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Anthropologists study cultural practices such as widowhood all over the world. In all societies widows have special status, but there is great variability in cultural practices. During their mourning period, these widows in Papua New Guinea wear 40-pound necklaces. Thus, they are unable to bend and can drink from a spring only with the help of a bamboo rod.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS ANTHROPOLOGY AND WHY SHOULD I CARE?

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Nacirema

Specialization in Anthropology

- Cultural Anthropology
- Anthropological Linguistics
- Archaeology
- Physical or Biological Anthropology
- Applied Anthropology

Anthropology and “Race”

Why Study Anthropology?

Bringing It Back Home: Anthropology and Homelessness

- You Decide

THE NACIREMA

ANTHROPOLOGISTS have become so familiar with the diversity of ways different peoples behave in similar situations that they are not apt to be 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 Tarahumare 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.

Multiple-choice 1

True-false 1

Multiple-choice 2

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.

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 household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The rituals associated with the shrine are secret and are discussed with children 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 he could live without. Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows his 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 the 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, awls, 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, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay. One has but to watch the gleam in the eye of a holy-mouth-man, as he jabs an awl 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 vestal maidens who move sedately about the temple chambers in distinctive costume.

The latipsoh ceremonies are so harsh that it is surprising that sick adults are not only willing but 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. A man whose own wife has never seen him in an excretory act suddenly finds himself naked and assisted by a vestal maiden while he performs his natural functions into a sacred vessel. Female clients find their naked bodies are subjected to the scrutiny, manipulation, and prodding of the medicine men. The fact that these temple ceremonies may not cure, and may even kill, in no way decreases 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 fat people thin and ceremonial feasts to make thin people fat. Still other rites are used to make women's breasts larger if they are small, and smaller if they are large. General dissatisfaction with breast shape is symbolized by the fact that the ideal form is virtually outside the range of human variation. A few women afflicted with almost inhuman hypermammary development are so idolized that they make a handsome living by simply going from village to village and permitting the natives to stare at them for a fee.

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 ex-

Multiple-choice 3

Essay 1

ist 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 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.”

Multiple-choice 4

1.1: Writing Assignment: Challenge your students to write a one- or two-paragraph essay like the Nacirema essay. Most people will find this extremely difficult. Ask students to read their essays to the class. Ask them why such essays are so difficult to write.

The essay you’ve just read is adapted from a classic piece of American anthropology by Horace Miner. Despite being half a century old, it has lost none of its bite. The essay is good because it plays upon two critical themes that continue to draw people to anthropology: our quest to gain knowledge and understanding of people who are vastly different from ourselves and our desire to know ourselves and our own culture better.

Miner’s essay draws you in as you read about the strange and bizarre customs of people who at first appear utterly different from yourself. You’re titillated by the details of exotic customs of the other but also comforted by the scientific writing style that seems to assure you that somehow these odd practices make sense. At some point in your reading, you may have realized that Miner is, in fact, describing American customs as they may 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 misunderstand a culture. But if you’re a reflective person, you might have also wondered if the narrator hadn’t turned up some fairly penetrating insights about the nature of our society. Clearly the narrator has misunderstood how Americans think about bathrooms, dentists, and hospitals. But is the narrator 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?

Multiple-choice 5 Short-answer 1

Miner’s essay deals with some of the critical questions and desires at the heart of anthropology: How do we understand other people and actions that seem different, odd, or strange? Why do people do what they do? And, perhaps more profoundly, how do we go about describing other people’s cultural worlds, and how do we know if these descriptions are accurate? We will return to these issues in many places in this book. But first, a brief definition and description of anthropology: **Anthropology** is the scientific and humanistic study of human beings. It encompasses the evolutionary history of humanity, physical variation among humans, the study

of past societies, and the comparative study of current-day human societies and cultures.

A **society** is a group of people who depend on one another for survival or well-being. **Culture** is the way members of a society adapt to their environment and give meaning to their lives.

A critical goal of anthropology is to describe, analyze, and explain different cultures, to show how groups live in different physical, economic, and social environments, and to show how their members give meaning to their lives. Anthropology attempts to comprehend the entire human experience. Through human paleontology it describes the evolutionary development of our species. Through archaeology it reaches from current-day societies to those of the distant past. Through primatology it extends beyond humans to encompass the animals most closely related to us.

