

## Chapter 2: The Concept of Culture

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### Learning Objectives

- Understand the differences between culture and society, as well as the differences and entanglements between structure and agency
- Explain the different elements of culture, including the differences between material and non-material culture
- Differentiate cultural relativism from ethnocentrism and consider the nuances within critical cultural relativism
- Understand emic and etic perspectives in cultural anthropology
- Know some of the ethnographic methods that cultural anthropologists use
- Consider recent shifts in anthropological research and how ethics factor into cultural analysis

### Understanding the Form and Influence of Culture

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The culture concept has a complicated history in anthropology. At times we have argued that it is central to our ability to understand why people behave in particular ways (attempting to understand other people's types of knowledge). At other times we have argued that it is too simplistic to capture the complexities of human action. As a term, it compresses a great amount of diversity into an imperfect shorthand. For example, the notion of a cohesive 'national culture' (e.g., Laotian, British, Ghanaian, Mexican, or Sri Lankan) proves increasingly problematic when set against the backdrop of world travel, multinational corporations, globalized trade, international migration, social media, and other boundary-crossing activities. Many people enjoy diverse choices of affiliation, or cultural membership, which might extend beyond the places and nations where they reside. The very notion of *cosmopolitanism* highlights how people build their identities based on a membership that goes beyond national boundaries (e.g., one might view themselves as 'citizens of the world', interact with and build communities in social media platforms such as Discord or Twitch, downplay their affiliations with a given country and by extension their fellow citizens, and connect with global brands or people important to their sense of self [Nike, Louis Vuitton, Instagram, Apple, Burberry, or perhaps Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, MrBeast, and so on]). Yet, others may derive great pride through their affiliation with a given country, its traditions, or its societal configurations of morals and values. How we think about ourselves, perceive others, behave appropriately, follow or break the rules, and so on is a complex, messy mixture of feelings, emotions, beliefs, and values that are shaped by material and non-material elements in and across societies.

In effect, culture is the most basic element of human society and encompasses virtually everything we know, think, value, or do. Even behaviors or actions that seem biological in nature (e.g., how people explore and conduct sexual relations or whether they decide to co-sleep with their baby) are shaped by our cultural beliefs and ideas of 'normalcy' in a given society. As members of a society, we learn our behaviors and ideas from each other and from the material and non-material things we create and use. In this context, **material culture** is what we make to survive, thrive, and adapt to our environments, such as clothing, technologies, weaponry, or some foods. **Non-material culture** refers to the elements that are intangible, without any shape or form, such as our beliefs, spirituality, norms, values, and hopes. While material and non-material culture can exist separately, they generally interrelate. We need to consider both to understand the fullness of the human experience. For example, going to college has material components such as books, buildings, desks, and computers. Of course, there are also non-material elements: professors' use of different teaching strategies; students' aspirations on what a college degree may offer in the future; the idea that education is something of value, which tuition costs reflect; following the agreed upon social norms of how one conducts themselves in a class; or a broadening of one's understanding of the world and the challenges others can face in their lives. Importantly, we may use material and non-material culture to transform and reimagine the societies in which we live.

It should be noted that while culture and society might be used interchangeably in regular conversations—'*That society is quite individualistic*'... '*This culture is more communal and cooperative than that one*'... '*Our society can be very consumeristic at times*'—they have different meanings and implications for our understanding of people. At a basic level, a **society** describes people that have organized their lives in groups, often (though not always) sharing a common culture and territory. **Culture** is a type of knowledge, not behavior. It reflects the way people learn about the world, and it allows them to generate their behavior, understand their experiences in it, and adapt to and change the world around them. As such, culture is rooted in the process of **enculturation**: how we learn and acquire our culture. Enculturation is knowing the rules established by society and cultural groups that may be taken for granted—that is, learning its norms, beliefs, customs, and expectations through various social interactions. You acquire the skills to appropriately interact with others through various types of individual or social experiences, whether such experiences are prosaic and common (e.g., going to the grocery store or hanging out at a neighborhood block party) or exceptional and extraordinary (e.g., being conscripted by a government to fight in a war or finding yourself suddenly out of work and struggling to make ends meet). This process of knowing how to operate within the boundaries of a society is what Pierra Bourdieu referred to as **habitus**, or the ways in which external forces, experiences, and interactions are (at times unconsciously) internalized and help form one's social knowledge and practices.

Of course, the learning process may be informed and shaped by people, things, and events that originate from other places and societies. Given the growth of transportation, international migration, global market systems, and telecommunications, our social worlds are rarely (if ever) fully contained within the areas where we live. Additionally, while societal norms, values, and expectations may exert influence upon one's behavior, we also see how people skirt expectations, challenge ideas of normalcy,

act independently, or overcome experiences of poverty, discrimination, or abuse. This tension between larger forces and individual will is what we often think of as structure and agency (see also Hays 1994). Whereas **structure** is the ways in which societal institutions or cultural systems and patterns may impinge upon or facilitate the types of opportunities made available to someone, **agency** focuses on people's capacity to make choices, creatively explore possible futures, and exert freedom over systems that may seek to constrain. Sherry Ortner (2006: 111) has argued that people commonly exist as *partially knowing subjects*, where "they have some degree of reflexivity about themselves and their desires, and that they have some 'penetration' into the ways in which they are formed by their circumstances".

