Cultural Anthropology

TENTH EDITION

A Perspective on the Human Condition

Emily A. Schultz | Robert H. Lavenda

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St. Cloud State University

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For Daniel and Rachel

Contents

Preface xv

CHAPTER 1 What Is the Anthropological Perspective? 3

What Is Anthropology? 4
What Is the Concept of Culture? 6
What Makes Anthropology a Cross-Disciplinary Discipline? 7
Biological Anthropology 8
In Their Own Words: Anthropology as a Vocation 9
Cultural Anthropology 10
Linguistic Anthropology 13
Archaeology 13
Applied Anthropology 14
In Their Own Words: What Can You Learn from an Anthropology Major? 15
Medical Anthropology 16
The Uses of Anthropology 17
CHAPTER SUMMARY 17
FOR REVIEW 18
KEY TERMS 18
SUGGESTED READINGS 18

Part I The Tools of Cultural Anthropology

CHAPTER 2 Why Is the Concept of Culture Important? 21

How Do Anthropologists Define Culture? 22
In Their Own Words: The Paradox of Ethnocentrism 23
Culture, History, and Human Agency 25
In Their Own Words: Culture and Freedom 27
Why Do Cultural Differences Matter? 27
What Is Ethnocentrism? 28
In Their Own Words: Human-Rights Law and the Demonization of Culture 29
Is It Possible to Avoid Ethnocentric Bias? 30
What Is Cultural Relativism? 31
How Can Cultural Relativity Improve Our Understanding of Controversial Cultural Practices? 31
Genital Cutting, Gender, and Human Rights 31
Genital Cutting as a Valued Ritual 32
Culture and Moral Reasoning 33
Did Their Culture Make Them Do It? 33
Does Culture Explain Everything? 35
Culture Change and Cultural Authenticity 36
The Promise of the Anthropological Perspective 37
CHAPTER SUMMARY 37
FOR REVIEW 38
KEY TERMS 38
SUGGESTED READINGS 39

CHAPTER 3 What Is Ethnographic Fieldwork? 41

Why Do Fieldwork? 43
What Is the Fieldwork Experience Like? 43
A Meeting of Cultural Traditions 45
Ethnographic Fieldwork: How Has Anthropologists' Understanding Changed? 46
The Positivist Approach 47
Was There a Problem with Positivism? 49
Can the Reflexive Approach Replace Positivism? 50
Anthropology in Everyday Life: Anthropological Ethics 52
Can Fieldwork Be Multisited? 54
What Is the Dialectic of Fieldwork? 55
How Are Interpretation and Translation Important Aspects of Fieldwork? 56
In Their Own Words: Who's Studying Whom? 57
How Can Anthropologists Move beyond the Dialectic? 58
In Their Own Words: Japanese Corporate Wives in the United States 59
The Dialectic of Fieldwork: Some Examples 60
What Happens When There Are Ruptures in Communication? 62
What Are the Effects of Fieldwork? 64
How Does Fieldwork Affect Informants? 64
How Does Fieldwork Affect the Researcher? 66
Does Fieldwork Have Humanizing Effects? 67
In Their Own Words: The Relationship between Anthropologists and Informants 68
Where Does Anthropological Knowledge Come From? 68
How Is Knowledge Produced? 69
Is Anthropological Knowledge Open Ended? 69
In Their Own Words: The Skills of the Anthropologist 70
CHAPTER SUMMARY 71
FOR REVIEW 72
KEY TERMS 72
SUGGESTED READINGS 72

CHAPTER 4 How Has Anthropological Thinking about Cultural Diversity Changed over Time? 75

Capitalism, Colonialism, and the Origins of Ethnography 76
Capitalism and Colonialism 77
The Fur Trade in North America 79
The Slave and Commodities Trades 79
Colonialism and Modernity 79
The Colonial Political Economy 80
Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter 80
In Their Own Words: The Anthropological Voice 81
What Explains Human Cultural Variation? 82
In Their Own Words: The Ecologically Noble Savage? 83
Evolutionary Typologies: The Nineteenth Century 83
Social Structural Typologies: The British Emphasis 85
Doing without Typologies: Culture Area Studies in America 88
How Do Anthropologists Study Forms of Human Society Today? 90
Postcolonial Realities 90
Locating Cultural Processes in History 91
Analyzing Cultural Processes under Globalization 91
The Anthropology of Science, Technology, and Medicine 93
CHAPTER SUMMARY 95
FOR REVIEW 97
KEY TERMS 97
SUGGESTED READINGS 97

Part II The Resources of Culture

CHAPTER 5 What Is Human Language? 99

Why Do Anthropologists Study Language? 100
Language and Culture 100
Talking about Experience 101
What Makes Human Language Distinctive? 102
In Their Own Words: Cultural Translation 104
What Does It Mean to "Learn" a Language? 105
Language and Context 105
Does Language Affect How We See the World? 106
What Are the Components of Language? 108
Phonology: Sounds 108
Morphology: Word Structure 109
Syntax: Sentence Structure 109
Semantics: Meaning 110
Pragmatics: Language in Contexts of Use 110
Ethnopragmatics 111
What Happens When Languages Come into Contact? 113
What Is the Relation of Pidgins and Creoles? 113
How Is Meaning Negotiated in Pidgins and Creoles? 114
What Does Linguistic Inequality Look Like? 114
What Are the Controversies Surrounding the Language Habits of African Americans? 114
In Their Own Words: Varieties of African American English 116
What Is Language Ideology? 116
What Are the Controversies Surrounding the Language Habits of Women and Men? 117
What Is Lost If a Language Dies? 119
Anthropology in Everyday Life: Language Revitalization 120
How Are Language and Truth Connected? 123
CHAPTER SUMMARY 124
FOR REVIEW 125
KEY TERMS 125
SUGGESTED READINGS 125

CHAPTER 6 How Do We Make Meaning? 127

What Is Play? 128
How Do We Think about Play? 128
What Are Some Effects of Play? 129
Do People Play by the Rules? 131
How Are Culture and Sport Related? 132
How Is Sport in the Nation-State Organized? 132
Sport as Metaphor 133
How Are Baseball and Masculinity Related in Cuba? 134
What Is Art? 135
Can Art Be Defined? 135
"But Is It Art?" 136
"She's Fake": Art and Authenticity 139
How Does Hip-Hop Become Japanese? 140
How Does Sculpture Figure in the Baule Gbagba Dance? 141
The Mass Media: A Television Serial in Egypt 143
In Their Own Words: Tango 144
What Is Myth? 145
How Does Myth Reflect—and Shape—Society? 146
Do Myths Help Us Think? 147
What Is Ritual? 148
How Do Anthropologists Define Ritual? 148
What Makes a Child's Birthday Party a Ritual? 148
How Is Ritual Expressed in Action? 149
What Are Rites of Passage? 149
How Are Play and Ritual Complementary? 150
In Their Own Words: Video in the Villages 151
How Do Cultural Practices Combine Play, Art, Myth, and Ritual? 152
CHAPTER SUMMARY 153
FOR REVIEW 154
KEY TERMS 155
SUGGESTED READINGS 155

CHAPTER 7 What Can Anthropology Tell Us about Religion and Worldview? 157

What Is a Worldview? 159
How Do Anthropologists Study Worldviews? 159
What Are Some Key Metaphors for Constructing Worldviews? 161
What Is Religion? 162
How Do People Communicate in Religion? 163
How Are Religion and Social Organization Related? 165
Worldviews in Practice: Two Case Studies 166
Coping with Misfortune: Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande 166
Are There Patterns of Witchcraft Accusation? 169
Coping with Misfortune: Listening for God among Contemporary Evangelicals in the United States 169
In Their Own Words: For All Those Who Were Indian in a Former Life 170
Maintaining and Changing a Worldview 171
How Do People Cope with Change? 171
Anthropology in Everyday Life: Lead Poisoning among Mexican American Children 172
In Their Own Words: Custom and Confrontation 174
How Are Worldviews Used as Instruments of Power? 174
Is Secularism a Worldview? 175
Religion and Secularism 175
Muslim Headscarves in France: A Case Study 177
CHAPTER SUMMARY 179
FOR REVIEW 180
KEY TERMS 180
SUGGESTED READINGS 181

Part III The Organization of Material Life

CHAPTER 8 How Are Culture and Power Connected? 183

Who Has the Power to Act? 184
How Do Anthropologists Study Politics? 186
What Is Coercion? 186
Coercion in Societies without States? 187
Domination and Hegemony 188
Power and National Identity: A Case Study 189
Biopower and Governmentality 191
Trying to Elude Governmentality: A Case Study 192
In Their Own Words: Reforming the Crow Constitution 193
Anthropology in Everyday Life: Anthropology and Advertising 194
The Ambiguity of Power 195
How Can Power Be an Independent Entity? 195
What Is the Power of the Imagination? 196
The Power of the Weak 196
What Does It Mean to Bargain for Reality? 198
In Their Own Words: Protesters Gird for Long Fight over Opening Peru's Amazon 201
How Does History Become a Prototype of and for Political Action? 203
How Can the Meaning of History Be Negotiated? 205
CHAPTER SUMMARY 206
FOR REVIEW 206
KEY TERMS 207
SUGGESTED READINGS 207

CHAPTER 9 How Do People Make a Living? 209

What Are Subsistence Strategies? 211
What Are the Connections between Culture and Livelihood? 212
Self-Interest, Institutions, and Morals 212
What Are Production, Distribution, and Consumption? 213
How Are Goods Distributed and Exchanged? 214
Capitalism and Neoclassical Economics 214
In Their Own Words: David Graeber on Debt 215
Modes of Exchange 217

Does Production Drive Economic Activities? 219
Labor 220
Modes of Production 220
The Role of Conflict in Material Life 221
Anthropology in Everyday Life: Producing Sorghum and Millet in Honduras and the Sudan 222
Applying Production Theory to Social and Cultural Life 222
In Their Own Words: "So Much Work, So Much Tragedy . . . and for What?" 224
Why Do People Consume What They Do? 224
In Their Own Words: Solidarity Forever 225
The Internal Explanation: Malinowski and Basic Human Needs 225
The External Explanation: Cultural Ecology 226
Food Storage and Sharing 226
How Does Culture Construct Human Needs? 227
What Is the Original Affluent Society? 227
The Abominations of Leviticus 229
Banana Leaves in the Trobriand Islands 229
Changing Consumption in Rural Guatemala 231
How Does Culture Construct Utility? 231
In Their Own Words: Fake Masks and Faux Modernity 232
Consumption Studies Today 232
Coca-Cola in Trinidad 233
What Is the Anthropology of Food and Nutrition? 234
Interplay between the Meaningful and the Material 235
CHAPTER SUMMARY 236
FOR REVIEW 236
KEY TERMS 237
SUGGESTED READINGS 237

Part IV Systems of Relationships

CHAPTER 10 What Can Anthropology Teach Us about Sex, Gender, and Sexuality? 239

How Did Twentieth-Century Feminism Shape the Anthropological Study of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality? 240
How Do Anthropologists Organize the Study of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality? 244
In Their Own Words: The Consequences of Being a Woman 247
How Are Sex and Gender Affected by Other Forms of Identity? 248
How Do Ethnographers Study Gender Performativity? 249
How Do Anthropologists Study Connections Among Sex, Gender, Sexuality, and the Body? 252
How Do Anthropologists Study Connections between Bodies and Technologies? 254
How Do Anthropologists Study Relations between Sex, Gender, and Sexuality? 255
How Does Ethnography Document Variable Culture Understandings Concerning Sex, Gender, and Sexuality? 257
Female Sexual Practices in Mombasa 258
Male and Female Sexual Practices in Nicaragua 260
Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Iran 261
CHAPTER SUMMARY 263
FOR REVIEW 264
KEY TERMS 265
SUGGESTED READINGS 265

CHAPTER 11 Where Do Our Relatives Come from and Why Do They Matter? 267

How Do Human Beings Organize Interdependence? 268
What Is Friendship? 269
What Is Kinship? 272
What Is the Role of Descent in Kinship? 273
Bilateral Kindreds 274
What Role Do Lineages Play in Descent? 275
Lineage Membership 275
The Logic of Lineage Relationships 277
What Are Patrilineages? 277
What Are Matrilineages? 278
Matrilineality, Electoral Politics, and the Art of the Neutral Partisan 279
What Are Kinship Terminologies? 280
What Criteria Are Used for Making Kinship Distinctions? 280

What Is Adoption? 281
Adoption in Highland Ecuador 282
What Is the Relation Between Adoption and Child Circulation in the Andes? 283
How Flexible Can Relatedness Be? 284
Negotiation of Kin Ties among the Ju/'hoansi 284
European American Kinship and New Reproductive Technologies 285
Assisted Reproduction in Israel 286
Compadrazgo in Latin America 287
Organ Transplantation and the Creation of New Relatives 288
What Is Marriage? 289
Toward a Definition of Marriage 289
Woman Marriage and Ghost Marriage among the Nuer 289
Why Is Marriage a Social Process? 290
Patterns of Residence after Marriage 290
Single and Plural Spouses 291
What Is the Connection between Marriage and Economic Exchange? 293
In Their Own Words: Outside Work, Women, and Bridewealth 294
What Is a Family? 295
What Is the Nuclear Family? 295
In Their Own Words: Dowry Too High. Lose Bride and Go to Jail 296
What Is the Polygynous Family? 297
Extended and Joint Families 298
How Are Families Transformed over Time? 298
Divorce and Remarriage 298
In Their Own Words: Law, Custom, and Crimes against Women 300
How Does International Migration Affect the Family? 300
In Their Own Words: Survival and a Surrogate Family 302
Families by Choice 303
Anthropology in Everyday Life: Caring for Infibulated Women Giving Birth in Norway 304
In Their Own Words: Why Migrant Women Feed Their Husbands Tamales 306
The Flexibility of Marriage 306
Love, Marriage, and HIV/AIDS in Nigeria 307
In Their Own Words: Two Cheers for Gay Marriage 308
CHAPTER SUMMARY 310
FOR REVIEW 312
KEY TERMS 313
SUGGESTED READINGS 313

Part V From Local to Global

CHAPTER 12 What Can Anthropology Tell Us about Social Inequality? 315

Class 316
Caste 318
Caste in India 318
How Do Caste and Class Intersect in Contemporary India? 319
Caste in Western Africa 322
The Value of Caste as an Analytic Category 323
Race 323
In Their Own Words: As Economic Turmoil Mounts, So Do Attacks on Hungary's Gypsies 324
In Their Own Words: On the Butt Size of Barbie and Shani 325
The Biology of Human Variation 325
Race as a Social Category 327
Race in Colonial Oaxaca 328
Colorism in Nicaragua 330
Ethnicity 331
In Their Own Words: The Politics of Ethnicity 332
Ethnicity in Urban Africa 333
Ethnicity and Race 334
Nation and Nation-State 335
Nationalities and Nationalism 336
Australian Nationalism 336
Anthropology in Everyday Life: Anthropology and Democracy 338
Naturalizing Discourses 340
The Paradox of Essentialized Identities 340
Nation-Building in a Postcolonial World: Fiji 340
Nationalism and Its Dangers 342
CHAPTER SUMMARY 343
FOR REVIEW 344
KEY TERMS 344
SUGGESTED READINGS 345

CHAPTER 13 What Can Anthropology Tell Us about Globalization? 347

In Their Own Words: Amazon Indians Honor an Intrepid Spirit 349
In Their Own Words: The Ethnographer's Responsibility 351
In Their Own Words: Slumdog Tourism 352
Cultural Imperialism or Cultural Hybridity? 353
Cultural Imperialism 353
Cultural Hybridity 353
In Their Own Words: How Sushi Went Global 354
The Limits of Cultural Hybridity 356
How Does Globalization Affect the Nation-State? 357
Are Global Flows Undermining Nation-States? 357
Migration, Trans-Border Identities, and Long-Distance Nationalism 358
In Their Own Words: Cofan 359
Anthropology and Multicultural Politics in the New Europe 362
How Can Citizenship Be Flexible? 366
What Is Territorial Citizenship? 368
What Is Vernacular Statecraft? 368
Are Human Rights Universal? 370
Human Rights Discourse as the Global Language of Social Justice 370
Rights versus Culture 371
Rights to Culture 372
Rights as Culture 373
Anthropology in Everyday Life: Anthropology and Indigenous Rights 374
How Can Culture Help in Thinking about Rights? 376
Violence against Women in Hawaii 377
What Is the Relationship between Human Rights and Humanitarianism? 379
Can We Be at Home in a Global World? 380
Cosmopolitanism 381
In Their Own Words: Destructive Logging and Deforestation in Indonesia 382
Friction 383
Border Thinking 384
CHAPTER SUMMARY 385
FOR REVIEW 387
KEY TERMS 387
SUGGESTED READINGS 387

CHAPTER 14 How Is Anthropology Applied in the Field of Medicine? 389

What Is Medical Anthropology? 390
What Makes Medical Anthropology "Biocultural"? 390
How Do People with Different Cultures Understand the Causes of Sickness and Health? 393
Kinds of Selves 393
Decentered Selves on the Internet 395
Self and Subjectivity 395
Subjectivity, Trauma, and Structural Violence 397
How Are Human Sickness and Health Shaped by the Global Capitalist Economy? 401
In Their Own Words: Ethical Dilemmas and Decisions 402
Health, Human Reproduction, and Global Capitalism 403
Medical Anthropology and HIV/AIDS 406
The Future of Medical Anthropology 410
Why Study Anthropology? 410
CHAPTER SUMMARY 411
FOR REVIEW 414
KEY TERMS 414
SUGGESTED READINGS 415

Glossary 417

Bibliography 425

Credits 441

Index 445

Preface

Humans are a social species whose members depend on one another for their survival, and for their flourishing. Movement from place to place has also characterized human history reaching back hundreds of thousands of years before the appearance of our own species, *Homo sapiens*. Anthropologists and others have long been impressed by the distinctive patterned activities in which the members of different human groups may engage, the orderly fashion in which they their members may arrange themselves in order to involve themselves, for example, in the performance of public rituals of various kinds. There may be nothing as quintessentially human as a group of people moving together in space, tracing intricate patterns with their bodies in motion, but also periodically ceasing to move where this is deemed appropriate.