Human beings almost everywhere are **ethnocentric**. That is, they consider their own behavior not only right but natural. We often want other people to behave just like we do, and we feel troubled, insulted, or outraged when they do not. Indeed, part of our reaction to the Nacirema essay stems from the fact that the Naciremans seem to do things that are neither right nor natural. However, as the essay suggests to us, the range of human behavior is truly enormous. For example, should you give your infant bottled formula, or should you breast-feed not only your own child but, like the Efe of Zaire, those of your friends and neighbors as well (Peacock 1991:352)? Is it right that emotional love should precede sexual relations? Or should sexual relations precede love, as is normal for the Manganian of the Pacific (Marshall 1971)? If a child dies, should we bury it, or, as Wari' elders say was proper, should it be eaten (Conklin 1995)? And what about sex? Are boys naturally made into men through receipt of semen from older men, as the Sambia claim (Herdt 1987)? For anthropologists, these examples suggest that what is right or natural is not easily determined and that attempts to understand human nature and theories of human behavior cannot be based simply on our own cultural understandings. To accurately reflect humanity, they also must be based on studies of human groups whose goals, values, views of reality, and environmental adaptations are very different from our own. We can achieve an accurate understanding of humanity only by realizing that other groups of people who behave very differently from us and have very different understandings also consider the way they do things and understand the world to be normal and natural. One job of anthropology is to understand what actions and ideas mean within their contexts and to place these within the broader framework of human society, environment, and history. Anthropologists refer to the practice of attempting to understand cultures within their contexts as **cultural relativism**. It is important to understand that practicing cultural relativism does not mean that anthropologists believe all cultural traditions to be good or

Short-answer 2
Multiple-choice 6

Multiple-choice 7

Essay 2
True-false 2
Multiple-choice 8
Short-answer 3

Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own culture is superior to any other.



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to be of equal worth. People around the world, and indeed in our own society, do terrible things. Slavery, human sacrifice, and torture are all cultural practices. Anthropologists do not defend such customs on the basis of cultural relativism. However, anthropologists do try to understand how all cultural practices, even those that horrify us, developed, how they work in society, and how they are experienced by the people who live them. Both ethnocentrism and cultural relativism are examined in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Anthropologists bring a holistic approach to understanding and explaining. To say anthropology is **holistic** means that it combines the study of human biology, history, 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—as the explanation for human behavior.

Because anthropologists use this 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 people in human societies think about time and space and how they see colors and name them. They are interested

True-false 3

Multiple-choice 9

1.2: Discussion Tip: Photo 1.2 is “At the Time of the Louisville Flood,” a famous picture taken by Margaret Bourke White in 1937. The people in the line are waiting for disaster relief. Discuss the image with your students. What cultural ideas are included in the billboard image? What does the image tell us about ethnocentrism and cultural relativism? Could a similar picture have been taken after Hurricane Katrina in 2005?

in health and illness and the significance of physical variation as well as many other things. Anthropologists maintain that culture, social organization, history, and human biology are tightly interrelated. Although we can never know absolutely everything about any group of people, the more we know about the many different facets of a society, the clearer picture we are able to draw and the greater the depth of our understanding.

SPECIALIZATION IN ANTHROPOLOGY

In the United States, anthropology has traditionally included four separate subdisciplines: cultural anthropology, anthropological linguistics, archaeology, and biological or physical anthropology. In this section we briefly describe each of them.

Multiple-choice 10
Short-answer 4

Cultural Anthropology

Cultural anthropology is the study of human society and culture. As we have said, a society is a group of people who depend upon one another for survival or well-being. Anthropologists also understand society as a set of social relationships among people—their statuses and roles. Societies are often thought of as occupying specific geographic locations, but due to rapid transportation and electronic communication societies are increasingly global. Culture is the way members of a society adapt to their environment and give meaning to their lives. It includes behavior and ideas that are learned rather than genetically transmitted as well as the material objects produced by a group of people. Cultural anthropologists attempt to understand culture through the study of its origins, development, and diversity.

