



The Anthropological Perspective on the Human Condition

Chapter Outline

- Explanations of the Human Condition
 - Dualistic, Idealistic, and Materialistic Explanations of Our World
 - Holistic Explanations
- The Anthropological Perspective: The Cross-disciplinary Discipline
 - Biological Anthropology
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 - Linguistic Anthropology
 - Cultural Anthropology
 - Medical Anthropology
 - Applied Anthropology
- Anthropology and the Concept of Culture
 - Anthropology and Culture/Cultures: Critiques and Response
- The Challenge of Cultural Differences
 - Ethnocentrism
 - Cultural Relativism
- Culture, History, and Human Agency
- The Promise of the Anthropological Perspective

Key Points

1. Anthropologists have argued that **culture** distinguishes the human condition from the condition of other living species. Human culture is learned, shared, patterned, adaptive, and symbolic. The role of culture in human life is often debated in the Western world using concepts rooted in philosophy. Mind–matter **dualism** is deeply rooted in Western thought, dating back to Plato. Because culture includes ideas, it is often associated with the mind and sometimes thought to control the material body. Those who emphasize matter rather than mind, by contrast, often try to reduce culture to a simple by-product of material factors such as genes, hormones, biology, the environment, or history. Dualist views of human nature can engender extremist positions that reduce human cultural practices to single determining causes. Most anthropologists find this way of explaining human action seriously inadequate.

2. In preference to dualism, reductionism, and determinism, many anthropologists have long thought holistically about human culture. Anthropological **holism** argues that objects and environments interpenetrate and even define each other. Thus, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Human beings and human societies are open systems that cannot be reduced to the parts that make them up. The parts and the whole mutually define, or co-determine, each other and co-evolve. This book adopts a **co-evolutionary** approach to human nature, human society, and the human past. What this means is that it is believed that culture and the human brain co-evolved—each helped shape the other. Human beings depend on symbolic cultural understandings to help them resolve the ambiguities inherent in everyday human experience.
3. **Anthropology** aims to describe what it means to be human, anywhere, and anytime. The anthropological perspective is holistic, comparative, evolutionary, and has relied on the concept of culture, even though it is a contested term, to explain the diversity of human ways of living and the meaning they give to their lives. Human beings depend on cultural learning for successful biological survival and reproduction and to help make sense of their world, which is why anthropologists consider human beings to be biocultural organisms. Today, anthropology is considered to have four major subfields: biological anthropology, archaeology, cultural anthropology, and linguistic anthropology. Some anthropologists argue that there is a fifth subfield, that of applied anthropology.
4. **Biological anthropology** began as an attempt to classify all the world's populations into different races. By the early twentieth century, however, most anthropologists had rejected racial classifications as scientifically unjustifiable and objected to the ways in which racial classifications were used to justify the social practice of racism. Contemporary anthropologists who are interested in human biology include biological anthropologists, primatologists, and paleoanthropologists.
5. **Cultural anthropologists** study cultural diversity in human societies, including their own. In this discipline, there is an emphasis on exploring the set of learned behaviours and ideas that humans acquire as members of a society.
6. **Linguistic anthropologists** approach cultural diversity by relating varied forms of language to their cultural contexts. Like cultural anthropologists, they gather information through fieldwork, by participating with their informants in social activities, and by observing those activities as outsiders. They publish accounts of their research in **ethnographies**.
7. **Medical anthropologists** use an approach that combines biological anthropology with cultural anthropology to understand how people in different cultures think about illness and wellness. This can have an applied aspect when anthropologists try to help people understand and deal with conditions that underlie illness and population health.
8. **Archaeology** is a cultural anthropology of the human past and present that places emphasis on the analysis of material remains, with interests ranging from the earliest stone tools to twenty-first-century garbage dumps. Insight into the technologies and cultural choices made by humans living in the past can bring us closer to understanding groups that left no written records.
9. **Applied anthropologists** use information from the other four anthropological specialties to solve practical cross-cultural problems. This often involves advocating for indigenous groups by working directly for their communities, their organizations, governments or lawyers.

