Social Anthropology

Anthropology has its intellectual origins in both the natural sciences, and the humanities. Its basic questions concern, "What defines \textit{Homo sapiens}?" "Who are the ancestors of modern \textit{Homo sapiens}?" "What are our physical traits?" "How do we behave?" "Why are there variations and differences among different groups of humans?" "How has the evolutionary past of \textit{Homo sapiens} influenced its social organization and culture?" and so forth.

While specific modern anthropologists have a tendency to specialize in technical subfields, their data and ideas are routinely synthesized into larger works about the scope and progress of our species.

The term "anthropology" refers in common parlance most often to Cultural Anthropology, the study of the culture, beliefs, and practices of living people. In American universities, however, the department of Anthropology often includes three or four subfields, including cultural anthropology, archaeology, biological anthropology and linguistic anthropology. However, in universities in the United Kingdom, and much of Europe, these fields are frequently housed in separate departments.\cite{8}

A brief overview of the discipline

One traditional approach to simplifying such a vast enterprise has been to divide anthropology into four fields, each with its own further branches: biological or physical anthropology, cultural anthropology, archaeology and anthropological linguistics.

Briefly put, biological or physical anthropology includes the study of human evolution, human evolutionary biology, population genetics, our nearest biological relatives, classification of ancient hominids, paleontology of humans, distribution human alleles, blood types and the human genome project. Primatology studies our nearest non-human relatives (human beings are primates), and some primatologists use field observation methods, written up in a manner quite similar to ethnography.\cite{5}

Biological anthropology is used by other fields to shed light on how a particular folk got to where they are, how frequently they've encountered and married outsiders, whether a particular group is protein-deprived, and to understand the brain processes involved in the production of language. Other related fields or subfields include paleoanthropology, anthropometrics, nutritional anthropology, and forensic anthropology.

Cultural anthropology is often based on ethnography, a kind of writing used throughout anthropology to present data on a particular people or folk (from the Greek, \textit{ethnos}/Έθνος), often based on participant observation research. Ethnology involves the systematic comparison of different cultures. Cultural anthropology is also called socio-cultural anthropology or social anthropology (especially in Great Britain). In some European countries, cultural anthropology is known as ethnology (a term coined and defined by Adam F. Kollár in 1783). The study of kinship and social organization is a central focus of cultural anthropology, as kinship is a human universal. Cultural anthropology also covers: economic and political organization, law and conflict resolution, patterns of consumption and exchange, material culture, technology, infrastructure, gender relations, ethnicity, childrearing and socialization, religion, myth, symbols, worldview, sports, music, nutrition, recreation, games, food, festivals, and language, which is also the object of study in linguistics. Note the way in which some of these topics overlap with topics in the other subfields.

Archaeology is the study of human material culture, including both artifacts (older pieces of human culture) carefully gathered \textit{in situ}, museum pieces and modern garbage.\cite{7} Archaeologists work closely
with biological anthropologists, art historians, physics laboratories (for dating), and museums. They are charged with preserving the results of their excavations and are often found in museums. Typically, archaeologists are associated with "digs," or excavation of layers of ancient sites.

Archaeologists subdivide time into cultural periods based on long-lasting artifacts: for example the Paleolithic, the Neolithic, the Bronze Age, which are further subdivided according to artifact traditions and culture region, such as the Oldowan or the Gravettian. In this way, archaeologists provide a vast reference of the places human beings have traveled over the past 200,000 years, their ways of making a living, and their demographics. Archaeologists also investigate nutrition, symbolization, art, systems of writing, and other physical remnants of human cultural activity.

Linguistics is the study of language. Linguistic anthropology (also called anthropological linguistics) seeks to understand the processes of human communications, verbal and non-verbal, variation in language across time and space, the social uses of language, and the relationship between language and culture. It is the branch of anthropology that brings linguistic methods to bear on anthropological problems, linking the analysis of linguistic forms and processes to the interpretation of sociocultural processes. Linguistic anthropologists often draw on related fields including anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, semiotics, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis.

This field is divided into its own subfields: descriptive linguistics the construction of grammars and lexicons for unstudied languages; historical linguistics, including the reconstruction of past languages, from which our current languages have descended; ethnolinguistics, the study of the relationship between language and culture, and sociolinguistics, the study of the social functions of language. Anthropological linguistics is also concerned with the evolution of the parts of the brain that deal with language.

Because anthropology developed from so many different enterprises (see History of Anthropology), including but not limited to fossil-hunting, exploring, documentary film-making, paleontology, primatology, antiquity dealings and curatorship, philology, etymology, genetics, regional analysis, ethnology, history, philosophy and religious studies, it is difficult to characterize the entire field in a brief article, although attempts to write histories of the entire field have been made.

On the one hand this has led to instability in many American anthropology departments, resulting in the division or reorganization of subfields (e.g. at Stanford, Duke, and most recently at Harvard). However, seen in a positive light, anthropology is one of the few places in many American universities where humanities, social, and natural sciences are forced to confront one another. As such, anthropology has also been central in the development of several new (late 20th century) interdisciplinary fields such as cognitive neuroscience, global studies, and various ethnic studies.

**Basic trends in anthropology**

The goal of anthropology is to provide a holistic account of humans and human nature. Since anthropology arose as a science in Western societies that were complex and industrial, a major trend within anthropology has been a methodological drive to study peoples in societies with more simple social organization, sometimes called "primitive" in anthropological literature, but without any connotation of "inferior." Today, most anthropologists use terms such as "less complex" societies or refer to specific modes of subsistence or production, such as "hunter-gatherer" or "forager" or "simple farmer" to refer to humans living in non-industrial, non-Western cultures, such people or folk (ethnos) remaining of great interest within anthropology.

The quest for holism leads most anthropologists to study a particular folk or people in detail, using biogenetic, archaeological, and linguistic data alongside direct observation of contemporary customs. In
the 1990s and 2000s, calls for clarification of what constitutes a culture, of how an observer knows where his or her own culture ends and another begins, and other crucial topics in writing anthropology were heard. It is possible to view all human cultures as part of one large, evolving global culture. These dynamic relationships, between what can be observed on the ground, as opposed to what can be observed by compiling many local observations remain fundamental in any kind of anthropology, whether cultural, biological, linguistic or archaeological.

Anthropologists are interested in both human variation and in the possibility of human universals (behaviors, ideas or concepts shared by virtually all human cultures) They use many different methods of study, but modern population genetics, participant observation and other techniques often take anthropologists "into the field" which means traveling to a community in its own setting, to do something called "fieldwork." On the biological or physical side, human measurements, genetic samples, nutritional data may be gathered and published as articles or monographs. Due to the interest in variation, anthropologists are drawn to the study of human extremes, aberrations and other unusual circumstances, such as headhunting, whirling dervishes, whether there were real Homo floresiensis [Hobbit people], snake handling, and glossolalia (speaking in tongues), just to list a few.

