

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. anthropology is strongly based on the concept of **culture**
 - in future classes, we will look more carefully at what culture is, exactly
 - a good-enough definition for now:
 - culture is 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
 - by not treating culture as a fundamental feature of people, behavior, and society,
 - other fields tend to assume that when they study some group of people,
 - they are studying humans in general
 - often assume that college undergraduates, New York voters, people who answer their phones in the 707 area code for a survey, etc. represent people in general
 - while 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 counseling, where diagnoses and treatments are clearly very culture-specific
 - there are also aspects of economics, political science, and many other fields that are also culture-specific
 - culture is sometimes divided into
 - **symbolic culture**: what and how people think and communicate, for example:
 - language and 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
- some would say that material culture, in turn, influences symbolic culture: how people understand and think about the world
- symbolic culture exists in two versions
 - **ideal culture**: how people think or say things work
 - the “official” or “normal” version of how things are
 - how people say things are supposed to work
 - example: “Marriage is a life-long commitment.”
 - **real culture**: how people actually behave
 - you often have to observe this; often only unusually perceptive people, or no one at all, realizes or will say that the reality is different from the ideal
 - example: “About half of all marriages end in divorce before the 20th year”
 - ideal culture is not necessarily what people want, or what they wish were true
 - it is how they think it supposedly is
- 2. anthropology tends to take a **holistic** view of people and societies
 - to really understand things, you have to consider the whole picture: take all aspects of culture or society into account
 - any aspect of life is entangled with every other aspect
 - example: say an anthropologist wants to understand how your workplace functions: how people treat each other, what gets done or doesn't, why the business is succeeding or failing, why workers are happy or unhappy, etc.
 - the anthropologist would want to know not only what the work is, but also
 - the organizational structure of the business, that is, how authority, responsibility, and communication are arranged
 - 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
 - the holistic approach differs from those more common in psychology, economics, political science, etc., which 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. anthropology tends to use a **comparative** approach
 - anthropology collects and compares examples of different ways of living
 - anthropology values all different ways equally

- no assumption that our own ways are 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, or 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 Fernea are both ethnographies
 - Lee’s ethnography of the Dobe Ju’/hoansi is fairly typical, but unusually well written
 - Fernea’s ethnography of the women of El Nahra is unusual in being written like a story, with emphasis on her own experience as well
 - and the process
 - many cultural anthropologists do ethnography
 - those who do are ethnographers
 - **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 aspects of behavior, society, and culture
 - like marriage patterns, food preferences, the sexual division of labor, etc.
 - and how features of culture in turn effect biology
 - how culture affects human evolution
 - how culture affects health, etc.
 - **paleoanthropology**: evolution of humans and our closer relatives
 - **primatology**: study of non-human primates for clues about basic human nature
 - 4. **Archaeology**
 - cultural anthropology of the past
 - 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
 - **forensic** anthropology: law enforcement applications of anthropology (usually biological anthropology)
 - **cultural resource management (CRM)**
 - **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, 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
 - more about this in a later class...

– **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
- this automatic, negative judgment of practices that differ from one's own is the key feature of ethnocentrism
 - one could make a reasoned argument that some feature of one's own culture was better than a feature of a different culture
 - traditional Hindus used to insist that widows should be burned on the funeral pyre of their dead husbands
 - we might oppose that, based on a full understanding of the practice and a reasonable difference of opinion
 - our opposition would only be ethnocentric if
 - it was based just on an automatic, uninformed judgment that what "they" do is wrong simply because it is different from what we do
 - that is, based not on
 - understanding and argument
 - but rather on
 - an assumption that whatever we do is normal and right, so anything that differs is abnormal and wrong
 - starts from the assumption that people who do things differently from one's own culture do so because they are ignorant, backward, stupid, slaves to outdated customs, etc.
 - you won't learn anything from another culture if you assume everything different about it is misguided and wrong
 - again, more on this in future classes

