ANTH 5: CULTURES OF THE U.S. IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE



Javier Espinoza
Chabot College

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ANTH 5 - Cultures of the U.S. in Global Perspective

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Author

Acknowledgement

Licensing

1: Introduction to Anthropology

1.1: Introduction to Anthropology

1.2: The Other Humans

1.3: Subfields in Anthropology

1.4: Career Opportunities in Anthropology

1.5: References

2: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the United States

2.1: Introduction

2.2: Identity and Social Construction

2.3: Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism

2.4: Multiculturalism in the United States

2.5: Major Cultural Communities in the United States

2.6: Everyday Cultural Expressions and Anthropological Perspectives

2.7: Conclusion

2.8: References

3: Migration, Immigration, and Globalization

3.1: Introduction

3.2: Why Humans Migrate

3.3: History of Immigration to the United States

3.4: Borders and Immigration Policy

3.5: Globalization

3.6: Diasporas and Transnational Communities

3.7: Case Studies

3.8: References

4: Race, Ethnicity, and Structural Inequality

4.1: Introduction

4.2: The Anthropology of Race

4.3: Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity

4.4: Racism

4.5: Segregation and Inequality

4.6: Whiteness and Privilege

4.7: Social Movements

4.8: Contemporary Issues

4.9: Conclusion
4.10: References

5: Family, Gender, Religion, and Everyday Life

5.1: Introduction
5.2: Family and Kinship
5.3: Gender and Sexuality
5.4: Religion and Spirituality
5.5: Language and Communication
5.6: Food, Media, and Popular Culture
5.7: Life-Cycle Perspectives
5.8: Conclusion
5.9: References

6: Power, Inequality, and Contemporary American Society

6.1: Introduction
6.2: Social Class and Economic Inequality
6.3: Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion
6.4: Media and Representation
6.5: Education and Opportunity
6.6: Health and Society
6.7: Cultural Change and the Future of Diversity
6.8: Conclusion
6.9: References

Index

Glossary

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About the Author

Javier Espinoza Barajas, MA

Javier Espinoza Barajas is an Anthropology Professor and PACE Program Coordinator at Chabot College. Originally from Michoacán, Mexico, he immigrated to the United States at age sixteen and began his college journey at Chabot while attending Mt. Eden High School. As a first-generation college student, Javier understands the challenges and opportunities many students face. He earned degrees from UC Santa Cruz and CSU Los Angeles and studied abroad at UNAM in Mexico City. Through his teaching, he encourages students to explore culture, identity, and diversity while connecting anthropology to real-world experiences and personal growth.

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1: INTRODUCTION TO ANTHROPOLOGY

1.1: Introduction to Anthropology
1.2: The Other Humans
1.3: Subfields in Anthropology
1.4: Career Opportunities in Anthropology
1.5: References

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1.1: Introduction to Anthropology

The Adventure of Being Human

Imagine an academic discipline dedicated to understanding human existence—a field that explores how people navigate life and search for meaning. Anthropology is the systematic study of humanity, examining how individuals and societies construct meaning, organize social worlds, and experience life across time and space. It encompasses the full range of the human condition, including joy and suffering, creativity and conflict, and continuity and change. As a holistic discipline, anthropology seeks to address fundamental questions about what it means to be human, how societies develop diverse ways of life, and how biological, cultural, and social forces shape human behavior (Kottak, 2022; Lavenda & Schultz, 2020).

From the earliest evidence of stone tool production to modern global digital networks, anthropology adopts a holistic perspective that distinguishes it from other social sciences. Rather than focusing on a single dimension of human life, the discipline integrates multiple subfields, including biological anthropology, which examines human evolution and variation; cultural anthropology, which investigates social practices and belief systems; and archaeology, which reconstructs past societies through material remains. Together, these perspectives enable anthropology to offer a comprehensive understanding of humanity by connecting biology, culture, and meaning within a unified analytical framework (American Anthropological Association, 2023; Kottak, 2022; Lavenda & Schultz, 2020).

What is Anthropology?

Anthropology is the scientific study of humanity, encompassing the biological, cultural, and social dimensions of human life. The term derives from the Greek words *ánthrōpos*, meaning "human," and *logos*, meaning "study," and thus translates to "the study of humanity." What distinguishes anthropology from other disciplines is its comparative and holistic approach, which examines human societies across both time and space. Anthropologists investigate the human experience from its earliest origins to the present, analyzing cultures and societies wherever they have existed (Brown et al., 2024; Kottak, 2022; Lavenda & Schultz, 2020).

Human Origins and Evolution Across Time and Space

The term *Homo* is derived from Latin and means "human," while *sapiens* translates to "wise." The species *Homo sapiens*, or anatomically modern humans, emerged in Africa approximately 300,000 years ago, as evidenced by fossil discoveries such as those at Jebel Irhoud in Morocco (Hublin et al., 2017; Stringer, 2016). These early humans possessed skeletal features broadly similar to those of present-day populations, although cultural and behavioral developments continued to evolve over time. Rather than reflecting a sudden increase in "intelligence," the emergence of modern human behavior—including symbolic thought, complex tools, and art—occurred gradually between approximately 100,000 and 50,000 years ago (Mellars, 2006).

Human evolution is not a linear progression but a complex, branching process involving multiple hominin species. *Homo sapiens* evolved in Africa from earlier populations of the genus *Homo*, sharing a common ancestor with species such as *Homo erectus* rather than descending directly from a single lineage (Klein, 2009; Stringer, 2016).

Studying humanity across time and space remains a central aim of anthropology. Today, the global population exceeds eight billion people, all belonging to the species *Homo sapiens* and sharing a high degree of genetic similarity (approximately 99.9%) (Hasty et al., 2023). Fossil and genetic evidence indicate that modern humans originated in Africa, particularly in regions such as the East African Rift Valley, before gradually dispersing across the globe beginning around 60,000–100,000 years ago (Stringer, 2016).

Early human populations lived as hunter-gatherers in small, mobile groups, relying on foraging and hunting for subsistence. Over time, some groups transitioned to sedentary agricultural lifestyles, particularly in regions such as Mesopotamia, where early farming communities emerged approximately 10,000 years ago. These developments marked a significant transformation in human social organization, economy, and interaction with the environment (Hasty et al., 2023; Klein, 2009).

This discipline seeks to understand these processes by examining human biological evolution, cultural development, and social diversity across both temporal and spatial contexts.

Goals in Anthropology

Anthropology, as a holistic discipline, seeks to understand human beings in their entirety—biologically, culturally, and socially—across time and space. One of its central aims is to explain both human diversity and commonality by examining how people live, think, and organize their societies in different environments and historical contexts (Kottak, 2022; Lavenda & Schultz, 2020). In addition to generating knowledge, certain branches of the discipline—particularly applied and public anthropology—aim to address contemporary social issues and contribute to improving human well-being.

A key approach in anthropology involves the identification of **human universals** and the analysis of **human variation**. Human universals are cultural, behavioral, and psychological traits that are widely shared across human societies. These shared features are understood to reflect common aspects of human biology, cognition, and social life (Brown, 1991; Singh, 2025). Examples of commonly cited universals include language, social norms, kinship systems, symbolic expression, play, and forms of spirituality. Some behaviors, such as violence or coercion, have been documented across many societies, although their meanings, expressions, and social regulation vary significantly across cultural contexts.

By systematically comparing societies across time and space, anthropologists aim to identify these patterns while also recognizing the diversity of human experience. This dual focus allows for a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be human.

The study of human universals and variation contributes to several important areas of inquiry. First, it helps anthropologists analyze broad social patterns, including inequality, cooperation, and conflict, by identifying shared structures and processes across societies. Second, it provides insight into the relationship between biology and culture, helping to explain how human behaviors are shaped by both evolutionary and social factors. Finally, it promotes a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity by demonstrating that differences among societies exist alongside fundamental similarities, encouraging more informed and critical perspectives on issues such as race, gender, and inequality (Kottak, 2022; Lavenda & Schultz, 2020).

While human universals highlight shared aspects of humanity, anthropology also emphasizes the study of human variation—the physical, genetic, and cultural differences among individuals and populations. This variation is continuous rather than categorical and is shaped by evolutionary processes, environmental adaptations, and cultural practices. Anthropologists examine how traits and behaviors vary across populations and regions, demonstrating the adaptability of humans to diverse ecological and social contexts. By rejecting simplistic and rigid classifications, this approach underscores the dynamic interplay between biology and culture, often referred to as the biocultural perspective (Fitzpatrick, 2020; Kottak, 2022; Lavenda & Schultz, 2020).

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1.2: The Other Humans

Although *Homo sapiens* is the primary focus of anthropology, a comprehensive understanding of humanity requires examining the broader primate family Hominidae, which includes both living and extinct relatives (Shook et al., 2024).

1. **The Great Apes:** The family Hominidae includes chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla*), and orangutans (*Pongo pygmaeus*), along with humans. These species share significant genetic, anatomical, and behavioral similarities with humans, reflecting a common evolutionary ancestry.
2. **Extinct Hominin Species:** The fossil record indicates that numerous hominin species existed over the past several million years. These extinct relatives of modern humans provide critical insights into evolutionary processes, including bipedalism, tool use, and changes in brain size.
3. **Modern Humans:** Today, *Homo sapiens* is the only surviving human species. Anatomically modern humans are characterized by distinct skeletal features and complex cultural behaviors that differentiate them from earlier hominin species.

Focusing exclusively on modern humans provides an incomplete picture of human evolution and behavior. By studying both living primates and extinct hominin species, anthropologists gain valuable insight into the biological and behavioral foundations of humanity. Comparative research allows scientists to identify shared traits inherited from common ancestors while also examining how uniquely human characteristics have developed over time.

This comparative approach offers a window into the evolutionary past, enabling researchers to reconstruct key developments in human biology and culture. By analyzing similarities and differences across species, anthropologists better understand the interplay between inherited biological traits and culturally shaped behaviors (Shook et al., 2024; Klein, 2009; Fuentes, 2013).

The Great Apes

Anthropologists study nonhuman primates because they are our closest biological relatives, and their behavior, anatomy, and social organization provide important insights into human evolution. Comparative research reveals significant similarities between *Homo sapiens* and the great apes in skeletal structure, brain organization, genetic composition, and aspects of social behavior. Among these apes, the African species—chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) and gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla*)—are most closely related to humans, followed by orangutans (*Pongo pygmaeus*). All of these species, including humans, belong to the family Hominidae. Members of this family are referred to as hominids, whereas the term *hominins* refers specifically to the evolutionary lineage leading to modern humans, excluding chimpanzees and gorillas (Shook et al., 2024; Fuentes, 2013).

Many distinctive human traits can be traced to adaptations that evolved in early primates living in arboreal (tree-based) environments. These adaptations include grasping hands with opposable thumbs, enhanced depth and color vision, relatively large and complex brains, and extended parental care. Together, these traits supported increased learning capacity, social interaction, and environmental flexibility (Fleagle, 2013).

These evolutionary features remain central to human adaptation. For example, manual dexterity facilitated tool use, a defining aspect of human technological development, with the earliest known stone tools dating to approximately 2.6 million years ago in East Africa. Likewise, increases in brain size and complexity contributed to advanced cognitive abilities, including problem-solving, symbolic thought, and eventually the development of language and culture.

Genetic research further highlights the close evolutionary relationships among primates. All humans share approximately 99.9% of their DNA, while humans share about 98–99% of their genetic material with chimpanzees, with slightly lower percentages shared with gorillas and orangutans. Phylogenetic evidence indicates that humans and chimpanzees share a common ancestor approximately 6–7 million years ago, with gorillas diverging earlier (around 8–10 million years ago) and orangutans even earlier (approximately 12–16 million years ago) (Fleagle, 2013; Shook et al., 2024).

By examining these biological and behavioral similarities, anthropologists are able to reconstruct key aspects of human evolution and better understand the relationship between inherited traits and culturally developed behaviors.

Extinct Hominin Species

The study of extinct hominin species provides essential insight into the evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens*. Hominins include a

diverse group of species within the human lineage, including members of the genera *Australopithecus*, *Paranthropus*, and *Homo*. While the term "archaic humans" is often used to describe later members of the genus *Homo*, such as Neanderthals and *Homo heidelbergensis*, earlier hominins also play a critical role in understanding human evolution (Klein, 2009; Stringer, 2016).

The following examples illustrate the diversity and chronological range of key hominin species:

1. **Homo neanderthalensis (Neanderthals):** Neanderthals inhabited Europe and parts of western Asia until approximately 40,000 years ago. They are the closest extinct relatives of modern humans and share evidence of interbreeding with *Homo sapiens*. Archaeological findings indicate complex behaviors, including advanced tool use, burial practices, and possible symbolic expression (Stringer, 2016).
2. **Homo erectus:** One of the longest-surviving hominin species, *Homo erectus* lived from approximately 1.9 million to about 110,000 years ago. This species is associated with Acheulean stone tools and controlled use of fire. Rather than being a direct ancestor in a linear sense, *Homo erectus* represents an important ancestral population from which later hominin species, including *Homo sapiens*, ultimately evolved (Klein, 2009).
3. **Homo naledi:** Discovered in South Africa, *Homo naledi* dates to approximately 335,000–236,000 years ago. Despite having a relatively small brain, evidence suggests the possibility of complex behaviors, including the deliberate placement of bodies in cave systems, although this interpretation remains debated (Berger et al., 2015).
4. **Homo heidelbergensis:** Often considered a transitional species, *Homo heidelbergensis* lived between approximately 600,000 and 200,000 years ago. Fossil and archaeological evidence suggests this species may have engaged in large-game hunting and possibly constructed simple shelters (Klein, 2009).
5. **Homo habilis:** Appearing around 2.4–1.4 million years ago, *Homo habilis* is associated with some of the earliest known stone tools (Oldowan technology). The name "handy man" reflects this association, although tool use may have also occurred in earlier hominins (Klein, 2009).
6. **Homo floresiensis:** Discovered on the island of Flores in Indonesia, this small-bodied hominin lived as recently as 50,000 years ago. Its unique anatomical features challenge traditional models of human evolution and dispersal (Brown et al., 2004).
7. **Australopithecus afarensis:** Best known from the fossil specimen "Lucy," this species lived between approximately 3.9 and 2.9 million years ago. *A. afarensis* provides important evidence of early bipedal locomotion while retaining adaptations for arboreal activity (Johanson & White, 1979).

Together, these species demonstrate that human evolution is not a linear progression but a complex and branching process involving multiple hominin populations. By studying these extinct relatives, anthropologists gain critical insight into the biological and cultural developments that ultimately contributed to the emergence of modern humans.

Modern Humans

The third group of primates within the family Hominidae consists of modern humans, classified as *Homo sapiens*. As the only surviving species of the genus *Homo*, modern humans represent the culmination of a long and complex evolutionary history characterized by both biological and cultural development. Anatomically modern humans first appeared in Africa approximately 300,000 years ago and are distinguished by features such as a relatively gracile skeletal structure, a rounded skull, and a highly developed brain capable of advanced cognitive functions (Stringer, 2016; Shook et al., 2024).

What sets *Homo sapiens* apart from other hominin species is not only anatomical characteristics but also the capacity for symbolic thought, language, and cumulative culture. Modern humans create and transmit knowledge across generations through complex systems of communication, enabling the development of technologies, social institutions, belief systems, and artistic expression. This capacity for culture allows humans to adapt to a wide range of environments, from arctic tundra to tropical rainforests and urbanized societies.

Despite the remarkable diversity observed among human populations, genetic research demonstrates that all humans share approximately 99.9% of their DNA, reflecting a recent common ancestry. This genetic similarity underscores the fact that variations in physical traits—such as skin color, body shape, and facial features—are adaptations to different environmental conditions rather than indicators of distinct biological categories or "races" (Kottak, 2022).

Anthropologists study modern humans not only as biological organisms but also as cultural beings whose behaviors, beliefs, and social structures are shaped by the dynamic interaction between biology and culture. By examining contemporary societies alongside archaeological and fossil evidence, anthropology provides a comprehensive understanding of how *Homo sapiens* evolved into a species capable of creating complex, interconnected global systems (Shook et al., 2024; Lavenda & Schultz, 2020).

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1.3: Subfields in Anthropology

The study of humanity is a complex and expansive endeavor. To address this breadth, anthropology is traditionally divided into four major subfields, particularly within the American anthropological tradition. These subfields—sociocultural anthropology, archaeology, biological (or physical) anthropology, and linguistic anthropology—each focus on different dimensions of the human experience while remaining interconnected (Kottak, 2022; Lavenda & Schultz, 2020).

Sociocultural anthropology examines patterns of culture, social organization, and human behavior in contemporary and historical societies. Archaeology investigates past human lifeways through the analysis of material remains such as tools, structures, and artifacts. Biological anthropology explores human evolution, genetics, and biological variation, as well as our relationship to other primates. Linguistic anthropology focuses on language as a key aspect of human culture, analyzing how communication shapes social life and meaning.

Together, these four subfields provide a holistic and multidimensional understanding of humanity. By integrating biological, cultural, linguistic, and historical perspectives, anthropology offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing both the diversity and unity of human experience (Kottak, 2022).

Sociocultural Anthropology

Sociocultural anthropology is the subfield of anthropology that examines patterns of human culture and social organization. It focuses on how cultural beliefs, values, and practices shape individuals' perceptions of reality, ways of life, and access to resources such as education, employment, and housing (Lavenda & Schultz, 2020; Kottak, 2022). By studying diverse societies, sociocultural anthropologists seek to understand how human behavior is influenced by cultural context.

A central methodological approach in this subfield is **ethnography**, which involves immersive, long-term fieldwork within a community. Through this approach, anthropologists aim to understand both the *emic* (insider) perspective and the *etic* (outsider, analytical) perspective. This dual perspective allows researchers to interpret cultural practices within their own context while also comparing them across societies (Kottak, 2022).

Sociocultural anthropologists investigate a wide range of cultural phenomena, including kinship systems, religion, language, gender, sexuality, race, and political organization. Using a comparative approach, they analyze both traditional and contemporary social issues such as inequality, migration, globalization, voting rights, and struggles for racial and gender equity (Saneda & Field, 2023). Rather than simply describing cultures, sociocultural anthropology seeks to explain how power, history, and social structures shape human experiences.

While the promotion of tolerance and cultural understanding is not the sole goal of the discipline, sociocultural anthropology contributes to these outcomes by challenging ethnocentrism and emphasizing cultural relativism—the practice of understanding cultural beliefs and behaviors within their own context.

Sociocultural anthropology also includes a range of specialized and applied areas:

- **Applied Anthropology:** Uses anthropological theories and methods to address real-world problems, including public health, environmental change, and technological development. Applied anthropologists work in government agencies, non-profit organizations, healthcare systems, and private industries.
- **Business Anthropology:** Examines how culture shapes organizations, markets, and consumer behavior. Anthropologists apply ethnographic methods to study workplace dynamics, branding, and user experience in a global economy.
- **Queer Anthropology:** Focuses on sexuality, gender diversity, and LGBTQ+ identities across cultures, analyzing how power and inequality shape lived experiences.
- **Indigenous and Native American Anthropology:** Studies the histories, cultures, and contemporary issues of Indigenous peoples, often emphasizing sovereignty, colonialism, and cultural revitalization through community-based research.
- **African American Anthropology:** Explores the cultural and social experiences of African-descended communities, with particular attention to race, identity, inequality, and cultural expression.
- **Latin American Anthropology:** Examines societies in Latin America and Latinx communities, focusing on migration, inequality, and the lasting impacts of colonialism.
- **Urban Anthropology:** Investigates social life in cities, including issues such as housing, migration, economic inequality, and

urban development.
- **Economic Anthropology:** Studies how cultural values influence economic systems, including production, exchange, labor, and globalization.

Together, these areas demonstrate the breadth of sociocultural anthropology and its relevance to understanding both everyday life and global challenges.

Linguistic Anthropology

Linguistic anthropology is the subfield of anthropology that examines language as a fundamental aspect of human culture. Language is a defining characteristic of *Homo sapiens*, distinguished by its symbolic, rule-governed, and generative nature. While many nonhuman animals possess communication systems, human language is uniquely capable of expressing abstract ideas, transmitting complex knowledge across generations, and organizing social life (Lavenda & Schultz, 2020; Kottak, 2022).

Linguistic anthropologists investigate the origins of language, its structure and use, and its role in shaping social relationships and cultural meaning. A central area of research explores the relationship between language, thought, and culture. This line of inquiry is often associated with the concept of **linguistic relativity**, which suggests that language can influence how individuals perceive and categorize the world, although this influence is understood as probabilistic rather than deterministic (Lucy, 1992).

In addition to theoretical research, linguistic anthropologists study contemporary issues such as multilingualism, language shift, language endangerment, and the social implications of language use in contexts such as education, politics, and media. They work in a wide range of settings, including academic institutions, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and private industries, where they conduct research, analyze data, and contribute to policy and communication strategies.

The related discipline of **linguistics** is the scientific study of language structure and function. Linguistics includes subfields such as phonetics (speech sounds), morphology (word formation), syntax (sentence structure), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (language use in context). One important subfield, **sociolinguistics**, examines how language varies across social groups and contexts, including differences related to age, gender, class, and ethnicity.

While linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics share an interest in the social dimensions of language, linguistic anthropology places greater emphasis on language as embedded within broader cultural systems. Rather than treating language as an isolated object of study, linguistic anthropologists analyze it as one element within the larger sociocultural life of a community (Saneda & Field, 2023).

Several specialized areas contribute to the study of language within anthropology:

- **Descriptive Linguistics:** Documents and analyzes the structure of languages, including grammar, phonology, and vocabulary, often with a focus on endangered languages.
- **Historical Linguistics:** Examines language change over time and reconstructs ancestral languages to better understand patterns of migration and cultural contact.
- **Sociolinguistics:** Investigates how language varies across social contexts and how social identities are expressed through language.
- **Ethnolinguistics:** Explores the relationship between language and culture, particularly how language reflects and shapes cultural knowledge, values, and worldviews.

Together, these approaches demonstrate that language is not only a tool for communication but also a central component of culture, shaping how people understand, organize, and interact with the world around them.

Archaeology

Archaeology is the subfield of anthropology that investigates past human societies through the analysis of material remains. These remains include tools, structures, food residues, pottery, art, and other artifacts left behind by human populations. By examining these materials, archaeologists reconstruct the lifeways, social organization, and cultural practices of past societies (Kottak, 2022; Renfrew & Bahn, 2018).

A central method in archaeology is **excavation**, the systematic and controlled recovery of material remains from the ground. Excavation involves carefully removing soil in layers while recording the precise context of each find, including its location, depth,

and association with other artifacts. However, excavation is only one component of archaeological research. Archaeologists also employ methods such as surface survey, remote sensing, laboratory analysis, and various dating techniques (e.g., radiocarbon dating) to interpret the past (Renfrew & Bahn, 2018).

Archaeological research spans from the earliest evidence of human activity—over two million years ago—to recent historical periods. Some archaeologists specialize in early human evolution and stone tools in regions such as Africa, while others focus on more recent contexts, including urban sites, colonial settlements, and cemeteries. Through these diverse approaches, archaeology provides insight into major developments in human history, including the origins of agriculture, the rise of complex societies, technological innovation, and patterns of social inequality.

Several specialized areas exist within archaeology:

- **Prehistoric Archaeology:** Studies human societies before the development of written records, relying primarily on material remains such as tools, dwellings, and cave art.
- **Historical Archaeology:** Examines societies with written records by integrating documentary evidence with archaeological data.
- **Underwater (Maritime) Archaeology:** Investigates submerged sites, including shipwrecks, ports, and sunken cities.
- **Bioarchaeology:** Analyzes human skeletal remains to understand health, diet, disease, and biological variation in past populations.
- **Zooarchaeology:** Studies animal remains to reconstruct diet, domestication, and human–animal relationships.

It is important to distinguish archaeology from related disciplines. **Paleontology** focuses on the fossilized remains of nonhuman organisms to study the history of life on Earth, while **history** relies primarily on written records to interpret the past. In contrast, archaeology emphasizes the scientific analysis of material culture to understand human behavior across time. By integrating these methods and perspectives, archaeology provides a critical foundation for understanding long-term human development and cultural change (Kottak, 2022).

Biological/Physical Anthropology

Biological anthropology (also known as physical anthropology) is the subfield of anthropology that studies humans as biological organisms. It seeks to understand human evolution, biological variation, adaptation, and the relationship between biology and culture. By examining both living populations and fossil evidence, biological anthropologists investigate how humans have evolved over time and how biological traits are shaped by environmental and cultural factors (Kottak, 2022; Jurmain et al., 2018).

This subfield employs a wide range of scientific methods, including the analysis of skeletal remains, genetics (DNA and genomics), comparative anatomy, and evolutionary theory. Through these approaches, biological anthropology provides insight into human origins, health, and diversity.

Biological anthropology is further divided into several specialized areas:

- **Primatology:** Focuses on the study of nonhuman primates, including monkeys and apes, in both natural and controlled environments. Primatologists examine similarities and differences in behavior, social organization, and biology to better understand human evolution.
- **Forensic Anthropology:** Applies skeletal analysis to legal and criminal investigations. Forensic anthropologists work to identify human remains and determine characteristics such as age, sex, ancestry, and cause of death, often collaborating with law enforcement agencies.
- **Paleoanthropology:** Studies the fossil record of early humans and their ancestors. Paleoanthropologists analyze extinct hominin species, such as Neanderthals and *Homo erectus*, to reconstruct patterns of human evolution and biological change.
- **Molecular Anthropology:** Examines genetic variation among human populations through DNA analysis. This field contributes to understanding human evolution, migration patterns, and biological relationships among populations.
- **Medical Anthropology (Biocultural Approach):** Although often considered part of sociocultural anthropology, medical anthropology overlaps with biological anthropology by examining how biological, environmental, and cultural factors influence health and disease.
- **Additional Areas:** These include human biology, bioarchaeology (the study of human remains in archaeological contexts), nutritional anthropology, evolutionary medicine, paleopathology (the study of ancient disease), and human behavioral ecology.

The term *biology* derives from the Greek words *bios* (life) and *logos* (study), reflecting the focus of this subfield on life processes

and biological systems. By integrating biological data with cultural and environmental perspectives, biological anthropology contributes to a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be human.

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1.4: Career Opportunities in Anthropology

Anthropology provides students with a broad set of analytical, research, and cross-cultural skills that are applicable to a wide range of professional fields. Students trained in anthropology may pursue graduate study and careers in teaching, academic research, or field-based work. However, the discipline also prepares individuals for careers beyond academia by fostering critical thinking, cultural awareness, and the ability to analyze complex social and environmental issues (Kottak, 2022; Lavenda & Schultz, 2020).

A key strength of anthropology is its emphasis on cross-cultural understanding. This perspective is valuable in professions that require engagement with diverse populations, including education, healthcare, business, law, public policy, and international development. Anthropological training also supports careers that focus on the interaction between humans and their environments, such as environmental science, human ecology, and sustainability studies.

In addition, the study of human evolution and biological processes provides a foundation for careers in medical and pharmaceutical research, public health, and forensic science. Skills developed through anthropological training—such as qualitative and quantitative research methods, data analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and effective communication—are highly transferable and sought after in both public and private sectors.

As a result, anthropology graduates are well-positioned to contribute to a variety of fields that require cultural competence, interdisciplinary thinking, and the ability to address complex global challenges.

Note. For more information, visit the Anthropology Program webpage at Chabot College: https://www.chabotcollege.edu/academics/social-sciences/anthropology/career.php

Anthropology & Other Academic Disciplines

Anthropology shares significant overlap with other academic disciplines that study human behavior and society. However, each field is distinguished by its scope of inquiry, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches. Anthropology is unique in its holistic and comparative perspective, examining humanity across both time and space while integrating biological, cultural, linguistic, and archaeological evidence (Kottak, 2022; Lavenda & Schultz, 2020). Although these disciplines often collaborate, they offer different lenses through which to understand the human experience.

In broad terms, several key distinctions can be identified:

- **Anthropology:** Anthropologists study humanity in its entirety, analyzing both cultural and biological diversity across time and space. This includes the study of contemporary societies as well as ancient populations, including nonhuman primates and extinct hominin species.
- **Sociology:** Sociology focuses primarily on social relationships, institutions, and structures within contemporary societies. While there is overlap with sociocultural anthropology, sociology tends to emphasize modern social systems, such as class, bureaucracy, and social inequality.
- **History:** Historians study past human events primarily through written records and documented sources, typically covering the last several thousand years. In contrast, anthropology—particularly archaeology—extends the study of humanity into deep prehistory through material remains.

- **Psychology:** Psychology examines mental processes and behavior, often focusing on cognition, emotion, and individual development. While some areas of psychology emphasize universal patterns of thought, anthropology highlights how these processes are shaped and expressed differently across cultural contexts.
- **Ethnic Studies:** Ethnic studies focuses on the experiences, histories, and cultural contributions of historically marginalized communities, often using interdisciplinary approaches and critical theories. Anthropology intersects with this field through its emphasis on culture, identity, power, and inequality.

While all of these disciplines contribute to the study of human behavior, anthropology's distinctive contribution lies in its integrative approach, combining multiple perspectives to develop a more comprehensive understanding of humanity (Kottak, 2022; Lavenda & Schultz, 2020). Recognizing these differences allows for a more nuanced appreciation of how knowledge about human societies is produced.

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2: CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND DIVERSITY IN THE UNITED STATES

2.1: Introduction

2.2: Identity and Social Construction

2.3: Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism

2.4: Multiculturalism in the United States

2.5: Major Cultural Communities in the United States

2.6: Everyday Cultural Expressions and Anthropological Perspectives

2.7: Conclusion

2.8: References

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2.1: Introduction

Understanding diversity and identity is central to anthropology because human societies are shaped by complex systems of culture, history, power, migration, and social interaction. Anthropologists examine how people construct meaning, form communities, and develop identities based on factors such as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, language, and social class. Rather than viewing identity as fixed or purely biological, anthropology emphasizes that identities are socially and culturally constructed, historically shaped, and constantly influenced by political, economic, and global processes (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Through cross-cultural comparison, anthropologists demonstrate that ideas about belonging, difference, normality, and social status vary widely across societies and historical periods, revealing that many social categories often taken for granted are culturally produced rather than universal (Kottak, 2022).

In the contemporary United States, diversity has been profoundly shaped by centuries of migration, colonization, globalization, and cultural exchange. The United States is home to people from a wide variety of cultural, linguistic, religious, and ancestral backgrounds, making it one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Anthropologists study how individuals and groups navigate issues of identity, inclusion, discrimination, representation, and inequality within this multicultural environment. They also analyze how institutions such as schools, governments, media, and economic systems influence the ways identities are formed and experienced in everyday life (American Anthropological Association, 2024). By studying diversity and identity from an anthropological perspective, students gain a deeper understanding of both cultural differences and shared human experiences, while developing the tools necessary to critically examine stereotypes, ethnocentrism, racism, and other forms of social inequality (Guest, 2020).

What Is Culture?

Culture refers to the shared system of learned behaviors, beliefs, values, customs, traditions, language, and social practices that members of a society use to understand and organize their world (Kottak, 2022). Anthropologists consider culture to be one of the defining characteristics of human societies because it shapes how people think, communicate, behave, and interact with others. Unlike biological traits that are inherited genetically, culture is learned socially through interaction with family, peers, institutions, and the broader community (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Culture influences nearly every aspect of human life, including food habits, religion, economic systems, family organization, political structures, gender expectations, and concepts of morality. Because culture is learned and shared, it can change over time as societies adapt to new environments, technologies, migrations, and global influences (Guest, 2020).

Symbols, Norms, Values, and Beliefs

Culture is built upon symbolic systems that allow humans to communicate meaning and organize social life. Symbols are objects, gestures, sounds, images, or words that carry shared cultural meaning within a group (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2023). Language is one of the most important symbolic systems because it allows humans to transmit ideas, history, emotions, and traditions across generations. Other examples of symbols include national flags, religious icons, wedding rings, clothing styles, and gestures such as handshakes or bows. Anthropologists study symbols because they reveal how societies construct identity, belonging, power, and social relationships (Nanda & Warms, 2021).

Norms are the socially accepted rules and expectations that guide behavior within a society. These norms influence how people dress, speak, eat, interact, and behave in public and private settings (Haviland et al., 2021). Some norms are informal, such as expectations regarding politeness or personal space, while others are formalized into laws and institutional rules. Closely connected to norms are cultural values, which are the shared ideas about what a society considers good, important, moral, or desirable. For example, some societies place a strong emphasis on individual achievement and independence, while others value collective responsibility and community cooperation more highly (Eriksen, 2020). Beliefs, including religious, spiritual, political, and moral ideas, also shape how individuals interpret reality and understand their place within society. Anthropologists emphasize that norms, values, and beliefs vary significantly across cultures, demonstrating that many behaviors people consider “natural” are actually culturally learned (Kottak, 2022).

Cultural Transmission

Culture is not inherited biologically but transmitted socially through a process known as cultural transmission or enculturation.

From infancy onward, individuals learn the language, behaviors, customs, and expectations of their culture through interactions with parents, relatives, peers, schools, religious institutions, media, and other social institutions (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). This learning process helps individuals develop cultural identities and understand how to function within their society. Anthropologists note that enculturation begins very early in life and continues throughout adulthood as people encounter new experiences and social environments.

Cultural transmission occurs both formally and informally. Formal transmission may include classroom education, religious instruction, or organized rituals, while informal transmission occurs through observation, imitation, storytelling, media consumption, and everyday social interaction (Guest, 2020). In modern societies, digital technology and globalization have dramatically expanded the ways culture is transmitted. Social media platforms, streaming services, online communities, and global communication networks now allow cultural ideas, trends, languages, and practices to spread rapidly across national boundaries (Miller, 2021). As a result, many individuals today participate simultaneously in local, national, and global cultural systems.

Cultural Universals vs. Cultural Differences

Although human cultures vary widely, anthropologists recognize that certain features, known as cultural universals, are found in all societies. Cultural universals are practices or institutions that appear across cultures because they address common human needs and social functions (Brown, 2004). Examples include language, family organization, marriage, food preparation, music, storytelling, religion, social rules, and systems of education. While these universals exist across societies, the specific ways they are expressed differ greatly from one culture to another. For instance, all societies have systems of family and marriage, but rules regarding marriage partners, gender roles, inheritance, and residence patterns vary significantly worldwide (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2023).