At the same time, anthropologists urge, as part of their quest for scientific objectivity, cultural relativism, which has an influence on all the subfields of anthropology. This is the notion that particular cultures should not be judged by one culture's values or viewpoints, but that all cultures should be viewed as relative to each other. There should be no notions, in good anthropology, of one culture being better or worse than another culture.\(^\text{[19]}\)

Ethical commitments in anthropology include noticing and documenting genocide, infanticide, racism, mutilation including especially circumcision and subincision, and torture. Topics like racism, slavery or human sacrifice, therefore, attract anthropological attention and theories ranging from nutritional deficiencies\(^\text{[20]}\) to genes\(^\text{[21]}\) to acculturation have been proposed, not to mention theories of acculturation, colonialism and many others as root causes of man's inhumanity to man. To illustrate the depth of an anthropological approach, one can take just one of these topics, such as "racism" and find thousands of anthropological references, stretching across all the subfields (and subfields of subfields).\(^\text{[22]}\)

In addition to dividing up their project by theoretical emphasis, anthropologists typically divide the world up into relevant time periods and geographic regions. Human time on Earth is divided up into relevant cultural traditions based on material, such as the Paleolithic and the Neolithic, of particular use in archaeology. Further cultural subdivisions according to tool types, such as Olduwan or Mousterian or Levallois help archaeologists and other anthropologists in understanding major trends in the human past. Anthropologists and geographers share approaches to Culture regions as well, since mapping cultures is central to both sciences. By making comparisons across cultural traditions (time-based) and cultural regions (space-based), anthropologists have developed various kinds of comparative method, a central part of their science.

Contemporary anthropology is an established science with academic departments at most universities and colleges. The single largest organization of Anthropologists is the American Anthropological Association, which was founded in 1903.\(^\text{[23]}\) Membership is made up of Anthropologists from around the globe.\(^\text{[24]}\) Hundreds of other organizations exist in the various subfields of anthropology, sometimes divided up by nation or region, and many anthropologists work with collaborators in other disciplines, such as geology, physics, zoology, paleontology, anatomy, music theory, art history, sociology and so on, belonging to professional societies in those disciplines as well.\(^\text{[25]}\)

**History of anthropology**
The first use of the term "anthropology" in English to refer to a natural science of humankind was apparently in 1593, the first of the "logies" to be coined.[26] It took Immanuel Kant 25 years to write one of the first major treatises on anthropology, his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View.*[27] Kant is not generally considered to be a modern anthropologist, however, as he never left his region of Germany nor did he study any cultures besides his own.[28] He did, however, begin teaching an annual course in anthropology in 1772. Anthropology is thus primarily an Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment endeavor.

Historians of anthropology, like Marvin Harris[29] indicate two major frameworks within which empirical anthropology has arisen: interest in comparisons of people over space and interest in longterm human processes or humans as viewed through time. Harris dates both to Classical Greece and Classical Rome, specifically Herodotus, often called the "father of history" and the Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote many of our only surviving contemporary accounts of several ancient Celtic and Germanic peoples. Herodotus first formulated some of the persisting problems of anthropology.

Medieval scholars may be considered forerunners of modern anthropology as well, insofar as they conducted or wrote detailed studies of the customs of peoples considered "different" from themselves in terms of geography. John of Plano Carpini reported of his stay among the Mongols. His report was unusual in its detailed depiction of a non-European culture.

Marco Polo's systematic observations of nature, anthropology, and geography are another example of studying human variation across space. Polo's travels took him across such a diverse human landscape and his accounts of the peoples he encountered as he journeyed were so detailed that they earned for Polo the name "the father of modern anthropology."

Another candidate for one of the first scholars to carry out comparative ethnographic-type studies in person was the medieval Persian scholar Abū Rayhān Bīrūnī in the 11th century, who wrote about the peoples, customs, and religions of the Indian subcontinent. Like modern anthropologists, he engaged in extensive participant observation with a given group of people, learnt their language and studied their primary texts, and presented his findings with objectivity and neutrality using cross-cultural comparisons. He wrote detailed comparative studies on the religions and cultures in the Middle East, Mediterranean and especially South Asia. Biruni's tradition of comparative cross-cultural study continued in the Muslim world through to Ibn Khaldun's work in the 14th century.

Most scholars consider modern anthropology as an outgrowth of the Age of Enlightenment, a period when Europeans attempted systematically to study human behavior, the known varieties of which had been increasing since the 15th century as a result of the first European colonization wave. The traditions of jurisprudence, history, philology, and sociology then evolved into something more closely resembling the modern views of these disciplines and informed the development of the social sciences, of which anthropology was a part.

Developments in the systematic study of ancient civilizations through the disciplines of Classics and Egyptology informed both archaeology and eventually social anthropology, as did the study of East and South Asian languages and cultures.

Institutionally, anthropology emerged from the development of natural history (expounded by authors such as Buffon) that occurred during the European colonization of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Programs of ethnographic study originated in this era as the study of the "human primitives" overseen by colonial administrations.

There was a tendency in late 18th century Enlightenment thought to understand human society as natural phenomena that behaved in accordance with certain principles and that could be observed empirically. In
some ways, studying the language, culture, physiology, and artifacts of European colonies was not unlike studying the flora and fauna of those places.

Early anthropology was divided between proponents of unilinealism, who argued that all societies passed through a single evolutionary process, from the most primitive to the most advanced, and various forms of non-lineal theorists, who tended to subscribe to ideas such as diffusionism. Most 19th-century social theorists, including anthropologists, viewed non-European societies as windows onto the pre-industrial human past.

As academic disciplines began to differentiate over the course of the 19th century, anthropology grew increasingly distinct from the biological approach of natural history, on the one hand, and from purely historical or literary fields such as Classics, on the other. A common criticism has been that many social science scholars (such as economists, sociologists, and psychologists) in Western countries focus disproportionately on Western subjects, while anthropology focuses disproportionately on the “Other”; this has changed over the last part of the 20th century as anthropologists increasingly also study Western subjects, particularly variation across class, region, or ethnicity within Western societies, and other social scientists increasingly take a global view of their fields.

20th Century

In the twentieth century, academic disciplines have often been institutionally divided into three broad domains. The natural and biological sciences seek to derive general laws through reproducible and verifiable experiments. The humanities generally study local traditions, through their history, literature, music, and arts, with an emphasis on understanding particular individuals, events, or eras.

The social sciences have generally attempted to develop scientific methods to understand social phenomena in a generalizable way, though usually with methods distinct from those of the natural sciences. In particular, social sciences often develop statistical descriptions rather than the general laws derived in physics or chemistry, or they may explain individual cases through more general principles, as in many fields of psychology. Anthropology (like some fields of history) does not easily fit into one of these categories, and different branches of anthropology draw on one or more of these domains.

Anthropology as it emerged among the colonial powers (mentioned above) has generally taken a different path than that in the countries of southern and central Europe (Italy, Greece, and the successors to the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires). In the former, the encounter with multiple, distinct cultures, often very different in organization and language from those of Europe, has led to a continuing emphasis on cross-cultural comparison and a receptiveness to certain kinds of cultural relativism.

In the successor states of continental Europe, on the other hand, anthropologists often joined with folklorists and linguists in the nationalist/nation-building enterprise. Ethnologists in these countries tended to focus on differentiating among local ethnolinguistic groups, documenting local folk culture, and representing the prehistory of the nation through museums and other forms of public education.