– **cultural relativism**

- contrasts with ethnocentrism
- view that cultures and practices are 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
- starts from the assumption that people do things for reasons that make sense to them
 - seeks to understand what those reasons are, and why they make sense

– **ethical relativism**

- an even more extreme extension of cultural 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
- Guests of the Sheik background
 - set in 1956-1958, mostly the year 1957
 - Iraq had been controlled by the British after the end of WW I
 - Iraq became independent in 1932
 - the Fernea's visit was just before a revolution in 1958, in which
 - the feudal system of landed sheiks was largely dismantled
 - and land was redistributed from the large landholders into many more small farms
 - this was the first of a series of revolutions and violent power struggles that eventually led to President Saddam Hussein
 - El Nahra: mostly Shia, or Shi'ite Muslims
 - the smaller of the two main divisions of Islam
 - Sunni and Shi'ite
 - "Islam": the religion
 - "Muslim": a person who believes in Islam
 - Spelling details
 - today the preferred spelling is "Muslim", not "Moslem"
 - "Moslem" is associated with British imperialism and foreign misunderstanding of Islam, so some Muslims find it offensive
 - Arabic uses a different alphabet, so many Arabic words and names are written in a multiple ways in the Latin alphabet
 - Diwaniya, Diwaniyah
 - Abayah, abaya
 - And many more...
 - Maps
 - Aerial views (why are the doors blue? Fernea tells you in Chapter 1)
 - "doors painted blue, the color to ward off the evil eye" p 16
 - suq
 - abayah
 - dishdasha
 - kaffiyeh (and agal)
 - aba (cloak)
- Intro
 - "I am not an anthropologist" no?
 - 1st two years of marriage to Robert (Bob) Fernea, social anthropology grad student from University of Chicago
- Chapter 1, Night Journey: Arrival in the Village
 - El Nahra
 - Guests of Sheik Hamid Abdul Emir el Hussein, chief of the El Eshadda tribe
 - Arrive at station in Diwaniya
 - Right away you get an example of ethnocentrism, and how Fernea overcomes it

- Fernea is the only woman without an abayah
- “Why should I have to wear that ugly thing? It’s not *my* custom”
- “If they can’t take me as I am - if we have to make artificial gestures to prove we are human beings too - what’s the point?”
- “my principles were weakening before my embarrassment”
- “my principles were not as strong as my desire to be inconspicuous and well thought of in my new home”
- “They say an uncovered woman is an immoral woman”
 - she is beginning to think about why the abayah makes sense to people here
- p. 6: the lady of the resthouse at Diwaniya explains that she is called...
 - Um Hassan = Mother of Hassan
 - just as her husband is called Abu Hassan = Father of Hassan
 - does this suggest anything about the importance of family and having children?
- a few other useful ethnographic details
 - high wall around the garden gives them complete privacy
 - concern for privacy will turn out to be a crucial, constant feature of this society
 - Mohammed does not want anyone to know that he is washing dishes – woman’s work
 - this captures two themes that will prove important:
 - concern for the proper roles of men and women
 - concern for what others think, or one’s reputation
- in a future class we will look at culture shock, but in Chapter 1 is a great example
 - “I knew what I should do... But I couldn’t do it. I felt only a flood of irrational resentment against my new husband for bringing me here...” (p. 10)
 - irrational resentment
 - “I was still clutching the despised abayah tightly under my chin...” (p. 10)
 - “I was almost shouting...” (p. 10)
 - intense emotional overreaction to a few birds in the roof structure
 - food details: “boiled potatoes, sliced tomatoes, and canned corned-beef hash with fried eggs...angel-food cake...Nescafe...” (p. 22)
 - focus on familiar items of food
- We immediately see that ethnography is a two-way street, not just “us” studying “them”
 - Mohammed is as uncomfortable (“scared”) of her as she is of him (p. 14)
 - Fernea saves the “extra” lunch, instead of leaving it for children, servants, etc; the man (Ali, the sheik’s gardener) who brought it assumes she ate it all - news travels!
 - *they* are observing *her*
 - drawing conclusions about her already