So what perspective on the human condition can an image like the one on this cover convey to an observer? The people we see are standing in a long line outdoors. Why might they be there? Are they watching something beyond the observer's field of vision? Might they be standing alongside a playing field, watching a sports competition? Might they be watching a public performance of some kind—the elaborate visit of political dignitaries, for example, or the enactment of a major religious ritual? Were they individually drawn to whatever is going on, or were they pressured to be present when they might have preferred to stay away? Much of the drama of the image is contributed by the dramatic and forbidding cloud formations in the sky above the line of people. Did the photographer take the photograph intending to emphasize these cloud formations, or later crop the photograph to produce this visual effect? Was the photograph finished the way it was in order to convey to the viewers the impression that the people standing in line were under some kind of threat? Or is a viewer who draws such a conclusion reading too much into the cloud formations?

One picture may be worth a thousand words, and yet no picture speaks for itself clearly and unambiguously. As it happens, the photograph is described as follows: "Refugees in Kibati (Democratic Republic of Congo) line up to receive food aid rations from the World Food Program at a camp for Internally Displaced People (2008)." They are there both willingly and unwillingly. Receiving food suggests that the threat of hunger will be avoided, but the fact that they are receiving food rations from an international aid organization suggests that it was threats they experienced elsewhere that drove them to stand in this line. The sky is not sunny, but it is not storming either. They are, for good and for ill, betwixt and between: they have fled their homes, but have not fled their country; their old ways of providing for themselves have been disrupted, but they are alive and will soon be able to eat. But they do indeed seem very much at the mercy of processes in the world—forces of nature as well as of human society and politics—that make the threatening sky an apt visual metaphor for their current situation.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, many people throughout the world find themselves in circumstances that resonate with that of the displaced line of humans in Kigali in 2008. Anthropologists and historians will rightly argue that no human society has ever been static, but recent decades have been unusually disruptive of many local ways of life throughout the world. Indeed, the discipline of anthropology, which aimed to investigate and understand such ways of life as lived in places outside the world of European and North American urban society, was born during the final decades of the nineteenth century, when the full force of European capitalism had

extended its reach around the world, putting the finishing touches on economic and political structures that would stabilize in the form of European (and American) colonial empires. Classic works of sociocultural research were carried out in colonized settings throughout the first two thirds of the twentieth century, with the aim of recovering and even celebrating the rich patterns of everyday life that drew from the past while finding ways to accommodate the challenges of so-called modernization imposed from elsewhere. By the end of the twentieth century, newer historical transformations were again remaking the face of the globe, drawing members of all human societies into new entanglements with one another. Not all such entanglements have been threatening. Still, for many people, the stakes have been exceptionally high, triggering political struggles and often violent clashes that lead to high loss of life, with survivors forced to move away from their homes into unknown and forbidding futures.

Sociocultural anthropology continues with its commitment to provide fine-grained ethnographic understandings of people's efforts to construct coherent and meaningful lives, even under changing and challenging circumstances. The chapters in this book aim to introduce students to the theories and methods traditionally developed in the discipline to address the many facets of human group life, as well as newer innovations that allow us to track the movements of people and their cultural resources into new settings, as they construct ways of life that may stabilize in new, often surprising ways, in relation to their neighbors.

Organization and Content

Cultural Anthropology: A Perspective on the Human Condition, Tenth Edition, consists of 14 chapters in five parts:

- Part I, The Tools of Cultural Anthropology, consists of three introductory chapters: one on the concept of culture, one on ethnographic fieldwork, and one on history and the explanation of cultural diversity.
- Part II, The Resources of Culture, is a set of three chapters on key dimensions and products of human creativity: language; play, art, myth, and ritual; and religion and worldview.
- Part III, The Organization of Material Life, consists of two chapters—one on power and one on making a living—that deal with the ways human cultural creativity is channeled and circumscribed by political and economic constraints.
- Part IV, Systems of Relationships, looks at the organization of human interdependence, covering gender, sex, and sexuality, kinship, other forms of relatedness, and marriage and the family.
- Part V, From Local to Global, concludes the text. We ask students to contemplate the globalizing, transnational context in which all human beings live at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Chapters examine dimensions of inequality in the contemporary world; how anthropology is applied to medicine; and some of the consequences of global political, economic, and cultural processes that all societies face today.

What's New in the Tenth Edition

In addition to updating the text, we have a number of key changes to this edition:

- Chapter 10 is a new chapter on Sex, Gender, and Sexuality. This chapter brings together material that was previously integrated into different chapters and expands and updates it with new anthropological research and analysis documenting the varied ways in which people around the world are revising their understandings and practices involving sex, gender, and sexuality.
- To make room for the new chapter 10, we have created a new chapter 11 that merges and integrates previous chapters on Relationships and Marriage and the Family. Also new in that chapter is a revised discussion of friendship and a new discussion of child circulation and adoption in the Andes.
- The material on the biology of race originally in chapter 4 has now been integrated into the discussion on racial inequality in chapter 12, offering students an integrated picture of how anthropologists approach the issue of race from both a biological and a cultural perspective. Chapter 12 also includes a new discussion of class and caste in urban India.

- The discussion of fieldwork in chapter 3 includes a much-expanded discussion of anthropology and ethics.
- The chapter on the anthropology of globalization is now chapter 13, and it includes new sections on humanitarianism and humanitarian reason, territorial citizenship, and vernacular statecraft.
- Chapter 14, on medical anthropology, is now the final chapter in the book.

Key Features

- *We take an explicitly global approach in the text*. We systematically point out the extent to which the current sociocultural situation of particular peoples has been shaped by their particular histories of contact with capitalism, and we highlight ways in which the post–Cold War global spread of capitalism has drastically reshaped the local contexts within which people everywhere live their lives.
- *We incorporate current anthropological approaches to power and inequality into the text.* We explore how power is manifested in different human societies; how it permeates all aspects of social life; and how it is deployed, resisted, and transformed. We discuss issues of trauma, social suffering, and human rights.
- *Material on gender and feminist anthropology is featured both in its own chapter and throughout the text*. Discussions of gender are tightly woven into the fabric of the book from the first chapter to the last and include (for example) material on genital cutting, gender issues in field research, language and gender, dance and gender politics, masculinity and baseball in Cuba, women and colonialism, gender issues in the Muslim headscarf controversy in France, and Nuer woman marriage.
- *Voices of indigenous peoples, anthropologists, and nonanthropologists are presented in the text in "In Their Own Words" commentaries*. These short commentaries provide alternative perspectives—always readable and sometimes controversial—on topics discussed in the chapter in which they appear.
- *How anthropology fits into everyday life continues to be an explicit focus.* Beginning with chapter 3, most chapters include a feature called "Anthropology in Everyday Life" that explores different practical applications of anthropology.
- *"EthnoProfiles" provide ethnographic summaries and maps of each society discussed at length in the text*. These boxes emerged from our desire as teachers to supply our students with basic geographical, demographic, and political information about the peoples with whom anthropologists have worked. These are not intended to be a substitute for reading ethnographies or for in-class lectures, and they are not intended to reify or essentialize the "people" or "culture" in question. Their main purpose is simply to provide a consistent orientation for readers. At the same time, as it becomes more and more difficult to attach peoples to particular territories in an era of globalization, the orientating purpose of the EthnoProfiles is also undermined. How does one calculate population numbers or draw a simple map to locate a global diaspora? How does one construct an EthnoProfile for overseas Chinese or trans-border Haitians? We did not know the answer to these questions, which is why EthnoProfiles for those groups will not be found in the textbook.
- *In our discussions, we have tried to avoid being omniscient narrators by making use of citations and quotations in order to indicate where anthropological ideas come from*. In our view, even first-year students need to know that an academic discipline like anthropology is constructed by the work of many people; no one, especially not textbooks authors, should attempt to impose a single voice on the field. We have avoided, as much as we could, predigested statements that students must take on faith. We try to give them the information that they need to see where particular conclusions come from.

Ancillaries

- A free Companion Website at http://www.oup.com/us/schultz features (1) Student Resources, including a study skills guide (filled with hints and suggestions on improving study skills, organizing information, writing essay exams, and taking multiple-choice exams), flashcards, self-quizzes, chapter outlines, and helpful links; (2) Instructor Resources, including PowerPoint

presentations for lectures, filmographies, activities, discussion questions, and guest editorials (brief essays by well-known anthropologists written especially for our text); and (3) a bonus chapter on human evolution, based on the suggestion of several reviewers who feel a need to provide their students with the basics of human evolutionary theory from a biological anthropological perspective.

- Further Instructor Resources include a free Computerized Test Bank and Instructor's Manual on CD, created by Brian Hoey of Marshall University, and free cartridges for Course Management Systems, available from your Oxford University Press sales representative.

A Final Note

We take students seriously. In our experience, although students may sometimes complain, they are also pleased when a course or a textbook gives them some credit for having minds and being willing to use them. We have worked hard to make this book readable and to present anthropology in its diversity, as a vibrant, lively discipline full of excitement, contention, and intellectual value. We do not run away from the meat of the discipline with the excuse that it's too hard for students. We are aware that instant messaging, text messaging, and social networks and live journals have changed the ways in which students communicate, spend their time, and interact with their courses, especially their textbooks. We believe that a clear, straightforward, uncluttered presentation of cultural anthropology works well. Our collective teaching experience has ranged from highly selective liberal arts colleges to multipurpose state universities to semirural community colleges. We have found that students at all of these institutions are willing to be challenged and make an effort when it is clear to them that anthropology has something to offer intellectually, emotionally, and practically. It is our hope that this new edition will continue to be a useful tool in challenging students and convincing them of the value of anthropology as a way of thinking about, and dealing with, the world in which they live.

Acknowledgments

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We continue to be impressed by the level of involvement of the reviewers of this book. Our reviewers recognize that they are important not only to us, the authors of this book, but also to the users of textbooks—both students and colleagues. They also recognize that authors have more than time invested in their work, and their thoughtfulness in their comments is much valued. We have found that even when we didn't follow their suggestions, their work caused us to think and rethink the issues they raised—it is safe to say that we have discussed every point they mentioned. We would like therefore to recognize the following individuals:

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We owe a special debt to the late Ivan Karp, who was our most important source of intellectual stimulation and support for this project in its early days.

Our children, Daniel and Rachel, have grown up with our textbooks. As they have grown, they have become increasingly concerned with the issues we raise in the book, as well they should: These are issues that affect the future of us all. This book is for them.

Cultural Anthropology

CHAPTER

1

What Is the Anthropological Perspective?

This chapter introduces the field of anthropology. We look at what anthropology is and explore its different subfields. We touch on anthropology's key concept—culture—as well as its key research method—fieldwork. We conclude with a discussion of the ways anthropological insights are relevant in everyday life.

Chapter Outline

What Is Anthropology?

What Is the Concept of Culture?

What Makes Anthropology a Cross-Disciplinary Discipline?

Biological Anthropology

Cultural Anthropology

Linguistic Anthropology

Archaeology

Applied Anthropology

Medical Anthropology

The Uses of Anthropology

Chapter Summary
For Review
Key Terms
Suggested Readings

In early 1976, the authors of this book traveled to northern Cameroon, in western Africa, to study social relations in the town of Guider, where we rented a small house. In the first weeks we lived there, we enjoyed spending the warm evenings of the dry season reading and writing in the glow of the house's brightest electric fixture, which illuminated a large, unscreened veranda. After a short time, however, the rains began, and with them appeared swarms of winged termites. These slow-moving insects with fat, two-inch abdomens were attracted to the light on the veranda, and we soon found ourselves spending more time swatting at them than reading or writing. One evening, in a fit of desperation, we rolled up old copies of the international edition of *Newsweek* and began an all-out assault, determined to rid the veranda of every single termite.

The rent we paid for this house included the services of a night watchman. As we launched our attack on the termites, the night watchman suddenly appeared beside the veranda carrying an empty powdered milk tin. When he asked if he could have the insects we had been killing, we were a bit taken aback but warmly invited him to help himself. He moved onto the veranda, quickly collected the corpses of fallen insects, and then joined us in going after those termites that were still airborne. Although we became skilled at thwacking the insects with our rolled-up magazines, our skills paled beside those of the night watchman, who simply snatched the termites out of the air with his hand, squeezed them gently, and dropped them into his rapidly filling tin can. The three of us managed to clear the air of insects—and fill his tin—in about 10 minutes. The night watchman thanked us and returned to his post, and we returned to our books.

The following evening, soon after we took up our usual places on the veranda, the watchman appeared at the steps bearing a tray with two covered dishes. He explained that his wife had prepared the food for us in exchange for our help in collecting termites. We accepted the food and carefully lifted the lids. One dish contained *nyiri*, a stiff paste made of red sorghum, a staple of the local diet. The other dish contained another pasty substance with a speckled, salt-and-pepper appearance, which we realized was termite paste prepared from the insects we had all killed the previous night.

The night watchman waited at the foot of the veranda steps, an expectant smile on his face. Clearly, he did not intend to leave until we tasted the food his wife had prepared. We looked at each other. We had never eaten insects before or considered them edible in the North American, middle-class diet we were used to. To be sure, "delicacies" like chocolate-covered ants exist, but such items are considered by most North Americans to be food fit only for eccentrics. However, we understood the importance of not insulting the night watchman and his wife, who were being so generous to us. We knew that insects were a favored food in many human societies and that eating them brought no ill effects. So we reached into the dish of *nyiri*, pulling off a small amount. We then used the ball of *nyiri* to scoop up a small portion of termite paste, brought the mixture to our mouths, ate, chewed, and swallowed. The watchman beamed, bid us goodnight, and returned to his post.

We looked at each other in wonder. The sorghum paste had a grainy tang that was rather pleasant. The termite paste tasted mild, like chicken, not unpleasant at all. We later wrote to our families about this experience. When they wrote back, they described how they had told friends about our experience. Most of their friends had strong, negative reactions. But one friend, a home economist, was not shocked at all. She simply commented that termites are a good source of clean protein.

What Is Anthropology?

