

# Anthropology: A Definition

# 1



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## Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Define anthropology as a discipline.
2. Enumerate and define the subdivisions of anthropology.
3. Outline the history of anthropology.
4. Discuss the research methods of anthropological research.
5. Explain the causes of culture shock.
6. Analyze the values of cultural relativism.
7. Identify the uses of cross-cultural comparison.
8. Explain the basic ethical questions of anthropological research.
9. Explain the different concepts used in an anthropological analysis of culture.
10. Explain the difference between humanistic and scientific approaches to culture.

## Chapter Outline

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*This chapter explains what anthropology is, the history of the discipline, how anthropologists gather information about human customs, how different anthropologists analyze culture, and how anthropology has evolved as a discipline.*

## 1.1 The Breadth of Anthropology

**A**nthropology is the general study of humans and their ways of life. Anthropology is broader in scope than are any of the other fields that study human beings or human customs. Traditionally, anthropologists might specialize in one of the four classic subdivisions of the field: cultural anthropology, archaeology, linguistic anthropology, and biological anthropology.

### The Four Traditional Subfields

**Cultural anthropology** is the study of the similarity and diversity of human ways of life (cultures) and of the regularities in how culture functions.

**Archaeology** is the study of cultures of the past, or of the past of existing cultures, by reconstructing ways of life from the remains of the material things that people left behind in the course of living.

**Linguistic anthropology** is the study of the characteristics of language, the relationship between language and culture, and how people use language in everyday life. **Biological anthropology** is the study of the origin of the human species and our relationship to other primates, variations in human biology around the world, and how human biology makes culture possible.

In recent decades, many anthropologists have become increasingly involved in using the theoretical knowledge and findings of the field to solve real-world problems. This kind of practical application is done within **applied anthropology**, which is sometimes seen as the fifth major subdivision within the discipline of anthropology, and one that often bridges two or more subdivisions.

Despite the fact that an anthropologist might specialize in one of these five subdivisions, he or she typically has some training in each of them, and the subfields remain connected to one another within the larger field of anthropology. This interconnectedness exists, in part, by virtue of the fact that anthropologists in each of the subfields understand that the topics studied in the other subfields cannot be ignored, even while they focus on their own specialties. For example, a colleague of mine clearly identified her specialty as “biological anthropology,” and all of her work emphasized such things as human evolution and contemporary variation in the bones that make up the human skeleton. Nevertheless,



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**Archaeologists use the physical remains of past societies to reconstruct a picture of what life looked like for ancient peoples.**

her application of these interests included an awareness of how cultural differences in customs affect the body—for example, the traditional use of kayaks among Eskimos and Inuits of the far north led to lower-back problems (due to greater stress experienced when fishing from kayaks, which placed the lower limbs at right angles to the torso). Her awareness of such cultural influences on the human skeleton also made it possible for her to put her knowledge to use in forensic work for the local police when skeletons were turned up. This was not limited to reconstructing “racial” characteristics or determining the cause of death from evidence on the skeletal remains. It also included her ability to make valid inferences from evidence (such as the stresses that influenced bone development) about whether the person had engaged in heavy labor or had lived a more sedentary lifestyle.

### Anthropology as Science and Humanity

Classified by subject matter, cultural anthropology is one of the humanities, so anthropologists share some of the interests of philosophers, literary and art critics, translators, and historians. Classified by aspiration, it is a human science and shares a great deal with sociology, psychology, political science, economics, linguistics, geography, paleontology, and biology. This distinctive breadth remains a hallmark of anthropology today. As cultural anthropologist E. R. Wolf (1964) noted over 50 years ago, anthropology uniquely bridges the gulf between the sciences and the humanities. At the same time, there is a long-standing tension between humanistic and scientific approaches in anthropology that can fracture the discipline. For example, in 1998, Stanford University’s anthropology department split into two departments: “anthropological sciences” and “cultural and social anthropology.” They merged again in 2007, rejoining the scientific and humanistic aspects that characterize the discipline as a whole.

The humanistic aspect of anthropology stems from our desire to know and understand other cultures. Anthropologists with a humanistic orientation approach the study of cultures as translators who try to make the symbols of one culture understandable in terms of those of another. They attempt to portray and interpret the customs, values, worldview, or art of one culture so that they can be appreciated by readers accustomed to a different language and way of viewing life.

While much of culture exists in the symbolic realm of ideas—the beliefs, feelings, and ideologies that can be studied and interpreted for their own sake—there is also a practical aspect of culture that makes it possible for a people to survive physically. Each culture, as a system of common understandings, serves as a form of social bonding and also as the action plan by which a human society interacts with its natural environment to fulfill its survival needs. Anthropologists whose interests lean toward the scientific goal of explaining and predicting human behavior emphasize the practical influences of social life, human biological and psychological needs, technology, and the environment in their descriptions of how the symbolic or ideological elements of culture arise. Their concern is for isolating the factors that give rise to the diverse cultures of the world and for developing models that show how these factors determine the form that a culture develops. In sum, the scientific approach searches for mechanistic, cause-and-effect explanations of how particular cultures have developed their distinctive qualities, and for causes of cultural universals, characteristics that are found in all cultures with a focus on the role culture plays in human adaptation to the environment and survival.

More generally, the main objective of science, which includes scientific facts, hypotheses, methodologies, and theories, is to explain: to answer such questions as why, when, and what. Scientific theories attempt to explain how nature works, or why people behave as they do. The main method that scientists—and scientifically oriented anthropologists—use is called the scientific method. This method is a **deductive** approach: It is a “top-down” approach whereby one begins with a theory and, based on this theory, develops a falsifiable and testable hypothesis about a given phenomenon. A **hypothesis** is a proposed explanation that can be shown to be right *or* wrong through scientific testing (e.g., observation or experimentation). After confirming or denying the original hypothesis, the scientist then makes statements, or construct new theories, about the particular phenomenon being studied. Whereas deductive approaches are considered to be scientific, **inductive**—or “bottom-up”—approaches are associated more with humanistic research. Using an inductive approach, one begins with observations, makes a hypothesis based on those observations, and eventually offers a set of conclusions or develops a theory.

Although they differ considerably, both deductive and inductive approaches aim to develop a **theory**—a generally accepted, reliable explanation that has been arrived at through observation and testing. Even though theories are seen as established explanations, they are not considered to be the “Truth.” Theories are not necessarily or irrevocably true; rather, they are explanations that have not yet been disproven, but may be disproven in the future. Indeed, scientific theories of the past have often been overturned in the face of new discoveries, which generate new theories. For example, in geology, George Lyell (1866–1951) developed his theory of uniformitarianism: the idea that the Earth was formed by slow-moving forces, which have been operating for a long time. His theory replaced the formerly accepted theory of catastrophism: the idea that abrupt changes created and altered the Earth’s surface. In anthropology, the theory of unilineal cultural evolutionism—the notion that all cultures progress through the same set of social stages—was replaced by theories of multilineal evolution and cultural relativism, which recognize that different cultures have distinct social trajectories (see *Section 1.4: Cultural Differences*).

In some ways, the scientific and humanistic strands of anthropology are associated with the different subfields: Many archaeologists, physical anthropologists, and some linguistic anthropologists use more scientific approaches, whereas many cultural anthropologists and other linguistic anthropologists use more humanistic approaches (although there are exceptions). Further, despite the fact that science-oriented and humanistic-oriented anthropologists differ in terms of their aims, methodologies, and approaches, they share a common interest in using systematic observation to better understand the human condition.

### Etic Versus Emic Perspectives

The dual quality of anthropology (the scientific attempt to explain cultures as patterned, rule-based systems and the humanistic desire to understand and interpret other cultures as systems of meanings) manifests itself in another way that makes anthropology broader than the physical sciences. Cultural anthropologists who either describe or interpret a particular culture must choose between what we call an *etic* and an *emic* viewpoint.

An **etic description or analysis**—that is, an outsider’s or observer’s allegedly “objective” account—creates a model of a culture by using cross-culturally valid categories, which anthropologists have found to be generally useful for describing all cultures. Etic models invariably describe each culture in ways that seem alien to its own participants but that facilitate comparisons between cultures and the discovery of universal principles in the structure and functioning of cultures. According to Marvin Harris (1968, p. 575), “Etic statements are verified when independent observers using similar operations agree that a given event has occurred,” and etic models are valid insofar as they accurately predict the behavior of the native participants of a culture.

An **emic description or analysis**—that is, an insider’s or native’s meaningful account—may be written for outsiders but portrays a culture and its meanings as the insider understands it. As Charles Frake (1964) has pointed out, such a model may incorrectly predict the actual behavior of the people whose culture it describes and still be valid—so long as the native member of that culture is equally surprised by the error. Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) was a symbolic anthropology whose work exemplifies the emic approach. He argued that the anthropologist should strive to interpret the “native’s point of view” by understanding the distinct terms, experiences, and symbolic systems that matter to the people whom the anthropologist is studying (Geertz 1973, p. 58).