Anthropologists are particularly interested in cultural differences because they demonstrate the remarkable diversity of human adaptation and social organization. Cultural differences can be observed in communication styles, religious beliefs, political systems, concepts of beauty, parenting practices, dietary customs, and attitudes toward gender and sexuality (Nanda & Warms, 2021). For example, eye contact may be interpreted as respectful confidence in some cultures but considered rude or confrontational in others. Similarly, ideas about appropriate clothing, emotional expression, and social hierarchy differ across societies. By comparing cultures, anthropologists challenge ethnocentrism—the tendency to judge other cultures according to one's own cultural standards—and promote cultural relativism, which encourages understanding cultures within their own historical and social contexts (Boas, 1940/2020). Through this comparative approach, anthropology highlights both the shared characteristics that unite humanity and the cultural diversity that enriches human societies worldwide.

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2.2: Identity and Social Construction

Anthropologists study identity because it plays a central role in shaping how individuals understand themselves and how societies organize social relationships, power, inclusion, and inequality. Identity refers to the ways people define themselves and are defined by others based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, class, and sexuality (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Anthropology emphasizes that many aspects of identity are socially constructed, meaning they are created, shaped, and maintained through cultural beliefs, historical processes, institutions, and social interactions rather than determined entirely by biology or nature (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/2011). Social constructions can have powerful real-world consequences because they influence laws, economic opportunities, education, social status, and access to resources. Although identities may feel natural or fixed, anthropologists demonstrate that definitions of identity categories vary across cultures and historical periods, revealing their cultural and political dimensions (Kottak, 2022).

Race

Race is one of the most studied forms of identity in anthropology. Modern anthropology and genetics demonstrate that race is not a biologically discrete category but a social construction based largely on perceived physical differences such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features (American Anthropological Association, 1998/2024). Genetic research shows that humans share approximately 99.9% of their DNA, and there is often more genetic variation within so-called racial groups than between them (Fuentes, 2023). Anthropologists argue that racial categories developed historically through colonialism, slavery, scientific racism, and systems of political and economic inequality. Although race lacks a clear biological basis, racial classifications have profound social consequences because societies treat racial categories as meaningful realities that shape experiences of discrimination, privilege, identity, and opportunity (Gravlee, 2009).

In the United States, racial categories have changed over time through census classifications, immigration laws, and shifting political ideologies. For example, groups such as Irish Americans, Italian Americans, and some Middle Eastern populations were historically excluded from whiteness but were later incorporated into broader racial categories (Omi & Winant, 2015). Anthropologists study race not as a biological fact, but as a system of social meaning connected to power, inequality, and historical processes.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to identification with a group based on shared cultural traditions, ancestry, language, religion, history, or geographic origin (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2023). Unlike race, which is often imposed externally through physical classification, ethnicity is more closely connected to cultural heritage and shared identity. Ethnic identities may include traditions related to food, music, religion, language, holidays, and family practices. Examples of ethnic groups include Mexican Americans, Navajo, Armenian Americans, Punjabi Sikhs, Haitian Americans, and Korean Americans.

Ethnic identities are often fluid and can change over time, especially within multicultural societies shaped by migration and globalization (Eriksen, 2020). Many individuals maintain multiple ethnic identities simultaneously or develop hybrid identities that combine influences from different cultural backgrounds. Anthropologists study ethnicity because it influences social belonging, political organization, community formation, and cultural continuity. Ethnic identity can also become especially important among immigrant and diaspora communities seeking to preserve cultural traditions while adapting to life in new societies (Guest, 2020).

Nationality

Nationality refers to legal membership and political belonging within a nation-state, often connected to citizenship, shared political institutions, and national identity (Anderson, 2006). National identity is frequently reinforced through symbols such as flags, national anthems, holidays, sports, and historical narratives. Anthropologists note that nations are socially constructed communities because members often feel connected to millions of strangers whom they will never personally meet, yet still imagine themselves as part of a shared national culture (Anderson, 2006).

In multicultural societies such as the United States, nationality and ethnicity do not always overlap. A person may identify nationally as American while also identifying ethnically as Salvadoran, Vietnamese, Somali, or Navajo. Globalization, migration,

and transnationalism have further complicated national identities because many individuals maintain social, economic, and emotional ties across multiple countries simultaneously (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Anthropologists examine how nationalism can promote unity and belonging, but also exclusion, xenophobia, and political conflict.

Gender

Gender refers to the cultural meanings, expectations, roles, and identities associated with masculinity, femininity, and other gender categories within a society (Nanda & Warms, 2021). Anthropologists distinguish gender from biological sex, which refers to physical traits such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive anatomy. While biological sex involves physical variation, gender is socially constructed and varies widely across cultures and historical periods (Fausto-Sterling, 2020). Societies teach gender roles through family socialization, education, religion, media, and peer interaction, shaping expectations regarding appearance, behavior, occupations, emotions, and social responsibilities.

Anthropological research demonstrates that gender systems are culturally diverse and not limited to only two categories. Many societies historically recognized additional gender identities beyond the male-female binary. Examples include Two-Spirit identities among some Indigenous North American communities, hijras in South Asia, and fa'afafine in Samoa (Towle & Morgan, 2002). Anthropologists study gender to understand how societies organize labor, power, family life, sexuality, and inequality. Gender expectations often intersect with race, class, religion, and sexuality, shaping individuals' opportunities and lived experiences in complex ways (Crenshaw, 1991).

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers to patterns of emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction toward others, including heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, and asexuality, among others (American Psychological Association, 2023). Anthropologists emphasize that attitudes toward sexuality vary significantly across cultures and historical periods. Behaviors and identities considered acceptable or taboo in one society may be viewed differently elsewhere, demonstrating that sexuality is shaped not only by biology but also by culture, religion, law, and social norms (Weeks, 2017).

Anthropological studies have documented wide variation in sexual practices and identities throughout human history. Some societies have historically accepted same-sex relationships or recognized non-binary sexual categories, while others have imposed strict regulations regarding sexuality (Nanda & Warms, 2021). In contemporary societies, sexuality is often connected to debates about human rights, religion, gender roles, family structures, and political identity. Anthropologists study sexual orientation comparatively to better understand how societies construct ideas about morality, intimacy, family, and personal identity.

Religion

Religion is another important aspect of identity because it shapes values, morality, worldview, social behavior, and community belonging. Religion generally refers to organized systems of beliefs and practices related to the sacred, supernatural, or spiritual realm (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2023). Religious identity may influence dietary practices, clothing, rituals, marriage customs, gender roles, political beliefs, and social relationships. Major world religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism each contain enormous internal diversity shaped by culture, history, and local traditions.

Anthropologists study religion not to determine whether spiritual beliefs are true or false, but to understand how religious systems function socially and culturally (Geertz, 1973). Religion often provides meaning, social cohesion, moral guidance, emotional support, and explanations for suffering and uncertainty. At the same time, religious identities can also become sources of political conflict, discrimination, or exclusion when linked to nationalism, colonialism, or social power structures (Guest, 2020). In multicultural societies like the United States, increasing religious diversity has contributed to both cultural exchange and social tensions surrounding religious freedom, secularism, and identity politics.

Class Identity

Class identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging within a particular social and economic position in society. Social class is often shaped by factors such as income, wealth, occupation, education, and access to resources (Haviland et al., 2021). Anthropologists examine class not only as an economic category, but also as a cultural experience that influences lifestyle,

language, opportunities, health outcomes, and social relationships. People from different class backgrounds may develop distinct cultural norms, consumption patterns, educational expectations, and political perspectives.

In the United States, social class inequality has grown significantly in recent decades, with increasing gaps between wealthy and poor populations (Piketty, 2022). Anthropologists study how class intersects with race, gender, immigration status, and geography to shape unequal life chances. For example, access to quality education, healthcare, safe housing, and economic mobility often differs dramatically across social classes. Class identity may also affect how individuals perceive themselves and others, influencing ideas about success, merit, responsibility, and social status (Ortner, 2006). Through the study of class, anthropologists analyze how economic systems and power structures contribute to both opportunity and inequality within society.

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2.3: Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism

Anthropologists use the concepts of cultural relativism and ethnocentrism to better understand how people perceive cultural differences and evaluate other societies. These concepts are foundational in anthropology because they help explain how human beliefs, values, and behaviors are shaped by culture rather than by universal standards alone (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Cultural relativism refers to the practice of understanding a culture within its own social, historical, and environmental context rather than judging it according to the values and expectations of another culture (Boas, 1940/2020). Ethnocentrism, by contrast, is the tendency to view one's own culture as normal, superior, or more correct than others (Kottak, 2022). Anthropologists emphasize that all humans are influenced by ethnocentrism to some degree because individuals are raised within particular cultural systems that shape their assumptions about morality, behavior, religion, family life, and social norms.

Understanding Cultural Differences

Cultural relativism encourages individuals to approach cultural differences with openness, empathy, and critical understanding. Anthropologists use this perspective to analyze behaviors and beliefs that may initially seem unfamiliar, unusual, or even irrational from an outsider's viewpoint (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2023). For example, practices involving marriage, food consumption, gender roles, religious rituals, clothing, communication styles, and concepts of beauty vary significantly across societies. In some cultures, direct eye contact is considered respectful and confident, while in others it may be viewed as rude or confrontational. Similarly, standards regarding modesty, family obligations, emotional expression, and social hierarchy differ widely throughout the world (Nanda & Warms, 2021). Cultural relativism does not require people to agree with all cultural practices, but it does encourage understanding how cultural behaviors develop within particular historical and social contexts.

Anthropologists argue that understanding cultural differences is increasingly important in a globalized world characterized by migration, multicultural societies, and rapid cross-cultural interaction (Eriksen, 2020). Exposure to cultural diversity through schools, workplaces, travel, media, and digital communication often brings people with different worldviews into close contact. Cultural relativism helps reduce simplistic judgments and promotes intercultural communication by recognizing that no single culture possesses a monopoly on truth, morality, or proper social behavior (Guest, 2020). This perspective is especially valuable in fields such as healthcare, education, social work, law enforcement, and international relations, where misunderstandings about cultural practices can significantly affect human interactions and outcomes.

Stereotypes and Prejudice

Ethnocentrism can contribute to stereotypes and prejudice when people make oversimplified or negative assumptions about entire cultural groups. Stereotypes are generalized beliefs about members of a group that ignore individual variation and complexity (Haviland et al., 2021). These stereotypes may involve assumptions about intelligence, behavior, work ethic, religion, gender roles, or morality. Although stereotypes can sometimes appear positive, they often reinforce inequality and reduce individuals to simplistic categories rather than recognizing their unique experiences and identities.

Prejudice refers to negative attitudes, emotions, or judgments directed toward individuals or groups based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, or sexuality (Allport, 1954/1979). Anthropologists study prejudice because it is closely connected to systems of social inequality, discrimination, and power. Historical examples such as colonialism, slavery, segregation, antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Asian racism, and xenophobia demonstrate how ethnocentric beliefs have often been used to justify violence, exclusion, and unequal treatment (Omi & Winant, 2015). Modern research in social psychology and anthropology also shows that stereotypes and prejudice are often reinforced through media representation, political rhetoric, educational systems, and institutional practices (American Psychological Association, 2023).

Anthropologists challenge stereotypes by emphasizing cultural complexity, historical context, and shared human diversity. Ethnographic research demonstrates that no cultural group is homogeneous and that individuals within societies hold diverse perspectives, identities, and experiences (Guest, 2020). By examining cultures comparatively and contextually, anthropology seeks to reduce prejudice and encourage more nuanced understandings of human societies.

Cultural Misunderstandings

Cultural misunderstandings occur when individuals interpret behaviors, language, symbols, or social expectations through the lens of their own cultural assumptions rather than understanding them within the context of another culture (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Because cultural norms vary widely, behaviors considered polite, respectful, or normal in one society may be interpreted differently elsewhere. Misunderstandings can emerge in areas such as communication styles, body language, concepts of time, personal space, humor, gender interaction, religious expression, and family obligations (Nanda & Warms, 2021).

For example, some cultures emphasize direct communication and individual self-expression, while others prioritize indirect communication and group harmony. In the United States, punctuality is often treated as highly important in professional settings, whereas other societies may place greater value on flexibility and social relationships over strict adherence to schedules (Eriksen, 2020). Similarly, gestures such as handshakes, physical touch, eye contact, or silence may carry entirely different meanings across cultures. Anthropologists note that many intercultural conflicts arise not because one culture is inherently better or worse, but because individuals interpret unfamiliar behaviors according to their own cultural expectations.

In increasingly multicultural societies such as the United States, cultural misunderstandings can influence education, healthcare, business, immigration, policing, and everyday social interaction (Guest, 2020). Anthropologists emphasize that developing cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills can help reduce conflict and improve cooperation among diverse populations. By practicing cultural relativism and recognizing the limitations of ethnocentric thinking, individuals are better able to navigate cultural diversity with respect, empathy, and critical understanding.

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2.4: Multiculturalism in the United States

The United States is one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world, shaped by centuries of Indigenous history, colonization, slavery, migration, globalization, and cultural exchange (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Anthropologists study multiculturalism to understand how different cultural groups interact, coexist, negotiate identity, and influence one another within a shared society. Multiculturalism refers to the presence and recognition of multiple cultural traditions, ethnic groups, religions, languages, and identities within a single nation-state (Kottak, 2022). Rather than viewing diversity as a problem, multicultural perspectives emphasize the value of cultural variety and the importance of respecting different cultural backgrounds and ways of life. Anthropologists analyze how multicultural societies develop systems of inclusion, exclusion, cooperation, conflict, and identity formation in response to cultural diversity (Guest, 2020).

Cultural Pluralism

Cultural pluralism is the idea that diverse cultural groups can maintain their distinct cultural traditions and identities while still participating in the broader society (Glazer & Moynihan, 1970/1975). In a culturally pluralistic society, individuals are not expected to abandon their languages, customs, religions, or cultural practices in order to be accepted as full members of society. Instead, cultural diversity is recognized as a source of social richness and collective strength. Anthropologists note that cultural pluralism encourages tolerance, intercultural dialogue, and respect for minority communities while allowing individuals to maintain connections to their cultural heritage (Eriksen, 2020).

The United States demonstrates many examples of cultural pluralism through the continued presence of ethnic neighborhoods, bilingual communities, religious diversity, and cultural celebrations such as Lunar New Year festivals, Día de los Muertos celebrations, powwows, Caribbean carnivals, and various immigrant traditions (Levitt, 2021). Schools, workplaces, media, and public institutions increasingly reflect multicultural influences, although inequalities and discrimination still affect many cultural communities. Anthropologists emphasize that cultural pluralism does not eliminate social tensions, but it provides a framework for understanding how diverse populations can coexist while preserving cultural distinctiveness (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023).

Assimilation

Assimilation refers to the process through which minority groups gradually adopt the cultural norms, language, behaviors, and values of the dominant society (Gordon, 1964). Historically, assimilation was often promoted in the United States through the expectation that immigrants and minority groups should conform to mainstream American culture in order to achieve social acceptance and economic mobility. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many European immigrant groups experienced pressure to abandon native languages, customs, and cultural traditions in favor of English language use and American social norms (Alba & Nee, 2003).

Anthropologists recognize that assimilation is often uneven and shaped by race, class, religion, immigration status, and social power. Some groups may assimilate more rapidly into mainstream institutions, while others continue to face barriers related to discrimination or exclusion (Omi & Winant, 2015). Assimilation can also involve cultural loss, including the decline of heritage languages, traditional practices, and intergenerational cultural knowledge. At the same time, many individuals and communities selectively adapt aspects of mainstream culture while preserving important elements of their cultural heritage, demonstrating that cultural identity is often flexible rather than entirely replaced (Guest, 2020).

Melting Pot vs. Salad Bowl

Anthropologists and sociologists have long used the metaphors of the “melting pot” and the “salad bowl” to describe cultural diversity in the United States. The melting pot model suggests that different cultural groups blend together over time to create a single, unified national culture (Israel, 1960). This metaphor became especially influential during periods of mass European immigration to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The melting pot ideal emphasized national unity and assimilation, often encouraging immigrants to minimize cultural differences in favor of a shared American identity.

Critics argue, however, that the melting pot model oversimplifies cultural diversity and often pressures minority groups to conform to dominant cultural norms (Kottak, 2022). In contrast, the salad bowl model emphasizes that cultural groups can retain distinct

identities and traditions while still contributing to the larger society (Nieto, 2017). In this model, diversity is viewed as a strength rather than something to be dissolved into a single culture. Contemporary anthropologists generally recognize that American society reflects aspects of both models simultaneously. While some cultural blending occurs through intermarriage, language change, and shared institutions, many communities continue to preserve unique cultural traditions, languages, religious practices, and ethnic identities across generations (Levitt, 2021).

Hybridity and Syncretism

Globalization, migration, and cultural interaction have increasingly produced forms of cultural hybridity and syncretism within the United States and around the world. Hybridity refers to the blending and mixing of cultural elements from different traditions, resulting in new cultural forms and identities (Bhabha, 1994). Examples of hybridity can be seen in language, cuisine, fashion, music, religion, and popular culture. Foods such as Korean tacos, Tex-Mex cuisine, and fusion sushi reflect the combination of multiple cultural influences, while musical genres such as jazz, hip-hop, reggaeton, and K-pop incorporate elements from diverse cultural traditions (Pieterse, 2019).

Syncretism refers specifically to the blending of religious or belief systems into new spiritual practices and traditions (Stewart & Shaw, 1994). Throughout history, many religions have incorporated beliefs and rituals from different cultures through migration, trade, colonization, and globalization. In the Americas, for example, African spiritual traditions blended with Catholicism to create syncretic religions such as Santería, Vodou, and Candomblé (Haviland et al., 2021). Anthropologists study hybridity and syncretism because they demonstrate that cultures are dynamic rather than isolated or fixed. Cultural exchange continually reshapes identities, traditions, and social life, especially in highly interconnected societies such as the contemporary United States (Eriksen, 2020).

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2.5: Major Cultural Communities in the United States

The United States is home to a wide range of cultural communities shaped by Indigenous history, colonization, slavery, migration, globalization, and cultural exchange. Anthropologists study these communities to better understand how culture, identity, inequality, and historical experience shape social life within a multicultural society (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Although cultural groups are often discussed separately for analytical purposes, anthropologists emphasize that no community is culturally uniform or isolated. Each group contains enormous internal diversity related to language, religion, social class, gender, region, immigration history, and political perspectives (Kottak, 2022). Furthermore, many individuals identify with multiple cultural backgrounds simultaneously, reflecting the increasing complexity of identity in contemporary American society.

African Americans

African Americans are descendants of diverse African populations whose histories in the United States have been profoundly shaped by slavery, segregation, racism, migration, resistance, and cultural creativity (Gates, 2021). The forced migration of millions of Africans through the transatlantic slave trade between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries created one of the foundational experiences shaping American society and racial inequality (Smallwood, 2007). Despite centuries of oppression, African Americans developed rich cultural traditions in language, religion, music, foodways, art, political activism, and community organization that have had enormous influence on American culture as a whole.

Anthropologists and historians note that African American culture has profoundly shaped global music and popular culture through genres such as blues, jazz, gospel, rock, hip-hop, rhythm and blues, and spoken word traditions (Rose, 1994). African American communities have also played central roles in social justice movements including abolition, the Civil Rights Movement, Black feminism, and Black Lives Matter (Taylor, 2016). At the same time, African Americans continue to face structural inequalities related to wealth, healthcare, housing, education, policing, and mass incarceration that are rooted in historical systems of racial discrimination (Alexander, 2020). Anthropologists study these inequalities while also emphasizing the resilience, diversity, and cultural contributions of African American communities throughout U.S. history.

Latino Americans

Latino Americans, also referred to as Hispanic or Latinx populations in some contexts, are among the fastest-growing and most diverse cultural communities in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Latino communities include people with ancestral origins in Mexico, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and Spain, encompassing enormous diversity in language, race, religion, migration history, and cultural traditions (García, 2020). Mexican Americans constitute the largest Latino subgroup in the United States, particularly in states such as California, Texas, Arizona, and Nevada.

Anthropologists emphasize that Latino identity is complex because it intersects with Indigenous, European, African, and mixed ancestries shaped by colonialism and migration (Mendoza, 2018). Latino cultural influences can be seen throughout American society in language, cuisine, music, religion, labor systems, family structures, and political activism. Spanish is the second most widely spoken language in the United States, and bilingualism plays an important role in many Latino communities (Pew Research Center, 2023). Anthropologists also study challenges faced by Latino populations, including immigration debates, labor exploitation, language discrimination, educational inequality, and anti-immigrant sentiment. At the same time, Latino communities continue to shape American cultural life through entrepreneurship, activism, arts, media, and transnational cultural exchange (Guest, 2020).

Asian Americans

Asian Americans represent one of the most diverse cultural categories in the United States, encompassing people with origins in East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Rim (Lee, 2015). Major Asian American populations include Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Indian Americans, Vietnamese Americans, Korean Americans, Japanese Americans, Pakistani Americans, and many others. Asian migration to the United States accelerated during the nineteenth century through labor migration, railroad construction, agriculture, trade, and later professional immigration linked to globalization and educational opportunities (Takaki, 1998).

Anthropologists note that Asian Americans have experienced both exclusion and success within American society. Historical examples of discrimination include the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Japanese American internment during World War II, anti-Asian violence, and stereotypes portraying Asians as perpetual foreigners regardless of citizenship or generational status (Ngai, 2004). The "model minority" stereotype, which portrays Asian Americans as universally successful and economically prosperous, has also been criticized because it ignores the vast economic, linguistic, and educational diversity within Asian American communities (Lee, 2015). Contemporary anthropologists examine how Asian Americans navigate issues of identity, racism, immigration, transnationalism, and cultural hybridity in a globalized world.

Native Americans

Native Americans, also referred to as Indigenous peoples or American Indians in some contexts, are the original inhabitants of the Americas and represent hundreds of distinct nations, tribes, languages, and cultural traditions (Treuer, 2019). Indigenous societies existed throughout North America for thousands of years before European colonization and developed highly diverse political systems, economies, spiritual traditions, agricultural practices, and ecological knowledge systems (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Colonization brought widespread violence, disease, displacement, forced assimilation, and land loss that dramatically affected Indigenous populations across the continent.

Despite these historical traumas, Native American communities continue to preserve and revitalize languages, ceremonies, governance systems, and cultural traditions (TallBear, 2013). Anthropologists increasingly collaborate with Indigenous scholars and communities in ways that emphasize Indigenous sovereignty, self-representation, and decolonizing research practices. Contemporary issues affecting Native American communities include land rights, environmental justice, healthcare access, educational inequality, cultural preservation, and the protection of sacred sites (Whyte, 2020). Indigenous activism movements such as Standing Rock have also drawn international attention to Indigenous environmental and political struggles. Anthropologists emphasize that Native American cultures are not relics of the past but living and evolving communities that continue to shape modern American society.

Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans

Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans represent highly diverse populations connected to regions including the Arab world, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, North Africa, and South Asia (Cainkar, 2009). Although these categories are often grouped together in public discourse, anthropologists emphasize that Middle Eastern identity and Muslim identity are not the same. Many Middle Eastern Americans are Christian, Jewish, Druze, or secular, while many Muslims in the United States are African American, South Asian, Southeast Asian, or converts from other backgrounds (Peek, 2011).

Muslim Americans represent one of the most ethnically diverse religious populations in the United States and include immigrants as well as multi-generational American communities (Pew Research Center, 2021). Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, many Middle Eastern and Muslim communities experienced increased surveillance, discrimination, hate crimes, and Islamophobia (Cainkar, 2009). Anthropologists study how these communities negotiate identity, citizenship, religion, and belonging within broader American society while also maintaining transnational cultural and family connections. At the same time, Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans contribute significantly to education, medicine, business, politics, arts, and public life in the United States.

Pacific Islander Communities

Pacific Islander communities include people with ancestral origins in Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, including Native Hawaiians, Samoans, Tongans, Chamorros, Marshallese, and Fijians, among many others (Diaz, 2015). Pacific Islanders possess rich cultural traditions connected to ocean navigation, kinship networks, oral histories, dance, spirituality, and communal systems of social organization. Anthropologists emphasize that Pacific Islander communities have unique colonial histories linked to U.S. military expansion, nuclear testing, migration, and tourism throughout the Pacific region (Hau'ofa, 2008).

In the United States, Pacific Islanders are often statistically grouped together with Asian Americans despite having distinct historical experiences, health outcomes, migration patterns, and cultural identities (Diaz, 2015). Many Pacific Islander communities face significant socioeconomic and healthcare disparities, including higher rates of poverty, diabetes, and housing insecurity compared to national averages (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). At the same time, Pacific Islander communities maintain strong cultural traditions through dance, language preservation, religious institutions, family networks, and community organizations. Anthropologists study how Pacific Islanders balance cultural continuity with adaptation

to contemporary economic and political realities both in the Pacific Islands and within the United States diaspora.

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2.6: Everyday Cultural Expressions and Anthropological Perspectives

Anthropologists often study everyday cultural practices because they provide insight into how people construct identity, maintain traditions, express values, and navigate social change. Activities such as eating, speaking, listening to music, celebrating holidays, and participating in popular culture may appear ordinary, but they are deeply connected to systems of meaning, history, power, and belonging (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Through ethnographic research and cross-cultural comparison, anthropologists analyze how these daily practices reflect broader social processes including globalization, migration, inequality, colonialism, resistance, and cultural exchange (Guest, 2020). In multicultural societies such as the United States, everyday cultural expressions are constantly evolving as communities interact with one another and adapt to changing economic, technological, and political conditions.

Food Culture

Food is deeply connected to culture, identity, religion, family life, and social organization. Anthropologists study food because dietary practices reflect environmental adaptation, historical contact, migration, trade, and cultural values (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). Meals often serve social functions that reinforce kinship ties, hospitality, religious traditions, and community identity. Different societies develop unique cuisines shaped by geography, available resources, colonization, and intercultural exchange. In the United States, foods such as tacos, barbecue, pizza, gumbo, pho, and sushi demonstrate the blending of Indigenous, African, European, Asian, and Latin American culinary traditions within American culture (Pilcher, 2017).

Food can also communicate social class, morality, religion, and political identity. Dietary practices such as halal, kosher, vegetarianism, veganism, and organic food consumption often reflect religious beliefs, ethical values, environmental concerns, or social status (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Anthropologists additionally study food insecurity, labor exploitation in food industries, and the globalization of fast food systems. Through the study of food culture, anthropologists gain insight into broader systems of economics, inequality, globalization, and cultural identity.

Language and Identity

Language is one of the most important tools humans use to transmit culture, construct identity, and organize social relationships (Duranti, 1997). Anthropologists study language because it reflects cultural values, social hierarchies, ethnicity, nationality, and power relations. The ways people speak—including accents, dialects, slang, and communication styles—often communicate important information about identity and group membership (Bonvillain, 2020). Language also shapes how individuals understand and interpret the world around them.

The United States is highly linguistically diverse due to Indigenous heritage, immigration, and globalization. Spanish remains the second most widely spoken language in the country, while hundreds of other languages are spoken within immigrant and Indigenous communities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Many individuals practice bilingualism or code-switching, meaning they alternate between languages or speech styles depending on social context (Zentella, 1997). Anthropologists also study how language discrimination affects social inequality. Certain accents or dialects, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), are often stigmatized despite being complex and fully developed linguistic systems (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). Language therefore becomes both a source of identity and a site of social power.

Music and Cultural Expression

Music exists in every known human society and plays important social, emotional, religious, and political roles (Merriam, 1964). Anthropologists study music because it communicates identity, preserves historical memory, strengthens community bonds, and expresses shared cultural values. Musical traditions are often connected to rituals, storytelling, dance, spirituality, and collective experiences (Titon, 2015). In multicultural societies, music also reflects migration, globalization, resistance, and cultural exchange.

The United States has been profoundly shaped by the musical contributions of African American, Latino, Indigenous, Asian

American, and immigrant communities. Genres such as jazz, blues, gospel, hip-hop, salsa, mariachi, reggaeton, country, and rock all emerged through cultural interaction and historical processes connected to migration, colonialism, slavery, and globalization (Rose, 1994). Anthropologists additionally study how music functions as political expression and resistance. Throughout history, music has played central roles in civil rights movements, labor struggles, feminist activism, antiwar protests, Indigenous movements, and LGBTQ+ advocacy (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). Contemporary digital media further accelerates the global circulation of music, creating hybrid styles that blend influences from multiple cultures.

Holidays and Rituals

Holidays and rituals are symbolic cultural practices that help societies reinforce shared beliefs, values, traditions, and collective identities (Turner, 1969). Anthropologists define rituals as patterned and meaningful actions associated with important social or spiritual events such as births, marriages, funerals, seasonal celebrations, and religious ceremonies. Rituals often involve music, dance, food, storytelling, clothing, prayer, and symbolic objects that strengthen social solidarity and cultural continuity (Geertz, 1973).

In the United States, holidays reflect the country's cultural and religious diversity. National celebrations such as Thanksgiving and Independence Day coexist alongside traditions connected to immigrant and religious communities, including Lunar New Year, Ramadan, Día de los Muertos, Hanukkah, Diwali, and Indigenous ceremonies (Levitt, 2021). Anthropologists examine how holidays evolve over time and adapt to multicultural environments. Rituals and celebrations can also become sites of political debate concerning national identity, historical memory, religion, and representation. Through the study of rituals, anthropologists better understand how societies create meaning, maintain traditions, and negotiate social change.

Cultural Appropriation

Anthropologists also study cultural appropriation, which occurs when elements of one culture are adopted or used by members of another culture, often without proper understanding, respect, acknowledgment, or permission (Young, 2010). Cultural appropriation becomes especially controversial when members of dominant groups adopt symbols, clothing, music, hairstyles, religious practices, or artistic traditions from historically marginalized communities while ignoring the original cultural significance or the inequalities faced by those communities (Rogers, 2006).

Examples of cultural appropriation may include the commercial use of Indigenous sacred symbols, the use of traditional religious attire as fashion accessories, or the adoption of minority cultural styles without recognition of their historical context. Anthropologists emphasize that not all cultural exchange is appropriation; cultures have always influenced one another through trade, migration, and interaction (Eriksen, 2020). However, appropriation often involves unequal power relationships shaped by colonialism, racism, globalization, and economic exploitation. Anthropologists analyze these debates to better understand issues of representation, ownership, identity, cultural respect, and social inequality in multicultural societies.

At the same time, anthropologists recognize that cultural interaction can also produce appreciation, hybridity, creativity, and mutual exchange when approached respectfully and collaboratively (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). The study of cultural appropriation therefore highlights broader questions about power, ethics, globalization, and the ways cultures influence one another in an interconnected world.

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2.7: Conclusion

Diversity and Shared Humanity

The study of culture and identity demonstrates that human societies are extraordinarily diverse, yet fundamentally connected through shared human experiences and social needs. Anthropologists have shown that all cultures develop systems of language, family organization, belief, symbolism, social rules, and identity formation, even though these systems may differ significantly across societies (Brown, 2004). Cultural diversity reflects humanity's ability to adapt creatively to different historical, environmental, political, and social conditions. At the same time, anthropology emphasizes that beneath these cultural differences, humans share common emotional experiences, social relationships, and biological foundations that connect people across the world (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Recognizing both diversity and shared humanity allows anthropologists to challenge stereotypes and simplistic assumptions about cultural difference while promoting greater understanding of the complexity of human societies.

Anthropologists also emphasize that cultural identities are dynamic rather than fixed. Race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, class, and sexuality are shaped by historical processes, migration, globalization, power structures, and everyday social interactions (Kottak, 2022). As societies change over time, identities also evolve, adapt, and become increasingly interconnected. In multicultural societies such as the United States, individuals often navigate multiple identities simultaneously, demonstrating that culture is flexible and constantly transforming rather than static or isolated (Guest, 2020).

Culture and Identity in a Globalized World

Globalization has intensified interactions among cultures through migration, communication technologies, trade, tourism, media, and transnational social networks (Eriksen, 2020). As a result, cultural ideas, languages, foods, music, fashion, and political movements circulate rapidly across national boundaries, influencing identities and everyday life throughout the world. Anthropologists study globalization because it reshapes how people experience belonging, community, and cultural identity in increasingly interconnected societies (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

In the United States, globalization has contributed to both cultural exchange and social tension. Many individuals participate simultaneously in local, national, and global cultural systems, creating hybrid identities that combine multiple cultural influences (Bhabha, 1994). While globalization can encourage cultural creativity, innovation, and communication, it can also produce inequality, cultural commodification, language loss, and political conflict surrounding immigration, nationalism, and cultural representation (Pieterse, 2019). Anthropologists analyze these complex processes in order to better understand how cultural identities are negotiated within rapidly changing global environments.

Anthropology and the Study of Human Diversity

Anthropology provides valuable tools for studying human diversity scientifically and comparatively. Through ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, cross-cultural analysis, and historical research, anthropologists examine how cultures shape human thought, behavior, institutions, and social relationships (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2023). One of anthropology's central contributions is its emphasis on cultural relativism, which encourages understanding cultural practices within their own historical and social contexts rather than judging them solely according to outside standards (Boas, 1940/2020).

Anthropologists also study how systems of inequality—including racism, sexism, class inequality, religious discrimination, and xenophobia—affect the lived experiences of individuals and communities (Omi & Winant, 2015). By examining these systems critically, anthropology helps reveal how social categories and power structures are constructed and maintained. The discipline therefore contributes not only to academic knowledge but also to broader discussions about social justice, inclusion, human rights, and cultural understanding in contemporary society (Guest, 2020).

The Importance of Cultural Understanding in Contemporary Society

In an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, cultural understanding has become essential for effective communication,

cooperation, and social coexistence. Misunderstandings based on stereotypes, ethnocentrism, prejudice, and misinformation can contribute to discrimination, conflict, and social division (Nanda & Warms, 2021). Anthropology encourages individuals to approach cultural differences with empathy, critical thinking, and openness while recognizing the historical and social contexts that shape human behavior and belief systems.