This anecdote is not just about us; it also illustrates some of the central elements of the anthropological experience. Anthropologists want to learn about as many different human ways of life as they can. The people they come to know are members of their own society or live on a different continent, in cities or in rural areas. Their ways of life may involve patterns of regular movement across international borders, or they may make permanent homes in the borderlands themselves. Archaeologists reconstruct ancient ways of life from traces left behind in the earth that are hundreds or thousands of years old; anthropologists who strive to reconstruct the origin of the human species itself make use of fossil remains that reach back millions of years into the past. Whatever the case may be, anthropologists are sometimes exposed to practices that startle them. However, as they take the risk of getting to know such ways of life better, they are often treated to the sweet discovery of familiarity. This shock of the unfamiliar becoming familiar—as well as the familiar becoming unfamiliar—is something anthropologists come to expect and is one of the real pleasures of the field. In this book, we share aspects of the anthropological experience in the hope that you, too, will come to find pleasure, insight, and self-recognition from an involvement with the unfamiliar.

Anthropology can be defined as the study of human nature, human society, and the human past (Greenwood and Stini 1977). It is a scholarly discipline that aims to describe in the broadest possible sense what it means to be human. Anthropologists are not alone in focusing their attention on human beings and their creations. Human biology, literature, art, history, linguistics, sociology, political science, economics—all these scholarly disciplines and many more—concentrate on one or another aspect of human life. Anthropologists are convinced, however, that explanations of human activities will be superficial unless they acknowledge that human lives are always entangled in complex patterns of work and family, power and meaning. What is distinctive about the way anthropologists study human life? As we shall see, anthropology is holistic, comparative, field based, and evolutionary. First, anthropology emphasizes that all the aspects of human life intersect with one another in complex ways. They shape one another and become integrated with one another over time. Anthropology is thus the integrated, or *holistic*, study of human nature, human society, and the human past. This **holism** draws together anthropologists whose specializations might otherwise divide them. At the most inclusive level, we may thus think of anthropology as the integrated (or holistic) study of human nature, human society, and the human past. Holism has long been central to the anthropological perspective and remains the feature that draws together anthropologists whose specializations might otherwise divide them.

Second, in addition to being holistic, anthropology is a discipline interested in **comparison**. To generalize about human nature, human society, and the human past requires evidence from the widest possible range of human societies. It is not enough, for example, to observe only our own social group, discover that we do not eat insects, and conclude that human beings as a species do not eat insects. When we compare human diets in different societies, we discover that insect eating is quite common and that the North American aversion to eating insects is nothing more than a dietary practice specific to a particular society.

Third, anthropology is also a field-based discipline. That is, for almost all anthropologists, the actual practice of anthropology—its data collection—takes place away from the office and in direct contact with the people, the sites, or the animals that are of interest. Whether they are biological anthropologists studying chimpanzees in Tanzania, archaeologists excavating a site high in the Peruvian Andes, linguistic anthropologists learning an unwritten language in New Guinea, or cultural anthropologists studying ethnic identity in West Africa or small-town festivals in Minnesota, anthropologists are in direct contact with the sources of their data. For most anthropologists, the richness and complexity of this immersion in other patterns of life is one of our discipline's most distinctive features. Field research connects anthropologists directly with the lived experience of other people or other primates or to the material evidence of that experience that they have left behind. Academic anthropologists try to intersperse field research with the other tasks they perform as university professors. Other anthropologists—applied anthropologists—regularly spend most or all of their time carrying out field research. All anthropology begins with a specific group of people (or primates) and always comes back to them as well.

Finally, anthropologists try to come up with generalizations about what it means to be human that are valid across space and over time. Because anthropologists are interested in documenting and explaining change over time in the human past, **evolution** is at the core of the anthropological perspective. Anthropologists examine the *biological evolution* of the human species, which documents change over time in the physical features and life processes of human beings and their ancestors. Topics of interest include both human origins and genetic variation and inheritance in living human populations. If evolution is understood broadly as change over time, then human societies and cultures may also be understood to have evolved from prehistoric times to the present.

Anthropologists have long been interested in *cultural evolution*, which concerns change over time in beliefs, behaviors, and material objects that shape human development and social life. As we will see in chapter 4, early discussions of cultural evolution in anthropology emphasized a series of universal stages. However, this approach has been rejected by contemporary

anthropology The study of human nature, human society, and the human past.

holism A characteristic of the anthropological perspective that describes, how anthropology tries to integrate all that is known about human beings and their activities. This is based on empirical evidence that any aspect of culture is entangled with other aspects in complex ways.

comparison A characteristic of the anthropological perspective that requires anthropologists to consider similarities and differences in as wide a range of human societies as possible before generalizing about human nature, human society, or the human past.

evolution A characteristic of the anthropological perspective that requires anthropologists to place their observations about human nature, human society, or the human past in a temporal framework that takes into consideration change over time.

anthropologists who talk about cultural evolution, like William Durham (1991) and Robert Boyd (e.g., Richerson and Boyd 2006). Theoretical debates about culture change and about whether it ought to be called "cultural evolution" or not are very lively right now, not only in anthropology but also in related fields like evolutionary biology and developmental psychology. In the midst of this debate, one of anthropology's most important contributions to the study of human evolution remains the demonstration that biological evolution is not the same thing as cultural evolution. Distinction between the two remains important as a way of demonstrating the fallacies and incoherence of arguments claiming that everything people do or think can be explained biologically, for example, in terms of "genes" or "race" or "sex."

What Is the Concept of Culture?

A consequence of human evolution that had the most profound impact on human nature and human society was the emergence of **culture**, which we define here as patterns of learned behaviors and ideas that human beings acquire as members of society, together with the material artifacts and structures humans create and use. Our cultural heritage allows humans to adapt to and transform the world around us, through our interactions with material structures and objects in the communities where we live, through the connections we form with other people, through the actions and skills of our individual bodies, and through the ideas and values of our minds. The cultural heritage of the human species is both meaningful and material, and it makes us unique among living creatures. Human beings are more dependent than any other species on learning for survival because we have no instincts that automatically protect us and help us find food and shelter. Instead, we have come to use our large and complex brains to learn from other members of society what we need to know to survive. This includes learning to manage the built environment—our dwellings and settlements—and mastering skills with tools and other artifacts that support our continued survival. Learning and enskillment are a primary focus of childhood, which lasts longer for humans than for any other species.

From the anthropological perspective, the concept of culture is central to explanations of why human beings are what they are and why they do what they do. Anthropologists are frequently able to show that members of a particular social group behave in a particular way not because the behavior was *programmed* by their genes, but because they observed or interacted with other people and *learned* how to perform the behavior themselves. For example, North Americans typically do not eat insects, but this behavior is not the result of genetic programming. Rather, North Americans have been told as children that eating insects is disgusting, have never seen any of their family or friends eat insects, and do not eat insects themselves. As we discovered personally, however, insects can be eaten by North Americans with no ill effects. The difference in dietary practice can be explained in terms of cultural learning rather than genetic programming.

However, to understand the power of culture, anthropologists must also know about human biology. Anthropologists in North America traditionally have been trained in both areas so that they can understand how living organisms work and become acquainted with comparative information about a wide range of human cultures. As a result, most anthropologists reject explanations of human behavior that force them to choose either biology or culture as the unique cause. Instead they emphasize that human beings are **biocultural organisms**. Our biological makeup—our brain, nervous system, and anatomy—is the outcome of developmental processes to which our genes and cellular chemistry contribute in fundamental ways. It also makes us capable of creating and using culture. Without these biological endowments, human culture as we know it would not exist. At the same time, our survival as biological organisms depends on learned ways of thinking and acting that help us find food, shelter, and mates and that teach us how to rear our children. Our biological endowment makes culture possible; human culture makes human biological survival possible.

To understand the power of culture, anthropologists are also paying increasing attention to the role played by **material culture** in the lives of biocultural human organisms. Many cultural anthropologists, including ourselves, have traditionally emphasized the way people's dealings with artifacts are shaped by the cultural meanings they attach to those artifacts. This emphasis has seemed particularly necessary in the face of the widespread assumptions in our own North American society

culture Sets of learned behavior and ideas that human beings acquire as members of society together with the material artifacts and structures humans create and use. Human beings use culture to adapt to and to transform the world in which they live.

biocultural organisms Organisms (in this case, human beings) whose defining features are codetermined by biological and cultural factors.

material culture Objects created or shaped by human beings and given meaning by cultural practices.

that material objects have obvious functional meanings that are the same for everyone, everywhere. But cultural anthropologists have found repeatedly that the same object can mean different things to different people: Just consider the varied meanings attached to assault weapons or the "morning after pill" that have been held by different groups of U.S. citizens in the recent history of the United States.

At the same time, innovative theories of materiality developed in fields called cyborg anthropology and science studies have provided cultural anthropologists with new ways of conceptualizing relations between persons and things. Examples illustrating these new approaches will be found throughout this book. Many examples center on human experiences with new kinds of things—computers, cell phones, the Internet—that are increasingly central to the everyday lives of people all over the world. For instance, persons who play online video games seem to join with the technology and the other players to form a seamless hybrid entity; or the technology that links us to friends on Facebook disappears from our awareness. This is a phenomenon that anthropologist Daniel Miller calls *the humility of things*: "objects are important, not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but quite the opposite. It is often precisely because we do not *see* them" (2010, 50). The merging of persons and things is sometimes a source of pleasure, as when we do our holiday shopping on the Internet; but it can also be troubling when we realize that our web-surfing activities are being tracked by commercial web bots. For these and other reasons, we agree with Daniel Miller that "the best way to understand, convey, and appreciate our humanity is through attention to our fundamental materiality" (2010, 4). And this means taking material culture seriously.

What Makes Anthropology a Cross-Disciplinary Discipline?

Because of its diversity, anthropology does not easily fit into any of the standard academic classifications. The discipline is usually listed as a social science, but it spans the natural sciences and the humanities as well. What it is *not*, as we will see, is the study of the "exotic," the "primitive," or the "savage," terms that anthropologists reject. Figure 1.1 brings some order to the variety of interests found under the anthropological umbrella.

Traditionally, North American anthropology has been divided into four subfields: *biological anthropology*, *cultural anthropology*, *linguistic anthropology*, and *archaeology*. Because of their commitment to holism, many anthropology departments try to represent most or all of the subfields in their academic programs. However, universities in other parts of the world, such as Europe, usually do not bring all these specialties together. Many North American anthropologists, however, associate

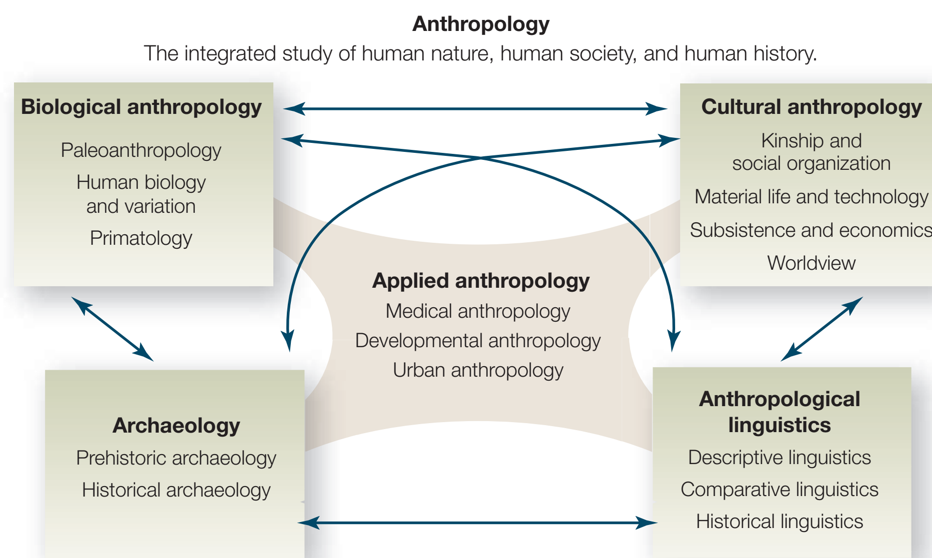

FIGURE 1.1 In the United States, anthropology is traditionally divided into four specialties: biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, anthropological linguistics, and archaeology. Applied anthropology draws on information provided by the other four specialties.

holistic four-field North American anthropology with the successful repudiation of nineteenth-century scientific racism by Franz Boas and other early-twentieth-century anthropologists. They also value four-field anthropology as a protected "trading zone" within which anthropologists are encouraged to bring together fresh concepts and knowledge from a variety of research traditions. North American anthropologist Rena Lederman, for example, has stressed that four-field anthropology does not insist on a single way of bringing the subfields together (2005).

Anthropological holism is attractive even to those who were not trained in North America. British anthropologist Tim Ingold, for example, argues, "The best anthropological writing is distinguished by its receptiveness to ideas springing from work in subjects far beyond its conventional boundaries, and by its ability to connect these ideas in ways that would not have occurred to their originators, who may be more enclosed in their particular disciplinary frameworks" (1994, xvii). We share the views of Lederman and Ingold: Trained in holistic, four-field anthropology, we continue to value the unique perspective it brings to the study of human nature, human society, and the human past. Indeed, as the organizers of a recent anthropological conference observed, "Even those who were the least persuaded that the traditional four-field organization of American anthropology was still viable (if it ever was) came away with a strong sense that the subfields had a great deal to say to one another and indeed needed one another" (McKinnon and Silverman 2005, viii).

Biological Anthropology

Since the nineteenth century, when anthropology was developing as an academic field, anthropologists have studied human beings as living organisms in order to discover what makes us different from or similar to other animals. Early interest in these matters was a by-product of centuries of exploration. Western Europeans had found tremendous variation in the physical appearance of peoples around the world and had long tried to make sense of these differences. Some researchers developed a series of elaborate techniques to measure different observable features of human populations, including skin color, hair type, body type, and so forth, hoping to find scientific evidence that would allow them to classify all the peoples of the world into a set of unambiguous categories based on distinct sets of biological attributes. Such categories were called **races**, and many scientists were convinced that clear-cut criteria for racial classification would be discovered if careful measurements were made on enough people from a range of different populations.

European scientists first applied racial categories to the peoples of Europe itself, but their classifications soon included non-European peoples, who were coming under increasing political and economic domination by expanding European and European American capitalist societies. These peoples differed from "white" Europeans not only because of their darker skin color but also because of their unfamiliar languages and customs. In most cases, their technologies were also no match for the might of the West. In the early eighteenth century, for example, the European biologist Carolus Linnaeus (Carl von Linne, 1707–1778) classified known human populations into four races (American, European, Asian, and Negro) based on skin color (reddish, white, yellow, and black, respectively). Linnaeus also connected racial membership with the mental and moral attributes of group members. Thus, he wrote, Europeans were "fickle, sanguine, blue-eyed, gentle, and governed by laws," whereas Negros were "choleric, obstinate, contented, and regulated by custom" and Asians were "grave, avaricious, dignified, and ruled by opinion" (Molnar 2001, 5–6).

In the nineteenth century, influential natural scientists such as Louis Agassiz, Samuel George Morton, Francis Galton, and Paul Broca built on this idea of race, ranking different populations of the world in terms of brain size; unsurprisingly, the brains of "white" Europeans and North Americans were found to be larger, and the other races were seen to represent varying grades of inferiority, with Africans ranked at the bottom (Gould 1996). These findings were used to justify the social practice of **racism**: the systematic oppression of members of one or more socially defined "races" by another socially defined race that is justified in terms of the supposed inherent biological superiority of the rulers and the supposed inherent biological inferiority of those they rule.

Biological or physical anthropology as a separate discipline had its origins in the work of scholars like these, whose training was in some other discipline, often medicine. Johann Blumenbach (1752–1840), for example, whom some have called the "father of physical anthropology," was trained as a physician. Blumenbach identified five different races (Caucasoid, Mongoloid,

races Social groupings that allegedly reflect biological differences.

racism The systematic oppression of one or more socially defined "races" by another socially defined "race" that is justified in terms of the supposed inherent biological superiority of the rulers and the supposed inherent biological inferiority of those they rule.

In Their Own Words

Anthropology as a Vocation

Listening to Voices

James W. Fernandez (Ph.D., Northwestern University) is a professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago. He has worked among the Fang of Gabon and among cattle keepers and miners of Asturias, Spain. This is an excerpt from an essay about the anthropological vocation.