In this scheme, Russia occupied a middle position. On the one hand, it had a large Asian region of highly distinct, pre-industrial, often non-literate peoples, similar to the situation in the Americas; on the other hand, Russia also participated to some degree in the nationalist discourses of Central and Eastern Europe. After the Revolution of 1917, anthropology in the USSR and later the Soviet Bloc countries were highly shaped by the need to conform to Marxist theories of social evolution.

Anthropology after World War II: Increasing dialogue in Anglophone anthropology
Before WWII British 'social anthropology' and American 'cultural anthropology' were still distinct traditions. After the war, enough British and American anthropologists borrowed ideas and methodological approaches from one another that some began to speak of them collectively as 'sociocultural' anthropology.

In the 1950s and mid-1960s anthropology tended increasingly to model itself after the natural sciences. Some anthropologists, such as Lloyd Fallers and Clifford Geertz, focused on processes of modernization by which newly independent states could develop. Others, such as Julian Steward and Leslie White, focused on how societies evolve and fit their ecological niche—an approach popularized by Marvin Harris.

Economic anthropology as influenced by Karl Polanyi and practiced by Marshall Sahlins and George Dalton challenged standard neoclassical economics to take account of cultural and social factors, and also employed Marxist analysis into anthropological study. In England, British Social Anthropology's paradigm began to fragment as Max Gluckman and Peter Worsley experimented with Marxism and authors such as Rodney Needham and Edmund Leach incorporated Lévi-Strauss's structuralism into their work.

Structuralism also influenced a number of developments in 1960s and 1970s, including cognitive anthropology and componential analysis. Authors such as David Schneider, Clifford Geertz, and Marshall Sahlins developed a more fleshed-out concept of culture as a web of meaning or signification, which proved very popular within and beyond the discipline. In keeping with the times, much of anthropology became politicized through the Algerian War of Independence and opposition to the Vietnam War; Marxism became a more and more popular theoretical approach in the discipline. By the 1970s the authors of volumes such as Reinventing Anthropology worried about anthropology's relevance.

Since the 1980s issues of power, such as those examined in Eric Wolf's Europe and the People Without History, have been central to the discipline. In the 80s books like Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter pondered anthropology's ties to colonial inequality, while the immense popularity of theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault moved issues of power and hegemony into the spotlight. Gender and sexuality became popular topics, as did the relationship between history and anthropology, influenced by Marshall Sahlins (again), who drew on Lévi-Strauss and Fernand Braudel to examine the relationship between social structure and individual agency. Also influential in these issues were Nietzsche, Heidegger, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Derrida and Lacan.

In the late 1980s and 1990s authors such as George Marcus and James Clifford pondered ethnographic authority, particularly how and why anthropological knowledge was possible and authoritative. They were reflecting trends in research and discourse initiated by Feminists in the academy, although they excused themselves from commenting specifically on those pioneering critics. Nevertheless, key aspects of feminist theorizing and methods became de rigueur as part of the 'post-modern moment' in anthropology: Ethnographies became more reflexive, explicitly addressing the author's methodology, cultural, gender and racial positioning, and their influence on his or her ethnographic analysis. This was part of a more general trend of postmodernism that was popular contemporaneously. Currently anthropologists pay attention to a wide variety of issues pertaining to the contemporary world, including globalization, medicine and biotechnology, indigenous rights, virtual communities, and the anthropology of industrialized societies.

**Controversies about the history of anthropology**

Anthropologists, like other researchers (esp. historians and scientists engaged in field research), have over time assisted state policies and projects, especially colonialism.
Some commentators have contended:

- That the discipline grew out of colonialism, perhaps was in league with it, and derived some of its key notions from it, consciously or not. (See, for example, Gough, Pels and Salemink, but cf. Lewis 2004).[62]
- That anthropologists typically have more power than the people they study and hence their knowledge-making is a form of theft in which the anthropologist gains something for him or herself at the expense of informants.
- That ethnographic work was often ahistorical, writing about people as if they were "out of time" in an "ethnographic present" (Johannes Fabian, *Time and Its Other*).

**Anthropology and the military**

Anthropologists' involvement with the U.S. government, in particular, has caused bitter controversy within the discipline. Franz Boas publicly objected to US participation in World War I, and after the war he published a brief expose and condemnation of the participation of several American archeologists in espionage in Mexico under their cover as scientists.

But by the 1940s, many of Boas' anthropologist contemporaries were active in the allied war effort against the "Axis" (Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan). Many served in the armed forces but others worked in intelligence (for example, Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Office of War Information). At the same time, David H. Price's work on American anthropology during the Cold War provides detailed accounts of the pursuit and dismissal of several anthropologists from their jobs for communist sympathies.

Attempts to accuse anthropologists of complicity with the CIA and government intelligence activities during the Vietnam War years have turned up surprisingly little (although anthropologist Hugo Nutini was active in the stillborn Project Camelot).[63] Many anthropologists (students and teachers) were active in the antiwar movement and a great many resolutions condemning the war in all its aspects were passed overwhelmingly at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association (AAA).

In the decades since the Vietnam war the tone of cultural and social anthropology, at least, has been increasingly politicized, with the dominant liberal tone of earlier generations replaced with one more radical, a mix of, and varying degrees of, Marxist, feminist, anarchist, post-colonial, post-modern, Saidian, Foucauldian, identity-based, and more.[64]

Professional anthropological bodies often object to the use of anthropology for the benefit of the state. Their codes of ethics or statements may proscribe anthropologists from giving secret briefings. The Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA) has called certain scholarships ethically dangerous. The AAA's current 'Statement of Professional Responsibility' clearly states that "in relation with their own government and with host governments ... no secret research, no secret reports or debriefings of any kind should be agreed to or given."

However, anthropologists, along with other social scientists, are once again being used in warfare as part of the US Army's strategy in Afghanistan. The Christian Science Monitor reports that "Counterinsurgency efforts focus on better grasping and meeting local needs" in Afghanistan, under the rubric of *Human Terrain Team* (HTT).

**Major discussions about anthropology**

**Focus on other cultures**
Some authors argue that anthropology originated and developed as the study of "other cultures", both in terms of time (past societies) and space (non-European/non-Western societies). For example, the classic of urban anthropology, Ulf Hannerz in the introduction to his seminal *Exploring the City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology* mentions that the "Third World" had habitually received most of attention; anthropologists who traditionally specialized in "other cultures" looked for them far away and started to look "across the tracks" only in late 1960s.\[65\]

Now there exist many works focusing on peoples and topics very close to the author's "home".\[57\] It is also argued that other fields of study, like History and Sociology, on the contrary focus disproportionately on the West.\[66\]

In France, the study of existing contemporary society has been traditionally left to sociologists, but this is increasingly changing,\[67\] starting in the 1970s from scholars like Isac Chiva and journals like *Terrain* ("fieldwork"), and developing with the center founded by Marc Augé (*Le Centre d'anthropologie des mondes contemporains*, the Anthropological Research Center of Contemporary Societies). The same approach of focusing on "modern world" topics by *Terrain*, was also present in the British Manchester School of the 1950s.\[citation needed\]

**Social anthropology** is the branch of anthropology that studies how currently living human beings behave in social groups. Practitioners of social anthropology investigate, often through long-term, intensive field studies (including participant observation methods), the social organization of a particular people: customs, economic and political organization, law and conflict resolution, patterns of consumption and exchange, kinship and family structure, gender relations, childrearing and socialization, religion, and so on.

