



Anthropologists study cultural practices all over the world in their attempt to understand the similarities and differences among human groups. Here, in Fukuoka, Japan, men celebrate the Gion Yamakasa festival. The festival commemorates an important event in the 13th century when a priest ended an epidemic of plague by scattering water while sitting on a float carried by townspeople. Now, each July, teams of men carrying floats that can weigh several tons race through the city streets following the priest's route.

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ANTHROPOLOGY AND HUMAN DIVERSITY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Define anthropology and explain how it differs from other academic disciplines.
- 1.2 Explain ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, and the ways anthropology has evolved under changing working conditions.
- 1.3 Discuss some of the key reasons for studying anthropology.
- 1.4 Assess the role of peace and violence in human societies.

As long as human beings have existed, they have lived in groups and have had to answer certain critical questions. They have had to figure out how to live with one another; how to feed, clothe, and house themselves; how to determine rights and responsibilities; how to lend meaning to their lives; and how to interact with those who live differently. Cultures are human responses to these basic questions. The goal of cultural **anthropology**, or the comparative study of human societies and cultures, is to describe, analyze, and explain different cultures. Anthropologists show how groups have adapted to their natural and social environments and how they have given significance to their lives. Anthropologists often focus on current and historical interactions among different cultural groups and patterns of power and inequality both within and among cultures.

In this chapter, we introduce some of the basic ideas of anthropology. We first describe the way the field is divided into major subdisciplines. We discuss ideas that are fundamental to the field, including ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, and we consider the ways in which anthropology has been affected by new global patterns of technology, commerce, and power. Finally, we turn to an examination of why anthropology is a critical discipline for humanity today. Along the way, we explore anthropology and medicine, learn a bit about a famous ethnic group, and consider the relationships between anthropologists and those they work with.

Anthropologists attempt to comprehend the entire human experience. We study our species from its ancestral beginnings several million years ago up to the present. We study human beings as they live in every corner of the earth, in all kinds of physical, political, and social environments. We reach beyond humans to understand primates, those animals most closely related to us. We reach into the future, contemplating how we might communicate with extraterrestrial intelligence (Traphagan, 2014) or live on space stations (Oman-Reagan, 2016). This interest in humankind and our closest relations throughout time and in all parts of the world distinguishes anthropology as a scientific and humanistic discipline.

In other academic disciplines, human behavior is usually studied primarily from the point of view of Western society. Scholars in these disciplines often consider the behavior of people in the modern industrial nations of Europe and North America to be representative of all humanity. Anthropologists, on the other hand, believe that we can only understand who we are as human beings—our potentials and our perils—through the study of humanity in its total variety. In an era when people from different cultures are increasingly in contact with one another and most people in the world live in multicultural and multiethnic nations, this anthropological perspective is vital.

Human beings everywhere consider their own behavior not only right but also natural. Our ideas about economics, religion, morality, and other areas of social life seem logical and inevitable to us, but others have found different answers. For example, should you give your infant bottled formula or breast-feed not only your own child but, like the Efe of The Democratic Republic of the Congo, those of your friends and neighbors as well (N. R. Peacock, 1991, p. 352)? How many genders are there? Does tradition say two, as many Americans believe, or five, as many Bugis (members of a large ethnic group in Indonesia) believe (Idrus, 2016)? Is it right that emotional love should precede sexual relations? Or should sexual relations precede love, as is normal for the Mangaian of the Pacific (D. Marshall, 1971)? What should we have for lunch: hamburgers and fries or termites, grasshoppers, and hot maguey worms, all of which are commonly eaten in certain regions of Mexico (Bates, 1967, pp. 58–59)? Should we bring

our baby into a shop or restaurant with us or leave them to snooze in a stroller outside as is common in Denmark (Lodish, 2014, Figure 1.1). In anthropology, concepts of human nature and theories of human behavior are based on studies of a wide variety of human groups. We often find that other people's goals, values, views of reality, and environmental adaptations are very different from our own.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ In Denmark, it is common for shopping or dining parents to leave their babies outside.



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Anthropologists bring a holistic approach to understanding and explaining. To say anthropology is **holistic** means that it combines the study of human biology, history, language, and the learned and shared patterns of human behavior and thought we call culture in order to analyze human groups. Holism separates anthropology from other academic disciplines, which generally focus on one factor—biology, psychology, physiology, or society—to explain human behavior. Anthropology seeks to understand human beings as organisms who adapt to their environments through a complex interaction of biology and culture.

Because anthropologists take a holistic approach, they are interested in the total range of human activity. Most anthropologists specialize in a single field and a single problem, but together they study the small dramas of daily living as well as spectacular social events. They study the ways in which mothers hold their babies or sons address their fathers. They want to know not only how a group gets its food but also the rules for eating it. Anthropologists are interested in how human societies think about time and space, as well as how they see colors and name them. They are interested in health and illness and the significance of physical variation. Anthropologists are interested in social rules and practices concerning sex and marriage. They are interested in folklore and fairy tales, political speeches, and everyday conversation. For anthropologists, great ceremonies like the coronation of a ruler and daily rituals like the way one greets a friend are both worth investigating.

THE FIELDS OF ANTHROPOLOGY

To cover such a broad range of interests, anthropology is divided into several specialized subdisciplines. The major divisions of anthropology are biological (sometimes called physical) anthropology, linguistic anthropology, archaeology, cultural anthropology, and applied anthropology. Although professional anthropologists generally have training in all the subdisciplines, they usually identify with only one of them.

Biological or Physical Anthropology

People live in a broad range of ecological and social conditions. Our ability to survive and prosper in many different circumstances is based on the enormous flexibility of cultural behavior. The capacity

FIGURE 1.2 ■ Understanding primate behavior is part of biological anthropology. Here, Biruté Mary Galdikas, a professor at Simon Fraser University and one of the founders of Orangutan Foundation International, films orangutans in Indonesia.



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for culture, however, is grounded in our biological history and physical makeup. Human adaptation is thus biocultural; that is, it involves both biological and cultural dimensions. Therefore, to understand fully what it is to be human, we need a sense of how the biological aspects of this adaptation came about and how they influence human cultural behavior.

Biological (or physical) anthropology is the study of humankind from a biological perspective. It focuses primarily on those aspects of humanity that are genetically inherited. Biological anthropology includes numerous subfields, such as skeletal analysis, or osteology; the study of human nutrition; demography, or the statistical study of human populations; epidemiology, or the study of patterns of disease; and primatology.

Human evolution and the biological processes involved in human adaptation are key areas of study for biological anthropologists. Paleoanthropologists search for the origins of humanity. They use both the fossil record and sophisticated forms of genetic analysis to trace the history of human evolution. Their research has demonstrated that a great diversity of fossil species bear some similarity to modern humans.

Another subspecialty of biological anthropology, called human variation, is concerned with physiological differences among humans. Anthropologists who study human variation map physiological differences among modern human groups and attempt to explain the sources of this diversity.

Because the human species evolved through a complex feedback system involving both biological and cultural factors, biological anthropologists are also interested in the origins and evolution of culture. For example, in his 2009 book *Catching Fire*, the biological anthropologist Richard Wrangham argued that an aspect of culture—the ability to control fire and use it to cook food—led to dramatic biological and social changes in human ancestors. Cooked food is more digestible than raw, and this resulted in changes in human anatomy, including far shorter digestive tracks than our closest primate relatives. Cooking food also required changes in social organization that led to much greater cooperation between males and females than is found among nonhuman primates. Wrangham thus argued that human evolution was both a biological and a cultural process.

Our unique evolutionary history resulted in the development of a biological structure—the human brain—capable of inventing, learning, and using cultural adaptations. Cultural adaptation, in turn, has freed humans from the slow process of biological evolution: Populations can invent new ways of dealing with problems almost immediately or adopt solutions from other societies. The study of the complex relationship between biological and cultural evolution links biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, and archaeology.

In addition to studying living human groups, biological anthropologists study living nonhuman primates, members of the order that includes monkeys, apes, and humans. Primates are studied for the clues that their chemistry, physiology, morphology (physical structure), and behavior provide about our own species. At one time, primates were studied mainly in the artificial settings of laboratories and zoos, but now much of the work of biological anthropologists involves studying these animals in the wild. Jane Goodall and Biruté Mary Galdikas (Figure 1.2) are two well-known anthropologists who study primates in the wild. Goodall works with chimpanzees in Tanzania, Galdikas with orangutans in Indonesia. Both are widely recognized for their conservation efforts.

Linguistic Anthropology

Language is the primary means by which people communicate with one another. Although most creatures communicate, human speech is more complex, creative, and used more extensively than the communication systems of other animals. Language is an essential part of what it means to be human and a basic part of all cultures. **Linguistic anthropology** is concerned with understanding language and its relation to culture.

