

# GENED 1056: Human Nature

## Fall 2024

Canvas: <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/140885>

MW 10:30 – 11:45am, Emerson Hall 108

### Course description

#### **What makes us human? How did we get that way? Why does it matter?**

What makes us psychologically and behaviorally human? Why is this important? In what ways are humans similar to other species, and how are we different? What are the evolutionary origins of the behavioral and psychological features found across human societies, including parental love, sibling rivalry, pair-bonding, incest aversion, social status, war, norms, altruism, religion, language and cooking? At the same time, how can we account for the immense diversity we observe in behavior and psychology across time and societies? Tackling these questions within a broad evolutionary framework, the course will draw on the latest insights and evidence from evolutionary biology, primatology, anthropological ethnography, neuroscience, genetics, linguistics, economics and psychology. We'll contextualize contemporary behavior by examining studies of non-human primates, especially chimpanzees, and a broad range of human variation based on comparative studies of hunter-gatherers, herders, agriculturalists and—most unusual of all—people from societies that are WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic). Along the way, we'll see how culture has driven much of our genetic evolution and runs deep into our evolutionary history. We'll consider how understanding the evolutionary origins of human behavior, psychology, and culture informs how we approach contemporary issues such as patriarchy, polygamous marriage, sex differences, child abuse, mating preferences, homosexuality, racism, psychological differences among populations and the use of oral contraceptives.

### Course materials

**Required text:** *The Secret of Our Success* by Joseph Henrich. Students will need to purchase access to this text through Perusall. When you start your first *The Secret of Our Success* reading assignment in Perusall, you will be prompted to purchase the book. All author royalties will be donated to [One Pencil Project](#). All required readings and other course materials will be provided on the Canvas site.

### Instructors

**Prof. Joseph Henrich** is the Ruth Moore Professor of Biological Anthropology in the Department of Human Evolutionary Biology. Before moving to Harvard, he was a professor of both Economics and Psychology at the University of British Columbia for nearly a decade, where he held the *Canada Research Chair in Culture, Cognition and Coevolution*. His research deploys evolutionary theory to

understand how human psychology gives rise to cultural evolution and how this has shaped our species' genetic evolution. Using insights generated from this approach, Professor Henrich has explored a variety of topics, including economic decision-making, social norms, fairness, religion, marriage, prestige, cooperation and innovation. He's conducted long-term anthropological fieldwork in Peru, Chile and in the South Pacific, as well as having spearheaded several large comparative projects. In 2004 he won the *Presidential Early Career Award* for young scientists, and, in 2009, the Early Career Award for Distinguished Contributions bestowed by the Human Behavior and Evolution Society. In 2013-14, Dr. Henrich held the Peter and Charlotte Schoenenfeld Faculty Fellowship at NYU's Stern School of Business. In 2018, the *Society for Personality and Social Psychology* awarded him the Wegner Prize for Theoretical Innovation. From 2010 to 2019, Dr. Henrich was a senior fellow in the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research in the Institutions, Organizations and Growth group and he became a fellow of the Cognitive Science Society in 2021. In 2016, he published *The Secret of Our Success* (Princeton) and in 2020, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous* (FSG).

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**Dr. Cameron Curtin** is a Lecturer in the Department of Human Evolutionary Biology. She received her BA in Neuroscience from Middlebury College and her PhD in Human Evolutionary Biology from Harvard University. Dr. Curtin studies cultural evolution—how cultural traits arise, spread, and shape psychology and behavior. Her recent work examines how social norms and other cultural practices sustain cooperation in indigenous Zapotec communities of Oaxaca, Mexico. Her research combines qualitative and quantitative methods from anthropology, psychology, and economics. During her time at Harvard, Dr. Curtin has served as a teaching fellow at Harvard College and as an instructor in the Harvard Pre-College Program, teaching courses in the Program for General Education, Human Evolutionary Biology, and Psychology. She holds a Bok Teaching Certificate from the Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard.

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## Teaching Fellows

**Amar Sarkar**

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**Yvette Yi-Chi Wu**

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## Course goals

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1. Apply the logic of natural selection within the context of human evolutionary history to understand human behavior and psychology. Assess what's productive theorizing and what's nonsense or 'just-so storytelling'.
2. Understand how to evaluate evolutionary hypotheses about human nature.
3. Explain current theories and evidence regarding various aspects of human nature.
4. Explain why understanding human nature is so important for making policies. Recognize where policymakers are unwittingly importing theories of human nature.
5. Conduct and write a literature review, using a scientific writing style (e.g. proper citation, evidence-based arguments).