Social anthropology also explores the role of meanings, ambiguities and contradictions of social life, patterns of sociality, violence and conflict, and the underlying logics of social behaviour. Social anthropologists are trained in the interpretation of narrative, ritual and symbolic behaviour not merely as *text*, but with communication examined in relation to action, practice, and the historical context in which it is embedded. Social anthropologists address the diversity of positions and perspectives to be found within any social group.

**Substantive focus and practice**

Social anthropology is distinguished from subjects such as economics or political science by its holistic range and the attention it gives to the diversity of culture and society across the world, and the capacity this gives the discipline to re-examine Euro-American assumptions. It is differentiated from sociology both in its main methods (based on long-term participant observation and linguistic competence),\[citation needed\] its commitment to the relevance and illumination provided by micro studies, and its extension beyond strictly social phenomena to culture, art, individuality, and cognition.\[citation needed\] While some social anthropologists use quantitative methods (particularly those whose research touches on topics such as local economies, demography, or health and illness), social anthropologists generally emphasize qualitative analysis of long-term fieldwork, rather than the more quantitative methods used by most economists or sociologists.\[citation needed\]

**Specialisations**
Specialisations within social anthropology shift as its objects of study are transformed and as new intellectual paradigms appear; ethnomusicology and medical anthropology afford examples of current, well-defined specialisms.

More recent and currently emergent areas within social anthropology include the relation between cultural diversity and new findings in cognitive development; social and ethical understandings of novel technologies; emergent forms of 'the family' and other new socialities modeled on kinship; the ongoing social fall-out of the demise of state socialism; the politics of resurgent religiosity; analysis of audit cultures and accountability.

The subject has been enlivened by, and has contributed to, approaches from other disciplines, such as philosophy (ethics, phenomenology, logic), the history of science, psychoanalysis, and linguistics.

**Ethical considerations**

The subject has both ethical and reflexive dimensions. Practitioners have developed an awareness of the sense in which scholars create their objects of study and the ways in which anthropologists themselves may contribute to processes of change in the societies they study.

**History**

Social anthropology has historical roots in a number of 19th-century disciplines, including ethnology, folklore studies, and Classics, among others. (See History of anthropology.) Its immediate precursor took shape in the work of Edward Burnett Tylor and James George Frazer in the late 19th century and underwent major changes in both method and theory during the period 1890-1920 with a new emphasis on original fieldwork, long-term holistic study of social behavior in natural settings, and the introduction of French and German social theory.

Departments of Social Anthropology exist in universities around the world. The field of social anthropology has expanded in ways not anticipated by the founders of the field, as for example in the subfield of structure and dynamics.

**1920s-1940**

Modern social anthropology was founded in Britain at The London School of Economics and Political Science following World War I. Influences include both the methodological revolution pioneered by Bronisław Malinowski's process-oriented fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands of Melanesia between 1915 and 1918 and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's theoretical program for systematic comparison that was based on a conception of rigorous fieldwork and the structure-functionalist conception of Durkheim’s sociology.[1] Other intellectual founders include W. H. R. Rivers and A. C. Haddon, whose orientation reflected the contemporary Volkerpsychologie of Wilhelm Wundt and Adolf Bastian, and Sir E. B. Tylor, who defined anthropology as a positivistic science following Auguste Comte. Edmund Leach (1962) defined social anthropology as a kind of comparative micro-sociology based on intensive fieldwork studies. There was never a settled theoretical orthodoxy on the nature of science and society but always a tension between several views that were seriously opposed.

**1940s-1980s**

Following World War II, sociocultural anthropology as comprised by the fields of ethnography and ethnology diverged into an American school of cultural anthropology while social anthropology diversified in Europe by challenging the principles of structure-functionalism, absorbing ideas from...
Claude Levi-Strauss’s structuralism and from Max Gluckman’s Manchester school, and embracing the study of conflict, change, urban anthropology, and networks. [citation needed]

1980s to present

A European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) was founded in 1989 as a society of scholarship at a meeting of founder members from fourteen European countries, supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. The Association seeks to advance anthropology in Europe by organizing biennial conferences and by editing its academic journal, Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale.

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Cultural anthropology

Cultural anthropology is one of four or five fields of anthropology (the holistic study of humanity). It is the branch of anthropology that examines culture as a meaningful scientific concept.

Cultural anthropologists study cultural variation among humans, collect observations, usually through participant observation called fieldwork and examine the impact of global economic and political processes on local cultural realities. One of the earliest articulations of the anthropological meaning of the term "culture" came from Sir Edward Tylor who writes on the first page of his 1897 book: “Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”[1] The term "civilization" later gave way to definitions by V. Gordon Childe, with culture forming an umbrella term and civilization becoming a particular kind of culture.[2]

The anthropological concept of "culture" reflects in part a reaction against earlier Western discourses based on an opposition between "culture" and "nature", according to which some human beings lived in a "state of nature".[citation needed] Anthropologists have argued that culture is "human nature," and that all people have a capacity to classify experiences, encode classifications symbolically (i.e. in language), and teach such abstractions to others.

Since humans acquire culture through the learning processes of enculturation and socialization, people living in different places or different circumstances develop different cultures. Anthropologists have also pointed out that through culture people can adapt to their environment in non-genetic ways, so people living in different environments will often have different cultures. Much of anthropological theory has originated in an appreciation of and interest in the tension between the local (particular cultures) and the global (a universal human nature, or the web of connections between people in distinct places/circumstances).[citation needed]

The rise of cultural anthropology occurred within the context of the late 19th century, when questions regarding which cultures were "primitive" and which were "civilized" occupied the minds of not only Marx and Freud, but many others. Colonialism and its processes increasingly brought European thinkers in contact, directly or indirectly with "primitive others."[3] The relative status of various humans, some of whom had modern advanced cultures that included engines and telegraphs, while others lacked anything but face-to-face communication techniques and still lived a Paleolithic lifestyle, was of interest to the first generation of cultural anthropologists.

Parallel with the rise of cultural anthropology in the United States, social anthropology, in which sociality is the central concept and which focuses on the study of social statuses and roles, groups, institutions, and the relations among them, developed as an academic discipline in Britain. An umbrella term socio-cultural anthropology makes reference to both cultural and social anthropology traditions.[4]

A brief history
Modern cultural anthropology has its origins in, and developed in reaction to, 19th century "ethnology", which involves the organized comparison of human societies. Scholars like E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer in England worked mostly with materials collected by others – usually missionaries, traders, explorers, or colonial officials – this earned them their current sobriquet of "arm-chair anthropologists".

Ethnologists had a special interest in why people living in different parts of the world often had similar beliefs and practices. In addressing this question, ethnologists in the 19th century divided into two schools of thought. Some, like Grafton Elliot Smith, argued that different groups must somehow have learned from one another, however indirectly; in other words, they argued that cultural traits spread from one place to another, or "diffused".

