

Chapter 1

The Study of Humanity

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The Contributions of Anthropology

Anthropologists investigate the biological, linguistic, and cultural diversity of humanity.

A couple of million years ago, on the plains of southern Africa, there lived a species that was a lot like us, although its brain was only about half as large. Members of this species walked on two legs, ate both animals and plants, lived in mobile social groups, made crude tools out of stone, and probably fought over mates and resources.

Twenty thousand years ago, on the continent known today as Europe, lived a people virtually indistinguishable from twentieth-century people biologically. They got most of their food from hunting large mammals, were highly skilled at fashioning knives and spearpoints out of stone, kept themselves warm with animal skins and fire, painted images of animals on the walls of caves, and occasionally fought among themselves.

Five thousand years ago, in the place that would later become part of the nation of Iraq, there existed a civilization. Its citizens got almost all of their food from growing and processing grains and eating the products of livestock, lived in walled cities that numbered in the thousands, smelted metals, manufactured pottery, kept records by making marks on tablets of wet clay, and fought among themselves and with other people quite a lot.

Right now, in the city of Los Angeles, people of many different nationalities live. Few of them know how to hunt or grow their own food, make tools or pottery or their own writing utensils, or build houses. Instead of doing these things, many of them get up at five so they can make it to work by eight, earn \$50,000 per year so they can afford their \$1,500 monthly mortgage payments, run themselves ragged getting their kids to soccer games, and wonder whether Social Security will be there for them. Few of them actually fight, but they do worry a lot about getting ripped off.

Anthropology is the field that studies all these people. Anthropologists are interested in almost everything about humans: our genetic make up, our biological evolution, our languages, our emotions, our technologies, our art styles, our families, and our behavior. Within colleges and universities, anthropology is usually classified as a social science, along with disciplines such as psychol-

ogy, sociology, economics, geography, and political science. But as we shall see, anthropology has much in common with the natural sciences (such as biology and geology) and the humanities (such as religion and art), as well.

Obviously, anthropology is a diverse field. In fact, perhaps the main way anthropology differs from other social sciences is its broad scope. Anthropology is broad in two senses. First, anthropologists are interested in all human beings: we study people wherever they are found today and whenever they lived in the past. Second, anthropologists are interested in many different aspects of humans: we investigate skin colors, kinship systems, religions, technologies, cuisines, and practically every other dimension of human life.



Subfields of Anthropology

Clearly, no individual can become familiar with the enormous range of subjects studied by the whole discipline of anthropology. As a practical matter, almost all modern anthropologists specialize in one of five the main subfields: physical anthropology, archaeology, cultural anthropology, anthropological linguistics, and applied anthropology. In turn, each subfield has its own divisions and subspecializations (summarized in the Concept Review). Although cultural anthropology is the main subject of this book, a brief discussion of the other four subfields will help to understand the whole discipline.

Physical Anthropology

Physical anthropology investigates the biological evolution of the human species, the behavior and anatomy of monkeys and apes, and the biological variations among human groups. Physical anthropology (also sometimes called **biological anthropology**) is closely related to the natural sciences in both its goals and its methods.

One goal of physical anthropology is to understand how and why humans evolved from pre-human, ape-like ancestors. The investigation of human biological evolution is known as **paleoanthropology**. Through many decades of searching for and analyzing fossil remains, paleoanthropologists are learning how humans evolved biologically. There remains much disagreement over details, but the outlines of human evolution are becoming clear. Most specialists now agree that the evolutionary line leading to modern humans split from the line leading to modern African apes (chimpanzees and gorillas) at least five million years ago. It also appears that fully modern human beings, *Homo sapiens*, came into existence surprisingly recently, probably less than 100,000 years ago. Recent evidence strongly supports the idea that “Neanderthal Man” (as this species was called when first discovered in the nineteenth century) is not a direct ancestor of humankind, but a sister species.

