

## What is Anthropology?

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- What is anthropology?
- Study of humanity
  - that is, the study of people: individuals and their societies (groups with their organization, institutions, relations, rules of behavior)
  - both how they work now, and how they got to be this way over time
- 3 major features distinguish anthropology from other social sciences
  - 1. strongly based on the concept of **culture**
    - in future classes, we will look more carefully at this concept
    - a good-enough definition for now: the learned, shared values, beliefs, and rules that structure people's thinking and behavior
  - unlike psychology, sociology, political science, economics... which otherwise overlap in many ways with anthropology, but until recently paid little attention to the role of culture
    - now it is becoming fashionable to discuss psychology and sociology in terms of culture, but this is new for them
    - some political scientists use the concept, but casually
    - very few economists are really using the concept yet
    - without culture, other fields tend to assume that they are studying humans in general, when anthropologists point out that they are really studying humans of a particular culture
      - so their conclusions may not apply in other cultures
      - this has become painfully obvious in clinical psychology and counselling, where diagnoses and treatments are clearly very culture-specific
  - culture is sometimes divided into
    - **symbolic culture**: what and how people think and communicate, for example:
      - language
      - non-linguistic communication
      - beliefs about people, the world, and the supernatural
      - values
      - rules of behavior
      - and many other aspects of culture that are "in people's heads"
    - **material culture**: the things people make and use
      - houses, clothes, food, tools, art, etc.
      - these obviously embody some aspects of symbolic culture
      - some would say that symbolic culture determines material culture
  - symbolic culture exists in two versions
    - **ideal culture**: how people think or say things work
      - the "official" or "normal" version of how things are
      - example: "Marriage is a life-long commitment."
    - **real culture**: how people actually behave

- example: "About half of all marriages end in divorce before the 20<sup>th</sup> year"
- 2. **holistic** view
  - any aspect of life is entangled with every other aspect
  - to really understand things, you have to take all aspects of culture or society into account
  - example: to understand how your workplace functions, an anthropologist would want to know not only what the work is, but also
    - economic matters that affect the business
      - how intense the competition is, profit margins, demands by investors, strategies of the CEO, etc.
    - government policies that affect the business
      - rules about salaries, overtime, working conditions, medical benefits, etc.
    - the class and economic backgrounds of the people there
    - the ethnicities represented and their historical relationships
      - maybe the Palestinian marketing guy and the Israeli engineer have a dicey relationship...
    - the age groups represented and their differing experiences and values
    - the kinds of school experiences that people there have had
    - and many other factors
  - unlike psychology, economics, political science, etc. that tend to emphasize one realm and ignore others
    - that is fine for the sake of simplicity and analysis
    - but anthropologists feel that we need to balance these intentionally simplified analyses with more complex, messy, realistic views of how life actually is
- 3. **comparative** approach
  - anthropology collects and compares examples of different ways of living
  - anthropology values all different ways equally
    - no assumption that our own is necessarily the best, most natural, most common, etc.
  - anthropology has an interest in learning comparative things about cultures such as
    - what is universal and what is not
    - what is common, rare, and why
    - why certain variations occur in certain circumstances but not in others
    - why certain features tend to occur together, etc.
  - also interested in comparisons across time: **culture change**
    - evolution or development of new kinds of societies and features of culture
    - **globalization** being the overarching process now
    - but actually since 1492 or before
- 4 main subfields
  - 1. **Cultural** anthropology
    - study of living people and societies; much more about this throughout the rest of the course
    - **ethnography**: description of a culture
      - through the process of **participant observation**
      - refers to both the product

- an ethnography is a book
- our books by Lee and Chavez are both ethnographies
- and the process
  - anthropologists do ethnography
- **ethnology**: the comparative study of cultures, based on personal observation and on reading ethnographies
  - coming up with generalizations, patterns, theories, etc. about cultures
  - example: what factors are linked to cultures being more warlike or more peaceful?
- 2. **Linguistic** anthropology
  - developed from the practical need of anthropologists to learn and document unstudied languages, often languages with no writing system
  - study of language itself
    - documenting and understanding languages
    - their variations and their logic
    - their development (**historical linguistics**)
  - language learning
    - cognitive processes involved, much as in other aspects of construction of identity and symbolic culture
  - **sociolinguistics**: language use in social context
  - how language is influenced by other aspects of culture, and how it influences other aspects of culture
- 3. **Physical or biological** anthropology
  - study of humans as biological organisms
    - human physical variation and how to explain it
    - human adaptation to the environment
    - how human biology affects or even explains some aspects of behavior, society, and culture
      - like marriage patterns, food preferences, the sexual division of labor, etc.
    - and how features of culture in turn have biological effects
      - on how humans evolve
      - on their health, etc.
  - **paleoanthropology**: evolution of humans and our closer relatives
  - **primatology**: study of non-human primates for clues about basic human nature
- 4. **Archaeology**
  - study of past cultures based primarily on remains of material culture
  - reconstruction of past symbolic culture from the remains of past material culture
- Many other, cross-cutting types of anthropology
  - Most broadly, **applied anthropology**
    - government development and aid projects
    - medical programs
    - non-governmental organizations (non-profits), often development, economic, advocacy, human rights
    - UN