Other ethnologists argued that different groups had the capability of inventing similar beliefs and practices independently. Some of those who advocated "independent invention", like Lewis Henry Morgan, additionally supposed that similarities meant that different groups had passed through the same stages of cultural evolution (See also classical social evolutionism). Morgan, in particular, acknowledged that certain forms of society and culture could not possibly have arisen before others. For example, industrial farming could have been invented before simple farming, and metallurgy could have developed without previous non-smelting processes involving metals (such as simple ground collection or mining). Morgan, like other 19th century social evolutionists, believed there was a more or less orderly progression from the primitive to the civilized.

20th century anthropologists largely reject the notion that all human societies must pass through the same stages in the same order, on the grounds that such a notion does not fit the empirical facts. Some 20th century ethnologists, like Julian Steward, have instead argued that such similarities reflected similar adaptations to similar environments (see cultural evolution).

Others, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (who was influenced both by American cultural anthropology and by French Durkheimian sociology), have argued that apparent patterns of development reflect fundamental similarities in the structure of human thought (see structuralism). By the mid-20th century, the number of examples of people skipping stages, such as going from hunter-gatherers to post-industrial service occupations in one generation, were so numerous that 19th century evolutionism was effectively disproved.[5]

In the 20th century most cultural (and social) anthropologists turned to the crafting of ethnographies. An ethnography is a piece of writing about a people, at a particular place and time. Typically, the anthropologist actually lives among another society for a considerable period of time, simultaneously participating in and observing the social and cultural life of the group.

However, any number of other ethnographic techniques have resulted in ethnographic writing or details being preserved, as cultural anthropologists also curate materials, spend long hours in libraries, churches and schools poring over records, investigate graveyards, and decipher ancient scripts. A typical ethnography will also include information about physical geography, climate and habitat. It is meant to be a holistic piece of writing about the people in question, and today often includes the longest possible timeline of past events that the ethnographer can obtain through primary and secondary research.

Bronislaw Malinowski (who conducted fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands and taught in England) developed this method, and Franz Boas (who conducted fieldwork in Baffin Island and taught in the United States) promoted it. Boas's students drew on his conception of culture and cultural relativism to develop cultural anthropology in the United States. Simultaneously, Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe Brown’s students were developing social anthropology in the United Kingdom. Whereas cultural anthropology focused on symbols and values, social anthropology focused on social groups and institutions. Today socio-cultural anthropologists attend to all these elements.
Although 19th century ethnologists saw "diffusion" and "independent invention" as mutually exclusive and competing theories, most ethnographers quickly reached a consensus that both processes occur, and that both can plausibly account for cross-cultural similarities. But these ethnographers pointed out the superficiality of many such similarities, and that even traits that spread through diffusion often changed their meaning and functions as they moved from one society to another.

Accordingly, these anthropologists showed less interest in comparing cultures, generalizing about human nature, or discovering universal laws of cultural development, than in understanding particular cultures in those cultures' own terms. Such ethnographers and their students promoted the idea of "cultural relativism", the view that one can only understand another person's beliefs and behaviors in the context of the culture in which he or she lived.

In the early 20th century socio-cultural anthropology developed in different forms in Europe and in the United States. European "social anthropologists" focused on observed social behaviors and on "social structure", that is, on relationships among social roles (e.g. husband and wife, or parent and child) and social institutions (e.g. religion, economy, and politics).

American "cultural anthropologists" focused on the ways people expressed their view of themselves and their world, especially in symbolic forms (such as art and myths). These two approaches frequently converged (kinship, for example, and leadership function both as symbolic systems and as social institutions), and generally complemented one another. Today almost all socio-cultural anthropologists refer to the work of both sets of predecessors, and have an equal interest in what people do and in what people say.

Today ethnography continues to dominate socio-cultural anthropology. Nevertheless, many contemporary socio-cultural anthropologists have rejected earlier models of ethnography which they claim treated local cultures as bounded and isolated. These anthropologists continue to concern themselves with the distinct ways people in different locales experience and understand their lives, but they often argue that one cannot understand these particular ways of life solely from a local perspective; they instead combine a focus on the local with an effort to grasp larger political, economic, and cultural frameworks that impact local lived realities. Notable proponents of this approach include Arjun Appadurai, James Clifford, George Marcus, Sidney Mintz, Michael Taussig and Eric Wolf.

A growing trend in anthropological research and analysis seems to be the use of multi-sited ethnography, discussed in George Marcus's article "Ethnography In/Of the World System: the Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography"). Looking at culture as embedded in macro-constructions of a global social order, multi-sited ethnography uses traditional methodology in various locations both spatially and temporally. Through this methodology greater insight can be gained when examining the impact of world-systems on local and global communities.

Also emerging in multi-sited ethnography are greater interdisciplinary approaches to fieldwork, bringing in methods from cultural studies, media studies, science and technology studies, and others. In multi-sited ethnography research tracks a subject across spatial and temporal boundaries. For example, a multi-sited ethnography may follow a "thing," such as a particular commodity, as it transfers through the networks of global capitalism.

Multi-sited ethnography may also follow ethnic groups in diaspora, stories or rumours that appear in multiple locations and in multiple time periods, metaphors that appear in multiple ethnographic locations, or the biographies of individual people or groups as they move through space and time. It may also follow conflicts that transcend boundaries. Multi-sited ethnographies, such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes's ethnography of the international black market for the trade of human organs. In this research she follows
organs as they transfer through various legal and illegal networks of capitalism, as well as the rumours and urban legends that circulate in impoverished communities about child kidnapping and organ theft.

Sociocultural anthropologists have increasingly turned their investigative eye on to "Western" culture. For example, Philippe Bourgois won the Margaret Mead Award in 1997 for *In Search of Respect*, a study of the entrepreneurs in a Harlem crack-den. Also growing more popular are ethnographies of professional communities, such as laboratory researchers, Wall Street investors, law firms, or IT computer employees.[6]

**Ethnography**

Ethnography (Greek ἔθνος ethnos = folk/people and γράφειν graphein = writing) is a methodological strategy used to provide descriptions of human societies, which as a methodology does not prescribe any particular method (e.g. observation, interview, questionnaire), but instead prescribes the nature of the study (i.e. to describe people through writing) [1]. In the biological sciences, this type of study might be called a "field study" or a "case report," both of which are used as common synonyms for "ethnography" [2].

**Introduction**

Ethnographic studies are usually holistic, founded on the idea that humans are best understood in the fullest possible context, including: the place where they live, the improvements they've made to that place, how they make a living and providing food, housing, energy and water for themselves, what their marriage customs are, what language(s) they speak and so on. Ethnography has connections to genres as diverse travel writing, colonial office reports, the play and the novel.[3] Many cultural anthropologists consider ethnography the essence of the discipline.[4] It would be a rare program in graduate cultural anthropology that didn't require an ethnography as part of the doctoral process.[5]

**Evaluating Ethnography**

Ethnographic methodology is not usually evaluated in terms of philosophical standpoint (such as positivism and emotionalism), ethnographies nonetheless need to be evaluated in some manner. While there is no consensus on evaluation standards, Richardson (2000, p.254) [6] provides 5 criteria that ethnographers might find helpful. They include:

1. **Substantive Contribution:** “Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social-life?”
2. **Aesthetic Merit:** “Does this piece succeed aesthetically?”
3. **Reflexivity:** “How did the author come to write this text…Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view?”
4. **Impact:** “Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Does it move me?  
5. **Expresses a Reality:** “Does it seem ‘true’—a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the ‘real’?”