For example, this is regularly seen in Thailand among agrarian households and with rural-urban migrants (e.g., Gullette 2019; Gullette, Thebpanya, and Singto 2017). A family working in agriculture may not know every state policy that seeks to move the country from an agrarian base to becoming a dominant industrial economy in Southeast Asia. However, they are at least 'partially aware' of how state support for agricultural communities has diminished over the years, how zoning regulations places farms in direct competition with expanding factories over water availability, or how agricultural work is socially held in lower regard compared to careers in banking, law, or education (see figure 1). Yet, families often persist and attempt to continue agricultural work, while at the same time sending daughters or sons into urban centers to find higher valued work and greater incomes, which can support families back home.

**Figure 1:** *Rice farming in Thailand can be arduous work that faces various challenges such as global downward pressures on rice prices and the need for increased fertilizers and pesticides to maintain adequate yields.*

Photograph by:  
Sirag Algaer.



We see that culture and societies are not deterministic in nature: people are not *automatically* or *deterministically* shaped and created by their cultures, the people around them, or their experiences. Rather, whether we consider agrarian families and rural-urban migrants in Thailand or communities of color in the United States that can experience forces of structural racism (an important issue taken up in the chapter on *Race, Ethnicity, and Privilege*), people are complex mixtures of larger societal and cultural forces as well as individual thoughts, desires, hopes, and feelings. People can escape political or economic

conditions that might seek to bind them or push back against societal expectations. Our environments and experiences do not have full power to dictate who we are or who we will become. What this means for anthropology is that the discipline must attempt to carefully define, analyze, categorize, and simply make sense of the diverse cultures and societies that help shape peoples' lives as well as people's creative attempts to integrate into, challenge, or overcome larger systems at play.

## Elements of Culture

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Given that culture encompasses virtually everything that humans do, anthropologists recognize the difficulty of discussing something that is both broad and specific. Yes, we all have culture, and we all share some fundamental traits: caring for loved ones, raising children, forming families, finding work, curing illnesses, or mourning someone's passing. Yet, a walk through a nearby city center that has different ethnic enclaves—areas that exhibit a high concentration of ethnic groups such as Ethiopian, Italian, Chinese, Hispanic, Jewish, or Vietnamese—demonstrates that we also have different ways of organizing our lives, building value systems, determining what's edible, figuring out what clothes to wear, and the list continues. There is a tremendous amount of diversity in something so universal. This is one of the challenges within cultural anthropology: to demonstrate that “despite differences in skin color, gender, ability, or custom... humanity is one undivided thing” (King 2019: 4).

How do anthropologists explore the universal underpinnings that bind us together, yet recognize the unique aspects of varying cultural groups (the cultural differences that set us apart and make us distinctive to varying degrees)? Generally, anthropologists recognize that culture is best conceptualized through a series of interrelated elements: culture is *symbolic, learned, integrated and patterned, shared, adaptive, interactive and mutable*, and *connected with nature*. Since each is central to anthropologists' abilities to understand societies and cultural groups, it is useful to more fully consider them in an expanded discussion. In so doing, we will also explore other concepts essential within anthropology.

### Culture is Symbolic

Our lives are shaped by symbols. At a basic level, a **symbol** is something that represents something else within a cultural system. We imbue meaning into a variety of items, pictures, actions, or words. The very process of writing this sentence is symbolic, taken further as you understand the patterning of these characters and the meaning conveyed within given words: *culture, agency, or structure*. Such words are culturally defined and stand for a set of ideas, which we generally share. The same is true for other areas of our lives. When someone sees the flag of a given country (see figure 2), it not only stands as a representation of that country and its people, but the *ideas* of being part of that nation-state (concepts of patriotism, sacrifice, community, belongingness, independence). When someone gives you the middle finger in the United States, there is (aggressive) meaning behind that action. When someone receives Holy

Communion in church, this can be read as a symbol of the body and blood of Christ (others may not view this as a symbol since the process of transubstantiation disappears the substance of the bread and wine to allow those items to become Christ's actual body and blood). Or when an artist attempts to convey feelings of joy, the macabre, isolation, or triumphant victory through color, shadow, particular iconography, or texture... symbolism surrounds us.

**Figure 2:** *The American Flag can evoke ideas of patriotism, honor, or the sacrifice given by soldiers and Gold Star Families. For others it can represent the promise of democracy and personal freedoms as they flee autocratic regimes; for those in Vietnam or Japan it might recall painful histories of war; for others it might represent legacies of slavery and the inhumane treatment of people.*

Photograph  
Joshua Nathanson.

by:



## Culture is Learned

Given that symbols do not need to have direct or natural associations with the meanings conveyed (i.e., symbols are arbitrary in nature [we might say *water* in English, *naam* in Thai, *agua* in Spanish, *mizu* in Japanese, or *wuha* in Amharic]), we must learn what symbols mean as we live within a given culture. This means that, as noted above, *culture is learned* through processes of enculturation and socialization, where we ideally improve upon cultures generation after generation. This learning can be explicit as well as implicit or unconscious (to a degree). While non-human primates and other species demonstrate capacity for learning and communication (e.g., Safina 2015), humans have a remarkable ability to learn new things, mimic others, and acquire the skills and behavior necessary to live within complex cultural groups. Starting at birth, we begin the process of learning the rules and norms of a given culture. By growing up and being surrounded by others, you learn through observation, direct instruction (“don’t do this, don’t touch that”), or unconscious awareness of what is taking place around you. Importantly, no biological restrictions exist that would prevent a Sudanese baby raised in Papua New Guinea from acquiring the language, skills, and knowledge needed to thrive within Papua New Guinean society and understand all its symbolic elements.