Cultural understanding is especially important in multicultural societies such as the United States, where individuals from different racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and national backgrounds interact daily in schools, workplaces, communities, and political institutions (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). By studying culture, identity, and diversity anthropologically, students gain a deeper appreciation for the complexity of human societies and the importance of respecting cultural differences while recognizing shared humanity. Ultimately, anthropology helps individuals become more informed global citizens capable of engaging thoughtfully with the cultural diversity that shapes the modern world (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023).

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3: MIGRATION, IMMIGRATION, AND GLOBALIZATION

3.1: Introduction

3.2: Why Humans Migrate

3.3: History of Immigration to the United States

3.4: Borders and Immigration Policy

3.5: Globalization

3.6: Diasporas and Transnational Communities

3.7: Case Studies

3.8: References

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3.1: Introduction

Human migration has been a defining feature of human history for tens of thousands of years. From the earliest migrations of Homo sapiens out of Africa to modern movements across international borders, humans have continually relocated in response to environmental change, economic opportunities, political conflict, social relationships, and cultural exchange (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). Anthropologists study migration because the movement of people profoundly shapes cultures, identities, languages, religions, economies, and political systems. Migration is not simply the physical relocation of individuals from one place to another; it is also a social and cultural process that transforms both migrants and the societies they enter (Brettell, 2022). In the United States, migration has been central to the development of the nation itself, influencing everything from labor systems and urban development to food traditions, music, language diversity, and debates about race, citizenship, and national identity (Daniels, 2021).

Contemporary migration is deeply connected to globalization, the increasing interconnectedness of societies through technology, transportation, communication, trade, media, and transnational economic systems (Eriksen, 2020). Advances in air travel, smartphones, social media, and digital communication now allow migrants to maintain close relationships with family members and communities across national borders in ways that were impossible in earlier generations. For example, many Mexican, Filipino, Indian, Nigerian, and Salvadoran migrants living in the United States regularly send remittances—money transferred to relatives in their countries of origin—which support millions of households worldwide and contribute significantly to local economies (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Migrants today may participate simultaneously in multiple cultural worlds, speaking different languages at home and work, consuming global media, and maintaining social ties across continents through platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, WeChat, Facebook, and Zoom.

Migration and globalization also shape everyday cultural life in the United States. Cities such as Los Angeles, New York, Houston, Miami, Chicago, and San Francisco contain neighborhoods influenced by generations of immigration from Latin America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). These migration patterns have transformed American cuisine, music, language, religion, education, fashion, and popular culture. Foods such as tacos, pho, sushi, halal street food, pupusas, kimchi, and birria tacos have become common parts of American urban life, while musical genres such as reggaeton, hip-hop, K-pop, Afrobeats, and bachata reflect ongoing global cultural exchange (Guest, 2020). At the same time, globalization and migration have contributed to political debates surrounding immigration policy, undocumented migration, border security, refugee resettlement, labor systems, and multiculturalism.

Anthropologists also examine the inequalities connected to migration and globalization. While some migrants move voluntarily in pursuit of education or economic opportunities, others are displaced by war, political violence, poverty, environmental disasters, or climate change (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). Refugees fleeing conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Ukraine, and parts of Central America often face dangerous migration journeys, family separation, detention systems, and discrimination upon arrival in new countries. Climate change is also contributing to increasing migration pressures as rising sea levels, droughts, hurricanes, and wildfires threaten livelihoods and housing in vulnerable regions worldwide (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023). This chapter explores the anthropological study of migration, immigration, and globalization by examining why people migrate, how migration reshapes cultural identities and communities, and how global interconnectedness continues to transform social life in both the United States and the wider world.

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3.2: Why Humans Migrate

Human migration has occurred throughout nearly all of human history and remains one of the most important forces shaping societies, cultures, economies, and identities around the world. Anthropologists study migration because the movement of people influences language, religion, family life, labor systems, political structures, and cultural exchange across local and global scales (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). Migration may occur voluntarily or involuntarily, temporarily or permanently, and across local, national, or international borders. Some people migrate seeking better opportunities, while others are forced to move because of war, violence, environmental disasters, or economic instability (Brettell, 2022). In the modern world, globalization, digital communication, and advances in transportation have intensified migration patterns, connecting distant regions and creating increasingly multicultural societies.

Migration also shapes everyday life in the United States. Many American cities and communities reflect generations of migration from Latin America, Asia, Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. Neighborhoods such as Chinatown in San Francisco, Little Havana in Miami, Koreatown in Los Angeles, and Somali communities in Minneapolis illustrate how migration reshapes urban life, food traditions, religion, language, business, and cultural identity (Guest, 2020). Anthropologists emphasize that migration is not simply about moving from one place to another; it is also about adapting to new cultural environments while often maintaining strong emotional, economic, and social ties to places of origin.

Push and Pull Factors

Migration scholars often explain migration through the concepts of push and pull factors. Push factors are conditions that encourage people to leave their home regions, while pull factors attract people to new locations (Lee, 1966). Push factors may include poverty, unemployment, political corruption, gang violence, war, environmental disasters, religious persecution, or lack of educational opportunities. Pull factors commonly include higher wages, employment opportunities, political freedom, access to healthcare and education, family connections, and improved living conditions (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020).

For example, many migrants from Central America—including Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador—have migrated to the United States due to a combination of gang violence, political instability, poverty, and limited economic opportunities in their home countries (Menjívar, 2000). At the same time, employment opportunities in agriculture, construction, hospitality, healthcare, and service industries in the United States serve as strong pull factors. Migration decisions are often influenced by multiple factors simultaneously rather than by a single cause. Anthropologists also note that migration is shaped by global inequalities, historical relationships between countries, labor demands, and immigration policies rather than solely individual choices (Brettell, 2022).

War and Refugees

War, political violence, persecution, and armed conflict have displaced millions of people throughout history. Refugees are individuals forced to flee their countries because of war, persecution, or fear of persecution related to race, religion, nationality, political beliefs, or membership in particular social groups (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). Unlike voluntary migrants, refugees are often forced to leave suddenly under dangerous and traumatic conditions.

Recent refugee crises have involved populations fleeing conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Sudan, Myanmar, and parts of Central America (UNHCR, 2024). The Syrian civil war alone displaced millions of people, many of whom sought refuge in Europe, Turkey, and North America. Similarly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine beginning in 2022 produced one of the largest refugee crises in Europe since World War II. Anthropologists study refugee experiences to understand how displacement affects identity, family structures, education, religion, mental health, and cultural continuity (Malkki, 1995).

Refugees often face significant challenges after migration, including language barriers, legal uncertainty, discrimination, housing insecurity, and limited access to employment or healthcare. At the same time, refugee communities demonstrate resilience by rebuilding social networks and preserving cultural traditions in new environments. For example, Somali refugee communities in Minnesota have established businesses, mosques, schools, and cultural organizations that maintain connections to Somali culture while adapting to American society (Fassin, 2012). Anthropologists emphasize that refugee migration is closely connected to global politics, colonial histories, international conflict, and humanitarian systems.

Labor Migration

Labor migration occurs when people move primarily for employment and economic opportunity. Throughout history, labor migration has been essential to agriculture, industrialization, urban development, and global capitalism (Massey et al., 1993). Migrant workers contribute significantly to industries such as farming, construction, caregiving, hospitality, technology, healthcare, transportation, and manufacturing. Economic inequality between countries often drives labor migration as workers move from regions with lower wages and fewer opportunities to areas with stronger labor markets (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020).

The United States has long relied on migrant labor. Mexican and Central American migrants have played major roles in agriculture and food production, while Filipino migrants have become highly represented in nursing and healthcare professions across the United States (Choy, 2003). Indian migrants have contributed significantly to technology industries in Silicon Valley and other major urban centers, while Caribbean and African immigrants contribute to education, transportation, healthcare, and service industries throughout American cities (Guest, 2020).

Anthropologists study labor migration because it reveals how globalization connects economies and labor systems across national borders. Many migrant workers send remittances to relatives in their countries of origin, helping support families, education, housing, and local economies. According to the World Bank (2024), remittances sent globally by migrants amount to hundreds of billions of dollars annually and are economically vital for many developing countries. At the same time, migrant workers often face exploitative labor conditions, low wages, discrimination, unsafe workplaces, and legal vulnerabilities connected to immigration status (Ngai, 2004).

Climate Migration

Climate migration refers to human movement influenced by environmental changes such as droughts, floods, hurricanes, wildfires, sea-level rise, crop failure, and desertification (International Organization for Migration, 2023). Anthropologists and climate scientists increasingly recognize climate change as a major factor contributing to migration and displacement worldwide. Environmental migration has existed throughout human history, but contemporary climate change is intensifying migration pressures on vulnerable populations (Whyte, 2020).

Communities in coastal regions, island nations, and drought-prone agricultural areas are particularly vulnerable. Rising sea levels threaten Pacific Island nations such as Kiribati and Tuvalu, where some residents may eventually be forced to relocate permanently (IPCC, 2023). In the United States, hurricanes such as Katrina in 2005 and Maria in 2017 displaced large populations, especially affecting poorer and marginalized communities with fewer economic resources (Fussell, 2015). Severe droughts in parts of Central America have also contributed to agricultural collapse and migration toward the United States as farming families struggle to survive economically (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020).

Anthropologists emphasize that climate migration is also a social justice issue because poorer populations and Indigenous communities are often disproportionately affected by environmental degradation despite contributing least to global carbon emissions (Whyte, 2020). Climate migration raises important ethical and political questions concerning borders, refugee protections, housing, resource access, and global inequality in the twenty-first century.

Family Reunification

Family reunification is another major reason people migrate and refers to migration motivated by the desire to join relatives already living in another country or region. Family-based migration has historically shaped immigration patterns in the United States because social networks help migrants find housing, employment, childcare, emotional support, and community connections (Brettell, 2022). Immigration laws in many countries, including the United States, prioritize family reunification by allowing citizens and permanent residents to sponsor close relatives for legal immigration.

Anthropologists study family reunification because migration often occurs through chain migration, in which earlier migrants help additional relatives migrate over time (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). For example, many immigrant neighborhoods develop through extended kinship networks that gradually bring multiple generations and family members into the same communities. In cities such as Los Angeles, Houston, New York, and Chicago, immigrant communities often maintain strong family-centered social networks connected across national borders.

Family reunification also contributes to transnational family structures in which relatives live in different countries but remain connected through communication technologies, travel, remittances, and shared cultural practices (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

Many migrants regularly communicate with relatives through WhatsApp, Zoom, Facebook, and other digital platforms while maintaining cultural traditions, religious celebrations, and emotional ties across borders. However, immigration restrictions, deportation policies, and border enforcement can separate families for years and create emotional and financial hardship (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Anthropologists examine these experiences to better understand how migration policies affect kinship, parenting, identity, and everyday life within migrant communities.

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3.3: History of Immigration to the United States

The history of the United States is fundamentally a history of migration, colonization, forced displacement, and cultural interaction. Anthropologists study immigration historically because population movements have shaped the country's demographic diversity, labor systems, political institutions, racial hierarchies, economic development, and cultural identity (Daniels, 2021). Different migration waves occurred under distinct historical conditions, including colonization, slavery, industrialization, globalization, war, and economic inequality. At the same time, immigration policies and public attitudes toward migrants have often reflected broader struggles surrounding race, religion, nationality, labor competition, and national identity (Ngai, 2004). Understanding the historical development of immigration helps explain the multicultural composition of the United States today and the continuing political debates surrounding migration and citizenship.

Indigenous Populations Before Colonization

Long before the arrival of Europeans, the Americas were inhabited by diverse Indigenous populations with highly developed societies, governments, trade networks, spiritual systems, agricultural practices, and languages (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Anthropological and archaeological evidence indicates that the ancestors of Indigenous peoples migrated into the Americas from Asia thousands of years ago, likely through Beringia, a land bridge that once connected Siberia and Alaska during the Ice Age (Smithsonian Institution, 2023). Over thousands of years, Indigenous peoples spread throughout North, Central, and South America and adapted to diverse environments ranging from deserts and plains to forests, mountains, and coastal regions.

Prior to European colonization, Indigenous societies in what is now the United States included hundreds of distinct nations and cultures. These included the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in the Northeast, Pueblo societies in the Southwest, Mississippian civilizations in the Southeast, Plains nations such as the Lakota, and numerous California Indigenous communities with sophisticated ecological knowledge systems (Treuer, 2019). Many Indigenous societies practiced advanced agriculture, trade, architecture, governance, and astronomy long before European arrival. For example, Cahokia, located near present-day St. Louis, was one of the largest urban centers in North America around 1100 CE and contained monumental earthen structures and extensive trade networks (Pauketat, 2009).

European colonization beginning in the late fifteenth century brought catastrophic consequences for Indigenous populations, including disease epidemics, warfare, forced displacement, cultural suppression, boarding schools, and land seizure (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Diseases such as smallpox devastated Indigenous communities that lacked immunity to European illnesses. Despite these historical traumas, Native American and Indigenous communities continue to preserve and revitalize languages, ceremonies, governance systems, and cultural traditions throughout the United States today (TallBear, 2013).

European Immigration

Large-scale European migration to North America began during the colonial period and accelerated throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Early colonists included Spanish, English, French, and Dutch settlers who established colonies connected to trade, religious expansion, territorial conquest, and resource extraction (Daniels, 2021). Many Europeans migrated seeking land ownership, economic opportunity, or religious freedom. English Puritans, for example, established colonies in New England partly to escape religious persecution in England, while Spanish colonizers expanded missions and settlements throughout the Southwest, Florida, and California (Takaki, 2008).

During the nineteenth century, industrialization and urban growth created enormous demand for labor, attracting millions of immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia, and other parts of Europe (Foner, 2000). Irish immigrants fled the Great Famine of the 1840s, while many southern and eastern Europeans escaped poverty, political instability, and religious persecution. Ellis Island in New York became one of the most important immigration processing centers in American history, receiving millions of European immigrants between 1892 and 1954 (Daniels, 2021).

European immigrants transformed American cities, industries, and cultural life. Italian immigrants contributed to construction, restaurants, and urban labor systems, while Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe established businesses and cultural institutions in cities such as New York and Chicago (Foner, 2000). However, many European immigrants initially faced discrimination and xenophobia. Irish Catholics, Italians, and Eastern European Jews were often portrayed as racially or culturally inferior by earlier Anglo-American populations (Omi & Winant, 2015). Over time, many European immigrant groups became

incorporated into broader definitions of whiteness within American society, illustrating how racial categories have changed historically.

Forced Migration and Slavery

One of the most significant migrations in American history was the forced migration of millions of Africans through the transatlantic slave trade. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, enslaved Africans were kidnapped, sold, and transported across the Atlantic Ocean under brutal conditions to provide labor for plantation economies in the Americas (Smallwood, 2007). Slavery became central to the economic development of the United States, especially in the production of cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugar (Baptist, 2014).

Anthropologists emphasize that enslaved Africans came from diverse societies with distinct languages, religions, technologies, and cultural traditions (Mintz & Price, 1992). Despite severe oppression, African-descended populations preserved and transformed many cultural traditions that profoundly influenced American society. African cultural influences can be seen in music, religion, language, foodways, storytelling, dance, and artistic traditions throughout the United States. Musical genres such as blues, jazz, gospel, rock, and hip-hop all emerged from African American cultural experiences and later influenced global popular culture (Rose, 1994).

The legacy of slavery continued after emancipation through segregation, racial violence, discriminatory laws, economic exclusion, and systemic racism (Alexander, 2020). The Great Migration of the early twentieth century, during which millions of African Americans moved from the rural South to northern and western cities seeking employment and escape from Jim Crow segregation, also transformed American urban culture and politics (Wilkerson, 2010). Anthropologists study slavery and forced migration to understand how systems of racial inequality and labor exploitation shaped both American institutions and contemporary social disparities.

Asian Immigration

Asian immigration to the United States increased significantly during the nineteenth century, especially during periods of railroad construction, mining expansion, agriculture, and industrial development (Lee, 2015). Chinese immigrants arrived in large numbers during the California Gold Rush and later worked extensively on the transcontinental railroad. Japanese, Filipino, Korean, South Asian, and Vietnamese migrants also contributed labor to agriculture, fishing industries, military service, healthcare, and urban economies throughout the United States and Hawai‘i (Takaki, 2008).

Asian immigrants frequently faced exclusion and discrimination. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 became the first major federal law restricting immigration based explicitly on nationality and race (Ngai, 2004). Anti-Asian racism intensified during periods of economic anxiety and war. During World War II, more than 120,000 Japanese Americans were forcibly placed into internment camps despite many being U.S. citizens (Daniels, 1993). Anthropologists examine these histories to understand how racial stereotypes and nationalism shaped immigration policy and racial formation in the United States.

Following immigration reforms in 1965, Asian immigration increased dramatically, leading to the growth of Chinese, Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, Filipino, and other Asian American communities in cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Houston, and New York (Lee, 2015). Asian Americans today represent one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States and contribute significantly to education, healthcare, business, science, and technology industries. Anthropologists also critique stereotypes such as the “model minority” myth because they ignore the economic and cultural diversity within Asian American populations and can obscure ongoing discrimination and inequality (Lee, 2015).

Latin American Migration

Migration from Latin America has profoundly shaped modern American society, particularly since the twentieth century. Latino populations in the United States include people with origins in Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean, representing enormous diversity in race, language, religion, and cultural traditions (García, 2020). Mexican migration has especially deep historical roots because much of the American Southwest—including California, Texas, Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico—was formerly part of Mexico prior to the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846–1848 (Takaki, 2008).

Labor demands in agriculture, construction, meatpacking, hospitality, and service industries encouraged migration from Mexico and Central America throughout the twentieth century (Massey et al., 2002). Programs such as the Bracero Program during World

War II recruited Mexican laborers to address agricultural labor shortages in the United States. Political instability, gang violence, economic inequality, and civil wars in countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela also contributed to migration flows into the United States (Menjívar, 2000).

Latino communities have transformed American culture through language, cuisine, music, religion, sports, labor systems, and political activism. Spanish is now the second most widely spoken language in the United States, and cultural traditions such as Día de los Muertos, salsa music, mariachi, reggaeton, and Latin American cuisines have become highly visible parts of American cultural life (Pew Research Center, 2023). Anthropologists study Latino migration because it highlights the connections between globalization, labor systems, transnationalism, family networks, and identity formation.

Contemporary Migration Patterns

Contemporary migration to the United States reflects increasing globalization, technological connectivity, climate change, economic inequality, and political instability (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). Today, migrants arrive from nearly every region of the world, including Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Immigration patterns have become more globally diverse than earlier periods dominated primarily by European migration (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

Modern migration includes refugees, asylum seekers, international students, highly skilled professionals, temporary workers, and undocumented migrants. Cities such as Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Toronto, and London increasingly function as global multicultural centers shaped by transnational migration and cultural exchange (Guest, 2020). Advances in communication technologies allow migrants to maintain close relationships with relatives abroad through WhatsApp, Facebook, WeChat, Zoom, and other digital platforms, creating transnational communities that span multiple countries simultaneously (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

At the same time, immigration remains politically controversial in the United States. Debates surrounding border security, undocumented migration, refugee admissions, asylum seekers, citizenship, and deportation reflect broader anxieties about globalization, race, economic inequality, labor competition, and national identity (Ngai, 2004). Anthropologists emphasize that migration is a normal and enduring aspect of human history and that understanding contemporary migration requires examining both the structural forces that drive migration and the lived experiences of migrants themselves.

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3.4: Borders and Immigration Policy

Borders and immigration policies play a central role in shaping migration patterns, labor systems, national identity, political debates, and everyday life in the modern world. Anthropologists study borders not only as physical boundaries separating nation-states, but also as social and political systems that regulate the movement of people, goods, ideas, and identities (De Genova, 2017). Immigration policies determine who can legally enter a country, who may become a citizen, who can work or study, and who may face detention or deportation. These policies are shaped by economic conditions, labor demands, security concerns, political ideologies, racial attitudes, and historical relationships between countries (Ngai, 2004). In the United States, immigration policy has long reflected broader debates surrounding race, national belonging, economic opportunity, globalization, and multiculturalism.

The United States shares one of the world's most heavily monitored borders with Mexico, stretching nearly 2,000 miles across California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Border regions are complex social spaces where migration, trade, family ties, labor systems, and cultural exchange intersect daily (Chavez, 2013). Millions of people legally cross the U.S.-Mexico border every year for work, education, tourism, and commerce, while others attempt dangerous crossings due to poverty, violence, or limited legal migration pathways. Anthropologists emphasize that borders are not merely lines on a map but highly unequal spaces shaped by political power, surveillance, militarization, and global inequality (De León, 2015).

Citizenship

Citizenship refers to legal membership within a nation-state and generally includes rights and protections such as voting, legal recognition, political participation, and access to certain government services (Anderson, 2006). In the United States, citizenship can be acquired by birth within U.S. territory, through parents who are citizens, or through naturalization for immigrants who meet legal requirements established by immigration law (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2024). Anthropologists study citizenship because it shapes access to education, healthcare, employment, housing, mobility, and political participation.

Citizenship is also connected to identity and belonging. Throughout American history, many groups—including Indigenous peoples, African Americans, Asian immigrants, and women—faced legal and political barriers limiting full citizenship rights (Ngai, 2004). For example, Native Americans were not universally recognized as U.S. citizens until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, and many Asian immigrants were historically denied naturalization due to racial exclusion laws (Lee, 2015). Anthropologists emphasize that citizenship is not only a legal status but also a social process connected to race, nationalism, language, and cultural identity (Ong, 1999).

Globalization has further complicated ideas about citizenship because many migrants maintain strong ties to multiple countries simultaneously. For example, immigrants may live and work in the United States while regularly communicating with relatives abroad, sending remittances, participating in foreign elections, or maintaining dual citizenship status (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). These transnational connections challenge older ideas that immigrants completely sever ties with their countries of origin.

Undocumented Migration

Undocumented migration refers to the movement or residence of individuals who lack official legal authorization to enter or remain in a country (De Genova, 2002). In the United States, undocumented migrants may include individuals who crossed borders without authorization, overstayed temporary visas, or lost legal immigration status because of changing laws or expired documentation. Anthropologists emphasize that undocumented migration is closely tied to global economic inequality, labor demands, political instability, and restrictive immigration systems rather than simply individual choices (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020).

Undocumented migrants contribute significantly to industries such as agriculture, food processing, construction, landscaping, caregiving, hospitality, and domestic labor throughout the United States economy (Pew Research Center, 2024). California's agricultural industry, for example, relies heavily on migrant labor for harvesting fruits, vegetables, and other crops. Many undocumented workers perform physically demanding labor while facing low wages, limited legal protections, unsafe working conditions, and fear of deportation (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012).

Anthropologists also study how undocumented status affects everyday life and identity. Many undocumented migrants live

in “mixed-status” families where some relatives are citizens while others are undocumented. Children in these families may experience anxiety, fear of family separation, housing insecurity, and economic hardship connected to immigration enforcement policies (Gonzales, 2016). At the same time, undocumented communities continue to build businesses, religious organizations, cultural networks, and social support systems within American society.

DACA

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was established in 2012 to provide temporary protection from deportation and work authorization to certain undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children (USCIS, 2024). Individuals eligible for DACA are often referred to as “Dreamers,” a term connected to proposed federal legislation known as the DREAM Act. DACA recipients are not granted citizenship or permanent legal residency, but the program allows many young immigrants to attend college, obtain employment, apply for driver’s licenses in many states, and participate more fully in social and economic life.

Anthropologists study DACA because it demonstrates how immigration policy shapes identity, mental health, education, and belonging (Gonzales, 2016). Many DACA recipients grew up in the United States, attended American schools, speak English fluently, and identify culturally as American despite lacking permanent legal status. DACA has allowed many young immigrants to pursue careers in healthcare, education, law, business, and public service. During the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of DACA recipients worked as essential healthcare workers, teachers, and food supply employees throughout the country (American Immigration Council, 2023).

At the same time, DACA recipients continue to face uncertainty because the program depends on executive policy decisions and ongoing legal challenges. Anthropologists emphasize that this uncertainty affects family planning, employment opportunities, psychological well-being, and long-term stability for many immigrant families (Patler & Laster Pirtle, 2018).

Deportation

Deportation refers to the formal removal of noncitizens from a country for violating immigration laws or other legal regulations (Golash-Boza, 2015). Immigration enforcement and deportation systems in the United States expanded significantly during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly following increased border securitization after the September 11, 2001 attacks (De Genova & Peutz, 2010). Deportation may involve detention centers, immigration courts, surveillance systems, and border enforcement agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Anthropologists study deportation because it has major social and emotional consequences for individuals, families, and communities. Deportation can separate parents from children, disrupt local economies, and create long-term psychological stress within immigrant communities (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Families with mixed immigration statuses often live with constant fear that relatives may be detained or deported. In some cases, U.S.-born citizen children remain in the United States while deported parents return to countries where children may have never lived (Golash-Boza, 2015).

Anthropologists also examine how deportation systems are connected to race and criminalization. Latino migrants, especially Mexicans and Central Americans, are disproportionately targeted by immigration enforcement despite undocumented migrants originating from many different regions of the world (Chavez, 2013). Immigration raids, detention centers, and deportation policies often generate fear and mistrust toward government institutions among immigrant communities.

Border Politics

Border politics refers to political debates and policies concerning immigration control, border security, refugee admissions, asylum seekers, undocumented migration, and national sovereignty (De Genova, 2017). In the United States, border politics have become highly polarized and are frequently connected to broader debates about race, globalization, economic inequality, labor competition, and national identity (Chavez, 2013).

Supporters of stricter border enforcement often argue that stronger borders are necessary for national security, crime prevention, economic regulation, and immigration control. Others emphasize the humanitarian dimensions of migration and advocate for policies protecting asylum seekers, refugees, labor rights, and family reunification (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). Anthropologists analyze how media representation and political rhetoric shape public perceptions of migrants, sometimes reinforcing stereotypes, xenophobia, and fears surrounding immigration.

Anthropologists also study the human consequences of border enforcement policies. Many migrants attempting to cross borders face dangerous journeys through deserts, rivers, mountains, or oceans. Along the U.S.-Mexico border, thousands of migrants have died from dehydration, heat exposure, drowning, or violence while attempting to cross remote desert regions in Arizona and Texas (De León, 2015). Humanitarian organizations frequently leave water, food, and medical aid in border regions to reduce migrant deaths.

At the same time, borders are also spaces of cultural interaction and economic exchange. Border cities such as San Diego-Tijuana and El Paso-Ciudad Juárez contain deeply interconnected economies, families, languages, and social networks that cross national boundaries daily (Vila, 2000). Anthropologists emphasize that borders are not simply barriers separating societies but dynamic social spaces shaped by globalization, migration, labor systems, and human relationships.

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3.5: Globalization

Globalization refers to the increasing interconnectedness of societies through trade, migration, communication technologies, transportation, media, finance, politics, and cultural exchange across national boundaries (Eriksen, 2020). Anthropologists study globalization because it affects nearly every aspect of human life, including economics, identity, language, labor systems, religion, food culture, politics, migration patterns, and everyday social interaction. While global connections have existed for centuries through trade routes and empires, contemporary globalization has accelerated dramatically due to advances in air travel, the internet, smartphones, digital communication, and global financial systems (Inda & Rosaldo, 2008). Today, people, products, ideas, music, fashion, and information move across the world at unprecedented speed, creating new forms of cultural interaction and economic integration.

Globalization has transformed life in the United States and around the world. Clothing sold in American stores may be designed in Europe, manufactured in Bangladesh or Vietnam, marketed through social media platforms headquartered in California, and shipped globally through international supply chains. Similarly, a teenager in Los Angeles may listen to Korean pop music, watch Japanese anime, eat Mexican food, use Chinese-made electronics, and communicate instantly with friends or relatives in other countries through TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, or WeChat (Guest, 2020). Anthropologists examine globalization not only as an economic process, but also as a cultural and political process that creates opportunities, inequalities, hybrid identities, and new forms of social connection.

Economic Globalization

Economic globalization refers to the growing integration of national economies through international trade, global financial systems, multinational corporations, outsourcing, and transnational production networks (Steger, 2020). Advances in transportation and communication technologies allow corporations to coordinate production across multiple countries, often locating manufacturing in regions where labor costs are lower. As a result, products consumed in the United States are frequently produced through global supply chains involving workers from many parts of the world.

For example, companies such as Apple design products in the United States while relying on factories in China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and other countries for manufacturing and assembly (Pun, Chan, & Selden, 2020). Similarly, major clothing brands often outsource production to factories in Bangladesh, Cambodia, or Honduras, where workers may receive significantly lower wages than workers in wealthier countries. Anthropologists study these labor systems to understand how globalization connects consumers, workers, corporations, and governments across national boundaries.

Economic globalization has created both opportunities and inequalities. Global trade can generate employment, technological development, and economic growth in some regions, while also contributing to labor exploitation, environmental degradation, wage inequality, and economic instability in others (Harvey, 2005). Many workers in global factories face unsafe working conditions, long hours, and low pay. The 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh, which killed more than 1,100 workers producing clothing for international brands, became a global symbol of labor inequality within global capitalism (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). Anthropologists analyze these inequalities to better understand how global economic systems shape human lives differently depending on class, nationality, gender, and political power.

Cultural Globalization

Cultural globalization refers to the worldwide exchange and circulation of cultural ideas, values, traditions, languages, media, music, food, fashion, and entertainment (Inda & Rosaldo, 2008). Anthropologists study cultural globalization because it reshapes identities, lifestyles, and cultural practices across societies. Through television, movies, streaming services, tourism, migration, and social media, people today are exposed to cultural influences from around the world on a daily basis.

American popular culture has spread globally through Hollywood films, fast-food chains, hip-hop music, blue jeans, sports, and social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Netflix (Steger, 2020). At the same time, cultural influences increasingly move into the United States from other regions of the world. Korean popular culture, including K-pop groups such as BTS and Blackpink, has become enormously popular among American youth, while anime from Japan, Latin American music genres such as reggaeton, and African musical styles such as Afrobeats have gained global audiences (Jin, 2016).

Anthropologists emphasize that cultural globalization does not simply create cultural uniformity. Instead, local communities often adapt global influences in culturally specific ways, producing hybrid cultural forms that combine local traditions with global trends (Pieterse, 2019). For example, fast-food restaurants in India may serve vegetarian options that reflect local religious practices, while immigrant communities in the United States blend traditional cultural customs with American influences. Anthropologists refer to these processes as hybridity and cultural syncretism because cultures continuously influence and reshape one another.

Technology and Social Media

Technology and digital communication have dramatically accelerated globalization by allowing people to communicate instantly across the world. Smartphones, video calls, social media platforms, and streaming services now connect billions of people globally through shared information, entertainment, activism, and social interaction (Miller et al., 2021). Anthropologists study technology because digital communication reshapes relationships, identity formation, political participation, migration experiences, and cultural exchange.

Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp allow cultural trends, music, fashion, memes, political movements, and news to spread rapidly across borders. For example, social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter gained international visibility partly through digital media and global online activism (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Similarly, immigrant families often maintain close relationships across countries through video calls, messaging apps, and social media communication. Migrants today can participate in family events, religious ceremonies, and political discussions in their countries of origin without physically returning home.

Technology also creates new forms of inequality known as the digital divide, referring to unequal access to internet services, digital devices, and technological literacy (Noble, 2018). Wealthier populations generally have greater access to education, digital infrastructure, and online opportunities, while poorer communities may face barriers to technological participation. Anthropologists also study how algorithms, surveillance systems, artificial intelligence, and digital media influence political polarization, misinformation, consumer behavior, and cultural representation in contemporary societies.

Global Labor Systems

Global labor systems connect workers, corporations, and economies across national boundaries through migration, outsourcing, international trade, and transnational production networks (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). Anthropologists examine how globalization depends heavily on the movement of labor and the unequal distribution of economic power between countries. Workers in developing nations often produce goods consumed in wealthier countries, while migrants travel internationally to fill labor shortages in agriculture, healthcare, construction, domestic work, transportation, and service industries.

For example, Filipino nurses and caregivers work extensively in hospitals and elder care facilities throughout the United States, Canada, the Middle East, and Europe, creating what anthropologists describe as global care chains (Parreñas, 2015). Similarly, migrant farmworkers from Mexico and Central America play essential roles in harvesting crops throughout California and other agricultural regions of the United States. These labor systems allow wealthier countries to meet labor demands while often depending on workers who experience legal vulnerability, family separation, low wages, and exploitative conditions (Ngai, 2004).

Anthropologists also study how labor migration affects family life and gender roles. In some cases, parents migrate internationally for employment while children remain in their countries of origin under the care of relatives. Remittances sent by migrant workers support education, housing, healthcare, and local economies in many countries worldwide (World Bank, 2024). At the same time, global labor systems often reinforce inequalities connected to race, class, nationality, gender, and immigration status.

Transnationalism

Transnationalism refers to the process through which migrants maintain active social, economic, political, and cultural connections across national borders (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Anthropologists use this concept to describe how globalization allows migrants to participate simultaneously in multiple societies rather than completely assimilating into only one country. Modern transportation and communication technologies make it easier for migrants to travel, send money, communicate with relatives, consume media from their home countries, and maintain cultural traditions abroad.

For example, Mexican migrants living in California may regularly send remittances to relatives in Mexico, participate in hometown festivals through online communication, vote in Mexican elections, and travel between countries while also participating in

American workplaces and schools (Smith, 2006). Similarly, Indian American families may maintain close ties to relatives in India through WhatsApp, Bollywood films, religious ceremonies, and frequent international travel. Chinese, Nigerian, Salvadoran, Filipino, and Somali immigrant communities also maintain strong transnational networks connecting families, businesses, religious institutions, and cultural organizations across countries.

Anthropologists emphasize that transnationalism challenges older ideas about immigration and assimilation by demonstrating that migrants often develop identities connected to multiple nations and cultures simultaneously (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). In increasingly globalized societies, people may feel emotionally, culturally, politically, and economically connected to several places at once. Transnationalism therefore illustrates how migration and globalization continue to reshape identity, family life, culture, and social belonging in the modern world.