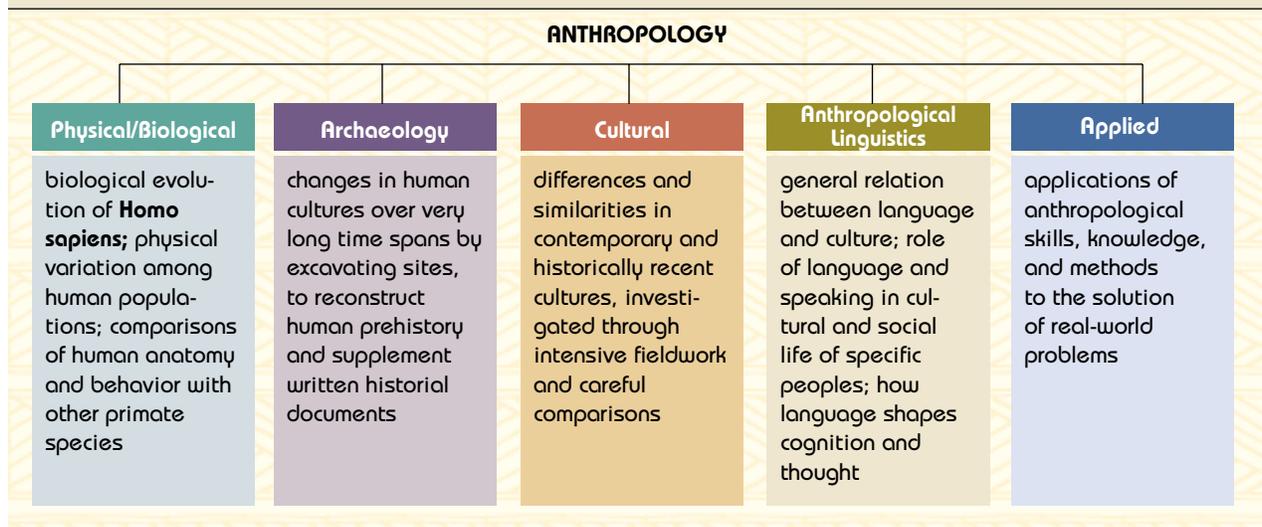
Another specialization within physical anthropology is **primatology**. Primatologists specialize in the evolution, anatomy, adaptation, and social behavior of primates, the taxonomic order to

which humans belong. By conducting field studies of how living primates forage, mate, move around in their environment, and interact socially, primatologists hope to shed light on the forces that affected early human populations. Primatological research on the behavior of group-living monkeys and apes has added significantly to the scientific understanding of many aspects of human behavior, including



 One specialization within physical anthropology is primatology. Here Sarah Blaffer Hrdy observes Hanuman langurs, a monkey of India.

Concept Review Primary Interests of the Five Subfields of Anthropology



sexuality, parenting, cooperation, tool use, and intergroup conflict and aggression.

Yet another type of biological anthropologist is interested in how and why human populations vary physically. All humans are members of a single species, and one of the basic tenets of anthropology is that the physical similarities among the world's peoples far outweigh the differences. Nonetheless, the residents of different continents were once more isolated from one another than they are today. During this separation they evolved differences in overall body and facial form, height, skin color, blood chemistry, and other genetically determined features. Anthropologists who study **human variation** seek to measure and explain the differences and similarities among the world's peoples in these and other physical characteristics.

Most physical anthropologists work in universities or museums, as teachers, researchers, writers, and curators. But many also work in "practical" jobs, applying their knowledge of human anatomy to find answers to problems. For instance, **forensic anthropologists** work for or consult with law enforcement agencies, where they analyze and help identify human skeletal remains. Among their contributions are determining the age, sex, height, and other physical characteristics of crime or accident victims. Forensic anthropologists know how to gather evidence from bones about old injuries or diseases, which are compared with medical histories to identify victims. For example, forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow has worked with governments and human rights investigators to identify victims of atrocities in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. In the 1990s, teams of forensic anthropologists exhumed remains from graves in Bolivia, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Haiti to identify victims of political assassinations and determine the exact causes of their tragic deaths.