This process of conscious and unconscious learning continues throughout our lives. Into adulthood people learn new cultural systems, values, changing norms, and generally what is considered acceptable as a society changes. Lifelong learning can be seen in people moving abroad and learning how to behave in another culture. Or how you might need to learn new cultural norms and values as you marry someone from a different country or religious background. Or perhaps some older adults need time (and an extension of grace) to understand the diverse gendered categories advanced by the LGBTQ+ movement, where new genders might prove unfamiliar for those that grew up with gender presented as a relatively neat binary. Regardless of why someone finds themselves in a new or unknown social environment, people have the capacity to learn what is appropriate in that context.

### *Culture is Integrated and Patterned*

Another key aspect to understanding cultures is to recognize that they are *integrated and patterned*. Cultures are made up of elements and institutions that, in some way, logically operate to provide structure and organization for people and societies. In part, this is what theorists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown explored within their theoretical framework of *psychological functionalism* and *structural functionalism*, respectively. **Psychological functionalism** focuses on the physiological needs of the individual (for example, we all need food, shelter, or relaxation) and the way institutions emerge to satisfy those needs (e.g., grocery stores, restaurants, single-family homes, apartment complexes, or amusement parks). **Structural functionalism** focuses on the ways that sociopolitical and economic institutions are set up and interrelate to maintain a functioning society. Consider the ways in which legal systems, religious institutions, or educational systems reinforce ideas of order, norms, and values, which create degrees of societal order and cohesion. Regardless of which strand of functionalism seems more attractive for cultural analysis, each approach is grounded in the idea of culture existing as an integrated and patterned system. For example, a change in economics will likely facilitate a change in some other area of cultural life; a change in marriage systems or gendered labor will trigger a change in a society's economic structure and who enters the labor force.

To understand the interrelated elements of a culture, anthropologists often use a holistic perspective. Here **holism** seeks to demonstrate that you cannot study only one or two aspects of that culture given the entanglements among areas of our lives. A comprehensive analysis that draws on a people's history, culture, ideologies, biologies, environments, economies and so forth will ultimately provide a more detailed and accurate description of that culture.

For example, if a researcher sought to explore the causes and consequences of genocidal actions and mass violence (in Rwanda, Guatemala, Bosnia, Cambodia.... disturbingly, the list continues), holism in anthropology enables a fuller understanding of these events. By not only considering racial and ethnic anxieties that engender genocidal actions within a society, anthropologists might also explore other factors that exacerbate mass violence (e.g., economic anxieties, deep historical mistrust among peoples, interference from international actors that can destabilize a country, or social conflict driven by restricted

access to natural resources such as land or water) and the consequences of that violence (e.g., the formation of refugee flows, inability to effectively communicate for people displaced into another country, psychological trauma, weakened infrastructure, the spread of disease and infection among vulnerable communities, or the individual traumas experienced as loved ones were disappeared and killed) (see for example Barnert 2023; Farmer 2008; Suárez-Orozco 2019). Rather than examining only one component of a given event, anthropology's holistic perspective allows for a more comprehensive analysis of an event, past or present, by considering how it is situated within the broader human experience.

## *Culture is Shared*

An early debate in cultural anthropology was to what extent people shaped culture or culture shaped people. While individuals can certainly influence cultural trends or ideologies, the inverse can also be true as we noted above in our discussion of structure and agency. To what degree does culture exist within an individual's mind and actions or in the public realm, beyond a given person? Anthropologists largely argue that both occur. Culture is something that is shared among people within a group through countless interactions with those around us (therefore, larger than any one person and perhaps irreducible to any individual, or what Alfred Kroeber [1917] referred to as the **superorganic**). Yet, culture also exists inside individuals, where people carry it with them and interpret it, build from it, mimic it, contort it, or attempt to bend it to their will.

As a result of this complex relationship between individuals, society, and culture, anthropologists are careful not to give too much importance to one more than another. If culture only existed beyond individuals, then the idea of homogenous national cultures would make sense (those in Japanese culture are like this, people in Sri Lankan cultures are like that). We know this is not the case and there is a great amount of diversity in these larger cultural systems. Thinking about the United States, there might be some tendencies that people share as a national group such as individualism, but at the same time we have specific forms of shared cultural knowledge in various subgroups (what we term **microcultures** or subcultures [see figure 3]). Whether someone belongs to a microculture of Dungeons and Dragons, avid rock climbers, kandi kid ravers, or football tailgaters, those individuals will not only have the general knowledge of what the broader society holds, but they also share with other members knowledge specific to that subgroup (e.g., how do you create a Dungeons and Dragon character or how to avoid ketamine at a club). Individuals might help create or alter that shared microculture, but that culture formed through ongoing social interactions will also affect the individual.



**Figure 3:** *The multi-genre convention known as Comi-con has emerged as one of the more influential events where fans of comic book culture, science fiction, and other forms of popular art can meet each other, notable creators, and experts in the field. Undoubtedly, rules on dress and attendance should be known by those attending.*

Photograph by:  
Daniel Knighton, 2019.