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**An etic description of culture attempts to describe it in a way that is meaningful to people outside of that culture. Conversely, an emic analysis describes culture in a way that is significant for those inside the culture.**

ily be acknowledged by those present if they were to be referred to by an anthropologist with the cross-culturally useful label of “rituals.” However, the third—“Ward Business”—is more problematic. It involves members of the congregation showing their assent to

This distinction between an insider’s and an outsider’s perspective is, of course, irrelevant in a field such as physics or chemistry, as the things those scientists study have no viewpoint of their own to be explained. So, although ways of life can be studied from the viewpoint of an outside observer, just as one can study the behavior of planets or chemicals, cultural anthropologists also have the option of pursuing the humanistic goal of explaining a way of life as those who live by it explain it. In doing so, they make this way of life more easily understood by people for whom the culture being explained would otherwise seem alien and strange. For this reason, cultural anthropologists who write emic studies of other cultures have been seen as cultural translators, similar to translators of languages.

The difference between using cross-culturally useful categories and categories that are meaningful from the point of view of the culture being described can be illustrated by my own research of Mormon religious culture. A typical Mormon worship meeting begins with a hymn and a prayer followed by “Ward Business.” The first two of these three regular activities would readily

changes in who will fill positions (such as “Sunday School teacher”) by a show of hands by members of the congregation, which members themselves sometimes refer to as a “vote.” However, dissent in this “voting” process is a rare occurrence, and it is clearly not a polling of the members that is intended to determine the majority position. The universal (or near universal) show of hands is so routine that an anthropologist, using *etic* terminology, might simply refer to this process as a “ritual” in the Mormon worship service. In my experience however, Mormons themselves typically find that term does not represent their own way of thinking about the process. For them, the word “ritual” seems better suited to their overt acts of worship, such as the group prayer and hymn singing. And the common usage of Mormon idiom itself—“Ward Business” and “voting”—both have a more secular connotation than does the word “ritual.” So while an *etic* discussion of Mormon worship services might apply the word “ritual” to this part of the meeting because of its highly predictable interplay between the leader who is conducting the services and the members of the congregation, an *emic* discussion would restrict the word “ritual” to the more worship-oriented parts of the meeting. In passing, my own use of the words “congregation” and “worship service” are themselves *etic* terms because the equivalent Mormon words would be “Ward” and “Sacrament Service” (although English-speaking Mormons would certainly recognize my terms from their common use by members of other religious denominations).

## The Holistic Perspective

In studying culture, using either a scientific or a humanistic approach, cultural anthropologists take a broader perspective than do other disciplines that study human behavior and social life. This broader perspective is a form of “systems theory,” which emphasizes how each cultural trait influences and is influenced by other parts of a culture, or, similarly, how a culture influences and is influenced by its natural environment. That is, cultural anthropologists treated cultures as *systems* rather than just a collection of customs and beliefs. This emphasis on the interconnectedness of the parts of a culture is referred to as **holism**. Holism is an approach to explaining how each part of a way of life interrelates with other parts of that way of life. For instance, an anthropologist who is interested in human economic life is likely to study how the economic customs of a society interact with that society’s physical environment, political system, religious customs, family patterns, or even its artistic endeavors. Holism is all about tying diverse parts of a way of life into a comprehensive system.

### The Cultural Ecology of Tsembaga Maring Rituals

One approach to cultural anthropology is known as cultural ecology. Its holistic approach focuses on the adjustment of ways of life to different habitats. It is assumed that culture is an adaptive mechanism, and that those customs that improve a society’s ability to adapt to its environment are most likely to survive over time. Anthropologist Julian Steward (1955) proposed a model for the study of cultural ecology as a method for discovering the origin of cultural traits that are specific to particular environments. Although he contrasted this with the use of an ecological perspective to discover general laws of biological or social adaptation to any cultural or environmental situation, the general idea of adaptation is shared by all ecological perspectives. Given the similar concern for adaptation

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### The Cultural Ecology of Tsembaga Maring Rituals (*continued*)

to environments that biologists apply to evolution, it is not surprising that cultural ecologists such as Andrew Vayda and Roy Rappaport (1968) have included the interaction of both culture and biology in their description of single adaptive systems. Thus, cultural ecologists view culture as part of a larger system that includes the natural environment and its interaction with human and animal populations and human customs.

Rappaport's (1967, 1968) analysis of the Tsembaga Maring people of New Guinea has become a classic illustration of the cultural ecological approach. The Tsembaga were tropical forest horticulturalists who grew taro, yams, sweet potatoes, and manioc, and raised pigs. The root crops were a daily staple for the Tsembaga diet, but pigs were eaten only in ceremonial events that formed part of a longer cycle of warfare and peace between neighboring villages. When the size of the herds was small, the pigs were easy to care for. They foraged for themselves during the day, and their rooting in the gardens actually aided in the cultivation of the soil.

As the herds grew, however, increasing proportions of garden crops were expended on feeding pigs. Finally, after a period of about 11 years, the costs of maintaining the herds became so great that the adult pigs began to be slaughtered in ceremonies that marked the beginning of a period of warfare between neighboring villages. The fighting continued for a period of weeks until one of the villages was routed. Its survivors abandoned their homes and sought refuge with their kin in other villages. At the end of each war, the major ceremonial slaughter of pigs occurred, as the winners gave thanks to their ancestors for their victory and rewarded with gifts of meat the allies who had helped. The size of the herds returned to manageable numbers, and a truce remained in effect between the victors and the vanquished until the herds had once again grown large enough that they had to be culled.

Rappaport believed that the Tsembaga pig ceremonies supported the long-term balance between the human population and the food supply. Alliances were more easily formed by villages that could demonstrate their ability to support herds large enough to attract supporters, who then would be rewarded during the pig slaughter ceremonies. So, the Tsembaga were motivated not to cull their herds as a source of protein throughout the year. Since the ceremonial slaughter was an integral part of the warfare process, conflicts between villages happened only periodically in a cycle that prevented human population growth from overtaxing the available land resources, and that geographically redistributed those who survived, while their garden plots returned to nature and regenerated.

## Breadth in Time and Space

In addition to being more holistic than other fields, anthropology tends to be broader in the sources of information that it collects and analyzes. For instance, instead of basing their insights solely on the study of European and North American societies, anthropologists study people in all parts of the world in both simple and complex societies. Thus, examples in this text will be drawn from societies as diverse as the Ituri forest pygmies, the Great Basin Shoshone, and the pastoral Bedouin of Jordan.

In addition to studying people in different places, anthropologists also study different temporal periods to learn as much as possible about societies of the distant past, as well

as about life in contemporary societies. The **artifacts**—that is, material things made by human beings—and fossil remains of ancient peoples are studied for clues to how people lived in the past in the hope that the knowledge gained will help us understand how we became what we are today.

## 1.2 The History of Cultural Anthropology

Cultural anthropology had its roots in the 18th-century Enlightenment era and later became a formal discipline in 19th-century Victorian times, when the primary focus of the field was how cultures evolved from simple foraging beginnings to the complex social institutions that industrialization was making possible in the Victorian period. This was the period during which the role of religion in determining the curriculum was replaced by a science and research-oriented curriculum. And it was in this period that the first professorships in anthropology were established.

### The Evolutionary Period

In the 18th century, Enlightenment philosophers began to consider the establishment of a science of human society. In contrast with the religiously based ways of thinking about the world's human societies, Enlightenment scholars laid the foundations for an approach based on empirical knowledge and the application of the scientific method to a study of human social life. The discipline of anthropology arose in this context.

New shipbuilding techniques in the 1500s launched a period of commercial expansionism that culminated in the establishment of a worldwide network of trade as European nations established colonies in resource-rich places throughout the world. Europeans' contact with the distant and seemingly exotic places that they came to dominate both politically and economically gave rise to a new perception of their own dominance in the world hierarchy they had established. Out of the contrast that Europeans saw between their own industrialized, urban societies and smaller-scale foraging, gardening, and non-industrialized agricultural societies grew the idea that cultures had evolved from simple beginnings to more complex civilizations. This concept of **cultural evolutionism** became the dominant view among Enlightenment scholars.

Later, in the 19th century, archaeology also provided support for the idea that ways of life had evolved over time. Excavation of the remains of prehistoric human groups showed that earlier human societies used simpler tools and lived in smaller, less sedentary communities than later human societies. Cultural anthropologists of this era readily adopted the Victorian emphasis on science, and their dominant concern became the question of how cultures or cultural institutions (such as politics, economics, family life, or religion) had evolved. For instance, in 1871 Sir Edward Burnett Tylor published *Primitive Culture*, in which he developed a theory of the evolution of religion and discussed the concept of **survivals**, remnants of earlier social customs and ideas that could be used as evidence for reconstructing the evolutionary past of societies. In 1883, Tylor became the first anthropologist to hold a position at a university and to gain respect as a professional scientist. Anthropology as a professional field of study was born.



In 1877 an American contemporary of Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, published another strong argument for the evolution of culture, *Ancient Society*, a book that remains influential (though highly disputed) to this day. Morgan contended that societies evolved through a series of three stages—Savagery, Barbarism, and Civilization—and that contemporary “primitive” societies represented vestiges or remnants of precivilized ways of life. Morgan applied the term *Savagery* to the stage of cultural evolution at which people survived on wild foods alone. Barbarism arose when humans invented pottery and began to domesticate plants and animals; Civilization was the product of the invention of writing, urbanization, and the shift from kinship to class systems as the organizing principle of human groups. His argument that *all* societies eventually progress through these three stages was later refuted by anthropologists in the 20th century.

