

## ANTHROPOLOGY CAN PROMOTE BETTER RACE RELATIONS

*by Robert Sussman*

President Bill Clinton should consider expanding the new advisory board on race relations to include an anthropologist.

Given the history of poor race relations in the United States, anthropologists, trained to bridge the gap between cultures and understand social processes, are especially well suited to play a major role in Clinton's plan to address current racial divisiveness.

Although some may view anthropologists as an esoteric group of social scientists digging up old bones or recording the behavior of chimpanzees, anthropologists with their international perspective on human behavior and society, from prehistory to the present, can provide rich information about human diversity and help combat problems related to misunderstandings over this diversity. Issues of interest to anthropologists are issues of the modern world from AIDS to homelessness to international economic interdependence.

As cross-cultural experts in human behavior and evolution, anthropologists can be non-judgmental when examining the issues at the root of the problem and provide a broader, cultural, human context for such questions as "What exactly is race?" "What are the causes of racism?" and "What are its consequences?"

Through ethnographic studies, anthropologists have found American notions of race are often derived from misunderstood and misused physical criteria (such as skin color, hair type, facial structure and body build), leading to conclusions that race is based on biological rather than social categories that carry with them presumed characteristics as well as social status.

For example, anthropologists have noted that Americans may accept that people brought up in Samoa have a different history, culture and world view than people in Australia, but they generally are much less aware of the equally dramatic cultural differences and history of isolation among racial groups in the United States.

As a case in point, black people brought up in the South may have a different subculture than white people from the same region. While Americans tend to assume that the differences between these groups are based on biological racial differences, in reality, the genetic differences between blacks and whites are quite small; about 85 percent of human genetic variation is explained by differences between individuals and only 15 percent by differences among "races."

Racism arises when those within differing ethnic groups develop hostilities toward and prejudices

about those outside their own group or subculture, often due to a lack of both understanding and tolerance. In the United States, racism is due, in part, to Americans marginalizing groups, condemning those groups for not buying into mainstream society, and, finally, stereotyping others of like ethnic groups as part of those marginalized groups.

Since biological anthropologists and geneticists can demonstrate conclusively that the problems of crime, drug abuse and poverty are not based on racial biology, we must turn to other explanations. In the case of the black urban poor, for example, behaviors considered "maladaptive" to mainstream society actually may be "adaptive" survival strategies, anthropologically speaking, given the hopeless situations some people face.

Anthropologists historically have been at the forefront of debunking theories about the biological basis of racial differences. As early as 1911, Franz Boas challenged the "eugenics" movement and the view that differences in race, ethnic group and social class were due to innate capacities. Boas' radical view at the time was that behavioral differences among ethnic groups were not genetically based, but

caused by environmental factors and "culture" - derived from people's varying histories and experiences. Other leading anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict and Ashley Montagu have been key figures in the debate over the essence of race.

Anthropology is itself at a crossroads and must again become central to the public debate on racism. As experts in comparing different societies and identifying the core cultural reasons behind certain behaviors, anthropologists can help us understand the need for education, for policies reversing socio-economic conditions and for a culture of tolerance in which we appreciate the richness of different subcultures.

Above all, anthropologists must lead the charge in recognizing that we are one species, and that no evolutionary evidence exists to demonstrate that one culture or ethnic group is supreme.

*Robert Sussman has been named editor-in-chief of American Anthropologist, the journal of the American Anthropological Association. The first issue under Sussman's editorship, which will be published in September 1998 marking the journal's 100th anniversary, will focus on race and racism.*