## Culture is Adaptive

Compared to other species, people's creative and expansive cultural systems allow us to adapt to a variety of circumstances, address challenges, and build resilient communities. Generally speaking, other species need to undergo genetic evolution or developmental adjustment to be able to adapt to new environments or threats. While people experience evolutionary pressures (think of crowd diseases, ecological degradation, environmental conditions such as heat and drought, or any number of pathogens), humans also have culture, which can circumvent the unknown and undependable aspects of genetic evolution (e.g., Boyd, Richerson, and Henrich 2011). For example, while regions of the world increasingly face water shortages and droughts, under those circumstances a genetic mutation that increases the threshold for becoming dehydrated could be useful (that is, biologically we would require less water). Of course, genetic evolution does not work like this and just because something might improve our survivability, this does not make it so. However, cultural evolution allows us to adapt to new environmental conditions and other challenges: inventing new desalination technologies, developing rainwater collection systems, or harvesting water from humid air (see figure 4). By living in societies and sharing cultural knowledge within and between generations, we are able to live and thrive in environments that our biology alone would not allow. Cultural knowledge and creativity are fundamental if we hope to survive harsh tundra climates or desert landscapes.



**Figure 4:** *Given the challenges of increasingly erratic weather—including droughts and heatwaves—societies have pursued new vertical growing technologies that automate the control of temperature, light, or humidity for food production. Seen here is a hydroponic ‘clean room’ in South Korea.*

Photograph by:  
Gregory Gullette, 2011.



Furthermore, we use culture and the creation of social groups for protection, support, or meeting emotional and existential needs. Certainly, having people that you can turn to for assistance in times of stress or instability helps ensure one’s survival, but people need deep and profound connections with others. Culture, love, kinship, marriage, family... all contribute to our ability to contend with and overcome life’s challenges. Of course, anthropologists recognize that cultures and societies can cause harm and lead to **maladaptive cultures** (e.g., societies’ negative impacts on the environment are explored in later chapters). Historically, the early work of Émile Durkheim (1897) explored how societies experiencing widespread social change (then the process of industrialization) could lead to **anomie**, or social disintegration and a breakdown in values, norms, or standards. Here we think of **norms** as the (unwritten) rules and expectations for how people should act in specific circumstances. **Values**, however, are the standards that a society has on what is good and bad, right and wrong, important and unimportant. Values help guide the behavior of people in that society and are generally passed down from generation to generation—ideas of honesty, hard work, kindness, community, and so forth.

Under profound changes, people in society can become unmoored and disconnected, leading to instabilities and weakened social cohesion. The consequences of anomie can be numerous: social isolation, emotional emptiness, lack of purpose, anxiety, and suicide. Durkheim demonstrated that humans certainly have the capacity to create societies that can cause harm and trauma to many people. In a more recent investigation, Chikako Ozawa-De Silva (2021) considers similar dysfunctions within contemporary Japan. Here she is interested in exploring how societies make people feel unseen, uncared for, and unimportant, what she terms ‘the lonely society’. Of course, Ozawa-De Silva points out that such deficiencies in society—a lack of purpose, diminished relationships, or increased depression and suicidal ideations—are not unique to Japan. As noted by the Dalai Lama:

“We all need to be needed... the problem [in prosperous nations] is not a lack of material riches. It is the growing number of people who feel they are no longer useful, no longer needed, no longer one with their societies... This pattern is occurring throughout the developed world—and the consequences are not merely economic. Feeling superfluous is a blow to the human spirit. It leads to social isolation and emotional pain, and creates the conditions for negative emotions to take root” (quoted in Ozawa-De Silva 2021: 5).

Research such as this, or perhaps your life experiences, demonstrates that we create societies that can hurt and isolate. However, given the creativity and the good within human culture, we can also build inclusive and supportive ones, cultivating greater attention to empathy, care, and love for others.

### *Culture is Interactive and Mutable*

The early work of anthropologists recognized the creativity of cultures and the ways that invented technologies, economies, or social organization could transform a society. For example, Leslie White (1943) and Julian Steward (1955) furthered the field of **neoevolutionism**, which addressed how societies change over long periods of time and how unrelated societies could create similar cultural features to adapt to similar environments, despite being widely separated in geography. White was primarily interested in technological inventions and material culture that would allow for more efficient extraction of energy from nature (think of the different amounts of food hunting and gathering societies can obtain from one square mile of land versus how much food can be obtained through regenerative agriculture). Such inventions and adaptations would then lead to changes in social organization and ideologies. Effectively, the more energy a society can extract from nature, the more resources it holds to sustain greater numbers of people and develop different types of societies and political economic systems. While Steward shared similar interests in cultural evolution, his work considered how unrelated societies may experience parallel development in their sociopolitical and economic organization as they—independent of one another—creatively responded to the challenges of living in similar environments. For example, culture groups living in areas requiring irrigation and water management demonstrated a tendency for collective labor and centralized authorities, which might later develop into state-level societies.

Of course, many early anthropologists argued that traits, characteristics, beliefs, or technologies could also be transmitted from one society to another society, often as trade or migration brought peoples into direct contact or connected through intermediaries (this process was referred to as **diffusionism**). Ultimately, what anthropologists noted was that cultural groups interact, and cultures change over time (i.e., *culture is interactive and mutable*). Though such a statement seems commonsensical to us now, heated debates emerged between anthropologists and other social scientists on the ways in which cultures changed or even if certain “lower” cultural groups had the mental capacity for invention and could only change through the introduction of new technologies created by “higher” or more “advanced”

societies (such arguments serve as pernicious examples of racist ideologies people might use to elevate their societies above others).