The anthropologists of the Victorian era attempted to move beyond reliance on earlier social philosophers by integrating the new knowledge about non-European societies that colonialism had brought to Europe. But, at this time, anthropologists were largely organizers of information and knowledge that they had not produced themselves. In attempting to create a science of culture, they had to rely on information that came from nonprofessional sources such as colonial administrators, missionaries, and those who carried out the trade in those foreign areas. In short, the base of information they had to work with was often tainted by a tendency of those who described non-European cultures to portray them as strange, exotic, and “uncivilized.”

### The Empiricist Period

American anthropology developed its own distinctive flavor at the beginning of the 20th century under the leadership of Franz Boas. Boas reacted strongly against the theories of the cultural evolutionists who preceded him. Although research of the world’s various societies carried out by anthropologists was not completely absent from the work of previous anthropologists, their speculative models tended to rely on secondhand information. Boas particularly criticized them for “armchair theorizing”—building grandiose theories based on speculation rather than on actual firsthand research.

Originally trained in physics (receiving his doctorate in 1881), Boas brought to the field of anthropology a scientific emphasis on **empiricism**. Boas was an empiricist who viewed science as a discipline dedicated to the recording of fact. In this vein, he taught his students that the careful collection of accurate information about other ways of life was as important as the building of theory. During his career, Boas published over 700 articles dealing with topics as diverse as changes in the bodily form of descendants of American immigrants, Native American mythology, geography, and the relationships between language and thought. Boas stressed the importance of firsthand research by anthropologists, and his students produced numerous ethnographies. An **ethnography** is a detailed description of ways of life based on careful observation and recording done by anthropologists while actually living with and interacting with the people whose customs they are describing. Since Boas’s time, it has become standard for students to spend some period of time (typically 1 year) studying a way of life by participating in and observing it firsthand.

During the first half of the 20th century, many cultural anthropologists adopted the concept of **diffusion**—the spread of customs, artifacts, and ideas from one society to another. The theory of diffusionism enabled them to understand how ways of life influence each

other and helped them move away from prior cultural evolutionary models. In the United States, the concept of diffusion led to the idea of **culture areas**, relatively small geographical regions in which different societies had come to share many similar traits through diffusion. A culture area can be exemplified by the Great Plains region of the United States. The Great Plains were occupied by dozens of different tribes whose people spoke many different languages. Yet these diverse societies had come to share many customs, manners of dress, worldviews, and values through diffusion.

During this same period, European anthropologists were also abandoning their interest in cultural evolution and turning to their own brand of diffusionism as a means of reconstructing social history. European diffusionists felt that earlier anthropologists had placed too much emphasis on the independent invention of social traits and underrated the role of the diffusion of ideas. They traced the spread of social traits and ideas around the entire world from a small number of centers in which they believed those traits had been originally invented. Whereas evolutionists believed that people everywhere eventually invent the same ways of life, diffusionists believed that people are uninventive; instead, they adopt or borrow traits from others.

### The Functionalist Period

By the 1930s, the diffusionist approach to human history had been replaced by an approach known as **functionalism**. Functionalists were not concerned as much with history or the origins of customs as they were with the mechanics of a society, the ways in which it functioned. In their view, a society was able to continue to exist because its customs were adaptive and made it possible for people to cope with their environment and with one another. Therefore, a society's customs can be analyzed by their **functions**—their contribution to maintaining the unity and survival of the society. The main proponents of this view were Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown. Both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown stressed the importance of firsthand research and rejected both evolutionism and diffusionism.

Malinowski saw culture as a mediator between human beings and their environment. Culture did this by providing people with guidelines for meeting basic human biological and psychological needs, such as obtaining food and bodily comforts. His theory, called bio-psychological functionalism, argued that we human beings do not meet our biological and psychological needs directly. Instead, we typically fulfill our needs as the culture of our social group prescribes. Thus, in no society do people eat every edible plant or animal available to them. People eat only those things their culture defines as “foods,” and they exclude from their diets other items of equal nutritional value. For instance, in parts of East Asia, dog meat is considered a delicacy, while the Western custom of eating cheese and yogurt is considered disgusting.

Similarly, in no society is the need for reproduction fulfilled by allowing all people to mate indiscriminately. In every society, sexual acts are controlled by cultural rules, such as those determining appropriate partners, when and where sexual acts may occur, and how those acts should be performed. For instance, among the Navajo of the southwestern United States, sexual intercourse is forbidden between any persons of known familial relationship, no matter how distant. The pre-Conquest Quechua Indians of the Andes, on the other hand, expected their emperor, the Inca, to mate with his full sister.

Each culture also includes plans of action for ensuring safety in dangerous situations. These include guidelines for conduct when walking down a dark street alone, when lost, or when attacked by an animal or by a human enemy. Human skills for coping with danger vary from culture to culture. Similarly, the panhuman needs for relaxation, movement, and growth are met in culturally patterned rhythms of work and sleep, exercise and rest, recreational and practical activities. Each society trains its young in the way of life of its people and teaches its members the skills they must acquire at each stage of their lives.

While Malinowski treated culture as a mediating mechanism between the behavior of individuals and their physical environment, other anthropologists were more interested in exploring the functions that culture plays within society itself. In contrast with Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and other British functionalists were less concerned with the individual and more concerned with the functional mechanisms that operate within society to maintain an orderly social life among its members. They emphasized the importance of **social structure**, the network of social relations among members of a society, in creating the basic customs of each culture. Their approach, called *social anthropology*, was founded by Radcliffe-Brown (1952). In the small-scale societies that were most often studied by anthropologists, kinship ties were determinants of how people were expected to treat one another. Because of the concern of Radcliffe-Brown and his colleagues for how a society's customs functioned to maintain its social structure, the analytical method of social anthropology has been given the name *structural-functionalism*.

Although the functionalist approaches to explaining how cultural systems work are still fundamental to the work of some cultural anthropologists, the early members of the functionalist school of thought were criticized by later anthropologists for assuming that every custom must have some *positive* social or cultural function. This bias led them to ignore the possibility that there could be *dysfunctional* customs. The early functionalists tended to ignore the fact that certain customs, while beneficial to some, might prove harmful to other members of the society. They focused on culture as a self-regulating system in which customs functioned to maintain stability. This focus led them to overlook questions about how cultures undergo change or the conflicting interests that different customs sometimes represent. For example, while Malinowski emphasized cultural responses to individual biological and psychological needs, he overlooked the fact that there can be more than one way to meet those needs, and that, within a given society, different people (due to their age, gender, or other characteristics) may have distinct needs and may meet them in distinct ways. Although functional analyses are still practiced by some anthropologists today, new theories (such as poststructuralism and postmodernism) have arisen that emphasize conflict and cultural change.

While functionalism was on the rise in England, one branch of American anthropology was becoming more interested in the role of psychology. Many anthropologists of this tradition were students of Boas who were influenced by his interest in human psychology and worldview. The best known of these anthropologists were Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead.

## The Contemporary Period

In the 1960s and 1970s, two new theoretical paradigms—namely, poststructuralism and postmodernism—emerged and significantly affected anthropology, as well as other disciplines. Poststructuralism is a reaction to structuralism, which was a theoretical paradigm that arose in Europe in the early 1900s. Influenced by developments in linguistics (mostly structural linguistics), structuralism examined human social experience and cultural traits in terms of basic, underlying universal structural elements that unconsciously exist in the mind and form a system of interrelated parts. In anthropology, structuralism is most associated with French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), who conducted structural analyses of cultural phenomena—such as myths, kinship, and food—which he believed were grounded in universal mental categories based on binary oppositions (nature/culture, male/female, raw/cooked, etc.).

Poststructuralists critiqued the structuralist emphases on binary oppositions, nonobservable “elementary” structures, and functional analyses. Instead of seeking out underlying structures or binaries, poststructuralists examine how discourses shape social life and how structures may be limited or even subverted. One highly influential poststructuralist was Michel Foucault (1926–1984), a French social theorist, philosopher, and historian. He was interested in power, particularly the interrelationship of power and knowledge and forms of social control. Many of his books were critiques of modern social institutions, such as prisons and hospitals, and of social norms, such as those of human sexuality. For example, his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) examined the rise of new ways of punishing criminals by imprisoning, observing, and disciplining them, rather than killing them. This new kind of punishment became a model of social control that extended to other areas of life, such as hospitals and schools.

Foucault’s work, and the work of many poststructuralists, overlaps with postmodernism, another significant theoretical, intellectual, and cultural movement of the mid to late 20th century. Postmodernists question the emphases of modernist thinkers on universal order and singular Truth and the emphases of Enlightenment thinkers on science, reason, and objectivity. Rather, postmodernists embrace contradictions, subjectivity, change, and relativism. Like Foucault, postmodernists seek to deconstruct hegemonic descriptions and power relationships. Most cultural anthropologists today incorporate some aspects of the postmodernist agenda by, for example, attending to the effects of power and reflecting on their role in producing partial and relative (rather than authoritarian) accounts of other cultures.