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3.6: Diasporas and Transnational Communities

Anthropologists use the term diaspora to describe populations that have migrated or been dispersed from their ancestral homelands while maintaining social, cultural, emotional, economic, or political connections to those places (Clifford, 1994). Diasporas may form through voluntary migration, labor migration, colonization, war, slavery, political persecution, or environmental displacement. Today, diasporic communities exist throughout the world and play major roles in shaping multicultural societies, global economies, political movements, and cultural exchange (Vertovec, 2009). In the United States, many immigrant populations—including Mexican, Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Nigerian, Armenian, Jewish, Somali, Korean, Cuban, and Haitian communities—maintain strong transnational relationships connecting them to countries of origin while also building lives within American society.

Anthropologists study diasporas because migration rarely involves a complete break from one's homeland. Instead, migrants often maintain ongoing ties through language, religion, family relationships, food traditions, business networks, media consumption, travel, and digital communication (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Advances in air travel, smartphones, social media, and internet communication have made it easier than ever for migrants to remain connected across national boundaries. Today, a migrant living in Los Angeles may speak daily with relatives in Mexico through WhatsApp, send money electronically, watch television programs from their home country, and participate in family celebrations through Zoom or social media platforms. Anthropologists emphasize that these transnational connections reshape ideas about identity, citizenship, family, and belonging in an increasingly globalized world.

Maintaining Ties to Homelands

Many migrants maintain strong cultural and emotional ties to their countries or regions of origin even after settling permanently in another society. These ties may involve language preservation, religious practices, traditional foods, music, holidays, political participation, and ongoing communication with relatives abroad (Vertovec, 2009). Anthropologists note that immigrant communities often create cultural institutions such as churches, mosques, temples, restaurants, language schools, and cultural festivals that help preserve connections to ancestral homelands while adapting to life in new societies.

For example, Mexican American communities throughout California and Texas continue to celebrate traditions such as Día de los Muertos and Mexican Independence Day, while Chinese American communities celebrate Lunar New Year festivals in cities such as San Francisco and New York (Guest, 2020). Similarly, Indian American communities maintain religious and cultural traditions through Hindu temples, Sikh gurdwaras, Diwali celebrations, and Bollywood film culture. Somali American communities in Minneapolis have established businesses, mosques, and social organizations that maintain linguistic, religious, and cultural ties to Somalia while participating in American urban life (Fassin, 2012).

Anthropologists emphasize that maintaining homeland ties does not prevent migrants from adapting to life in the United States. Instead, many immigrants simultaneously participate in both American society and transnational cultural networks. These connections often strengthen family relationships and cultural continuity across generations while contributing to multicultural diversity within American society (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

Remittances

Remittances are funds or resources sent by migrants to relatives or communities in their countries of origin. Anthropologists and economists study remittances because they play a major role in supporting families, education, healthcare, housing, and local economies around the world (World Bank, 2024). Global remittances amount to hundreds of billions of dollars annually and are economically vital for many developing countries, often exceeding foreign aid in some regions.

Many migrant workers in the United States regularly send money to family members in countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, the Philippines, India, Haiti, and Nigeria (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). These remittances may help pay for school tuition, medical care, food, housing construction, small businesses, or transportation. For example, many Filipino nurses and caregivers working abroad support extended family members in the Philippines through regular remittance payments, while Mexican migrants in the United States often contribute financially to relatives and hometown development projects in Mexico (Parreñas, 2015).

Anthropologists also examine the emotional and social dimensions of remittances. Sending money is often viewed not simply as an economic activity but as an expression of kinship obligation, love, family responsibility, and social identity (Brettell, 2022). However, migration may also create emotional strain and pressure when family members depend heavily on remittance income. In some cases, migrants work long hours under difficult conditions in order to financially support relatives abroad while sacrificing time with their own immediate families in the United States.

Bicultural Identities

Many migrants and children of immigrants develop bicultural identities, meaning they navigate and participate in two or more cultural systems simultaneously (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). Bicultural individuals may speak multiple languages, celebrate traditions from different cultures, consume diverse forms of media, and adapt behavior depending on social context. Anthropologists emphasize that bicultural identities are increasingly common in multicultural and globalized societies such as the United States.

For example, a Mexican American student may speak Spanish at home and English at school, celebrate both Día de los Muertos and Thanksgiving, and combine elements of Mexican and American cultural traditions in everyday life. Similarly, Korean American youth may balance expectations connected to Korean family values with broader American social norms, while Muslim American students may navigate both Islamic religious practices and mainstream American cultural environments (Guest, 2020).

Anthropologists study biculturalism because it reveals how identities are flexible, dynamic, and socially constructed rather than fixed or singular. Bicultural individuals often develop strong cross-cultural communication skills and adaptability, but they may also experience pressures related to discrimination, stereotyping, generational conflict, or questions about belonging (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). Some second-generation immigrants report feeling “too American” in their parents’ homeland but “too foreign” in the United States, reflecting the complex identity negotiations common within transnational communities.

Global Families

Migration increasingly creates global families, also called transnational families, in which relatives live across different countries while maintaining close social, emotional, and economic relationships (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). Anthropologists study global families because migration often transforms parenting, caregiving, marriage, communication, and kinship structures. Advances in digital technology now allow families separated by borders to remain connected through video calls, messaging apps, social media, and online celebrations.

For example, migrant parents working in the United States may maintain daily communication with children living in Mexico, the Philippines, or Central America through WhatsApp or Zoom while sending remittances to support education and housing (Parreñas, 2015). Some children are raised by grandparents or extended relatives while parents work abroad, creating family systems that stretch across national boundaries. Filipino labor migration has become one of the most widely studied examples of global family systems because many overseas workers spend years separated from spouses and children while working internationally in healthcare, domestic labor, shipping, or service industries (Parreñas, 2015).

Anthropologists note that global families often experience both opportunities and emotional challenges. Migration may provide improved economic opportunities, education, and financial stability, but long-term separation can also create loneliness, stress, and difficulties in maintaining family relationships (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). Children in transnational families may experience mixed emotions regarding absent parents, while migrants themselves often struggle with homesickness and cultural adjustment. Despite these challenges, global families demonstrate how kinship, caregiving, and emotional bonds continue across borders in an increasingly interconnected world.

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3.7: Case Studies

Anthropologists often use case studies to examine how migration, globalization, identity, and transnationalism shape the everyday experiences of real communities. Case studies allow researchers to analyze how historical events, immigration policies, economic systems, family structures, religion, race, and globalization affect specific populations in different social contexts (Brettell, 2022). Through ethnographic research, interviews, participant observation, and historical analysis, anthropologists explore how migrant communities maintain cultural traditions, adapt to new environments, navigate discrimination, and develop transnational identities across generations. The following examples illustrate how migration experiences differ depending on history, politics, labor systems, and global inequality while also demonstrating common themes of resilience, adaptation, and cultural continuity.

Mexican-American Communities

Mexican-American communities represent one of the largest and most historically significant migrant populations in the United States. Mexican migration has deep roots because much of the present-day American Southwest—including California, Texas, Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico—was formerly part of Mexico before the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846–1848 (Takaki, 2008). As a result, many Mexican-American families have histories in the region that predate the modern U.S.-Mexico border itself.

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Mexican migration has been shaped by labor demands, globalization, economic inequality, and family reunification (Massey et al., 2002). Mexican migrants have contributed heavily to agriculture, construction, hospitality, food processing, and service industries throughout the United States. California's agricultural economy, for example, relies extensively on Mexican and Mexican-American labor for harvesting crops such as strawberries, lettuce, grapes, almonds, and tomatoes (Holmes, 2013).

Anthropologists also examine how Mexican-American communities maintain strong transnational ties through language, food traditions, religion, music, and family networks. Celebrations such as Día de los Muertos and Mexican Independence Day remain important cultural events in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and San Antonio (Guest, 2020). Spanish language media, bilingual education, mariachi music, Mexican cuisine, and religious festivals all contribute to the preservation of cultural identity across generations. At the same time, Mexican-American communities often face challenges related to immigration enforcement, labor exploitation, racial discrimination, and political debates surrounding undocumented migration and border security (Chavez, 2013).

Filipino Transnational Families

Filipino migration provides one of the clearest examples of transnational family systems shaped by globalization and global labor markets. The Philippines has one of the largest overseas labor migration systems in the world, with millions of Filipinos working abroad in healthcare, domestic labor, shipping, education, and service industries (Parreñas, 2015). Historical connections between the Philippines and the United States date back to American colonization of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War in 1898, which contributed to long-term migration patterns and English-language education systems (Choy, 2003).

Filipino migrants have become especially prominent in the healthcare industry. Filipino nurses work extensively in hospitals, nursing homes, and healthcare facilities throughout the United States, particularly in California, Nevada, Hawai'i, New York, and Texas (Choy, 2003). Anthropologists study how Filipino workers maintain strong family ties across borders through remittances, video calls, social media, and regular communication with relatives in the Philippines.

Many Filipino families become transnational families, meaning relatives live in different countries while remaining socially and emotionally connected (Parreñas, 2015). For example, parents may work abroad for years while children remain in the Philippines under the care of grandparents or extended relatives. Although migration may improve economic opportunities, it can also create emotional strain, loneliness, and family separation. Anthropologists analyze how globalization reshapes parenting, caregiving, kinship, and identity within these global family systems.

Chinese Diaspora

The Chinese diaspora refers to Chinese migrant communities living outside China while maintaining cultural, economic, and

social ties to Chinese heritage and transnational networks (Tu, 1994). Chinese migration to the United States increased significantly during the California Gold Rush of the mid-nineteenth century and the construction of the transcontinental railroad (Lee, 2015). Chinese laborers played critical roles in mining, railroad construction, agriculture, restaurants, laundries, and urban economies despite facing severe discrimination and exclusion.

Anti-Chinese racism led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first major U.S. law restricting immigration based explicitly on nationality and ethnicity (Ngai, 2004). Despite these restrictions, Chinese immigrant communities established Chinatowns in cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, and New York, creating cultural, economic, and social centers that preserved language, food traditions, religious practices, and family networks (Zhou, 1992).

Contemporary Chinese diaspora communities are highly diverse and include immigrants from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and other regions. Many Chinese American families maintain strong transnational connections through business, education, digital communication, tourism, and family relationships (Guest, 2020). Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat allow migrants to remain connected to cultural and political developments in China while participating in American society. Anthropologists study the Chinese diaspora to understand globalization, ethnic entrepreneurship, bicultural identity, education, and transnational economic systems.

Somali Refugees

Somali refugee communities provide an important example of forced migration and refugee resettlement shaped by war and political instability. Somalia experienced civil war and state collapse beginning in the early 1990s, forcing hundreds of thousands of Somalis to flee violence, famine, and political instability (Besteman, 2016). Many Somali refugees resettled in the United States, particularly in Minnesota, Ohio, Washington State, and parts of California.

Minneapolis-Saint Paul now contains one of the largest Somali populations outside Africa and is sometimes referred to as “Little Mogadishu” because of its large concentration of Somali-owned businesses, restaurants, mosques, and community organizations (Fassin, 2012). Somali refugees have established strong transnational communities that preserve language, religion, cultural traditions, and kinship networks while adapting to American urban life.

Anthropologists study Somali communities to understand how refugees navigate displacement, religion, identity, racism, and integration into American society. Many Somali Americans maintain strong Islamic religious practices and community structures while participating in schools, businesses, politics, and labor systems in the United States (Besteman, 2016). Somali communities have also faced challenges related to Islamophobia, racial discrimination, language barriers, and public misunderstanding, particularly after the September 11 attacks and during periods of anti-Muslim political rhetoric (Cainkar, 2009). Despite these challenges, Somali Americans continue to contribute significantly to local economies, transportation industries, healthcare, entrepreneurship, and political activism.

Syrian Migration

Syrian migration represents one of the largest refugee crises of the twenty-first century. The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, displaced millions of people due to armed conflict, political repression, bombings, economic collapse, and humanitarian crises (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). Millions of Syrians fled to neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, while others sought asylum in Europe, Canada, and the United States.

Anthropologists study Syrian refugees to understand the social and emotional effects of war, displacement, family separation, and refugee resettlement (Chatty, 2018). Many Syrian refugees experienced trauma related to violence, loss of homes, interrupted education, and prolonged displacement in refugee camps or temporary housing. Refugee families often face major challenges after migration, including language barriers, employment difficulties, legal uncertainty, and cultural adjustment in host societies.

At the same time, Syrian communities work to preserve cultural traditions through food, language, religion, music, and family networks. Syrian restaurants, bakeries, cultural organizations, and mosques have become important community spaces in cities where refugees resettle. Anthropologists emphasize that refugees are not passive victims but active participants in rebuilding social networks, preserving cultural identity, and adapting creatively to new environments (Chatty, 2018). Syrian migration also illustrates how global conflicts, international politics, humanitarian systems, and border policies shape contemporary migration experiences in an increasingly interconnected world.

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4: RACE, ETHNICITY, AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

4.1: Introduction

4.2: The Anthropology of Race

4.3: Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity

4.4: Racism

4.5: Segregation and Inequality

4.6: Whiteness and Privilege

4.7: Social Movements

4.8: Contemporary Issues

4.9: Conclusion

4.10: References

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4.1: Introduction

Race and ethnicity are among the most important and debated topics in anthropology because they profoundly shape identity, social relationships, political systems, economic opportunities, and experiences of inequality throughout the world. Anthropologists study race and ethnicity not as fixed biological realities, but as social and historical constructions that societies create, define, and organize differently across time and place (Omi & Winant, 2015). Although humans share approximately 99.9% of their genetic makeup, societies have historically classified people into racial categories based largely on physical traits such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features, attaching social meanings and unequal power relationships to these differences (Fuentes, 2023). These classifications have had enormous consequences, influencing colonization, slavery, immigration policy, citizenship, labor systems, segregation, policing, healthcare access, education, and economic opportunity.

Anthropologists distinguish race from ethnicity, although the two concepts are often interconnected. Race generally refers to socially constructed categories based on perceived physical differences, while ethnicity refers to shared cultural traditions, language, ancestry, religion, history, and group identity (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Ethnic identities may involve food traditions, religious practices, music, language use, holidays, kinship systems, and cultural heritage. In multicultural societies such as the United States, individuals often navigate multiple racial and ethnic identities simultaneously, reflecting the complexity of migration, globalization, intermarriage, and cultural exchange (Guest, 2020). Anthropologists emphasize that racial and ethnic categories are not universal or biologically fixed; rather, they are shaped by political systems, colonial histories, economic structures, and social power.

This chapter also examines structural inequality, which refers to systematic patterns of unequal access to wealth, education, healthcare, housing, political representation, and social opportunities that are built into institutions and social systems (Rothstein, 2017). Structural inequalities are not simply the result of individual prejudice but are deeply connected to historical processes such as colonialism, slavery, segregation, discriminatory immigration laws, redlining, mass incarceration, and unequal labor systems (Alexander, 2020). For example, racial wealth gaps in the United States today are strongly connected to generations of housing discrimination, unequal educational opportunities, and employment inequality affecting African American, Latino, and Indigenous communities (Piketty, 2022). Anthropologists analyze how these inequalities are reproduced through institutions such as schools, housing markets, healthcare systems, media representation, and criminal justice systems.

Contemporary examples of racial and ethnic inequality can be observed throughout American society. African Americans experience disproportionately high rates of incarceration and police violence, while Indigenous communities often face higher poverty rates, land dispossession, environmental injustice, and health disparities (Whyte, 2020). Latino immigrant communities frequently encounter labor exploitation, anti-immigrant discrimination, and unequal access to healthcare and education, while Asian Americans continue to confront racism, xenophobia, and stereotypes such as the “model minority” myth (Lee, 2015). Events such as the Black Lives Matter movement, anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic, debates over immigration and border policy, and struggles over voting rights and Indigenous land sovereignty illustrate how race and inequality remain central issues in contemporary American life (Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

Anthropologists study race, ethnicity, and structural inequality comparatively and historically in order to understand how systems of power shape human experiences and social institutions. Through ethnographic research, historical analysis, and cross-cultural comparison, anthropology challenges biological racism and ethnocentric assumptions while emphasizing the social construction of race and the importance of cultural relativism (Boas, 1940/2020). This chapter explores how race and ethnicity developed historically, how structural inequalities continue to shape contemporary societies, and how individuals and communities resist discrimination and create movements for social justice, equality, and human rights in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

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4.2: The Anthropology of Race

Anthropologists study race as a social, historical, and political concept rather than as a fixed biological reality. Modern anthropology rejects the idea that humanity can be divided into separate biological "races" with clear genetic boundaries or hierarchies (American Anthropological Association, 1998/2024). Instead, anthropologists argue that race is a social construction, meaning that societies create racial categories and assign social meanings, stereotypes, privileges, and inequalities to perceived physical differences such as skin color, facial features, and hair texture (Omi & Winant, 2015). Although race is socially constructed rather than biologically discrete, it has very real social consequences because racial classifications influence housing, education, healthcare, employment, policing, immigration, wealth, and political power throughout societies.

Historically, ideas about race developed alongside European colonialism, slavery, imperialism, and scientific racism beginning in the fifteenth century (Smedley & Smedley, 2012). European colonizers often used racial ideologies to justify conquest, enslavement, segregation, and unequal treatment of Indigenous peoples, Africans, Asians, and other populations. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, pseudoscientific theories falsely claimed that racial groups possessed innate biological differences in intelligence, morality, or behavior (Gould, 1996). Anthropologists such as Franz Boas challenged these racist theories by demonstrating that cultural differences result primarily from history, environment, and social conditions rather than biological inferiority (Boas, 1940/2020). Contemporary anthropology continues to oppose biological racism while examining how racial categories are socially created and maintained through institutions, laws, media, and systems of inequality.

Race as a Social Construction

Race is considered socially constructed because racial categories differ across societies and historical periods rather than existing as universal biological facts (Omi & Winant, 2015). Different societies classify people differently based on historical, political, and cultural contexts. For example, racial categories used in the United States differ significantly from those used in Brazil, South Africa, or Japan. In the United States, individuals with any known African ancestry were historically classified as Black under the "one-drop rule," while other societies developed more fluid or complex systems of racial classification (Graves, 2004).

Anthropologists emphasize that racial categories change over time. Groups once considered racially distinct or inferior in the United States—such as Irish Americans, Italian Americans, Jewish Americans, and some Eastern European populations—were gradually incorporated into broader definitions of whiteness during the twentieth century (Roediger, 2005). Similarly, census categories in the United States have repeatedly changed over time to reflect shifting political and demographic realities. These changes demonstrate that race is not biologically fixed but socially and historically constructed.

Although race lacks a biological foundation, racism and racial inequality produce real social and health consequences. Studies show that racism affects access to education, employment, healthcare, housing, environmental safety, and economic opportunity (Gravlee, 2009). Anthropologists therefore study race not as a biological category, but as a system of social meaning connected to power, inequality, and historical processes.

Human Biological Variation

Anthropologists and geneticists recognize that human populations do exhibit biological variation, but this variation does not divide humans into separate biological races (Fuentes, 2023). Human biological differences developed gradually through adaptation to different environments over tens of thousands of years following the migration of Homo sapiens out of Africa. Traits such as skin pigmentation, body proportions, hair texture, lactose tolerance, and resistance to certain diseases evolved in response to environmental conditions including climate, sunlight exposure, diet, altitude, and pathogens (Jablonski, 2021).

For example, darker skin pigmentation evolved primarily as protection against intense ultraviolet (UV) radiation in equatorial regions, helping protect folate levels and reduce sun damage (Jablonski & Chaplin, 2010). In contrast, lighter skin pigmentation evolved in regions with lower UV exposure because lighter skin allows more efficient vitamin D production in areas with limited sunlight. Similarly, populations living at high altitudes in regions such as Tibet and the Andes developed physiological adaptations related to oxygen use and respiration (Beall, 2007).

Anthropologists emphasize that these biological traits evolved independently and gradually rather than as part of separate racial

packages. A person's skin color, hair texture, facial features, blood type, and genetic traits do not automatically cluster together into distinct racial groups (Marks, 2017). Modern genetics demonstrates that humans share approximately 99.9% of their DNA, and there is often more genetic variation within so-called racial groups than between them (Fuentes, 2023). This evidence strongly contradicts older racial theories claiming the existence of biologically separate human races.

Clinal Variation

Anthropologists use the concept of clinal variation to explain how human biological traits vary gradually across geographic space rather than existing in sharply divided racial categories (Livingstone, 1962). A cline refers to a gradual change in the frequency of a biological trait across a population distributed over geographic regions. Human biological traits such as skin color, height, blood types, and lactose tolerance vary continuously across populations rather than changing abruptly at racial boundaries.

For example, skin pigmentation gradually changes from darker populations near the equator to lighter populations farther from equatorial regions because of differences in UV radiation exposure (Jablonski, 2021). There is no sharp biological line separating "Black," "White," or "Asian" populations. Instead, human populations display overlapping patterns of variation shaped by migration, intermarriage, environmental adaptation, and gene flow over thousands of years (Marks, 2017).

Clinal variation also reflects the long history of human migration and interaction. Throughout history, populations have continuously migrated, traded, intermarried, and exchanged genes across regions. As a result, human populations are genetically interconnected rather than isolated biological groups (Templeton, 2013). Anthropologists emphasize that clinal variation provides a more scientifically accurate understanding of human biological diversity than traditional racial categories.

Why Race Is Not Biological

Modern anthropology, genetics, and biology reject the idea that race represents a valid biological classification of humans (American Anthropological Association, 1998/2024). Biological races would require clear genetic boundaries separating populations into distinct groups, but scientific evidence shows that no such boundaries exist among humans (Templeton, 2013). Human genetic variation is continuous, overlapping, and distributed gradually across populations rather than organized into separate racial divisions.

Anthropologists also emphasize that traits commonly used to define race—such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features—represent only a tiny fraction of overall human genetic diversity (Marks, 2017). These physical traits evolved as environmental adaptations and do not reliably predict intelligence, athletic ability, morality, personality, or cultural behavior. There is no scientific evidence supporting claims that racial groups possess fundamentally different biological capacities or mental characteristics (Gould, 1996).

Contemporary examples further illustrate the social rather than biological nature of race. People classified within the same racial category may possess enormous genetic, linguistic, cultural, and historical diversity. For example, the category "Black" in the United States includes individuals with ancestry from West Africa, East Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Europe, representing vast cultural and genetic variation (Graves, 2004). Similarly, the category "Asian" includes populations from China, India, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Pakistan, and the Philippines, all with highly diverse histories and biological backgrounds.

Anthropologists therefore argue that race should be understood primarily as a social system of classification tied to power, inequality, colonialism, and historical processes rather than as a biological reality (Omi & Winant, 2015). While race is not biologically real in the scientific sense, racism produces real consequences that affect health, wealth, education, life expectancy, housing access, and social opportunities for millions of people. Anthropology seeks to challenge biological misconceptions about race while examining how racial ideologies continue to shape societies around the world.

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4.3: Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity

Anthropologists distinguish ethnicity from race because ethnicity is primarily connected to shared culture, ancestry, language, religion, traditions, history, and collective identity rather than perceived physical traits alone (Eriksen, 2020). Ethnic identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a particular cultural group that shares common historical experiences, cultural practices, and often a sense of collective heritage (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Unlike race, which is frequently imposed through external classification systems, ethnicity is often more closely tied to self-identification and cultural participation. Anthropologists study ethnicity because ethnic identities shape family life, political organization, religion, language use, migration patterns, social relationships, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion within multicultural societies (Guest, 2020).

Ethnic identities are dynamic rather than fixed. They can change over time due to migration, globalization, intermarriage, political conflict, colonization, assimilation, and cultural exchange (Barth, 1969). In multicultural societies such as the United States, many individuals identify with multiple ethnic backgrounds simultaneously. For example, a person may identify as Mexican American, Chinese American, Armenian American, or Nigerian American, combining both ethnic heritage and national identity. Anthropologists emphasize that ethnicity is socially constructed and historically shaped, meaning that ethnic identities are continuously negotiated and transformed within changing social and political contexts (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007).

Shared Ancestry and Culture

Ethnic identity is often based on the belief in shared ancestry, common origins, and cultural traditions passed down across generations (Eriksen, 2020). These shared traditions may include language, religion, food, music, dance, clothing, storytelling, rituals, holidays, and family practices. Anthropologists note that ethnic groups frequently maintain collective memories about migration, homeland, struggle, colonization, or historical survival that strengthen group identity and social cohesion (Smith, 1986).

For example, many Irish Americans continue to celebrate St. Patrick's Day and maintain cultural traditions connected to Irish heritage despite generations of residence in the United States. Similarly, Armenian American communities preserve language, cuisine, religious traditions, and collective memory surrounding the Armenian Genocide of 1915 (Bakalian, 1993). Jewish communities throughout the world maintain strong ethnic and religious identities connected to shared history, ritual practices, and collective memory despite geographic dispersal over centuries (Goldscheider & Zuckerman, 2009).

Anthropologists also study how immigrant communities preserve ethnic traditions while adapting to new cultural environments. Chinatowns, Little Italies, Koreatowns, and other ethnic neighborhoods often function as centers for language preservation, religious practice, ethnic businesses, and cultural continuity (Zhou, 1992). Food traditions are especially important expressions of ethnicity. Restaurants serving pho, tacos, Ethiopian injera, Indian curry, or Middle Eastern shawarma often become spaces where ethnic communities preserve cultural identity while introducing traditions to broader society (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013).

Ethnic Boundaries

Anthropologists emphasize that ethnicity is shaped not only by shared culture but also by ethnic boundaries, which distinguish one group from another (Barth, 1969). Ethnic boundaries may involve language differences, religion, clothing, customs, geography, or historical narratives that help define who belongs to a group and who does not. These boundaries are socially constructed and can shift over time depending on political, economic, and social conditions.

Fredrik Barth argued that ethnic groups persist not because cultures remain isolated or unchanged, but because social boundaries continue to distinguish groups from one another even as cultural exchange occurs (Barth, 1969). For example, Mexican American communities in the United States may simultaneously adopt aspects of mainstream American culture while maintaining Spanish language use, family traditions, and cultural celebrations that reinforce ethnic identity. Similarly, Sikh communities often maintain visible ethnic and religious boundaries through the wearing of turbans and participation in gurdwara religious institutions while also participating fully in American education, business, and political life (Jakobsh, 2014).

Ethnic boundaries can also become sites of conflict, discrimination, and exclusion. Throughout history, ethnic differences have been politicized through nationalism, colonialism, religious conflict, and racism (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). In the United States, immigrant groups such as Irish, Italian, Jewish, Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, and Muslim communities have all faced periods of xenophobia and discrimination tied to ethnic identity (Takaki, 2008). Anthropologists study how ethnic boundaries are reinforced

through stereotypes, media representation, immigration policies, language discrimination, and political rhetoric.

At the same time, ethnic boundaries are often fluid rather than rigid. Intermarriage, migration, globalization, and multicultural environments frequently blur ethnic distinctions and create hybrid identities (Eriksen, 2020). For example, multiracial and multiethnic individuals may navigate multiple cultural traditions simultaneously, reflecting the growing complexity of identity in globalized societies.

Ethnic Pride and Revitalization

Many ethnic communities actively preserve and revitalize cultural traditions in response to globalization, assimilation pressures, historical oppression, or discrimination (Smith, 1986). Ethnic pride movements often involve efforts to reclaim language, religion, traditional arts, ancestral knowledge, and cultural heritage. Anthropologists study these revitalization movements because they demonstrate how identity can become a source of resistance, empowerment, and collective solidarity.

For example, Indigenous communities throughout North America have engaged in language revitalization programs aimed at preserving endangered Native languages and traditional ecological knowledge systems (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014). Powwows, Indigenous art movements, and cultural education programs also serve as important forms of cultural revitalization and resistance against historical assimilation policies. Similarly, African American cultural movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, Black Power Movement, and contemporary Black Lives Matter activism have emphasized cultural pride, racial identity, and resistance to systemic racism (Taylor, 2016).

Ethnic revitalization can also be observed among immigrant communities seeking to maintain cultural identity across generations. Festivals such as Lunar New Year celebrations, Día de los Muertos events, Caribbean carnivals, and Greek cultural festivals help strengthen community identity and educate younger generations about cultural heritage (Guest, 2020). Social media and digital communication increasingly support ethnic revitalization by allowing diasporic populations to share language, music, religious practices, and political activism across global networks.

Anthropologists note that ethnic pride movements can foster cultural resilience, social solidarity, and political activism, particularly among groups that have experienced colonization, forced assimilation, or discrimination (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). At the same time, ethnicity may also become politicized through ethnic nationalism or exclusionary ideologies. Anthropology therefore examines ethnicity both as a source of belonging and cultural continuity and as a social process shaped by power, inequality, migration, and historical change.

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4.4: Racism

Anthropologists study racism as a system of inequality that assigns social value, power, privilege, and disadvantage based on racial classifications that societies construct and maintain historically and politically (Omi & Winant, 2015). Although race itself is not a biological reality, racism produces very real social, economic, political, and health consequences for individuals and communities around the world (American Anthropological Association, 1998/2024). Racism operates at multiple levels, including personal attitudes, institutional policies, historical systems, and environmental conditions that disproportionately harm racialized populations. Anthropologists emphasize that racism is not limited to individual prejudice alone; it is deeply connected to colonialism, slavery, segregation, immigration laws, labor exploitation, housing discrimination, policing, and unequal access to resources throughout history (Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

In the United States, racism has shaped major social institutions since the colonial period. The transatlantic slave trade, Indigenous displacement, Jim Crow segregation, discriminatory immigration policies, redlining, and mass incarceration all contributed to systems of racial inequality that continue to affect wealth, healthcare, housing, education, and political power today (Alexander, 2020). Anthropologists study racism comparatively and historically to understand how societies create racial hierarchies and how those hierarchies influence everyday life, identity, and opportunities across generations.

Individual Racism

Individual racism refers to personal beliefs, attitudes, actions, or behaviors that discriminate against or stereotype people based on race or ethnicity (Feagin, 2013). Individual racism may include racial slurs, hate crimes, racial profiling, discriminatory treatment, or assumptions about intelligence, behavior, morality, or criminality based on racial categories. Anthropologists note that individual racism is often learned through socialization, media representation, historical narratives, and cultural stereotypes rather than being biologically or naturally inherited (Guest, 2020).

Examples of individual racism can be seen in everyday interactions. African Americans may experience racial profiling while shopping or driving, Asian Americans may encounter stereotypes portraying them as perpetual foreigners, and Latino immigrants may face assumptions about undocumented status based solely on appearance or language use (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian hate crimes and harassment increased significantly in the United States due to racist rhetoric linking Asians to the spread of the virus (Gover, Harper, & Langton, 2020).

Anthropologists emphasize that individual racism can occur both consciously and unconsciously. Implicit bias refers to unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that influence behavior even when individuals consciously reject racist beliefs (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016). For example, studies have shown that job applicants with names perceived as “White” are often more likely to receive interview opportunities than applicants with names associated with African American or Latino backgrounds despite having identical qualifications (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Anthropology examines how stereotypes and prejudice become normalized within societies and contribute to broader systems of inequality.

Institutional Racism

Institutional racism refers to discriminatory policies, practices, and procedures embedded within social institutions such as schools, housing markets, healthcare systems, banks, workplaces, immigration systems, and the criminal justice system (Feagin, 2013). Unlike individual racism, institutional racism does not require openly racist intentions from individuals; rather, it involves systems and institutions that produce unequal outcomes for different racial groups over time.

One major historical example is redlining, a discriminatory housing practice in which banks and government agencies denied mortgages and loans to residents of predominantly Black and minority neighborhoods throughout much of the twentieth century (Rothstein, 2017). Redlining contributed to long-term racial wealth gaps because home ownership became one of the primary ways American families accumulated wealth across generations. Many communities affected by redlining continue to experience lower property values, underfunded schools, fewer healthcare resources, and higher poverty rates today.

Institutional racism can also be observed in education and criminal justice systems. Schools located in wealthier predominantly White neighborhoods often receive greater funding, more experienced teachers, and better facilities than schools serving low-income communities of color (Kozol, 2005). Similarly, African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately represented in

arrests, sentencing, incarceration rates, and police violence statistics within the United States (Alexander, 2020). Anthropologists study institutional racism to understand how historical inequalities become embedded in social systems and continue to shape opportunities and life outcomes for racialized populations.

Structural Racism

Structural racism refers to the broader system of interconnected social, political, economic, and historical inequalities that collectively advantage some racial groups while disadvantaging others (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Structural racism involves the combined effects of institutions, laws, historical practices, media representation, labor systems, and social policies that reinforce racial inequality across generations. Anthropologists emphasize that structural racism operates even when overtly racist laws or openly discriminatory attitudes are absent because inequalities become built into the structure of society itself.

For example, racial wealth inequality in the United States reflects centuries of slavery, segregation, discriminatory lending, employment discrimination, and unequal educational opportunities (Piketty, 2022). According to recent economic studies, White households on average possess significantly greater wealth than Black and Latino households due largely to historical and structural factors rather than individual effort alone (Federal Reserve, 2023). Structural racism also affects healthcare outcomes. African American and Indigenous populations experience disproportionately higher rates of maternal mortality, chronic disease, environmental exposure, and reduced life expectancy compared to White populations (Bailey et al., 2017).

Anthropologists also analyze how structural racism intersects with immigration policy, labor systems, media representation, and urban development. For example, immigrant labor is often concentrated in low-paying and physically dangerous industries, while racial stereotypes in media may reinforce fears or misconceptions about certain populations (Omi & Winant, 2015). Structural racism therefore shapes everyday life in ways that are often invisible to those who benefit from existing systems of privilege and inequality.

Environmental Racism

Environmental racism refers to the disproportionate exposure of racial and ethnic minority communities to environmental hazards such as pollution, toxic waste, unsafe drinking water, poor air quality, industrial contamination, and climate-related risks (Bullard, 2000). Anthropologists and environmental justice scholars study environmental racism because environmental inequalities are closely connected to race, class, housing segregation, political power, and economic inequality.

