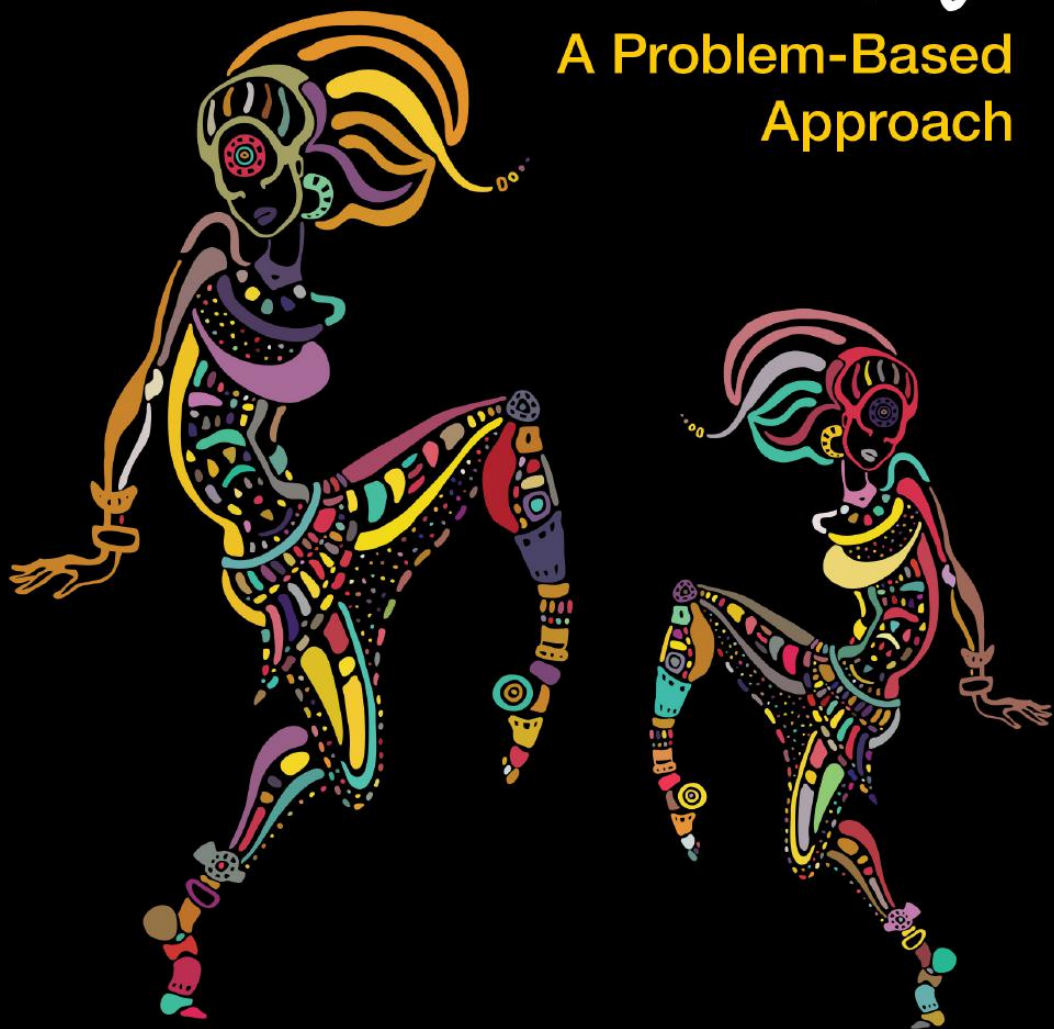


8th edition

Cultural Anthropology

A Problem-Based Approach



Richard H. Robbins • Rachel A. Dowty Beech





Cultural Anthropology

Eighth Edition

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Richard H. Robbins

State University of New York at Plattsburgh

Rachel A. Dowty Beech

University of New Haven



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Preface

Anthropologists enjoy a unique perspective on education. For us, learning and teaching form part of a cultural process affected by a host of social, cultural, individual, and situational factors. A classroom constitutes but one of many learning environments and, like other environments, influences the kind of learning that occurs within its boundaries. For the anthropologist, classrooms have their own unique cultures—some of which may be more or less conducive to the kinds of learning to which teachers and students aspire.

We designed *Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach* to help instructors and students in introductory courses in cultural anthropology to foster a classroom culture that, regardless of class size and instructional technique, actively involves students in the learning process, promotes critical thinking, and impresses on students that they, along with other peoples and cultures of the world, are cultural animals worthy of anthropological study. The case studies in doing anthropology included at the end of each chapter are designed to illustrate the uses of an anthropological perspective and its applications to various career paths.

How can the use of this book and the instructor's resources contribute to active learning? We think in at least three ways. First, the material is organized by problems and questions rather than topics. Each of the eight chapters of the book focuses on a specific problem of anthropology as well as a general concern:

- How can people begin to understand beliefs and behaviors that are different from their own?
- How do we explain the transformation of human societies over the past 10,000 years from small-scale nomadic bands of hunters and gatherers to large-scale urban-industrial states?
- How does our economy affect our way of life?
- Why are modern societies characterized by growing social, political, and economic inequalities?
- Why do people believe different things, and why are they so certain their view of the world is correct and other views are wrong?
- What do we need to know before we can understand the dynamics of family life in other societies?
- How do people determine who they are, and how do they communicate who they think they are to others?
- How do societies give meaning to and justify collective violence?

From these problems are derived specific questions, each of which is amenable to study and research and from which it is possible to come to a more or less definitive conclusion. These include the following:

- How do modern standards of health and medical treatment compare with those of traditional societies?
- Why do modern economies need to perpetually grow?
- How do people come to accept social hierarchies as natural?
- What are the characteristics of peaceful societies?

The selection of specific problems and questions for the text was a difficult one. It is impossible in an introductory-level textbook to present all the problems and questions of relevance to cultural anthropologists. However, we have tried to select problems and questions that are central to anthropological concerns, that allow discussion of anthropological subjects and works typically covered in introductory courses in cultural anthropology, and that are, in addition, meaningful to today's students. The Topic-Contents Correspondence chart below links topics in cultural anthropology to the contents where those topics are considered and can be used in guiding discussion.

