CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

SIXTH EDITION

Marvin Harris
Late, of the University of Florida

Orna Johnson
University of California, Los Angeles
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Five Fields of Anthropology
What Is Distinctive about Cultural Anthropology?
Holism
Fieldwork and Participant Observation

Ethnography
Ethnology
Anthropology and Science
Why Study Anthropology?
Summary

Diversity in the U.S.A. Children wearing ethnic clothing.
Anthropology is the study of humankind—of ancient and modern people and their ways of living. Different branches of anthropology focus on different aspects of the human experience. One branch focuses on how our species evolved from earlier species. Other branches focus on how we developed our facility for language, how languages evolved and diversified, and how modern languages serve the needs of human communication. Still others focus on the learned traditions of human thought and behavior, how ancient cultures evolved and diversified, and how and why modern cultures change or stay the same.

People from different continents who speak different languages and possess different values and religions find themselves living closer and closer together in a new global village. To all members of this new community, anthropology offers a unique invitation to examine, explain, and celebrate human diversity. At the same time, anthropology reminds us that, despite our different languages and cultures, we are all members of the same species and share a common nature and a common destiny.

The Five Fields of Anthropology

Departments of anthropology in the United States offer courses in five major fields of knowledge about humankind: cultural anthropology, archaeology, anthropological linguistics, physical anthropology, and applied anthropology.

- **Cultural anthropology** (sometimes called social anthropology) deals with the description and analysis of cultures—the socially learned traditions of past and present ages. It has a subdiscipline, ethnography, that describes and interprets present-day cultures. Comparing these interpretations and descriptions can generate hypotheses and theories about the causes of past and present cultural similarities and differences.

- **Archaeology** and cultural anthropology possess similar goals but differ in the methods they use and the cultures they study. Archaeology examines the material remains of past cultures left behind on or below the surface of the earth. Without the findings of archaeology, we would not be able to understand the human past, especially where people have not left any books or other written records.

- **Anthropological linguistics** is the study of the great variety of languages spoken by human beings. Anthropological linguists attempt to trace the history of all known families of languages. They are concerned with the way language influences and is influenced by other aspects of human life, and with the relationship between the evolution of language and the evolution of our species, whose scientific name is *Homo sapiens*. Anthropological linguists also study the relationship between the evolution and change of languages and the evolution and change of cultures.

- **Physical anthropology** (also called biological anthropology) connects the other anthropological fields to the study of animal origins and the biologically determined nature of *Homo sapiens*. Physical anthropologists seek to reconstruct the course of human evolution by studying the fossil remains of ancient human and humanlike species. They also seek to describe the distribution of hereditary variations among contemporary human populations and to sort out and measure the relative contributions to human life made by heredity, the natural environment, and culture.

- **Applied anthropology** uses the findings of cultural, archaeological, linguistic, and biological studies to solve practical problems affecting the health, education, security, and prosperity of human beings in many cultural settings.

What Is Distinctive about Cultural Anthropology?

The common thread that ties the fields of anthropology together is the broad focus on humankind viewed across time and space. The purpose of anthropology is to understand what it means to be human by studying all aspects of human behavior and ideas. Anthropologists recognize that immense differences lie between people—differences in physical traits, language, lifestyles, beliefs, values, and behavior. By studying these differences, we come to understand that ways of behaving and believing are intelligible in terms of the overall context in which they occur. By adopting this broad view of the human experience, perhaps we humans can tear off the blinders put on us by our local lifestyles. Thus anthropology is incompatible with the view that a particular group—and no one else—represents humanity, stands at the pinnacle of progress, or has been chosen by God or history to fashion the world in its own image.

**Holism**

The distinction of anthropology among the social sciences is that it is holistic; it tries to understand the processes that influence and explain all aspects of human thought and behavior.
Anthropologists at Work

A. Ethnographer Nancy Scheper-Hughes with the engineer of the Aquas Pretas Sugar Mill in Timbaupta, Brazil.  
B. Ethnographer Napoleon Chagnon charts kinship relationships among the Yanomami.  
D. Linguist Francesca Merlin with the speakers of a previously unknown language near Mt. Hagen, New Guinea.  
E. Biological Anthropologist Joan Silk records baboon behavior, Amboseli, Kenya.