For me, the anthropological calling has fundamentally to do with the inclination to hear voices. An important part of our vocation is "listening to voices," and our methods are the procedures that best enable us to hear voices, to represent voices, to translate voices.

By listening carefully to others' voices and by trying to give voice to these voices, we act to widen the horizons of human conviviality. If we had not achieved some fellow feeling by being there, by listening carefully and by negotiating in good faith, it would be the more difficult to give voice in a way that would widen the horizons of human conviviality. Be that as it may, the calling to widen horizons and increase human conviviality seems a worthy calling—full of a very human optimism and good sense. Who would resist the proposition that more fellow feeling in the world is better than less, and that to extend the interlocutive in the world is better than to diminish it?

At the same time, there is a paradox here, one that demands of us a sense of proportion. Although the anthropologist is called to bring diverse people into intercommunication, he or she is also called to resist the homogenization that lies in mass communication. We are called by our very experience to celebrate the great variety of voices in the human chorus. The paradox is that we at once work to amplify the scale of intercommunication—and in effect contribute to homogenization—while at the same time we work to insist on the great variety of voices in communication. We must maintain here too a sense of proportion. We must recognize the point at which wider and wider cultural intercommunication can lead to dominant voices hidden in the homogenizing process. Human intercommunication has its uses and abuses.

Source: Fernandez 1990, 14–15.

American, Ethiopian, and Malayan), and his classification was influential in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Molnar 2001, 6). He and his contemporaries assumed that the races of "mankind" (as they would have said) were fixed and unchanging subdivisions of humanity.

However, as scientists learned more about biological variation in human populations, some of them came to realize that traits traditionally used to identify races, such as skin color, did not correlate well with other physical and biological traits, let alone mental and moral traits. Indeed, scientists could not even agree about how many human races there were or where the boundaries between them should be drawn.

By the early twentieth century, some anthropologists and biologists were arguing that race was a cultural label invented by human beings to sort people into groups and that races with distinct and unique sets of biological attributes simply did not exist. Anthropologists like Franz Boas, for example, who in the early 1900s founded the first department of anthropology in the United States, at Columbia University, had long been uncomfortable with racial classifications in anthropology. Boas and his students devoted much energy to debunking racist stereotypes, using both their knowledge of biology and their understanding of culture. As the discipline of anthropology developed in the United States, students were trained in both human biology and human culture to provide them with the tools to fight racial stereotyping. After World War II, this position gained increasing strength in North American anthropology, under the forceful leadership of Sherwood Washburn. The "new" physical anthropology Washburn developed at the University of California, Berkeley, repudiated racial classification and shifted attention to patterns of variation and adaptation within the human species as a whole. This shift in emphasis led many of Washburn's followers to define their specialty as **biological anthropology**, a move that highlighted their differences with the older "physical anthropology" devoted to racial classification.

biological anthropology (or physical anthropology) The specialty of anthropology that looks at human beings as biological organisms and tries to discover what characteristics make them different from other organisms and what characteristics they share.

FIGURE 1.2 Some biological anthropologists are primatologists, such as Agustín Fuentes (*a*). Other biological anthropologists are paleoanthropologists, such as Matthew Tornow, who studies ancient primate ancestors (*b*).

Some biological anthropologists work in the fields of **primatology** (the study of the closest living relatives of human beings, the nonhuman primates), **paleoanthropology** (the study of fossilized bones and teeth of our earliest ancestors), and human skeletal biology (measuring and comparing the shapes and sizes—or morphology—of bones and teeth using skeletal remains from different human populations) (Figure 1.2). Newer specialties focus on human adaptability in different ecological settings, on human growth and development, or on the connections between a population's evolutionary history and its susceptibility to disease. Forensic anthropologists use their knowledge of human skeletal anatomy to aid law enforcement and human rights investigators. Molecular anthropologists trace chemical similarities and differences in the immune system, an interest that has led to active research on the virus that causes HIV/AIDS. Moreover, new analytic techniques, such as biostatistics, three-dimensional imaging, and electronic communication and publishing, have revolutionized the field. In all these ways, biological anthropologists can illuminate what makes human beings similar to and different from one another, other primates, and other forms of life (Boaz and Wolfe 1995; Weinker 1995).

Whether they study human biology, primates, or the fossils of our ancestors, biological anthropologists clearly share many methods and theories used in the natural sciences—primarily biology, ecology, chemistry, and geology. What tends to set biological anthropologists apart from their nonanthropological colleagues is the holistic, comparative, and evolutionary perspective that has been part of their anthropological training. That perspective reminds them always to consider their work as only part of the overall study of human nature, human society, and the human past.

primatology The study of nonhuman primates, the closest living relatives of human beings.

paleoanthropology The search for fossilized remains of humanity's earliest ancestors.

cultural anthropology The specialty of anthropology that shows how variation in the beliefs and behaviors of members of different human groups is shaped by sets of learned behaviors and ideas that human beings acquire as members of society—that is, by culture.

Cultural Anthropology

The second specialty within anthropology is **cultural anthropology**, which is sometimes called *sociocultural anthropology*, *social anthropology*, or *ethnology*. By the early twentieth century, anthropologists realized that racial biology could not be used to explain why everyone in the world did not dress the same, speak the same language,

FIGURE 1.3 Cultural anthropologists talk to many people, observe their actions, and participate as fully as possible in a group's way of life. Here, Sri Lankan anthropologist Arjun Guneratne converses with some of his consultants in Nepal.

pray to the same god, or eat insects for dinner. About the same time, anthropologists like Margaret Mead were showing that the biology of sexual difference could not be used to predict how men and women might behave or what tasks they would perform in any given society. Anthropologists concluded that something other than biology had to be responsible for these variations. They suggested that this "something else" was culture.

Many anthropologists did significant research throughout the twentieth century to separate human biological variation from human cultural practices, showing that these practices could not be reduced to "racial" difference. By the latter part of the twentieth century, anthropologists also regularly distinguished between the biological **sex** an individual was assigned and the culturally shaped **gender** roles considered appropriate for each sex in a given society. As we shall see in chapter 10, the contemporary anthropological study of sex, gender, and sexuality has become considerably more complex, drawing together contributions from cultural anthropologists, biological anthropologists, and other scholars and scientists.

Because people everywhere use culture to adapt to and transform everything in the wider world in which they live, the field of cultural anthropology is vast. Cultural anthropologists tend to specialize in one or another domain of human cultural activity (Figure 1.3). Some study the ways particular groups of human beings organize themselves to carry out collective tasks, whether economic, political, or spiritual. This focus within cultural anthropology bears the closest resemblance to the discipline of sociology, and from it has come the identification of anthropology as one of the social sciences.

Sociology and anthropology developed during the same period and share similar interests in social organization. What differentiated anthropology from sociology was the anthropological interest in comparing different forms of human social life. In the racist framework of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European and North American societies, some people viewed sociology as the study of "civilized" industrial societies and labeled anthropology as the study of all other societies, lumped together as "primitive." Today, by contrast, anthropologists are concerned with studying *all* human societies, and they reject the labels *civilized* and *primitive* for the same reason they reject the term *race*. Contemporary anthropologists do research in urban and rural settings around the world and among members of all societies, including their own.

Anthropologists discovered that people in many non-Western societies do not organize bureaucracies or churches or schools, yet they still manage to carry

sex Observable physical characteristics that distinguish two kinds of humans, females and males, needed for biological reproduction

gender The cultural construction of beliefs and behaviors considered appropriate for each sex.

out successfully the full range of human activity because they developed institutions of relatedness that enabled them to organize social groups through which they could live their lives. One form of relatedness, called *kinship*, links people to one another on the basis of birth, marriage, and nurturance. The study of kinship has become highly developed in anthropology and remains a focus of interest today. In addition, anthropologists have described a variety of forms of social groups organized according to different principles, such as secret societies, age sets, and numerous forms of complex political organization, including states. In recent years, cultural anthropologists have studied contemporary issues of gender and sexuality, transnational labor migration, urbanization, globalization, the post–Cold War resurgence of ethnicity and nationalism around the globe, and debates about human rights.

Cultural anthropologists have investigated the patterns of material life found in different human groups. Among the most striking are worldwide variations in clothing, housing, tools, and techniques for getting food and making material goods. Some anthropologists specialize in the study of technologies in different societies or in the evolution of technology over time. Those interested in material life also describe the natural setting for which technologies have been developed and analyze the way technologies and environments shape each other. Others have investigated the way non-Western people have responded to the political and economic challenges of colonialism and the capitalist industrial technology that accompanied it.

People everywhere are increasingly making use of material goods and technologies produced outside their own societies. Anthropologists have been able to show that, contrary to many expectations, non-Western people do not slavishly imitate Western ways. Instead, they make use of Western technologies in ways that are creative and often unanticipated but that make sense in their own local cultural context. For example, some anthropologists are currently tracing the various ways in which populations both inside and outside the West make use of cybertechnology for their own social and cultural purposes.

As cultural anthropologists have become increasingly aware of the sociocultural influences that stretch across space to affect local communities, they have also become sensitive to those that stretch over time. As a result, many contemporary cultural anthropologists make serious efforts to place their cultural analyses in detailed historical context. Cultural anthropologists who do comparative studies of language, music, dance, art, poetry, philosophy, religion, or ritual often share many of the interests of specialists in the disciplines of fine arts and humanities.

Cultural anthropologists, no matter what their area of specialization, ordinarily collect their data during an extended period of close involvement with the people in whose language or way of life they are interested. This period of research, called **fieldwork**, has as its central feature the anthropologists' involvement in the everyday routine of those among whom they live. People who share information about their culture and language with anthropologists have traditionally been called **informants**; however, anthropologists use this term less today and some prefer to describe these individuals as *respondents*, *collaborators*, *teachers*, or simply as "*the people I work with*" because these terms emphasize a relationship of equality and reciprocity. Fieldworkers gain insight into another culture by participating with members in social activities and by observing those activities as outsiders. This research method, known as *participant observation*, is central to cultural anthropology.

Cultural anthropologists write about what they have learned in scholarly articles or books and sometimes document the lives of the people they work with on film or video. An **ethnography** is a description of "the customary social behaviors of an identifiable group of people" (Wolcott 1999, 252–3); **ethnology** is the comparative study of two or more such groups. Thus, cultural anthropologists who write ethnographies are sometimes called *ethnographers*, and anthropologists who compare ethnographic information on many different cultural practices are sometimes called *ethnologists*. But not all anthropological writing is ethnographic. Some anthropologists specialize in reconstructing the history of our discipline, tracing, for example, how anthropologists' fieldwork practices have changed over time and how these changes may be

fieldwork An extended period of close involvement with the people in whose language or way of life anthropologists are interested, during which anthropologists ordinarily collect most of their data.

informants People in a particular culture who work with anthropologists and provide them with insights about their way of life. Also called *respondents*, *teachers*, or *friends*.

ethnography An anthropologist's written or filmed description of a particular culture.

ethnology The comparative study of two or more cultures.

related to wider political, economic, and social changes within the societies from which they came and within which they did their research.

Linguistic Anthropology

Perhaps the most striking cultural feature of our species is **language**: the system of arbitrary vocal symbols we use to encode our experience of the world and of one another. People use language to talk about all areas of their lives, from material to spiritual. **Linguistic anthropology** therefore studies language, not only as a form of symbolic communication, but also as a major carrier of important cultural information. Many early anthropologists were the first people to transcribe non-Western languages and to produce grammars and dictionaries of those languages. Contemporary linguistic anthropologists and their counterparts in sociology (called *sociolinguists*) study the way language differences correlate with differences in gender, race, class, or ethnic identity. Some have specialized in studying what happens when speakers are fluent in more than one language and must choose which language to use under what circumstances. Others have written about what happens when speakers of unrelated languages are forced to communicate with one another, producing languages called *pidgins*. Some linguistic anthropologists study sign languages. Others look at the ways children learn language or the styles and strategies followed by fluent speakers engaged in conversation. More recently, linguistic anthropologists have paid attention to the way political ideas in a society contribute to people's ideas of what may or may not be said and the strategies speakers devise to escape these forms of censorship. Some take part in policy discussions about literacy and language standardization and address the challenges faced by speakers of languages that are being displaced by international languages of commerce and technology such as English.

In all these cases, linguistic anthropologists try to understand language in relation to the broader cultural, historical, or biological contexts that make it possible. Because highly specialized training in linguistics as well as anthropology is required for people who practice it, linguistic anthropology has long been recognized as a separate subfield of anthropology. Contemporary linguistic anthropologists continue to be trained in this way, and many cultural anthropologists also receive linguistics training as part of their professional preparation.

Archaeology

Archaeology, another major specialty within anthropology, is a cultural anthropology of the human past involving the analysis of material remains. Through archaeology, anthropologists discover much about human history, particularly *prehistory*, the long stretch of time before the development of writing. Archaeologists look for evidence of past human cultural activity, such as postholes, garbage heaps, and settlement patterns. Depending on the locations and ages of sites they are digging, archaeologists may also have to be experts on stone-tool manufacture, metallurgy, or ancient pottery. Because archaeological excavations frequently uncover remains such as bones or plant pollen, archaeologists often work in teams with other scientists who specialize in the analysis of these remains.

Archaeologists' findings complement those of paleoanthropologists. For example, archaeological information about successive stone-tool traditions in a particular region may correlate with fossil evidence of prehistoric occupation of that region by ancient human populations. Archaeologists can use dating techniques to establish ages of *artifacts*, portable objects modified by human beings. They can create distribution maps of cultural artifacts that allow them to make hypotheses about the ages, territorial ranges, and patterns of sociocultural change in ancient societies. Tracing the spread of cultural inventions over time from one site to another allows them to hypothesize about the nature and degree of social contact between different peoples in the past. The human past that they investigate may be quite recent: Some contemporary archaeologists dig through layers of garbage deposited by human beings within the past two or three decades, often uncovering surprising information about contemporary consumption patterns.

language The system of arbitrary vocal symbols used to encode one's experience of the world and of others.

linguistic anthropology The specialty of anthropology concerned with the study of human languages.

archaeology A cultural anthropology of the human past involving the analysis of material remains left behind by earlier societies.

Applied Anthropology

Applied anthropology is the subfield of anthropology in which anthropologists use information gathered from the other anthropological specialties to propose solutions to practical problems (Figure 1.4). Some may use a particular group of people's ideas about illness and health to introduce new public health practices in a way that makes sense to and will be accepted by members of the group. Other applied anthropologists may use knowledge of traditional social organization to ease the problems of refugees trying to settle in a new land. Still others may use their knowledge of traditional and Western methods of cultivation to help farmers increase their crop yields. Given the growing concern throughout the world with the effects of different technologies on the environment, this kind of applied anthropology holds promise as a way of bringing together Western knowledge and non-Western knowledge in order to create sustainable technologies that minimize pollution and environmental degradation. Some applied anthropologists have become management consultants or carry out market research, and their findings may contribute to the design of new products.

In recent years, some anthropologists have become involved in policy issues, participating actively in social processes that attempt to shape the future of those among whom they work (Moore 2005, 3), and this has involved a change in their understanding of what applied anthropology is. Les W. Field, for example, has addressed the history of applied anthropology on Native American reservations—"Indian Country"—in the United States. He observes that by the end of the twentieth century, a major transformation had occurred, "from applied anthropology in Indian Country to applications of anthropological tools in Indian country to accomplish tribal goals" (2004, 472). This often draws anthropologists into work in the legal arena, as when, for example, they have lent their expertise to arguments in favor of legislation mandating the repatriation of culturally significant artifacts and tribal lands in North America, or to efforts by tribal groups to reclaim official government-recognized status (Field 2004), or to defending indigenous land rights in Latin America (Stocks 2005).

applied anthropology The subfield of anthropology that uses information gathered from the other anthropological specialties to solve practical cross-cultural problems.

FIGURE 1.4 Members of the Argentine Forensic Anthropologists Team work on the biggest dictatorship-era mass grave to date, where around 100 suspected victims of the 1976–1983 military junta were buried in a local cemetery in Córdoba, 800 km (500 miles) northwest of Buenos Aires.