TOPIC-CONTENTS CORRESPONDENCE	
Topic	Corresponding Chapter, Question, or Case Study
Applied anthropology	Case Studies 1–8
Art	Question 5.2
Belief	Chapter 5
Colonialism	Questions 2.3, 2.5
Communication	Case Study 1
Corporations	Questions 3.3, 3.4; Case Study 3
Cultural bias	Question 5.4
Cultural evolution	Question 2.1
Cultural relativism	Question 1.2
Culture change	Chapter 2; Case Studies 2, 3
Culture concept	Chapter 1
Ecology	Questions 1.5, 2.3; Case Study 2
Economic anthropology	Chapters 2, 3; Questions 4.1, 4.2, 4.5
Education	Questions 3.3, 5.2, 7.3; Case Studies 5, 7

TOPIC-CONTENTS CORRESPONDENCE	
Topic	Corresponding Chapter, Question, or Case Study
Family organization	Chapter 5
Feud	Questions 8.1, 8.3
Fieldwork	Question 1.3; Case Studies 1–8
Financial crisis	Question 3.5
Food	Questions 2.2, 2.3; Case Studies 2, 3, 7
Gender roles	Chapter 6; Questions 1.2, 5.5, 7.2, 7.3, 8.4; Case Studies 2, 7
Gift giving	Questions 6.3, 7.4, 7.5
Globalization	Chapter 3; Questions 2.2, 2.3, 2.5
Hunters and gatherers	Questions 2.1, 2.5, 8.2
Identity	Chapter 7
Industrialization	Questions 2.2, 2.3, 3.3
Inequality	Chapter 4; Question 7.2; Case Study 7
Kinship	Chapter 6; Question 4.4
Language and culture	Questions 1.4, 5.1, 5.3, 7.2, 7.3, 8.2, 8.5
Marriage rules	Chapter 6
Medical anthropology	Questions 2.4, 4.5; Case Study 4
Money	Question 3.1
Nation-state	Questions 3.4, 4.2
Neoliberalism	Chapter 3
Peasants	Chapter 6; Questions 2.1, 2.3, 2.5
Political organization and control	Questions 3.4, 4.2, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.5; Case Study 4
Religion	Chapter 5; Questions 1.1, 1.2, 6.4, 8.1
Revolution	Questions 4.2, 8.4
Ritual	Questions 1.4, 1.5, 2.4, 5.2, 5.3, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 7.5
Sexual stratification	Chapter 4; Questions 5.1, 5.2, 5.3
Sexuality	Questions 1.5, 4.2, 4.4, 7.2, 7.3; Case Study 6

(Continued)

(Continued)

TOPIC-CONTENTS CORRESPONDENCE	
Topic	Corresponding Chapter, Question, or Case Study
Social stratification	Chapter 4
Status and rank	Chapters 4, 6; Question 5.4; Case Study 5
Subsistence techniques	Questions 2.1, 2.2
Symbolism	Questions 1.1, 1.4, 1.5, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 7.3, 7.4; Case Study 5
Systems of exchange	Questions 3.1, 7.5
Urbanism	Question 4.4
War	Chapter 8; Question 3.4
Wealth	Questions 3.1, 4.1, 4.2

In providing material to explore answers to the questions posed in the text, we have tried to present a balanced approach and to invite readers to construct their own informed responses. We have also tried to select studies and writings that represent those classical studies typically found in introductory-level courses and newer or less well-known works that bear on contemporary concerns.

A second way that *Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach* contributes to active learning is through exercises, case studies, and simulations—some of which are included in the textbook and others in the instructor's manual available online. These are designed to help students realize some of the implications of the problems or questions for their own lives as well as for others' lives. Students and instructors can use them in various ways: as discussion questions, writing exercises, or topics for group inquiry or cooperative learning. As topics for group work, we have used them in classes as large as 75 students, and we believe they can be used effectively in even larger classes. If used as group inquiry topics, the exercises are designed to take no more than 15 to 20 minutes. As writing exercises, they can be used to prime classroom discussion; students can prepare brief responses prior to class, and these responses can be used as a starting point for discussion. Our own experience is that the use of these exercises conveys to students the positive value, the enjoyment, and the necessity of intellectual exchange. The exercises also allow students to bring to the class and contribute their own informed responses to the questions discussed in the textbook. The instructor's manual includes suggestions on using the exercises as well as information on what to expect in the way of student responses. In addition, it includes a guide to articles in introductory readers and film and video material to accompany each question raised in the book, along with suggestions on how the films or videos can be used to stimulate discussion.

The third feature that contributes to active learning stems from our conviction that people learning about the cultures of others cannot fully appreciate them without first understanding something of their own cultural perspectives. That is, to appreciate the fact that people construct their “worlds,” students must appreciate the fact that they, as cultural animals, do the same. For that reason, the textbook contains numerous comparisons of world cultures with American cultures, and many of the exercises in the textbook and instructor’s manual invite students to apply what they have learned to the analysis of their own behaviors and beliefs.

Changes in the Eighth Edition

There are a number of significant additions to the eighth edition, most significantly to recognize the contributions of cultural and social anthropology to a broader understanding of global problems and culture—for example, nutrition patterns, growing economic inequality, and the shift to authoritarian regimes—in addition to studies focusing on specific, small-scale societies.

In Chapter 1 we have included a discussion of social media and examined a nine-country study that should provide some perspective on the debates over the pros and cons of platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube as well as the growing influence of these platforms.

In Chapter 2 we have added material on what we can learn about diet and nutrition from gathering and hunting societies that may help us understand the global rise of obesity.

Chapters 3 and 4 have been revised to address the attention that anthropologists are placing on history and global issues and the emergence of capitalist culture. Consequently, Chapter 4 addresses the subject formerly addressed in Chapter 7, social stratification and hierarchy. However, given the additional attention of anthropologists as well as economists and other social scientists, we have included new sections documenting the growth of economic inequality with an emphasis on the role of finance and the study of financialization by anthropologists (see, for example, Hann & Kalb, 2020).