Change is one of the most basic attributes of all cultures and is clearly evident in any examination of recent society. Cultural anthropologists are particularly interested in documenting and understanding it. Understanding the underlying dynamics of change is critical for individuals, governments, and corporations. Many anthropologists study topics that have strong implications for this. For example, Scott Atran (2003, 2007) studies the origins and development of suicide terrorism in the Middle East, Caitlin Zaloom (2006) studies the ways in which technology affects the dynamics of stock and commodity trading in Chicago and London, and Michael Wesch (2007) studies the development of social networks on Facebook. Thus, cultural anthropology contributes to public understanding and debate about our promotion of and reaction to change.

Multiple-choice 11

Although most cultural anthropologists focus on current-day cultures, studying the ways in which societies change demands a knowledge of their past. As a result, many cultural anthropologists are drawn to his-

Multiple-choice 12

Multiple-choice 13**Multiple-choice 14****True-false 4****True-false 5**

1.3: Teaching Tip: Emics and etics present a rich field for high-level discussion. The book notes that the Nacirema essay presents an etic viewpoint (although perhaps not a very scientific one). Have your students discuss what an emic description of “body ritual” might be like. One problem that might come out of such a discussion is “whose emic viewpoint?” Further, is the Nacirema account truly etic? If so, how does one explain someone like Orin Scrivello, DDS, the dentist character in *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), who sings (quoting his mother) “You’ll be a dentist. You have a talent for causing things pain. Son, be a dentist. People will pay you to be inhumane. . . .” If you are not familiar with this song, search for “dentist song” on YouTube. You will find many versions.

Multiple-choice 15**Multiple-choice 16**

torical ethnography: description of the cultural past based on written records, interviews, and archaeology.

Ethnography and ethnology are two important aspects of cultural anthropology. Ethnography is the description of society or culture. An ethnographer attempts to describe an entire society or a particular set of cultural institutions or practices. Ethnographies may be either emic or etic, or they may combine the two. An **emic** ethnography attempts to capture what ideas and practices mean to members of a culture. It attempts to give the reader 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 tradition, such as ecology, economy, or psychology. For example, the Nacirema essay is an etic analysis drawn from a psychological perspective. **Ethnology** is the attempt to find general principles or laws that govern cultural phenomena. Ethnologists compare and contrast practices in different cultures to find regularities.

Anthropological Linguistics

Anthropological linguistics is the study of language and its relation to culture. The human ability to use language is one of our most fascinating attributes. Other animals make noise too: birds chirp and elephants trumpet, but human noise differs from animal noise in important ways. First, humans have a huge number of words and complex patterns that we use to put them together. As far as we know, no other animal has as large a language. Second, we form communities of speech. Different groups of humans speak different languages, and each has culturally based customs for determining what kinds of speech are appropriate for different social situations. Finally, although researchers have been able to teach other animals to use very limited humanlike vocabularies and language structures, the use of complex language is central to being a human being. There are no groups of humans who don’t use complex language. And, as far as we know, there are no other animals that, in their natural setting, do.

Anthropological linguists try to understand how words work in human communities. Sometimes they are interested in the histories of language. Sometimes they focus on the structure of language. More often they are concerned with discerning the patterns of speech and rules of verbal interaction that guide communication in different groups and in different social settings within a group. They focus on the social learning that enables people to know when it is appropriate to speak and what is appropriate to say.

Archaeology

A friend of ours once had a tee-shirt with the logo “All that remains is archaeology,” a pun that gets close to explaining what **archaeology** is about. Human beings in every culture make physical changes to their environment and leave traces of their activities behind them. In some cases these changes are large and easily visible . . . like New York City. In other cases, the changes are very small: only a fire circle, small objects of stone, remains of meals, and, perhaps, places where wooden poles were stuck in the ground.

One of the fundamental insights of anthropology is that, although surprising things may happen, our lives are not random. The things we do form some sort of pattern. Consider two simple examples. Every day most professors leave their homes and go to their offices. The vast majority of their possessions are in one of these places with little scattered between the two. If you were to make a guess at professorial behavior based on the distribution of professors’ belongings, you’d guess correctly that professors spent most of their time at their home or at their office. Similarly, if you were to look at professors’ homes, you would find that in most cases pots and pans are located in the kitchen and the books are located in the den. You might occasionally find a book in the kitchen or a pot in the den, but that would be rare. From this distribution, you probably would conclude that, in general, professors cooked in the kitchen and read in the den. These simple examples get at a central insight: the patterns of our lives impress themselves on our material belongings.

