

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY



Evans
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Cultural Anthropology

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1.1: Anthropology

Cultural Anthropology is the study of human cultures, their beliefs, practices, values, ideas, technologies, economies and other domains of social and cognitive organization. This field is based primarily on cultural understanding gained through first hand experience, or participant observation within living populations of humans.

This chapter will introduce you to the field of anthropology, define basic terms and concepts and explain why it is important, and how it can change your perspective of the world around you.

Anthropology is the scientific study of human beings as social organisms interacting with each other in their environment, and cultural aspects of life. Anthropology can be defined as the study of human nature, human society, and the human past. It is a scholarly discipline that aims to describe in the broadest possible sense what it means to be human. Anthropologists are interested in comparison. To make substantial and accurate comparisons between cultures, a generalization of humans requires evidence from the wide range of human societies. Anthropologists are in direct contact with the sources of their data, thus field work is a crucial component. The field of Anthropology, although fairly new as an academic field, has been used for centuries. Anthropologists are convinced that explanations of human actions will be superficial unless they acknowledge that human lives are always entangled in complex patterns of work and family, power and meaning. Anthropology is holistic, comparative, field based, and evolutionary. These regions of Anthropology shape one another and become integrated with one another over time. Historically it was seen as “the study of others,” meaning foreign cultures, but using the term “others” imposed false thoughts of “civilized versus savagery.” These dualistic views have often caused wars or even genocide. Now, anthropologists strive to uncover the mysteries of these foreign cultures and eliminate the prejudice that it first created.

While it is a holistic field, anthropology is typically considered to consist of five sub-disciplines, each focusing on a particular aspect of human existence:

- **Archaeology:** The study and interpretation of ancient humans, their history and culture, through examination of the artifacts and remains they left behind. Such as: The study of the Egyptian culture through examination of their grave sites, the pyramids and the tombs in the Valley of Kings. Through this branch, anthropologists discover much about human history, particularly prehistoric, the long stretch of time before the development of writing.



Figure 1.1.1 - Excavated ruins of Mohenjo-daro, Pakistan

- **Cultural Anthropology:**(also: sociocultural anthropology, social anthropology, or ethnology) studies the different cultures of humans and how those cultures are shaped or shape the world around them. They also focus a lot on the differences between every person. The goal of a cultural anthropologist is to learn about another culture by collecting data about how the world economy and political practices effect the new culture that is being studied.
- **Biological Anthropology** (also: Physical Anthropology):Specific type of Anthropology that studies humanity through the human body as a biological organism, using genetics, evolution, human ancestry, primates, and the ability to adapt. There was a shift in the emphasis on differences (with the older “physical anthropology”) due to the development of the “new” physical anthropology developed by Sherwood Washburn at the University of California, Berkley. This field shifted from racial classification when it was discovered that physical traits that had been used to determine race could not predict other traits such as intelligence and morality. Some biological anthropologists work in the fields of primatology, which is the study of the closest living relatives of the human being, the nonhuman primates. They also work in the field of paleoanthropology which is the study of fossilized bones and teeth of our earliest ancestors.
- **Linguistic Anthropology:** examines human languages: how they work, how they are made, how they change, and how they die and are later revived. Linguistic anthropologists try to understand language in relation to the broader cultural, historical, or biological contexts that make it possible. The study of linguistics includes examining phonemes, morphemes, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. They look at linguistic features of communication, which includes any verbal contact, as well as non linguistic features, which would include movements, eye contact, the cultural context, and even the recent thoughts of the speaker.

- **Applied Anthropology** includes the fields of Applied Medical Anthropology, Urban Anthropology, Anthropological Economics, Contract Archaeology and others. Applied anthropology is simply the practice of applying anthropological theory and or methods from any of the fields of Anthropology to solve human problems. For example, applied anthropology is often used when trying to determine the ancestry of an unearthened native American burial. Biological anthropology can be used to test the DNA of the body and see if the DNA of the burial has any similarities to living populations.

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External Links

- What is Anthropology? – Information from the American Anthropological Association
 - SLA– Society for Linguistic Anthropology
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1.2: Holism in Anthropology

Holism is the perspective on the human condition that assumes that mind, body, individuals, society, and the environment interpenetrate, and even define one another. In anthropology holism tries to integrate all that is known about human beings and their activities. From a holistic perspective, attempts to divide reality into mind and matter isolate and pin down certain aspects of a process that, by very nature, resists isolation and dissection. Holism holds great appeal for those who seek a theory of human nature that is rich enough to do justice to its complex subject matter.

An easier understanding of holism is to say that *the whole is greater than the sum of its parts*. Individual human organisms are not just x percent genes and y percent culture added together. Rather, human beings are what they are because of mutual shaping of genes and culture and experiences living in the world produces something new, something that cannot be reduced to the materials used to construct it. It is important to note that humans who grow and live together are inevitably shaped by shared cultural experiences and develop into a much different person than they would have if developing in isolation.

Sally Engle Merry, an anthropologist, got a call from a radio show asking her to talk about a recent incident that happened in Pakistan that resulted in a gang rape of a young woman authorized by a local tribal council. She explained to them that it was an inexcusable act and that the rape was probably connected to local political struggles and class differences. This relates to holism because the gang rape was authorized by higher authorities because it is a cultural norm for socially higher class men to feel more empowered over women. This emphasizes the connection between human actions and their environment and society.

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