## The Period of Specialization

Since World War II, two major trends have characterized cultural anthropology. The first has been a gradual shift from research carried out in relatively isolated non-Western, kinship-based societies toward research in urban settings and in Third World communities that are rural subdivisions of current nation-states. This has been a natural result of the extinction of the previously isolated groups or their gradual absorption into the politics and economics of the larger countries that have asserted increasing control over them. While the early history of anthropology was one in which fieldworkers were particularly expected to be exposed to cultures far different from their own and often far-removed from their own native country, today there is increasing use of fieldworkers who are engaged



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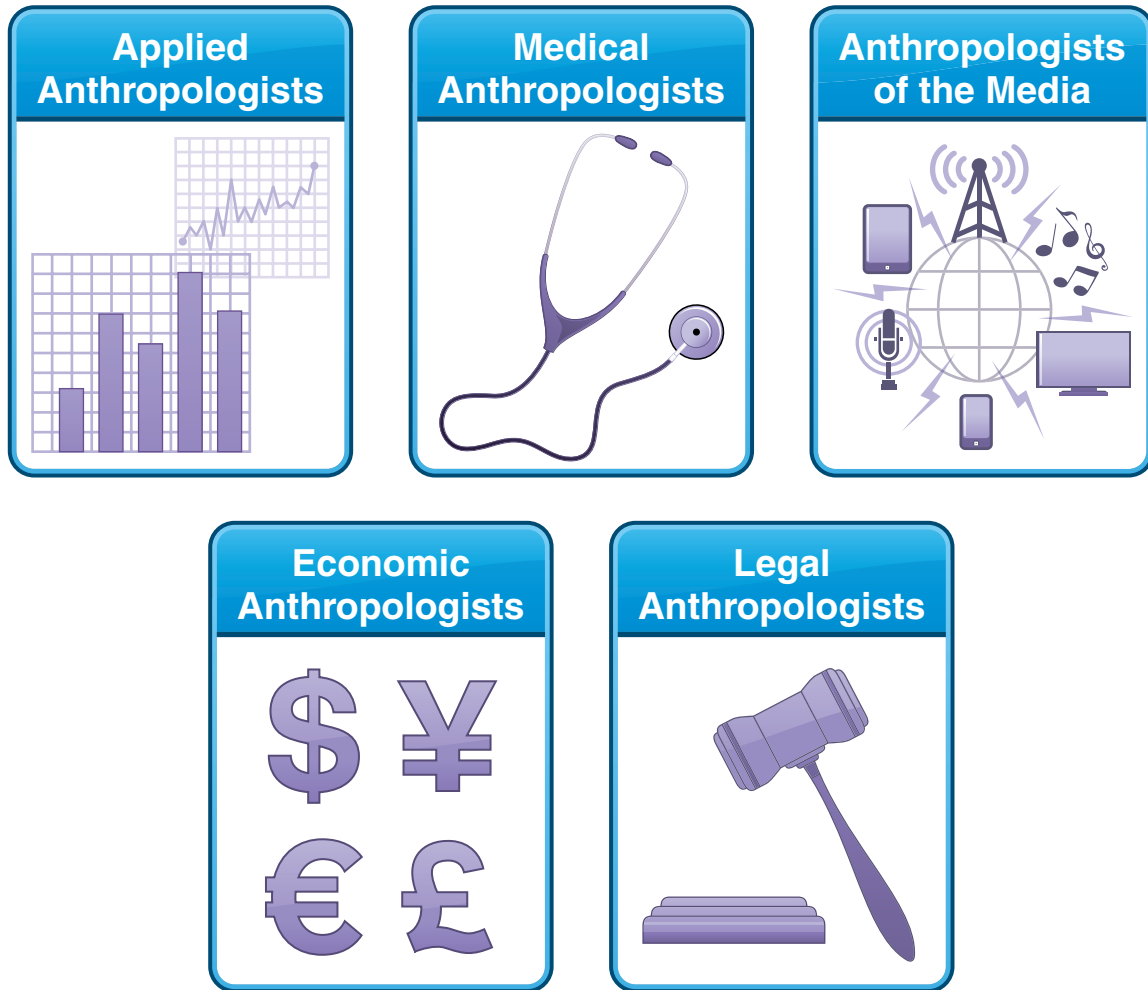
**Primatologists work in a subfield of physical anthropology, and they study primates to better understand how humans are unique. Here, Shirley Strum interacts with baboons to better understand their behavior.**

and social conditions to which human life must adjust—have continued to be the major divisions within cultural anthropology, but many specialized subfields have developed within both of these approaches to culture. There are, for example, “political anthropologists,” “environmental anthropologists,” and “anthropologists of religion,” among others.

In addition to the proliferation of specializations within anthropology itself, anthropologists have become increasingly engaged in interdisciplinary cooperation in a variety of university programs known as **area studies**. Area studies focus on geographical or cultural regions rather than traditional disciplinary topics and draw upon the skills of members of a variety of different disciplines in the area of focus. For instance, a Native American Studies program might involve anthropologists, political scientists, economists, and members of a variety of humanities specialists, such as arts history specialists, in a mutual attempt to better understand or teach within that area. Similarly, a growing number of Religious Studies programs at universities and colleges now offer courses taught not just by those with degrees in theology but by philosophers, historians, and anthropologists. See Figure 1.1 for more on Anthropology subfields.

in studying their own society and its culture. For example, after studying the Sherpas of Nepal for many years, anthropologist Sherry Ortner conducted a study of her own high school graduating class. The resulting book, entitled *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58* (2003) investigates the meanings of “class” in U.S. society and shows how class and social mobility, which are shaped by broader social movements, significantly affect individual lives in often unexpected ways.

The second trend has been the rise of a growing number of specializations within anthropology. The two major earlier interests—the symbolic aspects of culture and the material

**Figure 1.1: More subfields of anthropology**

Since World War II, the more traditional study of anthropology has expanded to many different subfields and specializations.

Changes within the major professional organization for anthropologists in the United States illustrate the flourishing of specialized approaches and interests within the field. The major U.S. professional organization for anthropologists is the **American Anthropological Association**. Its membership, which consists of individuals from all four of the primary subfields of anthropology, has grown so much that it is now composed of over a dozen smaller subunits such as the Society for Psychological Anthropology, the Society for Feminist Anthropology, and others.

## 1.3 Methods of Anthropological Research

As a discipline, anthropology has its own distinctive research methods. These involve *fieldwork* and the *comparative method*. In cultural anthropology, these methods take the form of participant observation and cross-cultural comparison.

The essential method of anthropological research that is shared by anthropologists regardless of their specialization is **fieldwork**—study that involves firsthand observation in the natural setting of whatever is being studied. Biological anthropologists may spend time in search of fossil remains of human ancestors or observing primates like chimpanzees or baboons in the wild to learn about the behavior of species closely related to our own. Archaeologists spend time in the field examining and excavating sites once occupied by human beings or even cataloging trash in a city garbage dump. Linguistic anthropologists work with native speakers of diverse languages to gather data firsthand about these languages and how they are used in real-life situations. Ethnographers spend prolonged periods living in isolated non-Western societies, in developing countries, or in a variety of settings such as rural villages, religious communes, prisons, central city slums, or even middle-class communities in Western societies to gather data about the life and customs of those they observe. Direct observation in natural settings is the common factor in data collection by all kinds of anthropologists. This feature contrasts with the work of other social and behavioral scientists, who have traditionally collected their data in laboratory settings, in structured interviews, or indirectly with printed questionnaires.

### Participant Observation

Most anthropological research is also carried out using what is called **participant observation**, whereby the anthropologist lives with, participates in, and observes the daily life of the people being studied. The anthropologist lives with the subjects in the field for a long enough period to earn the trust that people require in order to behave in the ways they usually do when strangers, tourists, or “outsiders” are not present. Ideally, the cultural anthropologist becomes skilled enough at following local customs to be accepted as a functioning member of the group, while maintaining sufficient objectivity about the way of life to be able to describe and analyze it fairly and impartially. In practice, complete acceptance as a member of the community being studied is rare.

The experience of working in a culture that is different from one’s own native culture and attempting to learn the system of a new culture in a give-and-take way with the people of that culture forces anthropological fieldworkers to confront their own **ethnocentrism**—the belief that one’s own group or culture is superior to another group or culture. This confrontation requires fieldworkers to ask themselves how their own preconceived ways of thinking and feeling may be influencing how they understand (or misunderstand) what they are trying to learn as they interact with those around them. This self-reflexive process leads fieldworkers to a deeper understanding of their own cultural assumptions as well as of the culture they are exploring. This process of self-reflexivity is part of the broader concept of **reflexivity**, the idea that the fieldworker is not an objective outside observer, but is both influenced by and an influence on those with whom she or he is interacting.