Holism is an approach that assumes that any single aspect of culture is integrated with other aspects, so that no single dimension of culture can be understood in isolation.

Other disciplines in the social sciences are concerned with a particular segment of human experience or a particular time or phase of cultural processes. In contrast, anthropology seeks to understand all the components and processes of social life; for example, the physical environment, methods of food production, the organization of family life, the political system, religious customs, and artistic endeavors. Because anthropologists study the interaction between biological and cultural differences, it is strategically equipped to address key issues concerning the origins of social inequality in the form of racism, sexism, exploitation, poverty, and international underdevelopment. Thus anthropology has much to contribute to our understanding of the major issues that divide contemporary society and threaten national and ethnic conflict.

Fieldwork and Participant Observation

In the early twentieth century, researchers studied cultures with the goal of describing them in as much detail as possible. In recent decades, anthropologists have been focusing more on problem-oriented research. Some are committed to scientific and causal research to explain aspects of culture that sometimes seem “unexplainable” (Murphy and Margolis 1995), such as why some cultures prohibit eating certain foods for
religious reasons. Other anthropologists favor more intuitive research that avoids hypothesis testing and favors evocative interpretationist descriptions in search of symbols, motivation, and meaning; for example, how apparently elusive conceptions of personhood are revealed in ceremonial conduct (Geertz 1973).*

Fieldwork refers to the firsthand experience with the people being studied. It involves integration into a community through long term residence and knowledge of the local language and customs, while maintaining the role of observer.

Cultural anthropologists collect their primary data through fieldwork, an extended period of involvement that typically entails living in the community and immersion in the culture being studied. The fieldworker typically gathers information through various methods of ethnographic field research that involve living close to the people and participating in their lives as much as possible.

Fieldnotes are the data collected by anthropologists. Fieldnotes include journals, daily logs, diaries, interviews, behavioral observations, and transcriptions of audiotapes. Some fieldnotes include everything the anthropologist writes down as she or he sees or hears it, as a source of background information, while others are devoted to more systematic records such as household census, life histories, gift exchange, land tenure histories and direct, systematic observations of behavior (Johnson and Sackett).

Interviews rely entirely on research subjects as sources of knowledge.

Research subjects (or informants) can provide cultural interpretations and report events they have witnessed (or heard) first hand.

Participant observation places the ethnographer at the scene where a combination of direct observation and interviews provide the evidence from which ethnographic accounts are constructed.

Just as children learn a great deal by observing family members, anthropologists learn about a culture by observing the behavior of others and participating in routine activities. However, coming from another culture, anthropological fieldworkers must keep an open mind and not let preconceptions get in the way of understanding the culture they are studying (DeWalt, DeWalt, and Wayland 1998).

Direct systematic behavior observations refer to the study of activity patterns that show patterns of action and interaction of the people we study.

Systematic observation is structured by explicit rules that include:

- who we observe (adult heads of household or children under age five)
- when and where we observe them (at random times throughout the day at home or in the evening during mealtime)
- what we observe (speech acts or specific physical actions)
- how we record our observations (descriptive notes or a checklist of behavior)

The voluminous data collected in the field generally require many hours of analysis for each hour spent collecting them (Sanjek 1990).

During the beginning of new fieldwork research, anthropologists and other strangers to the culture commonly feel awkward and unsure.

Culture shock is the feeling of anxiety and disorientation that develops in an unfamiliar situation when there is confusion about how to behave or what to expect.

Anthropologists commonly feel persistent feelings of uneasiness and anxiety that occur when one shifts from one culture to another. Once the initial period of adjustment passes, anthropologists often develop lifelong friendships with individual members of the community and may be adopted into local families through a relationship known as fictive kinship (see Chapter 9). The anthropologist often forms complex relationships with the people being studied. The researcher must see things from the other person’s point of view and still see patterns and processes that may not be consciously understood by the people in the culture being studied.

Anthropologists refer to the people who share information about their language and culture as informants, participants, or respondents.

Informants are people through whom the anthropologist learns about the culture through observation and by asking questions.