Archaeology

Archaeology is the investigation of the human past by excavating and analyzing material remains. Because it studies the ways in which human life has changed over the centuries, archaeology has

much in common with history. It differs, however, in its methods and, to some extent, its goals. Modern archaeology usually is divided into two major kinds of studies: prehistoric and historic.

Prehistoric archaeology investigates cultures that never kept written records of their activities, customs, and beliefs. Although prehistoric peoples lacked writing, evidence of their way of life exists in the tools, pottery, ornaments, bones, plant pollen, charcoal, and other materials they left behind, in or on the ground. Through excavation and laboratory analysis of these material remains, prehistoric archaeologists reconstruct the way people lived in ancient times and trace how human cultures have changed over the centuries. In fact, research conducted by prehistoric archaeologists provides our main source of information about how people lived before the development of writing.

To learn about the more recent past, historians use written materials such as diaries, letters, newspapers, and tax collection documents. Written records provide useful data, but they typically are fragmentary and provide information only on specific subjects and subgroups within a society. The growing field of **historic archaeology** supplements written materials by excavations of houses, stores, plantations, factories, and other historic structures. Historic archaeologists often uncover hard data on living conditions and other topics lacking in written accounts.

Many archaeologists are employed not in universities, but in museums, public agencies, and for-profit corporations. Museums offer jobs as curators of artifacts and as researchers. State highway departments employ archaeologists to conduct surveys of proposed new routes in order to locate and excavate archaeological sites that will be destroyed. The U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service hire archaeologists to find sites on public lands so that decisions about the preservation of cultural materials can be made. Those who work in the growing field of cultural resource management locate sites of prehistoric and historic significance, evaluate their importance, and make recommendations about total or partial preservation. Since the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966, private

corporations and government bodies that wish to construct factories, buildings, parking lots, shopping malls, and other structures must file a report on how the construction will affect historical remains and on the steps taken to preserve them. Because of this law, the business of contract archaeology has boomed in the United States. Firms engaged in contract archaeology bid competitively for the privilege of locating, excavating, and reporting on sites affected or destroyed by construction. Hundreds of (mostly small) contract archaeology companies exist.

Cultural Anthropology

Cultural anthropology (also called **ethnology**) is the study of contemporary and historically recent human societies and cultures. As its name suggests, the main focus of this subfield is culture—the customs and beliefs of some human group (the concept of culture is discussed at length in Chapter 2). Ethnologists are especially fascinated by the great variety of the world’s cultures. Describing and attempting to understand and explain this cultural diversity is one of their major objectives. Making the public aware of and respectful toward the cultural differences that exist within humanity is another mission of ethnology.

To collect information on some group or society, ethnologists conduct **fieldwork**. Fieldwork ordinarily involves moving into the community under study, communicating in the local language, and living in close contact with the people. Intimate interaction with the members of a community provides ethnologists with firsthand experiences that yield insights that could not be gained in any other way. Fieldworkers usually report the findings of their research in books or scholarly journals, where they are available to the general public. A written account of how a single human population lives is called an **ethnography** (which means “writing about a people”).

Anthropological Linguistics

Defined as the study of human language, linguistics is a field all its own, existing as a separate discipline



 Prehistoric archaeologists investigate how people lived in the distant past by careful excavations of material remains. This excavation in Oklahoma was headed by George and Frieda O’Dell.

from anthropology. Linguists describe and analyze the sound patterns and combinations, words, meanings, and sentence structures of human languages. As discussed in Chapter 3, language has some amazing properties, and the fact that humans are able to learn and use language at all is truly remarkable.

Language interests anthropologists for several reasons. The ability to communicate complex messages with great efficiency may be the most important capability of humans that makes us different from primates and other animals. Cultural anthropologists are interested in language mainly because of how the language and culture of a people affect each other. The subfield of **anthropological linguistics** is concerned with the complex relations between language and other aspects of human behavior and thought. For example, anthropological linguists are interested in how language is used in various social contexts: What style of speech must one use with people of high status? What does the way people attach labels to their natural environment tell us about the way they perceive that environment? We return to these and other topics in anthropological linguistics in Chapter 3.