Although many anthropologists believe that applied work can be done within any of the traditional four fields of anthropology, increasing numbers in recent years have come to view applied anthropology as a separate field of professional specialization (see Figure 1.1). More and more universities in the United States have begun to develop courses and programs in a variety of forms of applied anthropology. Anthropologists who work for government agencies or nonprofit organizations or in other nonuniversity settings often describe what they do as the *anthropology of practice*. In the twenty-first century, it has been predicted that more than half of all new Ph.D.s in anthropology will become practicing anthropologists rather than take up positions as faculty in university departments of anthropology.

In Their Own Words

What Can You Learn from an Anthropology Major?

The Career Development Center at SUNY Plattsburgh developed a document that highlights what students typically learn from a major in anthropology.

1. Social agility	In an unfamiliar social or career-related setting, you learn to quickly size up the rules of the game. You can become accepted more quickly than you could without this anthropological skill.
2. Observation	You must often learn about a culture from within it, so you learn how to interview and observe as a participant.
3. Analysis and planning	You learn how to find patterns in the behavior of a cultural group. This awareness of patterns allows you to generalize about the group's behavior and predict what they might do in a given situation.
4. Social sensitivity	Although other people's ways of doing things may be different from your own, you learn the importance of events and conditions that have contributed to this difference. You also recognize that other cultures view your ways as strange. You learn the value of behaving toward others with appropriate preparation, care, and understanding.
5. Accuracy in interpreting behavior	You become familiar with the range of behavior in different cultures. You learn how to look at cultural causes of behavior before assigning causes yourself.
6. Ability to appropriately challenge conclusions	You learn that analyses of human behavior are open to challenge. You learn how to use new knowledge to test past conclusions.
7. Insightful interpretation of information	You learn how to use data collected by others, reorganizing or interpreting the data to reach original conclusions.
8. Simplification of information	Because anthropology is conducted among publics as well as about them, you learn how to simplify technical information for communication to non-technical people.
9. Contextualization	Although attention to details is a trait of anthropology, you learn that any given detail might not be as important as its context and can even be misleading when the context is ignored.
10. Problem solving	Because you often function within a cultural group or act on culturally sensitive issues, you learn to approach problems with care. Before acting, you identify the problem, set your goals, decide on the actions you will take, and calculate possible effects on other people.
11. Persuasive writing	Anthropologists strive to represent the behavior of one group to another group and continually need to engage in interpretation. You learn the value of bringing someone else to share—or at least understand—your view through written argument.
12. Assumption of a social perspective	You learn how to perceive the acts of individuals and local groups as both shaping and being shaped by larger sociocultural systems. The perception enables you to "act locally and think globally."

Source: Omohundro 2000.

Medical Anthropology

Medical anthropology is one of the most rapidly growing branches of anthropology. Beginning half a century ago as a form of applied anthropology, it has developed into an important anthropological specialty that has offered new ways to link biological and cultural anthropology. Medical anthropology concerns itself with human health—the factors that contribute to disease or illness and the ways that human populations deal with disease or illness (Baer et al. 2003, 3). Medical anthropologists may consider the physiological variables that are involved with human health and disease, the environmental features that affect human well-being, and the way the human body adapts to various environments. Contemporary medical anthropologists engage in work that directly addresses the anthropological proposition that human beings must be understood as biocultural organisms (Figure 1.5).

Particularly significant has been the development of *critical medical anthropology*, which links questions of human health and illness in local settings to social, economic, and political processes operating on a national or global scale. Indeed, critical medical anthropologists have been among the most vocal in pointing out how various forms of suffering and disease cannot be explained only by the presence of microbes in a diseased body, but may depend on—or be made worse by—the presence of social inequality and a lack of access to health care. According to anthropologist Merrill Singer, critical medical anthropology "is committed to the 'making social' and the 'making political' of health and medicine" (1998, 195). Thus, critical medical anthropologists pay attention to the way social divisions based on class, race, gender, and ethnicity can block access to medical attention or make people more vulnerable to disease and suffering. They draw attention to the way traditional Western biomedicine "encourages people to fight disease rather than to make the changes necessary to prevent it," for example, by linking low birth weight in newborn babies to poor nutrition, but failing to note that poor nutrition "may be a major health factor among impoverished social classes and oppressed ethnic groups in developed countries despite an abundance of food in society generally" (M. Singer 1998, 106, 109).

One of the most important insights of critical medical anthropologists has been to point out that "various practices that bioculturalist anthropologists have traditionally called 'adaptations' might better be analyzed as social adjustments to the consequences of oppressive sociopolitical relationships" (M. Singer 1998, 115). Gavin Smith and R. Brooke Thomas, for example, draw attention to situations where "social relations compromise people's options" for attaining biological well-be-

medical anthropology The specialty of anthropology that concerns itself with human health—the factors that contribute to disease or illness and the ways that human populations deal with disease or illness.

FIGURE 1.5 Medical anthropologist Andrea Wiley is shown here in a high-altitude setting in the Himalayas of Ladakh (India), where she studied maternal and child health.

ing and cultural satisfaction but where people do not passively accept this situation and choose instead to "try to escape or change these relations"; Smith and Thomas call these practices "adaptations of resistance" (G. A. Smith and Brooke Thomas 1998, 466). Chapter 13 is dedicated to medical anthropology, and case studies by medical anthropologists are found in other chapters as well.

The Uses of Anthropology

Why take a course in anthropology? An immediate answer might be that human fossils or broken bits of ancient pots or the customs of faraway peoples inspire a fascination that is its own reward. But the experience of being dazzled by seemingly exotic places and peoples carries with it a risk. As you become increasingly aware of the range of anthropological data, including the many options that exist for living a satisfying human life, you may find yourself wondering about the life you are living. Contact with the unfamiliar can be liberating, but it can also be threatening if it undermines your confidence in the absolute truth and universal rightness of your previous understanding of the way the world works.

The contemporary world is increasingly interconnected. As we will see in later chapters, these interconnections have become even more complex since the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the incorporation of the entire planet into a global capitalist economy. No person on the planet is unaffected by globalization, making anthropological skills valuable for everyone. As people from different cultural backgrounds come into contact with one another, learning to cope with cultural differences becomes crucial. Anthropologists experience both the rewards and the risks of getting to know how other people live, and their work has helped to dispel many harmful stereotypes that sometimes make cross-cultural contact dangerous or impossible. Studying anthropology may help prepare you for some of the shocks you will encounter in dealing with people who look different from you, speak a different language, or do not agree that the world works exactly the way you think it does.

Anthropology involves learning about the kinds of living organisms we human beings are, the various ways we live our lives, and how we make sense of our experiences. Studying anthropology can equip you to deal with people with different cultural backgrounds in a less threatened, more tolerant manner. You may never be called on to eat termite paste. Still, you may one day encounter a situation in which none of the old rules seem to apply. As you struggle to make sense of what is happening, what you learned in anthropology class may help you relax and dare to try something totally new to you. If you do so, perhaps you too will discover the rewards of an encounter with the unfamiliar that is at the same time unaccountably familiar. We hope you will savor the experience.

Chapter Summary

1. Anthropology aims to describe in the broadest sense what it means to be human. The anthropological perspective is holistic, comparative, and evolutionary and has relied on the concept of culture to explain the diversity of human ways of life. Human beings depend on cultural learning for successful biological survival and reproduction, which is why anthropologists consider human beings to be biocultural organisms. Anthropology is also a field-based discipline. In the United States today, anthropology is considered to have five major subfields: biological anthropology, archaeology, cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and applied anthropology.
2. Biological anthropology began as an attempt to classify all the world's populations into different races. By the early twentieth century, however, most anthropologists had rejected racial classifications as scientifically unjustifiable and objected to the ways in which racial classifications were used to justify the social practice of racism. Contemporary anthropologists who are interested in human biology include biological anthropologists, primatologists, and paleoanthropologists.

(continued on next page)

Chapter Summary *(continued)*

3. Cultural anthropologists study cultural diversity in all living human societies, including their own. Linguistic anthropologists approach cultural diversity by relating varied forms of language to their cultural contexts. Both gather information through fieldwork, by participating with their informants in social activities, and by observing those activities as outsiders. They publish accounts of their research in ethnographies. Archaeology is a cultural anthropology of the human past, with interests ranging from the earliest stone tools to twenty-first-century garbage dumps. Applied anthropologists use information from the other anthropological specialities to solve practical cross-cultural problems. Medical anthropology overlaps biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, and applied anthropology and concerns itself with human health and illness, suffering, and well-being.

For Review

1. How is anthropology defined in the text?
2. What are the four distinctive ways anthropologists study human life?
3. How do anthropologists define culture?
4. What makes anthropology a cross-disciplinary discipline?
5. What are the subfields of modern anthropology?
6. What are some of the main topics of interest in biological anthropology?
7. What are some of the main topics of interest in cultural anthropology?
8. What is the difference between ethnography and ethnology?
9. What do linguistic anthropologists try to learn about human languages?
10. What are some of the things archaeologists study?
11. What is the connection of applied anthropology to the other branches of anthropology?
12. What is critical medical anthropology?

Key Terms

anthropology
holism
comparison
evolution
culture
biocultural organisms
material culture
races
racism
biological anthropology (or physical anthropology)
primatology
paleoanthropology
cultural anthropology
sex
gender
fieldwork
informants
ethnography
ethnology
language
linguistic anthropology
archaeology
applied anthropology
medical anthropology

Suggested Readings

Ashmore, Wendy, and Robert J. Sharer. 2009. *Discovering our past: A brief introduction to archaeology*, 5th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill. An engaging introduction to the techniques, assumptions, interests, and findings of modern archaeology.

Besteman, Catherine, and Hugh Gusterson (eds). 2005. *Why America's top pundits are wrong: Anthropologists talk back*. Berkeley: University of California Press. According to the editors, "pundits" are media personalities—conservative and liberal—who lack authoritative knowledge on important issues but whose confident, authoritative, and entertaining pronouncements attract large audiences, especially when they defend simplified views of issues that reinforce rather than challenge popular prejudices. Twelve anthropologists offer critical assessments of the writings of pundits Samuel Huntington, Robert Kaplan,

Thomas Friedman, and Dinesh D'Sousa and also explore questionable popular accounts of the origins of racial inequality and sexual violence.

Feder, Kenneth L. 2013. *Frauds, myths and mysteries: Science and pseudoscience in archaeology*, 8th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill. An entertaining and informative exploration of fascinating frauds and genuine archaeological mysteries that also explains the scientific method.

Kidder, Tracy. 2004. *Mountains beyond mountains: The quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a man who would cure the world*. New York, Random House. Kidder follows Dr. Farmer, an anthropologist and physician, relating his efforts to enlist powerful funders, the World Health Organization, and ordinary people in neglected communities in a quest to bring the best modern medicine to those who need it most.

Relethford, John. 2012. *The human species: An introduction to biological anthropology*, 9th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill. An excellent, clear introduction to biological anthropology.

CHAPTER

2

Why Is the Concept of Culture Important?

This chapter examines in greater detail the concept of culture, one of the most influential ideas that anthropologists have developed. We survey different ways that anthropologists have used the culture concept to expose the fallacies of biological determinism. We also discuss the reasons why some anthropologists believe that continuing to use the culture concept today may be a problem.

Chapter Outline

How Do Anthropologists Define Culture?

Culture, History, and Human Agency

Why Do Cultural Differences Matter?

What Is Ethnocentrism?
Is It Possible to Avoid Ethnocentric Bias?
What Is Cultural Relativism?

How Can Cultural Relativity Improve Our Understanding of Controversial Cultural Practices?

Genital Cutting, Gender, and Human Rights
Genital Cutting as a Valued Ritual
Culture and Moral Reasoning
Did Their Culture Make Them Do It?

Does Culture Explain Everything?

Culture Change and Cultural Authenticity

The Promise of the Anthropological Perspective

Chapter Summary
For Review
Key Terms
Suggested Readings

Anthropologists have long argued that the human condition is distinguished from the condition of other living species by *culture*. Other living species learn, but the extent to which human beings depend on learning is unique in the animal kingdom. Because our brains are capable of open symbolic thought and our hands are capable of manipulating matter powerfully or delicately, we interact with the wider world in a way that is distinct from that of any other species.

How Do Anthropologists Define Culture?

In chapter 1, we defined **culture** as patterns of learned behavior and ideas that human beings acquire as members of society, together with the material artifacts and structures humans create and use. Culture is not reinvented by each generation; rather, we learn it from other members of the social groups we belong to, although we may later modify this heritage in some way. Children use their own bodies and brains to explore their world. But from their earliest days, other people are actively working to steer their activity and attention in particular directions. Consequently, their exploration of the world is not merely trial and error: The path is cleared for them by others who shape their experiences—and their interpretations of their experiences. Two terms in the social sciences refer to this process of culturally and socially shaped learning. The first, **socialization**, is the process of learning to live as a member of a group. This involves mastering the skills of appropriate interaction with others and learning how to cope with the behavioral rules established by the social group. The second term, **enculturation**, refers to the cognitive challenges facing human beings who live together and must come to terms with the ways of thinking and feeling that are considered appropriate to their respective cultures. Because children learn how to act, think, feel, and speak at the same time, we will use the term *socialization/enculturation* to represent this holistic experience. *Socialization/enculturation* produces a socially and culturally constructed *self* capable of functioning successfully in society and is *shared* as well as *learned*. But many things we learn, such as table manners and what is good to eat and where people are supposed to sleep, are never explicitly taught but rather are absorbed in the course of daily practical living. French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu called this kind of cultural learning *habitus* and it is heavily influenced by our interactions with material culture. According to Daniel Miller, Bourdieu's theory "gives shape and form to the idea that objects make people . . . We walk around the rice terraces or road systems, the housing and gardens that are effectively ancestral. These unconsciously direct our footsteps, and are the landscapes of our imagination, as well as the cultural environment to which we adapt" (2010, 53). The cultural practices shared within social groups always encompass the varied knowledge and skills of many different individuals. For example, space flight is part of North American culture, and yet no individual North American could build a space shuttle from scratch in his or her backyard.

Human cultures also appear *patterned*; that is, related cultural beliefs and practices show up repeatedly in different areas of social life. For example, in North America individualism is highly valued, and its influence can be seen in child-rearing practices (babies are expected to sleep alone, and children are reared with the expectation that they will be independent at the age of 18), economic practices (individuals are urged to get a job, to save their money, and not to count on other people or institutions to take care of them; many people would prefer to be in business for themselves; far more people commute to work by themselves in their own cars than carpool), and religious practices (the Christian emphasis on personal salvation and individual accountability before God). Cultural patterns can be traced through time: That English and Spanish are widely spoken in North America, whereas Fulfulde (a language spoken in West Africa) is not, is connected to the colonial conquest and domination of North America by speakers of English and Spanish in past centuries. Cultural patterns also vary across space: In the United States, for example, the English of New York City differs from the English of Mississippi in style, rhythm, and vocabulary ("What? You expect me to schlep this around all day? Forget about it!" is more likely to be heard in the former than the latter!).

It is this patterned cultural variation that allows anthropologists (and others) to distinguish different "cultural traditions" from one another. But separate cultural traditions are often hard to delineate. That is because, in addition to any unique elements of their own, all contain contradictory elements, and they also share elements with other traditions. First, customs in one domain of

culture Sets of learned behaviors and ideas that humans acquire as members of society. Humans use culture to adapt to and transform the world in which they live.

socialization The process by which human beings as material organisms, living together with other similar organisms, cope with the behavioral rules established by their respective societies.

enculturation The process by which human beings living with one another must learn to come to terms with the ways of thinking and feeling that are considered appropriate in their respective cultures.

In Their Own Words

The Paradox of Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is usually described in thoroughly negative terms. As Ivan Karp points out, however, ethnocentrism is a more complex phenomenon than we might expect.

Anthropologists usually argue that ethnocentrism is both wrong and harmful, especially when it is tied to racial, cultural, and social prejudices. Ideas and feelings about the inferiority of blacks, the cupidity of Jews, or the lack of cultural sophistication of farmers are surely to be condemned. But can we do without ethnocentrism? If we stopped to examine every custom and practice in our cultural repertoire, how would we get on? For example, if we always regarded marriage as something that can vary from society to society, would we be concerned about filling out the proper marriage documents, or would we even get married at all? Most of the time we suspend a quizzical stance toward our own customs and simply live life.