In Chapter 7 we have added information on migrants and refugees.

Implicit in the textbook and the instructional materials is the conviction that the culture of the classroom should foster cooperation. However, cooperation does not preclude conflict and critique. In fact, it assumes it. We would be grateful for comments from instructors and students about the book, the questions, and the general approach, as well as suggestions for additional exercises, videos or films, or other materials that would enhance the use of *Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach*. We also would be happy to distribute those suggestions to others who are using the book. Richard H. Robbins can be contacted at the Department of Anthropology, SUNY at Plattsburgh, Plattsburgh, NY 12901, or by e-mail at richard.robbins@plattsburgh.edu, and Rachel Beech at Henry C. Lee College of Criminal Justice and Forensic Sciences, University of New Haven, or by e-mail at RDowtyBeech@newhaven.edu.

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Culture and Meaning

Problem 1: How Can People Begin to Understand Beliefs and Behaviors That Are Different From Their Own?

Introduction: The World Behind Everyday Appearances

In **cultural anthropology**, as in every science, we strive to look beyond the world of everyday experiences to discover the patterns and meanings that lie behind that world. For example, take the typical classroom chair with attached desk.

In our taken-for-granted, everyday world, this piece of furniture is a utilitarian object: something to sit on, or write on, or even put our feet on. But for the cultural anthropologist, the classroom chair tells some interesting tales and poses some interesting questions. For example, why do we have chairs at all? Many societies do not; people sit or squat on the ground or the floor or sit on stools or benches. Historically, the chair probably first appeared in Europe or the Near East, but it wasn't even common in Europe until the 18th century. And why does the classroom chair take the form it does? Why don't we sit on stools? One feature of the chair that anthropologists might explore as they try to decipher

the meaning of the classroom chair and desk is the erect position into which it forces the body, compelling it, in effect, to “pay attention.” We might take a clue from French philosopher Michel Foucault (1979); he refers to the shaping of the human body as a “political anatomy”—a way that people’s bodies are controlled by others to operate with the necessary speed and efficiency. Political anatomy produces, Foucault says, “docile bodies.”

An anthropologist might suggest that the classroom chair and desk are part of the political anatomy of educational settings—part of the system of relations that gives meaning to the classroom; that is, this piece of furniture forms the body into a shape that prepares it (or forces it) to attend to a teacher and not to others in the same room. Moreover, it is appropriate to its unique setting in the classroom, as are other objects of furniture. For example, imagine replacing classroom chairs with bar stools, whose main purpose is to promote bodily mobility and conversation with others.

Once alert to the idea that the classroom chair might serve as an instrument of control, we might notice other ways in which classroom design serves as a mode of discipline. The distribution of people in space, with each person in a particular “spot” in ordered rows, serves to discipline people to “pay attention” to the classroom center and not to others around them. We might also notice the distinctive ordering of time and the use of clocks, bells, and whistles to control the movement and activities of people in school settings. One can even take our analysis a step further and examine the discipline of the school setting sequentially—from kindergarten through high school; for example, contrast the wide-open space of the kindergarten classroom with its movable chairs and tables and the teacher’s desk set off to the side with the partitioned space of a high school classroom with its neatly arranged

desks facing the centered desk of the teacher. This is the evolution of classroom discipline.

Students, of course, do not always obey the subtle commands that direct their bodies to do certain things at certain times. Simply examine the strange bodily contortions of students as they resist the form into which the classroom chair tries to force them. They also occasionally try to resist the isolation imposed by the arrangement of classroom furniture or the timetables set by clocks, bells, and whistles.

The way that specific societies order behavior through the arrangement of space and time is but one small area examined by



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PHOTO 1.2 Cultural anthropologists find patterns of meaning even in objects as simple as a classroom chair.

cultural anthropology, but it can serve as an example of how from an anthropological perspective we cannot take anything about even our own beliefs and behavior for granted—let alone the behavior and beliefs of those whose backgrounds and histories differ from our own. This book is about how cultural anthropology can help us see beyond our taken-for-granted world. We will examine how cultural anthropology helps us to understand others and, in the process, to better understand ourselves. In addition, each chapter contains a case study in doing anthropology that illustrates how the concepts and perspectives discussed in the chapter can be applied in various career paths to solve real-life problems, such as preventing HIV/AIDS, designing public policy, designing media platforms, helping adolescent girls deal with negative body image, and much more.

Because any area of inquiry always begins with certain basic issues or questions, this book is organized around eight general problems that arise from the human condition—problems such as how to understand people with different beliefs and behaviors, reasons why ways of life change, how people justify violence, whether there is any solution to problems of social inequality, and so on. These are problems that concern everyone, not just cultural anthropologists. None of these problems has a definitive answer. The best we can do is reach a greater understanding of why the problem exists and what we might do about it. However, there are some specific questions that we can ask concerning these problems for which anthropologists have sought answers. We will focus on these questions. At various points, in exercises found in each chapter, we will ask you to supply your own answers to questions and, perhaps, to discuss your solutions to these questions with others. Understanding others requires you to recognize that your behaviors and beliefs as well as those of people in other societies are socially patterned and constructed. For that reason, you will find many comparisons between American life and life in other societies.

In considering the principal problem of how we can begin to understand beliefs and behaviors that are different from our own, in this first chapter, we explore five questions along with one case study. The first and most basic question is why human beings differ in their beliefs and behaviors; that is, what is it about human nature that produces such a variety of ways of believing and behaving? The second question involves values. More often than not, people react to different ways of life with shock, scorn, or disapproval. Are such reactions warranted, and if they're not, how do we judge the beliefs and behaviors of others? The third question is critical to anthropological inquiry. Is it possible to set aside the meanings that we ascribe to experience and see the world through the eyes of others? Fourth, assuming that it is possible to come to some understanding of how others see the world, how can the meanings that others find in experience be interpreted and described? The fifth question concerns what learning about other people can tell us about ourselves. Finally, in this chapter's case study we examine what anthropology can tell us about the significance of the rise of social media and its social and psychological effects.