Language is an amazing thing that we take for granted. When we speak, we use our bodies—our lungs, vocal cords, mouth, tongue, and lips—to produce noise of varying tone and pitch. And, somehow, when we and others do this together, we are able to communicate with one another, but only if we speak the same language. Linguistic anthropologists want to understand the variation among languages, how language is structured, how it is learned, and how it is used.

Language is a complex symbolic system that people use to communicate and to transmit culture. Thus, language provides critical clues for understanding culture. For example, people generally talk about the people, places, and objects that are important to them. Therefore, the vocabularies of spoken language may give us clues to important aspects of culture. For example, it is interesting that Spanish has a word for hanging out and talking at a meal after all the food is gone (*sobremesa*), Russian has a word for a person who asks too many questions (*pochemuchka*), and Inuit has a word for the feeling of anticipation you have waiting for someone to show up at your house (*iktsuarpok*). Knowing the words that people use for things might help us to glimpse how they understand the world.

Language involves much more than words. When we speak, we perform. If we tell a story, we don't simply recite the words. We emphasize some things. We add inflection that can turn a serious phrase comic or a comic phrase serious. We give our own special tilt to a story, even if we are just reading a book out loud. Linguistic anthropologists are interested in how people perform language—how their actions and expressions change and modify the meanings of their words.

All languages change. Historical linguists work to discover how languages have changed and their relationships to one another. Understanding linguistic change and the connections between languages helps us to work out the past of the people who speak them. Knowing, for example, the relationships among various Native American languages gives us insight into the histories and migrations of their speakers. For example, the Navajo, the Hopi, and the Zuni are Native American groups who live fairly close to one another in Arizona and New Mexico. However, the Navajo speak an Athabascan language that ties them historically to groups in Canada and Alaska, whereas the Hopi speak a Uto-Aztecan language, linking them historically with groups in Mexico. The Zuni speak a language that cannot easily be classified into a larger family.

The technological changes of the past two decades have opened a new world of communications. The widespread use of cell phones, e-mail, texting, emojis, and social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Tumblr, and Reddit creates entirely new ways of communicating, changing both the occasions on which people communicate and the language they use. For example, 20 years ago, people who lived at a great distance from each other communicated relatively rarely. The mail was often slow, and phone calls were expensive. Now, such people may communicate many times daily, texting, speaking on the phone, and messaging through websites. Cell phones in particular have become extremely important in poorer nations. For example, in 1998, there were no cell phones in Botswana. But by 2006, there were more than 800,000, enough for half the total population and more than six times the number of landlines (Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, n.d.). By 2008, virtually every citizen had a cell phone (Aker & Mbiti, 2010), and by 2019, there were 1.7 cellular subscriptions for every person in Botswana. In 2019, across sub-Saharan Africa, there were 477 million unique mobile phone subscribers, a number expected to rise to 1 billion by 2024 (GSMA, 2020, p. 3). Cell phone usage is explored in more detail in the section on ethnography in Chapter 5. Studying these changes in communication is an exciting new challenge for linguistic anthropologists.

Understanding language is a critical task for people interested in developing new technology. We live in a world where computers talk to us and listen to us. We will only be able to build machines that use language effectively if we understand how humans structure and use language.

Archaeology

Archaeology is the study of past cultures through their material remains. Archaeologists add a historical dimension to our understanding of cultures and how they change.

Many archaeologists study prehistoric societies—those for which no written records have been found or no writing systems have been deciphered (Figure 1.3). However, even when an extensive written record is available, as in the case of ancient Greece or colonial America, archaeology can help increase our understanding of the cultures and ways of life.

Archaeologists do not observe human behavior and culture directly but rather reconstruct them from material remains or artifacts. An artifact is any object that human beings have made, used, or altered. Artifacts include pottery, tools, garbage, and whatever else a society has left behind.

FIGURE 1.3 ■ Stephanie Schulz, Canto Photo Texas State University



In the popular media, archaeology is mainly identified with spectacular discoveries of artifacts from prehistoric and ancient cultures, such as the tomb of the Egyptian king Tutankhamun. As a result, people often think of archaeologists primarily as collectors. But contemporary archaeologists are much more interested in understanding and explaining their finds in terms of what those objects say about the behavior that produced them than in creating collections. Their principal task is to infer the nature of past cultures based on the patterns of the artifacts left behind. Archaeologists work like detectives, slowly sifting and interpreting evidence. The context in which things are found, the location of an archaeological site, and the precise position of an artifact within that site are critical to interpretation. These considerations are often more important than the artifact itself.

There are many different specialties within archaeology. Urban archaeology is a good example of a specialization. Urban archaeologists delve into the recent and distant past of current-day cities. In doing so, they uncover knowledge of the people often left out of the history books, making our understanding of the past far richer than it was. For example, Elizabeth Scott's (2001) work at Nina Plantation in Louisiana adds to our understanding of the lives of slaves and free laborers from the 1820s to the 1890s. Joseph Bagley's excavation of a Boston outhouse belonging to a Puritan woman from the late 1600s unearthed a bowling ball and frilly lace ... interesting because both were illegal at the time. Bagley's work shows that people's private behavior could be quite different from what was recorded in the official records (Bagley, 2016).

Another important archaeology subfield is cultural resource management (CRM). Archaeologists working in CRM are concerned with the protection and management of archaeological, archival, and architectural resources. They are often employed by federal, state, and local agencies to develop and implement plans for the protection and management of such cultural resources. Before construction on buildings, roadways, and public works begins, CRM archaeologists assess the area to determine if there are important archaeological remains. Sometimes they make critical finds. For example, in 1991, the U.S. government was about to build a new building on Broadway in New York City. Archaeologists evaluating the site discovered the remains of more than 400 people of African descent. Construction plans were modified, and today, the site is African Burial Grounds National Monument.

Cultural Anthropology

Cultural anthropology is the study of human society and culture. Cultural anthropologists focus on current-day culture and the cultures, as well as cultures of the recent past. Anthropologists define **society** as a group of people persisting through time and the social relationships among these people—their statuses

FIGURE 1.4 ■ Cultural anthropologists describe and analyze current-day culture. Many current studies focus on culture change the connections among societies. Here, a person wearing a Pikachu mascot outfit, which is from the Japanese video game *Pokemon*, stands on a street in London, England.



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and roles. **Culture** is the major way in which human beings adapt to their environments and give meaning to their lives. It includes human behavior and ideas that are learned rather than genetically transmitted, as well as the material objects a group of people produces. We describe culture more fully in Chapter 3.

Cultural anthropologists attempt to understand culture both as a universal human phenomenon and as a characteristic of a group of people. They may use many different research strategies to search for general principles that underlie all cultures or examine the dynamics of specific cultures. They may explore the ways in which members of different societies produce and acquire their food, how they raise children and pass on their beliefs and practices, and how they understand the world and their place in it. They may examine how members of different cultures interact with and change one another. Anthropologists are often particularly interested in the effects of differences of power both among cultures and within individual cultures.

Research in cultural anthropology is almost always based on **participant observation**, long-term fieldwork that involves gathering data by observing and participating in people's lives. Anthropologists are sometimes portrayed on TV and movies as studying groups that are wholly unaffected by the modern world and uncontaminated by its practices. Sometimes such groups are described as "stone-age" or "primitive." Whether presented as a documentary or a story, this is fiction. For better or for worse, such groups haven't existed for a long time. Members of industrialized cultures had reached virtually every group of people in the world by the time of World War I. Today, there are about 100 ethnic groups that choose to reject contact with outsiders. Of these, most live in the Brazilian and Peruvian Amazon (Survival International, 2017). However, here, uncontacted is a relative term. These groups are neither unknown nor undiscovered. In many cases, they have contact with neighboring tribes; in other cases, members have visited the outside world. They have guns, metal tools, and other elements of modern technology.

One of the most compelling facts of life in the 21st century is that although some groups of people are surely more isolated than others, virtually all groups are in contact with one another. Modern transportation and electronic communication have made specific locales less important. Societies are increasingly global. Today, even in relatively isolated locations, anthropologists are apt to find that the people they work with are well aware of events in the United States and the policies of governments around the world. They wear T-shirts with the names of U.S. cities or professional sports teams and drink Coca-Cola. They get their news from the radio, television, and the Internet. Even in very remote

locations, it is common to meet people who have traveled widely and who have relatives living in the United States or in Western Europe.

Ethnography and ethnology are two important aspects of cultural anthropology. **Ethnography** is the description of society or culture. Ethnography refers to both the process of qualitative, fieldwork-based research and the written results of that research. An ethnographer attempts to describe an entire society or a specific set of cultural institutions or practices. An ethnography may be either emic or etic, or it may be a combination of the two. An **emic** ethnography attempts to capture what ideas and practices mean to members of a culture. It attempts to give readers a sense of what it feels like to be a member of the culture it describes. An **etic** ethnography describes and analyzes culture according to principles and theories drawn from Western scientific traditions such as ecology, economy, or psychology. Emics and etics will be more fully described in Chapter 2. **Ethnology** is the attempt to find general principles or laws that govern culture, to compare and contrast practices in different cultures to find regularities.