Yet many of our own practices are peculiar when viewed through the lenses of other cultures. Periodically, for over fifteen years, I have worked with and lived among an African people. They are as amazed at our marriage customs as my students are at theirs. Both American students and the Iteso of Kenya find it difficult to imagine how the other culture survives with the bizarre, exotic practices that are part of their respective marriage customs. Ethnocentrism works both ways. It can be practiced as much by other cultures as by our own.

Paradoxically, ethnographic literature combats ethnocentrism by showing that the practices of cultures (including our own) are "natural" in their own setting. What appears natural in one setting appears so because it was constructed in that setting—made and produced by human beings who could have done it some other way. Ethnography is a means of recording the range of human creativity and of demonstrating how universally shared capacities can produce cultural and social differences.

This anthropological way of looking at other cultures—and, by implication, at ourselves—constitutes a major reason for reading ethnography. The anthropological lens teaches us to question what we assume to be unquestionable. Ethnography teaches us that human potentiality provides alternative means of organizing our lives and alternative modes of experiencing the world. Reading ethnographies trains us to question the received wisdom of our society and makes us receptive to change. In this sense, anthropology might be called the subversive science. We read ethnographies in order to learn about how other peoples produce their world and about how we might change our own patterns of production.

Source: Karp 1990, 74–75.

culture may contradict customs in another domain, as when religion tells us to share with others and economics tells us to look out for ourselves alone. Second, people have always borrowed cultural elements from their neighbors, and many increasingly refuse to be limited in the present by cultural practices of the past. Why, for example, should literacy not be seen as part of Ju/'hoansi culture once the children of illiterate Ju/'hoansi foragers learn to read and write (see EthnoProfile 11.1: Ju/'hoansi)? Thus, cultural patterns can be useful as a kind of shorthand, but it is important to remember that the boundaries between cultural traditions are always fuzzy. Ultimately, they rest on someone's judgment about how different one set of customs is from another set of customs. As we will see shortly, these kinds of contradictions and challenges are not uncommon, leading some anthropologists to think of culture not in terms of specific customs but in terms of rules that become "established ways of bringing ideas from different domains together" (Strathern 1992, 3).

So far we have seen that culture is learned, shared, and patterned. Cultural traditions are also reconstructed and enriched, generation after generation, primarily because human biological survival depends on culture. Thus, culture is also *adaptive*. Human newborns are not born with "instincts" that would enable them to survive on their own. On the contrary, they depend utterly on support and nurturance from adults and other members of the group in which they live. It is by learning the cultural practices of those around them that human beings come to master appropriate ways of thinking and acting that promote their own survival as biological organisms. Moreover, as can be seen in Figure 2.1, appropriate ways of thinking and acting are always scaffolded by artifacts and features of a particular local setting. In the 1970s, for example, young girls in Guider, Cameroon, promoted their own and their families' welfare by fetching water for their mothers, who were forbidden by propriety from leaving their household compounds alone during the day.

FIGURE 2.1 Of all living organisms, humans are the most dependent on learning for their survival. From a young age, girls in northern Cameroon learn to carry heavy loads on their heads and also learn to get water for their families.

The presence in town of public water spigots, only a few years old at the time, lightened the chore of bringing water back to homes that did not have plumbing. Imported metal basins and pails were more reliable than large calabashes for carrying water, especially for young water carriers who had mastered the impressive skill of balancing heavy loads on their heads (sometimes atop a small flat fabric pad). Public spigots, together with recycled metal containers, a pole, and rope, also afforded young men the opportunity to earn money by selling their services to residents who could not rely on young relatives to bring water to them. In such ways do tradition and innovation shape each other over time, mediated by material culture.

Finally, culture is *symbolic*. A **symbol** is something that stands for something else. The letters of an alphabet, for example, symbolize the sounds of a spoken language. There is no necessary connection between the shape of a particular letter and the speech sound it represents. Indeed, the same or similar sounds are represented symbolically by very different letters in the Latin, Cyrillic, Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek alphabets, to name but five. Even the sounds of spoken language are symbols for meanings a speaker tries to express. The fact that we can translate from one language to another suggests that the same or similar meanings can be expressed by different symbols in different languages. But language is not the only domain of culture that depends on symbols. Everything we do in society has a symbolic dimension, from how we conduct ourselves at the dinner table to how we bury the dead. It is our heavy dependence on symbolic learning that sets human culture apart from the apparently nonsymbolic learning on which other species rely.

symbol Something that stands for something else.

Human culture, then, is *learned*, *shared*, *patterned*, *adaptive*, and *symbolic*. And the contemporary human capacity for culture has also evolved, over millions of years. Culture's beginnings can perhaps be glimpsed among Japanese macaque monkeys who invented the custom of washing sweet potatoes and among wild chimpanzees who invented different grooming postures or techniques to crack open nuts or to gain access to termites or water (Boesch-Ackermann and Boesch 1994; Wolfe 1995, 162–63). Our apelike ancestors surely shared similar aptitudes when they started walking on two legs some 6 million years ago. By 2.5 million years ago, their descendants were making stone tools and may well have assisted their adaptation through the manufacture of other objects made of perishable materials (after all, even contemporary chimpanzees poke sticks through the walls of termite mounds and use leaves as sponges to sop up water in the hollows of trees). Thereafter, our hominin lineage gave birth to a number of additional species, all of whom depended on culture more than their ancestors had. Thus, culture is not something that appeared suddenly, with the arrival of *Homo sapiens*. By the time *Homo sapiens* appeared some 200,000 years ago, a heavy dependence on culture had long been a part of our evolutionary heritage.

Thus, as Rick Potts puts it, "an evolutionary bridge exists between the human and animal realms of behavior. . . . Culture represents continuity" (1996, 197). Potts proposes that modern human symbolic culture, and the social institutions that depend on it, rest on other, more basic abilities that emerged at different times in our evolutionary past (Figure 2.2). Monkeys and apes possess many of these abilities to varying degrees, which is why they may be said to possess simple cultural traditions. Certainly our earliest hominin ancestors were no different.

Apes apparently also possess a rudimentary capacity for *symbolic coding*, or symbolic representation, something our ancestors undoubtedly possessed as well. But new species can evolve new capacities not found in their ancestors. This occurred in the human past when our ancestors first developed a capacity for *complex symbolic representation*, including the ability to communicate freely about the past, the future, and the invisible. This ability distinguishes human symbolic language, for example, from the vocal communication systems of apes (see chapter 5). Biological anthropologist Terrence Deacon argues that evolution produced in *Homo sapiens* a brain "that has been significantly overbuilt for learning

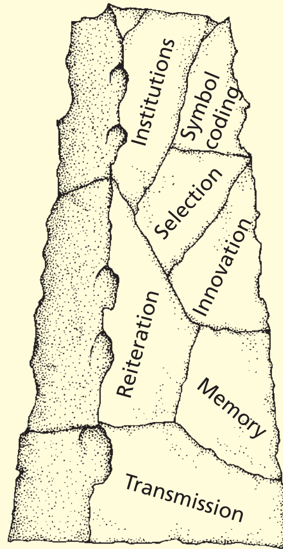

FIGURE 2.2 The modern human capacity for culture did not appear all at once; rather, the various pieces that make it up were added at different times in our evolutionary past.

symbolic associations" such that "we cannot help but see the world in symbolic categories" (1997, 413, 416). Complex symbolic representation apparently was of great adaptive value for our ancestors. It created selective pressures that increased human symbolic capacities over time. Put another way, culture and the human brain *coevolved*, each furnishing key features of the environment to which the other needed to adapt (Deacon 1997, 44; Odling-Smee 1994). One component of this coevolving complex was surely material culture, which reshaped the environments to which our ancestors were adapting through a process that biologists call *niche construction*. From nest-building birds to dam-building beavers, many species have altered the natural selection pressures to which they are exposed. They may do this by altering social relations, by modifying material features of the ecological settings in which they live, or both. Theorists of niche construction agree that human beings are "virtuoso niche constructors" (Odling-Smee et al. 2003, 367). When human matter-manipulating skills are considered together with human symbolic abilities, the unprecedented features of human niches constructed over time become more comprehensible. We have used our complex symbolic abilities to create what Potts calls *institutions*—complex, variable and enduring forms of cultural practice that organize social life. The material buttressing of cultural institutions over time, through customs like the exchange of valuable goods, or the material construction of permanent and symbolically distinctive dwellings, agricultural fields, irrigation canals, and monumental architecture, is all also unique to our species. As a result, for *Homo sapiens*, culture is not only central to our adaptation; it also has become "the predominant manner in which human groups vary from one another . . . it *swamps* the biological differences among populations" (Marks 1995, 200).

Culture, History, and Human Agency

The human condition is rooted in time and shaped by history. As part of the human condition, culture is also historical, being worked out and reconstructed in every generation. Culture is also part of our biological heritage. Indeed, our *biocultural* heritage has produced a living species that uses both meaningful and material culture to surmount biological and individual limitations and is even capable of studying itself and its own biocultural evolution.

This realization, however, raises another question: Just how free from limitations are humans? Opinion in Western societies often polarizes around one of two extremes: Either we have *free will* and may do just as we please, or our behavior is completely determined by forces beyond our control. Many social scientists, however, are convinced that a more realistic description of human freedom was offered by Karl Marx, who wrote, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted by the past" (1963, 15). That is, people regularly struggle, often against great odds, to exercise some control over their lives. Human beings active in this way are called *agents* (Figure 2.3). Human agents cannot escape from the cultural and historical context within which they act. However, they must frequently select a course of action when the "correct" choice is unclear and the outcome uncertain. Some anthropologists even liken human existence to a mine field that we must painstakingly try to cross without blowing ourselves up. It is in such contexts, with their ragged edges, that human beings exercise their **human agency** by making interpretations, formulating goals, and setting out in pursuit of them.

Many anthropologists insist that it is possible to develop a view of human beings that finds room for

human agency The exercise of at least some control over their lives by human beings.

FIGURE 2.3 People regularly struggle, often against great odds, to exercise some control over their lives. During the "Dirty War" in Argentina in the 1970s and early 1980s, women whose children had been disappeared by secret right-wing death squads began, at great personal risk, to stand every Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo, the central square of Buenos Aires, with photographs of their missing children. Called the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, they continue their weekly vigil today. They were a powerful rebuke to the dictatorship and to subsequent governments that were not forthcoming about providing information about the disappeared.

culture, history, and human agency. The anthropological point of view called *holism* assumes that no sharp boundaries separate mind from body, body from environment, individual from society, my ideas from our ideas, or their traditions from our traditions. Rather, holism assumes that mind and body, body and environment, and so on interpenetrate each other and even define each other. From a holistic perspective, attempts to divide reality into mind and matter are unsuccessful because of the complex nature of reality that resists isolation and dissection. Anthropologists who have struggled to develop this holistic perspective on the human condition have made a contribution of unique and lasting value. Holism holds great appeal for those who seek a theory of human nature that is rich enough to do justice to its complex subject matter.

In anthropology, **holism** is traditionally understood as a perspective on the human condition in which the whole (for example, a human being, a society, a cultural tradition) is understood to be greater than the sum of its parts. For example, from a holistic perspective, human beings are complex, dynamic living entities shaped by genes, culture, and experience into entities whose properties cannot be reduced to the materials out of which they were constructed. To be sure, human organisms are closed off from the wider world in some ways by how our cells, tissues, and organs are bound into a single body. At the same time, like all living organisms, human beings are open to the world in other ways: we breathe, eat, harbor colonies of intestinal bacteria to aid our digestion, excrete waste products, and learn from experience (Deacon 2003, 296–97). Similarly, a society is not just the sum of its individual members; people in groups develop dynamic relationships that facilitate collective actions impossible for individuals to bring about on their own. And cultural traditions are not just a list of beliefs, values, and practices; rather, different dimensions of cultural activity, such as economics and politics and religion, are knotted together in complex ways. To understand any human community requires untangling those cultural threads in order to reveal the full range of factors that shape particular cultural practices in that community.

Human beings who develop and live together in groups shaped by cultural patterns are deeply affected by shared cultural experiences. They become different from what they would have been had they matured in isolation; they also become different from other people who have been shaped by different social and cultural patterns. Social scientists have long known that human beings who grow up isolated from meaningful social interactions with others do not behave in ways that appear recognizably human. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz observed long ago, such human beings would be neither failed apes nor "natural" people stripped of their veneer of culture; they would be "mental basket cases" (1973, 40). Social living and cultural sharing are necessary for individual human beings to develop what we recognize as a *human* nature.

One useful way of thinking about the relationships among the parts that make up a whole is in terms of **coevolution**. A coevolutionary approach to the human condition emphasizes that human organisms, their physical environments, their manufactured objects, and their symbolic practices *codetermine* one another; with the passage of time, they can also *coevolve* with one another. A coevolutionary view of the human condition also sees human beings as organisms whose bodies, brains, actions, artifacts, and thoughts are equally involved in shaping what they become. Coevolution produces a human nature connected to a wider world and

holism A characteristic of the anthropological perspective that describes, at the highest and most inclusive level, how anthropology tries to integrate all that is known about human beings and their activities, with the result that the whole is understood to be greater than the sum of its parts.

coevolution The dialectical relationship between biological processes and symbolic cultural processes, in which each makes up an important part of the environment to which the other must adapt.

In Their Own Words

Culture and Freedom

Finding a way to fit human agency into a scientific account of culture has never been easy. Hoyt Alverson describes some of the issues involved.

One's assumptions concerning the existence of structure in culture, or the existence of freedom in human action, determine whether one believes that there can be a science of culture or not. Note that the possibility of developing a science of culture has nothing to do with the use of mathematics, the precision of one's assertions, or the elegance of one's models. If a phenomenon actually has structure, then a science of that phenomenon is at least conceivable. If a phenomenon exhibits freedom and is not ordered, then a science of that phenomenon is inconceivable. The human sciences, including anthropology, have been debating the issue of structure versus freedom in human cultural behavior for the past two hundred years, and no resolution or even consensus has emerged.

Some persuasive models of culture, and of particular cultures, have been proposed, both by those working with scientific, universalist assumptions, and by those working with phenomenological, relativistic assumptions.

To decide which of these approaches is to be preferred, we must have a specific set of criteria for evaluation. Faced with good evidence for the existence of both structure and freedom in human culture, no coherent set of criteria for comparing the success of these alternative models is conceivable. The prediction of future action, for example, is a good criterion for measuring the success of a model that purports to represent structure: it must be irrelevant to measuring the success or failure of a model that purports to describe freedom. For the foreseeable future, and maybe for the rest of time, we may have to be content with models that simply permit us to muddle through.

Source: Alverson 1990, 42–43

profoundly shaped by culture. These connections make us vulnerable over the courses of our lives to influences that our ancestors never experienced. The open, symbolic, meaning-making properties of human culture make it possible for us to respond to those influences in ways that our ancestors could not have anticipated.

Why Do Cultural Differences Matter?

The same objects, actions, or events frequently mean different things to people with different cultures. In fact, what counts as an object or event in one tradition may not be recognized as such in another. This powerful lesson of anthropology was illustrated by the experience of some Peace Corps volunteers working in southern Africa.

In the early 1970s, the Peace Corps office in Botswana was concerned by the number of volunteers who seemed to be "burned out," failing in their assignments, leaving the assigned villages, and increasingly hostile to their Tswana hosts. (See Figure 2.4 and EthnoProfile 2.1: Tswana.) The Peace Corps asked American anthropologist Hoyt Alverson, who was familiar with Tswana culture and society, for advice. Alverson (1977) discovered that one major problem the Peace Corps volunteers were having involved exactly this issue of similar actions having very different meanings. The volunteers complained that the Tswana would never leave them alone. Whenever they tried to get away and sit by themselves for a few minutes to have some private time, one or more Tswana would quickly join them. This made the Americans angry. From their perspective, everyone is entitled to a certain amount of privacy and time alone. To the Tswana, however, human life is social life; the only people who want to be alone are witches and the insane. Because these young Americans did not seem to be either, the Tswana who saw them sitting alone naturally assumed that there had been a breakdown in hospitality and that the volunteers would welcome some company. Here, one behavior—a person walking out into a field and sitting by himself or herself—had two very different meanings (Figure 2.5).