Questions

- 1.1 Why do human beings differ in their beliefs and behaviors?
- 1.2 How do people judge the beliefs and behaviors of others?
- 1.3 Is it possible to see the world through the eyes of others?
- 1.4 How can the meanings that others find in experience be interpreted and described?
- 1.5 What can learning about other peoples tell Americans about themselves?

Case Study in Doing Anthropology #1: Why We Post

Question 1.1 Why Do Human Beings Differ in Their Beliefs and Behaviors?

From an anthropological perspective, members of a society view the world in a similar way because they share the same **culture**; people differ in how they view the world because their cultures differ. A good place to start to understand the concept of culture is with the fact that members of all human societies experience specific life events, such as birth, death, and the quest for food, water, and shelter. All societies have what are for them appropriate rules for courtship, ideas about child rearing, procedures for exchanging goods, methods of food production, techniques for building shelters, and so on. But from society to society, the meanings people give to such events differ.

Attitudes toward death provide one example. For some people, death marks the passage of a person from one world to another. For others, death is an ending—the final event of a life span—whereas still others consider death a part of a never-ending cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The Kwakwaka'wakw of British Columbia, for example, believe that when a person dies, the soul leaves the body and enters the body of a salmon. When a salmon is caught and eaten, a soul is released and is free to enter the body of another person.

Some societies fear the dead; others revere them. In traditional China, each household contained a shrine to the family ancestors. Before any major family decision, the head of the household addressed the shrine to ask the ancestors' advice, thus making the dead part of the world of the living. However, in southern Italy, funeral customs were designed to discourage the dead from returning. Relatives placed useful objects such as matches and small change near the body to placate the soul of the deceased and ensure that it did not return to disturb the living.

Members of some societies accept death as a natural and inevitable occurrence, whereas others always attribute death to the malevolent act of some person—often through sorcery. In these societies, every death elicits suspicion and a demand for vengeance. Members of other societies require great demonstrations of grief and mourning for the deceased. Some, such as the Dani of New Guinea,

require a close female relative of a recently deceased person to sacrifice a part of a finger. It was the practice of the Wari of western Brazil—when they still lived independent of Western civilization—to dispose of the bodies of their dead by eating the roasted flesh, certain internal organs, and sometimes the ground bones. They ate the dead out of respect and compassion for the dead person and the dead person's family, not because they needed



Judy Mund/Alamy Stock Photo

PHOTO 1.3 While grief may be a universal emotion, how it is expressed may vary from the restrained Japanese ceremony to the amputation of a female relative's fingers among the Dani of New Guinea.

the meat or because they liked the taste of human flesh. In southern Europe, widows were required to shave their heads, whereas in traditional India, widows were cremated at their husbands' funerals. In the United States, survivors of the deceased are expected to restrain their grief almost as if it were a contagious disease. To Americans, the sight of southern Italian women pulling their hair and being restrained from flinging themselves into an open grave is as bewildering as their own restraint of grief would be to traditional southern Italians.

Or take the area of food. No society accepts all items in their edible universe as “good to eat.” Only a relatively few items are so designated. Grubs, beetles, and ants are acceptable fare in some societies, whereas people in others regard eating insects with horror. Americans generally don't define insects as food (although federal regulations do allow a certain percentage of insect matter to be included in processed food). Most Americans like and are encouraged to drink milk, whereas some people in China consider milk undrinkable; at the same time, the Chinese practice of raising dogs for meat is repulsive to most Americans. American children who have raised pet guinea pigs would have a hard time accepting the Peruvian practice of raising guinea pigs for food. Many American tastes in food originate in biblical definitions of what is considered edible and inedible. Thus, of edible land animals, the Book of Leviticus says that they must chew their cud and have split hoofs, consequently eliminating not only pigs but also camels and rock badgers. Of animals of the water, edible things must have scales and fins, removing from a biblical diet such things as clams, lobsters, and sea urchins. And of animals of the air, only things that have wings and fly are legitimate dining fare, eliminating the penguin, ostrich, and cassowary. Thus, human beings create and define for themselves what they may eat and what they may not eat independent of what is or is not truly edible.

Of the some two million species of living organisms that inhabit Earth, only humans dwell largely in worlds that they themselves create by giving meanings to things, events, activities, and people. This creation is what anthropologists mean

by the term *culture*. Human beings are cultural animals; they ascribe meanings of their own creation to objects, persons, behaviors, emotions, and events and then act as though those meanings are real. All facets of their lives—birth, courtship, mating, food acquisition and consumption, and death—are suffused with meaning.

Clifford Geertz (1973) suggests that human beings are compelled to impose meaning on their experiences because without these meanings to help them comprehend experience and impose order on the universe, the world would seem a jumble—“a chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions.” Geertz says that human beings are “incomplete or unfinished animals who complete themselves through culture—not culture in general, but specific forms of it: Balinese, Italian, Ilongot, Chinese, Kwakwaka’wakw, American, and so on” (p. 49). When people share the meanings they give to experiences, they share and participate in the same culture.

Differences in culture arise in part from the fact that different groups of human beings—for various reasons—create, share, and participate in different realities, assigning different meanings to birth, marriage, death, and food. Objects, persons, behaviors, emotions, and events in a human world have meanings ascribed to them by those who share, use, or experience them. The clothes people wear, the way they wear them, the food they eat (or refuse to eat), and even their gender are defined through the meanings that different groups of people give them.

One of the problems that cultural anthropologists address is understanding why different groups of human beings have different cultures. Why does one group assign one set of meanings to what they experience, whereas another group assigns those experiences a different set of meanings? Many of the questions to be addressed in later chapters concern how these differences can be explained. We may be able to overcome our initial shock or bewilderment upon confronting different cultures if we understand something of why cultural differences exist. But how should we react if the meanings that others ascribe to experiences differ from our own? It’s difficult enough to look beyond everyday appearances at our own beliefs and behaviors, but it’s far more difficult when we confront beliefs and behaviors of others that we initially consider wrong, horrible, or bizarre.