Cultural anthropology is a complex field with many different subfields. One index of this complexity is presented by the more than 50 different sections and interest groups of the American Anthropological Association; most of these are concerned with cultural anthropology. Some examples include political and legal anthropology, which is concerned with issues of nationalism, citizenship, the state, colonialism, and globalism; humanistic anthropology, which is focused on the personal, ethical, and political choices facing humans; and visual anthropology, which is the study of visual representation and the media.

Cultural anthropologists are often particularly interested in documenting and understanding the ways in which cultures change (Figure 1.4). They examine the roles that power and coercion play in change as well as humans' ability to invent new social forms and modify old ones. Studies of culture change are important because rapid shifts in society, economy, and technology are basic characteristics of the contemporary world. Understanding the dynamics of change is critical for individuals, governments, and corporations. One goal of cultural anthropology is to be able to contribute productively to public debate about the promotion of and reaction to change.

Applied Anthropology

Much of anthropology is concerned with basic research—that is, asking the big questions about the origins of our species, the development of culture and civilization, and the functions of human social institutions. **Applied anthropology** is the use of anthropology in both public and private sectors to solve real-world problems.

Applied anthropologists are trained in one of the four subdisciplines we have already mentioned. Sometimes referred to as practicing anthropologists, they work with governments, corporations, and other organizations to use anthropological research techniques to solve social, political, and economic problems. In this book, we highlight some of the work of applied anthropologists. Each chapter includes a feature titled “Anthropology Makes a Difference.” There, you will read about some of the ways anthropologists are involved in the practical worlds of business, defense, medicine, government, public policy, climate change, sustainable development, refugees, immigration, law enforcement, and communication.

Specialists in each of the subfields of anthropology make contributions to applied work. For example, in cultural anthropology, experts in the anthropology of agriculture use their knowledge to help people with reforestation, water management, and agricultural productivity. Such experts have been instrumental to the work of many organizations that promote the welfare of tribal and indigenous peoples throughout the world. Examples of these organizations include Cultural Survival, founded by anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis; the Center for World Indigenous Studies; and Survival International. Cultural anthropologists who study legal and criminal justice systems address problems such as drug abuse or racial and ethnic conflict. They have often promoted alternative forms of conflict resolution, such as mediation techniques that grew out of anthropological studies of non-Western societies. Anthropologists working in West Africa provided key information that helped focus the medical response to the Ebola crisis in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone in 2014 (American Anthropological

Association, 2014). Psychological and educational anthropologists contribute to the more effective development and implementation of educational and mental health policies, and medical anthropologists apply their cross-cultural knowledge to improve health care, sanitation, diet, and disease control in a variety of cultural contexts. Some anthropologists work closely with government agencies providing relief and educational resources to at-risk communities. And many anthropologists work in the business world studying corporate culture, user experience, design, entrepreneurship, and other facets of work. More than two dozen anthropologists work for the technology consulting firm Sapient. Anthropologists can also be found working at Microsoft, Intel, Kodak, Whirlpool, AT&T, Hallmark, General Motors, and many other large corporations. They have been instrumental in developing many consumer products. For example, anthropologists helped Procter & Gamble develop the Swiffer floor mop and helped Adobe design Photoshop (Coleman, 2015; Flavelle, 2010; Pearson, 2015).

Archaeology has numerous applications. Establishing an archaeological record has often enabled native peoples to regain access to land and resources that historically belonged to them. Work in archaeology is essential to understanding the history of groups that left little record. Excavations such as the one done at the African Burial Ground in New York City (Harrington, 1993) give us insight into the living conditions of groups not well represented in the written record—in this case, enslaved and free Africans living in Manhattan in the 17th and 18th centuries. Such knowledge is frequently fundamental to cultural identity. Beyond this, archaeology has sometimes produced technical applications relevant to the current world. For example, in Israel's Negev Desert, in Peru, and in other locations, archaeological studies of ancient peoples yielded information about irrigation design and raised-field systems that allowed modern people to make more effective use of the environment and increase agricultural yields (Downum & Price, 1999).

In biological anthropology, forensic anthropologists use their knowledge of human skeletal biology to discover information about the victims of crimes, thus aiding in law enforcement and judicial proceedings. Other biological anthropologists focus on anthropometry, the measurement of human beings, and provide critical information to designers who make everything from chairs to spacecraft.

Although there are indeed many careers in anthropology, it is our conviction that putting anthropology to work consists of more than just people earning a living with the skills they gained through training in anthropology. Perhaps the most important aspect of anthropology is the way an anthropological perspective demands that we open our eyes and experience the world in new ways. In a sense, anthropology is like teaching fish the meaning of water. How could a fish understand water? Water is all a fish knows, and it knows it so well it cannot distinguish it from the nature of life and reality itself. Similarly, all humans live in cultures, and our experiences are normally structured by our cultures. We often mistake the realities and truths of our culture for reality and truth itself, thinking that the ways we understand and do things are the only appropriate ways of understanding and doing.

The fish only understands the meaning of water when it's removed from the water (usually with fatal consequences). If anthropology is not exactly about removing people from their culture, it is, in a sense, the conscious attempt to allow people to see beyond the bounds of their culture. Through learning about other cultures, we become increasingly aware of differences in the ways that people understand the world around them and of the many different social dynamics that underlie cultures. This helps us see the underpinnings of our own culture and encourages us to think creatively about our lives and about the social and political issues that surround us.

Applying anthropology isn't just getting paid to use your anthropological training. All of us do applied anthropology when we bring anthropological understandings and insight to bear on problems of inequality, education, war, violence, and peace. We don't apply anthropology only when we write a report. We apply anthropology when we go to the voting booth and the grocery store, when we discuss issues with our friends, and, if we're religious, when we pray. Anthropology provides no simple answers. There is no correct anthropological way to vote, shop, or pray. However, anthropology does inform our decisions about these things. Our attempt to understand other cultures and lets us look on our own with new eyes.

As noted previously, in the "Anthropology Makes a Difference" boxes featured in each chapter of this book, you'll find interesting ways that people have made careers in anthropology and used it to help others. However, you'll also find examples of the ways in which anthropology contributes to our

understanding of the world. Ultimately, our lives are more about how we exemplify the meanings and values that we hold than about how we make our living. For some, anthropology is a career, but even if you never make a dime from your study of anthropology, it will inform, enrich, and perhaps complicate your life.

ANTHROPOLOGY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: DISEASE, ILLNESS, AND SYNDEMICS

Medical anthropology draws upon social, cultural, biological, and linguistic anthropology to help people better understand health and well-being. It is concerned with the experience of disease as well as its distribution, prevention, and treatment.

Medical anthropologists adapt the holistic and ethnographic approaches of anthropology to the study of health and disease in diverse societies. Modern biomedicine tends to regard diseases as universal entities. However, medical anthropologists have found that disease and medicine never exist independently of particular cultural and historical contexts. Health and sickness are not just biological notions but fundamentally sociocultural and political-economic concepts. This is captured by making the distinction between disease, which refers to the biological condition of the body, and illness, which refers to the culturally shaped ways in which people experience sickness (Kleinman, 1981; Rodlach, 2006). Disease and illness in any society are influenced by issues such as subsistence systems, inequality, and the way the sick are cared for.

Anthropologists and, increasingly, medical professionals often look at disease through the study of syndemics. Syndemics occur when multiple diseases and social, economic, environmental, and political factors interact. The syndemics model focuses on understanding these interconnections and finding ways to attack not only the biology of disease but also the contextual conditions that help cause it. Rather than only focusing on individuals and their symptoms, syndemics also explores how other aspects of people's lives lead to the development and perpetuation of illness. Early work in syndemics by anthropologist Merrill Singer examined HIV/AIDS in Hartford, Connecticut. Singer showed that it was important for public health officials to understand that the problem was not simply the HIV virus but rather a combination of substance abuse, violence, and HIV/AIDS, a condition that became known as the SAVA syndemic (Singer et al., 2017). Singer's work in Hartford has been expanded to include communities around the world (Gilbert et al., 2015).

The study of syndemics shows numerous patterns of disease in particular social, economic, and environmental contexts. In addition to SAVA, there is VIDDA: violence, immigration, depression, type 2 diabetes, and abuse among female Mexican immigrants to the United States (Mendenhall, 2012); the chronic kidney disease and tuberculosis syndemic (Romanowski et al., 2016); the tuberculosis-diabetes syndemic (Antonio-Arques et al., 2021); the obesity, undernutrition, and climate change syndemic (Swinburn et al., 2019); and the hepatitis and mental health syndemic (Clementi et al., 2020).