*Eye Ubiquitous/SuperStock*

**Participant observation involves anthropologists interacting with and participating in the culture they are studying.**

Anthropologists expect to learn the native language of the people they study, as it is a kind of record and model of its speakers' understanding of themselves and their environment. It also facilitates the direct questioning of a people about their customs and the meanings of those customs. Along with simple observation, direct questioning is an important part of participant observation. Anthropologists carry out their questioning in ways that are systematic enough to uncover implicit but not normally discussed aspects of ways of life that might otherwise remain unknown. Systematic questioning requires asking the same questions of many different informants. This is done partly to verify the accuracy of what the researcher is told—after all, anthropologists are outsiders, and they may be considered fair game to informants who may resent their presence or simply enjoy the humor of deceiving them. Asking the same questions of many informants also ensures that the information obtained is typical of the ideas expressed in the community at large.

Participant observation has limitations as well as strengths. One problem is that the time and energy it requires make it impossible for anthropologists to sample more than a fraction of the many lifestyles that exist at any time, and each anthropologist is only able to spend time in a limited number of communities within any one society. Choices such as which society to study, which communities within that society, and which members of the community to spend time with are influenced by many factors that cannot be called objectively scientific. For instance, financial limitations may determine the choice of where to do the research; national politics in the society may influence which communities are visited; and the chance meeting of a community member who belongs to a particular political, religious, or economic faction may determine who will shun or be willing to work with the anthropologist.

Another problem in the fieldwork approach is the fact that the anthropologist's very presence can significantly alter a way of life she or he is studying. For instance, Jean Briggs (1986) noted that

the hosts must also rearrange their lives, at some cost to themselves, to include the anthropologist and to solve the problems created by the latter's presence. The disruption may be more or less severe, depending on the nature of the role that the anthropologist adopts (or is assigned) in the society. (p. 20)



## The Fieldwork Experience: A Case Study

After three years of graduate training, I prepared for my first experience in anthropological fieldwork: the study of the Shoshone language and its probability of becoming extinct. I remember one piece of advice my mentor gave me as we drove for the first time to the reservation that he had selected for my work: Don't ask directly about how many people or families live on the reservation because such questions would raise the suspicion that I was really gathering information for the government for some nefarious purpose. I followed this advice even though it slowed considerably my building of a clear picture of the makeup of the reservation.

At first it seemed that I could not have been more fortunate in a fieldwork location. The Tribal Council had graciously offered me a rent-free ranch house that seemed luxurious. It was supplied with propane lighting, a stove, running cold water, and a propane refrigerator. It was furnished with a couch, desk, and bed. Most important of all, it actually had an indoor toilet!

My first crisis was the discovery that although the house had a mechanically perfect toilet, it was unusable. It seems a child had flushed a rubber ball down the drain. Ordinarily this might have been fixed, but the drainpipe narrowed, somewhere in the front yard, to a size smaller than the ball. Thus, my prized possession was as unfunctional as a fur-lined teacup.

The biggest initial adjustment to life in the field was loneliness. Residents of the reservation had their own work to do and lives to live. Most people were cattle ranchers, and their work kept them busy. They did not just drop everything because a young anthropologist had arrived. At first, I was at a loss to know how to go about meeting people. Residences were dispersed over the reservation. There were no stores to form a place of congregation. However, there was a third-class post office, a small two-room frame structure where mail arrived and departed only weekly and where I figured people would drop by occasionally. The reservation had no telephones, there was no television reception in the valley, and only a few houses had self-generated electricity to power even a radio, so I assumed that the mail would be an important source of information about the outside world. I stopped by the post office the next time I found it open. Mail was brought out to the reservation once a week by an automobile referred to as "the stage." People did come by to mail a letter or pick up their own deliveries, but few ever stayed long enough for me to get to know them. The one exception, of course, was the postmaster, Billy Mike, who became my first acquaintance. He expressed friendly interest in why I had come to the reservation, and spent many hours helping me learn the Shoshone dialect that was spoken locally. Eventually he introduced me to other, older members of the community.

My main task was to develop an accurate description of the roles of Shoshone and English on the reservation. I wanted to discover the rules that governed which language was likely to be spoken by which persons under various circumstances. Thus, I was interested in whether speakers' choice of language in a given conversation could be predicted by combinations of such things as the age or sex of each speaker, the topic being discussed, or the specific vocabulary items that were necessary for that topic. In essence, I was trying to characterize the degree to which English was displacing Shoshone as the language of choice in conversations, as well as the ways in which the displacement was happening.

The single most difficult barrier that I was forced to grapple with was my own lack of fluency in the Shoshone language. I had been fortunate in having been able to study the language for 2 years before starting my fieldwork, but what I had learned was only “Shoshone,” and once I was on my own on the reservation, it quickly became clear to me that I lacked the conversational abilities that would be needed to follow the important but subtle nuances of day-to-day speech among native Shoshone speakers. Shoshone is a fascinating language in which verbs are particularly problematic for a native English speaker who is accustomed to the need for remembering only a few variations on the past, present, and future tenses. Shoshone, by contrast, has some sixteen basic tenses that differ not only according to *when* in time the process is placed but also in the style or quality of the action. For instance, there are two simple past tenses that differ only in whether the activity was completed gradually or suddenly. Thus, the English sentence, “She died,” requires in Shoshone a choice of tense that would depend on whether the cause of death was a lingering illness or a broken neck. A third past tense in Shoshone is used for activities that were completed only in a location different from where the speaker currently is. It is true, of course, that these distinctions can be made by adding the right words and phrases to the basic English sentence, but unfortunately for the native English speaker, these differences in meaning are grammatically obligatory in Shoshone and—even worse—they are accomplished with suffixes that are appended to the basic verb. Consider the three Shoshone sentences, *Nə takka-nu* (I ate [a leisurely meal]), *Nə takka-hkwa* (I ate [quickly]), and *Nə takka-hkooni* (I ate [while I was over there]). Present tenses are equally elaborate. There is one suffix for an activity that has just recently begun, another for a process that has been going on for a specific period of time, and a third for one that is happening now but has no definite time of onset. For some time, I despaired of being able to follow the sense of even the simplest conversations. I had discovered that distinctions that a student could readily notice in a neatly typed text did not linger nearly long enough in the air when spoken. For a long time, I contented myself with collecting single words, preferably nouns.

Still, some facts about language use became apparent quite soon after my arrival. For instance, although almost everyone on the reservation whom I met spoke both Shoshone and English, there was tremendous variation in proficiency in both languages from one speaker to another. This was especially noticeable when persons of different age were compared. The oldest resident was a woman who was said to have reached her 100th birthday and who claimed to speak no English at all. Others who ranged in age from about 60 to 80 were fluent Shoshone speakers who typically spoke English as well but with a clear Shoshone accent and an occasional difficulty with English vocabulary. Middle-aged speakers usually had nearly equal proficiency in both languages, while many of those under 40 appeared to be more at home with English than with Shoshone.

Even before I could follow what was being said, I noticed that conversations in Shoshone were interspersed with English loan words regardless of the age of the speakers. When the topic dealt with technological issues, such as the repair of a water pump, English words such as *pliers*, *hammer*, or *wire* were common. Many words for recently adopted foods such as coffee, grapes, and oranges were also borrowed from English. Shoshone has no native obscenities, so when the Shoshone adopted the use of obscenities along with many other aspects of U.S. culture, English words and phrases were simply borrowed and used within Shoshone sentences. Here the pattern was noticeably age-related.

Situations and topics controlled language choice as well. Several families on the reservation were members of the Mormon religion, which is a major Christian denomination throughout many of the Great Basin states. Each week a non-Indian representative of this church came to the reservation to hold worship services. In this setting, the English language predominated even in conversations before and after the meeting among Shoshones who attended.

During my work with the Shoshone, I would typically tape-record the examples of speech that I intended to analyze later. Simultaneously, I made handwritten notes in an abbreviated style about what was happening. They contained comments on such things as the context of conversations, the persons involved, and the topics being discussed, as well as any spontaneous insights into linguistic or cultural aspects of the conversations that I felt might help my later analysis. At other times (for instance, when I was systematically eliciting ways of saying various things), these notes became careful transcriptions of the complete responses. Each evening at home, I would type my notes to produce a separate, neater collection of field notes.

The storylines of the material I had recorded raised cultural as well as linguistic questions that also had to be answered. Why, for instance, was the weasel the animal of choice for preparing both gambling and love magic? Or when the *medicines* prepared for these purposes were *spoken to*, did it imply a hearing spirit within the supernatural materials or was the speaking merely a way of manipulating the materials by invoking inanimate and unthinking supernatural forces? I made notes on such questions so that I could follow up on them.

As my work progressed, I began recording conversations and folktales that were part of the oral tradition. At the same time, I was able to crosscheck the accuracy of what I had learned. Such practice enabled me eventually to follow the sense of conversations that occurred spontaneously in my presence. So I began to examine the interplay of Shoshone and English in the natural speech that was happening around me. I started recording not just when and where one of the languages seemed to be preferred over the other and how the words of one language were adopted into the other, but also how speakers might switch from one language to another as topics of their discussion changed. At the same time, as I developed an increasing facility with the native language, I started to learn things about reservation life that had not been clear through English alone. For instance, I began to learn that adults, who previously had been careful to avoid suggesting that they accepted the traditional Shoshone religious beliefs, openly discussed such matters as native curing ceremonies and native mythology when speaking Shoshone in my presence. I began to learn something of the contemporary Shoshone ideology, a worldview that incorporates both traditional Shoshone ideas and those of the U.S. mainstream.