*See the first page of the References for an explanation of the system of citations used in this book.
The process of working with informants is a painstaking effort to sort out information and knowledge. It is important to choose informants who are knowledgeable and articulate; moreover, no matter how reliable the source, anthropologists find it advisable to explore the same topics with several informants and to use a variety of interview techniques and methods appropriate to the goal of the study (Weller 1998).

Besides talking to informants, anthropologists commonly undertake direct observations of behavior as a traditional method of fieldwork. Although expensive in terms of field and analysis time, systematic observations are the only way to obtain accurate data on what people are doing and how much time they spend in various activities. Informant recall—or even the researcher’s writeup of fieldnotes at the end of the day—will be shaped by selective remembering or forgetting that make descriptions based only on memory highly inaccurate (Johnson and Sackett 1998).

**Ethnography**

*Ethnography* is a firsthand description of a living culture based on personal observation.

Ethnography literally means “a portrait of a people.” It is a written description of the customs, beliefs, and behavior of a particular culture based on information collected through fieldwork. Anthropologists have tried to study small-scale societies before they had disruptive culture contact with modern societies. The resulting ethnographies often consisted of descriptions of traditional cultures as if they existed in the present. Ethnographies are still often written in the ethnographic present, and readers are cautioned that most cultures described may no longer exist.

Today anthropologists no longer restrict themselves to studying small traditional societies. Moreover, traditional ethnological approaches and methods are now used to study communities in complex nation-states. Today’s research also tends to be more specialized and often focuses on more specific topics of interest. A few topics covered in this book are

- Ecological anthropology, which considers the interaction between environment and technology to study human adaptation and change
- Economic anthropology, which studies how goods and services are distributed through formal and informal institutions
- Political anthropology, which focuses on political integration, stratification, methods of conflict resolution, leadership, and social control
- Medical anthropology, which studies biological and sociocultural factors that affect health and illness

"Anthropologists! Anthropologists!"
THE FAR SIDE © by Gary Larson © 1984 Far Works, Inc. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

- *Psychological anthropology*, which is concerned with how culture affects personality, child rearing, emotions, attitudes, and social behavior

Nonetheless, the discipline tries to retain its holistic orientation. For example, people who identify themselves as political anthropologists are concerned with the effects of environments or economies on political behavior or on how people raise their children.

More recent social changes, resulting from increased globalization, have led ethnographers to describe local cultures as embedded in the regional and global economy. This movement has led to the concept of transnational research, which recognizes that the world is not a mosaic of isolated cultures, but a network of communities linked by immigration, tourism, media, and now cyberspace. This situation may require multisited field studies; for example, migrants must be studied both at home and abroad to understand the diverse cultural influences they experience (Hannerz 1998).

**Ethnology**

Anthropologists use the comparative method to understand patterns of thought or behavior that occur in a number of societies.
Anthropologists insist first and foremost that conclusions based on the study of a particular culture be checked against the evidence of other groups. In this way anthropologists hope to control biases and generalize their findings to specific kinds of societies.

Ethnology is a study of a particular topic or problem in more than one culture, using a comparative perspective.

Whereas ethnography presents the details and particulars of a single community or culture, ethnology is the comparative study of customs and beliefs that tries to formulate theories about the similarities and differences between cultures. Comparative research can provide answers to a number of theoretical questions. For example, certain customs and practices, such as writing systems, tool use, and folktale motifs, tend to recur in different societies. Sometimes this recurrence is the result of geographical proximity, but in other cases, where there has been no known contact, we find independent occurrences of certain traits due to similar governing conditions. Cross-cultural comparisons provide evidence for such patterns and help explain them.

Anthropology and Science

Anthropology is handled as a social science by some and as one of the humanities by others. The humanistic side of anthropology focuses on the rich, complex descriptions of human experience through life histories, personal narratives, and the contemplation of religious and aesthetic meanings.

A humanistic approach aims to describe and interpret each culture on its own terms; it believes comparisons distort the unique qualities of a given culture.

A scientific approach aims to explain cultural differences and similarities; it believes that regularities exist across cultures and can be discovered through empirical data collection and systematic comparison.

As a science, anthropology looks for patterns and interrelationships to create possible explanations or hypotheses that explain the phenomena being observed.