**Data Collection methods**

One of the most common methods for collecting data in an ethnographic study is direct, first-hand observation of daily behavior. This can include participant observation. Another common method is interviewing, which may include conversation with different levels of form and can involve small talk to
long interviews. A particular approach to transcribing interview data might be genealogical method. This is a set of procedures by which ethnographers discover and record connections of kinship, descent and marriage using diagrams and symbols. Questionnaires can be used to aid the discovery of local beliefs and perceptions and in the case of longitudinal research, where there is continuous long-term study of an area or site, they can act as valid instrument for measuring changes in the individuals or groups studied.

**Differences across disciplines**

The ethnographical method is used across a range of different disciplines, primarily by anthropologists but also frequently by sociologists. Cultural studies, economics, social work, education, ethnomusicology, folklore, geography, linguistics, performance studies and psychology are other fields which have made use of ethnography.

**Cultural and social anthropology**

Cultural anthropology and social anthropology were developed around ethnographic research and their canonical texts which are mostly ethnographies: e.g. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) by Bronisław Malinowski, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) by Margaret Mead, *The Nuer* (1940) by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, or *Naven* (1936, 1958) by Gregory Bateson. Cultural and social anthropologists today place such a high value on actually doing ethnographic research that ethnology—the comparative synthesis of ethnographic information—is rarely the foundation for a career.\[citation needed\] The typical ethnography is a document written about a particular people, almost always based at least in part on emic views of where the culture begins and ends. Using language or community boundaries to bound the ethnography is common.\[2\] Ethnographies are also sometimes called "case studies."\[3\] Ethnographers study and interpret culture, its universalities and its variations through ethnographic study based on fieldwork. An ethnography is a specific kind of written observational science which provides an account of a particular culture, society, or community. The fieldwork usually involves spending a year or more in another society, living with the local people and learning about their ways of life. Ethnographers are participant observers. They take part in events they study because it helps with understanding local behavior and thought. Classic examples is Carol Stack's *All Our Kin*, Jean Briggs's "Never in Anger," Richard Lee's "Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers," Victor Turner's "Forest of Symbols," David Maybry-Lewis's "Akew-Shavante Society," E.E. Evans-Pritchard's "The Nuer" and Claude Levi-Strauss's "Tristes Tropiques."

A typical ethnography attempts to be holistic\[9\][10] and typically follows an outline to include a brief history of the culture in question, an analysis of the physical geography or terrain inhabited by the people under study, including climate, and often including what biological anthropologists call habitat. Folk notions of botany and zoology are presented as ethnobotany and ethnozoology alongside references from the formal sciences. Material culture, technology and means of subsistence are usually treated next, as they are typically bound up in physical geography and include descriptions of infrastructure. Kinship and social structure (including age grading, peer groups, gender, voluntary associations, clans, moieties, and so forth, if they exist) are typically included. Languages spoken, dialects and the history of language change are another group of standard topics.\[11\] Practices of childrearing, acculturation and emic views on personality and values usually follow after sections on social structure.\[12\] Rites, rituals, and other evidence of religion have long been an interest and are sometimes central to ethnographies, especially when conducted in public where visiting anthropologists can see them.\[13\]

As ethnography developed, anthropologists grew more interested in less tangible aspects of culture, such as values, worldview and what Clifford Geertz termed the "ethos" of the culture. Clifford Geertz's own fieldwork used elements of a phenomenological approach to fieldwork, tracing not just the doings of people, but the cultural elements themselves. For example, if within a group of people, winking was a
communicative gesture, he sought to first determine what kinds of things a wink might mean (it might mean several things). Then, he sought to determine in what contexts winks were used, and whether, as one moved about a region, winks remained meaningful in the same way. In this way, cultural boundaries of communication could be explored, as opposed to using linguistic boundaries or notions about residence. Geertz, while still following something of a traditional ethnographic outline, moved outside that outline to talk about "webs" instead of "outlines" of culture.

Within cultural anthropology, there are several sub-genres of ethnography. Beginning in the 1950s and early 1960s, anthropologists began writing "bio-confessional" ethnographies that intentionally exposed the nature of ethnographic research. Famous examples include *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The High Valley* by Kenneth Read, and *The Savage and the Innocent* by David Maybury-Lewis, as well as the mildly fictionalized *Return to Laughter* by Elenore Smith Bowen (Laura Bohannan). Later "reflexive" ethnographies refined the technique to translate cultural differences by representing their effects on the ethnographer. Famous examples include "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight" by Clifford Geertz, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* by Paul Rabinow, *The Headman and I* by Jean-Paul Dumont, and *Tuhami* by Vincent Crapanzano. In the 1980s, the rhetoric of ethnography was subjected to intense scrutiny within the discipline, under the general influence of literary theory and post-colonial/post-structuralist thought. "Experimental" ethnographies that reveal the ferment of the discipline include *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* by Michael Taussig, *Debating Muslims* by Michael F. J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *A Space on the Side of the Road* by Kathleen Stewart, and *Advocacy after Bhopal* by Kim Fortun.

**Sociology**

Sociology is another field which prominently features ethnographies. Urban sociology and the Chicago School in particular are associated with ethnographic research, with some well-known early examples being *Street Corner Society* by William Foote Whyte and *Black Metropolis* by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Caton. Some of the influence for this can be traced to the anthropologist Lloyd Warner who was on the Chicago sociology faculty, and to Robert Park's experience as a journalist. Symbolic interactionism developed from the same tradition and yielded several excellent sociological ethnographies, including *Shared Fantasy* by Gary Alan Fine, which documents the early history of fantasy role-playing games. Other important ethnographies in the discipline of sociology include Pierre Bourdieu's work on Algeria and France, Paul Willis's *Learning To Labour* on working class youth, and the work of Mitchell Duneier and Loic Wacquant on black America. But even though many sub-fields and theoretical perspectives within sociology use ethnographic methods, ethnography is not the *sine qua non* of the discipline, as it is in cultural anthropology.

**Other fields**

The American anthropologist George Spindler (Stanford University) was a pioneer in applying ethnographic methodology to the classroom.

Anthropologists like Daniel Miller and Mary Douglas have used ethnographic data to answer academic questions about consumers and consumption. In this sense, Tony Salvador, Genevieve Bell, and Ken Anderson describe design ethnography as being "a way of understanding the particulars of daily life in such a way as to increase the success probability of a new product or service or, more appropriately, to reduce the probability of failure specifically due to a lack of understanding of the basic behaviors and frameworks of consumers.