The reservation on which I lived was one of the few places throughout the Great Basin homeland of the Shoshone that was fortunate enough to have a practicing Indian doctor, a religious curer called a *pohakantə*. Willie Blackeye was highly respected and held traditional curing ceremonies about once a month for patients who came to him from throughout Nevada. He claimed that he did not speak English, but I am still not sure whether this was so or if his fostering of this belief was a means of maintaining a certain distance from

what those on the reservation called *Anglo culture*. But whether it was intended or not, the contrast between the predominant use of English in the setting of Mormon worship services and the dominant role of Shoshone in Willie Blackeye's curing ceremonies clearly marked the contrast between nontraditional and traditional aspects of Shoshone religious ideology. Thus, as the Indians shared with me the traditional religious lore of Coyote and the other supernatural animals that populate Shoshone mythology, words borrowed from English occurred only rarely. Stories about more recent history contained many examples of borrowed words. Finally, English was most commonly used in gossip and in tales of recent events.

My exploration of language choice among contemporary Shoshone exemplifies the holistic and integrative nature of cultural anthropology. Although the central concern of my research was a linguistic topic, I was not primarily interested in the Shoshone language as a closed system. Instead I sought to uncover the cultural rules that governed when and where one language would more likely be used than another. This forced me to examine how the Shoshone discussed their environment, their artifacts, and their economic activities. I also had to examine the social facts of Shoshone life, as their patterns of language use differed so dramatically by age. Ideology also could not be ignored because English had not been uniformly adopted for communicating about all the various aspects of Shoshone symbolic life.

Although my personal goal was an academic one—completing the requirements for a degree in anthropology—participant observation research is not a process of detached data gathering and analysis. I could only obtain information about the use of language in real life by living with my subjects and interacting with them in their own settings. As a matter of fact, many of the important insights into the dynamics of a society come as a result of the interplay between the fieldworker and the native participants as the researcher struggles to understand the culture. It is the give and take of participant research that is particularly central to the anthropologist's ability to translate another culture into the idiom and metaphor of his or her own way of life. I too found that I was drawn into the life of the reservation in ways that fulfilled my own goals and, at the same time, served the values of the people I had come to study. In fact, I am fortunate to be able to still maintain some contact with those people who touched my life in meaningful ways and broadened my understanding of both the range of diversity within the human condition and the underlying similarities that make us all one human family.

### Cross-Cultural Comparison

Anthropological fieldworkers are especially skilled at providing insights into the relationship of a custom to its broader social context. Their in-depth exposure to a particular way of life allows them to notice in detail how one part of a culture influences another. Yet, to develop truly useful generalizations about the ways in which culture functions, it is necessary to demonstrate that relationships that appear to be valid in one culture will hold true for others under like circumstances. **Cross-cultural comparison**—examination of the varied ways a certain aspect of human life is treated in many different cultures—is the typical strategy that anthropologists use for this purpose. By comparing a sufficient number of historically unrelated cultures from different parts of the world, it is possible to determine, for

instance, whether warfare is more likely in societies in which there are large differences in wealth between families than in societies in which all families have about the same level of wealth. Or anthropologists can also determine whether sexual inequality is more likely in societies where warfare occurs between neighboring peoples who belong to the same culture than in societies where warfare occurs between members of very different cultures.

Currently, the most sophisticated collection of data on many different societies is one that was begun in 1937 by George Peter Murdock and several colleagues. His collection of cross-cultural data has been greatly expanded and is now known as the **Human Relations Area Files (HRAF)**. HRAF, Inc., is a nonprofit organization based in New Haven, Connecticut, that maintains over three quarters of a million pages of information on 335 major societal groups, each of which has been coded for the presence or absence of characteristics on a standard list of over 700 cultural and environmental traits. Use of data from the HRAF has made it possible for researchers to determine what cultural traits or environmental factors are the best predictors of the presence or absence of various customs, thereby testing their ideas about the effects of one part of a cultural system on another.



*Eye Ubiquitous/SuperStock*

**Anthropologists look across cultures to answer questions regarding human diversity. How does this Nigerian wedding appear to differ from typical weddings in the U.S.?**

### Ethics in Anthropological Research

Because the subjects of anthropological research are human beings, there are important ethical considerations in doing fieldwork. It is generally agreed that the first loyalties of an anthropological fieldworker must lie with the people being studied. Our work must be carried out and reported in ways that cannot be used to harm the people whose lives we are investigating. When an anthropologist lives for extended periods with a people to thoroughly absorb the details of their lives and customs, it is almost inevitable that the researcher will become privy to information that might be harmful to the welfare and dignity of the host people were it to become public knowledge. Such knowledge is expected to be held in confidence, and anthropological research is reported only in ways that ensure the anonymity of individual informants and the welfare of the communities studied. Where harm may exist, those persons with whom anthropologists interact should be informed of any potential risks, and, of course, the use of any information gained during such research should not harm the people who were studied. Today, the research of both advanced scholars and students training in cultural anthropology are routinely examined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of their college or university to ensure confidentiality and avoidance of potential harm to subjects of the study.

Because anthropological research carried out among living peoples is a matter of skilled observation and inquiry, anthropologists generally have no qualms about informing their subjects about the purposes of their research. There are, of course, situations in which the gathering of specific information about people's behavior would be made more difficult by an explicit admission of what the anthropologist is seeking, either because the informants' knowledge would make them self-conscious—thereby causing them to alter their normal behavior—or because informants may sometimes say what they think the investigator would like to hear. For instance, it would probably be self-defeating to announce one's intention to count how often people violate their own rules of public etiquette, as this would warn them to be on their best behavior whenever they see you coming! Thus, anthropologists may be open about their general topic of interest without compromising their ability to observe the specific behaviors that are relevant to learning about that topic. The real issue here is that anthropologists endeavor not to deceive their subjects or carry out research that serves interests that differ from the community's own. Clandestine or secret research is frowned on by most anthropologists. One way of avoiding conflicts of interest over allegiance to the people studied and to others with differing political aims is to avoid accepting research assignments that the funding agency requires be carried out in secrecy.

The anthropologist's second allegiance is to the expansion of a scientifically respectable body of knowledge about the human condition. Thus, anthropologists seek to do everything in their power to collect accurate information and to make it openly available to others in a form that does not violate their informants' rights or compromise their dignity. It is common practice for anthropologists to provide copies of their research reports and publications to the communities they are studying. This ensures integrity in the research process and loyalty to the values of the subjects, and it also makes it possible for the fruits of anthropological research to be used by the subjects for their own benefit.

## 1.4 Cultural Differences

Cultures differ greatly in their ideologies and practical responses to their varying environments. When very different peoples come in contact with each other, usually the one with less political and economic power is changed by the other. Even when both maintain their integrity, members of differing groups may find it difficult to understand and appreciate each other's ways. In this section, we will look at intercultural influences, intercultural prejudices, ethnocentrism (the attitude that one's own culture is the only proper way of life), and cultural relativism (understanding and appreciating other cultures in their own terms).

### Culture Shock

Anthropologists who engage in fieldwork in a culture that differs from the one in which they grew up often experience a period of disorientation or even depression known as **culture shock** before they become acclimatized to their new environment. Even tourists who travel for only a short time outside their own nations may experience stress in adjusting to even relatively minor differences in what they experience in other countries, and unless they are prepared for these differences, they may simply transform their own distress into a motive for prejudice against their host society. For instance, although life in

industrialized England shares many similarities with life in the United States, it is not merely the difficulty of adjusting to things such as driving on the left side of the street (or looking first to my right to check whether it is safe to step into the street as a pedestrian who wants to cross to the other side) that is most emotionally difficult for me during my short tourist stays. Rather, it is such subtle differences as adjusting to the different kinds of door handles when I reach to open a door and the fact that my spontaneous “excuse me” when I jostle someone in a bus or subway gets strange looks from those who are more accustomed to a simple “sorry” that eventually leaves me ready to return home after a short few weeks.

Some anthropologists distinguish between various phases in the experience of another culture. In the “Honeymoon Phase,” people are often intrigued by the differences they are experiencing in a society with a culture different from their own. For a few weeks or even months, disorientation may be overshadowed by the pleasure of learning about these differences, but often by at least three months the newness will have worn off enough that anxiety and disorientation become more center-stage, and homesickness and even depression may become extreme, as the concern for one’s own possible violation of rules that one does not yet fully understand comes to the fore. This is sometimes called the “Negotiation Phase” because the out-of-place person is now faced with the necessity of consciously communicating with those whose culture he or she is learning in order to better cope with his or her own awkwardness at fitting in. After months of effort, the “Adjustment Phase,” in which one begins to feel more at home at meeting the expectations of others and adopting the dominant norms of the mainstream, may be achieved. This phase is not without continued mistake making and new learning, but it is much more comfortable psychologically, and it may be a matter of many more months or even years before a “Mastery Phase” may be claimed, in which one feels completely at home.

Today, the world is much more homogeneous and interdependent than it was in the early days of anthropological fieldwork. It has been largely taken over by states and governments that assert their sovereignty over all peoples within their boundaries. Thus, there are fewer truly simple, isolated societies like those that anthropologists once preferred to study. Nearly all of these independent, small-scale societies are now extinct or have changed tremendously to cope with the influences of the industrializing world around them.