Applied Anthropology

In the past, almost all professional anthropologists spent their careers in some form of educational institution, most commonly in colleges and universities, or in museums. Today, hundreds of anthropologists hold full-time positions that allow them to apply their expertise in governmental agencies, nonprofit groups, private corporations, and international bodies. These institutions and organizations employ anthropologists because they believe that people trained in the discipline will help them in problem solving. In recognition of the growth of noneducational employment opportunities, the American Anthropological Association (the professional organization of anthropologists) officially recognizes applied anthropology as a separate subfield. In fact, in the 1990s, about half of new anthropology Ph.D.s acquire jobs in some federal, state, or local governmental agency or in the private sector.

Anthropologists who apply their knowledge and research skills to solving human problems are trained in all four of the other subfields. Archaeologists employed as cultural resource managers and physical anthropologists who do forensic work may be viewed as applied anthropologists, for example. However, most applied anthropologists have extensive training in cultural anthropology, and many consider it their primary specialization. A few examples will illustrate some of the ways cultural anthropologists use their knowledge and research skills in problem solving.

Medical anthropology is one of the fastest growing specializations. Medical anthropologists are trained to investigate the complex interactions between human health, nutrition, social environment, and cultural beliefs and practices. Because the transmission of viruses and bacteria are greatly affected by people's diets, sanitation, sexual habits, and other behaviors, medical anthropologists work with epidemiologists to identify cultural practices that affect the spread of disease. Different cultures have different ideas about the causes and symptoms of disease, how best to treat illnesses, the abilities of traditional healers and doctors, and the importance of community involvement in the healing process.

By studying how a human community perceives such things, medical anthropologists can provide information to hospitals and agencies that help them deliver health care services more effectively.

Development anthropology is another area in which anthropologists apply their expertise to the solution of practical human problems, usually in the Third World. Working both as full-time employees and as consultants, development anthropologists provide information on communities that help agencies adapt projects to local conditions and needs. Examples of agencies and institutions that employ development anthropologists include the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Program. Perhaps the most important role of the anthropologist in such institutions is to provide policymakers with knowledge of local-level ecological and cultural conditions, so that projects will avoid unanticipated problems and minimize negative impacts.

Educational anthropology also offers jobs in public agencies and private institutions. Some roles of educational anthropologists include advising in bilingual education, conducting detailed observations of classroom interactions, training personnel in multicultural issues, and adapting teaching styles to local customs and needs. An increasingly important role for North American educational anthropologists is to help teachers understand the learning styles and behavior of children from various ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds.

Increasingly, corporations employ cultural anthropologists. The growth of overseas business opportunities leads North American companies to need professionals who can advise executives and sales staff on what to expect and how to speak and act when they conduct business in other countries. Because of their training as acute observers and listeners, anthropologists are employed in the private sector in many other capacities as well.

As these examples show, anthropologists apply their knowledge and skills to the solution of practical human problems in many ways. Speaking very broadly, cultural anthropologists are valuable to agencies, companies, and other organizations

because they are trained to do two things very well: first, to observe, record, and analyze human behavior; and, second, to look for and understand the cultural assumptions, values, and beliefs that underlie that behavior.



Cultural Anthropology Yesterday and Today

As the preceding overview of the five subfields shows, anthropology is indeed a broad field of study. Different kinds of anthropologists conduct research on topics as different as chimpanzees, prehistoric diets, modern-day cultures of the Amazon basin, the political uses of spoken language among the people of Vanuatu, and medical clinics in London. Despite these varied interests, anthropology does have a focus. More so than other fields, anthropology's focus is *human diversity*. Humanity is diverse in a multitude of ways, two of which are most important to anthropologists. First, although all modern humans are members of the same species, human populations differ somewhat in their genetic heritage, making humans diverse *biologically*. Second, the customs and beliefs of one society or ethnic group differ from those of other

societies or ethnic groups, reflecting the fact that humans are diverse *culturally*. Anthropologists investigate, describe, and try to understand or explain human biological and cultural diversity.