Recent anthropological research into culture focuses on the entanglements that occur between cultural groups and societies. While this is explored in greater detail in the chapter on *Globalization, Migration, and Economic Inequalities*, it is important to note here that many forces contribute to societal change: internal and external forces, inter- and intra-generational struggle, economic integration into global economies, transnational flow of commodities and goods, virtual communities created on social media platforms, and the list continues. No culture stays the same and we vary in how we change and respond to the innumerable challenges we face. For example, how might the United States deal with gun violence, the disturbing rise of self-harm among young girls, upticks in the feelings of worthlessness among men, climate change and increasingly erratic weather, the opioid epidemic, or the increase in political divisiveness? Do we look to other cultures that have found some workable solutions and implement those within our own? Do we look inward and capitalize on the creative energies and experiences of the young and old alike? Do we attempt to work across sociocultural and economic differences in an effort to see how others view the world and our problems? Such questions remain unanswered; however, attempting to find answers and solutions to our difficulties falls squarely into the realm of anthropology.

### *Culture is Connected with Nature*

It is common to hear the phrase, “*That’s human nature*” or perhaps “*That’s just not natural*”. Each highlights the complicated way human culture intersects with and builds from nature. In some cases, people assume that there is a natural way of doing things and anything that deviates from that idea is somehow peculiar, unnatural. Yes, people certainly have biological urges and needs (such as sex, eating, and sleep [not necessarily in that order]), but how we meet those needs is very much shaped by culture. As noted above, whether someone co-sleeps with their child, this is a cultural decision. Should couples experiencing infertility use the science and technology of IVF (in-vitro fertilization) to have children? At what age of the child does a woman stop breastfeeding? What kinds of foods are considered delicacies? Why are select animals eaten, others cherished as members of a family, and some considered too polluted to consume? What kinds of sociocultural connections emerge as people share food with others (the veritable, ‘breaking of bread’)? People have basic biological requirements to fulfill, but *how* we meet those needs and the meanings behind those actions vary greatly from culture to culture.

In a classic piece of anthropological literature, Mary Douglas (1966) explored the cultural rules and values humans place on food (her work also has broader relevance to notions of social boundaries and violations of transgressing social orders). Specific to our discussion here, Douglas detailed how societies’ efforts to construct a world with order and strict social norms would require the creation of categories indicating what kinds of things (and people) are considered pure or impure, clean or polluted. Mapping that desire for a natural order onto food, cultures create taboos indicating what someone can

safely consume or create rules on ideas of food cleanliness (see figure 4). For example, considering the Jewish taboo on eating pork, Douglas traces the rationale to the animal classification system detailed in Leviticus in the Old Testament (see also Znoj 2022). Jews could eat, for example, fish with scales or ruminants such as cows, sheep, or goats. However, animals that did not neatly align with the classification system detailed in the Bible were considered unclean and impure. Though pigs have cloven hooves like cows or sheep, they do not chew cud and therefore do not fall into the 'natural' order of things, becoming sources of disorder and danger. The same would hold true for shellfish or eels since they lacked scales. In this case, despite biological requirements, human desires to create order in nature (and clearly mark our relational place in it) influence various areas of people's sociocultural realities.



*Figure 5: Where we shop and what types of food we consume can vary from culture to culture. Of course, perhaps you have shopped in markets like this one in Thailand, recalling fond memories of food and people.*

Photograph by:  
Gregory Gullette, 2022.

## Cultural Relativism, Ethnocentrism, and the Process of Othering

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In Charles King's (2019) analysis of the beginnings of American Anthropology—through considerations of scholars such as Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Zora Neal Hurston, Alfred Kroeber, and Ruth Benedict—he noted the challenges anthropologists faced when they attempted to explain the world differently, in the process confronting a host of racist, sexist, or bigoted views of other people. The context in which anthropology emerged as a discipline was one where:

"... any educated person knew that the world worked in certain obvious ways. Humans were individuals, but each was also representative of a specific type, itself the summation of a distinct set of racial, national, and sexual characteristics. Each type was fated to be more or less intelligent, idle, rule-bound, or warlike. Politics properly belonged to men, while women, when they were admitted to public life, were thought to be most productive in charitable organizations,

missionary work, and the instruction of children. Immigrants tended to dilute a country's natural vigor and breed political extremism. Animals deserved kindness, and backward peoples, a few rungs above animals, were owed our help but not our respect..." (King 2019: 4).

Rooted in this assumed knowledge of the world was a ranking system that relied upon indices of sociocultural, ethnoracial, and political economic differences. Hierarchies that placed some cultures and racial groups at the top and others on the lower rungs of civilization were simply the 'natural' order of things. While such classifications of people and cultures have insidious expressions of nativism, racism, sexism, and other -isms, they also reflect undercurrents of **ethnocentrism**, or when someone uses the standards and values of their own culture to judge other cultures. While some degrees of ethnocentrism can create cohesion among people in a society (e.g., viewing your ways of raising children or caring for the environment as a good strategy), such judgements when taken to extremes can lead to xenophobic tendencies, designs for colonial or imperial interventions, or horrific policies of **ethnocide** (that is, systematically undermining and eliminating an ethnic group's culture).

For example, in both the United States and Canada, *American Indian boarding schools* and *Canadian Indigenous school systems* sought to erase indigenous cultures by separating children from their parents and sending them to schools run by the state and Christian church organizations. By denying children the opportunity to speak their native languages, learn and practice their cultural traditions, or use their indigenous names, schools systematically attempted to destroy other cultural groups viewed as savage, uncivilized, or barbaric (see Churchill 2004; Lajimodiere 2019; Milloy 2017). Children experienced loneliness, were deprived of healthy and loving familial bonds, suffered sexual abuse, and lost cultural knowledge under the policies of forced assimilation.