## Course Structure

### **Lectures** (1h15 meetings, twice weekly)

Lectures represent the primary means to convey the course materials. Prof. Henrich and Dr. Curtin will give lectures that explore and extend upon the readings for each class. Several appearances by experts on various topics will inform these discussions.

### **Section** (1h, once weekly)

Led by our teaching fellows, sections will serve three functions. First, sections offer students opportunities to ask questions about course materials and learn through discussion of the course materials in a smaller group. Second, some sections will feature hands-on activities to deepen understanding of course materials. Third, some sections will include skill-building for the research paper assignment. Note that in a few cases, additional video materials should be watched and annotated prior to the start of your section (see Canvas Modules for details).

## Course Policies

**Attendance:** As attendance is required in all Gen Ed courses, Gen Ed courses are not eligible for course-wide simultaneous enrollment waivers. Students pursuing simultaneous enrollment in a Gen Ed course and a non-Gen Ed course must attend the Gen Ed course.

**Engagement:** The instructors need your help to make this course a successful and enjoyable learning experience. Students are expected to be mentally present, attentive, and engaged during class sessions. As part of this, questions of all sorts will be posed to students, who will respond in real-time through **Poll Everywhere**. Responses won't be graded for correctness, but rather for effort. To use Poll Everywhere, you will need either a laptop, tablet or smartphone, so please come properly equipped. Responding for another person will likely be detected and will be considered a violation of the honor code. Students are expected to refrain from engaging in non-class activities on the computer, phone, or other devices while participating in class sessions.

**Class preparation:** All readings and videos will be linked to in the Modules section of the Canvas site. These links will take students to **Perusall**. Students will need to purchase access to *The Secret of Our Success*, which is the primary text for this course. In Perusall, students should read and annotate the

material. These assignments must be completed by 8am on the day of the relevant classes, so students' comments and questions can be reviewed prior to the lecture. Readings and annotations will be graded for effort. The first two classes with readings are practice, so you'll receive the grades but they don't count.

**Late policy:** All students have a bank of 24 “grace period” hours that they may use over the course of the semester to extend a deadline for any reason. You may use these 24 hours to extend a deadline for the Research Paper assignment (or, you may break the 24 hours up, e.g. to extend two deadlines by 12 hours each). These hours may not be used to extend Perusall reading deadlines. You must reach out to your TF to let them know when you are using your grace period hours. After the 24 hours have been used up, late assignments will be subject to a penalty of 10 percentage points per day. Extensions without penalty may also be granted for excused reasons on a case-by-case basis (e.g. documented illness, family emergency); documentation will be required.

**Respectful discourse:** The goal of this course is to apply a broad evolutionary framework to understanding human behavior, psychology and diversity both across history and into the modern world. This investigation will take us through topics and themes related to human nature, genetic evolution, genetic differences among populations, war, religion, psychological diversity, sex differences, economic outcomes and much more. An exploration of these topics may make some students uncomfortable, and may provoke strong opinions and emotions. Any students that choose to take this course should be prepared to engage scientifically on potentially controversial topics. Our classroom is intended to be a place for vigorous but civil academic discussion. At the same time, we will strive to have a classroom that is inclusive and respectful. Disagreement is allowed; disrespect is not. If you do feel uncomfortable, you are invited and encouraged to discuss any concerns with Professor Henrich, Dr. Curtin, or any of the Teaching Fellows.

**Academic integrity:** Academic integrity is central to the University’s mission. All students will be expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the [Honor Code](#). All work, whether involving tests, examinations or writing, must be the student’s own work. For exams, all answers must come from your own head, and not from smartphones, cheat sheets, neighbors, friends or other sources. In all students' writing for this course, the copying of any portion of someone’s else writing or oration material without appropriate attribution, including the use of quotation marks or other indicators, is plagiarism. Claiming to have accidentally incorporated copied materials from notes or study materials is not an excuse or mitigating factor. You must take the necessary step to prevent such accidental plagiarism. For more guidance, visit [Harvard's Guide to Using Sources](#).

**Generative AI:** We expect that all work students submit for this course will be their own. We specifically forbid the use of ChatGPT or any other generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools at all stages of the work process, including preliminary ones. Violations of this policy will be considered academic misconduct. We draw your attention to the fact that different classes at Harvard could implement different AI policies, and it is the student’s responsibility to conform to expectations for each course.

