# Nature vs. nurture? Both are important, anthropologist argues

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Evolutionary science stresses the contributions biology makes to our behavior. Some anthropologists try to understand how societies and histories construct our identities, and others ask about how genes and the environment do the same thing. Which is the better approach? Both are needed, argues Agustin Fuentes, University of Notre Dame biological anthropologist.

"Seeing bodies and evolutionary histories as things that can be measured separate from the human cultural experience is a poor approach and bad science," Fuentes said. "Seeing cultural perceptions and the human experience as unconnected to biology and evolutionary history is equally misguided. Data from a vast array of sources tell us that we need an integrative approach to best understand what it means to become and be human."

In a forthcoming paper in the journal *Current Anthropology*, Fuentes builds on the extended evolutionary synthesis of biologist Kevin Laland of the University of St. Andrews and colleagues.

"The extended evolutionary synthesis is basically an update of what we know about how evolution works," Fuentes said. "Most people think 'survival of the fittest' is all that happens in evolution and that DNA and genes are all that really matters. Both counts are wrong. Evolution is an awesome mix of bodies, ecologies, behaviors, chemistry and history. We know more about how life works, and the range of systems that impact it, than ever before. Organisms are constructed in development, not

simply 'programmed' to develop by genes. Things don't 'evolve' to fit into environments. They co-construct and co-evolve with their environments."

Fuentes argues in the paper that anthropologists can, and should, combine evolutionary science, cultural analysis and ethnographic research.

"In the extended evolutionary synthesis, what we think, feel and do can be as relevant as our DNA, the shape of our bones and the density of muscles … Many of those things are connected," he said. "This makes evolution approaches to why humans do what they do more exciting and more accessible to a wide range of researchers, but it also makes our jobs a lot harder.

"We need more collaboration across areas in anthropology, more interaction with those outside anthropology and the development of more complex, but much better, answers about being human."

**More information:** Agustin Fuentes. The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, Ethnography, and the Human Niche: Toward an Integrated Anthropology, *Current Anthropology* (2016). DOI: 10.1086/685684

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