10. **Ethnocentrism** is the term that anthropologists use to describe the opinion that one's own way of life is natural or correct, and is in fact the only way of truly being human. It is a form of reductionism. Anthropologists believe it can be countered by a commitment to **cultural relativism**, which is an attempt to understand the cultural underpinnings of behaviour within the context of the culture in which it is found. Cultural relativism does not require us to abandon every value our society has taught us; however, it does discourage the easy solution of refusing to consider alternatives from the outset. Cultural relativism can make moral decisions more difficult because it requires us to take into account many things before we making any judgments about another culture.
11. Human history is an important aspect of the human story, a dialectic between biology and culture. Culture is dynamic and aspects of it are passed on from one generation to the next. The cultural beliefs and practices we learn from the past or borrow from other people in the present make some things easier for us, but can also make other things more difficult. As culture is adaptive, shared, learned, and symbolic, it can serve as a resource that human beings can use in the pursuit of their own goals. Thus, the anthropological understanding of human life recognizes the importance of **human agency**.
12. Many anthropologists have criticized using the terms *culture* (singular), which refers to the distinguishing human characteristic of being able to create and imitate patterned, symbolically mediated ideas to promote the survival of the species, and *cultures* (plural) that indicates a particular learned way of life belonging to a specific group of human beings. Critics argue that this way of talking about culture seems to endorse a kind of oppressive cultural determinism and that it is important that anthropologists be attentive to this by remaining vigilant that oppression does not result from the research being done.

Key Terms

Anthropological perspective An approach to the human condition that is holistic, comparative, and evolutionary.

Anthropology The integrated study of human nature, human society, and human history.

Applied anthropology The use of information gathered from the other anthropological specialties to solve practical problems within and between cultures.

Archaeology The specialty of anthropology interested in what we can learn from material remains left behind by earlier human societies.

Binary opposition A pair of opposites used as an organizing principle (e.g., body–soul; yin–yang; male–female).

Biocultural organisms Organisms (in this case, human beings) whose defining features are co-determined by biological and cultural factors.

Biological evolution Evolution of the resources for human development provided by our genes and other elements that make up our physical bodies.

Biological (or physical) anthropology The specialty of anthropology that looks at humans as a biological organisms and tries to discover what characteristics make us different from and/or similar to other living things.

Co-evolution The relationship between biological processes and symbolic cultural processes in which each makes up an important part of the environment to which the other must adapt.

Comparative A characteristic of the anthropological perspective that requires anthropologists to consider similarities and differences in a wide a range of human societies before generalizing about human nature, human society, or human history.

Cultural anthropology The specialty of anthropology that studies how variation in beliefs and behaviours is shaped by culture and learned by different members of human groups.

Cultural evolution Evolution of the beliefs and behaviours we incorporate into human development through the experiences of teaching and learning.

Cultural pattern A behaviour or idea that members of a society repeatedly passed on to one another, across generations, and that is recognizable to all members of that society.

Cultural relativism Understanding another culture in its own terms in a way that the culture appears to be a coherent and meaningful way to live.

Culture Sets of learned behaviours and ideas that humans acquire as members of a society. We use culture to adapt to and transform the world in which we live.

Determinism The philosophical view that one simple force (or a few simple forces) causes (or determines) complex events.

Dualism The philosophical view that reality consists of two equal and irreducible forces.

Essence An unchanging core of features that is unique to things of the same kind (whether they are chairs, cows, ideas, or people) and makes them what they are.

Ethnocentrism The opinion that one's own way of life is the most natural, correct, or fully human way of life.

Ethnography An anthropologist's written (or filmed) description of a particular culture.

Ethnology The comparative study of two or more cultures.

Evolutionary A characteristic of the anthropological perspective that requires anthropologists to place their observations about human nature, human society, or human history in a temporal framework that takes into consideration change over time.

Habitus Everyday routine social activity rooted on habitual behaviour.

Holism A perspective on the human condition that assumes that mind and body, individual and society, and individual and environment interpenetrate and even define one another.

Human agency Human beings' ability to exercise at least some control over their lives.

Idealism The philosophical view (dating back as far as Plato in Western thought) that ideas—or the mind that produces such ideas—constitute the essence of human nature.

Informants People in a particular culture who work with anthropologists and provide them with insights about their way of life; also called *respondents*, *teachers*, or *friends*.

Linguistic anthropology The specialty of anthropology concerned with the study of human languages.