**Accessibility:** Harvard University values inclusive excellence and providing equal educational opportunities for all students. Our goal is to remove barriers for disabled students related to

inaccessible elements of instruction or design in this course. If reasonable accommodations are necessary to provide access, please contact the [Disability Access Office \(DAO\)](#). Accommodations do not alter fundamental requirements of the course and are not retroactive. Students should request accommodations as early as possible, since they may take time to implement. Students should notify DAO at any time during the semester if adjustments to their communicated accommodation plan are needed.

## Assignments and grading

| Assignment  | Weight   | Due date  |
|---|--|---|
| <p><b>Class and section participation</b></p> <p>Of the 20% for this category, 10% comes from Poll Everywhere. Note, if you respond at least 80% of the time to Poll Everywhere questions during class, you'll receive 100% of the credit for that component. If you respond less than 80% you get that percentage.</p> <p>The remaining 10% for this category comes from contributions during Section and Class, as judged by your TF.</p> | 20%  | Ongoing   |
| <p><b>Perusall annotations, reading and viewing</b></p> <p>Perusall's automated algorithm observes your reading and annotations to assign a grade. Pro-tip: make sure to look at every page and write at least 4 comments using 5 or more words. The first assignments will be practice so you can see how the algorithm responds to you.</p>   | 15%  | Ongoing   |
| <p><b>Exams</b></p> <p><i>Exam 1 (In-class multiple-choice, T/F and short answer)</i></p> <p><i>Exam 2 (In-class cumulative multiple-choice, T/F and short answer)</i></p> <p><i>Exams will be curved.</i></p>  | <p>35%</p> <p>15%</p> <p>20%</p>                       | <p>Oct. 16</p> <p>Dec. 4</p>                                  |
| <p><b>Research paper</b></p> <p>Research paper on a topic related to the evolution of human behavior (10-12 pages). Over the course of the semester, you will submit and receive feedback on an outline (10%); workshop a draft with a peer in section; and submit the final paper (20%) during Reading Period.</p> <p><i>Topic selection</i></p> <p><i>Outline</i></p> <p><i>Draft peer workshop</i></p> <p><i>Final paper</i></p>         | <p>30%</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>10%</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>20%</p> | <p>Oct. 2</p> <p>Oct. 25</p> <p>Nov. 21-22</p> <p>Dec. 10</p> |

**Pass/Fail:** This course may be taken pass-fail with permission of the instructors; please submit a Change of Grading Basis Request via my.harvard. If taken pass-fail, students must complete all assignments and earn a final, cumulative grade of 70 or above in order to pass.

**Number-to-Letter grade conversion:**

|    |              |
|----|--------------|
| A  | 94.0 - 100.0 |
| A- | 90.0 - 93.9  |
| B+ | 87.0 - 89.9  |
| B  | 84.0 - 86.9  |
| B- | 80.0 - 83.9  |
| C+ | 77.0 - 79.9  |
| C  | 74.0 - 76.9  |
| C- | 70.0 - 73.9  |
| D+ | 67.0 - 69.9  |
| D  | 64.0 - 66.9  |
| D- | 60.0 - 63.9  |
| F  | Below 60     |

## Course outline

*Subject to change. For the most up-to-date information, see Canvas Modules section.*

**Unit 1: Introduction to human evolution**

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Wed Sept 4  | <b>Humans: Just another animal?</b> ..... Curtin<br><i>What do we think makes us so special?</i>  |
| Mon Sept 9  | <b>Genetic evolution and natural selection</b> .....Curtin<br><i>How does evolution work?</i>   |
| Wed Sept 11 | <b>Meet the cousins and the ancestors</b> ..... Curtin<br><i>Why are primates interesting for understanding human evolution? What were some major patterns of evolutionary change in the human lineage?</i> |
| Section 1   | <b>Introductions and evolution discussion</b> .....Sarkar & Wu<br><i>Understanding evolution</i>  |
| Mon Sept 16 | <b>Hunter-gatherers and other small-scale societies</b> ..... Henrich<br><i>Why study diverse human societies, and especially modern hunter-gatherers?</i>  |