- political policy and area experts
- business anthropology: culture of the workplace, production, marketing, management
- **medical** anthropology
- **cultural resource management (CRM)**
- **forensic** anthropology
- **visual** anthropology
- **cognitive** or **psychological** anthropology
- **feminist** anthropology
- **anthropology of law**
- **anthropology of food** or **dietary** anthropology
- and countless other subdivisions...
- Some key concepts (we will return to these later, too)
  - **participant observation**
    - one of the principal methods of cultural anthropology, especially for ethnographic research
    - learning about a culture by living with the people and participating in their activities, while also specifically paying attention, recording, and developing explanations for what is going on
  - **ethnocentrism**
    - the very common assumption that...
    - one's own culture is normal, natural, the most sensible and best
    - while cultures or practices that differ from it are abnormal, unnatural, irrational, inferior, the result of ignorance or superstition
  - **cultural relativism**
    - view that cultures and practices are usually best understood in their own context, in their own terms, from the point of view of the people of that culture and the circumstances they are in
    - this is an intellectual tool or method
      - intended to help with understanding other cultures
      - by not pre-judging, but instead suspending judgment of cultures and practices in order to allow us to understand them in their own context
  - **ethical relativism**
    - view that right and wrong are relative to each culture
      - one cannot judge ethics from outside of a culture
    - note that this is NOT required for cultural relativism
      - a cultural relativist does not have to be an ethical relativist
      - many, if not most, anthropologists are NOT ethical relativists
      - a cultural relativist can suspend judgment sufficiently to understand a culture or a practice in its own context, yet still find that it is morally wrong
- A taste of a classic ethnography: Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, first published in 1922
- I should probably have assigned you more of this... you can find the entire text online at <http://www.archive.org/details/argonautsofthewe032976mbp>

- the book is about people of the Trobriand Islands
  - where Malinowski was stuck during WWII, because he was a Polish citizen in English-controlled territory
    - (in case your history is rusty, England was at war with Poland)
- Understand that some of his ways of expressing things are no longer acceptable
  - some of his language sounds racist, like “the white man” and “the native”, even though he certainly was not racist
  - some of it sounds arrogant, like his own “mind striving after the objective, scientific view of things”, versus “untrained minds, unaccustomed to formulate their thoughts with any degree of consistency and precision”
- Malinowski starts off conversing with the Trobrianders in pidgin English
  - **pidgin**: a “contact language”, usually a mix of two languages (in this case, the Trobriand language and English), with limited vocabulary and simplified grammar, usually used only in contact situations between people who do not otherwise share a language
- he makes little headway as long as he keeps living with “some neighboring white man”
  - instead, Malinowski developed the outlines of what we now call the method of **participant observation**
    - which we will look at more in future class sessions
- Malinowski's three secrets for successful anthropological fieldwork:
  - 1. Have scientific aims
    - he explains and implies elsewhere what this means:
      - your purpose is to understand the people and explain them to others, not judge or ridicule them
      - recognize that they are just as human and intelligent as you are
        - and that they think and behave as they do for understandable reasons
        - not just because they are childish or ignorant
      - the ethnographer's task is to figure out these reasons, the logic, the “skeleton” of the culture that allows us to understand it
    - have some general theoretical issues in mind to investigate
      - such as the nature of religion or magic
      - the nature of economic exchange, etc.
    - but do not begin with preconceived notions
  - 2. Live with the people you are studying, not with others like yourself
    - otherwise you will simply not see and experience the events that will help you understand their culture
    - this is the part that he elaborates on in your extract
    - by not being able to retreat to the company of people of your own culture, you are forced to find companionship among the people you are studying
      - and thus get to know them better, on more normal terms
    - and they get used to you and start to be less self-conscious
    - when something happens, you can (and must) investigate immediately
      - while everyone is involved and talking about it
    - the Trobrianders came to regard Malinowski as “part and parcel of their life, a necessary evil or nuisance, mitigated by donations of tobacco”

- 3. Use some specific methods
  - his discussion of this is not included in your extract, but the point of these methods is to
    - study the whole society, not just art, or technology, or religion
    - because things only make sense when you consider the whole pattern of thought and social organization
  - Malinowski's three methods are:
    - 1. collect a lot of specific cases, make tables or charts that summarize them, and try to discern the regularities among them
      - he called this the method of *concrete, statistical documentation*
    - 2. take detailed notes about things that are common and ordinary, people's state of mind and expressions as they do things, others' reactions to them, etc., as well as things that are unusual and exciting
      - he called this recording *the imponderabilia of actual life*
      - sometimes stop taking notes and just participate, in order to better observe these "imponderabilia"
    - 3. document what people think about what they are doing (explanations, stories, typical expressions, folklore, magical incantations, etc.) by writing down their exact words, in their own language
      - he called the resulting large collection of utterances a *corpus inscriptionum*, which "documents native mentality"
      - the ethnographer can then use this collection of verbatim statements to develop and check interpretations of the peoples' ways of thinking and understanding their world
- Even though Malinowski wrote this book almost 90 years ago, and the language is a bit old-fashioned, the ideas are still amazingly current
  - you will find strong echoes of Malinowski's thinking in some of our future readings
- Photo of Malinowski sitting on a log with four Trobrianders
  - they are all holding "lime pots", used to hold an alkaline substance ("lime") made from ground shell or fire ashes
    - this is put in the mouth while you chew betel nut
    - betel nut is the 4<sup>th</sup> most widely used recreational drug, after tobacco, caffeine, and alcohol
    - used by 10%-20% of the world's population, mostly SE Asia and India
    - causes mild euphoria and alertness; turns your teeth brown
  - check out the differences in dress and body language
    - what does this say about the deep, unconscious influence of culture?
- Photo of Malinowski being observed while writing in his tent
  - the ethnographic experience goes both ways!
  - Malinowski was very modern here in including himself in his description of Trobriand life
    - unlike the invisible, supposedly objective narrator of many ethnographic documentaries
- One difference: today, a lot of anthropology is done in less exotic places
  - there is just as much need to understand the culture of auto workers in Detroit as to understand Trobriand Islanders
  - but the concepts remain the same.