The main subject of this book is *human cultural diversity*, which is studied by the subfield known as cultural anthropology. Cultural anthropology itself is an enormously broad specialization, for modern fieldworkers study human communities from all parts of the world, from the Sahara of northern Africa to the Andes of South America, from the streets of Toronto to the plains of East Africa.

In the popular imagination, cultural anthropological fieldworkers go to far-off places and study exotic peoples, or "natives." Except for most of the stereotypes about the "natives," this image was reasonably accurate until the 1970s. Until then, ethnology differed from sociology and other disciplines that studied living peoples and cultures mainly by the kinds of cultures studied. Cultural anthropologists mainly focused on small-scale, non-Western, preindustrial, subsistence-oriented cultures, whereas sociological studies mainly dealt with large Euro-American, industrial, money-and-market countries. Cultural anthropologists themselves often sought out pristine, untouched tribal cultures to study because living among the "primitives"



 Anthropological fieldwork used to focus on non-Western, pre-industrial peoples and their cultures, but this has changed today.

brought prestige and enhanced one's reputation in the discipline.

All this has changed. Contemporary ethnologists study New Jersey fraternities, Swedish churches, Chicago motorcycle gangs, Canadian medical clinics, American bodybuilders, British witches' covens, Appalachian towns, and the recent decline of the middle class—to name just a few examples of specific studies recently done by anthropologists in modern industrialized societies. There are many reasons for the trend away from the “far away” in favor of “here-at-home” studies. One is the realization that anthropological concepts and fieldwork methods can yield insights about modern societies that other disciplines miss. Another is that increasing numbers of anthropologists are using their knowledge and training to solve real-world problems. A third reason—this one somewhat embarrassing—is that many contemporary African, Asian, Native American, and Pacific peoples no longer wish to be studied by outsiders. They believe (rightly) that anthropology itself arose out of the Western colonization of other continents and, hence, that field studies were often an instrument of their oppression. Some further believe (sometimes rightly) that fieldworkers are exploitative. A few even believe (almost always wrongly) that ethnographers will use the information about them for nefarious purposes. For these and other reasons, more and more cultural anthropologists today concentrate on their own countries.

In many ways, modern cultural anthropology overlaps with numerous other disciplines that study people. For example, a fieldworker may be especially interested in the agriculture, leadership patterns, legal system, or art of a culture or region. He or she will, therefore, want to be acquainted with the work of economists, political scientists, and art historians—disciplines that have made some particular dimensions of human life their specialization. Likewise, an ethnologist who specializes in some geographical region (such as West Africa, China, or Brazil) will read the works of historians, sociologists, novelists, and political scientists who also have written about the region. Cultural anthropologists regularly study subjects

that are the specializations of other disciplines, as is nicely illustrated by anthropological specializations in such areas as ethnomusicology, ethnopoetics, ethnobotany, and ethnolinguistics. Cultural anthropology thus cuts across many disciplines, encompassing many of the subjects that other scholars consider their special province—law, religion, literature, music, and so on.

For these and other reasons, the differences between cultural anthropology and the other disciplines (especially sociology and history) are much less clear-cut than they were just a couple of decades ago. However, anthropology retains its distinctiveness. More than scholars in other fields, anthropologists concentrate on relatively small communities (of a few hundred to a few thousand), in which the researcher can live among and participate first hand in the lives of the people. More than any other single factor, the emphasis on direct contact with people gained from the fieldwork experience distinguishes anthropology from other disciplines concerned with humankind. Also, cultural anthropology remains far more comparative and global in its goals and interests than the other social sciences and humanities.



Anthropological Perspectives

Because cultural anthropologists study many of the same kinds of things studied by other scholars, obviously it is not *what* they study that makes the field distinct. The main distinctive feature lies not so much in the kinds of subjects ethnologists investigate as in the approach they take to studying humankind. We believe it is important that cultures and communities be studied holistically, comparatively, and relativistically. It is these perspectives, as much as anything else, that make cultural anthropology distinctive.