Throughout the United States, hazardous industries, highways, landfills, oil refineries, and waste facilities are disproportionately located near low-income communities and communities of color (Bullard, 2000). For example, the water crisis in Flint, Michigan exposed predominantly African American residents to dangerous lead contamination after cost-cutting decisions affected water infrastructure and safety (Pulido, 2016). Similarly, many Indigenous communities face environmental threats connected to mining, pipelines, deforestation, and contamination of sacred lands and water sources (Whyte, 2020).

Environmental racism is also closely connected to climate change. Poorer communities and racial minorities are often more vulnerable to hurricanes, flooding, heat waves, wildfires, droughts, and rising sea levels because of unequal housing conditions, infrastructure, healthcare access, and economic resources (IPCC, 2023). Hurricane Katrina in 2005 disproportionately affected African American neighborhoods in New Orleans, revealing how racial and economic inequalities shape disaster vulnerability and recovery processes (Fussell, 2015).

Anthropologists study environmental racism within the broader framework of environmental justice, which advocates for equal protection from environmental harm regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (Bullard, 2000). Environmental justice movements led by Indigenous activists, African American communities, Latino farmworkers, and other marginalized populations have challenged pollution, land dispossession, pipeline construction, and environmental inequality throughout the United States and around the world. These movements demonstrate how struggles over race, inequality, land, and environmental sustainability are deeply interconnected in contemporary society.

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4.5: Segregation and Inequality

Anthropologists study segregation and structural inequality because racial and ethnic inequalities are often built into social institutions, neighborhoods, economic systems, and public policies rather than resulting solely from individual prejudice (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Structural inequalities shape where people live, the quality of schools they attend, their access to healthcare, employment opportunities, environmental safety, transportation, and their likelihood of experiencing policing or incarceration (Rothstein, 2017). These inequalities are historically connected to slavery, colonization, segregation, discriminatory housing policies, unequal labor systems, and systemic racism that developed over generations in the United States. Anthropologists emphasize that social inequality is spatially organized, meaning that race and class often influence which communities receive investment, political attention, and social resources.

In many American cities, racial and economic segregation continue to shape everyday life. Wealthier neighborhoods often contain better-funded schools, safer environments, parks, healthcare facilities, grocery stores, and economic opportunities, while poorer communities—often disproportionately populated by racial minorities—may experience underfunded schools, environmental hazards, higher crime rates, housing instability, and limited healthcare access (Massey & Denton, 1993). Anthropologists analyze these inequalities comparatively in order to understand how systems of race, class, and power shape unequal life chances across generations.

Redlining

Redlining was a discriminatory housing practice in which banks, insurance companies, and government agencies denied mortgages and loans to residents living in neighborhoods considered financially "risky," often because those neighborhoods contained African American or other minority populations (Rothstein, 2017). Beginning in the 1930s, federal housing maps created by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) classified neighborhoods according to perceived investment risk. Predominantly Black neighborhoods were frequently outlined in red and labeled undesirable for lending, leading to systematic disinvestment and housing segregation.

Anthropologists and historians emphasize that redlining had long-lasting consequences because home ownership became one of the primary ways American families accumulated wealth over generations (Massey & Denton, 1993). White families were more likely to receive affordable mortgages and accumulate property wealth in suburban areas, while many Black families were excluded from these opportunities. Even after redlining was officially outlawed through the Fair Housing Act of 1968, many formerly redlined neighborhoods continued to experience lower property values, underfunded schools, aging infrastructure, higher pollution exposure, and concentrated poverty (Rothstein, 2017).

Examples of the effects of redlining can still be observed today in many American cities. In parts of Oakland, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Baltimore, neighborhoods historically subjected to redlining continue to display higher poverty rates and lower household wealth than nearby predominantly White neighborhoods (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Anthropologists study redlining because it demonstrates how historical discrimination can become embedded within urban geography and continue affecting communities across generations.

Housing Inequality

Housing inequality refers to unequal access to safe, affordable, and stable housing based on race, class, income, and social status (Desmond, 2016). Anthropologists study housing because where people live strongly influences education, healthcare, employment opportunities, environmental safety, transportation access, and quality of life. Housing segregation often reinforces racial and economic inequality by concentrating resources in some communities while depriving others of investment and public services.

In the United States, racial minorities are disproportionately affected by housing insecurity, homelessness, overcrowding, eviction, and discriminatory rental practices (Desmond, 2016). African American and Latino families are more likely to experience housing discrimination when applying for mortgages or rentals, while lower-income neighborhoods often contain fewer parks, grocery stores, healthcare facilities, and public transportation options (Rothstein, 2017). Gentrification—the process through which wealthier residents move into historically lower-income neighborhoods—can also contribute to displacement as rising rents and property values push long-term residents out of their communities.

For example, neighborhoods in cities such as San Francisco, Brooklyn, and Washington, D.C. have experienced rapid gentrification linked to rising housing costs and the expansion of technology and professional industries (Zukin, 2010). Anthropologists examine how housing inequality affects family stability, mental health, community networks, and cultural identity. Housing is not only shelter; it is closely tied to social belonging, security, and access to opportunities.

School Inequality

Educational inequality is another major form of structural inequality closely connected to race and class. Anthropologists study schools because education strongly influences future employment opportunities, income, political participation, and social mobility (Kozol, 2005). In the United States, public schools are often funded largely through local property taxes, meaning wealthier neighborhoods typically have better-funded schools, more educational resources, experienced teachers, advanced placement courses, technology access, and extracurricular opportunities compared to schools in lower-income communities.

Schools serving predominantly African American, Latino, Indigenous, and low-income students frequently face overcrowding, aging facilities, underfunding, higher teacher turnover, and limited academic resources (Kozol, 2005). These inequalities contribute to achievement gaps, lower graduation rates, and unequal access to higher education. Anthropologists emphasize that educational disparities are not caused by cultural deficiencies but by structural inequalities connected to housing segregation, poverty, and unequal public investment.

Examples of school inequality can be observed across many American metropolitan areas. In some cities, schools located only a few miles apart may differ dramatically in funding levels, class sizes, technology availability, library resources, and college preparation programs (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Anthropologists also study the school-to-prison pipeline, a pattern in which harsh disciplinary policies, increased police presence in schools, and unequal punishment practices disproportionately affect African American and Latino students, increasing the likelihood of criminal justice involvement later in life (Alexander, 2020).

Healthcare Disparities

Healthcare disparities refer to unequal access to medical care, health resources, insurance coverage, and health outcomes among different populations (Bailey et al., 2017). Anthropologists study healthcare inequalities because health is strongly influenced by social, economic, environmental, and political conditions rather than biology alone. Factors such as poverty, housing quality, environmental exposure, food access, employment conditions, stress, discrimination, and healthcare availability all affect health outcomes across communities.

In the United States, African American, Indigenous, and Latino populations experience disproportionately higher rates of chronic disease, maternal mortality, diabetes, asthma, infant mortality, and reduced life expectancy compared to White populations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023). Indigenous communities often face limited healthcare infrastructure and higher rates of mental health challenges, substance abuse, and suicide connected to historical trauma, poverty, and land dispossession (Whyte, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed major racial and economic healthcare inequalities in the United States. African American, Latino, and Indigenous populations experienced disproportionately high infection and mortality rates due to factors such as crowded housing, frontline employment, unequal healthcare access, and preexisting structural inequalities (CDC, 2023). Anthropologists emphasize that these disparities are not caused by racial biology but by social conditions shaped by structural racism and economic inequality.

Policing and Incarceration

Anthropologists also study how policing and incarceration disproportionately affect racial and ethnic minority communities in the United States. African Americans and Latinos are arrested, searched, sentenced, and incarcerated at significantly higher rates than White Americans, even when controlling for similar offenses in some categories (Alexander, 2020). Anthropologists examine how historical patterns of racial control—including slavery, segregation, and discriminatory policing practices—shaped modern criminal justice systems.

The United States has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, with millions of people cycling through prisons, jails, probation systems, and detention centers (Alexander, 2020). Mass incarceration has had particularly severe effects on African American communities, contributing to family separation, economic hardship, political disenfranchisement, and long-term social

inequality. Anthropologists also study racial profiling, stop-and-frisk policies, police violence, and surveillance practices that disproportionately target minority populations (Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

High-profile cases involving the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, and many others contributed to the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, which challenged police brutality and systemic racism in law enforcement (Taylor, 2016). Anthropologists analyze these events within broader systems of structural inequality rather than viewing them as isolated incidents. They also examine how communities organize resistance movements, mutual aid networks, and political activism in response to racialized policing and criminal justice inequalities.

Anthropologists emphasize that policing and incarceration are deeply connected to broader systems of race, class, housing inequality, educational inequality, and economic marginalization. Structural inequalities affecting employment, education, healthcare, and housing often overlap with criminal justice disparities, reinforcing cycles of poverty and inequality across generations (Alexander, 2020).

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4.6: Whiteness and Privilege

Anthropologists study privilege and inequality in order to understand how social systems distribute power, resources, opportunities, and disadvantages across different groups within society. Systems of privilege are often connected to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, citizenship, and social class, shaping how individuals experience education, employment, housing, healthcare, policing, and everyday social interaction (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Privilege does not mean that individuals never experience hardship; rather, it refers to unearned social advantages that individuals may receive because of their membership in socially dominant groups (McIntosh, 1989). Anthropologists examine privilege comparatively and historically to understand how inequalities become normalized and embedded within social institutions and cultural beliefs.

In the United States, systems of racial privilege developed historically through colonialism, slavery, segregation, discriminatory immigration policies, and unequal access to wealth and political power (Omi & Winant, 2015). Anthropologists emphasize that these systems continue to shape contemporary inequalities even after many explicitly racist laws were abolished. Concepts such as white privilege, colorblind ideology, and intersectionality help anthropologists analyze how social power operates within modern societies and how inequalities overlap across multiple dimensions of identity.

White Privilege

White privilege refers to the social, economic, and political advantages often experienced by individuals classified as White within societies shaped by historical and structural racism (McIntosh, 1989). Anthropologists emphasize that white privilege does not imply that all White individuals are wealthy or free from hardship. Instead, it refers to advantages associated with living in a society where whiteness has historically been treated as the social norm and where institutions often disproportionately benefit White populations (Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

Examples of white privilege may include being less likely to experience racial profiling by police, being more accurately represented in media and educational materials, having greater access to generational wealth, or being less likely to encounter discrimination in housing and employment (Feagin, 2013). Research shows that White households in the United States generally possess significantly higher median wealth than African American and Latino households due largely to historical inequalities involving housing discrimination, inheritance, employment opportunities, and unequal educational access (Federal Reserve, 2023).

Anthropologists study whiteness itself as a cultural and historical category rather than treating it as invisible or “normal” (Roediger, 2005). Historically, groups such as Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Eastern European immigrants were not always considered fully “White” in American society but were gradually incorporated into broader racial categories over time (Omi & Winant, 2015). This demonstrates that whiteness is socially constructed and historically shaped rather than biologically fixed.

Anthropologists also emphasize that privilege often operates invisibly to those who benefit from it because social advantages become normalized within dominant institutions and cultural systems. Peggy McIntosh famously described white privilege as an “invisible knapsack” of unearned advantages that individuals may experience in everyday life without always recognizing them (McIntosh, 1989). Anthropology examines how privilege affects social interactions, access to opportunities, and perceptions of fairness within society.

Colorblind Ideology

Colorblind ideology refers to the belief that race no longer significantly matters in society and that individuals should ignore racial differences entirely (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Supporters of colorblind approaches often argue that treating everyone “the same” regardless of race promotes equality and reduces discrimination. However, anthropologists and sociologists critique colorblind ideology because ignoring race can also obscure ongoing systems of racial inequality and structural discrimination.

Anthropologists argue that racial inequalities continue to exist in areas such as wealth distribution, healthcare access, educational opportunities, housing, policing, and incarceration (Alexander, 2020). For example, African American families on average possess far less generational wealth than White families due to historical factors such as slavery, segregation, redlining, and discriminatory labor systems (Piketty, 2022). Ignoring race entirely may therefore prevent societies from recognizing and addressing these inequalities.

Colorblind ideology can also minimize discussions about racism by framing racial inequality as the result of individual choices rather than structural conditions (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Anthropologists emphasize that recognizing racial differences and histories does not necessarily promote division; instead, understanding how race shapes experiences and opportunities can help societies address inequality more effectively. For example, movements such as Black Lives Matter emerged partly in response to concerns that colorblind narratives ignored systemic patterns of police violence and racial discrimination affecting African American communities (Taylor, 2016).

Anthropologists also examine how colorblind ideology appears in schools, workplaces, media, and political discourse. In some contexts, claims that society is now "post-racial" may overlook continuing disparities connected to race and ethnicity. Anthropology therefore encourages critical examination of how inequality operates within institutions and social systems even when overt racism is less publicly visible than in earlier historical periods.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a concept developed primarily by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain how different forms of inequality and identity overlap and interact simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1991). Anthropologists use intersectionality to analyze how race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, disability, immigration status, and other identities combine to shape people's lived experiences in complex ways. Individuals do not experience social categories separately; rather, these identities intersect and influence one another within systems of power and inequality.

For example, the experiences of a wealthy White woman may differ significantly from those of a poor Latina immigrant woman because race, class, gender, and immigration status interact differently in each case (Collins, 2019). Similarly, Black men and Black women may experience racism differently because gender shapes how racial stereotypes and discrimination operate. Muslim women wearing hijabs may experience forms of discrimination connected simultaneously to religion, gender, race, and ethnicity (Cainkar, 2009).

Anthropologists emphasize that intersectionality helps avoid oversimplifying social inequality by recognizing that individuals experience privilege and oppression differently depending on multiple overlapping identities (Collins, 2019). For example, LGBTQ+ immigrants may face challenges related both to immigration status and sexual orientation, while Indigenous women may experience unique forms of violence connected to both gender inequality and colonial histories (Whyte, 2020).

Intersectionality is especially important in understanding social movements and activism. Movements such as Black feminism, Indigenous feminism, immigrant rights activism, disability justice movements, and LGBTQ+ advocacy often emphasize intersectional approaches because inequality rarely affects people along only one dimension of identity (Crenshaw, 1991). Anthropologists use intersectionality to better understand how systems of racism, sexism, class inequality, heteronormativity, and colonialism operate together within contemporary societies.

By examining privilege, colorblind ideology, and intersectionality, anthropology provides a more complex understanding of inequality and social power. These concepts help reveal how historical systems of race and privilege continue to shape opportunities and experiences in modern societies while also highlighting the diverse ways individuals navigate identity, discrimination, and resistance in everyday life.

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4.7: Social Movements

Anthropologists study social movements because they reveal how communities organize collectively to challenge inequality, discrimination, political exclusion, and systems of oppression. Social movements emerge when groups seek social, economic, cultural, or political change in response to injustice and unequal treatment (Tarrow, 2011). Throughout United States history, marginalized racial and ethnic communities have organized movements demanding civil rights, voting rights, educational access, labor protections, land rights, police accountability, immigration reform, and cultural recognition. Anthropologists analyze these movements not only as political events, but also as cultural processes that shape identity, solidarity, collective memory, and social transformation (Goodale, 2017).

Social movements often develop through protests, marches, legal challenges, art, music, community organizing, labor strikes, digital activism, and grassroots political organizing. Advances in social media and communication technologies have also transformed activism by allowing movements to spread rapidly across national and global networks (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Anthropologists emphasize that social movements are deeply connected to broader historical conditions such as colonialism, segregation, labor exploitation, racism, globalization, and structural inequality. The following examples illustrate how different communities in the United States have mobilized to challenge inequality and advocate for justice and human rights.

Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement was one of the most influential social movements in United States history. Emerging primarily during the 1950s and 1960s, the movement sought to end racial segregation, disenfranchisement, and discrimination against African Americans in the United States, particularly in the South (Morris, 1984). Although African Americans had resisted racism and slavery for centuries, the modern Civil Rights Movement gained national attention through organized protests, legal activism, boycotts, and acts of civil disobedience challenging Jim Crow segregation laws.

Major events included the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–1956, sparked by Rosa Parks' refusal to surrender her bus seat to a White passenger; the March on Washington in 1963, where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech; and the Selma voting rights marches of 1965 (Branch, 1988). Activists risked violence, imprisonment, economic retaliation, and even death while organizing sit-ins, freedom rides, voter registration drives, and school desegregation campaigns throughout the South.

The Civil Rights Movement contributed to major legal changes including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which outlawed many forms of racial segregation and voter suppression (Morris, 1984). Anthropologists study the movement as an example of collective resistance against institutional racism and structural inequality. The movement also influenced later struggles involving women's rights, Indigenous activism, LGBTQ+ rights, immigrant rights, and disability justice movements throughout the United States and globally.

Black Lives Matter

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a contemporary social movement focused on challenging police violence, systemic racism, racial inequality, and mass incarceration affecting African American communities (Taylor, 2016). The movement began in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager in Florida. The phrase "Black Lives Matter" rapidly spread through social media and became a broader movement protesting racial injustice and state violence.

The movement gained global visibility after police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner in New York; Breonna Taylor in Louisville; George Floyd in Minneapolis; and many others (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). The murder of George Floyd in 2020 sparked some of the largest protests in U.S. history, with demonstrations occurring in hundreds of cities across the United States and internationally. Protesters called for police accountability, criminal justice reform, reductions in police militarization, and greater investment in housing, healthcare, education, and community services.

Anthropologists study Black Lives Matter as both a political movement and a cultural movement shaped by digital activism, grassroots organizing, art, music, and community solidarity (Taylor, 2016). Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook played major roles in organizing protests and spreading awareness globally. Anthropologists also examine how BLM connects contemporary racial inequality to historical systems of slavery, segregation, policing, and structural racism in

the United States.

Indigenous Activism

Indigenous activism refers to movements led by Native American and Indigenous communities seeking sovereignty, land rights, environmental protection, cultural preservation, treaty recognition, and social justice (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Anthropologists emphasize that Indigenous activism is deeply connected to histories of colonization, forced assimilation, land dispossession, boarding schools, and cultural suppression experienced by Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas.

One major Indigenous activism organization was the American Indian Movement (AIM), founded in 1968 to address police brutality, poverty, treaty violations, and Indigenous rights (Smith & Warrior, 1996). AIM organized highly visible protests including the occupation of Alcatraz Island from 1969 to 1971 and the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, both of which drew national attention to Indigenous struggles and treaty rights.

More recently, Indigenous activism gained international visibility through the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016–2017 (Whyte, 2020). Indigenous activists and allies argued that the pipeline threatened sacred lands and water sources for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. The movement became a major symbol of Indigenous environmental justice activism and attracted global support through social media and international solidarity networks.

Anthropologists study Indigenous activism because it demonstrates how Indigenous communities resist colonialism while revitalizing language, religion, cultural practices, and political sovereignty. Contemporary Indigenous movements also focus on missing and murdered Indigenous women, climate justice, land protection, and cultural revitalization programs throughout North America and globally (TallBear, 2013).

Chicano Movement

The Chicano Movement, also known as El Movimiento, emerged during the 1960s and 1970s as a civil rights movement focused on Mexican American identity, educational equality, labor rights, political representation, land rights, and resistance to discrimination (Muñoz, 2007). The movement was closely connected to broader struggles against racism, poverty, labor exploitation, and segregation affecting Mexican American communities in the United States.

Labor leader César Chávez and the United Farm Workers (UFW) became major symbols of Chicano activism through efforts to improve wages and working conditions for farmworkers, many of whom were Mexican or Mexican American laborers in California and the Southwest (Ganz, 2009). Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and other organizers led strikes, marches, and national grape boycotts to protest exploitative agricultural labor systems and pesticide exposure affecting farmworkers.

The Chicano Movement also emphasized educational reform and cultural pride. Student walkouts in East Los Angeles during 1968 protested unequal educational conditions, discrimination, and lack of Mexican American representation in schools and curricula (Muñoz, 2007). Chicano activists promoted Mexican American history, bilingual education, Indigenous heritage, mural art, literature, and political organizing as forms of cultural resistance and empowerment.

Anthropologists study the Chicano Movement as an example of ethnic revitalization, labor activism, and anti-colonial resistance within the United States. The movement significantly influenced Latino political participation, educational reform, labor rights activism, and contemporary immigrant rights movements.

Asian American Activism

Asian American activism emerged prominently during the 1960s and 1970s alongside the Civil Rights Movement, antiwar activism, and student movements (Lee, 2015). Asian American activists challenged racism, anti-Asian violence, immigration exclusion, labor exploitation, and stereotypes such as the “model minority” myth. Anthropologists note that Asian American activism also contributed to the development of Asian American identity as a broader political coalition among diverse ethnic groups including Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, South Asian, and other communities.

Student activism played a major role in Asian American political organizing. In 1968, Asian American students joined Black, Latino, and Indigenous students during the Third World Liberation Front strikes at San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley, demanding ethnic studies programs and greater representation in higher education (Wei, 1993).

These protests contributed to the establishment of some of the first ethnic studies departments in the United States.

Asian American activism also addressed anti-Asian violence and discrimination. The 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man killed by White autoworkers who blamed Japanese competition for economic decline, became a major turning point in Asian American civil rights activism (Zia, 2000). More recently, anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic led to renewed activism challenging racism and xenophobia directed toward Asian communities (Gover, Harper, & Langton, 2020).

Anthropologists study Asian American activism because it demonstrates how racial identity, immigration history, globalization, and political organizing intersect within multicultural societies. Asian American activism continues to address immigration rights, labor justice, educational representation, anti-racism, and solidarity with other social justice movements across the United States.

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4.8: Contemporary Issues

Anthropologists study contemporary racial and ethnic issues because systems of inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion continue to shape everyday life in the United States and around the world. Although many openly discriminatory laws from earlier historical periods have been abolished, racial and ethnic inequalities persist through political debates, media representation, institutional practices, social attitudes, and structural inequalities connected to housing, employment, education, healthcare, policing, and immigration policy (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Contemporary issues such as immigration debates, Islamophobia, anti-Asian racism, anti-Black violence, and hate crimes demonstrate how race and ethnicity remain deeply connected to national identity, globalization, political conflict, and social power in modern societies.

Anthropologists emphasize that these issues are not isolated incidents but are shaped by broader historical and political processes including colonialism, slavery, war, economic inequality, nationalism, migration, and media representation (Omi & Winant, 2015). Social media and digital communication have also transformed how racial conflict, activism, and discrimination are experienced and discussed. Videos of police violence, hate crimes, and protests now circulate globally within minutes, increasing public awareness while also intensifying political polarization and misinformation in some cases (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Anthropology examines these contemporary issues comparatively and historically in order to understand how racism and inequality adapt and persist in changing social conditions.

Immigration Debates

Immigration remains one of the most politically contested issues in the United States. Public debates surrounding undocumented migration, border security, asylum seekers, refugee resettlement, deportation, and citizenship often reflect broader concerns about race, economic inequality, labor competition, globalization, and national identity (Chavez, 2013). Anthropologists study immigration debates because they reveal how societies define belonging, citizenship, and cultural identity while also exposing fears and anxieties related to demographic and social change.

Political debates about immigration frequently focus on the U.S.-Mexico border, undocumented migration from Latin America, refugee admissions, and the role of immigrants within the labor force. Some political groups advocate stricter border enforcement and expanded deportation systems, arguing that immigration threatens economic stability or national security. Others emphasize the humanitarian dimensions of migration and advocate for refugee protections, family reunification, labor rights, and pathways to citizenship (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020).

Anthropologists note that immigrants contribute significantly to the United States economy and labor system, particularly in agriculture, healthcare, construction, transportation, hospitality, and food production (Pew Research Center, 2024). Immigrant communities also contribute to cultural diversity through language, religion, cuisine, entrepreneurship, and transnational social networks. At the same time, anti-immigrant rhetoric and restrictive immigration policies may contribute to fear, discrimination, family separation, and social exclusion within immigrant populations (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012).

Islamophobia

Islamophobia refers to prejudice, fear, discrimination, or hostility directed toward Muslims or people perceived to be Muslim (Cainkar, 2009). Anthropologists study Islamophobia because it reflects broader systems of racialization, nationalism, religious discrimination, and political conflict. Although Muslims in the United States represent highly diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and national backgrounds, Islamophobia often stereotypes Muslims as dangerous, foreign, violent, or incompatible with American society (Peek, 2011).

Islamophobia intensified significantly in the United States following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Increased surveillance, airport profiling, hate crimes, mosque vandalism, workplace discrimination, and anti-Muslim political rhetoric affected many Muslim and Middle Eastern communities throughout the country (Cainkar, 2009). Sikh Americans, South Asians, Arab Americans, and others who were mistakenly perceived as Muslim also experienced harassment and violence due to racialized stereotypes surrounding religion and appearance.

Anthropologists emphasize that Islamophobia is often reinforced through media portrayals and political discourse that associate Islam primarily with terrorism or extremism while ignoring the diversity and complexity of Muslim communities worldwide (Peek,

2011). At the same time, Muslim Americans continue to contribute significantly to education, healthcare, business, science, politics, arts, and public life throughout the United States. Anthropologists study how Muslim communities navigate identity, religion, citizenship, discrimination, and belonging within contemporary multicultural societies.

Anti-Asian Racism

Anti-Asian racism has a long history in the United States connected to immigration exclusion laws, labor competition, war, and stereotypes portraying Asians as perpetual foreigners regardless of citizenship or generational status (Lee, 2015). Historical examples include the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Japanese American internment during World War II, anti-Filipino violence in California during the early twentieth century, and discrimination against South Asian immigrants (Ngai, 2004).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian racism increased significantly in the United States and globally. Political rhetoric that associated the virus with China contributed to rising hate crimes, verbal harassment, physical assaults, and discrimination targeting Asian American communities (Gover, Harper, & Langton, 2020). Elderly Asian Americans were especially targeted in several highly publicized attacks in cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

Anthropologists study anti-Asian racism because it demonstrates how racial stereotypes and xenophobia intensify during periods of fear, economic instability, and political tension. Asian Americans are often simultaneously stereotyped as successful "model minorities" while also being treated as outsiders who do not fully belong within American society (Lee, 2015). Anthropologists emphasize that Asian American communities are highly diverse and include populations with very different migration histories, economic backgrounds, languages, religions, and political experiences.

Social movements such as Stop Asian Hate emerged during the pandemic to challenge racism, increase public awareness, and advocate for community safety and solidarity across racial groups (Jeung et al., 2021). Anthropologists examine these movements as examples of contemporary anti-racist activism and coalition building within multicultural societies.

Anti-Black Violence

Anthropologists study anti-Black violence as part of broader systems of racism, policing, economic inequality, segregation, and historical oppression affecting African American communities in the United States (Alexander, 2020). Anti-Black violence includes police brutality, racial profiling, mass incarceration, hate crimes, vigilante violence, and systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect Black populations.

High-profile killings of African Americans such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and many others sparked widespread protests and international attention to racial injustice and police violence (Taylor, 2016). Videos of these incidents circulated widely through social media, contributing to the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement and broader demands for criminal justice reform and racial equity.

Anthropologists analyze anti-Black violence within historical contexts that include slavery, lynching, segregation, housing discrimination, and unequal policing practices (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). African Americans remain disproportionately represented in arrest rates, incarceration rates, use-of-force incidents, and economic inequality statistics compared to White populations (Alexander, 2020). Anthropologists emphasize that anti-Black violence is not limited to isolated acts of prejudice but is connected to structural systems of racial inequality embedded within institutions and public policy.

At the same time, African American communities have developed powerful traditions of resistance, activism, music, art, scholarship, and political organizing in response to racial oppression. Anthropology studies these forms of resilience and activism alongside the structural conditions producing inequality and violence.

Hate Crimes

Hate crimes are criminal acts motivated wholly or partly by bias against a person's race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other social identity (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2023). Anthropologists study hate crimes because they reveal how prejudice and social tensions can escalate into violence and intimidation directed at marginalized communities.

Hate crimes in the United States have targeted African Americans, Jewish communities, Muslims, Sikhs, Asian Americans,

Latinos, LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, and other minority groups. Examples include attacks on synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway, violence against Muslim communities after 9/11, anti-Asian assaults during the COVID-19 pandemic, and racially motivated mass shootings targeting Black and Latino communities (FBI, 2023).

Anthropologists emphasize that hate crimes are often connected to broader social conditions including political extremism, economic insecurity, misinformation, conspiracy theories, and inflammatory political rhetoric (Perry, 2001). Social media and online platforms may sometimes contribute to the spread of extremist ideologies, racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, and conspiracy movements that encourage violence against minority populations.

At the same time, communities frequently respond to hate crimes through solidarity movements, vigils, interfaith coalitions, educational programs, and anti-racist activism. Anthropologists study these responses to understand how communities resist violence, rebuild trust, and promote social cohesion in diverse societies. Contemporary struggles against racism, hate crimes, and discrimination continue to shape political life, identity, and social movements in the United States and around the world.

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4.9: Conclusion

Race and Ethnicity in a Globalized World

Race and ethnicity continue to shape human experiences in powerful ways within an increasingly interconnected and globalized world. Migration, globalization, digital communication, and transnational economic systems have intensified interactions among people from different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds (Eriksen, 2020). In multicultural societies such as the United States, individuals regularly navigate complex identities connected to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, language, and class. Anthropologists emphasize that racial and ethnic identities are not fixed biological realities but socially constructed categories shaped by history, politics, migration, colonialism, and systems of power (Omi & Winant, 2015).

Globalization has created new opportunities for cultural exchange, hybrid identities, and cross-cultural interaction. Music, food, fashion, language, religion, and political activism now circulate rapidly across national boundaries through migration and digital media. At the same time, globalization has also intensified social tensions surrounding immigration, nationalism, citizenship, labor competition, and cultural belonging (Steger, 2020). Contemporary debates over border security, refugee migration, racial justice, and multiculturalism illustrate how race and ethnicity remain central to political and social life in the modern world. Anthropologists study these processes comparatively to understand how global interconnectedness simultaneously creates cultural diversity, social inequality, and new forms of identity formation.

The Persistence of Structural Inequality

Although many overtly racist laws and segregation policies have been abolished, structural inequalities connected to race and ethnicity continue to shape access to wealth, education, healthcare, housing, political representation, and economic opportunity (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Anthropologists emphasize that structural inequality is reproduced through institutions, historical patterns, public policies, and economic systems rather than through individual prejudice alone. Historical processes such as slavery, colonization, redlining, discriminatory immigration policies, school segregation, and unequal labor systems continue to influence contemporary inequalities across generations (Rothstein, 2017).

Examples of these inequalities can be observed throughout American society. African American and Latino households generally possess significantly lower median wealth than White households due largely to historical housing discrimination and unequal economic opportunities (Federal Reserve, 2023). Indigenous communities often experience higher poverty rates, environmental injustice, healthcare disparities, and land dispossession connected to colonial histories (Whyte, 2020). Immigrant communities may face language barriers, labor exploitation, anti-immigrant discrimination, and legal vulnerabilities, while Asian Americans and Muslim Americans continue to encounter xenophobia and racial stereotyping (Cainkar, 2009).

Anthropologists also emphasize that inequalities intersect with social class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and geography. Poorer communities and communities of color are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, underfunded schools, healthcare inequalities, and over-policing (Bailey et al., 2017). Understanding structural inequality therefore requires examining how race, power, economics, and historical systems interact to shape everyday life and unequal opportunities within society.

Resistance, Activism, and Social Change

Throughout history, marginalized communities have resisted racism, discrimination, colonization, and inequality through activism, protest movements, cultural revitalization, legal challenges, education, art, music, and community organizing (Tarrow, 2011). Anthropologists study social movements because they demonstrate how collective action can challenge systems of power and promote social transformation. Movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter, Indigenous sovereignty movements, the Chicano Movement, Asian American activism, immigrant rights campaigns, and environmental justice movements all illustrate how communities organize to demand equality, representation, and human rights.

Contemporary activism increasingly operates through both local organizing and global digital networks. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allow activists to document discrimination, organize protests, and build international solidarity movements rapidly across borders (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Indigenous activists opposing pipelines, immigrant youth advocating for DACA protections, and anti-racist organizers challenging police violence all demonstrate how

activism adapts to changing political and technological conditions.

Anthropologists emphasize that resistance is not limited to large-scale protests alone. Cultural preservation, language revitalization, storytelling, religious practice, music, art, and education can also function as forms of resistance and identity affirmation (Smith, 1999). For example, Indigenous language revitalization programs, African American cultural movements, and immigrant cultural festivals help preserve heritage while challenging historical systems of marginalization and assimilation. Anthropology highlights both the persistence of inequality and the resilience, creativity, and resistance of communities working toward social justice and collective empowerment.

Anthropology and the Study of Human Diversity and Justice

Anthropology provides important tools for understanding race, ethnicity, inequality, and human diversity from historical, comparative, and cross-cultural perspectives. One of anthropology's most significant contributions has been its rejection of biological racism and its emphasis on the social construction of race and the importance of cultural relativism (Boas, 1940/2020). Anthropologists demonstrate that human biological variation does not divide humanity into separate races and that cultural differences are shaped primarily by history, environment, migration, politics, and social systems rather than biological superiority or inferiority (Fuentes, 2023).

Anthropologists also study how systems of inequality affect lived experiences and social institutions while working increasingly alongside communities to address issues related to healthcare access, education, environmental justice, migration, policing, and Indigenous sovereignty (Goodale, 2017). Applied anthropology, public anthropology, and activist anthropology seek to use anthropological knowledge to support human rights, challenge inequality, and promote social justice within contemporary societies.

Ultimately, the anthropological study of race and ethnicity encourages critical thinking about identity, power, inequality, and belonging in a diverse and interconnected world. By examining how racial and ethnic categories are socially constructed and historically shaped, anthropology helps challenge stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and discrimination while emphasizing shared humanity and cultural diversity. Understanding race, ethnicity, and structural inequality anthropologically allows individuals to better recognize the historical roots of inequality and the ongoing importance of social justice, inclusion, and human dignity in modern societies (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023).