Materialism The philosophical view that the activities of our physical bodies in the material world constitute the essence of human nature.

Medical Anthropology A form of applied anthropology that links biological and cultural aspects of anthropology concerning human health.

Metanarrative A grand-scale story or theme that members of a given culture recognize and that often drives ideas and actions within that society.

Paleoanthropology The study of the fossilized remains of human beings' earliest ancestors.

Primatology The study of non-human primates, the closest living relatives of human beings.

Symbol Something that stands for something else.

Review Questions

1. Compare dualism with materialism and idealism. What aspect of experience does each highlight?
2. What is meant by holism? Why is holism important to the anthropological perspective?
3. What is the relationship among the four subfields of anthropology? How does this reflect the anthropological perspective?
4. Consider the definition of *culture* proposed in your textbook on page 5. Pay special attention to the characteristics of culture (e.g., learned, shared). What are the implications of this definition?
5. What is the focus of cultural anthropology?

6. How might a medical anthropology approach to understanding people and illness be different from the approach of traditional Western medicine?
7. Think about the definitions of *fieldwork*, *ethnography*, and *ethnology*. What is the relationship between fieldwork and the production of anthropological knowledge?
8. What are Richard Potts's eight elements for the foundation of culture? Do you agree with his choices? Are there any that you would add or remove?
9. Discuss the distinction between *culture* and *cultures*.
10. Does cultural relativism require us to abandon our sense of morals?
11. What are the three flawed assumptions used to support cultural determinism?
12. How do humans use symbols? What can be expressed by symbols?
13. How did early anthropologists combat the fallacy of racial categorization?
14. What does Bell and Heller's ethnography, discussed in the *Living Anthropology* section, tell us about language community and belonging in French and English Canada?

Additional Resources

Films

- *Strangers Abroad* Series

A series of documentaries on six founders of anthropology, sponsored and supported by the Royal Anthropological Institute in London. All six are available to watch online.

- Fieldwork – Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPOMu_cBfmk
 - Everything is Relatives – William Rivers (1864–1922): <http://youtu.be/3LtTp7Kep6s>
 - The Shackles of Tradition – Franz Boas (1858–1942): <http://youtu.be/GOvFDioPrMM>
 - Off the Verandah – Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjCMOpnx6r8>
 - Strange Beliefs – Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973):
http://youtu.be/8q9HyONL_10
 - Coming of Age – Margaret Mead (1901–1978): <http://youtu.be/K2FhWyulpb8>
- *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman: "The Hottentot Venus."* Directed by Zola Maseko. Icarus/First Run Films. 1998.

This documentary explores the life of Sara Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who was taken to Europe and displayed as a freak show exhibit. An example of scientific racism.

- <http://icarusfilms.com/new99/hottento.html>

Annotated Video Links

Anthropology: The Four Fields - The Essence of Anthro

This 30-minute video provides a detailed introductory grounding to the four main subfields of anthropology: biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, archaeology and linguistic anthropology.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPYVXojUIp4>

Franz Boas

This short film clip introduces Franz Boaz who was the most prominent anthropologist in North America in the early twentieth century. Boaz promoted the idea of cultural relativism and trained much of the first generation of American anthropologists. His work among the Inuit and the First Nations people of British Columbia was the best in its day.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ght6ZY5KjGM>

Anthropology in 10 or Less: 102: Understanding Culture

This 10-minute clip provides a lot of focused insight as to how anthropologists view culture. While the term culture has many uses in everyday life, its use by anthropologists focuses us on the aspects of human belief and behaviour that vary from society to society.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbSn3VP3w90>

Websites

- Mysteries of Çatalhöyük, Science Museum of Minnesota
An interactive exploration of a Neolithic archaeological site in Central Turkey
<http://www.smm.org/catal/top.php>
- Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University
One of the oldest museums in the world devoted to anthropology
<http://www.peabody.harvard.edu/>
- University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology
Includes a blog on anthropological and archaeological news and issues
<http://www.penn.museum/>
- Primatology.net
A blog collecting articles on news and research in the world of primatology
<http://primatology.net/>
- Anthropology resources from the Smithsonian Institution

The Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History
<http://anthropology.si.edu/>