A hypothesis is a proposition or tentative explanation of the relationship between certain phenomena that can be validated (or invalidated) by evidence collected according to explicit procedures. The social sciences, however, lack the ability to yield precise and reliable long-range predictions. Scientific truth is not absolute, but states what is considered to be the most probable explanation and then tests to see if the interpretation is correct.

Science does not yield certainties or laws; it yields probabilities.

As our knowledge expands, some theories may prove better than others, and sometimes old truths are discarded as new theories become more probable.

Why Study Anthropology?

Most anthropologists make their living by teaching in universities, colleges, and community colleges, and by carrying out university-based research. But a substantial and increasing proportion of anthropologists find employment in nonacademic settings. Museums, for example—especially museums of natural history, archaeology, and art and folklore—have long relied on the expertise of anthropologists. In recent years, anthropologists have been welcomed in a greater variety of public and private positions in government agencies concerned with welfare, drug abuse, mental health, environmental impact, housing, education, foreign aid, and agricultural development; in the private sector as personnel and ethnic relations consultants and as management consultants for multinational firms; and as staff members of hospitals and foundations (see Box 1.1).

In recognition of the growing importance of these nonacademic roles as a source of employment for anthropologists, many university departments of anthropology have started or expanded programs in applied anthropology. These programs supplement traditional anthropological studies with training in statistics, computers, and other skills suitable for solving practical problems in human relationships under a variety of natural and cultural conditions.

Despite the expanding opportunities in applied fields, the study of anthropology remains valuable not so much for the opportunities it presents for employment as for its contribution to the basic understanding of human variations and relationships. Just as most students who study mathematics do not become mathematicians, so too most students who study anthropology do not become anthropologists. For human relations fields, such as law, medicine, nursing, education, government, psychology, economics, business administration, and communication media, anthropology has a role to play that is as basic as mathematics. Only by becoming sensitive to the cultural dimensions of human existence and
Learning to cope with them can one hope to become really effective in any of these fields.

Anthropology has much to contribute to the educational philosophy known as multiculturalism, which stresses the importance of viewing the world from the perspectives of all the cultures, races, and ethnic groups present in modern nations. As part of their attempt to broaden the cultural horizons of their students and combat ethnocentrism, many colleges have developed required “cultural diversity” courses. Cultural anthropology is the original multicultural approach to human social life, and it remains by far the most systematic and comprehensive alternative to traditional curricula that view the world primarily in terms of “dead, White, European males.” In anthropological perspective, multiculturalism consists not merely of the knowledge that cultures are different and worthy of respect, but also of a commitment to analyzing the causes of similarities as well as differences (Paredes and Pohl 1995).

According to Gary Ferraro (n.d.), people with training in cultural anthropology are able to use their observational and analytic skills in a variety of ways in both the public (government) and private (business) sectors of the economy. Students are finding their way into areas of employment such as aging, criminal justice, cultural resource management, family planning, human and civil rights, medical systems and patient care, museum, program evaluation, refugee settlement, substance abuse and welfare policy to name only a few. You won’t see many positions specifically advertised for anthropologists, but the research skills that anthropologists acquire can be used in a variety of employment environments (Schwartz 2000).

SUMMARY

1. Anthropology is the study of humankind. Its five major branches are cultural or social anthropology, anthropological linguistics, physical (or biological) anthropology, archaeology, and applied anthropology.

2. Anthropology is distinctive in its commitment to holism and to understanding all factors that influence human thought and behavior.

3. Through fieldwork, cultural anthropologists participate in social activities, directly observe behav-
ior and conduct interviews to understand human thought and behavior.

4. An ethnography is a published account of a particular culture. Ethnology is the comparison of ethnographic information from two or more cultures.

5. A humanistic approach to anthropology describes the unique aspects of a given culture; a scientific approach seeks to find probabilistic explanations for cultural differences and similarities.

6. Anthropology has much to contribute to understanding multiculturalism; it is committed to understanding the processes that underlie cultural similarities and differences.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT
1. What does it mean to say that anthropology is holistic?
2. What are some goals of anthropological research?
3. How can anthropologists be useful outside of academic settings?