As a result of such pervasive and destructive valuations of other cultures, anthropologists introduced the notion that people make their realities and societies make their social truths. We are all products of our unique histories, symbolic universes, and adaptive strategies used to survive from one generation to another. As a result, if someone was studying a group of people, living in a new society, reading about some far-off culture, or any number of reasons why people would connect with other societies, one would need to understand and view other cultures by using the standards and values of *those* cultures, not one's own. This cornerstone in the discipline is known as **cultural relativism**, and it is one of the central tenets that anthropologists use when conducting research within a culture.

By immersing oneself into another culture and not relying upon their view of the world—the values they hold on right and wrong, moral and immoral, good and bad—anthropologists (ideally) portray and understand that culture's systems of values, norms, mores, and beliefs. This is easier said than done, and anthropologists have been charged at times of arguing from an absolutist position. That is, nobody has the right to critique or question what unfolds in another culture. You can see how such a position can dangerously slide into never questioning certain cultural practices. Should you, as an outsider, be prohibited from raising concerns on the traumas inflicted on families and children within American Indian boarding schools? Can you not advocate for the advancement of human rights in Afghanistan, particularly



as the Taliban has implemented extrajudicial executions, public flogging, press and media intimidation, and the barring of women and girls from obtaining a comprehensive education (issues that we return to in the chapter on *Power and Sociopolitical Organization*)? Anthropologists that recognize the slippery slope of absolutist positions generally use **critical cultural relativism** in their work. While imperfect, here anthropologists work from the perspective of people in the culture and the harm that they might face and the changes that they might want implemented. Instead of applying the anthropologist's ideas of human rights, an anthropologist aligns themselves with people in that culture, understanding how certain practices help some and hurt others. Importantly, this position highlights that cultures are rarely homogenous. Rather, societies often have different experiences of internal subjugation, exploitation, or exclusion, as well as their own internal efforts to correct certain wrongs. How anthropologists approach such issues raises a host of ethical considerations on the appropriate role of anthropologists advocating for some people or certain rights.

## Methodological Approaches and Ethics

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As seen above, tremendous diversity exists in how we live. Additionally, anthropologists may face ethical dilemmas as they work in cultures experiencing individual or collective violence, social inequities, class and caste divisions, or other pronounced social frictions. To understand this diversity, cultural anthropologists use various methodological techniques when conducting ethnographic research. Given the diverse methods in the discipline, it is not possible to explore an exhaustive list (for more please see Bernard and Gravlee 2015). Of course, our discussion here highlights the time, care, and commitment that cultural anthropologists place in their work as they attempt to understand someone else's life or culture.

Foundationally, cultural anthropologists rely upon long-term, in-depth **ethnographic fieldwork** to learn about a group of people, which often requires that they travel to the 'field site', or where people live, and stay in those communities. Once there, an anthropologist might conduct interviews, domain analysis, free-listing activities, surveys, network analysis, among others. Each method chosen will produce types of data specifically designed to answer certain research questions or illuminate particular elements of that society. For example, if you want to determine people's views on the most recent election, perhaps you use probability-based sampling strategies and structured questionnaires. This would allow you to state with a degree of certainty that, say, 38 percent of the community dislikes a political party's nominee. Or if you want to understand how someone comes to the decision to leave home and elope without their parents' approval, perhaps you use (unstructured) interviews, providing the interlocutor the freedom to walk you through important events leading to that moment. In general, anthropologists use both quantitative and qualitative data in their work. For example, conducting interviews and writing down events of a given day enable anthropologists to understand people's lived experiences. Simultaneously, collecting or analyzing probability-based quantitative data—such as demographics, wealth distribution, wages, or home ownership—enables anthropologists see how that society's broader socioeconomic and

political contexts influence the more granular experiences of those they interview. Ultimately, methods are specifically chosen to ensure the integrity of one's research design and come up with an overall accurate portrayal of that culture.

A major component of ethnographic fieldwork—introduced early in the discipline by Bronislaw Malinowski—is **participant observation**. This commonly used technique sees anthropologists participating in the activities of the people they are learning from (e.g., helping with a rice harvest, taking care of the aged, or making preparations to celebrate someone's rite of passage). At the same time, anthropologists carefully observe the events to uncover the logic and reasons for the activities taking place (see figure 6). In essence, one learns by doing. By engaging in long-term fieldwork and participant observation, an anthropologist often spends a great deal of time with people. Helping with work, making jokes, hanging out, sharing meals... all these activities provide opportunities for them to learn and develop **rapport**, or build an intimate and trusting relationship with those in the community. Building relationships and being integrated into a community is central to exploring issues of importance. For example, socially sensitive issues would not likely be explored before sufficient time of living in the community, building social networks, and learning culturally relevant values and norms. Whether we seek to understand illicit drug use, domestic violence, the passing of loved ones, or racist or homophobic tendencies, it is unlikely that someone will divulge deeply personal and intimate histories without an opportunity to get to know and trust you. Conducting long-term ethnographic research in a community or among a cultural group is a central way to develop those relationships.

*Figure 6: Cultural anthropologists might attend personal, intimate activities with families in a community, or they might attend large public events that hold deep cultural significance. Pictured here is the Guelaguetza Popular, organized by indigenous groups in Oaxaca, Mexico as a counter-event to state-sponsored activities. The Guelaguetza is meant to draw attention to the importance of indigenous peoples in Mexico.*

Photograph by:  
Gregory Gullette, 2008.



