Anthropology helps us bust myths about human nature: for example, are men and women really that different?

Agustin Fuentes, University of Notre Dame

Anthropologists frequently write and talk about the status of anthropology as a discipline. These types of discussion are important for us as we seek to understand the history and future of the field. But for students in introductory anthropology classes these debates about inherent value, intellectual validity, and systemic integrity are pretty meaningless. Most students, and the public in general, simply want to know “so what?” Why should we learn anthropology? The short answer is because anthropology helps us bust myths about human nature. A slightly longer answer is what makes up the rest of this essay.

A myth is a story, or explanation, of why things are the way we think they are. Myths make up a large part of what many of us would call common sense; stuff that you just know about the world around you. This is why they are so powerful; myths help us make sense of the world we live in. They help us to go about our daily lives and understand our world without having to really analyze everyday situations. But, as Clifford Geertz tells us, much in myths, these major pieces of our common sense, is socially constructed. The main problem with certain myths about human nature, about who we are at our core, is that many of these beliefs are based on misinformation, partial truths, and a large dose of ignorance. Anthropology is a kind of antidote; it provides both the basic information and the critical toolkit to effectively tackle these myths.

The anthropological toolkit involves thinking about humans both as a single species and simultaneously as many, many cultures; a recognition that humans are all the same and yet remarkable diverse. It requires us to ask about data from many areas, biology, ethnography, history, archeology, psychology, etc... and see how it all fits together and how it relates to the question at hand. An anthropological toolkit also forces us to realize that humans develop over time from birth to death in specific contexts and that the responses of our bodies and minds are contingent on our biological histories and experiential past, our lived present, and our perceived future.

Take for example the incredibly strong belief about the “nature” of differences between males and females. You know, “men are from mars and women are from venus”...males and females are biologically different, our brains are wired differently and thus we just want different things out of life, relationships, and sex. This is common sense, and it is wrong; it is a myth. The anthropological approach to this myth requires us to ask three questions: Are our assumptions correct across all humans? Are our assumptions supported by actual data? Are there aspects of our own society that created and maintain these assumptions?

In answering the first question we can simply look across the wide array of anthropological studies of gender roles in human cultures. These studies show us that there are many similarities across cultures in male and female roles and expectations, but there are also many differences. The similarities tend to be cultural expectations and practices associated with the facts that females give birth to children and nurse them and that males have, usually, more upper body strength than women. However, when we
look at economic roles, kinship, social classifications, power in the household and in public, sex roles, contribution to overall household or group nutrition and health, inheritance of land and name, etc...we find amazing diversity across human groups. This tells us that there is not only one way to be male and female for humans and that many cultures “do” gender roles in different ways. Strike one.

Because anthropology interfaces with so many other disciplines, and is open to their data and concepts, the second test is an easy one. Researchers have spent over a century in intensive study of the differences between male and female brains; what are the only reliably and repeatedly supported patterns they found? Males’ brains are, on average, larger and females’ brains stop growing before males’ brains. None of the other purported differences stand up to repeated testing (that is, no male-female differences but LOTS of inter-individual differences). What about bodies? Males are usually about 10-15% larger than females and there are some differences in patterns of fat deposition and the ruggedness of the skeleton. However, male and female bodies develop from the same stuff using the same hormones and basic physiological systems; we are variations on a theme, not different kinds of things. For example, male and female genitals arise from the exact same tissue masses and do not even differentiate until after the fetus is 6 weeks old!

What about behavior? If we look at sexual behavior patterns across our species we find that males and females do more or less the same things (not surprising since they are frequently doing those things together). Males and females are more or less equally aggressive as children but as adults more males display violent physical aggression and more females display indirect aggression, except in romantic couples where women are slightly more physically aggressive but men’s aggression is more likely potential to cause serious injury (remember men are usually larger with more upper body strength). Janet Shibley-Hyde examined over 5000 studies looking at male and female psychological and behavioral patterns and found that the similarities vastly outweigh the differences. It turns out that societal structures and histories affect how we think about male-female differences more than the actual differences in our bodies and behavior affect what we do. Compiling data from anthropology, biology, psychology, and sociology and analyzing it via an anthropological perspective demonstrates an absence of support for the myth that males and females are inherently more different than they are similar. Strike two.

The third question is the heart of a traditional anthropological approach. Can we look at our own cultures and histories and find structures, events, and processes that act to create and maintain the perception of, and the practice of, differences between the sexes? You bet we can. The arguments in the USA against female voting rights (too emotional), the expectation of male aggression (being natural hunters makes men aggressive) and female nurturing (females give birth so are built to be nurturing in all contexts), the association of masculine and feminine features to nonliving commercial objects (cars, movies, wristwatches, etc….) all demonstrate a very clear suite of socially constructed perceptions that structure our world view. For example, if someone who has never played baseball picks up a baseball and throws it, they will just use their forearm and “flick” it forward as opposed to using the whole arm, winding back and throwing. In common USA parlance that person would be said to be “throwing like a girl” and a number of specific gendered assumptions would surround that comment. But the truth of the matter is the person was throwing the ball like a human being who had never be trained how to
throw a baseball and was just following the basic kinetics and structure of the body. Our culturally
gendered perception of reality is so strong that we cannot even see the basic functioning of the human
body without interpreting it in a gendered context. We grow up in a social stew of symbols, beliefs,
ideologies and histories; that is where myths of human nature largely come from and is especially how
they are maintained.

Of course there are male and female differences in biology and behavior, but only a few of them are
fixed or shared across all human societies. Learning about Anthropology can show us that there are
many “correct” ways to be a male or a female and they are not all the same across the planet. The data
from the study of our bodies and our behavior demonstrates that males and females are more similar
than we are different… we are the same species after all. Strike three.

Three strikes and the myth should be busted, but for most people it is not. Why? They do not have
access to the information nor are they provided with the toolkit for thinking critically about the topic. In
fact, many of you reading this are probably skeptical of the assertions I’ve made. Please, check it out for
yourself, the data are out there and widely accessible, but you have to look for it as an anthropologist
would; aware of our sameness and diversity, the need to compare and contrast multiple data sources,
and the core role of experience and context in shaping our worldview.

This is an extremely abbreviated example of why learning about anthropology can mean something for
us. Now take these three basic aspects of the toolkit and challenge common sense, go bust a few myths
for yourself.