From this example we can see that human experience is inherently ambiguous. Even within a single cultural tradition, the meaning of an object or an action may differ, depending on the context. Quoting philosopher Gilbert Ryle, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, 6) noted that there is a world of difference between a wink

EthnoProfile 2.1

Tswana

Region: Southern Africa

Nation: Botswana

Population: 1,200,000 (also 1,500,000 in South Africa)

Environment: Savanna to desert

Livelihood: Cattle raising, farming

Political organization: Traditionally, chiefs and headmen; today, part of a modern nation-state

For more information: Comaroff, Jean. 1985. *Body of power, spirit of resistance: The culture history of a South African people.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

FIGURE 2.4 Location of Tswana. For more information, see EthnoProfile 2.1.

ethnocentrism The opinion that one's own way of life is natural or correct and, indeed, the only true way of being fully human.

FIGURE 2.5 For Tswana, human life is social life. It was difficult for Peace Corps volunteers from the United States accustomed to having "private time" to adjust to Tswana practices.

and a blink, as anyone who has ever mistaken one for the other has undoubtedly learned. To resolve the ambiguity, experience must be interpreted, and human beings regularly turn to their own cultural traditions in search of an interpretation that makes sense. They do this daily as they go about life among others with whom they share traditions. Serious misunderstandings may arise, however, when individuals confront the same ambiguous situation without realizing that their cultural ground rules differ.

What Is Ethnocentrism?

Ethnocentrism is the term anthropologists use to describe the opinion that one's own way of life is natural or correct, indeed the only way of being fully human. As long as we are among people who share our way of life, this may seem unproblematic, even comforting. As Sarah Mahler points out (2012), the skills and knowledge we adopt from those who nurture us shapes the cultural "comfort zones" we come to take for granted. But the limits of our cultural comfort zones are tested when we encounter others whose beliefs or actions differ from our own. Often enough, such encounters leave us "discomforted," but as Mahler points out, culture is something we do, not just something we possess. Consequently, as we come to appreciate cultural diversity we can expand our comfort zones and learn new ways of doing culture.

At the same time, ethnocentrism can turn into a form of defense against the inevitable tension that cultural discomfort can produce when people with different cultural backgrounds come into contact. It reduces the other way of life to a version of one's own. Sometimes we correctly identify meaningful areas of cultural overlap. But other times, we are shocked by the differences we encounter. We may conclude that if our way is

In Their Own Words

Human-Rights Law and the Demonization of Culture

Sally Engle Merry is professor of anthropology at New York University.

Why is the idea of cultural relativism anathema to many human-rights activists? Is it related to the way international human-rights lawyers and journalists think about culture? Does this affect how they think about anthropology? I think one explanation for the tension between anthropology and human-rights activists is the very different conceptions of culture that these two groups hold. An incident demonstrated this for me vividly a few months ago. I received a phone call from a prominent radio show asking if I would be willing to talk about the recent incident in Pakistan that resulted in the gang rape of a young woman, an assault apparently authorized by a local tribal council. Since I am working on human rights and violence against women, I was happy to explain my position that this was an inexcusable act, that many Pakistani feminists condemned the rape, but that it was probably connected to local political struggles and class differences. It should not be seen as an expression of Pakistani "culture." In fact, it was the local Islamic religious leader who first made the incident known to the world, according to news stories I had read.

The interviewer was distressed. She wanted me to defend the value of respecting Pakistani culture at all costs, despite the tribal council's imposition of a sentence of rape. When I told her that I could not do that, she wanted to know if I knew of any other anthropologists who would. I could think of none, but I began to wonder what she thought about anthropologists.

Anthropologists, apparently, made no moral judgments about "cultures" and failed to recognize the contestation and changes taking place within contemporary local communities around the world. This also led me to wonder how she imagined anthropologists thought about culture. She seemed to assume that anthropologists viewed culture as a coherent, static, and unchanging set of values. Apparently cultures have no contact with the expansion of capitalism, the arming of various groups by transnational superpowers using them for proxy wars, or the cultural possibilities of human rights as an emancipatory discourse. I found this interviewer's view of culture wrongheaded and her opinion of anthropology discouraging. But perhaps it was just one journalist, I thought.

However, the recent article "From Skepticism to Embrace: Human Rights and the American Anthropological Association" by Karen Engle in *Human Rights Quarterly* (23: 536–60) paints another odd portrait of anthropology and its understanding of culture. In this piece, a law professor talks about the continuing "embarrassment" of anthropologists about the 1947 statement of the AAA Executive Board, which raised concerns about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Engle claims that the statement has caused the AAA "great shame" over the last fifty years (p. 542). Anthropologists are embarrassed, she argues, because the statement asserted tolerance without limits. While many anthropologists now embrace human rights, they do so primarily in terms of the protection of culture (citing 1999 AAA Statement on Human Rights at www.aaanet.org). Tensions over how to be a cultural relativist and still make overt political judgments that the 1947 Board confronted remain. She does acknowledge that not all anthropologists think about culture this way. But relativism, as she describes it, is primarily about tolerance for difference and is incompatible with making moral judgments about other societies.

But this incompatibility depends on how one theorizes culture. If culture is homogenous, integrated and consensual, it must be accepted as a whole. But anthropology has developed a far more complex way of understanding culture over the last two decades, focusing on its historical production, its porosity to outside influences and pressures, and its incorporation of competing repertoires of meaning and action. Were this conception more widely recognized within popular culture as well as among journalists and human-rights activists, it could shift the terms of the intractable debate between universalism and relativism. Instead, culture is increasingly understood as a barrier to the realization of human rights by activists and a tool for legitimating noncompliance with human rights by conservatives.

One manifestation of the understanding of culture prevalent in human-rights law is the concept of harmful traditional practices. Originally developed to describe female genital mutilation or cutting, this term describes practices that have some cultural legitimacy yet are designated harmful to women, particularly to their health. In 1990, the committee monitoring the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), an international convention ratified by most of the nations of the world, said that they were gravely concerned "that there are continuing cultural, traditional and economic pressures which help to perpetuate harmful practices, such as female circumcision," and adopted General Recommendation 14, which suggested that state

(continued on next page)

In Their Own Words

Human-Rights Law and the Demonization of Culture

(continued)

parties should take measures to eradicate the practice of female circumcision. Culture equals tradition and is juxtaposed to women's human rights to equality. It is not surprising, given this evolving understanding of culture within human-rights discourse, that cultural relativism is seen in such a negative light. The tendency for national elites to defend practices oppressive to women in the name of culture exacerbates this negative view of culture.

Human-rights activists and journalists have misinterpreted anthropology's position about relativism and difference because they misunderstand anthropology's position about culture. Claims to cultural relativism appear to be defenses of holistic and static entities. This conception of culture comes from older anthropological usages, such as the separation of values and social action advocated in the 1950s by Talcott Parsons. Since "culture" was defined only as values, it was considered inappropriate to judge one ethical system by another one. For Melville Herskovits, the leader of the AAA's relativist criticism of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1947, cultural relativism meant protecting the holistic cultures of small communities from colonial intrusion (AAA 1947 Statement, AA 49: 539–43).

If culture is understood this way, it is not surprising that cultural relativism appears to be a retrograde position to human-rights lawyers. Nor is it puzzling that they find anthropology irrelevant. As human-rights law demonizes culture, it misunderstands anthropology as well. The holistic conception of culture provides no space for change, contestation or the analysis of the links between power, practices and values. Instead, it becomes a barrier to the reformist project of universal human rights. From the legal perspective on human rights, it is the texts, the documents and compliance that matter. Universalism is essential while relativism is bad. There is a sense of moral certainty which taking account of culture disrupts. This means, however, that the moral principle of tolerance for difference is lost.

When corporate executives in the U.S. steal millions of dollars through accounting fraud, we do not criticize American culture as a whole. We recognize that these actions come from the greed of a few along with sloppy institutional arrangements that allow them to get away with it. Similarly, the actions of a single tribal council in Pakistan should not indict the entire culture, as if it were a homogeneous entity. Although Pakistan and many of its communities have practices and laws that subordinate women, these are neither homogeneous nor ancient. Pakistan as a "culture" can be indicted by this particular council's encouragement to rape only if culture is understood as a homogenous entity whose rules evoke universal compliance. Adopting a more sophisticated and dynamic understanding of culture not only promotes human-rights activism, but also relocates anthropological theorizing to the center of these issues rather than to the margins, where it has been banished.

Source: Merry 2003.

right, then their way can only be wrong. (Of course, from their perspective, our way of life may seem to be a distortion of theirs.)

The members of one society may go beyond merely interpreting another way of life in ethnocentric terms. They may decide to do something about the discrepancies they observe. They may conclude that the other way of life is wrong but not fundamentally evil and that the members of the other group need to be converted to their own way of doing things. If the others are unwilling to change their ways, however, the failed attempt at conversion may enlarge into an active dualism: us versus them, civilization versus savagery, good versus evil. The ultimate result may be war and *genocide*—the deliberate attempt to exterminate an entire group based on race, religion, national origin, or other cultural features.

Is It Possible to Avoid Ethnocentric Bias?

One way to address this question is to view relationships between individuals with different cultural backgrounds as not being fundamentally different from relationships between individuals with very similar cultural backgrounds. Even people with little in common can learn to get along, even if it is not always easy. Like all human relationships, they affect all parties involved in the encounter, changing them as they learn about each other. People with a cultural background very different from your own may help you see possibilities for belief and action that are drastically at odds with everything your tradition considers possible. By becoming aware of these unsuspected possibilities,

you become a different person. People from cultural backgrounds different from yours are likely to be affected in the same way.

Learning about other cultures is at once enormously hopeful and immensely threatening; once it occurs, we can no longer claim that any single culture has a monopoly on truth. Although this does not mean that the traditions in question must therefore be based entirely on illusion or falsehood, it does mean that the truth embodied in any cultural tradition is bound to be partial, approximate, and open to further insight and growth.

What Is Cultural Relativism?

Anthropologists must come to terms with the tensions produced by cultural differences as they do their fieldwork. One result has been the formulation of the concept of cultural relativism. Definitions of cultural relativism have varied as different anthropologists have tried to draw conclusions based on their own experience of other ways of life. For example, **cultural relativism** can be defined as "understanding another culture in its own terms sympathetically enough so that the culture appears to be a coherent and meaningful design for living" (Greenwood and Stini 1977, 182). According to this holistic definition, the goal of cultural relativism is to promote understanding of cultural practices, particularly of those that an outsider finds puzzling, incoherent, or morally troubling. These practices range from trivial (like eating insects) to horrifying (like genocide), but most are likely to be located somewhere between these extremes.

How Can Cultural Relativity Improve Our Understanding of Controversial Cultural Practices?

Rituals initiating girls and boys into adulthood are widely practiced throughout the world. In some parts of Africa, this ritual includes genital cutting. For example, ritual experts may cut off the foreskins of the penises of adolescent boys, who are expected to endure this operation without showing fear or pain. In the case of girls, ritual cutting may involve little more than nicking the clitoris with a knife blade to draw blood. In other cases, however, the surgery is more extreme. The clitoris itself may be cut off (or *excised*), a procedure called *clitoridectomy*. In some parts of eastern Africa, however, the surgery is even more extreme: The labia are excised along with the clitoris, and the remaining skin is fastened together, forming scar tissue that partially closes the vaginal opening. This version is often called *pharaonic circumcision* or *infibulation*. When young women who have undergone this operation marry, they may require further surgery to widen the vaginal opening. Surgery may be necessary again to widen the vaginal opening when a woman gives birth; and after she has delivered her child, she may expect to be closed up again. Many women who have undergone these procedures repeatedly can develop serious medical complications involving the bladder and colon later in life.

The removal of the male foreskin—or *circumcision*—has long been a familiar practice in Western societies, not only among observant Jews, who perform it for religious reasons, but also among physicians, who have encouraged circumcision of male newborns as a hygienic measure. The ritual practice of female genital cutting, by contrast, has been unfamiliar to most people in Western societies until recently.

Genital Cutting, Gender, and Human Rights

In 1978, radical feminist Mary Daly grouped "African female genital mutilation" together with practices such as foot binding in China and witch burning in medieval Europe and labeled all these practices patriarchal "Sado-Rituals" that destroy "the Self-affirming being of women" (1978, 111). Feminists and other cultural critics in Western societies spoke out against such practices in the 1980s. In 1992, African American novelist Alice Walker published a best-selling novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, in which the heroine is an African woman who undergoes the operation, suffers psychologically and physically, and eventually pursues the female elder who performed the ritual on her. Walker also made a film, called *Warrior Marks*, that condemned female genital cutting. While many Western readers continue to regard the positions taken by Daly and Walker as formidable and necessary feminist assertions of women's resistance against patriarchal oppression, other readers—particularly women from societies in which female genital cutting is an ongoing practice—have responded with far less enthusiasm.

cultural relativism Understanding another culture in its own terms sympathetically enough so that the culture appears to be a coherent and meaningful design for living.

Does this mean that these women are in favor of female genital cutting? Not necessarily; in fact, many of them are actively working to discourage the practice in their own societies. But they find that when outsiders publicly condemn traditional African rituals like clitoridectomy and infibulation, their efforts may do more harm than good. Women anthropologists who come from African societies where female genital cutting is traditional point out that Western women who want to help are likely to be more effective if they pay closer attention to what the African women themselves have to say about the meaning of these customs: "Careful listening to women helps us to recognize them as political actors forging their own communities of resistance. It also helps us to learn how and when to provide strategic support that would be welcomed by women who are struggling to challenge such traditions within their own cultures" (Abusharaf 2000, 18).

A better understanding of female genital cutting is badly needed in places like the United States and the European Union, where some immigrants and refugees from Africa have brought traditions of female genital cutting with them. Since the mid-1990s, growing awareness and public condemnation of the practice has led to the passage of laws that criminalize female genital cutting in 15 African states and 10 industrialized nations, including the United States and Canada (http://www.crlp.org/pub_fac_fgmicpd.html). Nonprofit legal advocacy organizations such as the Center for Reproductive and Legal Rights consider female genital cutting (which they call *female genital mutilation*, or FGM) a human-rights violation. They acknowledge: "Although FGM is not undertaken with the intention of inflicting harm, its damaging physical, sexual, and psychological effects make it an act of violence against women and children" http://www.crlp.org/pub_fac_fgmicpd.html). Some women have been able successfully to claim asylum or have avoided deportation by claiming that they have fled their home countries to avoid the operation. However, efforts to protect women and girls may backfire badly when immigrant or refugee mothers in the United States who seek to have their daughters ritually cut are stigmatized in the media as "mutilators" or "child abusers" and find that this practice is considered a felony punishable by up to five years in prison (Abusharaf 2000). Indeed, such efforts can backfire even when members of the receiving society attempt to be culturally sensitive.

Genital Cutting as a Valued Ritual

Female genital cutting is clearly a controversial practice about which many people have already made up their minds. In such circumstances, is there any role to be played by anthropologists? Abusharaf thinks there is. She writes: "Debates swirling round circumcision must be restructured in ways that are neither condemnatory nor demeaning, but that foster perceptions illuminated by careful study of the nuanced complexities of culture" (Abusharaf 2000, 17).

One ethnographic study that aims to achieve these goals has been written by Janice Boddy, a cultural anthropologist who has carried out field research since 1976 in the Muslim village of Hofriyat in rural northern Sudan, where female genital surgery is traditionally performed in childhood. She writes that "nothing . . . had adequately prepared me for what I was to witness" when she first observed the operation; nevertheless, "as time passed in the village and understanding deepened I came to regard this form of female circumcision in a very different light" (1997, 309). Circumcisions in Hofriyat were traditionally performed on both boys and girls, but the ritual had a different meaning for boys than it did for girls. Once circumcised, a boy takes a step toward manhood, but a girl will not become a woman until she marries. Female circumcision is required, however, to make a girl marriageable, making it possible for her "to use her one great gift, fertility" (310).