Lauren Slubowski Keenan-Devlin (2014) explored the syndemic relationship between obesity, stress, poverty, and insecure living conditions among Black youth in Chicago. She found that poor schools, inadequate law enforcement, lack of employment, and financial insecurity had powerful effects on people's stress levels and waist circumferences. These effects could be tracked by measuring study participants' body mass indices and levels of cortisol, a hormone released in response to stress. High cortisol levels increase risk for depression and mental illness and lower life expectancy. Keenan-Devlin found that among youth in the South Austin neighborhood of Chicago, psychological stress, obesity, and poor living conditions are linked to metabolic and cardiovascular stresses that result in current obesity and also increase the likelihood that these individuals will suffer chronic health problems throughout their lives. Thus, these conditions affect not only the youth in the study but future generations as well.

Medical care and the provision of information about diet can play strong roles in reducing both stress and obesity among South Austin youth. However, Keenan-Devlin argued that neither of these efforts is sufficient. Breaking the multigenerational chain of stress, obesity, and, frequently, depression will require attention to stable housing, schools, and socioemotional support services that create belonging and interconnectedness.

As the example of the children in South Austin shows, it is often important to think about the connections between health and the degree to which people in different societies have access to resources such as food and water, as well as the goods and social positions their society values (Baer et al., 1997). Medical anthropologist and psychiatrist Arthur Kleinman (1995) noted that the body connects individual and group experience. Trauma caused by violence and depression caused

by chronic pain are best understood as personal experiences of broader social concerns rather than simply as individual medical problems. The implication is that medical ills are closely related to social problems. Effectively treating the first sometimes requires addressing the second.

Perhaps nothing has demonstrated the connections between culture, society, and health more than the COVID-19 pandemic. In the spring and summer of 2020, as the disease swept through the United States, people's vulnerability to it was determined in part by their wealth and the jobs they held. Wealthier people were more able to social distance, work from home, and protect themselves. Additionally, they tended to have fewer comorbidities such as diabetes or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (Reeves & Rothwell, 2020). Perry et al. (2021) showed that the pandemic wreaked havoc on vulnerable groups. They found that Black adults were three times more likely than whites to report pandemic-related food insecurity or unemployment. Those without high school degrees were four times more likely to report such hardships than those who had completed college.

The social effects of COVID-19 were further compounded by cultural and political factors. Republicans and right-wing media sources tended to minimize the severity of the disease or deny it altogether. This led to a linkage between individual behavior and political-cultural identity. Mask wearing and social distancing became public performances of cultural identity. As vaccines became available in 2021, the cultural and political aspects of the disease became increasingly evident. Although the vaccines were developed under a Republican president and some Republican officials urged people to get them, others and many right-wing media sources disparaged the vaccine and told people to refuse it. As of mid-September 2021, almost 53% of people in counties that voted for Biden in 2020 were fully vaccinated, but only 40% of those in counties that voted for Trump were. As the delta variant swept the United States in late summer and fall of 2021, COVID-19 had a far greater effect in U.S. counties that voted for Trump than it did on those that voted for Biden (Bump, 2021). Between June 30 and September 25, 2021, deaths from COVID-19 were more than five times higher in the reddest counties than they were in the bluest (Jones, 2022). This isn't surprising given that unvaccinated people have died at about 11 times the rate of the vaccinated and that state vaccination rates have been closely tied to political affiliation. As of mid-September 2021, undervaccination in red states allowed almost 12,000 preventable deaths (Pierson et al., 2021).

The work of medical anthropologists emphasizes the complex relationship of biology and culture and the ways in which cultural, political, and economic contexts shape health, sickness, and medical practice. As Keenan-Devlin (2014, pp. 146–147) noted, "Anthropology is uniquely suited to support community-based effort of transformation" and, because of its ability to use different research methodologies, speak across different professions, and create intimacy and trust with community members, "has a profound role to play" in improving health outcomes.

SOME CRITICAL ISSUES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

A major contribution of anthropology is to demonstrate the importance and variability of culture in human societies. The remainder of this book analyzes and describes various human societies and examines their differences and similarities in detail. However, there are several issues to consider before we begin this investigation. These include the nature of ethnocentrism, the meaning and importance of cultural relativism in anthropology, and how global flows of power, products, information, and people impact our cultures and our lives. These are issues that cultural anthropologists must always address, regardless of their subject of study or their perspective.

Ethnocentrism

Imagine a deaf person raised in a culture where music and dance don't exist. Imagine they come across a group of people with fiddles and drums, jumping around every which way. The deaf person might think the people jumping about were crazy. They cannot hear the music, so they don't see that the others are dancing (Myerhoff, 1978). Similarly, a person who does not hear the music of another culture cannot make sense of its dance. In other words, if we don't understand the patterns and rules of other cultures, then the actions of other people may seem incomprehensible. One of the most important contributions of anthropology is its ability to open our ears to the music and meaning in other cultures. It challenges and corrects our ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism is the idea that one's own culture is superior to any other. It is the idea that other cultures should be measured by the degree to which they live up to our cultural standards. We are ethnocentric when we view other cultures through the narrow lens of our own culture or social position.

FIGURE 1.5 ■ Ethnocentrism is the notion that one's own culture is superior to any other. It is illustrated by this billboard showing a famous advertising campaign



Dorothea Lange/Library of Congress/Getty Images

The American tourist who, when presented with a handful of Mexican pesos, asks, “How much is this in real money?” is being ethnocentric—but there is nothing uniquely American about ethnocentrism. People all over the world tend to see things from their own culturally patterned point of view—through their own cultural filters. They tend to value what they have been taught to value and to see the meaning of life in terms of their own culturally defined purposes. For example, people in the New Guinea Highlands understood the world of conscious beings to be composed of themselves, their allies, their enemies, and spirits, including ancestors, gods, and other figures. When they first encountered European outsiders in the 1930s, they rapidly classified them as spirits and believed that the dark-skinned carriers who accompanied them were their dead relatives. They quickly realized their mistake, but initially, this was the only way that they could make sense of what they were seeing (Connolly & Anderson, 1987, pp. 36–37).

Although most peoples are ethnocentric, the ethnocentrism of wealthy and powerful societies has had greater consequences than that of smaller, less technologically advanced, and more geographically isolated peoples. For example, the historical circumstances that led to the spread of Western culture gave many of its members a strong belief in its superiority to all others. Westerners have been in a position to impose their beliefs and practices on other peoples because of their wealth and their superior military technology. It may matter little, for example, to the average Frenchman if the Dogon (an ethnic group in the African nation Mali) believe that their way of life and beliefs are superior to those of the French. The Dogon have little ability to affect events in France. However, it mattered a great deal to the Dogon that the French believed that their way of life and beliefs were superior. The French colonized Mali and imposed their beliefs and institutions on its people.

Although ethnocentrism gets in the way of understanding other people, a group's belief in the superiority of its way of life may help bind its members together and help them to perpetuate their values. When people no longer believe in their way of life, they may experience anomie, a condition where social and moral norms are absent or confused. This results in great emotional stress, and those who suffer it may even lose interest in living. Such people may be rapidly absorbed by other groups and their culture lost. Anomie may happen under conditions of invasion, colonialism, genocide, and racism.

To the extent that ethnocentrism prevents building bridges between cultures, however, it is maladaptive. When one culture is motivated by ethnocentrism to trespass on another, the harm done can be enormous. It is but a short step from this kind of ethnocentrism to **racism**—beliefs, actions, and patterns of social organization that exclude individuals and groups from the equal exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms based on perceived biological differences. The transformation from ethnocentrism to racism underlies much of the structural inequality that characterizes modern history.

Anthropology and Cultural Relativism

Anthropology helps us understand peoples whose ways of life are different from our own but with whom we share a common human destiny. However, we can never understand a people's behavior if we insist on judging it first. **Cultural relativism** is the idea that a people's values and customs must be understood in terms of the culture to which they belong. Cultural relativists maintain that to understand the logic and dynamics of other cultures, anthropologists must suspend judgment of them. Researchers who view the actions of other people simply in terms of the degree to which they correspond to the observers' notions of right and wrong systematically distort the cultures they study.

Cultural relativism is a fundamental research tool of anthropology. It is distinct from moral relativism—the notion that because no universal standard of behavior exists, people should not judge behaviors as good or evil. Anthropological methods require researchers to suspend judgment but not to dispense with it entirely. There are many things that should offend us. Slavery, genocide, human sacrifice, and racism are all cultural practices. Anthropologists are not required to approve of them to study them. However, it is possible to understand other cultures without believing that their practices are good. Anthropologists insist that every culture has a logic that makes sense to its members. It is our job to understand that logic, even if we do not approve of it or wish that culture for ourselves.

Using the anthropological technique of cultural relativism helps us to see that our own culture is only one design for living among the many in the history of humankind. We can see that our culture came into being under a particular set of historical circumstances. It is not the inevitable result of human social evolution. Understanding this provides a much-needed corrective for ethnocentrism.