Holism

To study a subject holistically is to attempt to understand all the factors that influence it and to

interpret it in the context of all those factors. With respect to studies of human cultures and societies, the **holistic perspective** means that no single aspect of a community can be understood unless its relations to other aspects of the community's total way of life are explored. Holism requires, for example, that a fieldworker studying the rituals of a people must investigate how those rituals are influenced by family life, economic forces, political leadership, relationships between the sexes, and a host of other factors. The attempt to understand a community's customs, beliefs, values, and so forth holistically is one reason why ethnographic fieldwork takes so much time and involves close contact with people.

Taken literally, a holistic understanding of a people's customs and beliefs is probably not possible because of the complexity of human societies. But anthropologists have learned that ignoring the interrelations between language, religion, art, economy, family, and other dimensions of life results in distortions and misunderstandings. Although more complicated than this, the essence of the holistic perspective may be stated fairly simply: *Look for connections and interrelations between things, and try to understand parts in the context of the whole.*

Comparativism

As we have already seen, in the early decades of its existence, ethnological research focused mainly on non-Western peoples, many of whom thought and acted quite differently from the citizens of the anthropologist's own (usually European or North American) nation. Anthropologists soon learned that the ideas and concepts that applied to their own societies often did not apply to those of other peoples, whose cultural traditions were vastly different. They learned, for example, to mistrust the claims put forth by French scholars about human nature when the only humans these scholars had ever encountered lived in Western Europe.

More than most people, anthropologists are aware of the enormous diversity of the world's cultures. This diversity means that any general theories or ideas scholars might have about humans—about human nature, sexuality, warfare,

family relationships, and so on—must take into account information from a wide range of societies. In other words, general theoretical ideas about humans or human societies or cultures must be tested from a **comparative perspective**. The ways of life of people in different times and places are far too diverse for any theory to be accepted until it has been tested in a range of human populations. We may state the comparative perspective as: *Generalizations about humans must take the full range of cultural diversity into account.*

Relativism

Fundamentally, the perspective known as **cultural relativism** means that no culture is inherently superior or inferior to any other. The reason anthropologists adopt this perspective is that concepts such as "superiority" require judgments about the relative worthiness of behaviors, beliefs, and other characteristics of a culture. Such judgments are inevitably rooted in one's values, and one's values, by and large, depend on the culture in which one was raised. (You may think, incidentally, that surely there are universally valid standards for judging and evaluating cultures. Perhaps you are right; the trouble is, people don't agree on what they are!)

To see why approaching the study of cultures relativistically is important, we may contrast cultural relativism with ethnocentrism. **Ethnocentrism** is the belief that the moral standards, manners, attitudes, and so forth of one's own culture are superior to those of other cultures. Most people are ethnocentric, and a *certain degree* of ethnocentrism probably is essential if people are to be content with their lives and if their culture is to persist. Mild ethnocentrism—meaning that people hold certain values dear but don't insist that everyone else live by those values—is unobjectionable to ethnologists. But extreme ethnocentrism—meaning that people believe that their values are the only correct ones and that all people everywhere should be judged by how closely they live up to those values—breeds attitudes and behaviors of intolerance that are anathema to cultural anthropology.



Cultural anthropologists believe that valid generalizations about humans can only be made when the full range of cultural variability is taken into account. These New Guineans wear masks to make them into “mud men” for ceremonial purposes.



Ethnocentric attitudes are detrimental to the objectivity of ethnographic fieldworkers, who try not to evaluate the behavior of the people being studied according to the standards of the fieldworker’s own culture. Like the holistic and comparative perspectives, the essential point of cultural relativism may be stated simply: *In studying another culture, do not evaluate the behavior of its members by the standards and values of your own culture.*



The Contributions of Anthropology

What insights does anthropology offer about humanity? We have already seen that applied anthropologists help in planning and implementing programs, and in future chapters we look further at how anthropological research contributes to the solution of human problems. For now, we want to note some of the more general insights of the field.