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5: FAMILY, GENDER, RELIGION, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

5.1: Introduction

5.2: Family and Kinship

5.3: Gender and Sexuality

5.4: Religion and Spirituality

5.5: Language and Communication

5.6: Food, Media, and Popular Culture

5.7: Life-Cycle Perspectives

5.8: Conclusion

5.9: References

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5.1: Introduction

Family, gender, religion, and everyday cultural practices are among the most important subjects studied by anthropologists because they shape how people experience identity, relationships, morality, belonging, and social life across cultures. Anthropologists examine these institutions comparatively in order to understand how societies organize kinship, gender roles, spirituality, parenting, sexuality, labor, rituals, and daily interactions (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Although many people assume that family structures, gender expectations, or religious beliefs are "natural" or universal, anthropology demonstrates that these systems vary enormously across societies and historical periods (Kottak, 2022). What one culture considers normal regarding marriage, childrearing, masculinity, femininity, religion, or social behavior may differ dramatically in another cultural context.

Family is one of the primary institutions through which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. From infancy onward, individuals learn language, values, traditions, religion, gender expectations, food practices, social norms, and ideas about identity primarily through family and kinship systems (Guest, 2020). Anthropologists study different family structures—including nuclear families, extended families, blended families, single-parent households, same-sex families, and transnational families—to understand how societies organize caregiving, inheritance, labor, and emotional support. In the United States, family life has changed significantly over recent decades due to migration, globalization, economic change, women's participation in the workforce, delayed marriage, increasing cultural diversity, and evolving attitudes toward gender and sexuality (Cherlin, 2010). At the same time, families continue to serve as central sources of socialization, cultural continuity, and emotional connection.

Anthropologists also study gender as a cultural and social system rather than simply a biological category. While biological sex refers to physical traits such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive anatomy, gender refers to the cultural expectations, identities, behaviors, and social roles associated with masculinity, femininity, and other gender identities within particular societies (Nanda & Warms, 2021). Gender roles differ significantly across cultures and historical periods, influencing labor divisions, family responsibilities, religious participation, political power, clothing, sexuality, and social status. Anthropologists emphasize that many societies recognize more gender diversity than the strict male-female binary often assumed in Western societies, including Two-Spirit identities among some Indigenous North American groups, hijras in South Asia, and fa'afafine in Samoa (Towle & Morgan, 2002). Contemporary debates surrounding gender identity, LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, and gender inequality demonstrate how gender remains a major social and political issue in modern societies.

Religion and spirituality are also central components of cultural life. Anthropologists study religion not to determine whether spiritual beliefs are true or false, but to understand how religious systems provide meaning, morality, identity, emotional support, social cohesion, and explanations for suffering, uncertainty, and human existence (Geertz, 1973). Religious traditions influence everyday practices involving food, dress, rituals, holidays, marriage, death, gender roles, and political beliefs. In the United States, increasing religious diversity resulting from immigration and globalization has contributed to the coexistence of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Indigenous spiritual traditions, secularism, and many other belief systems (Pew Research Center, 2023). Anthropologists examine how religion can both unite communities and contribute to social conflict, nationalism, discrimination, or political activism depending on historical and social conditions.

This chapter also focuses on everyday life, which anthropologists view as an important site where culture is lived, negotiated, and reproduced. Activities such as eating meals, speaking languages, celebrating holidays, using social media, attending religious ceremonies, raising children, listening to music, or expressing gender identity all reflect broader cultural values and social systems (Eriksen, 2020). In multicultural societies such as the United States, globalization, migration, technology, and digital communication continually reshape family life, religion, identity, dating practices, work patterns, and interpersonal relationships. Anthropologists study these everyday experiences in order to better understand how individuals navigate changing cultural expectations, inequality, tradition, and social change in an increasingly interconnected world.

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5.2: Family and Kinship

Anthropologists study family and kinship because these institutions are central to how societies organize social life, transmit culture, distribute resources, and create systems of identity and belonging. Family relationships influence language learning, religion, gender roles, inheritance, caregiving, emotional support, and social expectations beginning in early childhood (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Through the process of enculturation, individuals learn cultural values, traditions, norms, and behaviors largely through family interactions and kinship systems (Guest, 2020). Anthropologists emphasize that although families exist in all human societies, family structures and kinship patterns vary significantly across cultures and historical periods. What one society considers a "normal" family may differ greatly from family systems found elsewhere in the world.

Kinship refers to the socially recognized relationships connecting individuals through blood ties, marriage, adoption, or other culturally defined relationships (Kottak, 2022). Anthropologists analyze kinship systems because they help organize responsibilities involving caregiving, marriage, inheritance, political alliances, residence patterns, and economic cooperation. In multicultural societies such as the United States, migration, globalization, economic change, technology, and shifting gender roles have transformed family life and produced increasingly diverse family structures (Cherlin, 2010). Anthropologists therefore study family comparatively to understand how social institutions adapt to changing economic, cultural, and political conditions.

Nuclear and Extended Families

One of the most common distinctions anthropologists make is between nuclear families and extended families. A nuclear family typically consists of parents and their children living together within a single household (Haviland et al., 2021). Nuclear families became especially associated with industrialized societies such as the United States during the twentieth century, partly because industrial economies often encouraged geographic mobility and smaller household sizes connected to wage labor and urban living (Cherlin, 2010). In the United States, the image of the nuclear family—often represented as a married heterosexual couple with children—was heavily promoted during the post–World War II era through media, suburbanization, and economic policies.

However, anthropologists emphasize that the nuclear family is not universal nor historically dominant in all societies. Extended families include relatives beyond parents and children, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws living together or maintaining close cooperative relationships (Nanda & Warms, 2021). Extended family systems are common in many parts of Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Indigenous communities, where kinship networks often provide childcare, elder care, economic cooperation, and emotional support.

For example, many Mexican American, Filipino, South Asian, and Middle Eastern families in the United States maintain strong extended kinship systems in which grandparents, cousins, and other relatives play active roles in raising children and supporting households (Guest, 2020). Anthropologists note that extended family systems may become especially important during economic hardship, migration, or periods of social instability because larger kin networks can share labor, childcare responsibilities, and financial resources.

Family Diversity

Anthropologists emphasize that there is no single universal family form. Family diversity refers to the wide variety of household structures and kinship arrangements found across societies and historical periods (Coontz, 2016). Contemporary families in the United States include single-parent households, blended families, adoptive families, same-sex parent families, child-free couples, cohabiting partners, multigenerational households, and transnational families connected across national borders.

Migration and globalization have contributed significantly to family diversity. For example, transnational families may involve parents working abroad while children remain in their home country under the care of grandparents or extended relatives (Parreñas, 2015). Similarly, immigration may create bicultural households where multiple languages, religions, and cultural traditions are practiced within the same family.

Anthropologists also study LGBTQ+ families to challenge assumptions that heterosexual marriage and parenting are the only legitimate family forms. Same-sex couples increasingly raise children through adoption, surrogacy, co-parenting, or previous heterosexual relationships, demonstrating that family bonds are based on social relationships and caregiving rather than solely biological reproduction (Weston, 1991). Anthropologists emphasize that successful family systems are shaped less by structure

alone and more by emotional support, stability, caregiving, and social connection.

Marriage Patterns

Marriage is a socially recognized relationship that often establishes kinship ties, economic cooperation, sexual partnerships, inheritance rights, and childrearing responsibilities (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2023). Anthropologists study marriage comparatively because marriage practices vary enormously across cultures and historical periods. While romantic love is often emphasized in contemporary Western societies, many cultures historically viewed marriage primarily as an alliance between families, economic groups, or kinship networks (Nanda & Warms, 2021).

Monogamy, involving one spouse at a time, is the most common legally recognized form of marriage in the United States and many other countries. However, anthropologists have documented many other marriage systems throughout the world, including polygyny, where one man has multiple wives, and more rarely polyandry, where one woman has multiple husbands (Kottak, 2022). Arranged marriages remain common in parts of South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, although many contemporary arranged marriages increasingly involve individual choice and consent.

Marriage patterns in the United States have changed significantly in recent decades. People are generally marrying later, cohabitation before marriage has increased, interracial and interethnic marriages have become more common, and same-sex marriage became federally legalized nationwide in 2015 through the Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* (Pew Research Center, 2023). Anthropologists analyze these changes as reflections of broader shifts involving gender roles, economic conditions, globalization, migration, education, and changing attitudes toward sexuality and family life.

Parenting Styles

Parenting styles vary widely across cultures because societies hold different beliefs about child development, discipline, independence, obedience, education, and social responsibility (Lancy, 2015). Anthropologists study parenting comparatively to understand how cultural values shape childhood experiences and socialization processes. In some societies, children are encouraged to develop independence and individual decision-making from an early age, while other cultures emphasize obedience, collective responsibility, and close family interdependence.

For example, many middle-class American families emphasize encouraging children's self-expression, extracurricular activities, and individual achievement (Lareau, 2011). In contrast, some cultures place greater emphasis on respect for elders, shared household responsibilities, and collective family obligations. Anthropologists note that no single parenting style is universally "correct"; parenting practices are shaped by economic systems, labor demands, religion, education, gender roles, and historical traditions.

Technology and social media have also transformed parenting in contemporary societies. Parents today navigate issues involving screen time, online safety, cyberbullying, digital communication, and social media influence on children's identity and mental health (Miller et al., 2021). Anthropologists examine how globalization, migration, economic pressures, and technological change continue to reshape parenting practices and childhood experiences worldwide.

Intergenerational Households

Intergenerational households involve multiple generations of a family—such as grandparents, parents, and children—living together within the same home or maintaining very close economic and caregiving relationships (Bengtson, 2001). Anthropologists study intergenerational households because they often reflect cultural values concerning family responsibility, elder care, kinship obligations, and economic cooperation.

In many cultures, caring for aging parents within the household is considered an important family responsibility. Multigenerational living arrangements are especially common in parts of Asia, Latin America, Africa, and among many immigrant communities in the United States (Guest, 2020). Economic factors such as rising housing costs, childcare expenses, student debt, and elder care needs have also contributed to increasing numbers of multigenerational households in the United States during recent decades (Pew Research Center, 2022).

For example, many immigrant families combine resources by living in extended family households where grandparents assist with childcare while younger adults contribute financially to the household. During the COVID-19 pandemic, multigenerational

households became especially visible as families relied on kinship networks for caregiving, emotional support, and economic survival (CDC, 2023). Anthropologists emphasize that intergenerational households often strengthen kinship bonds and cultural continuity, although they may also involve tensions related to privacy, generational differences, and changing social expectations.

By studying family and kinship systems comparatively, anthropology demonstrates that families are highly flexible social institutions shaped by culture, economics, migration, religion, technology, and historical change. Family diversity reflects humanity's wide range of strategies for caregiving, cooperation, belonging, and cultural transmission across societies and generations.

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5.3: Gender and Sexuality

Anthropologists study gender and sexuality because they are central to how societies organize identity, labor, family life, power, religion, social expectations, and everyday behavior. Although many people assume that gender roles and sexual norms are biologically fixed or universal, anthropology demonstrates that ideas about masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and gender identity vary significantly across cultures and historical periods (Nanda & Warms, 2021). Anthropologists distinguish biological sex—which refers to physical traits such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive anatomy—from gender, which refers to the socially and culturally constructed roles, expectations, identities, and behaviors associated with masculinity, femininity, and other gender categories (Fausto-Sterling, 2020).

Gender and sexuality influence nearly every aspect of social life, including work, politics, religion, family organization, education, clothing, language, and media representation. Anthropologists emphasize that gender systems are learned through socialization beginning in early childhood and reinforced through family, schools, religion, peer groups, media, and cultural institutions (Guest, 2020). In contemporary societies, globalization, social media, migration, feminist movements, and LGBTQ+ activism continue to reshape attitudes toward gender and sexuality around the world.

Gender Roles

Gender roles refer to the cultural expectations, behaviors, responsibilities, and social norms associated with different genders within a society (Kottak, 2022). Anthropologists emphasize that gender roles are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Different societies assign different expectations regarding work, family responsibilities, emotional expression, leadership, dress, childcare, and sexuality based on cultural beliefs about gender (Nanda & Warms, 2021).

For example, in many industrialized societies women have historically been associated with domestic labor and caregiving, while men were expected to participate primarily in wage labor and political leadership. However, anthropological research demonstrates that gender divisions of labor vary widely across cultures. In some societies, women play major economic and political roles, while in others men participate actively in childcare and domestic work (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2023). Among the Aka people of Central Africa, for example, fathers spend unusually high amounts of time caring for infants compared to many industrialized societies (Hewlett, 1991).

Gender roles have changed significantly in the United States over recent decades. Women now participate heavily in higher education, politics, science, medicine, business, and the workforce, while traditional expectations surrounding marriage, parenting, and household labor continue to evolve (Cherlin, 2010). Anthropologists study these changes to understand how economic systems, social movements, globalization, and technological developments reshape gender expectations over time.

Masculinity and Femininity

Masculinity and femininity refer to the cultural meanings and expectations associated with being male, female, or expressing gender identities within specific societies (Connell, 2005). Anthropologists emphasize that ideas about masculinity and femininity are culturally variable rather than universal. Traits considered masculine in one society may not be viewed the same way elsewhere, and ideals of femininity differ significantly across cultures and historical periods.

For example, some societies value emotional restraint, physical strength, and competitiveness as markers of masculinity, while others emphasize cooperation, wisdom, or caregiving (Gilmore, 1990). Similarly, femininity may be associated with beauty, motherhood, nurturing, modesty, or independence depending on cultural context. Media, religion, schools, sports, and peer groups often reinforce ideas about appropriate masculine and feminine behavior (Lorber, 2011).

Anthropologists also study how rigid gender expectations can create social pressure and inequality. Boys may be discouraged from expressing vulnerability or emotional openness, while girls may experience pressure related to appearance, beauty standards, caregiving, or submissiveness (Connell, 2005). Contemporary social movements increasingly challenge restrictive gender norms by promoting broader understandings of identity, emotional expression, and gender diversity.

Globalization and digital media have also transformed ideas about masculinity and femininity. Social media influencers, celebrities, films, music videos, and online communities contribute to global conversations about beauty standards, body image,

gender identity, relationships, and self-expression (Miller et al., 2021). Anthropologists analyze how these global media influences interact with local cultural traditions and social expectations.

LGBTQ+ Identities

Anthropologists study LGBTQ+ identities comparatively to understand how societies define sexuality, gender identity, relationships, and social belonging across cultures (Weston, 1991). LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other diverse sexual and gender identities. Anthropology demonstrates that same-sex relationships and gender diversity have existed throughout human history and across many cultures rather than being recent or exclusively Western phenomena (Nanda & Warms, 2021).

Many societies historically recognized more than two gender categories. Examples include Two-Spirit identities among some Indigenous North American groups, hijras in South Asia, fa'afafine in Samoa, and muxes in parts of Mexico (Towle & Morgan, 2002). Anthropologists emphasize that Western binary ideas about gender are not universal and that cultures vary widely in how they understand gender identity and sexuality.

LGBTQ+ activism has significantly influenced contemporary discussions about human rights, marriage equality, healthcare access, gender identity, and discrimination. In the United States, same-sex marriage became federally legalized in 2015 through the Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* (Pew Research Center, 2023). At the same time, LGBTQ+ individuals continue to experience discrimination, violence, homelessness, mental health disparities, and political controversy in many societies (Human Rights Campaign, 2024).

Anthropologists also study chosen families within LGBTQ+ communities, where strong social support networks form outside traditional biological kinship structures (Weston, 1991). These networks often provide emotional support, caregiving, and community belonging, particularly for individuals rejected by relatives because of sexuality or gender identity.

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality refers to unequal access to power, resources, opportunities, rights, and social status based on gender (Lorber, 2011). Anthropologists study gender inequality because it affects education, employment, political representation, wages, healthcare access, reproductive rights, labor systems, and personal safety worldwide. Although gender inequality affects different societies in different ways, women and gender minorities often experience disproportionate disadvantages connected to patriarchal social systems and historical power structures.

Globally, women continue to earn lower average wages than men in many occupations, remain underrepresented in political leadership positions, and perform disproportionate amounts of unpaid domestic labor and caregiving work (United Nations Women, 2024). In some societies, girls face barriers to education, healthcare, property ownership, and political participation. Anthropologists also examine gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, honor-based violence, and human trafficking, as major human rights issues affecting women and gender minorities worldwide (Farmer, 2004).

In the United States, gender inequality intersects with race, class, sexuality, and immigration status. Women of color often experience both racism and sexism simultaneously, resulting in unequal healthcare outcomes, wage disparities, and workplace discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). Indigenous women, transgender individuals, and immigrant women may face especially high levels of violence and social vulnerability. Anthropologists use intersectionality to understand how multiple systems of inequality overlap and shape lived experiences differently across populations.

Media Representations

Anthropologists study media representations because television, film, advertising, social media, music, and digital culture strongly influence public ideas about gender, sexuality, race, beauty, relationships, and identity (Hall, 1997). Media representations help shape cultural expectations regarding masculinity, femininity, attractiveness, success, and social behavior. Historically, women and LGBTQ+ individuals were often stereotyped, excluded, or misrepresented in mainstream media.

For example, women in media have frequently been portrayed primarily through beauty standards, romantic relationships, or caregiving roles, while men are often associated with aggression, leadership, and emotional control (Kilbourne, 1999). LGBTQ+ characters were historically underrepresented or depicted through stereotypes in television and film, although representation has

expanded significantly in recent decades.

Social media has transformed how gender and sexuality are represented and discussed globally. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter allow individuals to share personal experiences, challenge stereotypes, organize activism, and create communities around gender and sexual identity (Miller et al., 2021). At the same time, social media may reinforce unrealistic beauty standards, body image pressures, cyberbullying, and online harassment.

Anthropologists emphasize that media both reflects and shapes broader cultural values and social inequalities. Increased representation of women, LGBTQ+ individuals, racial minorities, and diverse body types in media can challenge stereotypes and promote inclusion, while unequal or stereotypical representation may reinforce discrimination and social exclusion (Hall, 1997). Anthropology therefore examines media critically as a powerful cultural institution that influences how societies understand gender, sexuality, and identity in everyday life.

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5.4: Religion and Spirituality

Religion and spirituality are central subjects in anthropology because they help humans create meaning, explain the unknown, organize moral systems, strengthen social relationships, and cope with uncertainty, suffering, and death. Anthropologists study religion not to determine whether spiritual beliefs are true or false, but to understand how religious systems function socially and culturally within different societies (Geertz, 1973). Religious beliefs influence identity, family life, politics, food practices, gender roles, holidays, rituals, morality, and community organization across cultures. Anthropologists emphasize that spirituality and religion are nearly universal aspects of human societies, although religious beliefs, practices, and institutions vary enormously throughout the world (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2023).

In the United States, religion has been deeply connected to migration, colonization, politics, social movements, and cultural diversity. Immigration and globalization have contributed to increasing religious pluralism, meaning that many different religious traditions coexist within American society (Pew Research Center, 2023). Churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, shrines, and spiritual communities can be found throughout the country, reflecting the multicultural nature of the United States. Anthropologists study religion comparatively in order to understand how spiritual beliefs shape identity, social cohesion, conflict, morality, healing practices, and cultural change in both historical and contemporary societies.

Christianity in the United States

Christianity has historically been the dominant religion in the United States and has significantly shaped American culture, politics, education, holidays, and social values (Marsden, 1990). Christian traditions in the United States include Protestantism, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Mormonism, and many smaller denominations. Early European colonization was closely tied to Christianity, as groups such as the Puritans, Quakers, Catholics, and Spanish missionaries established religious communities throughout North America (Takaki, 2008).

Christianity has played major roles in both supporting and challenging social inequality throughout American history. Some Christian institutions historically justified slavery, segregation, and colonization, while others became central to abolitionist movements, the Civil Rights Movement, labor activism, and social justice campaigns (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). African American churches, in particular, served as important centers of political organizing, education, mutual aid, and resistance against racial oppression during segregation and the Civil Rights era.

Contemporary Christianity in the United States is highly diverse. Megachurches, evangelical movements, progressive Christian organizations, Black churches, Latino Catholic communities, and immigrant Christian congregations all reflect different cultural interpretations of Christianity (Pew Research Center, 2023). Anthropologists also note that younger generations in the United States increasingly identify as religiously unaffiliated, reflecting broader social changes connected to secularization and globalization.

Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism

The United States contains growing populations practicing Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and many other world religions due largely to immigration and globalization (Pew Research Center, 2023). Anthropologists study these religious communities to understand how migration, identity, transnationalism, and multiculturalism shape spiritual life in diverse societies.

Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions in the United States and includes highly diverse communities with origins in the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia, and African American communities (Peek, 2011). Muslim Americans contribute significantly to education, medicine, business, politics, and public life while also navigating challenges related to Islamophobia, discrimination, and media stereotypes following the September 11 attacks (Cainkar, 2009). Mosques often function not only as places of worship but also as community centers providing education, charity, and social support.

Judaism has played a major role in American cultural and intellectual life since early immigration waves from Europe and the Middle East. Jewish communities in the United States maintain diverse religious traditions including Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and secular Jewish identities (Goldscheider & Zuckerman, 2009). Jewish cultural contributions can be seen in education, law, science, literature, politics, business, and social justice activism throughout American history.

Hinduism and Buddhism expanded significantly in the United States following immigration reforms in 1965 that increased migration from South Asia and East Asia (Kurien, 2007). Hindu temples, Buddhist meditation centers, yoga communities, and spiritual retreats now exist throughout the country. Anthropologists examine how immigrant religious communities preserve traditions while adapting practices to American cultural environments. For example, Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Buddhist meditation practices have become increasingly visible within mainstream American culture.

Indigenous Spirituality

Indigenous spiritual traditions represent some of the oldest religious systems in the Americas and are deeply connected to land, ancestors, community, nature, and ceremonial life (Deloria, 2003). Anthropologists emphasize that Indigenous religions are highly diverse and vary significantly among different Native American nations and communities. Many Indigenous spiritual systems involve sacred relationships with animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and the natural environment, reflecting holistic worldviews connecting humans to the broader ecological world.

European colonization and forced assimilation policies severely disrupted Indigenous religious practices. Boarding schools, Christian missionary activity, and government policies historically attempted to suppress Indigenous ceremonies, languages, and spiritual traditions (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Some ceremonies, such as the Sun Dance and potlatch ceremonies, were even outlawed by the U.S. government during certain periods.

Despite these historical pressures, Indigenous communities continue to preserve and revitalize spiritual traditions today. Powwows, sweat lodge ceremonies, storytelling traditions, healing practices, and sacred ecological knowledge remain important aspects of many Indigenous cultures (Deloria, 2003). Anthropologists also study contemporary Indigenous activism surrounding sacred land protection and environmental justice. Movements such as the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline emphasized the spiritual importance of water and land protection within Indigenous worldviews (Whyte, 2020).

New Age Spirituality

Anthropologists also study New Age spirituality, a broad category of spiritual practices and beliefs that emerged primarily during the twentieth century and often combine elements from multiple religious traditions, psychology, alternative healing, meditation, astrology, and self-help philosophies (Heelas, 1996). New Age spirituality typically emphasizes personal growth, individual spiritual exploration, holistic healing, energy, mindfulness, and alternative understandings of consciousness and wellness.

Practices associated with New Age spirituality may include meditation, yoga, crystal healing, astrology, tarot reading, Reiki, chakra systems, manifestation practices, and spiritual retreats (Heelas, 1996). Many New Age movements draw inspiration from Buddhism, Hinduism, Indigenous traditions, and Western esoteric philosophies, often blending multiple belief systems together in syncretic ways.

Anthropologists analyze New Age spirituality within the context of globalization and consumer culture because spiritual ideas and practices increasingly circulate through social media, online communities, wellness industries, and global tourism (Eriksen, 2020). Yoga studios, meditation apps, spiritual influencers, wellness retreats, and alternative healing industries have become widespread in contemporary American culture.

At the same time, anthropologists critically examine concerns surrounding cultural appropriation when spiritual practices from Indigenous or non-Western traditions are commercialized or removed from their original cultural contexts (Young, 2010). Anthropology therefore studies New Age spirituality both as a reflection of contemporary spiritual searching and as part of broader global cultural exchanges and consumer systems.

Religious Diversity

The United States is one of the most religiously diverse societies in the world due to immigration, globalization, constitutional religious freedom, and multiculturalism (Pew Research Center, 2023). Religious diversity refers to the coexistence of multiple belief systems and spiritual traditions within the same society. Churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, gurdwaras, meditation centers, and secular communities all contribute to the complex religious landscape of contemporary American life.

Anthropologists study religious diversity because religion often intersects with race, ethnicity, nationality, migration, politics, and identity formation (Guest, 2020). Immigrant communities frequently use religious institutions to preserve language, culture,

family networks, and social support systems. For example, Korean churches, Sikh gurdwaras, Hindu temples, and Latino Catholic parishes often function as both spiritual and cultural community centers.

Religious diversity can encourage intercultural understanding and cooperation, but it can also contribute to social conflict, discrimination, and political tension. Islamophobia, antisemitism, religious nationalism, and debates over religious freedom illustrate how religion remains politically significant in contemporary societies (Cainkar, 2009). Anthropologists emphasize that understanding religious diversity requires cultural relativism and careful attention to the historical and social contexts shaping spiritual beliefs and practices.

In increasingly globalized societies, religion continues to evolve through migration, technology, media, and cross-cultural interaction. Anthropologists therefore study religion not as a static institution but as a dynamic and adaptive aspect of human culture that continues to shape identity, morality, politics, and everyday life throughout the modern world.

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5.5: Language and Communication

Language is one of the most important aspects of human culture because it allows people to communicate ideas, emotions, traditions, beliefs, identities, and social relationships across generations. Anthropologists study language not simply as a system of words and grammar, but as a cultural system connected to power, identity, politics, migration, ethnicity, social class, and worldview (Duranti, 1997). Language influences how people understand the world around them, organize social relationships, and express cultural belonging. Different languages and dialects reflect unique cultural histories, values, humor, storytelling traditions, and ways of interpreting reality (Bonvillain, 2020).

The United States is one of the most linguistically diverse societies in the world due to Indigenous heritage, slavery, migration, globalization, and transnational communication. Although English is the dominant language in most public institutions, hundreds of languages are spoken throughout the country, including Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Arabic, Korean, Hindi, Navajo, and many others (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Anthropologists study language diversity because communication patterns reveal broader social inequalities, identity negotiations, cultural adaptation, and power relationships within multicultural societies.

Bilingualism

Bilingualism refers to the ability to speak and understand two languages, while multilingualism involves using multiple languages (Grosjean, 2010). Anthropologists study bilingualism because it is closely connected to migration, globalization, identity, education, and transnational family systems. Millions of people throughout the world regularly navigate multiple languages in their daily lives, especially within immigrant communities and multicultural societies.

In the United States, bilingualism is especially common among immigrant and second-generation populations. Many Latino, Asian American, Middle Eastern, African, and Indigenous communities maintain heritage languages while also using English in schools, workplaces, and public life (Zentella, 1997). For example, many Mexican American families speak Spanish at home while children primarily use English in school settings. Similarly, Chinese American, Filipino American, and Arab American families often maintain bilingual communication across generations.

Anthropologists emphasize that bilingualism provides important cognitive, social, and economic benefits. Research suggests that bilingual individuals often develop stronger communication flexibility, problem-solving abilities, and cross-cultural awareness (Grosjean, 2010). At the same time, immigrant families sometimes experience pressure to abandon heritage languages in favor of English due to assimilation pressures or language discrimination. Anthropologists study these tensions because language preservation is closely tied to cultural identity, family relationships, and intergenerational continuity.

Code-Switching

Code-switching refers to the practice of alternating between languages, dialects, accents, or communication styles depending on social context (Zentella, 1997). Anthropologists and sociolinguists study code-switching because it reflects how people navigate multiple cultural identities and social environments. Code-switching is common among bilingual and multilingual populations, but it can also occur within a single language when individuals shift speech styles depending on audience, setting, or social expectations.

For example, a bilingual Mexican American student may speak Spanish with grandparents at home, use English in school, and blend both languages while speaking with friends. Similarly, many African Americans shift between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard American English depending on workplace, educational, or social contexts (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). Code-switching may also occur online, where individuals blend languages, slang, emojis, and digital communication styles across social media platforms.

Anthropologists emphasize that code-switching is not a sign of linguistic confusion or deficiency. Instead, it reflects sophisticated communication skills and social adaptability (Bonvillain, 2020). Code-switching often allows individuals to express identity, solidarity, professionalism, humor, intimacy, or cultural belonging depending on the social setting. Anthropologists study code-switching as an important example of how language and identity interact within multicultural and globalized societies.

Language Discrimination

Language discrimination occurs when individuals are treated unfairly because of the language they speak, their accent, dialect, or communication style (Lippi-Green, 2012). Anthropologists study language discrimination because language is closely connected to race, ethnicity, immigration, class, nationality, and social power. In many societies, dominant languages are associated with education, intelligence, professionalism, and political authority, while minority languages and dialects are often stigmatized.

In the United States, immigrants and bilingual speakers may experience pressure to speak only English in schools, workplaces, or public spaces. Spanish speakers, for example, have historically faced discrimination despite Spanish being one of the most widely spoken languages in the country (Zentella, 1997). Indigenous languages were also heavily suppressed through boarding school systems that punished Native American children for speaking their ancestral languages (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014).

Anthropologists emphasize that language discrimination often reinforces broader systems of racism, xenophobia, and inequality. Accents associated with immigrant populations may lead to stereotypes about intelligence, education, or citizenship status (Lippi-Green, 2012). At the same time, anthropologists highlight efforts to preserve endangered languages and promote linguistic diversity through bilingual education, language revitalization programs, and multicultural curricula.

African American Vernacular English

African American Vernacular English (AAVE), sometimes referred to as Black English or Ebonics, is a distinct linguistic system spoken primarily within many African American communities in the United States (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). Anthropologists and linguists emphasize that AAVE is not “broken” or incorrect English but a rule-governed dialect with its own grammatical structures, pronunciation patterns, vocabulary, and cultural meanings.

AAVE developed historically through the experiences of enslaved Africans, segregation, migration, and African American cultural history (Smitherman, 2000). Features of AAVE include distinctive verb usage, pronunciation patterns, and vocabulary that differ from Standard American English. Linguists have shown that AAVE follows consistent grammatical rules and represents a fully developed linguistic system rather than poor speech or lack of education (Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

Anthropologists study AAVE because language is closely tied to identity, culture, music, humor, storytelling, and resistance within African American communities. AAVE has profoundly influenced American popular culture, especially through hip-hop, rap, comedy, social media, and youth slang (Alim, 2004). Terms and expressions originating in African American communities often spread into mainstream American language and global popular culture.

At the same time, speakers of AAVE may face discrimination in schools, workplaces, and legal systems because Standard American English is often treated as the dominant or “proper” form of speech (Smitherman, 2000). Anthropologists analyze how language hierarchies reinforce racial inequality and how linguistic diversity reflects broader systems of power and identity.

Spanglish

Spanglish refers to the blending of Spanish and English within communication, especially among Latino populations in the United States (Stavans, 2003). Anthropologists study Spanglish because it reflects migration, bilingualism, cultural hybridity, and bicultural identity formation. Spanglish may involve mixing vocabulary, grammar, phrases, or pronunciation from both languages within the same conversation or sentence.

For example, bilingual speakers may combine English and Spanish expressions such as “Voy a parquear el carro” (“I’m going to park the car”) or “Texteame más tarde” (“Text me later”) (Stavans, 2003). Spanglish is especially common among second-generation Latino populations who navigate both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking cultural environments daily.

Anthropologists emphasize that Spanglish is not linguistic confusion but an example of cultural adaptation and hybrid identity formation within multilingual societies (Zentella, 1997). For many Latino Americans, Spanglish reflects bicultural experiences and social belonging in both Latino and broader American cultural worlds. Music genres such as reggaeton and Latin pop, as well as social media and entertainment, have helped popularize Spanglish expressions within mainstream American culture.

At the same time, some bilingual speakers experience criticism from both English-only and Spanish-only speakers who may view mixed-language communication negatively. Anthropologists study these tensions because they reveal broader debates about assimilation, identity, language purity, and cultural authenticity within immigrant communities and multicultural societies.

Through the study of language and communication, anthropology demonstrates that language is far more than a technical system of grammar and vocabulary. Language reflects culture, identity, migration, inequality, history, and power, while also serving as a dynamic tool through which people create meaning and navigate social life in an interconnected world.

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5.6: Food, Media, and Popular Culture

Anthropologists study food, media, and popular culture because they reveal how people express identity, communicate values, resist inequality, and create social belonging in everyday life. Activities such as eating, listening to music, wearing clothing, participating in online communities, or supporting sports teams may appear ordinary, but they are deeply connected to culture, politics, globalization, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and social class (Storey, 2021). Popular culture includes the widely shared forms of entertainment, fashion, music, sports, social media, and consumer practices that shape everyday experiences within societies. Anthropologists analyze these cultural expressions because they reflect broader systems of power, migration, inequality, resistance, and identity formation (Guest, 2020).

Globalization and digital technology have transformed popular culture by allowing cultural products, trends, music, fashion, and media to circulate rapidly across national boundaries. Today, a teenager in Los Angeles may eat Korean tacos, listen to Afrobeats and reggaeton, follow influencers from multiple countries on TikTok, and wear fashion styles inspired by global cultural trends (Eriksen, 2020). Anthropologists emphasize that popular culture is not trivial or superficial; it is an important arena where social identities, political struggles, and cultural values are negotiated and expressed.

Cuisine and Identity

Food is one of the most visible and meaningful expressions of cultural identity. Anthropologists study cuisine because food practices reflect migration, religion, ethnicity, social class, globalization, family traditions, and historical experience (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). Meals are not only sources of nutrition but also important social rituals connected to family bonding, celebration, hospitality, spirituality, and community identity.

In the United States, cuisine reflects centuries of migration and cultural exchange. Foods such as tacos, pizza, sushi, pho, gumbo, barbecue, birria, curry, soul food, and halal street food all illustrate the multicultural influences shaping American culinary life (Pilcher, 2017). Immigrant communities often preserve cultural identity through food traditions passed down across generations. For example, Mexican American families may prepare tamales during holidays, while Chinese American communities celebrate Lunar New Year with symbolic foods connected to prosperity and family unity.