From its beginnings, anthropology held a dual promise: contributing to the understanding of human diversity and providing a cultural critique of our own society (Marcus & Fischer, 1986). By becoming aware of cultural alternatives, we are better able to see ourselves as others see us and to use that knowledge to make constructive changes in our society. Through looking at the “other,” we come to understand ourselves.

ETHNOGRAPHY THE NACIREMA

Anthropologists have become so familiar with the diversity of ways different peoples behave that they are not usually surprised by even the most exotic customs. However, the magical beliefs and practices of the Nacirema present such unusual aspects that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go. The Nacirema are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumara of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east.

Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy, but Naciremans spend a considerable portion of the day in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the people. Such a concern is certainly not unusual, but its ceremonial aspects and associated philosophy are unique.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and has a natural tendency to debility and disease. People's only hope is to avert these through the use of ritual and ceremony, and every family unit has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The rituals associated with the shrine are secret and are normally discussed only with children and only when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to establish sufficient rapport with the natives to examine these shrines and to have the rituals described to me.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest built into the wall in which are kept the many charms and magical potions no native believes they could live without. These preparations are secured from medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts.

Beneath the charm box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows their head before the charm box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of purification. The holy waters are secured from the water temple of the community, where priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.

The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Each day, Naciremans perform a complex set of rituals devoted to the mouth. Were it not for these rituals, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them.

In addition to daily mouth rites, the people seek out a “holy mouth man” once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, pokers, probes, and prods. The use of these objects in the exorcism of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. The holy mouth man uses these tools to scrape, prod, and cut particularly sensitive areas of the mouth. Magical materials believed to arrest decay and draw friends are inserted in the mouth. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy mouth men year after year, even though their teeth continue to decay. One has but to watch the gleam in the eye of a holy mouth man as he jabs a poker into an exposed nerve to suspect that a certain amount of sadism is involved in these practices. And indeed, much of the population shows definite masochistic tendencies. For example, a portion of the daily body ritual performed only by men involves scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument.

Nacirema medicine men have an imposing temple, or latipsoh, in every community of any size. The more elaborate ceremonies required to treat very sick patients can be performed only at this temple. These ceremonies involve not only the priests who perform miracles but also a permanent group of acolytes who move sedately about the temple chambers in distinctive costumes.

The latipsoh ceremonies are so harsh that it is surprising that sick adults are not only willing but also eager to undergo the protracted ritual purification if they can afford to do so. No matter how ill the supplicant or how grave the emergency, the guardians of the temple will not admit a client if he cannot give a rich gift to the custodian. Even after one has gained admission and survived the ceremonies, the guardians continue to demand gifts, sometimes pursuing clients to their homes and businesses.

Supplicants entering the temple are first stripped of all their clothes. Psychological shock results from the fact that body secrecy is suddenly lost. Naciremans who ordinarily hide their excretory act from even their partners and closest friends suddenly find themselves naked and assisted by an acolyte while they perform their natural functions into a sacred vessel. Most Naciremans are normally prudish, but at the latipsoh, clients find their naked bodies routinely subjected to scrutiny, manipulation, and prodding by members of the opposite sex. The fact that these temple ceremonies may not cure and may even kill does not decrease the people’s faith in the medicine men.

In conclusion, mention must be made of certain practices that have their base in native esthetics but depend upon the pervasive aversion to the natural body and its functions. There are ritual fasts to make overweight people thin and ceremonial feasts to make thin people gain weight. Rituals of cutting are used to transform virtually every aspect of the body, from noses to breasts, jowls, arms, even buttocks, and genitalia. General dissatisfaction with the body is symbolized by the fact that the ideal form is virtually outside the range of human variation.

Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has shown them to be a magic-ridden people. It is hard to understand how they have managed to exist so long under the burdens they have imposed upon themselves. But even exotic customs such as these take on real meaning when they are viewed with the insight provided by Malinowski when he wrote, “Looking from far and above, from our high places of safety in the developed civilization, it is easy to see all the crudity and irrelevance of magic. But without its power and guidance early man could not have mastered his practical difficulties as he has done, nor could man have advanced to the higher stages of civilization.”

The essay you’ve just read is adapted from a classic piece of American anthropology written by the anthropologist Horace Miner (1813–1993) in the mid-1950s. Miner’s essay draws you in as you read about the strange customs of people who at first appear utterly different from yourself. At some point in your reading, you probably realized that Miner is describing American customs (Nacirema is just American spelled backward) as they might be seen from the point of view of an unknowing but perhaps quite perceptive observer. Your first reaction might be to chuckle at the narrator’s misunderstandings and treat the essay as an example of just how deeply an outside observer might be in error about a culture. But if you’re a reflective person, you might also wonder if the narrator didn’t

present some fairly penetrating insights about the nature of our society. Clearly, the narrator has misunderstood some of the ways Americans think about bathrooms, dentists, and hospitals. But is Miner so far off in describing the American attitude toward disease, decay, and death? Finally, if you caught the joke early enough, you might have pondered the meaning of the quote that ends the essay: Have we really “advanced to the higher stages of civilization?” What does that mean anyway?

Critical Thinking Questions

The Nacirema do not generally see themselves as Horace Miner does. But an interpretation that makes no sense to members of the culture being described is not necessarily wrong. Outsiders may be able to perceive essential truths invisible to members of a culture. Given this, how do anthropologists know if their descriptions and analyses are accurate?

Many essays in anthropology have political and social implications. By drawing our attention to aspects of other cultures, anthropologists implicitly ask us to examine our own. What do you think the social and political goals of this essay are?

Miner’s essay was written more than half a century ago in 1956. Does it need updating? What has changed about American society and what has not?

Anthropologists and “Natives”

From the late 19th through the mid-20th centuries, when anthropology was developing as a field of study, much of the world was colonized by powerful nations. These nations often held ethnic minorities and traditional societies as subjugated populations. Overwhelmingly, anthropologists came from colonizing countries and worked among the colonized. British and French anthropologists usually worked among colonized people in Africa. American anthropologists often worked with Native American populations or Pacific Islanders in areas under U.S. control.

In the early 20th century, some of the most famous anthropologists, including Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, were women. There were Native American anthropologists, including Ella Deloria, George Hunt, and Edward Dozier; African Americans, including Zora Neale Hurston and St. Clair Drake; African anthropologists such as Jomo Kenyatta, who became the first president of Kenya; and Asian anthropologists, including Fei Hsiao-tung and F. L. K. Hsu. However, it was also true that most anthropologists were white men from powerful countries. This limited their research in important ways. First, since they were men, anthropologists often had few ways of knowing about women’s world or, sometimes, even perceiving it. Second, since anthropologists usually had the backing of governments or powerful institutions, communities had little control over whether or not to accept them. If the colonial government gave an anthropologist permission to work in a village, the residents had to accept them. Third, anthropologists did not have to be responsive to the political or economic needs of the people among whom they worked. Finally, because it was very rare that the people among whom anthropologists worked read their books and articles, anthropologists did not have to be sensitive to their concerns and had little fear of being contradicted by them. Although anthropologists during these times frequently did outstanding and enduring research, the conditions under which they worked inevitably affected their descriptions of society.

Things are different today. Although there are still plenty of men in anthropology, most anthropologists are now women (Ginsberg, 2016). Anthropologists now come from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Anthropology degrees are available from places as diverse as the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, Chulalongkorn University in Thailand, Peking University in China, Seoul National University in Korea, the University of Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania, and many hundreds of others around the world.

Sometimes, anthropologists face hazardous, life-threatening situations. But most of the time, they work under conditions of relative safety. However, they work in independent nations among people who can choose to accept or reject them. Many anthropologists study their own ethnic group or community. They, as well as outsiders studying these communities, frequently face reactions and criticism from an audience that includes members of the groups they study.

Anthropologists today must be sensitive to the political and social implications of their work. As contemporary social groups, whether nations or smaller units within nations, search for identity and autonomy, cultural representations become important resources, and traditions once taken for granted become the subject of heightened political consciousness. People want their cultures to be represented to the outside world in ways acceptable to them and may hold anthropologists responsible for the political impact of their work. Anthropologists must carefully consider exactly whose story gets told and why (Campbell, 2010; Faubion & Marcus, 2009).

Anthropologists have responded to these changes in a variety of ways. For example, most anthropologists have become much more explicit about the exact conditions under which their data were collected, their motivations for doing research, and the personal background and values they bring to research. Anthropologists from wealthy countries often work with anthropologists from the countries and communities they study. However, these changes have also added fuel to theoretical disputes that have long simmered in the discipline. Should anthropology try to be an objective social science striving to discover fundamental principles of human social behavior? Or should it be an interpretive art, engaged in trying to cause people to see and understand the realities of the lives of those who are different from themselves? Should anthropologists be somewhat detached observers or impassioned advocates? If the former, will the anthropologists' data and analysis be accurate? If the latter, will the data and analysis be trustworthy? (See D'Andrade, Scheper-Hughes et al., 1995, for a good exploration of this debate.)