Exercise 1.1

The Definition of Food Tastes

Food is a cultural creation; that is, human beings define what is and what is not food. For example, consider the items listed here—all of which serve as food for one group of people or another. Which of these would you eat, and which would you not eat? If there are any you would not eat, explain why.

Yes

No

Eel

Kangaroo tail

Dog

YesNo

Guinea pig

Raw squid

Sea urchin (sea slugs)

Ants

Monkey brains

Grubs

Opossum

Rattlesnake

Iguana

Horse

Dolphin

Pickled pig's feet

Haggis (stuffed intestines)

Cow brains

Blood sausage

Raw steak

Rotten meat

Armadillo

Question 1.2 How Do People Judge the Beliefs and Behaviors of Others?

Richard Scaglion (1990) is fond of telling the story of his friend, a member of the Abelam tribe of Papua New Guinea, who was looking through an issue of *Sports Illustrated* magazine. The friend, dressed in full ceremonial regalia with a feather through his nose, was laughing uncontrollably at a woman shown in a liquor advertisement. When he managed to stop laughing long enough to explain what he thought was so funny, he said, "This white woman has made holes in her ears and stuck things in them." When Scaglion pointed out that his friend had an ornament in his nose, the reply was: "That's different. That's for beauty and has ceremonial significance. But I didn't know that white people mutilated themselves."

Scaglion's friend confronted a problem that many people do when they encounter behavior or beliefs that seem to differ from their own, and his response wasn't unusual. He was shocked and mystified at the strange behavior. And this poses a dilemma: Because there are so many versions of what the world is like, how do we try to understand each of them without making positive or negative



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PHOTO 1.4 The ceremonial attire worn by this Abelam villager in Papua New Guinea conveys beauty and meaning to the members of this tribe, to whom modern American fashions might seem odd.

virginity, her genitalia are mutilated to close the vaginal opening so completely that additional surgery is often required to allow intercourse and childbirth later in life. They have also studied modern states that routinely engage in or sanction torture, terror, and genocide. The question is, how should we react to practices and beliefs such as these?

judgments? Which version is correct? Are there any we can reject or condemn? Can we say, as so many have, that one culture is superior to another?

In the catalog of human behaviors and beliefs, it's not difficult to find practices or ideas that may seem bizarre or shocking—even to trained anthropologists. Cultural anthropologists have described the beliefs of the Ilongots of the Philippines, who must kill an enemy to obtain a head they can throw away in order to diminish the grief and rage they feel at the death of a kinsman or kinswoman. They have studied the historical records of the Aztecs of Mexico, who when contacted by Cortés in 1519 believed that the universe underwent periodic destruction and that the only way to ward off disaster was to pluck the hearts from live sacrificial victims to offer to the gods. They have reported on the circumcision practices of the people in the Nile Valley of the Sudan, where in order to ensure a young girl's chastity and

The Ethnocentric Fallacy and the Relativist Fallacy



DEAG. DAGLI ORTI/De Agostini via Getty Images

PHOTO 1.5 To protect their world from potential destruction, Aztecs in the 1500s offered blood to the gods through rituals of human sacrifice and self-mutilation.

If we do condemn or reject the beliefs or behaviors of others, we may be committing the **ethnocentric fallacy**—the idea that our beliefs and behaviors are right and true, whereas those of other peoples are wrong or misguided. Cultural anthropologists have long fought against **ethnocentrism**. They try to show that what often appears on the surface to be an odd belief or a bizarre bit of behavior is functional

and logical in the context of a particular culture. They find the ethnocentric fallacy *intellectually* intolerable; if all people everywhere think that they're right and others must be wrong, they can only reach an intellectual and social dead end. Furthermore, if we assume that we have all the right answers, our study of other cultures becomes simply the study of other people's mistakes.

Because of the intellectual implications of ethnocentrism, cultural anthropologists emphatically reject this position. But the alternative to ethnocentrism—**relativism**—is equally problematic. Simply stated, relativism holds that no behavior or belief can be judged to be odd or wrong simply because it's different from our own. Instead, we must try to understand a culture in its own terms and to understand behaviors or beliefs in terms of the purpose, function, or meaning they have for people in the societies in which we find them. In other words, relativism holds that a specific belief or behavior can be understood only in relation to the culture—the system of meanings—in which it is embedded.

For example, according to Renato Rosaldo (1989), the ceremonies and rituals accompanying a successful headhunting expedition psychologically help the Ilongot manage their grief over the death of a kinsperson. Rose Oldfield-Hayes (1975) explains that even to the women of the northern Sudan, the genital mutilation of young girls makes perfect sense. Because family honor is determined in part by the sexual modesty of female family members, by preventing intercourse, the operation protects the honor of the family, protects girls from sexual assault, and protects the honor and reputation of the girl herself. Moreover, says Oldfield-Hayes, the practice serves as a means of population control.

Exercise 1.2a

Resolving Value Differences

After the class has been divided into groups of four to six, *individually* record whether you agree or disagree with each statement that follows. Then go over each statement in order. See if anyone in your group disagrees with each statement being considered. If even one person disagrees, the group should change the wording so that the statement is acceptable to *all* the members of the group. You may not simply agree to disagree. Choose one member to record the revised statements.

Statements:

The fact that the United States was able to place people on the moon proves its technological superiority.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Foreigners coming to live here should give up their foreign ways and adapt to the new country as quickly as possible.

Many of the world's populations do not take enough initiative to develop themselves; therefore, they remain "underdeveloped."

Minority members of any population should be expected to conform to the customs and values of the majority.

However, relativism poses a *moral* predicament. We may concede that it is permissible to rip hearts out of living human beings, provided you believe this is necessary in order to save the world, or that it is permissible to subject young girls to painful mutilation to protect family reputations or control population growth. But this quickly leads us into the **relativistic fallacy**—the idea that it is impossible to make moral judgments about the beliefs and behaviors of others. Of course, this seems morally intolerable because it implies that there is no belief or behavior that can be condemned as wrong. Thus, we are left with two untenable positions: the ethnocentric alternative, which is intellectually unsatisfactory, and the relativist alternative, which is morally unsatisfactory. How do we solve this problem?

