

American Anthropology:

Doing Anthropology, Defining the Discipline

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Consider:

- ❖ What is the general definition of **anthropology**?
- ❖ What is **holism**?
- ❖ How is Anthropology unique in its understanding of human behavior?
- ❖ Why is Anthropology divided into major subfields, and how are these integrated with each other?
- ❖ What are these subfields and what is their focus?

Anthropology and Fieldwork

- ❖ **Anthropology**—is the *holistic* study of humankind—searching for interrelationships along all the parts of its subject: Anthropologists all try to answer questions about the human species.
- ❖ **Fieldwork** is one of the things that attract people to anthropology as a career. It's important, but only partially reflects the 'holistic' nature of the discipline



Subfields of American Anthropology

- ❖ Anthropology is divided into *four* subfields:
 - ❖ **Biological (physical) anthropology**—focuses on humans as a biological species; includes human genetics, human evolution, the fossil record, non-human primates, and the biology of living populations.
 - ❖ **Cultural anthropology**—focuses on our ability to create ideas, behaviors, and technologies that are shared with one another (our culture); Culture is studied as a trait of our species.
 - ❖ **Linguistic anthropology**—studies language as a human characteristic; attempts to explain differences among more than 3,000 existing human languages. Examines the relationship between language and culture.
 - ❖ **Archaeology**—the study of human activity through the recovery and analysis of material culture. The archaeological record consists of artifacts, architecture, biofacts or ecofacts, and cultural landscapes. Also studies the relationships between artifacts and culture to reconstruct past cultural systems: also develops techniques for locating, recovering, dating and preserving fragile cultural remains.

Target Language

- ❖ *Species*: A group of organisms that can produce fertile offspring among themselves, but not with members of other groups.
- ❖ *Culture*: Ideas and behaviors that are learned and transmitted. Non-genetic means of adaptation.
- ❖ *Artifact*: Any object that has been consciously manufactured.
- ❖ *Cultural relativity*: Studying another culture from its point of view without imposing our own cultural values.

Concepts of Culture

- ❖ Culture is *learned*: skills and information learned are transmitted by those who learned them from someone else.
- ❖ Culture involves *concepts, generalizations, abstractions, assumptions, and ideas*.
- ❖ Culture involves *active learning*. Specific data and general ideas are *transmitted* from one organism *extragenetically* (without any direct genetic influence).
- ❖ Culture involves the presence of *artifacts (any object made intentionally)*. Artifacts may be concrete or abstract.

Language and Culture

- ❖ Language is a human cultural universal with a great deal of cross-cultural variation—over 3,000 spoken in the world today. Many will become extinct or already have.
- ❖ As with cultures in general, languages are related to one another. They can be arranged taxonomically according to similarities and differences. A common ancestor language can give rise to several new languages.
- ❖ Comparing similarities and differences in certain ways, we can even date the common ancestor of several existing languages, and draw a family tree of language groups as in Figure 11.8.
- ❖ Classification is based on similarities and differences among languages (grammar rules, phonemic inventories, & vocabulary). Examining these elements helps to understand the evolutionary history of languages.
- ❖ Because language is fluid, classifying and reconstructing it is difficult. Language changes rapidly and is easily influenced. English uses words whose origin come from French, Latin, Greek, Spanish, and other languages.
- ❖ *Historical linguistics* tries to classify and reconstruct languages. Words that are less likely to change with contact between cultures are used (i.e., words for body parts, numbers, and family relations).

Language and Culture

- ❖ Many English-speakers are familiar with the degree of linguistic variation in other Indo-European languages through language courses or having spoken it, but we lack an appreciation of the large variation among the world's languages—800 in Africa and 1,000 on one New Guinea island.
- ❖ Language is central to the success of a culture and the most important way we learn and pass on our culture. Understanding another language is to understand the culture it represents.
- ❖ Anthropology has forever sought to discover the relationships between a cultural system and the language its people speak. There have been many attempts to describe the relationships, and nearly all have failed. Language, like genes has specific features that undergo flow, drift, and mutation. Changes are random and not directly related to cultural adaptation.
- ❖ Words *are* directly connected to cultural systems. They name the categories people recognize and tell us how they view the world. Kinship terminology is an example.
- ❖ Grouping things according to a society's worldview is called *folk taxonomy*. *Ethnosemantics* or “cultural meanings” is the study of folk taxonomies. The words used for *snow* is often used as an example. The Shuar (formerly the Jivaro) of Ecuador refer to it by a single term as a referent to the Andes Mountains, also including the snow, the idea of high altitude, and “*the way it is up there.*”

Language and Culture

- ❖ Eskimo words for snow are legendary in anthropological literature, and thought to refer to different kinds of conditions of snow without any root word for snow. Linguist Laura Martin discovered that the root word exists, but it is difficult to ascertain because of *how* the Eskimo modify it. Snow is important and their folk taxonomies for it demonstrate this.
- ❖ Color terms are also studied and compared. There is great cross-cultural variation. The Dani of New Guinea only have two color terms *light* and *dark*. Western cultures have many, but these distinctions do *not* represent perceptual differences. The difference lies in the *cultural importance* given by each group to distinguish and name them.
- ❖ Number systems are another example. Our system is infinite. The Dani recognize “one,” “two,” “three,” and “many.” This too is *not* a reflection of perception or intellectual difference, but different cultural systems and differences in the need to keep track of a tally.
- ❖ Languages have histories and are related to the cultural history of a society. Hutterite society is trilingual, for example—English, German, and a unique dialect of their own.
- ❖ Languages also vary according to the social contexts they are used in. *Sociolinguistics* focuses on the way language differs by class, geographical region, gender, ethnic group, and social setting. Language is an intimate part of any cultural system.

Definitions

- ❖ *Cognates*: Words that are similar in two or more languages as a result of common descent.
- ❖ *Ethnosemantics*: The study of the meanings of words, especially as they relate to folk taxonomies.
- ❖ *Sociolinguistics*: The study of language in its social contexts.

Questions For Further Thought

- ❖ Consider another culture you are familiar with and imagine what particular responsibilities would be involved in studying that culture as an anthropologist.
- ❖ Because of anthropology's wide range of interests and its overlap with other scholarly disciplines, anthropologists have sometimes been characterized as, "jacks of all trades and masters of none." How would you respond to this label?
- ❖ Imagine that you are doing field work in a society that has a practice entirely antithetical to your cultural beliefs, but quite consistent and integral with *their* cultural beliefs. You can probably think of some real-life examples. How would you deal with this as an anthropologist and as an individual?