We firmly believe that anthropology benefits from lively discussion of its role and meaning. The participation of anthropologists from many backgrounds, as well as that of members of the communities anthropologists study, makes the discipline richer and the debate more useful. There is time and space for more than one kind of anthropology.

Anthropology and Global Connections

FIGURE 1.6 ■ Port Blair is the capital of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Here it is in the 19th century.



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During the early years of anthropology in the 19th and early 20th centuries, anthropologists usually studied societies as if each culture was a separate, well-defined, and isolated unit. Books from this era often include exhaustive descriptions of individual cultures but contain only scant mention of the relationships between cultures. For example, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's *The Andaman Islanders*, a well-known ethnography first published in 1922, described people living on an archipelago in the Indian Ocean between India and Thailand. In *The Andaman Islanders*, there are 500 pages of

description and analysis of the social organization, ceremonies, religious customs, and technology but only one or two pages describing the connections between the islands and the rest of the world.

FIGURE 1.7 ■ This is Port Blair in the early 21st century.



James Davis Photography/Alamy Stock Photo

Even in the era when Radcliffe-Brown wrote, the Andamans were only relatively isolated. The British government established a penal colony there in the 18th century, and contacts between the islands and the outside world were well established by the time Radcliffe-Brown arrived more than a century later. Radcliffe-Brown did his work by interviewing people at Andaman Homes, an institution founded by a colonial clergyman that functioned as something between a prison and a boarding school (Mukerjee, 2003, p. 50; Pandya, 2005).

Today, the Andaman Islands remain remote from the rest of the world (Figures 1.6 and 1.7). However, you can fly from New York City to the Andamans on regularly scheduled service in under 2 days. You can book your vacation there through www.andamanholidays.com and stay at one of several resorts. You can join the Switzerland-based Andaman Association, and you can view more than 60,000 pictures from the Andamans on Flickr.com. This increased contact has not been good for all of the islands' residents. One hundred and fifty years ago, there were perhaps 5,000 to 8,000 indigenous people living on the Andaman Islands. Today, the total population of the islands is almost 400,000, but there are fewer than 500 indigenous people. One indigenous group, the Jarawas, remained more or less isolated until the 1990s, when a highway extended into their territory, bringing timber companies, tourists, poachers, and disease. Today, the Jarawa are the largest of the Andaman indigenous groups, but only about 400 remain (Sinha 2021; Stock & Migliano, 2009).

One of the most compelling facts of our world is that no place is truly isolated. Today, we are connected by lines of transportation and communication. Even more important, we are connected by flows of money, products, people, and information. Policy decisions, wars, natural disasters, fashions, and tastes in one part of the globe have profound effects on the lives of people in many parts of the world. Wars in the Middle East directly affect the lives of American servicemen and their families as well as the millions who live in areas of political instability. The consumption habits of Americans and Chinese affect each other as the price of oil moves up and down in dramatic swings. Styles in clothing in the West affect the lives of villagers in Asia and Latin America as corporations search for the cheapest and most efficient way to produce products. Migration has become so extensive that anyone living in a large Western city is likely to come into contact with people from all over the world every day. Conversely, individuals living in poverty in rural Africa, Asia, and Latin America are likely to have relatives living in large cities in the United States, Europe, or the Arab world.

These patterns of global interconnection have affected anthropology in many ways and changed how anthropologists work and write. As we saw in the case of Radcliffe-Brown, until the late 20th century, anthropologists generally focused on the particular unique characteristics of the communities they studied. Today, they are far more likely to focus on the relationships and exchanges between those they study and the rest of the world. Anthropologists rarely write works that purport to describe an entire culture. Even books that sound as if they might be descriptions of a single group emphasize global connections. Hillary Kahn's (2006) *Seeing and Being Seen: The Q'eqchi' Maya of Livingston, Guatemala, and Beyond* is a good example. It includes chapters on colonialism, how religious belief is connected to exchange with outsiders, and Q'eqchi' relations with their neighbors, the Garifuna, one quarter of whom have migrated to New York City (Kahn, 2006, p. 12).

The Internet, extremely rapid communication, and the relative ease of travel have all increased the connections between anthropologists and the communities they study. In the early 20th century, anthropologists spent days or weeks traveling to their research sites. Communication was almost entirely by letter, and the mail, if it existed at all, was extremely slow. Today, few research sites are more than 48 hours away from any major world city. Communication, even in quite remote places, is rapid and inexpensive. This means that anthropologists can be in touch with the people with whom they work with far greater frequency.

Rapid communication and economic change have politicized some anthropologists. Anthropologists have often worked with small, relatively isolated groups. These groups most often have little power in the nations that control their territory. Like the Andaman Islanders, they have often suffered enormously from increased contact with the outside world. They have been pushed onto smaller and smaller areas of land, decimated by disease, and exploited by corporations, governments, and even tourists. Anthropologists have responded by becoming increasingly engaged in political and social action. Our interest in defending the rights of indigenous people has sometimes led to activist research in which anthropologists work together with the people they study to formulate strategies to improve their lives and end their oppression (Hale, 2001, p. 13).

We explore global connections and relations of power in many places in this book. The ethnographies in Chapter 5, for example, indicate how making a living in today's world ties many people to others around the world. Chapter 6, "Economics," provides some additional background for understanding the connections among different cultures. In Chapters 7, "Kinship," and 10, "Political Organization," we examine the issues of global migration, and Chapter 9, "Gender," explores some of the new roles of women in a global economy. Religion and art, too, now have global dimensions, which we explore in Chapters 12 and 13. Chapter 14, "Power, Conquest, and a World System," describes the historical development of economic and social links between disparate peoples, and in Chapter 15, "Culture, Change, and the Modern World," we examine many of the problems and prospects that face people in both wealthy and poor nations alike. In addition, each chapter of the book ends with a feature called "The Global and the Local," in which we offer examples of the ways in which global and local cultures interact with each other; these sections include discussion questions about this interaction.

WHY STUDY ANTHROPOLOGY

If you're reading this book for a course at a college or university, and particularly if you are considering a major in anthropology, you've probably faced some strong questioning from friends and family members. Some may have known about anthropology and applauded your wisdom in taking this course. Others may have had no idea what anthropology is. Still, others probably asked you what anthropology is good for and what you hope to do with it. You might have told them that you want to work in one of the many aspects of applied anthropology or to become a college professor, but we think there are other good answers as well.

Some Honest Talk About College Majors and Jobs

Anthropology is, in most places, part of a liberal arts curriculum, which also generally includes English, geography, history, modern languages, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology, as well as other departments and programs. Some liberal arts departments have teacher-training programs. If

you want to teach middle school English, in most places, you will probably need a degree in English. Some liberal arts programs involve training in highly technical skills that are directly applicable to jobs. For example, geography departments may offer training in remote sensing, the acquisition and analysis of aerial photography, and multispectral and infrared imagery and radar imagery for use by government and businesses. However, most liberal arts programs produce generalists. An undergraduate degree in psychology does not generally get you a job as a psychologist. Most people who study political science do not go on to be politicians, and few who study sociology go on to work as sociologists. In fact, surveys consistently find that only about 30% of college graduates have jobs that are closely connected with their college major (Abel & Deitz, 2015). For example, a survey of 3,000 alumni from the University of Virginia School of Arts and Sciences found that 70% of respondents reported that there was little such connection. And this survey included many who had majored in subjects that taught very specific technical skills (University of Virginia, 2008). Even more surprising, data from the National Science Foundation show that only about a quarter of science and engineering graduates hold jobs that are related to their degrees and that require at least a bachelor's degree to perform Landivar (2013).

Despite the statistics just cited, many private and public organizations look specifically to hire anthropologists. The U.S. government is probably the largest employer of anthropologists, followed by Microsoft (Wood, 2013, p. 51). Companies that have hired anthropologists include Intel, Citicorp, AT&T, Kodak, Disney, and General Mills, among many others. Additionally, there are numerous jobs for anthropologists in the public and nonprofit sectors, including positions in international development, social services, museums, national parks, and governmental organizations concerned with national security. In a 2015 article by George Anders in the business magazine *Forbes* titled “That ‘Useless’ Liberal Arts Degree Has Become Tech’s Hottest Ticket,” the chief information officer at a major tech firm argues that technical brilliance is not enough; firms need people who understand culture and processes. A recently published study by Harvard professor David J. Deming (2017) demonstrates that jobs requiring an understanding of social interaction grew rapidly between 1980 and 2012, while the number of less socially informed jobs shrank. Culture, process, and social interaction are skills at which anthropology students excel.

However, like students with other majors, most anthropology graduates go on to more general positions in government, business, and the professions. Some become executives at large corporations, some are restaurateurs, some are lawyers, some are doctors, some are social service workers, some sell insurance, some are government officials, some are diplomats, and, no doubt, some may struggle financially and have to work at entry-level or temporary positions. And you could say the same for the vast majority of students majoring in most subjects.

