belief systems to our language use and our material remains. I believe everyone can interpret their own meaning of anthropology because we are varied humans with varied thinking. This variation of thought needs to be brought to the fore; variation exists all around us in the diversity of lifestyles, language patterns, and food traditions. But if we fail to view this diversity (so coveted among travel bloggers and study abroad students) from a standpoint of understanding and respect, then we have failed each other as global citizens. Judging by the current rise in activism against human rights violations, it seems we have a lot of work to do. After describing anthropological principles and perspectives on human difference, I will discuss how offering anthropology at the high school level can benefit students who are struggling to understand and respond to the important human rights conversations happening today, such as the Black Lives Matter movement. I argue that an anthropology education in high school would help students develop three capacities fundamental to just societies: empathy, understanding, and respect. Encouraging these tendencies is vital at the high-school level when students are intellectually developing and forming their own opinions of the world.

Anthropological Foundations: Cultural Relativity and Ethnocentrism
Cultural relativity and ethnocentrism are two foundational concepts emphasized at the beginning of many anthropology classes and are taught together because they are two sides of the same coin. The Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential defines the former as "the idea that a person's beliefs, values, and practices should be understood based on that person's own culture, rather than be judged against the criteria of another" (Cultural Relativism). Scholars define ethnocentrism as the attitude of "seeing one's own group as virtuous and superior, one's own standards of value as universal" (Hammond & Axelrod, 2006, 926). To practice cultural relativity, you must be actively anti-ethnocentric. These two terms are essential to a beginner anthropology education. They foster introspective thinking about one's own biases and force students to actively counter and unlearn internalized values about their own cultures as they learn about others. They teach students to approach unfamiliar practices with an open mind. To give a broad example: when faced with a culture that forages with tools created only from resources found in their immediate environment, the student should acknowledge the skill and resourcefulness required to perform that task rather than judging the group as less advanced or intelligent because they do not have the modern technology of Western cultures. This way of thinking can cultivate curious students who want to discover more about the world around them and ask questions like, "What can I learn from this?"

An anthropology education offers a chance to open students’ eyes to the vast expanse of lived experiences that happen around the globe. Lessons, readings, and films assigned in class can bring awareness to the diversity of lifestyles, traditions, and hardships that exist outside of our bubble of community and comfort. These real-life (ethnographic) stories begin to create a space for empathy, understanding, and respect for cultural differences. To raise a generation full of accepting, curious, driven and forward-thinking individuals, we must equip them with the tools to foster those capacities, and I believe anthropology taught in high school can contribute to this mission.

**ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE HISTORY OF “RACE”**

In the early 1900s, anthropologist Ruth Benedict said, “The purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human difference” (Appel-Warren, 2016). However, to date, anthropology has failed in this purpose. The Black Lives Matter movement is a reaction to an absence of safety, and I would argue that anthropology has played a role in creating and perpetuating the centuries-long oppression of Black people. Only in acknowledging anthropology’s role in the history of these injustices can we move forward as students of anthropology to reroute the path towards social and racial justice.

While anthropology courses will teach students about Franz Boas, who coined the term cultural relativism and argued against the racist theories of other anthropologists, they should also learn about the scientists who contributed, intentionally or not, to the false concepts of race we have today (“Boas, Franz”, 2020), namely Johann Blumembach. Blumembach was a physical scientist and anthropologist who studied human skulls and divided them into 5 distinct categories based on craniological data: Caucasians, Ethiopians, Mongolians, Americans and Malays (Bhopal, 2007). While he attributed the variation largely to environmental conditions (the stance held today by many physical anthropologists) he made a gross error by including his subjective view of beauty when classifying the skulls. In his notes he described the Georgian skull (Caucasian) as "very symmetrical and beautiful . . . the most handsome and becoming" and even steps out of the boundaries of scientific proof to say that white skin color can be assumed “to have been the primitive colour of mankind” (Bhopal, 2007, pp. 1309). Letting these biases slip into his scientific writing likely misled readers of the time and generations after. The simple act of creating distinct groups by separating populations on the basis of skin color has created and perpetuated a false biological divide between groups and a space for ethnocentric thinking to prevail. Blumembach’s work paved the way for other ethnocentric anthropologists to coin racist theories, such as Lewis Henry Morgan. Morgan believed that there were stages to cultural development, naming them in ascending order from savagery to barbarism to civilization. This (now rejected) unilineal approach suggests that
different cultures can be ranked and judged and therefore it was crucial in legitimizing colonial efforts around the world (Pauls, 2019). A high school education in anthropology’s history can help young students dismantle the narrow-minded thinking that still predominate in the minds of our parents and grandparents.