Businesses, too, have found ethnographers helpful for understanding how people use products and services, as indicated in the increasing use of ethnographic methods to understand consumers and consumption, or for new product development (such as video ethnography). The recent Ethnographic
Praxis in Industry (EPIC) conference is evidence of this. Ethnographers’ systematic and holistic approach to real-life experience is valued by product developers, who use the method to understand unstated desires or cultural practices that surround products. Where focus groups fail to inform marketers about what people really do, ethnography links what people say to what they actually do—avoiding the pitfalls that come from relying only on self-reported, focus-group data.

**Ethics**

Gary Alan Fine argues that the nature of ethnographic inquiry demands that researchers deviate from formal and idealistic rules or ethics that have come to be widely accepted in qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. Many of these ethical assumptions are rooted in positivist and post-positivist epistemologies that have adapted over time, but nonetheless are apparent and must be accounted for in all research paradigms. These ethical dilemmas are evident throughout the entire process of conducting ethnographies, including the design, implementation, and reporting of an ethnographic study. Essentially, Fine maintains that researchers are typically not as ethical as they claim or assume to be — and that “each job includes ways of doing things that would be inappropriate for others to know”.

Fine is not necessarily casting blame or pointing his finger at ethnographic researchers, but rather is attempting to show that researchers often make idealized ethical claims and standards which in actuality are inherently based on partial truths and self-deceptions. Fine also acknowledges that many of these partial truths and self-deceptions are unavoidable. He maintains that “illusions” are essential to maintain an occupational reputation and avoid potentially more caustic consequences. He claims, “Ethnographers cannot help but lie, but in lying, we reveal truths that escape those who are not so bold”. Based on these assertions, Fine establishes three conceptual clusters in which ethnographic ethical dilemmas can be situated: “Classic Virtues,” “Technical Skills,” and “Ethnographic Self.”

Much debate surrounding the issue of ethics arose after the ethnographer Napoleon Chagnon conducted his ethnographic fieldwork with the Yanomamo people of South America.

**Classic Virtues**

- “The kindly ethnographer” – Most ethnographers present themselves as being more sympathetic than they actually are, which aids in the research process, but is also deceptive. The identity that we present to subjects is different from who we are in other circumstances.
- “The friendly ethnographer” – Ethnographers operate under the assumption that they should not dislike anyone. In actuality, when hated individuals are found within research, ethnographers often crop them out of the findings.
- “The honest ethnographer” – If research participants know the research goals, their responses will likely be skewed. Therefore, ethnographers often conceal what they know in order to increase the likelihood of acceptance.

**Technical Skills**

- “The Precise Ethnographer” – Ethnographers often create the illusion that field notes are data and reflect what “really” happened. They engage in the opposite of plagiarism, giving credit to those undeserving by not using precise words but rather loose interpretations and paraphrasing. Researchers take near-fictions and turn them into claims of fact. The closest ethnographers can ever really get to reality is an approximate truth.
- “The Observant Ethnographer” – Readers of ethnography are often led to assume the report of a scene is complete – that little of importance was missed. In reality, an ethnographer will always miss some aspect because they are not omniscient. Everything is open to multiple interpretations.
and misunderstandings. The ability of the ethnographer to take notes and observe varies, and therefore, what is depicted in ethnography is not the whole picture.

- “The Unobtrusive Ethnographer” – As a “participant” in the scene, the researcher will always have an effect on the communication that occurs within the research site. The degree to which one is an “active member” affects the extent to which sympathetic understanding is possible.\[^{[19]}\]

### The Ethnographic Self

- “The Candid Ethnographer” – Where the researcher situates themselves within the ethnography is ethically problematic. There is an illusion that everything reported has actually happened because the researcher has been directly exposed to it.
- “The Chaste Ethnographer” – When ethnographers participate within the field, they invariably develop relationships with research subjects/participants. These relationships are sometimes not accounted for within the reporting of the ethnography despite the fact that they seemingly would influence the research findings.
- “The Fair Ethnographer” – Fine claims that objectivity is an illusion and that everything in ethnography is known from a perspective. Therefore, it is unethical for a researcher to report fairness in their findings.
- “The Literary Ethnographer” – Representation is a balancing act of determining what to “show” through poetic/prosaic language and style versus what to “tell” via straightforward, ‘factual’ reporting. The idiosyncratic skill of the ethnographer influences the face-value of the research.\[^{[20]}\]

Seven principles should be considered for observing, recording and sampling data according to Denzin:

1. The groups should combine symbolic meanings with patterns of interaction.
2. Observe the world from the point of view of the subject, while maintaining the distinction between everyday and scientific perceptions of reality.
3. Link the group’s symbols and their meanings with the social relationships.
4. Record all behaviour.
5. Methodology should highlight phases of process, change and stability.
6. The act should be a type of symbolic interactionism.
7. Use concepts that would avoid casual explanations.

### Cultural relativism

**Cultural relativism** is the principle that an individual human’s beliefs and activities should be understood in terms of his or her own culture. This principle was established as axiomatic in anthropological research by Franz Boas in the first few decades of the 20th century and later popularized by students. Boas first articulated the idea in 1887: “...civilization is not something absolute, but ... is relative, and .. our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes.”\[^{[1]}\] but did not actually coin the term "cultural relativism." The term became common among anthropologists after Boas’ death in 1942, to express their synthesis of a number of ideas Boas had developed; the first use of the term was in the journal *American Anthropologist* in 1948.

Cultural relativism involves specific epistemological and methodological claims. Whether or not these claims necessitate a specific ethical stance is a matter of debate. This principle should not be confused with moral relativism.

### Epistemological origins
The epistemological claims that led to the development of cultural relativism have their origins in the German Enlightenment. The philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that human beings are not capable of direct, unmediated knowledge of the world. All of our experiences of the world are mediated through the human mind, which universally structures perceptions according to sensibilities concerning time and space.

Although Kant considered these mediating structures universal, his student Johann Gottfried Herder argued that human creativity, evidenced by the great variety in national cultures, revealed that human experience was mediated not only by universal structures, but by particular cultural structures as well. The philosopher and linguist, Wilhelm von Humboldt, called for an anthropology that would synthesize Kant and Herder's ideas.

Although Herder focused on the positive value of cultural variety, the sociologist William Graham Sumner called attention to the fact that one's culture can limit one's perceptions. He called this principle ethnocentrism, the viewpoint that "one's own group is the center of everything," against which all other groups are judged.

**As a methodological and heuristic device**

According to George Marcus and Michael Fischer,

> 20th century social and cultural anthropology has promised its still largely Western readership enlightenment on two fronts. The one has been the salvaging of distinct cultural forms of life from a process of apparent global Westernization. With both its romantic appeal and its scientific intentions, anthropology has stood for the refusal to accept this conventional perception of homogenization toward a dominant Western model.\[^2\]

Cultural relativism was in part a response to Western ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism may take obvious forms, in which one consciously believes that one's people's arts are the most beautiful, values the most virtuous, and beliefs the most truthful. Franz Boas, originally trained in physics and geography, and heavily influenced by the thought of Kant, Herder, and von Humboldt, argued that one's culture may mediate and thus limit one's perceptions in less obvious ways. He understood "culture" to include not only certain tastes in food, art, and music, or beliefs about religion. He assumed a much broader notion of culture, defined as

> the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of the individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relation to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself, and of each individual to himself.\[^3\]

This understanding of culture confronts anthropologists with two problems: first, how to escape the unconscious bonds of one's own culture, which inevitably bias our perceptions of and reactions to the world, and second, how to make sense of an unfamiliar culture. The principle of cultural relativism thus forced anthropologists to develop innovative methods and heuristic strategies.