Virginity Testing in Turkey and Cannibalism Among the Wari

To further illustrate the dilemma of relativism and the difficulty of appreciating the cultures of others without making moral judgments, a few years ago, an American-based human rights group issued a report condemning the practice of virginity testing in Turkey. Traditionally, young women in Turkey, as in some other cultures, are expected to avoid sexual relations prior to marriage, although the same rule doesn't apply to men. The morning after the wedding, the bride's virginity is revealed by displaying the sheet that was spread on the couple's wedding bed with the telltale hymeneal blood stain. The human rights report condemns the traditional testing as well as the reported practice of forcing tests on hospital patients, students, and applicants for government jobs. Here is the question: Is the human rights group being ethnocentric in judging Turkish customs by American cultural norms, or is it correctly identifying abuses of women that must be corrected? And does it help if we further understand the so-called logic behind the belief?

In her book on Turkish village society—*The Seed and the Soil*—anthropologist Carol Delaney (1991) describes how virginity testing is related to the way that Turkish villagers conceptualize and explain the reproductive process. They see producing children as analogous to the planting and growing of crops: The man provides the "seed" with his semen, and the woman serves as the "soil" in which the seed germinates and grows. As a metaphor for reproduction, the

idea of the seed and the soil provides villagers with a way of thinking about and understanding reproduction. However, the metaphor of seed and soil has at least one very important implication: Because seeds don't have a limited life span, as we know semen to have, villagers believe that once planted, the seed (semen) may grow at any time. Consequently, if a woman has had sexual relations with a man other than her husband at any time prior to her marriage, the paternity of the child will be in doubt. Because descent in traditional Turkish villages is closely tied to many things, including property rights, uncertainty about the identity of the true father can have major implications. Thus, in the context of Turkish beliefs about procreation, virginity testing may be said to make sense. Furthermore, Turkish beliefs about conception aren't that far removed from our own because our language draws from the same agricultural metaphors as that of Turkish villagers to explain reproduction. We talk about women being "fertile" or "barren" and semen "fertilizing" "eggs." "Sowing one's oats" as an expression of sexual activity is still heard in parts of the United States and Canada. Furthermore, these views are reinforced by religious proscription, legitimized in the Koran and the Old Testament. Thus, before we either condemn or accept the Turkish villagers for their treatment of women, we need to examine what their beliefs tell us about our own. Ours may be equally problematic.

But what of cannibalism, such as the Wari practice of roasting and eating the dead? Surely there is no way of justifying that. As Beth Conklin (2001) points out in her study of Wari cannibalism—*Consuming Grief*—cannibalism pushes the limits of cultural relativism, guaranteeing reactions of revulsion and fascination. But in addition to the emotional reactions, it also has political implications. For centuries, cannibalism was the ultimate smear tactic; to accuse one's enemies, or people one wished to degrade or dominate, of cannibalism was the ultimate justification for conquest, domination, and exploitation. In 1503, Queen Isabella of Spain decreed that Spaniards could legally enslave specifically those American Indians who were cannibals. In 1510, Pope Innocent IV ruled that Christians could punish by force of arms the sin of cannibalism. Thus, by claiming moral superiority, they were claiming the right to decide ultimately what is right and what is wrong. Armed with that kind of power, they felt justified in imposing their own views and way of life. What Queen Isabella and Pope Innocent IV conveniently overlooked, however, was the fact that Europeans at the time themselves practiced cannibalism. As Conklin notes, medicinal cannibalism—the consumption of human body parts for curing purposes—had a long tradition in Europe. Until two centuries ago, European physicians prescribed the consumption of human flesh, heart, bones, and other body parts as cures for afflictions such as arthritis, reproductive disorders, sciatica, warts, and skin blemishes. Human blood was thought to be a cure for epilepsy, with physicians recommending that it be drunk immediately after the supplier died. Physicians also thought that the blood of someone who died violently was particularly effective. Thus, in Denmark, people with epilepsy would stand around the scaffolds, cups in hand, waiting to catch the blood of executed criminals. And almost every apothecary kept dried and powdered human body parts on hand for anxious customers.



PHOTO 1.6 Although early modern Europeans condemned cannibalism and justified enslaving people who they claimed practiced it, Europeans themselves prescribed the consumption of human body parts and blood, particularly of those who died violently, as a cure for various afflictions.

In their ethnocentric justifications for conquest and racism, people of medieval Europe managed to accept in their own lives the same types of practices they condemned in others. Furthermore, they failed to understand those practices from others' points of view. For example, the Wari ate their dead because they believed it was the compassionate thing to do. As Conklin (2001) puts it, "More painful than having the corpse eaten would have been to have it *not* eaten." For the Wari, a

corpse left intact was a painful reminder of the deceased; people unrelated to the deceased ate the corpse—even though the smell or taste sometimes repulsed them—because the practice was believed to help family members come to terms with their loss. Furthermore, the Western practice of burying the dead (which missionaries and government officials forced the Wari to do after contact) was almost as horrific to the Wari as their cannibalism might have been for us. "It's cold in the earth," a father who had recently lost a two-year-old son explained to Conklin. "We keep remembering our child, lying there, cold. We remember and we are sad," he continued. "It was better in the old days, when the others ate the body. Then we did not think about our child's body much. We did not remember our child as much, and we were not so sad."

Burying the body also violated many Wari fundamental values. For the Wari, the ground was considered "dirty" and "polluting." People never sit directly on the dirt, and discarding things on the ground is considered disrespectful. Special ritual objects are never supposed to touch the ground.

Furthermore, if we didn't have a deeper understanding of Wari culture, we wouldn't know how consuming the dead fits in with dealing with their emotions and with the meaning that they impose on their world. By consuming the dead, the Wari are trying to obliterate the painful memories of their loss. Not only is the memory of the body painful, but equally painful are the material objects associated with the deceased as well as mention of the deceased's name. Thus, they not only consume the body, but they also burn the house and personal possessions of the deceased. For months, they also make trips into the forest to find places associated with the person—such as a place where a hunter made a kill or a woman felled a fruit tree or a favorite log on which the deceased liked to sit.