First, because of its broad scope, anthropology gives us the information we need to understand the biological, technological, and cultural development of humankind. Most of the reliable data now available about human biological evolution, prehistoric cultures, and non-Western peoples were collected by anthropologists. Because much of this

knowledge has become part of our cultural heritage, where it is written about in textbooks and taught in schools, it is easy to forget that someone had to discover and interpret these facts. For example, only in the late nineteenth century did most scientists accept that people are related to apes, and only in the late twentieth century did the closeness of this relation become apparent.

But anthropology has contributed more than just factual material to our understanding of the human condition. Concepts first developed by anthropologists have been incorporated into the thinking of millions of people. For example, in this chapter we have used the term *culture*—a concept that we assume our readers are aware of and a word that is used in everyday life. You may not know that the scientific meaning of this word, as used in the phrase “Japanese culture,” is not very old. Into the nineteenth century, people did not fully understand the importance of the distinction between a people’s culture (the learned beliefs and habits that made them distinctive) and their biological makeup (their physical characteristics). Patterns of acting, thinking, and feeling often were thought to be rooted in a group’s biological constitution—carried in their genes, as we say today. For example, because there often were readily observable differences in the physical appearances of various

racism, it was thought that these physical differences accounted for differences in beliefs and habits as well. In other words, differences that we now know are caused largely or entirely by learning and cultural upbringing were confused with differences caused by biological inheritance. Early twentieth-century anthropologists such as Franz Boas marshaled empirical evidence showing that race and culture are independent of each other. As this example shows, anthropologists have added to our understanding of the human condition, although most people are not aware of these contributions.

Another value of anthropology (ethnology, especially) is that it emphasizes the importance of understanding and appreciating cultural diversity; that is, it urges us not to be ethnocentric in our attitudes toward other peoples. The orientation known as cultural relativism is not only important to the objectivity of ethnologists but also is one of the main lessons anthropology offers to the general public. Knowledge of anthropology helps people avoid some of the miscommunication and misunderstandings that commonly arise when people from different parts of the world interact with one another. As we shall see in future chapters, our upbringing in a particular culture influences us in subtle ways. For instance, Canadians know how to interpret one another's actions on the basis of speech styles or body language, but these cues do not necessarily mean the same thing to people from different cultures. A Canadian salesperson selling products in Turkey may wonder why her host will not cut the small talk and get down to business, whereas the Turk can't figure out why the visitor thinks they can do business before they have become better acquainted. Anthropology teaches people to be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences—people's actions may not mean what we take them to mean, and much misunderstanding can be avoided by taking cultural differences into account in our dealings with other people.

Finally, because of its insistence on studying humanity from a comparative perspective, anthropology helps us to understand both our own individual lives and our societies. By encouraging you to compare and contrast yourself and your ways of

thinking, feeling, and acting with those of people living in other times and places, anthropology helps you see new things about yourself. How does your life compare to the lives of other people around the world? Do people in other cultures share the same kinds of problems, hopes, motivations, and feelings as you do? Or are individuals raised in other societies completely different? How does the overall quality of your existence—your sense of well-being and happiness, your self-image, your emotional life, your feeling that life is meaningful—compare with people who live elsewhere? Anthropology offers the chance to compare yourself to other peoples who live in different circumstances.

Summary

1. Defined as the study of humans, anthropology differs from other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities primarily because of its broad scope. The field as a whole is concerned with all human beings of the past and present, and is also interested in all aspects of humanity: biology, language, technology, art, politics, religion, and all other dimensions of human life.
2. As a practical necessity, however, anthropologists must specialize. Traditionally, the field is divided into five subdisciplines. Physical anthropology studies the biological dimensions of human beings, including our evolution, the physical variations between contemporary populations, and the biology and behavior of nonhuman primates. Archaeology uses the material remains of prehistoric and historic cultures to investigate the past, focusing on the long-term technological and social changes that occurred in particular regions of the world. Cultural anthropology, or ethnology, is concerned with the social and cultural life of contemporary and historically recent human societies. By conducting fieldwork in various human communities, cultural anthropologists contribute to the understanding of cultural diversity and to making the general public more aware and tolerant of cultural differences. Anthropological linguistics studies language, concentrating on nonwritten languages and investigating the interrelations between language and other elements of a

people's way of life. Finally, applied anthropology uses the concepts, methods, and theories of anthropology to solve real-world problems in such areas as health, development, and education.