**As a methodological tool**

Between World War I and World War II, "cultural relativism" was the central tool for American anthropologists in this refusal of Western claims to universality, and salvage of non-Western cultures. It functioned to transform Boas' epistemology into methodological lessons.
This is most obvious in the case of language. Although language is commonly thought of as a means of communication, Boas understood that it is also a means of categorizing experiences. The existence of different languages suggests that people categorize, and thus experience, language differently (this view was more fully developed in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis). He especially called attention to language not as a means of communication but as a means of categorizing experiences.

Thus, although all people perceive visible radiation the same way, in terms of a continuum of color, people who speak different languages slice up this continuum into discrete colors in different ways. Some languages have no word that corresponds to the English word "green." When people who speak such languages are shown a green chip, some identify it using their word for blue, others identify it using their word for yellow. Thus, Boas' student Melville Herskovits summed up the principle of cultural relativism thus: "Judgements are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation."

Boas pointed out that scientists grow up and work in a particular culture, and are thus necessarily ethnocentric. He provided an example of this in his article, "On Alternating Sounds". Alternating sounds is a phenomenon described by a number of linguists at Boas' time, in which speakers of a language pronounce a given word in two distinct ways. The difference is not a matter of accent but of specific phonetic elements.

For example, when many native-Japanese speakers speak in English, many English speakers hear them alternate between pronouncing one word as "lice" and as "rice." Anthropologists in the 19th century observed that it was common in Native American languages that an individual would pronounce a word in his or her own language in such different ways. These anthropologists believed they had perceived a unique feature of Native American languages.

Boas, however, argued that in these cases Native Americans had been pronouncing the word in question the same way, consistently. He pointed out that the problem was that English lacks a certain sound (just as some languages lack a word for green). Consequently, when English speakers hear someone use that sound in another language, they systematically misperceive it as one of two similar sounds (just as some people classify a green chip as either blue or yellow).

Boas' students drew not only on his engagement with German philosophy. They also engaged the work of contemporary philosophers and scientists, such as Karl Pearson, Ernst Mach, Henri Poincaré, William James and John Dewey in an attempt to move, in the words of Boas' student Robert Lowie, from "a naively metaphysical to an epistemological stage" as a basis for revising the methods and theories of anthropology.

Boas and his students realized that if they were to conduct scientific research in other cultures, they would need to employ methods that would help them escape the limits of their own ethnocentrism. One such method is that of ethnography: basically, they advocated living with people of another culture for an extended period of time, so that they could learn the local language and be enculturated, at least partially, into that culture.

In this context, cultural relativism is an attitude that is of fundamental methodological importance, because it calls attention to the importance of the local context in understanding the meaning of particular human beliefs and activities. Thus, in 1948 Virginia Heyer wrote, "Cultural relativity, to phrase it in starkest abstraction, states the relativity of the part to the whole. The part gains its cultural significance by its place in the whole, and cannot retain its integrity in a different situation."[5]

As a heuristic tool
Another method was ethnology: to compare and contrast as wide a range of cultures as possible, in a systematic and even-handed manner. In the late nineteenth century, this study occurred primarily through the display of material artifacts in museums. Curators typically assumed that similar causes produce similar effects; therefore, in order to understand the causes of human action, they grouped similar artifacts together — regardless of provenance. Their aim was to classify artifacts, like biological organisms, according to families, genera, and species. Thus organized, museum displays would illustrate the evolution of civilization from its crudest to its most refined forms.

In an article in the journal *Science*, Boas argued that this approach to cultural evolution ignored one of Charles Darwin's main contributions to evolutionary theory:

> It is only since the development of the evolutional theory that it became clear that the object of study is the individual, not abstractions from the individual under observation. We have to study each ethnological specimen individually in its history and in its medium .... By regarding a single implement outside of its surroundings, outside of other inventions of the people to whom it belongs, and outside of other phenomena affecting that people and its productions, we cannot understand its meanings .... Our objection ... is, that classification is not explanation.\[6\]

Boas argued that although similar causes produce similar effects, different causes may also produce similar effects. Consequently, similar artifacts found in distinct and distant places may be the products of distinct causes. Against the popular method of drawing analogies in order to reach generalizations, Boas argued in favor of an inductive method. Based on his critique of contemporary museum displays, Boas concluded:

> It is my opinion that the main object of ethnological collections should be the dissemination of the fact that civilization is not something absolute, but that it is relative, and that our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes.

Boas' student Alfred Kroeber described the rise of the relativist perspective thus:

> Now while some of the interest in anthropology in its earlier stages was in the exotic and the out-of-the-way, yet even this antiquarian motivation ultimately contributed to a broader result. Anthropologists became aware of the diversity of culture. They began to see the tremendous range of its variations. From that, they commenced to envisage it as a totality, as no historian of one period or of a single people was likely to do, nor any analyst of his own type of civilization alone. They became aware of culture as a "universe," or vast field in which we of today and our own civilization occupy only one place of many. The result was a widening of a fundamental point of view, a departure from unconscious ethnocentricity toward relativity. This shift from naive self-centeredness in one's own time and spot to a broader view based on objective comparison is somewhat like the change from the original geocentric assumption of astronomy to the Copernican interpretation of the solar system and the subsequent still greater widening to a universe of galaxies.

This conception of culture, and principle of cultural relativism, were for Kroeber and his colleagues the fundamental contribution of anthropology, and what distinguished anthropology from similar disciplines such as sociology and psychology.

Ruth Benedict, another of Boas' students, also argued that an appreciation of the importance of culture and the problem of ethnocentrism demands that the scientist adopt cultural relativism as a method. Her book, *Patterns of Culture*, did much to popularize the term in the United States. In it, she explained that:
The study of custom can be profitable only after certain preliminary propositions have been violently opposed. In the first place any scientific study requires that there be no preferential weighting of one or another items in the series it selects for its consideration. In all the less controversial fields like the study of cacti or termites or the nature of nebulae, the necessary method of study is to group the relevant material and to take note of all possible variant forms and conditions. In this way we have learned all that we know of the laws of astronomy, or of the habits of the social insects, let us say. It is only in the study of man himself that the major social sciences have substituted the study of one local variation, that of Western civilization.[8]

Benedict was adamant that she was not romanticizing so-called primitive societies; she was emphasizing that any understanding of the totality of humanity must be based on as wide and varied a sample of individual cultures as possible. Moreover, it is only by appreciating a culture that is profoundly different from our own, that we can realize the extent to which our own beliefs and activities are culture-bound, rather than natural or universal. In this context, cultural relativism is a heuristic device of fundamental importance because it calls attention to the importance of variation in any sample that is used to derive generalizations about humanity.

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