



# INTRODUCTION TO ANTHROPOLOGY

**ANTH 101**

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## H. What Is Culture?



### 1. What is culture?

- Culture is **learned**.
- Culture is **shared**.
- Culture is **ideas**.
- Culture is **behavior, action**

Culture can involve the way people dress, their food, language, music, games, what they make to trade, their laws, common religious notions, and/or their basic worldview (or cosmology).

**“Culture is to people as water is to fish.”**

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## H.1. What is Culture?



### a. Culture develops as a result of our natural human ability to imitate.

*Q: Where does our ability to imitate and learn come from? A: It evolved.*

**“Mirror Neurons”**

*VIDEO: NOVA Science NOW (PBS)*

A recently discovered system in the brain may help explain why we humans are so naturally social, and why we develop culture.

See also [the work of neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran](#).

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## H.1. What is Culture?

### b. Cultural Artifacts are:



the wide range of material human creations. These artifacts always *reflect underlying cultural values*.

This tension between material and non-material culture is realized in the balance between *form (design) and function (usefulness)* of an artifact.

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## H.1. What is Culture?

### c. Is culture unique to humans? No!



- [Chimps use tools!](#)
- [Great Ape Culture Finding Narrows Divide Between Humans](#)

*Jan 3 2003, NPR Morning Edition*

*“Culture = innovation, followed by social transmission”*

- [Ancient chimps 'used stone tools'](#)

*Feb 13 2007, BBC News*

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## H.1. What is Culture?

### d. Cultural Change:

#### Invention, Diffusion and Acculturation



i. **Invention** can be **accidental (unconscious)**, as with small improvements to the hand ax over thousands of years) or **deliberate** (as with the light bulb). **Discovery** and **innovation** are part of the inventive process.

ii. **Diffusion** happens when cultural elements **move from one culture to another**

iii. **Acculturation** is like **diffusion**, but **cultural power is the force that creates adoption** (as with the Native American experience).

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## H.1. Memetics – “Contagion Science”

-  e. Cultural ideas are a deliberative and potent means of reinforcing social norms, roles and institutions. Culture is determined by the ideas people share and act upon. **Today, the science of “memetics” investigates the nature of ideas in the context of cultural life.**

Nowhere better do “[memes](#),” or units of information, inform culture than through the internet. The study of [social contagion](#) is the study of “memes”.

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## H.1. Memetics - Contagion Science

-  e.1. **A “meme” is simply an idea that can reside within the human brain.**

Its analogy is the gene. Whereas the “gene” is the unit of transmission in biological evolution, the “meme” is the unit of transmission in cultural evolution.

**Gene:Cell-DNA**

**Meme:Neuron-Plex**

**What are the three principles of natural selection?**

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## H.1. Memetics – Contagion Science

### e.2. What is a Meme?

-  “a replicator that conveys the idea of a **unit of cultural transmission**, or a unit of imitation”

--Richard Dawkins

- or -

“**an information pattern**, held in an individual's memory, which is capable of being copied to another individual's memory.”

-- F. Heylighen

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## H.1. Memetics – Contagion Science

**e.3. A meme unit is the smallest ideas or (idea sets) that get copied completely.**



*Examples of memes or meme units:*

- Technology (fire, paper clips, cars, etc.)
- The first four note of Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony (“ba-ba-ba-bummm”)
- Proverbs, aphorisms and advertising slogans
- Songs one can’t stop thinking of (“earworms”)
- Internet jokes that are passed around
- Social norms, including mythology and religion

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## H.1. Memetics – Contagion Science

**e.4. Meme “vehicles” or “machines” are ways in which idea sets get copied from one brain to another.**



Meme machines always rely on human transportation and communication technologies.

*Examples of meme machines are:*

- Human signals
- Human speech
- Traditional Media: printing press, newspaper, radio
- New media: TV, the Internet, email, etc.

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## H.1. Memetics – Contagion Science

**e.5. Language (code) as cultural evolution**



Some scientists believe that culture and language evolve using the same patterns and principles as genetic evolution.

Genes are replicators that pass on DNA. Memes are replicators that pass on ideas. The best are all strong on:

- Fecundity** – speed of transmission (and amount of transmitted material)
- Fidelity** – accuracy of transmission
- Longevity** – life-span of replicator

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## H.1. Memetics – Contagion Science

### e.5. The Science of “Memetics”

Some scientists believe that culture and language evolve along the same patterns and principles as genetic evolution.