Asking Better Questions

To refocus our question about the use of anthropology, we might ask the following: What are the particular ways of thought that anthropology courses develop and that apply to the very broad range of occupations that anthropologists follow? How is anthropology different from other social science disciplines? Although there are certainly many ways to answer these questions, it seems to us that three are of particular importance.

First, anthropology is the university discipline that focuses on understanding other groups of people. This focus on culture is one of the most valuable contributions anthropology can make to our ability to understand our world and to analyze and solve problems.

Although the United States has always been an ethnically and culturally diverse place, for most of the 20th century, the reins of wealth and power were held by a dominant group: white Protestant men of northern European ancestry. Members of other groups did sometimes become rich, and there were certainly many poor white Protestants. However, wealthy white Protestants held the majority of positions of influence and power in U.S. society, including executive positions at most large corporations, high political offices at both state and national levels, and seats on the judiciary. As a result, if you happened to be born white, Protestant, and male, you had an advantage. Of course, you might inherit great wealth. But, even if (as was far more likely) you were the son of a factory hand or a shopkeeper, you were a representative of the dominant culture. The ways of the powerful were, more or less, your ways. If members of other cultural groups wanted to speak with you, do business with you, or participate in public and civic affairs with you, they had to learn to do so on your terms—not theirs. They not only had to learn to speak English but also

had to learn the forms of address, body language, clothing, manners, and so on appropriate to their role in your culture. Because others had to do the work of changing their behavior, you were probably almost completely unaware of this disparity and accepted it simply as the way things are. *Miami Herald* columnist Leonard Pitts (2009) has pointed out that “if affirmative action is defined as giving preferential treatment on the basis of gender or race, then no one in this country has received more than white men” (p. 214). This is true whether or not such men wanted preference or realized they were getting it.

White, Protestant, northern European men still control most of the wealth in the United States. However, by the late 20th century, their virtual monopoly on power had begun to break up. Members of minority groups have moved to stronger economic and political positions. According to census data, in 2000, people who identify as white made up 69% of the U.S. population. By 2010, that number had dropped to 64%, and in the 2020 census, only 58% of the population said they were white (Tavernise & Gebeloff, 2021). Moreover, the United States increasingly exists in a world filled with powerful nations with very different histories and traditions. It is less and less a world where everyone wants to do business with the United States and is willing to do so on American terms. Instead, it is a rapidly globalizing world characterized by corporations with headquarters and workforces spread across the globe by international institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization; and by capital and information flows that cross cultural boundaries in milliseconds. Americans who wish to understand and operate effectively in such a world must learn other cultures and other ways; failure to do so puts them at a distinct disadvantage.

Some of the most important lessons anthropology has to teach concern the idea of race. Biological anthropology shows that humanity is composed of a single race. Biological differences between individual people are very small, and no agreed-upon scientific way of dividing humans into biological races has ever been found. Races are aspects of history and culture rather than of biology. These ideas are explored fully in Chapter 9 on race and ethnicity.

At home, the United States is once again a nation of immigrants. In 2018, the United States had about 44.7 million foreign-born residents, more than 13% of the total population (Frey, 2019; Figure 1.8). Until the late 20th century, most immigrants were cut off from their homelands by politics and by the expense and difficulty of communication. Under these conditions, assimilation to the dominant American culture was essential. Although politics may sometimes prevent truly free communication, today’s immigrants can, in most cases, communicate freely and inexpensively with family and friends in their homelands and may be able to travel back and forth regularly. Thus, complete assimilation is far less necessary or desirable.

FIGURE 1.8 ■ The United States is a nation of immigrants. In 2018, the United States had about 44.7 million foreign-born residents, more than 13% of the total population. Here, newly sworn-in U.S. citizens celebrate in Lowell, Massachusetts, in January



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Some people may applaud multiculturalism; others may bemoan what they feel is the passing of the “American” way of life. What no one can dispute is that the world of today is vastly different from the world of 1950. Given the increasing integration of economic systems, the declining costs of communication and transportation, and the rising economic power of China and other nations, we can be sure that people of different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds will meet more and more frequently in arenas where none has clear economic and cultural dominance. Thus, an understanding of the nature of culture and knowledge of the basic tools that scholars have devised to analyze it are essential, and anthropology is the place to get them.

In addition to this very practical application, there is a more philosophical concern. Like scholars in many other disciplines, anthropologists grapple with the question of what it means to be a human being. However, they bring some unique tools to bear upon this issue. Within anthropology, we can look for the answer to this question in two seemingly mutually exclusive ways. We can look at culture as simply the sum of everything that humans have done, thought, created, and believed. In a sense, as individual humans, we are heirs to the totality of the cultural practices and experiences humans have ever had. Anthropology is the discipline that attempts to observe, collect, record, and understand the full range of human culture and experience. Through anthropology, we know the great variety of forms that cultures can take. We know the huge variation in social organization, belief systems, production, and family structure that is found in human society. This gives us insight into both the plasticity of human society as well as the limits to variation. It shows humanity as capable of great works of art and intellect, but also of horror and violence.

Alternatively, we can answer the question by ignoring the variability of human culture and focusing on the characteristics that all cultures share. In the 1940s, George Murdock listed 77 characteristics that he believed were common to all cultures. These included such things as dream interpretation, incest taboos, inheritance rules, and religious rituals. More recent authors (Antweiler, 2016; Brown, 1991) have developed other lists and analyses. Brown (1991, p. 143) notes that human universals are very diverse, and there is likely no single explanation for them. However, thinking about such commonalities among cultures may guide us in our attempt to understand human nature.

Finally, a third interest of anthropologists is in creating new and useful ways to think about culture. One particularly effective way to understand culture is to think of it as a set of answers to a particular problem: How does a group of human beings survive together in the world? In other words, culture is a set of behaviors, beliefs, understandings, objects, and ways of interacting that enable a group to survive with greater or lesser success and greater or lesser longevity. At some level, all human societies must answer the question of how to survive together in the world, and to some degree, each culture is a different answer to it.

In the world today and in our own society, we face extraordinary problems: hunger, poverty, inequality, violence between groups, violence within families, drug addiction, pollution, crime. The list is long. However, we are not the only people in the world ever to have faced problems. At some level, all these problems are the result of our attempt to live together as a group on this planet. Learning how other peoples in other places, and perhaps at other times as well, solved or failed to solve their problems may give us the insight to solve our own; we might learn lessons, both positive and negative, from their cultural experiences.

In some ways, the cultures of today are unique. Societies have never been as large and interconnected as many are today. They have never had the wealth that many societies have today. They have never had the levels of technology, abilities to communicate, and/or capacity to destroy that our current global society has. These characteristics make it naive to imagine that we could simply observe a different culture, adopt its ways as our own, and live happily ever after. We can no more re-create tribal culture or ancient culture or even the culture of industrialized nations from 50 years ago than we can walk through walls. But it does not, therefore, follow that the answers of others are useless to us.

In Greek drama, the notion of **hubris** is critical. It is probably best understood as excessive pride or confidence that leads to both arrogance and insolence toward others. In Greek tragedy, the hubris of characters is often their fatal flaw and leads to their downfall. Heroes such as Oedipus and Creon were doomed by their hubris.

We surely won't find that the members of other cultures have provided ready-made answers to all the problems that confront us. But to imagine ourselves as totally unique, to imagine that the experiences of other peoples and other cultures have nothing to teach us, is a form of hubris, and, as in tragedy, could well lead to our downfall.

The ancient Greeks contrasted hubris with *arete*. This characteristic implies a humble striving for perfection, along with the realization that such perfection cannot be reached. With the notion of *arete* in mind, we approach the study of anthropology cheerfully and with a degree of optimism. From anthropology, we hope to learn new ways of analyzing, understanding, celebrating, and coming to terms with the enormous variations in human cultural behavior. We hope to be able to think creatively about what it means to be human beings and to use what we learn to provide insight into the issues, problems, and possibilities of our own culture. We hope that, with the help of such understanding, we will leave the world a better place than we found it.

THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL: THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF VIOLENCE

The holistic approach of anthropology can help us understand violence. To what extent is it simply part of human nature, and to what extent is it a product of certain kinds of cultures? Have human beings always been violent, or was there an age when people lived in societies without it? Can we hope for a peaceful future, or are we condemned to ever-increasing cycles of violence?

There are no simple answers to these questions. Anthropologists, political philosophers, and others have sometimes imagined that people in early human societies led a peaceful, almost utopian existence. At other times, they have imagined such societies as a struggle of all against all: a constant battle for survival in which violence against nonfamily and nongroup members was the rule rather than the exception. Neither of these ideas seems to hold much validity.