Missionaries and traders have brought about many of these changes even in relatively remote areas. The search for new sources of income and for resources valued by the industries of the cities have brought many kinds of immigrants into the frontier territories that were once occupied by societies that had no direct experience with external governments.

Most ethnographic fieldwork, therefore, is carried out today among the rural and urban descendants of peoples of more “exotic” cultures that existed in the past. Nevertheless, culture shock is still an experience that ethnographers must cope with, even as it has become a subtler phenomenon. The economic and political interconnectedness of most of the world’s people has made us all more alike in many superficial ways. The Yanomamö of the Venezuelan and Brazilian tropical forests now wear t-shirts and running shorts. The Navajo wear jeans and drive automobiles. Zúñi pottery and jewelry can be found in department stores. In many cases, the peoples whose lives and customs ethnographers study today speak the national language of the countries in which they live. It has become easy for anthropologists to approach their fieldwork with naïveté, expecting fewer differences and misunderstandings than they actually discover because superficial similarities can mask important deeper cultural differences that may not have been lost.

Due to the similarities among the world's increasingly interdependent peoples, the phases of culture shock described above may not be as psychologically intense as they might once have been, but almost all students from other countries I have known at American universities report similar problems in adjusting to what is, for them, a foreign country. Likewise, American students, who have studied abroad for any length of time, face similar challenges. And culture shock is still an experience of anthropological fieldworkers, as well as of others who are committed to long-term residence in a cultural environment that differs from that of their homeland. Immigrants, foreign students, and employees of international companies who are stationed away from home for long periods are still confronted with the psychological difficulties of adjusting to, if not mastering, their new circumstances.

### Ethnocentrism

When people learn about groups whose ideologies and adaptive strategies differ from their own, they may have little understanding or appreciation of those differences. People grow up under the nurturance of their group, identify themselves as members of the group, and learn to fulfill their needs by living according to its culture. Often, the training of children in the ways of the group is communicated expressly by contrasting them with the supposed behaviors of outsiders: "Other parents may let their children come to the table like that, but in our family we wash our hands before eating!" Such expressions teach children the patterns of behavior expected of group members, but they also communicate a disapproval of outsiders.

In complex societies with large populations, people may learn to express prejudices about the superiority of their own groups over other competing ones *within* the society. The expression of these prejudices may vary from the good-natured jibes of members of one political party toward those in the "loyal opposition," to the friendly but serious theological disagreements between neighbors of different religious persuasions, to the confrontational hostilities exchanged between political demonstrators, such as the exchanges that sometimes occur in the United States over issues like gun control or abortion.

In all societies it is common for people to feel prejudices against groups whose cultures differ from their own. This attitude that the culture of one's own society is the naturally superior one, the standard by which all other cultures should be judged, and that cultures different from one's own are inferior, is such a common way of reacting to others' customs that it is given a special name by anthropologists: *ethnocentrism*, centered in one's *ethnos*, the Greek word for a people or a nation. Ethnocentrism, which is found in every culture, involves the way that people allow their judgments about human nature and about the relative merits of different ways of life to be guided by ideas and values that are centered narrowly on the way of life of their own society.

Ethnocentrism serves a society by creating greater feelings of group unity. Individuals affirm their loyalty to the ideals of their society when they communicate with one another about the superiority of their way of life over other cultures. This enhances their sense of identity. A shared sense of group superiority—especially during its overt communication between group members—can help them overlook internal differences and prevent conflicts that could otherwise decrease the ability of the group to undertake effectively coordinated action.



For most of human history, societies have been smaller than the nations of today, and most people have interacted only with members of their own society. Under such circumstances, the role of ethnocentrism in helping a society to survive by motivating its members to support one another in their common goals has probably outweighed its negative aspects. However, ethnocentrism definitely has a darker side. It is a direct barrier to understanding among peoples of diverse customs and values. It enhances enmity between societies and can be a motivation for conflict among peoples whose lives are guided by different cultures.

Ethnocentrism stands in fundamental conflict with the goals of anthropology: the recognition of the common humanity of all human beings and the understanding of the causes of cultural differences. To many students, much of the appeal of the field of anthropology has been its intriguing discussions of the unending variety of customs grown out of what, from the viewpoint of the uninitiated, may seem like strange, exotic, unexpected, and even startlingly different values. Yet, a people's values generally make perfectly good sense when seen and explained in the context of their cultural system as a whole.

### Cultural Relativism

The alternative to ethnocentrism is **cultural relativism**, the idea that the significance of an act is best understood by the standards of the actor's own cultural milieu. This implies that it is academically invalid to evaluate other cultures in terms of the standards and values of one's own culture and that each way of life is best understood by its own standards of meaning and value. Relativism is not an idea unique to anthropology. In every culture, people interpret the meaning of a thing depending on the context in which it occurs. For instance, we might react very differently to seeing someone lying in a gutter in an inner city ghetto versus finding someone lying face down in an office in the financial district of the same city. In the first situation we might assume, perhaps mistakenly, that the person was simply drunk, while in the second setting the possibility of a heart attack would probably come to mind more quickly. The symbolic basis of all cultural systems invariably leads to differences in the meanings of things from situation to situation. People who share the same culture learn to take the context of one another's acts into account when they are trying to communicate. Of course, intergroup prejudices sometimes interfere with people's efforts to understand one another, even within the same culture.

Anthropologists have come to value cultural relativism as a first step toward understanding other cultures. A relativistic view of other cultures holds all ways of life to be equally valid sources of information about human nature. Relativism, as a research tool, reminds us that even customs that seem inhumane or irrational according to our own values must be described and analyzed as objectively as possible if we wish to develop scientifically valid understandings of human behavior. Relativism reminds us that all cultures have customs that seem bizarre or repugnant to outsiders. For instance, both electroconvulsive treatment for depression and the use of machines for measuring heartbeat, blood pressure, and respiration to determine whether a person is lying might well seem inhumane or irrational to people whose cultures do not include these practices.

Cultural relativism grew out of the recognition that cultures can be quite diverse in the meanings they assign to the same behaviors and in the values they embody. However, cultural relativism is *not* the same as **moral relativism**, the idea that because there are no absolute or universal standards that are shared by all cultures for deciding what is right or wrong, all values can be rejected as arbitrary, and any custom is as acceptable as any other. Unlike moral relativism, cultural relativism is not the claim that “anything goes” and does not imply that we must abandon our own values or accept customs that are personally repugnant to us. Rather, it is a methodological tool for *understanding* other cultures and their customs, including customs that we might not like. We need not, for instance, come to value infanticide in order to understand the roles it may play in peoples’ lives in a society where it is customary. What cultural relativism requires of us is simply that we do not confuse our own feelings about such a custom with understanding it. To do the latter, we must investigate the meanings the custom has for those who practice it and the functions it may fulfill in their society.

As a result of working among peoples with ways of life very different from their own, anthropological fieldworkers commonly find that the preconceived notions they bring with them do not help them understand what is going on in the culture they are studying. Cut off from their own people and their accustomed way of life, it is they who must learn to understand the meanings of the symbols of the people they are living with, rather than the other way around. The anthropological imperative is “Respect or fail!” Learning to understand the language and the customs as they are understood by the insiders of the group is often a clear and basic necessity for survival in a foreign culture. It can also be a prerequisite to the work of gathering accurate information about a culture or of developing insights about how it might have come to be the way it is and why it functions the way it does. The necessity of interpreting the meaning or value of an act within the culture in which it is found—that is, from a cultural relativistic viewpoint—has been long recognized within anthropology as a fundamental first step in learning to understand a culture as a coherent system of meaningful symbols.

An experience by Elizabeth Hahn (1990, pp. 73–74) illustrates the difficulties that ethnocentrism can impose on puzzling out the meanings of cultural behavior. Her fieldwork took her to the island of Tongatapu in Tonga. After a frustrating period of isolation in which she was unable to establish a relationship with anyone, Hahn decided to visit a government official. He showed his thoughtful attentiveness to her discussion of the anthropological work she wished to carry out by the traditional Tongan custom of raising and wiggling his eyebrows at her; she had only her own culture as a basis for interpreting what his behavior meant. She became convinced that he was coming on to her, and she began to feel anger at what she now thought was his only feigned show of interest in her work. It was only until sometime later, while Hahn was talking to a Tongan woman who did the same thing that Hahn began reinterpret the possible meanings of the gesture, but she still wondered whether it might be a show of teasing her. As she interacted with other people, Hahn eventually decided the gesture did not seem to fit her idea that it might express a joke that she had missed and eventually came to realize that it was “a simple, elegant expression of affirmation—a gesture that draws the participants to each other’s eyes, giving an intensity and intimacy to a friendly exchange,” a conclusion that she later confirmed by a direct inquiry to a friend (p. 74).