APPLYING ANTHROPOLOGY TO BLACK LIVES MATTER

Learning about anthropology’s history allows us to understand its application to Black Lives Matter. The BLM movement for “Freedom, Liberation and Justice” was founded in 2013 by Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi (About-Black Lives Matter). A vital part of their mission is to “eradicate white supremacy,” as it is the chief factor driving white violence against black communities (About-Black Lives Matter). A white supremacist is defined by Merriam Webster as “a person who believes that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that white people should have control over people of other races” (White Supremacist). If we return to our earlier definition of ethnocentrism, we can see that these two concepts fall right in line. White supremacists only have their values in mind when encountering someone of another culture or race and, therefore, judge based on their standards of belief. If anthropology can get young students to make this connection, to see how this mindset is wrong, and to be aware of the fact that no two cultures can be compared or ranked, we have taken a step in the right direction.

I experienced one such transformative moment in my Language and Culture class where we learned about language ideologies and how intelligence is often culturally tied to language use. The lesson examined the use of Standard American English (SAE) versus African American English (AAE) and how Black Americans have faced, and continue to face, discrimination based on false ideologies surrounding AAE. MLK Jr Elementary School vs Ann Arbor School District Board was a lawsuit about the unequal treatment of black children who were placed in special education classes because the teachers (SAE speakers) could not understand the children who spoke AAE (Morgan, 2009). This case opened up a large debate surrounding AAE and its validity as a language. The most important takeaway from this study is that AAE, although different from SAE, is just as logical and effective. AAE is governed by its own set of complex linguistic rules and fully facilitates the expression of intelligent ideas. This case forced me to do a lot of introspection. As a white person who speaks SAE, I had to think about times I heard AAE and reflect on how I had reacted. Initially, AAE sounds grammatically incorrect, but that is because I based my judgment on the rules of SAE—an ethnocentric mindset. In reality, those linguistic pairings and phrases that sound “off” are actually following the rules of AAE, and if I made an effort, I would find that the sentence makes perfect sense. The issue with many SAE speakers is that they do not make that effort to understand. At the first hint of unfamiliarity or incorrectness, they immediately dismiss the speaker as wrong or uneducated.

ANTHROPOLOGY FOR THE YOUNG

Anthropology classes teach lessons that expose students to what at first appear to be minor issues that, in fact, aggregate into larger prejudices and legitimize systemic oppression. Introducing young students to anthropological ideas and methodologies can help them be cognizant of how they react to something unfamiliar and to question where that reaction comes from. There is very little data on the number of U.S. high schools that offer anthropology as an elective. National anthropology organizations have been campaigning for better incorporation of anthropology into precollege education since the 1970s. But in 2018, only 63 International Baccalaureate high schools (a small percentage of U.S. high schools and a decrease from 193 schools in 2012) offered an anthropology elective (Popson & Selig, 2019). Anthropology provides foundational tools for understanding and embracing the differences that exist in our world and I believe it should be considered a vital part of secondary education. In seeing so many young people championing human rights today, I have no doubt that younger generations will be open and eager to learn what anthropology has to offer.

WORKS CITED