3. Until around 1970 cultural anthropology (the main subject of this text) concentrated on human cultures that are popularly known as "tribal," "premodern," or "preindustrial." This is not as true today, when anthropologists often do their research in the complex urbanized and industrialized nations of the developed world. It is increasingly difficult to distinguish ethnology from the kindred disciplines of sociology and history. However, firsthand, extended fieldwork in villages or relatively small towns or neighborhoods continues to be a hallmark of cultural anthropology.
4. Cultural anthropologists also differ from other scholars who study living people by their approach. There are three main characteristics of this approach. Holism is the attempt to understand the interrelations between the customs and beliefs of a particular society. The comparative perspective means that any attempt to understand humanity or explain cultures or behaviors must include information from a wide range of human societies, for anthropologists have learned that most customs and beliefs are products of cultural tradition and social environment, rather

than of a universal human nature. The perspective known as cultural relativism refers to fieldworkers' efforts to understand people's behaviors on their own terms, not those of the anthropologist's own culture. This requires that anthropologists avoid being ethnocentric in their research, for each people have their own history and values.

5. Anthropology has made many contributions to our modern understanding of humanity. Only anthropology allows us to see the development of human biology and culture over long time spans. Most of the knowledge we have about human evolution, prehistoric populations, and modern tribal societies was discovered by anthropologists. Early anthropologists were instrumental in popularizing the concept of culture and in showing that cultural differences are not caused by racial differences. The value of inculcating understanding and tolerance among citizens of different nations is another practical lesson of anthropology, one that is increasingly important as the economies of the world become more interdependent and as the development of weaponry makes the consequences of international misunderstanding more serious. The information that ethnographers have collected about alternative ways of being human allows us to judge the benefits against the costs of industrialization and progress.

Key Terms

physical (biological)
anthropology
paleoanthropology
primatology
human variation
forensic anthropologists

archaeology
prehistoric archaeology
historic archaeology
cultural anthropology
(ethnology)
fieldwork

ethnography
anthropological
linguistics
applied anthropology
holistic perspective
comparative perspective

cultural relativism
ethnocentrism




Suggested Readings

Chodkiewicz, Jean-Luc. *Peoples of the Past and Present*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1995.

A collection of short articles from all subfields.

Fagan, Brian M. *World Prehistory: A Brief Introduction*. 3rd ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

Covers human prehistory from a global perspective. Prehistory of various continents is presented, with an overview of the development of civilization in different regions.

Farb, Peter. *Word Play: What Happens When People Talk*. New York: Knopf, 1974.

A highly readable introduction to language and how it is used in social life.

Fromkin, Victoria, and Robert Rodman. *An Introduction to Language*. 5th ed. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993.

Witty and thorough introduction to linguistics.

Jurmain, Robert, and Harry Nelson. *Introduction to Physical Anthropology*. 6th ed. St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1994.

Basic and thorough textbook in biological anthropology, covering genetics, human physical variation, primate biology and behavior, and human evolution. Richly illustrated with photos, maps, and charts.

Renfrew, Colin, and Paul Bahn. *Archaeology: Theories, Methods, and Practice*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1991.

A lengthy and detailed yet very readable introduction to archaeological methods, focusing especially on how prehistorians use artifacts to draw conclusions about the past.

The following ethnographies are excellent for introducing the ways of life of various people around the world. All are highly readable.

Balikci, Asen. *The Netsilik Eskimo*. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 1989.

A well-rounded description of an Eskimo people.

Chagnon, Napoleon A. *Yanomamö: The Last Days of Eden*. San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.

A readable ethnography of an Amazonian people who are threatened by the incursions of missionaries, miners, tourists, and other outsiders.

Farrer, Claire R. *Thunder Rides a Black Horse: Mescalero Apaches and the Mythic Present*. 2nd ed. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 1996.

Concise account of ethnographer's experience with the modern Apache. Focuses on girls' puberty ceremonies, interweaving Apache culture into the account.

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