- Wed Sept 18    **The secret of our success**.....Henrich  
*What explains the ecological dominance of our species? Is it really our intelligence?*
- Section 2      **Life as a hunter-gatherer**..... Sarkar & Wu  
*Discussion of the film, “Baka: People of the Forest”*
- Mon Sept 23    **The evolution of culture**.....Curtin  
*What is our “capacity for culture”? How has natural selection shaped human psychology to make us such effective cultural learners? How does culture accumulate?*
- Wed Sept 25    **Big brains, small guts: Intro to gene-culture coevolution**..... Curtin  
*How has culture driven the genetic evolution of our species?*
- Section 3      **Cultural evolution in action**.....Sarkar & Wu  
*Hands-on activity demonstrating how culture evolves*
- Mon Sept 30    **Recent culture-driven genetic evolution**.....Henrich  
*What’s the evidence that culture can drive genetic evolution? Three examples of recent culture-driven genetic evolution.*
- Wed Oct 2      **Cultural adaptations and maladaptations**..... Henrich  
*How can evolved mechanisms of cultural transmission give rise to true adaptations? Are kayaks, spicing techniques, and Fijian food taboos cultural adaptations? Can this process also produce maladaptive behavioral patterns and beliefs?*
- Due: Research paper topic**
- Section 4      **Sister Noella’s cheese** ..... Sarkar & Wu  
*Discussion of a clip from Michael Pollan’s Netflix series, “Cooked”.*

## **Unit 2: Human sociality and culture**

- Mon Oct 7      **Human kinship**..... Henrich  
*Why do close blood-relatives love each other so much, yet are disgusted at the idea of having sex? Is blood thicker than water? How does understanding kinship help explain murder patterns?*
- Wed Oct 9      **Prestige, dominance, and menopause**..... Henrich  
*What is prestige? How did it evolve? What’s the difference between prestige and dominance? Why do people care what celebrities think?*

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Section 5  | <b>Exam review</b> .....Sarkar & Wu<br><i>Study tips and a concept mapping activity.</i>  |
| Mon Oct 14 | <i>No class (Indigenous People's Day)</i>   |
| Wed Oct 16 | <b>Exam # 1</b>   |
| Section 6  | <b>Skill-building workshop</b> .....Sarkar & Wu<br><i>How to do a literature review</i>   |
| Mon Oct 21 | <b>Social norms, institutions, and large-scale cooperation</b> .....Curtin<br><i>What are social norms, and how are they relevant to human evolution? Why are humans so cooperative, even sometimes with strangers? What is cultural group selection?</i> |
| Wed Oct 23 | <b>Intergroup conflict and war</b> ..... Curtin<br><i>Is war unique to humans? How could war evolve?</i>  |
| Section 7  | <b>Cooperation in the lab</b> ..... Sarkar & Wu<br><i>Behavioral economic games</i>   |
| Fri Oct 25 | <b>DUE: Research paper outline</b>  |
| Mon Oct 28 | <b>Self-domestication and aggression</b> ..... Guest: Dr. Erin Hecht<br><i>What is domestication, biologically? Does it apply to us?</i>  |
| Wed Oct 30 | <b>The collective brain and the evolution of technology</b> .....Henrich  |
| Section 8  | <b>Self-domestication and collective brains</b> ..... Sarkar & Wu<br><i>Discussion</i>  |
| Mon Nov 4  | <b>Childhood</b> .....Guest: Dr. Rachna Reddy   |
| Wed Nov 6  | <b>Language</b> .....Henrich<br><i>The evolution of language and languages.</i>   |
| Section 9  | <b>Language &amp; TBD</b> ..... Sarkar & Wu<br><i>Discussion</i>  |
| Mon Nov 11 | <b>Religion</b> .....Henrich<br><i>Why do people believe in gods, ghosts, angels, and elves? Why are religious rituals so common across societies? How did supernatural beings, communal ritual, and morality get wound up together?</i>                  |



Wed Nov 13     **Music**..... Guest: Dr. Ani Patel  
*The evolution of a human universal*

Section 10     **Form and function in human song** ..... Sarkar & Wu  
*Activity and discussion about music*

**Unit 3: Sex, mating, and marriage**

Mon Nov 18     **Sex & sexual selection**.....Curtin  
*What is biological sex? What is sexual selection, and how does it work?*

Wed Nov 20     **Sex and gender differences**.....Curtin  
*Are there behavioral differences between men and women? How can we explain them?*

Section 11     **Workshopping the research paper**..... Sarkar & Wu  
*Peer workshopping and feedback on research paper drafts*

Mon Nov 25     **Marriage systems**.....Henrich  
*Are humans naturally monogamous? Do all societies have marriage? Are there any societies in which the women can seek out extra sex partners? Are there societies in which two men share one wife?*

Wed Nov 27     *No class (Thanksgiving break)*

Mon Dec 2     **The future of human nature**.....Henrich & Curtin  
*Review of the course and discussion of controversies about the evolution of human behavior.*

Wed Dec 4     **Exam #2**

Wed Dec 10     **DUE: Research paper**  
*(Reading Period)*