Anthropologists also study how food can become connected to social inequality and politics. Access to healthy food often differs across communities due to poverty, racial segregation, and urban planning. Food deserts—areas with limited access to affordable nutritious food—disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color in the United States (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Anthropologists also examine debates surrounding cultural appropriation in food industries, where cuisines from marginalized communities may become commercialized without acknowledgment of their cultural origins.

Music and Resistance

Music exists in every known human society and plays important social, emotional, spiritual, and political roles (Merriam, 1964). Anthropologists study music because it communicates identity, collective memory, social values, and political resistance. Throughout history, music has been used to preserve culture, strengthen communities, express emotions, challenge oppression, and mobilize social movements (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998).

In the United States, many musical traditions developed directly from the experiences of marginalized communities. African American musical traditions such as blues, jazz, gospel, hip-hop, and rap emerged from histories of slavery, segregation, racism, and urban inequality while also becoming powerful forms of artistic expression and resistance (Rose, 1994). Hip-hop culture, for example, developed in the Bronx during the 1970s as a creative response to poverty, racial discrimination, and urban disinvestment. Rap lyrics often address topics such as police violence, inequality, racism, and economic struggle.

Latino communities have also shaped American music through salsa, reggaeton, mariachi, bachata, Tejano music, and other genres connected to migration and cultural identity (Manuel, 2018). Indigenous musicians frequently use music to preserve language and cultural traditions while also addressing colonialism and land rights struggles. Protest songs played important roles during the Civil Rights Movement, antiwar activism, labor movements, feminist movements, and LGBTQ+ activism throughout American history (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998).

Anthropologists emphasize that music is deeply connected to globalization. Genres such as K-pop, Afrobeats, reggaeton, and hip-hop now circulate globally through streaming services and social media, creating hybrid musical styles that blend influences from multiple cultures.

Fashion and Identity

Fashion is another important form of cultural expression that communicates identity, gender, ethnicity, religion, social class, and political values (Craik, 2009). Anthropologists study clothing and fashion because styles of dress often symbolize belonging, status, resistance, spirituality, or cultural heritage. Clothing choices may reflect religious traditions, gender expectations, political beliefs, occupation, regional identity, or participation in youth subcultures.

For example, hijabs, turbans, Indigenous beadwork, African prints, tattoos, punk fashion, and LGBTQ+ pride symbols all carry cultural and social meanings beyond simple appearance (Kaiser, 2012). Fashion may also become a form of resistance or identity affirmation. During the Black Power Movement, Afro hairstyles and African-inspired clothing symbolized pride in African heritage and resistance to Eurocentric beauty standards (Mercer, 1987). Similarly, Chicano fashion, Indigenous regalia, and queer fashion cultures often express political identity and cultural solidarity.

Anthropologists also examine how globalization and consumer culture influence fashion industries. Global clothing brands, social media influencers, and fast fashion companies rapidly spread trends across countries and cultures. However, fashion industries are also connected to labor exploitation and environmental concerns. Many clothing items sold in wealthier countries are manufactured in factories in Bangladesh, Vietnam, or Cambodia where workers may experience low wages and unsafe conditions (Steger, 2020). Anthropology therefore studies fashion not only as personal expression but also as part of global systems of labor, media, identity, and capitalism.

Social Media Communities

Social media has transformed communication, identity formation, activism, entertainment, and social interaction throughout the world. Anthropologists study social media because online platforms increasingly shape how people form relationships, express identity, share culture, consume information, and participate in politics (Miller et al., 2021). Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook allow individuals to create digital communities that transcend geographic boundaries.

Social media communities often form around shared interests, identities, fandoms, political movements, religions, or cultural traditions. LGBTQ+ youth, immigrant communities, Indigenous activists, gamers, musicians, and artists frequently use social media to build support networks and express cultural identity (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #StopAsianHate, #MeToo, and #LandBack demonstrate how digital activism can spread globally and mobilize collective action.

Anthropologists also examine how social media influences mental health, body image, political polarization, misinformation, and consumer behavior. Algorithms often shape which content users see, reinforcing certain beliefs or trends while marginalizing others (Noble, 2018). Online communities can provide emotional support and cultural visibility, but they may also contribute to cyberbullying, harassment, surveillance, and unrealistic beauty standards. Anthropology studies social media as a major cultural institution shaping contemporary identity, politics, and communication.

Sports and Nationalism

Sports are important cultural activities that often reflect identity, politics, nationalism, race, gender, and globalization (Giulianotti, 2005). Anthropologists study sports because athletic events frequently become symbolic expressions of national pride, community belonging, masculinity, competition, and collective identity. International sporting events such as the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup often promote nationalism by encouraging emotional attachment to national teams and symbols.

In the United States, sports such as football, basketball, baseball, and soccer are deeply connected to media industries, celebrity culture, race relations, education systems, and local identity (Andrews & Silk, 2018). Anthropologists examine how sports may both reinforce and challenge inequality. African American athletes, for example, have historically used sports as platforms for activism and social change. Athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Colin Kaepernick, Megan Rapinoe, and Billie Jean King used their visibility to challenge racism, sexism, war, and inequality.

Anthropologists also study how sports can reproduce stereotypes and unequal power systems. Women athletes frequently receive

less media coverage and lower salaries than male athletes, while racial stereotypes may influence how athletes are portrayed in media and scouting systems (Messner, 2002). At the same time, sports can create solidarity and social mobility opportunities for marginalized communities.

Globalization has transformed sports into massive international industries involving migration, media contracts, sponsorships, and transnational fan communities. Soccer players from Africa, Latin America, and Asia regularly compete in European leagues, while American basketball and hip-hop culture influence youth worldwide (Giulianotti, 2005). Anthropologists therefore study sports as important sites where globalization, identity, politics, race, gender, and nationalism intersect within contemporary society.

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5.7: Life-Cycle Perspectives

Anthropologists study the human life cycle because culture shapes how people experience childhood, adolescence, adulthood, aging, family responsibilities, and death across societies. Different cultures organize the stages of life in distinct ways, creating varying expectations regarding education, work, gender roles, religion, family obligations, independence, and social responsibility (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Anthropology emphasizes that stages of life are not purely biological processes but are also culturally constructed experiences shaped by social norms, economic systems, religion, migration, globalization, and historical conditions (Kottak, 2022).

In multicultural societies such as the United States, people often experience the life cycle differently depending on race, ethnicity, social class, religion, gender, immigration status, and family background. Anthropologists examine how institutions such as schools, families, religious organizations, healthcare systems, and labor markets influence life experiences from childhood through old age (Guest, 2020). They also study how migration and globalization reshape intergenerational relationships, parenting practices, elder care, and identity formation across different cultural communities.

Childhood

Anthropologists view childhood as a culturally shaped stage of life rather than a universal experience that is identical across societies (Lancy, 2015). Different cultures hold different ideas about children's responsibilities, independence, education, discipline, and participation in family life. In some societies, children are expected to contribute to household labor, childcare, farming, or family businesses from an early age, while in industrialized societies childhood is often associated more strongly with formal education, play, and protection from labor responsibilities (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2023).

In the United States, childhood is strongly influenced by schools, media, technology, sports, peer groups, and digital communication. Children today are exposed to social media, smartphones, streaming platforms, and online communities from increasingly young ages, shaping language use, identity, socialization, and mental health (Miller et al., 2021). Anthropologists also examine how childhood experiences differ based on race, class, and neighborhood conditions. Children growing up in wealthier communities often have greater access to extracurricular activities, technology, healthcare, and educational opportunities than children living in under-resourced neighborhoods (Lareau, 2011).

Migration also shapes childhood experiences. Children in immigrant families may grow up bilingual, navigate multiple cultural systems simultaneously, and often help parents interpret language and institutions such as schools or healthcare systems (Orellana, 2009). Anthropologists emphasize that childhood is deeply connected to broader systems of inequality, cultural values, and social expectations.

Adolescence

Adolescence refers to the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, often associated with identity formation, physical development, social independence, and changing responsibilities (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). Anthropologists study adolescence comparatively because cultures differ greatly in how they define adulthood and structure the transition into adult social roles.

In many societies, rites of passage formally mark the transition from childhood to adulthood through ceremonies, initiations, religious rituals, or community recognition (Turner, 1969). Examples include quinceañeras in many Latino communities, bar and bat mitzvahs in Jewish traditions, confirmation ceremonies in Christianity, and coming-of-age rituals in Indigenous societies. These ceremonies often symbolize increased social responsibilities and changing expectations regarding gender, family roles, or religious participation.

In the United States, adolescence is heavily shaped by schools, peer groups, sports, dating, social media, and youth culture. Teenagers often explore identity through music, fashion, online communities, language, and social activism (Best, 2017). Anthropologists also study how race, gender, class, and sexuality influence adolescent experiences differently across communities. LGBTQ+ adolescents, immigrant youth, and racial minority youth may navigate additional challenges related to discrimination, bicultural identity, family expectations, or social belonging.

Social media has become especially influential during adolescence. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube

shape communication, body image, friendships, political awareness, and identity formation among youth (Miller et al., 2021). Anthropologists examine both the opportunities and challenges associated with digital adolescence, including cyberbullying, online activism, mental health concerns, and global cultural exchange.

Aging

Anthropologists study aging because attitudes toward older adults differ significantly across cultures and historical periods. Aging involves biological changes, but it is also shaped by cultural values, economic systems, healthcare access, family organization, and social expectations (Sokolovsky, 2020). In some societies, elders are highly respected as sources of wisdom, spiritual knowledge, and cultural continuity, while industrialized societies may place greater emphasis on youth, productivity, and independence.

In many Indigenous, Asian, African, and Latino cultures, older adults often play important roles in childcare, storytelling, religious leadership, conflict mediation, and preserving cultural traditions (Guest, 2020). Grandparents frequently participate actively in multigenerational households and extended family systems. In contrast, some industrialized societies increasingly isolate elderly populations through retirement communities, nursing homes, or social separation from younger generations.

Anthropologists also examine how aging intersects with healthcare, gender, social class, and economic inequality. Wealthier individuals generally have greater access to healthcare, retirement savings, safer housing, and elder support services than poorer populations (Sokolovsky, 2020). Women often live longer than men on average but may face greater economic insecurity in old age due to wage inequality and caregiving responsibilities across the life course.

Global aging populations have become major social issues in many countries. Improvements in medicine and public health have increased life expectancy, creating growing elderly populations requiring healthcare, caregiving, and social support systems (World Health Organization, 2023). Anthropologists study how societies adapt culturally and economically to changing age demographics.

Elder Care

Elder care refers to the social, emotional, medical, and economic support provided to aging populations. Anthropologists study elder care because caregiving practices reflect broader cultural values concerning family responsibility, kinship, gender roles, and social obligation (Sokolovsky, 2020). Different societies organize elder care differently depending on family structure, government programs, religion, economic conditions, and cultural beliefs about aging.

In many cultures, caring for elderly parents within the family household is considered a moral responsibility and an important expression of respect for elders (Nanda & Warms, 2021). Multigenerational households are common in many Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, and African communities where grandparents, parents, and children live together or maintain close caregiving relationships. In contrast, industrialized societies such as the United States often rely more heavily on nursing homes, assisted living facilities, retirement communities, and professional healthcare systems for elder care.

Anthropologists also examine how gender shapes caregiving responsibilities. Women disproportionately perform unpaid caregiving labor for children, elderly relatives, and disabled family members in many societies (Lorber, 2011). Migration and globalization have additionally transformed elder care systems. Migrant workers from countries such as the Philippines, Mexico, and Caribbean nations often work as caregivers for elderly populations in wealthier countries, creating global care chains that connect labor migration to family caregiving systems (Parreñas, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted major challenges facing elderly populations, particularly in nursing homes and long-term care facilities where many older adults experienced isolation, illness, and high mortality rates (CDC, 2023). Anthropologists study these issues to better understand how aging, healthcare systems, family structures, and social inequality intersect in contemporary societies.

Immigration Across Generations

Anthropologists also study how migration affects different generations within immigrant families and communities. Immigration across generations often produces differences in language use, cultural identity, social expectations, religion, and family relationships (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). First-generation immigrants, who were born outside the United States, may maintain strong ties to homeland cultures, languages, and traditions. Second-generation individuals, born or largely raised in the United

States, often navigate bicultural identities combining both ancestral heritage and mainstream American culture.

For example, immigrant parents may emphasize preserving heritage languages, traditional values, religion, and family expectations, while younger generations adapt more quickly to American schools, peer culture, social media, and mainstream cultural norms (Orellana, 2009). These generational differences can create tensions surrounding dating, gender roles, education, careers, religion, and family obligations within immigrant households.

Anthropologists also examine how transnational families maintain connections across borders through remittances, digital communication, travel, and cultural traditions (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Many immigrant families remain emotionally and economically connected to relatives in countries of origin for generations. For example, Mexican American, Filipino American, Indian American, Somali American, and Chinese American families may maintain strong cultural and kinship ties through religious ceremonies, holidays, language use, food traditions, and online communication platforms such as WhatsApp or WeChat.

Immigration across generations also contributes to cultural hybridity and identity transformation. Younger generations often blend traditions from multiple cultural worlds, creating new forms of language, fashion, music, religion, and identity that reflect globalization and multiculturalism (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). Anthropologists study these generational experiences to better understand how migration reshapes family life, identity, belonging, and social change in increasingly interconnected societies.

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5.8: Conclusion

Family, Identity, and Social Change

Family and kinship systems remain central to human societies because they shape identity, caregiving, emotional support, socialization, inheritance, and cultural continuity across generations. Anthropologists emphasize that families are not fixed or universal institutions; instead, family structures change over time in response to migration, globalization, economic systems, technological change, religion, and shifting social values (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Nuclear families, extended families, blended households, same-sex families, transnational families, and multigenerational households all demonstrate the diversity of ways humans organize social relationships and caregiving throughout the world.

Contemporary societies continue to experience major changes involving marriage patterns, parenting styles, gender expectations, and intergenerational relationships. In the United States, increasing cultural diversity, delayed marriage, women's participation in the workforce, migration, and digital communication technologies have transformed family life significantly during recent decades (Cherlin, 2010). At the same time, family remains one of the primary ways culture is transmitted through language, religion, food traditions, values, and social expectations. Anthropologists study these changes to understand how people adapt to shifting economic and cultural conditions while maintaining social belonging and kinship ties.

Gender, Religion, and Cultural Diversity

Anthropologists also study how gender, sexuality, and religion shape social life and cultural identity across societies. Anthropology demonstrates that gender roles, ideas about masculinity and femininity, and attitudes toward sexuality are culturally constructed rather than biologically fixed (Nanda & Warms, 2021). Different societies organize gender and family responsibilities in different ways, while contemporary social movements continue to challenge inequality related to gender, sexuality, and identity. LGBTQ+ activism, feminist movements, and broader struggles for social equality demonstrate how concepts of gender and sexuality continue to evolve within modern societies (Crenshaw, 1991).

Religion and spirituality remain powerful forces shaping morality, identity, rituals, politics, and community life around the world. In the United States, increasing religious diversity resulting from migration and globalization has contributed to the coexistence of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Indigenous spiritual traditions, secularism, and many other belief systems (Pew Research Center, 2023). Anthropologists emphasize that religion can provide emotional support, social cohesion, meaning, and cultural continuity, while also contributing to political conflict, discrimination, or social activism depending on historical and cultural conditions (Geertz, 1973). The study of gender, sexuality, and religion therefore reveals the complexity and diversity of human cultural experiences in contemporary global societies.

Everyday Life in a Globalized Society

Anthropologists view everyday life as an important site where culture is continuously practiced, negotiated, and transformed. Activities such as speaking languages, eating meals, listening to music, participating in social media, wearing clothing, celebrating holidays, and supporting sports teams all reflect broader systems of identity, migration, globalization, social class, race, and political power (Eriksen, 2020). Popular culture, media, and digital communication increasingly connect people across national boundaries, allowing ideas, trends, languages, and cultural practices to circulate globally at unprecedented speed.

Globalization has created new opportunities for cultural exchange while also producing challenges related to inequality, cultural homogenization, misinformation, and social fragmentation. Social media platforms allow individuals to maintain transnational family ties, build online communities, and organize social movements, but they may also reinforce unrealistic beauty standards, political polarization, and digital inequalities (Miller et al., 2021). Anthropologists study these developments to better understand how technology, migration, and globalization reshape communication, identity formation, family relationships, and everyday cultural practices in modern societies.

At the same time, cultural diversity remains visible in everyday life throughout the United States. Bilingualism, ethnic cuisines, religious festivals, music traditions, and multicultural communities all reflect the continuing influence of migration and globalization on American society (Guest, 2020). Anthropology highlights how ordinary daily experiences reveal broader social

structures and cultural processes shaping human life in a rapidly changing world.

Anthropology and the Study of Human Experience

Anthropology provides valuable tools for understanding the diversity and complexity of human experience across cultures and historical periods. Through ethnographic research, participant observation, cross-cultural comparison, and historical analysis, anthropologists examine how humans create meaning, organize social relationships, adapt to changing environments, and construct systems of identity and belief (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2023). One of anthropology's most important contributions is its emphasis on cultural relativism, which encourages understanding cultural practices within their own historical and social contexts rather than judging them solely according to outside standards (Boas, 1940/2020).

The anthropological study of family, gender, religion, language, media, and everyday life demonstrates that human societies are extraordinarily diverse while also sharing common social and emotional needs. Across cultures, people seek belonging, identity, caregiving, spirituality, communication, and social connection, although these needs are expressed differently depending on cultural traditions and historical circumstances (Lavenda & Schultz, 2023). Anthropology therefore helps challenge stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and simplistic assumptions about what is "normal" or universal in human behavior.

Ultimately, the anthropological perspective encourages critical thinking about culture, inequality, identity, globalization, and social change. By examining everyday life comparatively and historically, anthropology helps people better understand both cultural differences and shared humanity within an increasingly interconnected world.

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6: POWER, INEQUALITY, AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY

6.1: Introduction

6.2: Social Class and Economic Inequality

6.3: Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion

6.4: Media and Representation

6.5: Education and Opportunity

6.6: Health and Society

6.7: Cultural Change and the Future of Diversity

6.8: Conclusion

6.9: References

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6.1: Introduction

Anthropologists study power and inequality because they shape nearly every aspect of human life, including access to resources, political influence, education, healthcare, employment, housing, and social opportunities. In the United States, systems of power influence how people experience everyday life differently depending on factors such as social class, race and ethnicity, gender, immigration status, religion, sexuality, age, and geographic location. By examining these inequalities comparatively and historically, anthropologists seek to understand not only how unequal systems develop, but also how they are maintained, challenged, and transformed over time.

Power refers to the ability of individuals, groups, or institutions to influence behavior, control resources, shape beliefs, or make decisions that affect others. Anthropologists recognize that power operates at multiple levels of society. Some forms of power are direct and visible, such as laws, policing, government policies, and economic systems. Other forms are more subtle and operate through culture, language, media, education, religion, and social norms, shaping how people think about themselves and others (Foucault, 1977; Gramsci, 1971). Because culture influences human perception and behavior, anthropologists are especially interested in how inequality becomes normalized within everyday life.

Inequality exists when individuals or groups have unequal access to wealth, opportunities, rights, prestige, or social power. While some degree of social differentiation exists in nearly all societies, anthropologists emphasize that inequality is not simply the result of individual effort or biological differences. Instead, inequalities are historically produced and socially organized through institutions and systems that advantage some groups while disadvantaging others. These systems include colonialism, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, segregation, unequal schooling, labor exploitation, and discriminatory laws and policies (Farmer, 2004; Mullings, 2005).

Anthropologists also examine how inequalities intersect. The concept of intersectionality explains that people experience social advantages and disadvantages differently depending on how multiple social identities combine. For example, the experiences of a wealthy white woman may differ greatly from those of a working-class immigrant woman or a Black transgender individual. These overlapping forms of inequality shape people's opportunities, vulnerabilities, and lived experiences in complex ways (Crenshaw, 1989).

In the contemporary United States, rapid globalization, technological change, political polarization, climate change, migration, and economic restructuring continue to reshape American society. Anthropologists study how these large-scale forces affect ordinary people's daily lives, identities, relationships, and communities. Topics such as homelessness, mass incarceration, healthcare inequality, digital culture, labor precarity, immigration debates, environmental injustice, and social movements reveal how power operates in modern society and how individuals resist or adapt to changing social conditions.

At the same time, anthropology highlights human resilience, creativity, and resistance. Throughout history, communities facing inequality have developed strategies of survival, solidarity, activism, and cultural expression. Social movements advocating for civil rights, gender equality, labor protections, Indigenous sovereignty, immigrant rights, disability rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and environmental justice demonstrate how people challenge systems of inequality and seek social change.

This chapter brings together many of the themes explored throughout the course, including culture, identity, race and ethnicity, gender, family, economics, politics, religion, globalization, and human diversity. By applying anthropological perspectives to contemporary American society, students can better understand how historical forces and cultural systems continue to shape modern social realities. Anthropology ultimately encourages critical thinking about inequality, empathy toward diverse human experiences, and a deeper understanding of how societies can both reproduce and challenge systems of power.

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6.2: Social Class and Economic Inequality

Anthropologists study social class and economic inequality because access to wealth, labor, housing, education, healthcare, and political influence is unevenly distributed within societies. In the United States, economic inequality has become one of the most significant social issues of the 21st century. While the U.S. is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, millions of Americans experience poverty, housing insecurity, low wages, debt, and limited access to essential resources. Anthropologists analyze how economic systems shape people's daily lives and how inequalities are connected to larger historical and political structures.

Social class refers to a person's position within a system of economic stratification. Class is often shaped by income, wealth, occupation, education, and access to resources. Anthropologists emphasize that class is not only economic but also cultural and social, influencing lifestyles, opportunities, social networks, and life chances. Social class affects where people live, the quality of schools they attend, the food they consume, healthcare access, exposure to violence or pollution, and even average life expectancy (Bourdieu, 1984; Farmer, 2004).

Poverty

Poverty refers to the condition in which individuals or families lack sufficient resources to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, transportation, and clothing. Anthropologists argue that poverty is not simply the result of personal failure or lack of motivation, but is deeply connected to structural inequalities within society. These inequalities include unequal educational opportunities, wage disparities, discrimination, deindustrialization, rising housing costs, healthcare expenses, and limited access to stable employment.

In the United States, poverty disproportionately affects children, racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, single-parent households, people with disabilities, and elderly populations. Structural barriers such as residential segregation, unequal school funding, and limited access to healthcare contribute to cycles of intergenerational poverty. Anthropologists also study the "culture of poverty" debate critically, emphasizing that poverty is primarily produced by structural conditions rather than cultural deficiencies (Lewis, 1966; Mullings, 2005).

Poverty is often geographically concentrated. Many rural communities experience persistent poverty due to limited economic opportunities, while urban poverty is frequently associated with underinvestment, housing segregation, unemployment, and high living costs. Anthropologists examine how communities develop survival strategies and informal support networks to cope with economic hardship.

Wealth Inequality

Wealth inequality refers to the unequal distribution of assets and financial resources within society. Wealth includes savings, investments, property ownership, inheritance, businesses, and other accumulated assets. Anthropologists and sociologists note that wealth inequality in the United States has increased dramatically in recent decades, with a small percentage of the population controlling a large share of national wealth.

Unlike income, wealth can be passed down across generations, contributing to long-term advantages for some families and disadvantages for others. Historical inequalities—including slavery, segregation, discriminatory lending practices, exclusion from homeownership opportunities, and unequal educational access—have contributed to significant racial wealth gaps in the United States. For example, white households on average possess substantially greater wealth than Black and Latino households due to generations of accumulated advantages and systemic exclusion (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006).

Anthropologists study how wealth shapes social mobility and life opportunities. Wealthier families are more likely to access elite education, safer neighborhoods, political influence, and financial security during crises. Meanwhile, economically marginalized communities often face debt, housing insecurity, food insecurity, and limited upward mobility.

Labor and Capitalism

Anthropologists analyze labor and capitalism as cultural and historical systems rather than purely economic processes. Capitalism is an economic system based on private ownership, wage labor, markets, and the pursuit of profit. Anthropologists study how

capitalist systems shape social relationships, values, identities, and inequalities around the world (Marx, 1867/1976; Wolf, 1982).

Under capitalism, labor refers to human work exchanged for wages or income. Anthropologists examine how labor systems affect workers' lives, including working conditions, exploitation, job insecurity, migration, and labor organization. Industrialization and globalization transformed labor in the United States by shifting economies from agriculture and manufacturing toward service industries, finance, and technology sectors.

Anthropologists also study how capitalism influences consumer culture and social identity. Consumption often becomes associated with status, success, and personal identity, while economic pressures can produce stress, debt, and competition. Critics argue that contemporary capitalism contributes to widening inequality because economic gains are often concentrated among corporations and wealthy elites while many workers experience stagnant wages and rising living costs.

Labor movements and unions have historically played important roles in improving wages, workplace safety, and workers' rights. Anthropologists examine how workers organize collectively to resist exploitation and demand economic justice.

Gig Economy

The gig economy refers to forms of temporary, freelance, contract, or app-based work rather than long-term stable employment. Companies such as rideshare, food delivery, and freelance digital platforms have expanded rapidly in the 21st century. Anthropologists study how the gig economy reflects broader changes in labor under late capitalism and globalization.

Gig work is often promoted as flexible and independent, allowing workers to choose their schedules. However, many gig workers experience unstable income, lack of healthcare benefits, limited job protections, unpredictable hours, and economic insecurity. Because gig workers are often classified as independent contractors rather than employees, companies may avoid providing benefits such as paid leave, retirement plans, unemployment insurance, or healthcare coverage.

Anthropologists are interested in how digital technology reshapes labor relationships. App-based systems use algorithms, ratings, and surveillance technologies to monitor worker performance and productivity. These technologies can create new forms of labor control while giving the appearance of flexibility and autonomy.

The gig economy also illustrates broader transformations in work culture, where stable long-term employment has become less common for many younger workers. Rising housing costs, student debt, and inflation contribute to economic precarity among many gig workers and low-wage employees.

Homelessness

Homelessness is one of the most visible forms of economic inequality in contemporary American society. Anthropologists study homelessness not as an individual moral failure, but as a structural issue connected to housing costs, poverty, mental health challenges, substance abuse, unemployment, domestic violence, medical debt, and inadequate social services.

The rising cost of housing in many American cities has contributed significantly to homelessness. In regions such as California and the San Francisco Bay Area, high rents and limited affordable housing have displaced many low-income residents. Anthropologists examine how urban development, gentrification, and housing policies affect vulnerable populations.

Homeless individuals experience numerous social and health challenges, including exposure to violence, poor sanitation, food insecurity, criminalization, and barriers to healthcare. Many cities respond to homelessness through policing and encampment removals rather than long-term structural solutions such as affordable housing and healthcare access.

Anthropologists conducting ethnographic research with homeless populations often emphasize the humanity, resilience, and survival strategies of unhoused individuals. Despite difficult circumstances, homeless communities frequently develop systems of mutual aid, social support, and informal economies that help individuals survive under conditions of extreme inequality.

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6.3: Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion

Anthropologists study politics because political systems shape how societies organize power, distribute resources, define belonging, and regulate human behavior. In every society, political institutions determine who has rights, protections, and access to participation, while also influencing who may become marginalized or excluded. In the United States, debates surrounding citizenship, immigration, voting rights, nationalism, surveillance, and civil liberties reveal how political power affects everyday life.

Anthropologists emphasize that political systems are deeply connected to culture, identity, history, and inequality. Governments do not simply manage populations; they also shape ideas about national identity, morality, security, race, and belonging. Through laws, institutions, media narratives, and public policies, states influence who is considered a legitimate member of society and who may be viewed as an outsider or threat.

Citizenship

Citizenship refers to legal membership within a nation-state and typically includes rights, responsibilities, and protections granted by the government. Citizenship often provides access to voting, legal protections, public services, employment opportunities, and political participation. Anthropologists study citizenship not only as a legal status, but also as a social and cultural process connected to identity, belonging, and exclusion.

In the United States, citizenship has historically been shaped by race, gender, class, and immigration policies. Throughout American history, many groups—including Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, women, Asian immigrants, and other marginalized populations—were denied full citizenship rights or political participation. Anthropologists examine how citizenship laws reflect broader systems of power and inequality.

Contemporary debates surrounding immigration, border enforcement, undocumented migrants, refugees, and pathways to citizenship continue to shape American political life. Anthropologists often study how immigrants navigate legal uncertainty, family separation, labor exploitation, and cultural adaptation while contributing significantly to the economy and society.

Anthropologists also distinguish between formal citizenship and lived citizenship. Even individuals who possess legal citizenship may experience discrimination, unequal treatment, or limited access to opportunities depending on race, ethnicity, religion, language, sexuality, or socioeconomic status.

Voting Rights

Voting rights are central to democratic participation because they allow citizens to influence government policies and leadership. Anthropologists study voting not only as a political act, but also as a cultural and historical process shaped by power relations and struggles for equality.

The history of voting rights in the United States reflects ongoing conflicts over inclusion and exclusion. Initially, voting rights were largely restricted to white male property owners. Over time, social movements expanded suffrage through constitutional amendments and civil rights activism, including the abolition of racial restrictions, women's suffrage, and protections against discriminatory voting practices.

Despite legal protections, anthropologists and political scholars continue to examine barriers that affect voter participation. These barriers may include voter identification laws, gerrymandering, felony disenfranchisement, polling place closures, language barriers, misinformation, and unequal access to transportation or time off work. Critics argue that such obstacles disproportionately affect racial minorities, low-income communities, elderly populations, students, and immigrants.

Anthropologists are interested in how political participation reflects broader social inequalities. Communities with greater wealth and education often possess more political influence, while marginalized groups may experience lower levels of representation or trust in political institutions.

Nationalism

Nationalism refers to a strong identification with and loyalty to a nation, often accompanied by beliefs about shared culture, history, language, territory, or identity. Anthropologists study nationalism because nations are not biologically natural groups, but socially constructed communities shaped by historical narratives, symbols, institutions, and political ideologies.

Nationalism can promote unity, collective identity, and social solidarity. National symbols such as flags, holidays, monuments, anthems, and patriotic rituals help create a shared sense of belonging among diverse populations. In multicultural societies like the United States, nationalism often intersects with debates about immigration, race, religion, language, and cultural identity.

Anthropologists also examine how nationalism can become exclusionary. Extreme forms of nationalism may portray certain groups as outsiders, threats, or less "truly" national. Throughout history, nationalist ideologies have sometimes contributed to xenophobia, racism, colonialism, militarism, and discrimination against minority groups.

Globalization has complicated modern nationalism by increasing international migration, cultural exchange, digital communication, and economic interdependence. Anthropologists study how people negotiate national identities within an increasingly interconnected world.

Xenophobia

Xenophobia refers to fear, distrust, or hostility toward foreigners, immigrants, or people perceived as culturally different. Anthropologists analyze xenophobia as a social and political phenomenon shaped by economic anxieties, political rhetoric, media representations, historical conflicts, and cultural fears.

In many societies, immigrants and minority groups are blamed for economic problems, crime, unemployment, or social change, even when evidence does not support such claims. Anthropologists examine how stereotypes and moral panics contribute to discrimination and social exclusion.

In the United States, xenophobia has appeared throughout history in reactions to various immigrant groups, including Irish, Chinese, Mexican, Japanese, Muslim, Jewish, and other immigrant communities. Immigration policies and public attitudes often reflect broader anxieties about economic competition, demographic change, national identity, and security.

Anthropologists emphasize that migration is a normal part of human history. Human populations have migrated for thousands of years due to trade, war, environmental change, labor opportunities, persecution, and family connections. Anthropological research often highlights the economic, cultural, and social contributions immigrants make to societies despite facing discrimination and marginalization.

Surveillance

Surveillance refers to the monitoring of individuals, groups, or populations by governments, corporations, institutions, or digital technologies. Anthropologists study surveillance because it reveals how power operates in modern societies and how authorities regulate behavior, security, and social control.

Historically, states have used surveillance to monitor political dissent, labor movements, minority groups, and perceived threats. In the contemporary world, surveillance has expanded dramatically through digital technologies such as smartphones, facial recognition systems, social media platforms, internet tracking, security cameras, biometric databases, and artificial intelligence.

Governments often justify surveillance as necessary for public safety, crime prevention, border control, or national security. However, anthropologists and civil liberties advocates raise concerns about privacy, discrimination, and the unequal targeting of marginalized populations. Surveillance technologies may disproportionately affect racial minorities, immigrants, political activists, religious groups, and low-income communities.

Anthropologists are also interested in how surveillance changes everyday behavior. People may alter how they speak, interact, travel, or express political opinions when they know they are being monitored. Digital surveillance by corporations additionally allows companies to collect large amounts of personal data for advertising, profit, and behavioral prediction.

The expansion of surveillance technologies raises important ethical questions about privacy, freedom, democracy, and the

balance between security and civil liberties in contemporary society.

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6.4: Media and Representation

Anthropologists study media because it plays a major role in shaping culture, identity, beliefs, values, and social relationships. Media influences how people understand the world, interpret social issues, construct ideas about race, gender, class, religion, nationality, and view different groups within society. In contemporary American society, media has become one of the most powerful institutions affecting public opinion, political behavior, consumer culture, and social interaction.

Media includes television, film, news organizations, advertising, music, social media, video games, streaming platforms, podcasts, and digital communication technologies. Anthropologists examine not only the content of media, but also how media systems produce and distribute information, whose voices are represented, and how power influences public narratives.

Because media shapes cultural perceptions and social norms, anthropologists are especially interested in how representation can reinforce inequality, stereotypes, or systems of power while also creating opportunities for resistance, activism, and social change.

News Media

News media plays a significant role in informing the public about politics, crime, economics, global events, and social issues. Anthropologists study how news organizations shape narratives and influence public understanding of reality. News does not simply present objective facts; rather, journalists, editors, corporations, and political institutions make decisions about which stories receive attention, how events are framed, and whose perspectives are prioritized.

Media framing can strongly influence public opinion. For example, the same protest may be described as either a “civil rights demonstration” or a “riot” depending on political and ideological perspectives. Anthropologists analyze how language, imagery, and storytelling shape emotional responses and public attitudes.