- Anthropology-related articles from *Smithsonian* magazine
<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/topics/Subject-Anthropology.html>
- Smithsonian: What does it mean to be human? Human fossils.
<http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/species>
- Becoming human: evolution timeline of human development
<http://www.becominghuman.org/node/human-lineage-through-time>
- Interactive slideshow on the four fields of anthropology
<https://www.slideshare.net/PaulVMcDowell/four-fields-in-anthropology>
- Interactive slideshow on how we see culture in anthropology
<https://www.slideshare.net/PaulVMcDowell/introduction-to-anthropology>

A Critical Look

BY ROBERTA ROBIN DODS

The Canadian Mosaic

Where the United States has termed its national character a melting pot, Canadians have chosen the image of a cultural mosaic—a rich, colourful collage made up of pieces from many different cultures. But where did this notion of Canada as a multicultural nation come from? And just how inclusive of different cultures is our national identity?

The idea of the cultural mosaic was first developed by Scottish-Canadian writer John Murray Gibbon (1875–1952), in his book *Canadian Mosaic* (1938). Gibbon was, in many ways, a model of a certain type of “British” colonial-era immigrant. He was born in British colonial Ceylon (now post-colonial Sri Lanka); his father was a British colonial bureaucrat. As a child, he was sent “home” to be educated in Scotland, and he later attended university in England and then in Germany. In 1913, the year before World War I broke out in Europe, Gibbon came to Canada to work for the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).

The CPR was—and remains—an iconic Canadian company. Between 1881 and 1885, it built a national railway linking eastern Canada to the west coast. The CPR was a model of late nineteenth-

century capitalism. Driven by profit, it imported 15,000 Chinese labourers willing to work for little pay and under dangerous conditions. In the five years it took to complete the project, at least 600 of those workers died. The CPR accepted these deaths as the cost of progress, as did they accept the disruptions the railway brought to Aboriginal peoples' ways of life. And in the end, most Canadians did, too. After all, the railway helped to unify Canada as a nation, and it allowed European immigrant families to move west.

In the decades following the completion of the railway, Canadian officials actively encouraged the settlement and development of western Canada. They offered free land to Europeans looking for a new start (but not to the Chinese who had built the railway), and their campaign was very successful. As Canadian academic Antonia Smith (2007) notes, however, members of the British-Canadian elite soon felt threatened by the influx of so many new people from southern and eastern Europe. One response to this perceived threat was to implicitly accept Canadian-British culture as the country's dominant culture, while characterizing non-British cultures as "other." By extension, people from "other" cultures were "outsiders," while British-Canadians remained "insiders."

It was against this historical backdrop that Gibbon, the quintessential colonial company man, began to consider the emerging character of Canada in the post-World War I period. Undoubtedly, Gibbon's status as a British-Canadian immigrant in a country ruled (for the most part) by British-Canadians coloured his view of what he termed a "mosaic." To Gibbon and his like-minded contemporaries, encouraging diversity meant organizing and supporting festivals of "folk" (usually meaning "non-British") culture and crafts. These events consolidated specific images of "Canadian-ness," creating "multiple discourses of race, citizenship, cultural belonging, and national identity" at a time of "demographic flux" (Smith 2007: 37). Subsequently, Gibbon's work contributed to definitions of multiculturalism and, indeed, culturally "inclusive" legislation. Thus emerged a Canadian identity based in pluralism. However, in some senses a binary remained—between "English" Canadians and the "folks."

Questions about the place of different cultural traditions in relation to our national identity remain relevant today. A major concern, which Canadian anthropologist Regna Darnell (2000) discusses, is why our national identity doesn't reflect a greater influence from First Nations peoples. If, as we so often hear, Canada's national identity is founded on multiculturalism, why are Aboriginal peoples

still viewed as “others”? These peoples were, after all, here long before the British or the French began colonizing the land. And we could, as a nation, learn a great deal from them—from “the application of First Nations strategies of consensus, environmental stewardship, community rights and obligations, respect for the wisdom of age, and the autonomy of individuals” (Darnell 2000: 166). Suggesting the need for a more holistic, inclusive approach, Darnell notes that anthropologists are uniquely situated to participate in “reconstituting the Canadian national identity” (173). Ultimately, anthropological work may lead to a national identity that truly reflects the cultural diversity of the Canadian people.