The key focus of archaeology is to look at the material remains people leave behind and to try to infer their cultural patterns from it. Understanding this is important for at least two reasons. First, most people probably have an “Indiana Jones” conception of archaeology. In the movies, archaeology is about collecting exciting or beautiful objects for museums and personal collections. Although it is perhaps true that every researcher likes finding a really beautiful artifact, archaeology is not really about finding objects; it is about interpreting their patterns to provide insights into the lives and cultural ways of other people in other times. Second, a focus on pattern provides a small moral reminder. Archaeological sites are a highly limited resource. Once they are destroyed, they are gone for good. Looters and amateur collectors disturb sites to take artifacts. The loss of the artifacts themselves is bad, but these objects rarely have scientific importance in themselves. The loss of the patterns is far worse. A site that has been looted or otherwise disturbed cannot tell us much about the lives and culture that went on there.

Multiple-choice 17

Multiple-choice 18

Multiple-choice 19

True-false 6

Physical or Biological Anthropology

Multiple-choice 20

The fourth subdiscipline of anthropology is **physical** or **biological anthropology**. Physical and biological anthropologists study humans as physical and biological entities. Understanding human biology is critical to anthropology because all human culture rests on a biological base. For example, we have highly accurate depth perception, hands with opposable thumbs, and the ability to manipulate objects with great precision. These features are fundamental to the making of tools, and without them human culture would be vastly different, if it existed at all. Anthropologists are engaged in an often fierce debate about the biological origins of specific behaviors, but no one doubts that our evolutionary history, patterns of health and sickness, hereditary transmission of diseases such as sickle-cell anemia and cystic fibrosis, and many other biological factors both shape and are shaped by culture.

Multiple-choice 21

Multiple-choice 22

There are numerous foci within physical and biological anthropology, some of which are very well known. When we think about humans as biological organisms, one of the first things we'd like to understand is where we came from, our evolutionary history. **Human paleontology** is a focus within biological anthropology that tries to answer this question. Human paleontologists search for fossils to discover and reconstruct the evolutionary history of our species. They extract biological and chemical data from ancient bones or from living humans to help discover the biological histories of humanity and the relationships among different human groups.

Multiple-choice 23

Primatology is a second well-known focus in biological anthropology. Humans are primates, and other primates, such as apes, Old World and New World monkeys, and prosimians, are biologically very close to us. We share about 98 percent of our genes with our closest ape relations. Studying these relatives may give us important insights into the behavior of our evolutionary ancestors. It is useful to keep in mind that although the 2 percent genetic difference between us and our nearest ape relations sounds like a small amount, it is clearly extraordinarily important. It is that 2 percent that, in some critical way, makes us who we are. We learn more about what it means to be not-an-ape, to be human, by studying our nonhuman relations.

Multiple-choice 24

True-false 7

Forensic anthropology, a third major focus, is concerned with using the tools of physical anthropology to aid in the identification of skeletal or badly decomposed human remains. Forensic anthropologists identify the victims of crimes, warfare, and genocide. Their work often is critical in bringing those guilty of crimes against individuals or crimes against humanity to justice. In recent years, several books, including Mary Manheim's *The Bone Lady* and William Maples and Michael

Browning's *Dead Men Do Tell Tales*, and television shows, such as *Bones* and *Forensic Files*, have brought forensic anthropology to the public's attention.

There are numerous other fields within physical and biological anthropology. These include the study of human variation, population genetics, and anthropometry: the measurement of human bodies.

Multiple-choice 25

Applied Anthropology

From the start, anthropologists have been interested in the application of their studies. Anthropologists such as Franz Boas contributed to debates on race and foreign policy at the turn of the 20th century. Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and others did studies aimed at helping America's war effort during World War II. However, in the first half of the 20th century, almost all anthropologists worked in universities. In the past 50 years, anthropology has increasingly become a full-time profession for people outside of academe. **Applied anthropology** is the use of cultural anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, and biological anthropology to solve practical problems in business, politics, delivery of services, and land management. There are anthropologists who analyze factory floors and decision-making structures for large corporations. There are those who try to determine the best ways to sell products or deliver services. There are anthropologists who work for hospitals and health care organizations, improving the ability of these agencies to serve their patients. Some anthropologists work in politics, performing foreign and domestic policy analysis for governmental agencies. Some are employed in trying to find effective ways to deliver aid to people in poor nations. There are anthropologists who work in museums and those who work on public lands, uncovering our archaeological heritage and both preserving it and making it available to the public.