In Hofriyat, female circumcision traditionally involved infibulation, the most extreme version of genital cutting. Among the justifications offered for infibulation, Boddy found that preserving chastity and curbing female sexual desire made the most sense in rural northern Sudan, where women's sexual conduct is the symbol of family honor. In practical terms, infibulation ensures "that a girl is a virgin when she marries for the first time" (Boddy 1997, 313). Women who undergo the procedure do indeed suffer a lot, not only at the time of circumcision, but whenever they engage in sexual intercourse, whenever they give birth, and, over time, as they become subject to recurring urinary infections and difficulties with menstruation. What cultural explanation could make all this suffering meaningful to women?

The answer lies in the connection rural northern Sudanese villagers make between the infibulated female body and female fertility. Boddy believes that the women she knew equated the category of "virgin" more with fertility than with lack of sexual experience and believed that a woman's virginity and her fertility could be renewed and protected by the act of reinfibulation after giving birth. Women she knew described infibulated female bodies as clean and smooth and pure (Boddy 1997, 313). Boddy concluded that the ritual was best understood as a way of socializing female fertility "by dramatically de-emphasizing their inherent sexuality" and turning infibulated women into potential "mothers of

men." This means they are eligible, with their husbands, to found a new lineage section by giving birth to sons. Women who become "mothers of men" are more than mere sexual partners or servants of their husbands and may attain high status, their name remembered in village genealogies (314).

Boddy discovered that the purity, cleanliness, and smoothness associated with the infibulated female body is also associated with other activities, concepts, and objects in everyday village customs. For example, Boddy discovered that "clean" water birds, "clean food" like eggs, ostrich eggshells, and gourds shaped like ostrich eggshells were associated with female fertility. Indeed, "the shape of an ostrich egg, with its tiny orifice, corresponds to the idealized shape of the circumcised woman's womb" (Boddy 1997, 317). Fetching water is traditionally considered women's work, and the ability of an object to retain moisture is likened to its ability to retain fertility. A dried egg-shaped gourd with seeds that rattle inside it is like the womb of an infibulated woman that contains and mixes her husband's semen with her own blood. The traditional house in Hofriyat itself seems to be a symbol for the womb, which is called the "house of childbirth" (321). In the same way that the household enclosure "protects a man's descendants, so the enclosed womb protects a woman's fertility . . . the womb of an infibulated woman is an oasis, the locus of appropriate human fertility" (321).

Evidence like this leads Boddy to insist that, for the women of Hofriyat, pharaonic circumcision is "an assertive symbolic act" (321). The experience of infibulation, as well as other traditional curing practices, teach girls to associate pure female bodies with heat and pain, making them meaningful. Such experiences become associated with the chief purpose women strive for—to become mothers of men—and the lesson is taught them repeatedly in a variety of ways when they look at waterbirds or eggs or make food or move around the village. Boddy's relativistic account demonstrates how the meanings associated with female infibulation are reinforced by so many different aspects of everyday life that girls who grow up, marry, and bear children in Hofriyat come to consider the operation a dangerous but profoundly necessary and justifiable procedure that enables them to help sustain all that is most valued in their own world.

Culture and Moral Reasoning

A relativistic understanding of female genital cutting, therefore, accomplishes several things. It makes the practice comprehensible and even coherent. It reveals how a physically dangerous procedure can appear perfectly acceptable—even indispensable—when placed in a particular context of meaning. It can help us see how some of the cultural practices that we take for granted, such as the promotion of weight loss and cosmetic surgery among women in our own society, are equally dangerous—from "Victorian clitoridectomy" (Sheehan 1997) to twenty-first century cosmetic surgery. In the March 1, 2007, issue of the *New York Times*, for example, reporter Natasha Singer observes, "Before braces, crooked teeth were the norm. Is wrinkle removal the new orthodontics?" (N. Singer 2007, E3). Media and marketing pressure for cosmetic treatments that stop the visible signs of aging bombard middle-aged women. People are living longer, and treatments like Botox injections are becoming more easily available, with the result that "the way pop culture perceives the aging face" is changing, leaving women "grappling with the idea of what 60 looks like" (E3). Moreover, pressure to undergo antiaging treatments, including plastic surgery, is not simply a matter of vanity. "At the very least, wrinkles are being repositioned as the new gray hair—another means to judge attractiveness, romantic viability, professional competitiveness and social status" (E3). Singer quotes a 33-year-old real estate broker who has had Botox injections, chemical peels, and laser treatments who said, "If you want to sell a million-dollar house, you have to look good . . . and you have to have confidence that you look good" (E3). In Sudan, people say that virgins are "made, not born" (Boddy 1997, 313); perhaps in the United States, youth is also made, not born. In the United States today, the media message to women is that success in life requires not an infibulated body, but a face that never ages. In both cases, cultural practices recommend surgical intervention in the female life cycle to render permanent certain aspects of youthful female bodies that are otherwise transient (fertility and unlined faces, respectively).

Did Their Culture Make Them Do It?

Do these examples imply that women support "irrational" and harmful practices simply because "their culture makes them do it?" For some people, this kind of explanation is plausible, even preferable, to alternative explanations, because it absolves individual people of blame. How can one justify accusing immigrant African women of being mutilators or abusers of children and throw them into prison if they had no choice in the matter, if their cultures conditioned them into believing that female circumcision was necessary and proper and they are powerless to resist?

Nevertheless, such an explanation is too simplistic to account for the continued practice of infibulation in Hofriyat. First, the villages of northern Sudan are not sealed off from a wider, more diverse world. Northern Sudan has experienced a lively and often violent history as different groups of outsiders, including the British, have struggled to control the land. Boddy describes the way rural men regularly leave the village as migrant workers and mix with people whose customs—including sexual customs—are very different from the ones they left behind; and outsiders, like anthropologists, also may come to the village and establish long-lasting relationships with those whom they meet. Second, Boddy's account makes clear that the culture of Hofriyat allows people more than one way to interpret their experiences. For example, she notes that although men in Sudan and Egypt are supposed to enjoy sexual intercourse with infibulated women more than with noninfibulated women, in fact these men regularly visit brothels where they encounter prostitutes who have not undergone the surgery.

Third and perhaps most significantly, Boddy observes that a less radical form of the operation began to gain acceptance after 1969, and "men are now marrying—and what is more, saying that they prefer to marry—women who have been less severely mutilated," at least in part because they find sexual relations to be more satisfying (1997, 312). Finally, as these observations all show, Boddy's account emphatically rejects the view that women or men in Hofriyat are passive beings, helpless to resist cultural indoctrination. As Abusharaf would wish, Boddy listened to women in Hofriyat and recognized them "as political actors forging their own communities of resistance." Specifically, Boddy showed how increasing numbers of women (and men) continued to connect female genital cutting with properly socialized female fertility—but they no longer believed that infibulation was the only procedure capable of achieving that goal.

Understanding something is not the same as approving of it or excusing it. People everywhere may be repelled by unfamiliar cultural practices when they first encounter them. Sometimes when they understand these practices better, they change their minds. They may conclude that the practices in question are more suitable for the people who employ them than their own practices would be. They might even recommend incorporating practices from other cultures into their own society. But the opposite may also be the case. It is possible to understand perfectly the cultural rationale behind such practices as slavery, infanticide, headhunting, and genocide—and still refuse to approve of these practices. Insiders and outsiders alike may not be persuaded by the reasons offered to justify these practices, or they may be aware of alternative arrangements that could achieve the desired outcome via less drastic methods. In fact, changing practices of female circumcision in Hofriyat seem to be based precisely on the realization that less extreme forms of surgery can achieve the same valued cultural goals. This should not surprise us: It is likely that any cultural practice with far-reaching consequences for human life will have critics as well as supporters within the society where it is practiced. This is certainly the case in the United States, where abortion and capital punishment remain controversial issues.

A sensitive ethnographic account of a controversial cultural practice, like Boddy's account of infibulation in Hofriyat, will address both the meaningful dimensions of the practice and the contradictions it involves. As Boddy concludes,

> Those who work to eradicate female circumcision must, I assert, cultivate an awareness of the custom's local significances and of how much they are asking people to relinquish as well as gain. The stakes are high and it is hardly surprising that efforts to date have met with little success. It is, however, ironic that a practice that—at least in Hofriyat—emphasizes female fertility at a cultural level can be so destructive of it physiologically and so damaging to women's health overall. That paradox has analogies elsewhere, in a world considered "civilized," seemingly far removed from the "barbarous East." Here too, in the west from where I speak, feminine selfhood is often attained at the expense of female well-being. In parallels like these there lies the germ of an enlightened approach to the problem (1997, 322).

Cultural relativism makes moral reasoning more complex. It does not, however, require us to abandon every value our own society has taught us. Every cultural tradition offers more than one way of evaluating experience. Exposure to the interpretations of an unfamiliar culture forces us to reconsider the possibilities our own tradition recognizes in a new light and to search for areas of intersection as well as areas of disagreement. What cultural relativism does discourage is the easy solution of refusing to consider alternatives from the outset. It also does not free us from sometimes facing difficult choices between alternatives whose rightness or wrongness is less than clearcut. In this sense, "cultural relativism is a 'toughminded' philosophy" (Herskovits 1973, 37).

Does Culture Explain Everything?

We believe that our view of the concept of culture as presented in this chapter is widely shared among contemporary cultural anthropologists. Nevertheless, in recent years the concept of culture has been critically reexamined as patterns of human life have undergone major dislocations and configurations. The issues are complex and are more fully explored in later chapters, but we offer here a brief account to provide some historical context.

For at least the past 50 years, many anthropologists have distinguished between Culture (with a capital *C*) and cultures (plural with a lowercase *c*). *Culture* has been used to describe an attribute of the human species as a whole—its members' ability, in the absence of highly specific genetic programming, to create and to imitate patterned, symbolically mediated ideas and activities that promote the survival of our species. By contrast, the term *cultures* has been used to refer to particular, learned *ways of life* belonging to specific groups of human beings. Given this distinction, the human species as a whole can be said to have Culture as a defining attribute, but actual human beings would only have access to particular human cultures—either their own or other people's.

It is the plural use of cultures with a lowercase c that has been challenged. The challenge may seem puzzling, however, because many anthropologists have viewed the plural use of the culture concept not only as analytically helpful but also as politically progressive. Their view reflects a struggle that developed in nineteenth-century Europe: Supporters of the supposedly progressive, universal civilization of the Enlightenment, inaugurated by the French Revolution and spread by Napoleonic conquest, were challenged by inhabitants of other European nations, who resisted both Napoleon and the Enlightenment in what has been called the Romantic Counter-Enlightenment. Romantic intellectuals in nations like Germany rejected what they considered the imposition of "artificial" Enlightenment *civilization* on the "natural" spiritual traditions of their own distinct national *cultures* (Kuper 1999; Crehan 2002).

This political dynamic, which pits a steamroller civilization against vulnerable local cultures, carried over into the usage that later developed in anthropology, particularly in North America. The decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century marked the period of expanding European colonial empires as well as westward expansion and consolidation of control in North America by European settlers. At that time, the social sciences were becoming established in universities, and different fields were assigned different tasks. Anthropology was allocated what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991) has called "the savage slot"—that is, the so-called "primitive" world that was the target of colonization. Anthropologists thus became the official academic experts on societies whose members suffered racist denigration as "primitives" and whose ways of life were being undermined by contact with Western colonial "civilization."

Anthropologists were determined to denounce these practices and to demonstrate that the "primitive" stereotype was false. Some found inspiration in the work of English anthropologist E. B. Tylor, who, in 1871, had defined "culture or civilization" as "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" (1958 [1871]:1). This definition had the virtue of blurring the difference between "civilization" and "culture," and it encouraged the view that even "primitives" possessed "capabilities and habits" that merited respect. Thus, in response to stereotypes of "primitives" as irrational, disorganized, insensitive, or promiscuous, anthropologists like Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski were able to show that, on the contrary, so-called "primitives" possessed "cultures" that were reasonable, orderly, artistically developed, and morally disciplined. The plural use of culture allowed them to argue that, in their own ways, "primitives" were as fully human as "civilized" people.

By the end of the twentieth century, however, some anthropologists became concerned about the way the plural concept of culture was being used. That is, the boundary that was once thought to protect vulnerability was starting to look more like a prison wall, condemning those within it to live according to "their" culture, just as their ancestors had done, like exhibits in a living museum, whether they wanted to or not. But if some group members criticize a practice, such as female genital cutting, that is part of their cultural tradition, does this mean that the critics are no longer "authentic" members of their own culture? To come to such a conclusion overlooks the possibility that alternatives to a controversial practice might already exist *within* the cultural tradition and that followers of that tradition may *themselves* decide that some alternatives make more sense than others in today's world. The issue then becomes not just which traditions have been inherited from the past—as if "authentic" cultures were monolithic and unchanging—but, rather, which traditional practices *ought* to continue in a contemporary world—and who is entitled to make that decision.

Culture Change and Cultural Authenticity

It is no secret that colonizing states have regularly attempted to determine the cultural priorities of those whom they conquered. Sending missionaries to convert colonized peoples to Christianity is one of the best known practices of Western cultural imperialism. In North America in the 1860s, for example, escalating struggles between settlers and Native American groups led federal policy makers to place federal Indian policy in the hands of Christian reformers "who would embrace the hard work of transforming Indians and resist the lure of getting rich off the system's spoils" (Lassiter et al. 2002, 22). And although missionaries were initially resisted, eventually they made many converts, and Christianity remains strong among indigenous groups like the Comanches and Kiowas today. But how should this religious conversion be understood?

Doesn't the fact that Kiowas are Christians today show that federal officials and missionaries succeeded in their policies of Western Christian cultural imperialism? Maybe not: "Taking the 'Jesus Way' is not necessarily the story of how one set of beliefs replace another one wholesale, or of the incompatibility of Kiowa practices with Christian ones. Rather, it is a more complex encounter in which both sides make concessions" (Lassiter et al. 2002, 19). True, missionaries arrived as the buffalo were disappearing and Kiowa people were being confined to reservations, and in 1890 the U.S. government used military force to put an end to the Kiowa Sun Dance, the centerpiece of Kiowa ceremonies. And yet, Lassiter tells us, "For many Kiowas—as for Indian people generally—Christianity has been, and remains, a crucially important element in their lives as Native people. Its concern for community needs, its emphasis on shared beliefs, and its promise of salvation have helped to mediate life in a region long buffeted by limited economic development, geographic isolation, and cultural stress" (18).

One reason it succeeded was that missionaries did not insist that the Kiowa give up all traditional ways (Lassiter et al. 2002, 53). Prominent Kiowa individuals adopted Christianity, and Kiowa converts were trained to become missionaries and ministers, which proved attractive (57; Figure 2.6). Especially persuasive were women missionaries who "lived in the Kiowa camps, ate their food, and endured the privations of life on the plains with impressive strength" (59). Missionaries, in turn, actively sought to adapt Christian practices to traditional Kiowa ways. For example, "Missions were historically located in and around established camps and communities," with the result that "churches were the natural extension of traditional Kiowa camps" and eventually took their place at the center of Kiowa life (61). "People would often camp on the grounds or stay with relatives for weeks at a time. . . . Services with Kiowa hymns and special prayers often extended into the evening" (62).

FIGURE 2.6 Among the Kiowa, prominent individuals, like Chief Lone Wolf, adopted Christianity and invited missionaries to train Kiowa ministers.

It might be as accurate to say that the Kiowa "kiowanized" Christianity, therefore, as it would be to say that missionaries "Christianized" the Kiowa. One of Lassiter's Kiowa collaborators, Vincent Bointy, insists that Christianity is not the same as "the white man's way" and explains that "the elders didn't say 'Christian.' . . . They said 'this is the way of God'" (Lassiter et al. 2002, 63). Kiowa identity and Christian values are so closely intertwined for Bointy that "he believes that he can express the power of Christianity better in Kiowa than in English." (63). And this is why Kiowa hymns are so important. Unlike other Kiowa songs, Kiowa hymns are sung in the Kiowa language, which is spoken less and less in other settings. Kiowa hymns "give life to a unique Kiowa experience, preserve the language, and affirm an ongoing (and continually unfolding) Kiowa spirituality. Indeed, Kiowa Indian hymns are as much Kiowa (if not more) as they are 'Christian'" (Lassiter 2004, 205).