#### 1. Principles of Natural Selection apply

(the “evolutionary algorithm”)

- Inheritance = Invention: creation of new forms of culture
- Variation = Innovation: altering existing forms of culture
- Selection = Diffusion: spread of culture

#### 2. Memes are analogous to genes

Genes: instructions for making proteins

Memes: instructions for carrying out behavior

“Meme” is a shortened version of the Greek word “mimeme”, which means “imitation” or “mimicry”.

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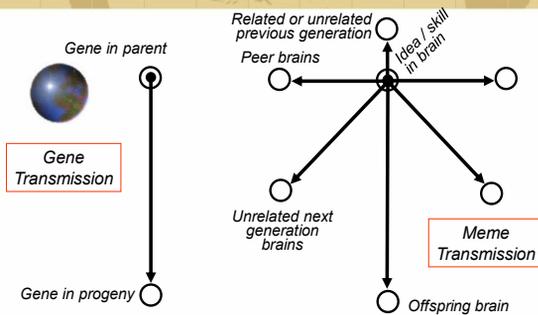
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## H.1. Memetics – Contagion Science




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## H.1. Memetics – Contagion Science

### e.6. Questions about the “memeplex”:



- “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via ... imitation.” (Dawkins).

*How do memes “leap from brain to brain”?*

- Memes “compete ... for space in our memories” (Blackmore, 1999) ... and form ‘co-adapted memeplexes’ that sometimes act like parasites ‘by propagating themselves at the expense of their hosts’ (Dawkins).

*What is an example of a “self-destructive meme”?*

- “Contagion” is another concept debated in this context .... (see A. Lynch).

*Can you think of a meme you have been “contaminated” with, which you don’t want influencing you (but nonetheless does)? What are the implications?*

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## H.2. Studying Culture: Ethnography

### 2. Studying Culture: Ethnography



#### a. Ethnography is the firsthand personal study of a local cultural setting.

"Ethnographers try to understand the **whole** of a particular culture, not just fragments (e.g., only the economy, family or politics)." (Spradley 2008)

- In pursuit of this holistic goal, ethnographers usually spend **an extended period of time living with the group** they are studying and employ many different techniques to gather information. (Watch: [first contact with the Penan of Borneo](#))

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## H.2. Studying Culture: Ethnography

### 2. Studying Culture: Ethnography



#### b. Early ethnographers conducted **research almost exclusively among small-scale, relatively isolated indigenous societies**, with simple technologies, politics and economies.

The cultures of **indigenous peoples** are increasingly **threatened by modernization**. ([Global Response](#))

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## H.2. Studying Culture

#### c. **Ethnographic Fieldwork** involves the researcher taking part in the activities being observed.

Ethnographers are trained to be aware of and **record details from daily events**, the significance of which may not be apparent until much later. **Field notes** are the traditional means of recording experiences.

#### **Ethnographic goals:**

**i. Achieving Realism:** The writer's goal was to produce an accurate, objective, scientific account of the study community.

**ii. Comparing Differences:** The writer's goal was to compare differences between culture in a non-biased way.



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## H.2. Studying Culture

### c. Fieldwork

#### i. Positives (Pros)

- Access the culture
- Determine actual behavior
- Develop rapport
- Biculturalism



#### ii. Problems (Cons)

- Language
- Lies
- Ethics
- Culture shock (*Malinowski*) (*Mars*)
- Witness effect  
(cultural/individual bias)
- Heisenberg effect  
(you affect what  
you are observing)
- "Going native"

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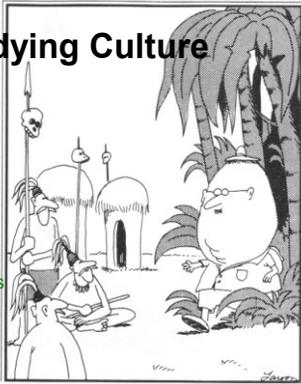
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## H.2. Studying Culture

### iii. Dangers and Difficulties

- Faux Pas
- Group Hostility  
/ Defense Reactions
- Poor Sanitation
- Environmental Stresses
- Health and Illness
- Civil Wars



Unwittingly, Palmer stepped out of the jungle and into headhunter folklore forever.

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## H.2. Studying Culture

### c. Three Generations of "Fieldworkers"

**i. Bronislaw Malinowski** (1884-1942) is generally considered the father of ethnography. He did "salvage ethnography," recording cultural diversity that was threatened by westernization. *Trobriland Magic* was one of his more well read ethnographies.



**ii. Margaret Mead** (1901-1978)

Popularized the insights of fieldwork with a book titled *Coming of Age in Samoa* about culture and sexuality the peoples of the South Pacific islands.

**iii. Napoleon Chagnon** (living)

Famous for his exposing the *Yanomamö* natives of the Amazon rainforest in Venezuela to the modern world. Controversy has recently emerged.



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