Multiple-choice 26

Multiple-choice 27

True-false 8

Essay 3

In all of these cases and many others besides, anthropologists take the knowledge and the methodological skills they have learned in the classroom and through fieldwork and apply them to the real-world tasks of making money, providing better services to people, and, we would like to think, making the world a bit better.



Jerry Melbye

Forensic anthropologist Jerry Melbye and graduate students conduct a body recovery in San Saba, Texas.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND “RACE”

Essay 4

One thing that anthropology can help us understand is “race.” In the United States, most people see humanity as composed of biological “races.” Census forms, applications, and other documents ask us to indicate our “race.” Although “race” is clearly an important social and historical fact in America, most anthropologists believe that “race” is not a scientifically valid system of classification. Despite more than a century of attempts, no agreed-on, consistent system of “racial” classification has ever been developed. We have put the word “race” in quotation marks in this paragraph to begin to focus your attention on these problems. To make reading easier, we dispense with the quotation marks for the remainder of the book.

Short-answer 5

Multiple-choice 28

There are many problems in developing a scientifically valid racial classification scheme. First, most Americans understand race as a bundle of traits: light skin, light hair, light eyes, and so on. But, if this is so, the races you create are the result of the traits you choose. For example, races based on blood type would be very different than races based on skin color. However, there is no biological reason to think that skin color is more important than blood type. Almost all traits we use to assign people to a race are facial traits. It is hard to imagine a biological reason why the shape of one’s eye or nose should be more important than the characteristics of one’s gallbladder or liver. It is easy to find a social reason: traits easily visible on the face enable us to rapidly assign individuals to a racial group. This is a good clue that race is about society, not biology.

Multiple-choice 29

Multiple-choice 30

True-false 9

There are many other problems with racial classifications. For example, if race is biological, members of one race should be genetically closer to each other than to members of different races. But, measurement reveals that people are as different from others classified in their same race as they are from those in different races. Or consider people from Central Africa, Melanesia (islands in the Western Pacific), and France. Most Central Africans and most Melanesians have dark-colored skin. Most French are light. However, Africans are more closely related to the French than either is to Melanesians. This isn’t surprising considering the geographical distances involved, but it suggests that traits like skin color have arisen at many times and many places in the past. Furthermore, although the characteristics of our species, *Homo sapiens*, were fully present 35,000 to 40,000 years ago, a recent study argues that all current-day humans have common ancestors who lived only 2000 to 5000 years ago. At a time depth of more than 5000 years, all people alive today have exactly the same ancestors (Rohde, Olson, and Chang 2004). Thus, differences among people are very recent and unlikely to be of great biological importance.

1.4: Classroom Challenge: Who are your ancestors? Most Americans carry their father’s family name but acknowledge that they are equally related to both of their parents. The length of a genealogical generation is about 25 years. That means that a student who is 25 in 2010 had roughly 512 ancestors alive in 1785, 1024 in 1760, and so on. The student is equally related to each of these ancestors. Who were they? What did they look like? What were their lives like?

Multiple-choice 31

Anthropology teaches us that the big differences among human groups result from culture, not biology. Adaptation through culture, the

potential for cultural richness, and creativity are universal. They override physical variation among human groups. We explore issues surrounding race and ethnicity many places in this book, particularly in Chapter 11.

WHY STUDY ANTHROPOLOGY?

Let's be honest. If you're reading this book for a course at a college or university, what happened when you told your friends you were taking anthropology? Some certainly thought it was cool, but others no doubt said something like "Why would you do that? What's that good for?" If you're a traditional student (age 18–23) and you told your parents that you're planning on majoring in anthropology, they might have told you it was a great idea, but more likely they threw up their hands and conjured up visions of you moving back into their house in your mid-20s. So what did you tell them? Why should you major in anthropology or even take a course in it? Well, you might have told them that you want to work in some aspect of applied anthropology or you want to become a college professor, but we think there are other good answers as well.