There is no doubt that humans have often lived in societies characterized by high levels of violence. Further, violence is ancient: A recent analysis of skulls at a 430,000-year-old archaeological site in Spain shows evidence of humans killing other humans (Sala et al., 2015). But Dr. Nohemi Sala, the lead author of the study, also notes that finds at the same site also show that human ancestors cared for the sick and the dead (Gill, 2015). Caring and killing are both part of the human heritage.

Cultural anthropologists have often documented violence, and sometimes warfare, in many different societies. However, they have documented societies that have extremely low levels of violence as well. These include the Chewong of the Malaysian peninsula (Howell, 1989), the G/wi of central Botswana (Silberbauer, 1982), and the Yanadi of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh (Kumar, 1995). The Semai, a gardening society in the central Malay Peninsula, is one of the best-documented peaceful societies. Clayton and Carole Robarchek, anthropologists who have studied the Semai for more than 30 years, report that worldview is a key factor in Semai peacefulness. Semai see themselves as “essentially helpless in a hostile and malevolent universe” and believe that virtually all activities, even the most innocuous, are fraught with danger (1992, p. 201). In this frightening world, they depend vitally on one another, and anything that threatens discord or violence is understood as a threat to their survival itself. Although their society is peaceful, theirs is not a worldview that many would like to share.

More recently, Steven Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011) argues that humanity is becoming less violent. He claims that acts of violence, torture, and cruelty of all types, which were common in humanity's past, are far less present today. Pinker argues that the decline in violence is the result of a combination of factors, including the political dominance of large state societies whose governments monopolize the use of force, the emergence of humanitarian thinking in 17th- and 18th-century Europe, and the spread of commerce. Using a phrase from philosopher Peter Singer, Pinker talks of an “escalator of reason” that we use to discover that our interests are similar to those of other people, and thus, we develop empathy with them.

It is certainly true that public cruelties such as executions and animal fights, common in Europe in the 19th century, have become rare. However, many anthropologists are deeply skeptical of Pinker's claims. For example, anthropologist Rahul Oka and his collaborators have argued that the changes that Pinker documents are simply related to the size of societies. People, they argue, are neither more nor less violent than they have been in the past. However, the larger a society is, the smaller the percentage

of people who are involved in violence (Oka et al., 2017, p. E11109). Anthropologists Dean Falk and Charles Hildebolt (2017) make a similar argument, noting that evidence shows humans to be more violent than chimpanzees and that human violence remains more a function of the size of a society rather than the way it is organized or the beliefs of its members. There is no “escalator of reason,” merely a demographic effect.

Claims that society has become more peaceful must also confront many disturbing examples of institutionalized violence in our own society. There is little doubt that, in terms of the total number of people killed, the 20th century was the most violent in the history of humanity. New forms of mechanized warfare and new technologies gave people the ability to kill on a scale much greater than before. Much of the death occurred in various forms of state-sponsored violence, from warfare to famines caused by political actions. Even when physical violence is not present, state society includes the pervasive violence of inequality and, in many cases, outright oppression. The use of torture remains an important political issue. At a news conference in early 2017, then- President Donald Trump said that torture “absolutely works” (Masters, 2017), and Gina Haspel, whom he appointed director of the CIA in 2018, is widely believed to have supported torture at secret prisons in the 2000s (Shankar, 2018).

The idea that violence is an acceptable or even a desirable way to resolve disputes may be gaining ground in the United States. In a survey conducted in January 2021, more than a third of Americans, including almost 60% of Republicans, agreed with the following statement: “The traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it” (Cox, 2021).

Anthropology does not provide any easy answers to violence. Instead, it shows that both violence and reconciliation are very basic aspects of human and indeed nonhuman primate behavior. The sources of both peace and violence may ultimately lie in human nature. However, the ways that violence is expressed and the amount of violence present seem to be determined both by demographics and by culture. Humans will probably always have violent thoughts and desires. But we can hope to create societies in which violence is rare or, perhaps, even entirely absent.

Key Questions

1. Do you believe that humankind is getting more or less violent and cruel? What evidence can you bring to support your position?
2. The Robarcheks’ analysis of the Semai shows that their peaceful lifestyle is a product of both the way their society is structured and the worldviews they hold. What kind of social structures and worldviews do you think promote peace?
3. Do you believe in the possibility of a society and a world without violence? What do you think is the relationship between physical violence and less obvious forms of violence such as discrimination, inequality, and oppression?

SUMMARY

1. What is the definition of anthropology? Anthropology is the comparative study of human societies and cultures. Its goal is to describe, analyze, and explain different cultures—to show how groups have adapted to their environments and given significance to their lives.
2. In what ways is anthropology holistic? Anthropology is holistic in that it combines the study of human biology, history, language, and the learned and shared patterns of human behavior and thought we call culture in order to analyze human groups.
3. What are the five subdisciplines, or specializations, of anthropology? The five areas of specialization within anthropology are cultural anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, biological (or physical) anthropology, and applied anthropology.
4. What is the focus of study of biological anthropology? Biological anthropologists study humankind from a biological perspective, focusing on evolution, human variation, skeletal analysis, and primatology, as well as other facets of human biology.

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5. What is the focus of study of linguistic anthropology? Linguistic anthropology examines the history, structure, and variation of human language.
6. What is the focus of study of archaeology? Archaeologists try to reconstruct past cultures through the study of their material remains.
7. What is the focus of study of cultural anthropology? Cultural anthropology focuses on the learned and shared ways of behaving typical of a particular human group.
8. What do applied anthropologists do? Applied anthropologists are trained in one of the other subfields. They use anthropological research techniques to solve social, political, and economic problems for governments and other organizations.
9. For medical anthropologists, how do disease and illness differ and what is a syndemic? Disease refers to the biological condition of the body. Illness refers to the culturally shaped ways in which people experience sickness. A syndemic occurs when multiple diseases and social, economic, environmental, and political factors interact.
10. What is ethnocentrism and what is its importance in the study of different cultures? Ethnocentrism is the notion that one's own culture is superior to all others. Anthropologists find that ethnocentrism is common among almost all people and may serve important roles in society. However, anthropology also shows the problems of judging other people through the narrow perspective of one's own culture.
11. What is cultural relativism, and is it the same as moral relativism? Cultural relativism is the belief that cultures must be understood as the products of their own histories rather than being judged by comparison with one another or with our own culture. Anthropologists note that cultural relativism differs from moral relativism; understanding cultures on their own terms does not necessarily imply approval of them.
12. How is the practice of anthropology different today than it was 60 years ago? Until about 60 years ago, anthropologists usually worked in colonies or other controlled areas. "Natives" had little choice about participating in studies and rarely read works by anthropologists. Today, people often determine whether or not they will participate in anthropological studies and frequently read the works of anthropologists.
13. How have anthropologists responded to the increasing interconnections among people throughout the world? Anthropologists are deeply concerned with documenting and understanding how global economic, social, and political processes affect local culture throughout the world. Anthropologists have often been involved in advancing the rights and interests of native peoples.
14. What is anthropology's relationship to other university disciplines, and what sorts of jobs do anthropology majors hold? Anthropology is part of the liberal arts curriculum. Both the job prospects and the careers of those who study anthropology are similar to those who study other liberal arts disciplines. Anthropology courses develop ways of thinking that apply to the broad range of occupations that anthropologists follow.
15. In what ways is anthropological thinking useful in the world? Anthropology focuses on understanding other groups of people. This is critical because people are more in contact with each other than ever before. Anthropologists grapple with the question of what it means to be a human being. Anthropologists attempt to observe, collect, record, and understand the full range of human cultural experience. Anthropology presents many useful ways of thinking about culture. Learning how other people in other places solved their problems may give us insight in solving our own. Additionally, we can learn lessons from their cultural experiences.
16. What does anthropology tell us about humans and violence? Anthropology tells us that violence is ancient and part of our human heritage. However, peacemaking and reconciliation are also part of that heritage. Nonviolent societies do exist, and we can hope to build societies with low levels of violence.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Anthropology includes archaeology, biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, and linguistics. What are the similarities and differences among these approaches, and in what ways do they share goals?
2. The book notes that in some ways, doing anthropology is like teaching fish the meaning of water. Explain what this expression means.
3. Why is ethnocentrism so common in the world, and why is cultural relativism often extremely difficult?
4. Describe some of the ways in which the experiences of anthropologists working today are different from those of anthropologists working 50 or more years ago.

KEY TERMS

anthropology (p. 2)	ethnography (p. 9)
applied anthropology (p. 9)	ethnology (p. 9)
archaeology (p. 6)	etic (perspective) (p. 9)
biological (or physical) anthropology (p. 5)	holistic/holism (p. 3)
cultural anthropology (p. 7)	linguistic anthropology (p. 5)
cultural relativism (p. 14)	participant observation (p. 8)
culture (p. 8)	racism (p. 14)
emic (perspective) (p. 9)	society (p. 7)
ethnocentrism (p. 13)	