Corporate ownership also affects modern news systems. In the United States, a relatively small number of large corporations own many television stations, newspapers, streaming services, and online platforms. Critics argue that concentrated media ownership can influence political discourse, advertising priorities, and the diversity of perspectives presented to the public.

Anthropologists additionally study how digital media and social media have transformed news consumption. Many individuals now receive information through algorithms, short videos, influencers, and personalized online feeds rather than traditional journalism. This shift has contributed to the rapid spread of misinformation, conspiracy theories, political polarization, and “echo chambers,” where people primarily encounter viewpoints similar to their own.

At the same time, digital media has allowed marginalized communities to share experiences, organize activism, and challenge dominant narratives through independent journalism and social media platforms.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are oversimplified and generalized beliefs about particular social groups. Anthropologists study stereotypes because they influence how people perceive and treat others, often contributing to prejudice, discrimination, and inequality.

Media has historically played a major role in producing and reinforcing stereotypes related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, and social class. Minority groups are frequently portrayed through narrow or negative representations that can shape public attitudes and social policies.

For example, racial minorities in American media have historically been stereotyped as dangerous, criminal, exotic, unintelligent, hypersexual, or dependent on welfare. Women have often been portrayed as emotional, passive, overly sexualized, or primarily valued for physical appearance. Immigrants may be represented as threats to jobs, culture, or national security. LGBTQ+ individuals have also faced long histories of invisibility or harmful caricatures in media representations.

Anthropologists emphasize that stereotypes are socially constructed rather than biologically based. Repeated exposure to stereotypical imagery can normalize prejudice and influence institutional practices such as policing, hiring, education, and political policy-making.

At the same time, media can also challenge stereotypes by presenting more diverse, realistic, and complex representations of different communities. Anthropologists examine how marginalized groups use media to reclaim narratives, preserve cultural identities, and advocate for social justice.

Algorithms and Bias

Anthropologists increasingly study how algorithms and artificial intelligence shape modern social life. Algorithms are sets of computer instructions used by digital platforms to organize information, recommend content, predict behavior, and automate decision-making. Social media feeds, search engines, streaming services, advertisements, hiring systems, facial recognition software, and predictive policing technologies all rely heavily on algorithms.

Although algorithms are often viewed as neutral or objective, anthropologists and computer scientists argue that algorithms can reproduce human biases because they are created using existing social data and institutional assumptions. If historical data reflects inequality or discrimination, algorithmic systems may reinforce those same patterns.

For example, facial recognition technologies have sometimes shown higher error rates when identifying women and people with darker skin tones. Hiring algorithms may unintentionally disadvantage applicants from certain racial, gender, or socioeconomic backgrounds if trained using biased employment histories. Social media algorithms may also amplify misinformation, political extremism, sensationalism, or harmful stereotypes because emotionally charged content often generates more engagement and profit.

Anthropologists examine how digital technologies shape human behavior and social inequality. Algorithms influence what people see online, which opinions become visible, how individuals consume information, and even how people form political beliefs and social identities.

Digital inequality also exists in access to technology itself. Communities with limited internet access, lower digital literacy, or fewer technological resources may face disadvantages in education, employment, healthcare, and political participation.

Representation in Film and Television

Film and television are powerful cultural institutions that shape public imagination and social values. Anthropologists study representation in entertainment media because movies, television shows, and streaming platforms influence how audiences understand different cultures, identities, and social groups.

Historically, many minority communities were either excluded from mainstream media or portrayed through harmful stereotypes. Hollywood films frequently centered white, heterosexual, middle-class characters while marginalizing or misrepresenting Indigenous peoples, Black Americans, Latinos, Asians, immigrants, disabled individuals, women, and LGBTQ+ communities.

For much of American film history, minority actors were denied leading roles or were cast primarily in stereotypical positions such as criminals, servants, comic relief characters, or exoticized figures. Indigenous peoples were commonly portrayed as violent “savages” in Western films, while Asian characters were frequently represented through caricatures or played by white actors using racist makeup practices.

Anthropologists analyze how these portrayals affect public perceptions and reinforce systems of inequality. Media representations can influence self-esteem, social expectations, interpersonal interactions, and institutional treatment of marginalized groups.

In recent decades, there has been increasing pressure for greater diversity and inclusion within film and television industries. More productions now feature diverse casts, multilingual storytelling, and narratives centered on historically underrepresented communities. Streaming platforms and digital media have also expanded opportunities for independent creators and global cultural exchange.

Anthropologists are interested not only in representation itself, but also in who controls media production. Diversity behind the camera—including writers, directors, producers, and executives—strongly influences whose stories are told and how communities are represented.

Media representation remains an important area of anthropological study because entertainment and communication technologies continue to shape cultural values, political debates, social identities, and public understandings of human diversity in contemporary society.

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6.5: Education and Opportunity

Anthropologists study education because schools are major institutions through which societies transmit culture, knowledge, values, language, social norms, and expectations to younger generations. Education strongly influences life opportunities, employment, income, political participation, and social mobility. Although education is often presented as a pathway to equal opportunity in the United States, anthropologists emphasize that access to high-quality education is not distributed equally across all communities.

Educational systems reflect broader social inequalities connected to race, ethnicity, social class, language, immigration status, disability, and geography. Anthropologists analyze how schools can both reproduce social inequality and provide opportunities for social change. They also study how students experience education differently depending on cultural background, economic resources, and institutional structures.

Unequal Schools

Schools in the United States differ dramatically in funding, resources, teacher experience, technology access, extracurricular opportunities, and physical conditions. Anthropologists argue that these inequalities are connected to broader historical and structural factors rather than individual student ability.

Public schools in the United States are often funded through local property taxes, meaning wealthier neighborhoods generally have better-funded schools than lower-income communities. As a result, students in affluent areas may have access to smaller class sizes, advanced placement courses, modern facilities, arts programs, college counseling, and updated technology. Meanwhile, schools in low-income communities may experience overcrowding, outdated materials, teacher shortages, deteriorating infrastructure, and limited academic opportunities.

Educational inequality is also closely connected to residential segregation. Because neighborhoods in the United States remain highly stratified by race and social class due to historical processes such as redlining and housing discrimination, schools often reflect these same patterns of inequality. Anthropologists examine how unequal schooling contributes to long-term disparities in income, healthcare access, employment opportunities, and political representation.

Students from marginalized communities may additionally face cultural and linguistic barriers within schools. Standardized testing, curriculum design, disciplinary practices, and language expectations may privilege dominant cultural norms while disadvantaging students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Anthropologists study how schools sometimes pressure students to assimilate into dominant cultural values while undervaluing local languages, identities, and forms of knowledge.

At the same time, schools can also serve as spaces of resistance, creativity, and empowerment. Teachers, students, families, and communities often develop programs that promote cultural inclusion, bilingual education, ethnic studies, and social justice initiatives designed to challenge educational inequality.

College Access

Higher education is often associated with increased economic opportunities, higher wages, and greater social mobility. Anthropologists study college access because not all students have equal opportunities to attend or complete higher education.

Economic inequality plays a major role in college access. Rising tuition costs, housing expenses, transportation costs, and student debt create significant barriers for many low-income families. Students from wealthier households are more likely to attend well-funded schools, receive college preparation support, participate in extracurricular activities, and access tutoring or test preparation services that improve college admissions opportunities.

First-generation college students—those whose parents did not attend college—often face additional challenges navigating complex application systems, financial aid processes, and academic expectations. Immigrant students, undocumented students, and students from marginalized racial or ethnic backgrounds may also encounter institutional barriers and discrimination within higher education systems.

Anthropologists are interested in how higher education can reproduce social inequality while simultaneously functioning as a

potential pathway toward upward mobility. Elite universities often enroll disproportionately high numbers of students from affluent families, reflecting broader inequalities in wealth and educational preparation.

Student debt has become a major issue in contemporary American society. Many students graduate with significant financial burdens that affect future decisions regarding careers, housing, family formation, and economic stability. Anthropologists examine how debt influences social relationships, mental health, and long-term inequality.

At the same time, colleges and universities can provide spaces for intellectual growth, cultural exchange, political activism, and social transformation. Higher education institutions often play important roles in advancing research, diversity initiatives, civil rights movements, and public debate.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to institutional practices and disciplinary systems that increase the likelihood that students—particularly marginalized youth—will become involved in the criminal justice system. Anthropologists and sociologists use this concept to examine how punitive school policies contribute to broader patterns of inequality and incarceration.

Students from Black, Latino, Indigenous, low-income, and disabled communities are disproportionately affected by harsh disciplinary practices such as suspensions, expulsions, police presence in schools, and arrests for minor behavioral issues. Anthropologists argue that these disciplinary patterns often reflect broader racial and social inequalities within American society.

Beginning in the late 20th century, many schools adopted “zero tolerance” policies modeled after criminal justice approaches. These policies imposed severe punishments for a wide range of infractions, sometimes including behaviors that were previously handled through counseling or school-based interventions. Critics argue that zero tolerance policies contribute to criminalization rather than education and disproportionately target minority students.

Anthropologists study how schools may function as systems of social control through surveillance, policing, standardized discipline, and unequal treatment. Students who are repeatedly suspended or expelled are more likely to experience academic failure, school dropout, unemployment, and later involvement with the criminal justice system.

The presence of law enforcement officers and surveillance technologies in schools has also increased in many districts. Some critics argue that treating students as potential threats creates hostile learning environments and contributes to criminalization, particularly for students of color.

Anthropologists additionally examine how broader social factors—including poverty, community violence, underfunded schools, housing instability, trauma, and lack of mental health services—affect student behavior and educational outcomes. Many scholars advocate for restorative justice programs, counseling services, mental health support, and community-based interventions as alternatives to punitive disciplinary systems.

The study of education and opportunity demonstrates how schools are deeply connected to broader systems of power and inequality in contemporary American society. While education has the potential to promote social mobility and empowerment, anthropologists emphasize that educational experiences are shaped by larger economic, political, and historical forces that affect individuals and communities differently.

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6.6: Health and Society

Anthropologists study health because ideas about illness, healing, medicine, the body, and healthcare are shaped not only by biology, but also by culture, economics, politics, and social inequality. Medical anthropology examines how social conditions influence patterns of disease, access to healthcare, mental health experiences, nutrition, environmental exposure, and life expectancy. In the United States, health outcomes differ significantly across social groups, revealing how inequality affects human well-being.

Although the United States spends more money on healthcare than many other countries, access to quality healthcare remains uneven. Anthropologists emphasize that health is closely connected to larger social factors such as poverty, housing, employment, discrimination, education, pollution, food access, stress, and political policies. These conditions are often referred to as the social determinants of health because they strongly shape people's physical and mental well-being.

Anthropologists are also interested in how culture influences ideas about illness and treatment. Different communities may interpret health, healing, pain, disability, and mental illness in different ways. Medical systems themselves reflect cultural values, including beliefs about individual responsibility, science, technology, and the role of government in healthcare.

Healthcare Inequality

Healthcare inequality refers to unequal access to medical care, health insurance, treatment quality, and health outcomes among different populations. Anthropologists study healthcare inequality because it reflects broader systems of social stratification and structural inequality.

In the United States, access to healthcare is strongly influenced by income, employment, race and ethnicity, immigration status, geographic location, disability, and insurance coverage. Many individuals delay medical treatment because of high costs, lack of insurance, transportation barriers, or fear of medical debt. Rural communities may face shortages of hospitals, specialists, and mental health providers, while low-income urban neighborhoods may experience overcrowded healthcare systems and limited preventive care.

Anthropologists examine how historical inequalities contribute to present-day health disparities. Communities of color often experience higher rates of chronic illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, asthma, and heart disease due to factors including environmental exposure, unequal healthcare access, stress related to discrimination, and economic inequality.

Medical mistrust also plays an important role in healthcare experiences. Historical abuses—including unethical medical experimentation, forced sterilization, and unequal treatment—have contributed to distrust toward medical institutions among some marginalized communities. Anthropologists study how trust, culture, language barriers, and communication influence patient experiences and treatment outcomes.

Healthcare inequality additionally affects life expectancy. Wealthier populations generally have longer life expectancies and greater access to preventive healthcare, nutritious foods, safe neighborhoods, and lower-stress living conditions than economically marginalized populations.

Mental Health Stigma

Mental health refers to emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Anthropologists study mental health because ideas about emotions, behavior, illness, trauma, and healing vary across cultures and historical periods.

In many societies, including the United States, mental illness has often been stigmatized. Stigma refers to negative social attitudes that cause individuals to feel shame, discrimination, fear, or social exclusion. People experiencing depression, anxiety, addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, or other mental health conditions may avoid seeking help because they fear judgment or discrimination.

Anthropologists emphasize that mental health is influenced not only by individual biology, but also by social conditions such as poverty, violence, discrimination, loneliness, war, migration, housing insecurity, and economic stress. Structural inequalities can contribute to higher levels of stress and psychological suffering among marginalized populations.

Cultural beliefs strongly influence how mental illness is interpreted and treated. Some communities may view emotional distress through religious, spiritual, or family-centered frameworks rather than strictly medical models. Anthropologists examine how different societies understand healing, therapy, trauma, and emotional support.

Access to mental healthcare is also unequal. Therapy, psychiatric treatment, and counseling services may be expensive, unavailable, or culturally inaccessible for many individuals. Mental health resources are often limited in rural areas and underfunded communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic, economic instability, social isolation, and digital pressures have also contributed to rising concerns about anxiety, depression, burnout, and loneliness, particularly among younger generations. Anthropologists study how social change and technology influence mental health experiences in modern societies.

COVID-19 Disparities

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and intensified many existing inequalities within American society. Anthropologists study pandemics not only as biological events, but also as social and political phenomena that affect communities differently depending on economic resources, occupation, healthcare access, housing conditions, and social vulnerability.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, low-income communities and racial and ethnic minorities experienced disproportionately high infection rates, hospitalization rates, and death rates. Anthropologists and public health researchers found that structural inequalities contributed significantly to these disparities.

Many essential workers—including healthcare workers, grocery employees, warehouse workers, agricultural laborers, delivery workers, and public transportation employees—could not work remotely and therefore faced greater exposure to the virus. Crowded housing conditions, lack of paid sick leave, limited healthcare access, and preexisting health conditions also increased vulnerability among marginalized populations.

The pandemic additionally highlighted inequalities in education, employment, childcare, and technology access. Students from lower-income households often struggled with remote learning because of limited internet access, lack of computers, or overcrowded living conditions.

Anthropologists also examine how political polarization, misinformation, distrust in institutions, and media narratives shaped public responses to vaccines, masking, and public health policies. Cultural beliefs and political identities strongly influenced how people interpreted scientific information and government recommendations.

The pandemic demonstrated that health crises are deeply connected to social systems and inequalities rather than affecting all populations equally.

Environmental Health

Environmental health examines how environmental conditions affect human health and well-being. Anthropologists study environmental health because access to clean air, safe water, nutritious food, and healthy living environments is unevenly distributed across societies.

Environmental inequality occurs when marginalized communities face greater exposure to pollution, toxic waste, industrial hazards, unsafe drinking water, and environmental degradation. These inequalities are often connected to poverty, racism, urban planning, and political power.

Low-income communities and communities of color are more likely to live near highways, factories, refineries, landfills, and polluted industrial areas. Exposure to environmental hazards can increase rates of asthma, cancer, respiratory illness, lead poisoning, and other chronic health problems. Anthropologists study how environmental risks are shaped by historical housing segregation, zoning policies, and unequal political influence.

Climate change has also become an important area of anthropological research. Rising temperatures, droughts, wildfires, hurricanes, flooding, and environmental displacement disproportionately affect vulnerable populations with fewer economic resources. Poorer communities often have less access to air conditioning, disaster preparation, healthcare, insurance, and emergency recovery resources.

Anthropologists examine how environmental problems intersect with social inequality, public health, migration, food systems, and Indigenous land rights. Many communities facing environmental injustice have organized social movements advocating for clean water, pollution regulation, climate action, and environmental protection.

The study of health and society demonstrates that health is not determined solely by biology or personal choices. Anthropologists emphasize that social structures, economic systems, cultural beliefs, environmental conditions, and political policies all shape human health experiences and contribute to unequal outcomes in contemporary society.

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6.7: Cultural Change and the Future of Diversity

Anthropologists study cultural change because cultures are never static. Human societies continuously transform through migration, globalization, technological innovation, economic shifts, political movements, environmental change, and intercultural interaction. In the United States, demographic changes and increasing cultural diversity are reshaping ideas about identity, race, ethnicity, family, language, religion, gender, and national belonging.

Anthropologists emphasize that cultural diversity has always been part of American society. Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, European settlers, immigrants from Asia and Latin America, and countless other communities have all contributed to the cultural development of the United States. Contemporary demographic trends continue to increase cultural mixing and social interaction among different populations.

As social attitudes evolve, anthropologists examine how younger generations negotiate identity in increasingly multicultural and interconnected environments. Topics such as interracial marriage, multiracial identities, changing gender and sexual identities, immigration, and digital communication reveal how cultural boundaries continue to shift in modern American society.

Interracial Marriage

Interracial marriage refers to marriage between individuals from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Anthropologists study interracial relationships because they reflect changing social attitudes, demographic shifts, and transformations in ideas about race and identity.

Throughout much of American history, interracial marriage was heavily stigmatized and, in many states, legally prohibited through anti-miscegenation laws. These laws were rooted in racial segregation, white supremacy, and efforts to maintain rigid racial boundaries. It was not until the 1967 Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* that laws banning interracial marriage were declared unconstitutional nationwide.

Since the late 20th century, interracial marriage rates in the United States have increased significantly. Anthropologists attribute this rise to factors such as immigration, urbanization, expanded educational opportunities, social integration, globalization, and changing public attitudes toward race and diversity.

Interracial relationships challenge traditional racial categories and demonstrate that race is socially constructed rather than biologically fixed. Anthropologists also study how interracial families navigate identity, cultural traditions, language, discrimination, and social expectations within broader society.

Despite increasing acceptance, interracial couples may still experience prejudice, stereotyping, or family and community tensions in some social contexts. Anthropologists examine how race continues to influence social interactions and perceptions even as society becomes more diverse.

Multiracial Identities

Multiracial identities refer to individuals who identify with more than one racial or ethnic background. Anthropologists are interested in multiracial identities because they challenge traditional ideas about rigid racial classification and reveal the fluid and socially constructed nature of race.

Historically, American society often forced individuals into narrow racial categories. Laws such as the “one-drop rule” classified anyone with African ancestry as Black regardless of mixed heritage. Anthropologists examine how these classifications were politically and socially constructed to maintain systems of racial hierarchy and inequality.

In recent decades, growing numbers of Americans have identified as multiracial or multiethnic. The U.S. Census first allowed individuals to select more than one racial category in 2000, reflecting broader recognition of mixed identities within society.

Multiracial individuals may experience identity differently depending on appearance, family background, community acceptance, language, social context, and personal experiences. Some individuals strongly identify with multiple cultural traditions, while others may feel pressure to choose a single identity category. Anthropologists study how multiracial people navigate belonging,

representation, discrimination, and cultural expectations.

The growth of multiracial populations illustrates how racial categories are continually changing over time. Anthropologists argue that increasing demographic mixing further demonstrates that race is not a fixed biological reality, but a social system shaped by history, politics, and culture.

Gen Z and Changing Identities

Anthropologists study younger generations because generational experiences often reflect broader cultural transformations. Generation Z—generally referring to people born from the late 1990s through the early 2010s—has grown up in a highly globalized, digital, and socially interconnected world.

Compared to previous generations, Gen Z is often characterized by greater racial and ethnic diversity, increased acceptance of cultural differences, broader discussions surrounding mental health, and more flexible understandings of gender and sexuality. Anthropologists examine how social media, globalization, online communities, and digital communication influence identity formation among younger populations.

Many Gen Z individuals are more likely to view identity as fluid and multidimensional rather than fixed or singular. Discussions surrounding pronouns, gender identity, sexuality, neurodiversity, race, mental health, and intersectionality have become increasingly visible in schools, universities, workplaces, and online spaces.

Social media platforms allow younger generations to connect with diverse communities, access information rapidly, and participate in global conversations about politics, culture, activism, and identity. At the same time, anthropologists also study the challenges associated with digital life, including online harassment, misinformation, social comparison, surveillance, and mental health pressures.

Gen Z has also become heavily involved in social movements related to racial justice, climate change, gender equality, immigrant rights, LGBTQ+ rights, gun violence prevention, and mental health awareness. Anthropologists analyze how younger generations use digital technologies, protest movements, and cultural expression to challenge existing social structures and advocate for change.

Future Demographic Changes in the U.S.

Anthropologists and demographers study population change because demographic shifts influence economics, politics, education, healthcare, urban development, and cultural life. The United States is becoming increasingly diverse due to immigration, interracial relationships, changing birth rates, and generational change.

Demographic projections suggest that no single racial or ethnic group will constitute a majority of the U.S. population in the future. Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, multiracial, and immigrant populations are expected to continue growing, while the population overall is becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse.

Anthropologists examine how demographic change can produce both cultural innovation and social tension. Increasing diversity may encourage intercultural exchange, multilingualism, hybrid identities, and broader representation within media, politics, and institutions. At the same time, rapid social change can also generate political polarization, nationalism, xenophobia, and debates over immigration, citizenship, and national identity.

An aging population is another major demographic trend in the United States. Improvements in healthcare and life expectancy have increased the number of elderly individuals, creating new challenges related to healthcare systems, retirement, caregiving, and social support networks.

Urbanization and migration patterns are also reshaping American society. Large metropolitan regions continue to attract diverse populations, while climate change, housing costs, economic inequality, and environmental pressures may increasingly influence future migration patterns within the country.

Anthropologists emphasize that cultural diversity is not a threat to society, but a normal and recurring feature of human history. Human populations have always migrated, interacted, exchanged ideas, and adapted to changing environments. The future of the United States will likely continue to be shaped by cultural mixing, technological change, globalization, and evolving understandings of identity and belonging.

The study of cultural change helps anthropologists understand how societies adapt to transformation while negotiating continuity, conflict, and diversity. By examining these processes, anthropology encourages students to think critically about identity, inequality, social change, and the future of multicultural societies in an increasingly interconnected world.

Applied Anthropology

Anthropologists do not only study human societies; many also work directly with communities, organizations, governments, schools, healthcare systems, businesses, and social movements to address real-world problems. Applied anthropology refers to the use of anthropological knowledge, research methods, and cultural understanding to solve practical social issues and improve human well-being.

Anthropologists use ethnographic research, participant observation, interviews, cross-cultural analysis, and community collaboration to better understand how people experience social problems in everyday life. Applied anthropology recognizes that policies and programs are often more effective when they are culturally informed and developed in cooperation with the communities they affect.

In the contemporary United States and globally, anthropologists contribute to fields such as healthcare, education, environmental protection, human rights, migration, urban planning, international development, public policy, and conflict resolution. Applied anthropology demonstrates how anthropological perspectives can help create more inclusive, equitable, and culturally sensitive solutions to social challenges.

Anthropology and Social Justice

Anthropologists are often deeply concerned with issues of inequality, discrimination, violence, and human rights. Social justice refers to efforts aimed at creating a more equitable society by addressing systems of oppression and unequal access to resources, opportunities, and protections.

Anthropologists study how systems such as racism, colonialism, sexism, poverty, ableism, xenophobia, and economic inequality affect individuals and communities. Many applied anthropologists work alongside marginalized populations to advocate for improved healthcare access, Indigenous sovereignty, labor rights, immigrant protections, environmental justice, educational equity, and gender equality.

Anthropologists emphasize cultural relativism and empathy, encouraging people to understand human experiences within broader social and historical contexts rather than through stereotypes or ethnocentric assumptions. By documenting lived experiences and structural inequalities, anthropologists can help policymakers, organizations, and the public better understand the challenges faced by different communities.

Medical anthropologists, for example, may work to improve healthcare systems for underserved populations. Environmental anthropologists may collaborate with Indigenous groups to protect land and natural resources. Legal anthropologists may study immigration systems, incarceration, or human rights violations. Educational anthropologists may advocate for culturally inclusive teaching and equitable school policies.

Applied anthropology often seeks not only to study inequality, but also to contribute to positive social change.

Public Anthropology

Public anthropology refers to efforts to make anthropological knowledge accessible and useful beyond universities and academic settings. Public anthropologists engage with broader audiences through journalism, documentaries, museums, podcasts, public speaking, social media, community programs, policy work, and activism.

Anthropologists recognize that academic research can help people better understand contemporary social issues such as migration, climate change, racism, political polarization, healthcare inequality, artificial intelligence, religious conflict, and globalization. Public anthropology attempts to bridge the gap between academic research and public understanding.

During major social events and crises—including pandemics, refugee movements, environmental disasters, or social justice protests—anthropologists may provide cultural insights that help explain how communities experience these events differently. Anthropological perspectives can help challenge stereotypes, misinformation, and simplistic explanations of complex social

problems.

Museums are one important area of public anthropology. Anthropologists working in museums increasingly focus on collaboration with Indigenous and descendant communities, ethical representation, repatriation of cultural artifacts, and more inclusive storytelling practices.

Digital technology has also expanded opportunities for public anthropology. Anthropologists now share research and educational materials through online platforms, documentaries, virtual exhibits, and social media, reaching much larger audiences than traditional academic publishing alone.

Community Activism

Community activism involves collective efforts by individuals or groups to address social issues and create change within communities. Anthropologists often collaborate with grassroots organizations, local leaders, and activists to support community-based solutions to problems such as housing inequality, environmental pollution, healthcare access, discrimination, food insecurity, and violence.

Anthropologists conducting community-based research typically emphasize collaboration rather than imposing outside solutions. Instead of treating communities merely as research subjects, many applied anthropologists work directly with community members to identify needs, share knowledge, and develop culturally appropriate programs and policies.

Participatory action research is one example of this approach. In participatory research, community members actively contribute to the research process, helping define problems, collect information, interpret findings, and implement solutions. Anthropologists view this collaborative model as more ethical and empowering than purely top-down approaches.

Anthropologists may assist communities by conducting surveys, documenting oral histories, supporting language preservation, advocating for Indigenous rights, evaluating public programs, or helping organizations understand local cultural dynamics.

Community activism also illustrates how ordinary people organize to challenge systems of inequality and advocate for social justice. Anthropologists study how protest movements, mutual aid networks, community organizations, and local coalitions build solidarity and respond to social problems.

Careers Using Anthropology

Anthropology provides students with valuable skills in cultural understanding, research, communication, critical thinking, writing, interviewing, observation, and cross-cultural analysis. Because human behavior and cultural diversity affect many professions, anthropology graduates work in a wide range of careers.

Some anthropologists continue into academic careers involving teaching and research at colleges and universities. Others work outside academia in applied settings where cultural knowledge and research skills are highly valuable.

Medical and public health anthropologists may work in hospitals, public health agencies, nonprofits, or international health organizations to improve healthcare access and understand cultural beliefs surrounding illness and treatment.

Business and corporate anthropologists study consumer behavior, workplace culture, marketing, technology use, and user experiences. Technology companies increasingly hire anthropologists to study how people interact with digital systems and artificial intelligence.

Educational anthropologists work in schools, universities, nonprofits, and educational policy organizations to improve educational systems and support diverse student populations.

Environmental anthropologists may work in conservation, sustainability, climate research, or environmental justice organizations. Forensic anthropologists assist in identifying human remains and may work with law enforcement or humanitarian organizations.

Anthropologists also work in museums, government agencies, urban planning, social services, immigration support, international development, journalism, human rights organizations, cultural resource management, nonprofit leadership, and community advocacy.

The broad applicability of anthropology reflects the discipline's focus on understanding human diversity, social systems, cultural change, and real-world problem solving.

Applied anthropology demonstrates that anthropology is not only about studying distant cultures or the past; it is also deeply relevant to contemporary social issues and everyday life. By applying anthropological perspectives to real-world challenges, anthropologists help promote cultural understanding, social awareness, and more equitable approaches to solving human problems in an increasingly interconnected world.

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6.8: Conclusion

Anthropology helps us understand that power, inequality, and cultural diversity are deeply connected to the organization of human societies. Throughout this chapter, we have examined how systems of class, race, politics, media, education, healthcare, and identity shape everyday life in contemporary American society. Anthropologists emphasize that these inequalities are not natural or inevitable, but are historically produced through social institutions, political decisions, economic systems, and cultural beliefs.

Power, Culture, and Inequality

Power influences who has access to resources, opportunities, representation, and decision-making authority within society. Economic inequality, unequal schooling, healthcare disparities, housing insecurity, discrimination, and political exclusion all demonstrate how power operates through institutions and social systems. Anthropology encourages students to look beyond individual explanations for inequality and instead examine the larger historical and structural forces that shape human experiences.

Culture also plays a major role in maintaining or challenging inequality. Media representations, stereotypes, political narratives, and social norms influence how people understand race, gender, class, nationality, and identity. Anthropologists study how cultural ideas can normalize unequal systems while also providing tools for resistance, creativity, solidarity, and social change.

Diversity and Social Transformation

The United States continues to become increasingly diverse due to migration, globalization, demographic change, interracial relationships, and cultural exchange. Anthropologists recognize diversity as a normal and valuable aspect of human societies rather than a problem to be solved. Human cultures have always changed through interaction, movement, adaptation, and innovation.

At the same time, periods of social transformation can produce tensions surrounding identity, nationalism, immigration, and political belonging. Anthropology helps explain how these conflicts emerge while emphasizing the importance of empathy, cross-cultural understanding, and critical thinking.

The growth of multiracial identities, multilingual communities, digital communication, and new forms of social activism demonstrates that culture is constantly evolving. Younger generations continue to challenge traditional ideas about identity, gender, race, mental health, and social justice, reshaping the cultural landscape of contemporary society.

Anthropology and Contemporary Challenges

Anthropologists contribute important perspectives on many of the major challenges facing the modern world, including climate change, healthcare inequality, political polarization, migration, poverty, racism, technological change, environmental destruction, and global conflict. By examining how these issues affect real communities and everyday lives, anthropology provides a more human-centered understanding of contemporary problems.

Anthropologists also emphasize that many social problems are interconnected. Economic inequality affects healthcare access, education, housing, and political participation. Environmental injustice disproportionately affects marginalized communities. Media systems influence public perceptions and political attitudes. Understanding these connections helps reveal how complex systems shape human experiences.

Applied anthropology demonstrates that anthropological knowledge can be used to address real-world issues through community collaboration, public education, activism, healthcare reform, environmental protection, and culturally informed policy-making.

The Future of American Society

The future of the United States will likely continue to be shaped by demographic change, globalization, technological innovation, migration, and evolving cultural identities. Anthropologists study how societies adapt to these transformations and how

communities negotiate continuity and change.

Technological developments such as artificial intelligence, digital surveillance, automation, and social media will continue to influence labor, communication, education, politics, and identity formation. Climate change and environmental pressures may increasingly affect migration patterns, public health, urban planning, and economic systems.

At the same time, future American society will continue to reflect growing cultural diversity and interconnectedness. Anthropologists emphasize that multicultural societies require dialogue, inclusion, cooperation, and recognition of human dignity across social differences.

Anthropology and Human Possibility

One of anthropology's greatest contributions is its demonstration that human societies can be organized in many different ways. By studying cultures across time and space, anthropologists show that no single social system, belief system, or way of life is inevitable or universal.

Anthropology encourages people to question assumptions, challenge stereotypes, and recognize the shared humanity that connects diverse populations. The discipline promotes cultural relativism, empathy, and critical thinking while helping students better understand both cultural differences and common human experiences.

Ultimately, anthropology reminds us that humans are capable of creativity, adaptation, cooperation, resilience, and social transformation. Although inequality and conflict remain major challenges, anthropology also highlights the human capacity to build more inclusive, equitable, and compassionate societies.

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6.9: References

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INDEX

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GLOSSARY

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Sample Word 1 | Sample Definition 1

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- ANTH 5: Cultures of the U.S. in Global Perspective - *CC BY 4.0*
  - Front Matter - *CC BY 4.0*
    - TitlePage - *CC BY 4.0*
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    - Acknowledgement - *CC BY 4.0*
    - Table of Contents - *CC BY 4.0*
    - Licensing - *CC BY 4.0*
  - 1: Introduction to Anthropology - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 1.1: Introduction to Anthropology - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 1.2: The Other Humans - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 1.3: Subfields in Anthropology - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 1.4: Career Opportunities in Anthropology - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 1.5: References - *CC BY 4.0*
  - 2: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the United States - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 2.1: Introduction - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 2.2: Identity and Social Construction - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 2.3: Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 2.4: Multiculturalism in the United States - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 2.5: Major Cultural Communities in the United States - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 2.6: Everyday Cultural Expressions and Anthropological Perspectives - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 2.7: Conclusion - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 2.8: References - *CC BY 4.0*
  - 3: Migration, Immigration, and Globalization - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 3.1: Introduction - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 3.2: Why Humans Migrate - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 3.3: History of Immigration to the United States - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 3.4: Borders and Immigration Policy - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 3.5: Globalization - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 3.6: Diasporas and Transnational Communities - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 3.7: Case Studies - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 3.8: References - *CC BY 4.0*
  - 4: Race, Ethnicity, and Structural Inequality - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.1: Introduction - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.2: The Anthropology of Race - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.3: Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.4: Racism - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.5: Segregation and Inequality - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.6: Whiteness and Privilege - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.7: Social Movements - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.8: Contemporary Issues - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.9: Conclusion - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.10: References - *CC BY 4.0*
  - 5: Family, Gender, Religion, and Everyday Life - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 5.1: Introduction - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 5.2: Family and Kinship - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 5.3: Gender and Sexuality - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 5.4: Religion and Spirituality - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 5.5: Language and Communication - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 5.6: Food, Media, and Popular Culture - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 5.7: Life-Cycle Perspectives - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 5.8: Conclusion - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 5.9: References - *CC BY 4.0*
  - 6: Power, Inequality, and Contemporary American Society - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 6.1: Introduction - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 6.2: Social Class and Economic Inequality - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 6.3: Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 6.4: Media and Representation - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 6.5: Education and Opportunity - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 6.6: Health and Society - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 6.7: Cultural Change and the Future of Diversity - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 6.8: Conclusion - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 6.9: References - *CC BY 4.0*

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