Once there, they cut the vegetation around the site, and, after it has dried, they burn the spot, changing the appearance of the last earthly places to which memories of the deceased might cling. As they “sweep,” as the Wari call it, they cry over the memories. Once done, however, “it is different. . . . [T]here is not much sadness there.” For us, a dead body is only a shell—its soul or spiritual essence gone. Thus, some societies, such as our own, can prepare the dead to look as they did in life and think of them buried that way. By contrast, the Wari—as well as other groups—want to separate the dead from the living, so obliterating their memories is perfectly logical.

Exercise 1.2b

Honoring Our Dead

The Wari attempt to obliterate the memory of the dead in their funeral practices, as do many other societies. Others, however—such as ours—memorialize the dead; forgetting them would be an act of disrespect. Try to list the ways we attempt to keep the memory of deceased persons alive, and speculate why we do that rather than trying to forget them.

There are other aspects to Wari beliefs about consuming the dead, such as their belief that the spirits of the dead ultimately enter into the bodies of animals that the Wari depend on for food, thus creating a cycle of eating and being eaten, but the main point is that by imposing the meanings we have adopted for something, such as cannibalism, and failing to see it as others may, we miss the point.

But does this mean that, once we understand any practice or belief from “the native’s point of view,” that it is acceptable? Does understanding the cultures of others require that we accept and justify all beliefs and practices?

Objectivity and Morality

The conflict between ethnocentrism and relativism is not just a theoretical one for anthropologists. In their choice of research subject, anthropologists may face the dilemma of either maintaining a “moral distance” from the objects of their studies and remaining “objective” or becoming actively involved in criticizing behavior or beliefs they encounter (such as genital mutilation).

The contradiction between “objective” anthropology and a politically committed anthropology became apparent to Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) when she returned as an anthropologist to a shantytown in Brazil where she had previously worked as a community organizer. The women with whom she worked became angry, asking why, when as a community organizer she had helped them organize to fight for clean water, decent wages, and protection from police brutality,

was she now, as an anthropologist, so passive and so indifferent to the destruction around her? She tried to explain that as an anthropologist her work was different—that she was there now to observe, document, and write about their lives as truthfully as she could. The women refused to accept that and insisted that if they were to work with her, she had to also work with them to fight for better lives. “What,” they said, “is anthropology to us?”

As a consequence of her experience, Scheper-Hughes (1995) argues for a politically committed, morally engaged, and ethically grounded anthropology. “Those of us who make our living observing and recording the misery of the world,” she says, “have a particular obligation to reflect critically on the impact of the harsh images of human suffering that we foist upon the public” (p. 416).

Scheper-Hughes proposes a more humanitarian anthropology—one that is concerned with how people treat one another. Moral relativism, she says, is no longer appropriate to the world in which we live, and if anthropology is to be worth anything at all, it must be, as she puts it, “critically grounded.” Anthropologists cannot ignore the massacres and disappearances of vulnerable people that often occur in communities in which anthropologists work. Anthropologists must, she insists, serve as witnesses and reporters of human rights abuses and the suffering of the poor and the oppressed.

But even serving as a witness for the poor and oppressed can lead to still other moral dilemmas for the anthropologist when the people with whom the anthropologist works engage in behavior that may appear morally questionable. Scheper-Hughes confronted this question when she discovered and reported that impoverished women in the Brazilian shantytowns would sometimes allow their starving infants to die in the belief that they were doomed anyway. When Philippe Bourgois (1995) studied the world of crack dealers on the Upper East Side of New York City, he worried about the negative images he would convey if he reported the personal violence, sexual abuse, addiction, and alienation he witnessed. He recalled the advice of anthropologist Laura Nader, who cautioned others not to study the poor and powerless because whatever one says will be used against them.

Human rights activists are particularly skeptical about the idea of cultural relativity. If, they say, we must tolerate the beliefs and practices of other cultures because to do otherwise would be ethnocentric, how can we ever criticize what seem to be violations of basic human rights, such as the right to bodily integrity, or the right to be free from torture, arbitrary imprisonment, slavery, or genocide? Cultural relativism, say human rights advocates, makes arguments about human rights meaningless by legitimizing almost any behavior.

Consider the case of the practice in some areas of India of *sati*, the burning of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre. The last fully documented case of *sati* in India occurred in 1987 when Roon Kanwar, an 18-year-old girl, was burned alive on her husband’s pyre.¹ Women’s rights groups protested, but

¹More recent alleged cases have been reported (see BBC, 2006).

relatives claimed that it is an ancient Indian custom and accused protestors of being Western imperialists imposing their own cultural standards on them. Although the practice is outlawed, prosecutors rarely enforce the law because of the difficulty of obtaining evidence. Does it matter if Roon Kanwar committed *sati* voluntarily? What would happen if she objected? Does it matter that only women are burned? Is *sati* a practice to deny a widow the inheritance of her husband's family's land? Elizabeth Zechenter (1997), who makes the argument for the establishment of some universal principles for human rights, says that cultural relativists are right to claim that the endorsement or rejection of some foreign custom risks imposing one's own cultural prejudices on others. But the idea that we can make no judgments without being ethnocentric is illusory:

One simply cannot avoid making judgments when faced with oppression and brutality masquerading under the guise of cultural tradition. Such a nonjudgmental tolerance of brutality is actually an ultimate form of ethnocentrism, if not an outright ethical surrender. (p. 336)

Exercise 1.2c

Combating Ethnocentrism

You have been doing anthropological research in the United States with a group of people who believe they must live the life described in the Bible—particularly the book of Acts. They live communally, sharing all property; they believe that women should be subservient to their husbands; they enforce rules against drinking alcoholic beverages and smoking. The group has lately come under attack by a group in the local community as being a “dangerous cult.” You know that although their beliefs and practices differ from those of the larger society around them, they are not dangerous and in fact lead lives of harmony. They have asked you to speak in their defense. Can you do this without sacrificing your objectivity?