Anthropology, in most colleges, is part of a liberal arts curriculum. The liberal arts generally also include English, geography, history, modern languages, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology. They may include many other departments and programs as well. Some liberal arts departments have teacher training programs. If you want to teach middle school English, in most places you 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, acquisition and analysis of aerial photography, or multispectral and infrared imagery and radar imagery for use by government and business, highly complex skills with very specific job applications. However, the vast majority of 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, survey data show that there often is little connection between people's undergraduate major and their eventual career. For example, in a survey of 3000 alumni from the University of Virginia School of Arts and Sciences, 70 percent reported that there was little such connection. This survey included many who had majored in subjects that required specific technical skills (University of Virginia 2006; Tang 2007).

In fact, both job prospects and the careers that people eventually pursue are about the same for students who study anthropology and for those who major in other liberal arts disciplines. Like the others, anthropology

graduates go on to government, business, and the professions. Some are 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 yes, no doubt, some still live with their parents. Any you could say the same of every other liberal arts program.

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

Multiple-choice 32
True-false 10

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, to analyze and solve problems.

Although America 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 sometimes did become rich, and many white Protestants certainly were poor. However, wealthy white Protestants held the majority of positions of influence and power in American 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 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 you on theirs. They had to learn to speak your style of English, the customs of your religion, the forms of address, body language, clothing, manners, and so on, appropriate to their role in your culture. Because it was others who had to do the work of changing their behavior, you yourself probably were almost completely unaware of this; you simply accepted it as the way things were. Miami Herald columnist Leonard Pitts (2007) 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.”

Multiple-choice 33

Although the white, Protestant, northern European male is hardly an extinct species in America (such people today still control most of the nation’s wealth), by the late 20th century, their virtual monopoly on power began to break up. In America, members of minority groups have moved

to stronger economic and political positions. Moreover, America increasingly exists in a world filled with other powerful nations with very different histories and traditions. It is less and less a world where everyone wants to do business with America 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 world, 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.

At home, America once again is a nation of immigrants. Until the late 20th century, most immigrants were cut off from their homelands by politics and by the expense and difficulty of communication. In this condition, assimilation to the dominant American culture was essential. Although politics will always be an issue, 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 on a regular basis. Thus, complete assimilation is far less necessary or desirable.

Some people may applaud multiculturalism; others may bemoan what they feel is the passing of the "American" way of life. What no one can really 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 a knowledge of the basic tools scholars have devised to analyze it is essential, and anthropology is the place to get it.

In addition to this first, very practical application, there is a second, more philosophical concern of anthropologists. Like scholars in many other disciplines, anthropologists grapple with the question of what it means to be a human being. However, anthropologists 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 total of everything that humans have done, thought, created, and believed. In a sense, as individual humans, we are heirs to the vast array of 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 cultural experience. Through anthropology we know the great variety of forms that cultures can take. We know the huge variation in social organization, belief system,

production, and family structure that is found in human society. This gives us insight into the plasticity of human society as well as the limits to that plasticity.

Multiple-choice 34

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 ritual. More recent authors (Brown 1991; Cleaveland, Craven, and Danfelter 1979) have developed other lists and analyses. Brown (1991:143) notes that human universals are very diverse, and there likely is no single explanation for them. However, thinking about such commonalities among cultures may guide us in our attempt to understand human nature.

Essay 5

Finally, anthropology presents many useful ways of thinking about culture. One particularly effective way of understanding 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 this critical question, 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: problems of 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 of 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 other times as well, solved their problems may give us the insight to solve our own; we might learn lessons, both positive and negative, from their cultural experiences.

1.5: Discussion Tip: Ask the class to brainstorm about the nonacademic uses of anthropology. Numerous resources are available to help you. The American Anthropological Association provides a film called *Anthropology: Real People, Real Careers*. Wadsworth maintains a website about careers in anthropology at <http://academic.cengage.com/anthropology/arc>.

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 abilities to destroy that our current society has. These characteristics make it naive to imagine that we could simply observe a different culture, adopt their 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 of 50 years ago than we can walk through walls. But it does not follow that the answers of others are useless to us.

In Greek drama, the notion of hubris is critical. Hubris probably is best understood as excessive pride or confidence that leads to both arrogance and insolence toward others. In Greek tragedy, the hubris of charac-

ters is often their fatal flaw and leads to their downfall. Heroes such as Oedipus and Creon are 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. Arete implies a humble striving for perfection along with the realization that such perfection can not be reached. With this notion 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.

