

In response to a commentary on anthropology by Adam Kuper and Jonathan Marks (*Nature*, 470:166-168, 10 February 2011), Michael Gurven, Monique Borgerhoff Mulder and I coauthored a letter, signed by an additional 27 anthropologists. The letter was published in the 24 March 2011 issue of *Nature* (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/471448b>), but *Nature's* editors cut the length by two thirds, and deleted most of our references. Below is the original submission, followed by the full list of co-signers.

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In their recent commentary,¹ (*Nature*, 9 February 2011) Adam Kuper and Jonathan Marks (hereafter, K&M) paint a somewhat dismal portrait of integrative, big-question research in anthropology. Although the state of anthropology is far from ideal, K&M are far off the mark when they write that "Only a handful [of anthropologists] still try to understand the origins and possible connections between biological, social and cultural forms, or to debate the relative significance of history and microevolution in specific, well-documented instances." This assessment does not square with the robust body of research produced by anthropologists in areas such as behavioral ecology,² cultural evolution³, cognitive anthropology⁴, gender studies⁵, cross-cultural economics⁶, moral psychology⁷, and environmental change⁸. Much of this work appears in high-impact general science journals (*Science*, *Nature*, *PNAS*) and more focused interdisciplinary ones (*Human Nature*, *Evolution and Human Behavior*, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, all of which have anthropologists on their editorial board); this publication strategy ensures, greater scientific as well as public attention. But the research we refer to also appears in anthropological journals such as *Evolutionary Anthropology*, *Current Anthropology*, *American Antiquity*, *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, and *American Anthropologist*.

K&M mention the Evolutionary Anthropology Society⁹, but do not note that it was created specifically to cut across traditional subdisciplinary anthropological divides, and includes ca. 350 members drawn from biological, cultural, and archaeological specialties. The Human Behavior and Evolution Society,¹⁰ the European Human Behaviour and Evolution Association,¹¹ and the Society for Anthropological Sciences¹² are other interdisciplinary scholarly associations, each with hundreds of member anthropologists very active in the kind of research K&M claim is scarce or lacking. In addition, very productive and interdisciplinary centers bringing together anthropologists of all subdisciplinary persuasions, biologists, economists, psychologists, etc. are important catalysts for innovative research integrating biological, cultural, and archaeological perspectives.¹³

Robust, big-question research on human biology/culture/history needs a rigorous interdisciplinary basis that is scientific and ethnographically rich. Accordingly, growing numbers of anthropologists interested in such endeavors are collaborating with economists, biologists, psychologists, philosophers and others; examples of such work are cited above. Successful interdisciplinary cross-cultural work that is truly comparative does require empiricism and scientific rigor—methods not currently embraced by humanistic anthropologists. However, a genuine interdisciplinary field of human diversity is emerging, synthesizing theory and data from the social and behavioral sciences with theory and modeling techniques from evolutionary biology and game theory. Contra K&M, there is ample evidence that this work *does* "feature in the front line of current debates about cognition, altruism or, for that matter, economic behaviour or environmental degradation," and includes a healthy contribution from anthropologists.

In sum, there is far more valuable, synthesizing, and theoretically informed scientific research on broad-interest topics and pressing issues being done by anthropologists than K&M suggest. It would be a shame if readers of *Nature* were led to believe otherwise.

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- ¹ Kuper A, Marks J. Anthropologists unite! *Nature* 470, 166–168 (09 February 2011) | doi:10.1038/470166a
- ² Winterhalder, B. & Smith, E. *Evolutionary Anthropology*, 9:51-72 (2000).
- ³ Boyd, R. & Richerson, P.J. *The origin and evolution of cultures*. (Oxford U. Press, 2005)
Currie, T.E., et al. *Nature* 467:801-804 (2010).
Powell, A., Shennan, S. & Thomas, M.G. *Science* 324:1298-1301 (2009).
- ⁴ Boyer, P. & Bergstrom, B. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 37:111-130 (2008).
- ⁵ Gurven, M. et al. *Human Nature* 20(2):151-183 (2009).
- ⁶ Borgerhoff Mulder, M., et al. *Science* 326:682-688 (2009).
Henrich, J., et al. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28(6):795-815 (2005).
- ⁷ Marlowe, F., et al. *Proceedings of Royal Society of London, Series B* 275:587-590 (2008).
See also Culture and the Mind Project: <http://www.philosophy.dept.shef.ac.uk/culture&mind/>
- ⁸ Bliege Bird, R., et al. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 105(39):14796-14801 (2008).
Hayashida, F. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34:43-65 (2005).
- ⁹ <http://www.evanthsoc.org/>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.hbes.com/>
- ¹¹ <http://www.ehbea.com/>
- ¹² <http://anthrosciences.org/>
- ¹³ For example, the Centre for Evolution of Cultural Diversity (<http://www.cecd.ucl.ac.uk/>), the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (<http://www.eva.mpg.de/>), and the Santa Fe Institute (<http://www.santafe.edu/>).
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