It is not always an easy task to describe customs in terms that people who follow a different way of life can comprehend. This is especially true when we try to explain things that we ourselves have always taken for granted. Our experiences are so common in our own culture that we rarely need to talk about them or explain them—even to ourselves. This can pose problems when people of quite different cultural backgrounds attempt to communicate. Barre Toelken (1979, pp. 277–278) described an experience during his fieldwork among the Navajo that illustrates such a difficulty. After living with a Navajo family for some months, an old man asked him about the noise made by Toelkin’s watch early each morning. Toelkin tried to explain that the watch was a tool for keeping track of time. This was difficult, since the Navajo language had no word for the general term “time” in English. None of his explanations seemed to make any sense to the elderly Navajo man. Resorting to concrete examples, Toelkin explained that the positions of the hands on the watch told him when he should do things like eating, to which the Navajo replied “Don’t your people eat when they are hungry? We eat when we are hungry if there is food.” The old man found the idea of letting the watch tell him when to do his work strange; after all, he was able to do things that were necessary without having to rely on a machine to tell him to do so. He asked, “Aren’t those things that you do anyway? What is it that this tells you to do that you wouldn’t do anyway?” After further attempts, Toelkin finally had to give up and admit that he could not really explain the purpose of the watch in any way that was meaningful to the Navajo elder.

These kinds of cultural misunderstandings are increasingly common in our globalized and technologically connected world. For example, in many Western countries, people have come to see the free flow of, and access to, information on the Internet as a kind of “human right.” Thus, they are shocked by the Chinese government’s filtering of some “Western” content accessed via Google, or by the Egyptian government’s decision to shut off the Internet during the 2010 uprisings known as the Arab Spring. In such instances, it is important to recognize that citizen’s “rights” to the global Internet are—like all aspects of culture—relative and shaped by particular social and political contexts.

## 1.5 Employment in Anthropology

According to the American Anthropological Association, “Anthropological study provides training particularly well suited to the 21st century. The economy will be increasingly international; workforces and markets, increasingly diverse; participatory management and decision making, increasingly important; communication skills, increasingly in demand” (para. 11).

Training in anthropology equips students with skills that are useful in many different kinds of employment. This is not because the specific “facts of the field” are necessarily immediately relevant to them, so much as the ways in which anthropologists approach their work teaches them how to function in new and difficult circumstances, how to work independently, and how to solve problems in ways that are not constrained by the habits into which their own culture has socialized them. Beyond this, the fieldwork method of participant observation is a method of data gathering that can be useful in many different work settings. Thus, although someone with a degree in a specialized field such as marketing might have an initial edge in obtaining employment in that particular field, employees with a degree in anthropology often find themselves advancing at a faster pace



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**Anthropology is more than the study of the exotic. It's the study of all people in all places.**

because their general people-related skills turn out to be useful in doing their work. Increasingly, companies in the private sector are also realizing that anthropologists have skills that are of particular interest.

According to a 2009 survey of people with a masters degree in cultural, applied, or physical anthropology, 20% were employed in the academic sector (e.g., research institutions, museums, teaching, etc.); 15% were employed by nonprofit organizations; 15% were employed by the federal, state, or local government; 9% were self-employed, owned their own business, or worked as independent consultants; and 4% worked in small or medium-sized businesses (Fisk, Bennett, Ensworth, Redding, & Brondo, 2010). International companies as diverse as Apple, Procter & Gamble, and General Motors hire anthropologists because their training is especially useful in their dealing effectively with both production and marketing overseas, where cultural differences must be understood.

## Chapter Summary

1. Anthropology is the broadest of the disciplines studying the human condition, for it draws on fields as diverse as philosophy, art, economics, linguistics, and biology for its conclusions.
2. The major fields of anthropology itself are cultural anthropology, archeology, linguistic anthropology, and biological anthropology. They all utilize the same basic anthropological methods of fieldwork and comparative studies.
3. Anthropology grew out of 18th-century European Enlightenment attempts to explain the diversity of cultures that had been encountered during the prior centuries of world exploration and colonial expansion.
4. Anthropological history has emphasized various models for analyzing cultural differences. Its early period was dominated by an evolutionary perspective. Early evolutionist models gave way to a greater interest in a more particularistic focus complemented by a heavy emphasis on fieldwork as a means of data collection. Starting in the 1930s, most anthropology was dominated by functionalist analysis; more recently there has been a proliferation of many different schools of thought.
5. Fieldwork is the basic method of all subfields of anthropology. In cultural anthropology, the traditional fieldwork method is participant observation.
6. Anthropologists try to maintain an ethical approach that safeguards the interests of the people they study.
7. In cultural anthropology, research methods include participant observation, observation, interviewing, the genealogical method, life history, survey research, and cross-cultural comparison.

8. Approaches to explaining culture include a variety of scientific schools of thought as well as various humanistic approaches. The two main models—culture as a symbolic system and culture as an adaptation to the environment—are represented in all of the subfields of anthropology today.
9. While most anthropologists continue their work through universities, applied and practicing anthropologists are bringing their skills to nonacademic settings.

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## Discussion Questions

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1. Explain briefly why anthropology can be considered both as one of the humanities and as one of the sciences.
2. In what ways is anthropology broader in scope than other fields that study human beings or human customs?
3. What does it mean when anthropologists say that they take a holistic view of the human condition? How does a holistic perspective add to the breadth of anthropology?
4. What are some of the specific skills and methods used by cultural anthropologists to learn about and document a way of life?
5. How does the work of linguistic anthropologists differ from that of linguists in other fields? How can learning the native language of a people benefit the research of a cultural anthropologist who plans to study them?
6. The specialized interests of cultural anthropologists, linguistic anthropologists, archaeologists, and biological anthropologists can be quite diverse. How does the field of anthropology maintain its unity as a single discipline?
7. What is applied anthropology, and why is it becoming increasingly important as a new fifth subdivision of anthropology?
8. Define *cultural relativism*. Why is it important to the study of other cultures?
9. Why is cross-cultural research important to the goals of anthropology? What is the name of the major archive of cross-cultural data?
10. How does the primary goal of a humanistic understanding of the human condition differ from that of a scientific understanding? Why can humanistic approaches to anthropology be said to be similar to the work of translating a foreign language?

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## Key Terms

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**American Anthropological Association** The major U.S. professional organization for anthropologists.

**anthropology** The general study of human beings and their ways of life.

**applied anthropology** A fifth subfield engaged in the practical application of the theoretical knowledge and findings of anthropology to solve real-world problems.

**archaeology** The study of cultures of the past or the past of existing cultures by reconstructing ways of life from the remains of the material things that people left behind.

**area studies** Interdisciplinary studies that focus on geographical or cultural regions rather than traditional disciplinary topics.

**artifacts** Material things made by human beings.

**biological anthropology** The study of the origin of the human species and our relationship to other primates, variations in human biology around the world, and how human biology makes culture possible.

**cross-cultural comparison** Examination of the varied ways a certain aspect of human life is treated in many different cultures.

**cultural anthropology** The study of the similarity and diversity of human ways of life (cultures) and of the regularities in how culture functions.

**cultural evolutionism** Enlightenment-era idea that cultures evolved from simple beginnings to more complex civilizations.

**cultural relativism** The idea that the significance of an act is best understood by the standards of the actor's own culture.

**culture areas** Relatively small geographical regions in which different societies have come to share many similar traits through diffusion.

**culture shock** Period of disorientation or even depression before one becomes acclimated to new culture.

**deductive** Research approach that is "top-down"; one begins with a theory, develops and tests a falsifiable hypothesis, and then affirms or denies the original hypothesis to draw conclusions.

**diffusion** Spread of customs, artifacts, and ideas from one society to another.

**emic description or analysis** An insider's or native's meaningful account.

**empiricism** Belief that knowledge comes from direct experience.

**ethnocentrism** The belief that one's own group or culture is superior to another group or culture.

**ethnography** Detailed description of ways of life based on careful observation and recording done by anthropologists while actually living with and interacting with the people whose customs they are describing.

**etic description or analysis** An outsider's or observer's allegedly "objective" account.

**fieldwork** Study that involves firsthand observation in the natural setting of whatever is being studied.

**functionalism** School of thought interested in the mechanics of a society—the way in which it functioned.

**functions** Contributions to maintaining the unity and survival of the society.

**holism** An approach to explaining how each part of a way of life interrelates with other parts of that way of life.

**Human Relations Area Files (HRAF)** Large collection of cross-cultural data.

**hypothesis** A proposed explanation that can be shown to be right or wrong through scientific testing (e.g., observation or experimentation).

**inductive** Research approach that is “bottom-up”; one begins with observations, develops a hypothesis to be tested, and eventually offers a set of conclusions or a theory.

**linguistic anthropology** The study of the characteristics of language, the relationship between language and culture, and how people use language in everyday life.

**moral relativism** The idea that because there are no universal standards shared by all cultures for deciding what is right or wrong, all values can be rejected as arbitrary, and all customs are equally acceptable.

**participant observation** Method by which the anthropologist lives with, participates in, and observes the daily life of the people being studied.

**reflexivity** The idea that the fieldworker is not an objective outside observer but is both influenced by and an influence on those with whom she or he is interacting.

**social structure** The network of social relations among members of a society.

**survivals** Remnants of earlier social customs and ideas that could be used as evidence for reconstructing the evolutionary past of societies.

**theory** A generally accepted, reliable explanation that has been arrived at through observation and testing.