BRINGING IT BACK HOME: ANTHROPOLOGY AND HOMELESSNESS

Most anthropologists would like their work to further a deep understanding of the human condition. But they also want to provide practical help that enables people to live their lives and do their jobs more effectively. They want to help find meaningful solutions for problems in our own society. The work of Vincent Lyon-Callo, an anthropologist who studies social services for homeless people, is a good example. Lyon-Callo hopes to understand homelessness but also to move attention on its causes to the center of American culture and politics.

Lyon-Callo believes that most homelessness in the United States results from a cultural and political philosophy that embraces the free markets and private initiative as the solution to social problems. He argues that most Americans believe the problem of homelessness can be solved through charity or services aimed at reforming homeless people, who are seen as deviant or disabled. This understanding undercuts attempts to see homelessness as a result of systemic inequalities, such as increasing unemployment, declining relative wages, and exploitation of workers. Lyon-Callo argues that by distracting action from these issues, the social services orientation helps to maintain homelessness.

Multiple-choice 35

Multiple-choice 36

Working in collaboration with community members and homeless people in Northampton, Massachusetts, Lyon-Callo promoted new understandings of homelessness. His emphasis on structural causes of homelessness, such as lack of jobs and lack of housing, led to the creation of a winter-cot program in community churches, a living-wage campaign, and new job opportunities for the homeless.

Lyon-Callo suggests that anthropological analysis can challenge routine understandings, raise new questions, and get people to think in new ways. He argues that in the absence of political efforts to transform the economy, caring and helping cannot themselves end homelessness. Anthropologists must work in public political forums to expose the connections between social problems, political ideologies, and inequality. However, promoting profound change is slow and discouraging work. Even those who basically agree with Lyon-Callo note that the current social service approach at least offers a degree of immediate hope for homeless people.

YOU DECIDE

1. Lyon-Callo promotes a politically engaged anthropology in which the researchers become advocates for their subjects. What are the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach?
2. Lyon-Callo's research focuses on a critique of American society, and the critical problems he identifies are very difficult to correct. Have you ever had a problem that seemed impossible to solve? Did you wish the problem would go away, or did you enjoy "digging in" and finding a solution? Is it fair to be critical of your society? Are you?
3. What are some specific American cultural values that underlie both the causes and the treatment of homelessness in the United States? How might an understanding of those cultural values help provide solutions to the problem of homelessness? Have you ever spent the night outside? Was it because you wanted to, or was it beyond your control? Was it fun? Were you scared? What did others think? Would you do it again? Could you live like that?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. The essay on "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema" by Horace Miner illustrates two critical themes that continue to draw people to anthropology: our quest to gain knowledge and understanding of people who are vastly different from ourselves and our desire to know ourselves and our own culture better.

2. Anthropology is a comparative study of humankind. Anthropologists study human beings in the past and in the present and in every corner of the world.
3. Anthropology is holistic. Anthropologists study the entire range of human social, political, economic, and religious behavior as well as the relationships among the different aspects of human behavior.
4. Anthropology is divided into subfields: cultural anthropology, anthropological linguistics, archaeology, biological or physical anthropology, and applied anthropology.
5. Anthropology stresses the importance of culture in human adaptation. It asserts that critical differences among individuals are cultural rather than biological.
6. Anthropology demonstrates that race is not a valid scientific category but rather is a social and cultural construct.
7. 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.
8. Anthropology courses develop three important ways of thought that are applicable to the broad range of occupations followed by anthropologists. (1) Anthropology focuses on understanding other groups of people. (2) Anthropologists grapple with the question of what it means to be a human being. Anthropology is the discipline that attempts to observe, collect, record, and understand the full range of human cultural experience. (3) Anthropology presents many useful ways of thinking about culture.
9. Learning how other peoples in other places solved their problems may give us insight into solving our own problems. In addition, we can learn lessons, both positive and negative, from their cultural experience.

KEY TERMS

anthropological linguistics
anthropology
applied anthropology
archaeology
biological (or physical) anthropology
cultural anthropology
cultural relativism
culture
emic

ethnocentrism
ethnography
ethnology
etic
forensic anthropology
holism
human paleontology
primatology
society