## Ethics and Affective Relations

While establishing trust and closeness is central in cultural anthropology, the process has caveats and possible ethical complications. Over the years anthropologists have considered our positionality relative

to those we seek to learn from. How might an anthropologist's class, gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, religious background, political affiliation, among others, influence the types of information people freely divulge or perhaps one's ability to develop rapport? Given that anthropologists rarely (if ever) fully share the traits and characteristics of those they learn from, they must reflect on how their identities such as cisgender, Black, male, queer, Catholic, female, educated, and so on create opportunities of separation between anthropologists and their interlocutors. For example, in a situation where an anthropologist has more money, education, and status, could someone in a subaltern position feel compelled to provide consent for an interview? To what degree does an anthropologist's positionality influence certain biases in their understanding of a culture? What happens in a situation if someone discloses information but later regrets having told that story or viewed the anthropologist as more than a researcher?

In a study of sexual violence in Oaxaca, Mexico, Jayne Howell (2004) considers the ethical and moral dilemmas that arise when the lines become blurred between her role as a researcher and that of a friend. Due to the sensitive nature of certain topics—criminal activities, infidelity, violence, sexual behavior, and so forth—anthropologists recognize that it can be awkward to probe for information on those topics, or even how one should handle the information freely volunteered by an interlocutor. Certainly, conversations unfold in private where information is shared that one might guard closely to hide it from public knowledge. When an interlocutor shares sensitive information, there are standard ethical channels that exist for a research participant (all cultural anthropological research must undergo evaluation and assessment by an Institutional Review Board to ensure the protection of all research participants). As noted by Howell (2004), ethnographic research becomes complicated when sensitive information on sexual assault is volunteered in confidence between friends.

Howell's various identities as researcher, friend, or godmother illustrate how close personal relationships form with those in the community. Topics never elaborated on during formal interviews were offered in casual conversations. Given how clear research boundaries can become muddled through intimate relations, anthropologists must consider "issues of confidentiality, betrayal, and power [and recognize] that all informants must have the protection of saying things off the record and... asking for permission to publish information about another's pain may add further to an informant's suffering" (ibid: 346). While ethical guidelines such as that offered by the American Anthropological Association offer a framework for best practices in ethnographic research—*do no harm, be open and honest regarding your work, obtain informed consent and necessary permissions, weigh competing ethical obligations due collaborators and affected parties, make your results accessible, protect and preserve your records, and maintain respectful and ethical professional relationships*—they do not remove dilemmas or conflicts experienced during fieldwork. Anthropologists must still work through those complicated relationships, ensuring the safety of research participants as well as documenting the subjective virtues and shortcomings of a given culture.

## Ethnographic Vignette: *Human Rights and the Transformation of Social Life*

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As noted above, critical cultural relativism allows anthropologists to advocate for human rights from the perspective of those in the culture and the changes they want implemented. However, issues can arise. Can an anthropologist's presence introduce changes and new understandings in that culture? Is human rights law neo-imperialism used by the West to justify intervening in other cultures? Do Western ideas on human rights provide communities with the tools to actually support vulnerable people? When advocating for change, how does an anthropologist achieve an expanded human rights subjectivity (and is this a legitimate use of anthropological research)? In this edited excerpt, Sally Engle Merry (2017) explores such questions and notes the challenges faced within the global women's rights movement.

*"How do norms and ideas like human rights or gender equality travel from one place to another? This is a critically important question for women's human rights. After two decades of global feminism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in which there was a remarkable movement of ideas, practices, and people across national lines dealing with a variety of women's issues including violence against women, there is a more recent trend toward resistance, retrenchment, and a turn away from women's rights concerns....*

*Under these conditions, it is important to ask how ideas of women's human rights move from one setting to another, when and how they are adopted, and how they are changed in the process. Under what conditions are they translated into local contexts and when are they resisted or rejected?...*

*When normative ideas or practices move from one social context to another, they are inevitably translated, redefined, and adapted to the new circumstances. I have studied the translation and adaptation of global human rights norms about violence against women from local areas to global areas and back to local social contexts, a process I have labeled vernacularization... But [the human rights frameworks] are inevitably transformed in the process, even becoming unrecognizable in their local instantiation...*

*Based on my ethnographic research in the USA as well as many other countries, I find that in order for women's rights ideas to be accepted, they have to be adapted to local cultural categories, symbols, and ideologies: they need to be made to fit in with what is already there. In the late 1980s, Abdullahi An Na'im described this process in terms of cultural legitimacy... He argued that ideas are more readily accepted if they fit into existing value systems, using the example of Islamic law and human rights. He argued that seeking out areas of compatibility between human rights and Islamic law enables advocates to negotiate a shared moral and legal system... Global laws and policy statements that are appropriated by local organizations need to be translated into terms that make sense in their communities. This is the process of **vernacularization**: the extraction of ideas and practices from the universal sphere of international*

*organizations and their translation into ideas and practices that resonate with the values and ways of doing things in local contexts...*

*Women's rights are typically produced in particular places, become redefined as global, and are then set to travel. For example, violence against women is the sum of a wide variety of particular issues, some more general such as rape and domestic violence, others more specific such as honor killing, dowry murders, female genital cutting, face veiling, and sex trafficking, which are all merged into a general category of violence against women...*

*My ethnographic research in a small town in Hawai'i in the 1990s showed the dramatic shift this idea gave to conceptions of kinship, family, gender, and the state... Men who had assumed they could hit their wives for what they viewed as misbehavior found themselves in court and batterer retraining programs. Some of these men were both surprised and outraged that they ended up in court for violence that they had long seen as a normal part of their everyday lives. Many felt entitled to use violence to discipline their partners, wives, and children when they thought they were misbehaving... Under the influence of this new perspective on domestic violence brought by the battered women's movement, however, women who had long assumed that violence was an unpleasant but inevitable dimension of marriage began to call the police and take their complaints to court. Some women who were forced to have sex with their partners or husbands began to see this as an instance of rape. There was a dramatic increase in the number of cases of domestic violence coming to the courts.*

*The transition to a new view of domestic violence as a crime was not a smooth or easy process, as many family members of both men and women rejected women who turned to the law for help. Women with supportive mothers tended to fare better than those whose mothers felt that they had chosen this relationship and now had to put up with it. Thus, there was both acceptance and resistance to the new regime of criminalizing domestic violence. In the process, some women were better protected but faced hostility from kin and some men refused to accept the legitimacy of the new regime.*

*As this example shows, changing ideas about the acceptability of domestic violence is a long, slow process, one that challenges many basic understandings of social life. It is a relatively radical change, framing kinship obligations and marriage relationships in terms of crime and the law. Instead of viewing the family as inviolate from the law, it is now constructed as open to state intervention... Thus, the idea that domestic violence is a crime that the state takes seriously is an idea that leads to a radically different conception of the family. This makes it hard to accept...*

*Active appropriation and redefinition of human rights is an inevitable dimension of the global circulation of ideas and practices that allows them to travel. Yet, this process confronts the resonance dilemma: human rights ideas need to be locally adapted, but in order to be deeply transformative, they cannot be overly resonant. On the other hand, if they are insufficiently different from prevailing moralities, they may well be accepted but not institute change. Thus, the*



*need to vernacularize human rights in a way that is resonant with local cultural practices is essential to their travel but also limits their transformative power” (Merry 2017: 1-15).*

## Chapter Summary

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This chapter considered the broad contours of how anthropologists have approached culture. By discussing the different elements of culture, we see the ways in which societies express diverse sociocultural and political economic systems, creating symbolic universes and material cultures that reflect their unique histories, interactions with others, and adaptive strategies. As such, anthropology argues for a cultural relativism framework in our understandings of ‘other’ societies. Given that culture encompasses virtually everything that humans think, feel, and do, anthropologists have also worked through the ways that individuals might shape culture and be shaped by culture, what was discussed as the relationship between structure and agency. Ultimately, the complex and variable nature of culture requires that anthropologists use different methodological approaches when collecting ethnographic data. Of course, how one conducts research, forms relationships in communities and with people, and engages in critical analyses of cultures can introduce ethical considerations that anthropologists must consider in their analysis and ethnographic portrayal.

## Key Terms

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Agency	Microcultures
Anomie	Neoevolutionism
Critical cultural relativism	Non-material culture
Cultural relativism	Norms
Culture	Participant observation
Diffusionism	Psychological functionalism
Enculturation	Rapport
Ethnocentrism	Society
Ethnocide	Structural functionalism
Ethnographic fieldwork	Structure
Habitus	Superorganic
Holism	Symbol
Maladaptive cultures	Values
Material culture	Vernacularization

## Comprehension Questions

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1. What are the differences and connections between structure and agency?
2. How do anthropologists differentiate society and culture?
3. What are the seven elements of culture? Be sure you can explain and provide examples drawn from each of the main elements.
4. What are the pros and cons of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism?
5. What are the ethical considerations that anthropologists must consider when conducting ethnographic fieldwork?

## Critical Thinking and Engagement Questions

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1. Reflecting on your experiences, how might you have overcome structural forces in your life, exerting agency and taking responsibility for the choices you made?
2. Given that cultures change under various internal and external pressures, what do you think has most directly contributed to recent changes in your culture?
3. In the discussion of how culture is *interactive and mutable*, it was noted that societies can create solutions for the problems they face as well as draw on solutions that have worked in other cultures dealing with similar issues. What are some of the larger challenges that you think we face in the United States? What are some possible ways we can change our culture to address those issues, including taking inspiration from other societies?
4. What ethical and moral issues can you see in an anthropologist using critical cultural relativism in their work?
5. In the extended ethnographic excerpt taken from Sally Engle Merry's work, what do you think of her argument regarding the 'resonance dilemma'? What complications exist in promoting global standards for human rights?

## Resource Links

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The culture concept has gained currency over the past couple of decades—everything from how we discuss 'culture wars' to improving upon 'corporate culture'. The term has been used by individuals, groups, or even states to encapsulate a great amount of diversity into a single term. As such, we cannot cover all elements of how culture is thought of or used in the broader public. Of course, this chapter has attempted to sketch the contours of how anthropologists and allied social scientists think about the concept. Should you want to consider other issues within cultural debates, please use the resources below.

- <https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca> (One of the top journals in cultural anthropology, which is now open access and freely available)
- American Anthropological Association's Statement on Ethics (not specific to cultural anthropology alone): <https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-ethics/>
- The Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative's *Human Subject Research Training Course*: <https://about.citiprogram.org/series/human-subjects-research-hsr/>
- [Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology](#) (An open-access resources that is oriented toward social and cultural anthropology, which contains numerous well-written and research articles on a variety of topics)

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