There is obviously no easy answer to the question of when or if it is proper to judge the beliefs and practices of others to be right or wrong or when to actively work to change behaviors or beliefs judged to be wrong. Ideally, our attempts to understand what at first seems puzzling in some cultures and our arrival at some solution to that puzzle should result in questioning what it was about us that made the behavior or belief seem puzzling in the first place. In addition, we need to understand that if each culture orders the world in a certain way for its members, it also blocks off or masks other ways of viewing things. We need to appreciate that there are perspectives different from our own and that our ethnocentric biases may blind us to those alternatives. In other words, although culture provides us with certain meanings to give

to objects, persons, behaviors, emotions, and events, it also shields us from alternative meanings. What our culture hides from us may be more important than what it reveals.

Question 1.3 Is It Possible to See the World Through the Eyes of Others?

This question lies at the heart of the anthropological enterprise. Anthropologists must be able to look beyond everyday appearances to decipher the often-hidden meanings of beliefs, objects, and behaviors while at the same time setting aside their preconceptions of what is normal or proper. Anthropologists must also learn one culture and then relate what they learn to members of another culture to translate the meanings of one world into the meanings of another.

Like other social scientists, anthropologists use surveys, written documents, historical accounts, and questionnaires as part of their research toolbox. But the unique feature of cultural anthropology is the application of the **ethnographic method**—the immersion of investigators in the lives of the people they’re trying to understand and, through that experience, the attainment of some level of understanding of the meanings those people ascribe to their existence. This immersion process utilizes the techniques of **anthropological fieldwork**, which requires **participant observation**—the active participation of observers in the lives of their subjects.

The ethnographic method is only part of the anthropological enterprise. Anthropologists also seek to explain why people view the world as they do and to contribute to the understanding of human behavior in general. But fieldwork is the beginning of the enterprise. Fieldwork involves the meeting of at least two cultures: that of the researcher and that of the culture and people the researcher is trying to understand. Anthropological researchers must set aside their own views of things and attempt to see the world in a new way. In many respects, they must assume the demeanor and status of children who must be taught by their elders the proper view of the world. And like children making their way in a world they don’t fully comprehend, anthropologists often find themselves in awkward, embarrassing, or dangerous situations and must be prepared to learn from these moments.

The Embarrassed Anthropologist

Awkwardness and embarrassment are a part of fieldwork as well as a part of the process through which the fieldworker learns about another culture. Richard Scaglion (1990) spent more than a year with the Abelam of Papua New Guinea. Shortly after he arrived in the field, he observed and photographed an Abelam pig hunt in which the men set out nets and waited while the women and children made lots of noise to drive the pigs into the nets. Soon after, he was invited by the Abelam to participate in a pig hunt, and he took this as a sign of acceptance—that the people “liked him.” He started to

go with the men, but they told him they wanted him to go with the women and children to beat the bush, explaining, “We’ve never seen anyone who makes as much noise in the jungle as you.” Later, wanting to redeem himself, Scaglion offered to help an Abelam who was planting crops with a digging stick. A crowd gathered to watch as Scaglion used a shovel to try to dig a demonstration hole. After he had struggled for several minutes to get the shovel into the hard-packed soil, someone handed him a digging stick, and he was amazed at how easy it was to use. Later, he found out that several Abelam had shovels but rarely used them because they didn’t work.

After months of answering Scaglion’s questions about their view of the natural world, such as the moon, sun, and stars, some Abelam asked him about his views of the universe. Feeling on safe ground, he gave the usual grade-school lecture about the shape of Earth, its daily rotation, and its travels around the sun. Using a coconut, he showed them the relative positions on Earth of New Guinea, Australia, Europe, and the United States. Everyone listened intently, and Scaglion thought it went well until about a week later—when he overheard some elders wondering how it was that Americans walked upside down!

Beginning again, Scaglion used the coconut to explain how, as Earth rotates, sometimes the United States would be upright and New Guinea would be on the bottom. The Abelam rejected this because they could see that they were *not* upside down, and no one—not even some of the old people in the community—remembered ever having walked upside down. Scaglion began to draw on the physics he had in college, and as he tried to explain Newton’s law of gravity (or “grabity,” as his friends pronounced it), he suddenly realized that he didn’t understand “grabity” either. It was something he had accepted since third grade—a concept that even physicists simply take for granted as a convenient theoretical concept.

Exercise 1.3

The Art of Self-Reflection

Think of some awkward or embarrassing situation created by something you did or did not do or say. What was inappropriate about your behavior, and why did it lead to misunderstanding or embarrassment? What did you learn from the experience about the meaning of your or others’ behavior?

Confronting Witchcraft in Mexico

Awkward or embarrassing moments in the field may help anthropologists to understand a culture or even to question their own view of the world. But the

possibility of seeing the world through the eyes of others remains a subject of contention among anthropologists. To communicate with anyone—even members of their own society—people must share some of the meanings they ascribe to objects, persons, behaviors, emotions, and events. But what happens when views of the world are completely different?

When Michael Kearney (1991) traveled to the town of Santa Catarina Ixtepeji in the valley of Oaxaca, Mexico, he intended to study the relationship between the people's view of the world and their social arrangements and environment. He began his work secure in his knowledge of the scientific and materialist view of the world in which he was reared, but he was often fascinated by the differences between his view and that of the people of Santa Catarina Ixtepeji. Theirs was a world controlled by mystic notions of "fate," the will of God, and malevolent witches and other harmful and sometimes lethal spiritual forces. He became familiar with the Ixtepejanos' view of the world—never doubting that it was "unscientific" but perhaps justified by a life in which suffering, disease, and death were common.

Kearney's faith in his own view of the world was shattered momentarily by an incident that began innocently enough. Walking to an appointment, he came upon an obviously distressed woman, Doña Delfina. She was known as a witch, and Kearney had been trying unsuccessfully to interview her. When they met, she explained that her sister-in-law had a "very bad disease in her arms," and she wanted him to help. Kearney accompanied Doña Delfina to her house, where he found that the sister-in-law's arms were ulcerated with deep, oozing lesions that looked to him like infected burns. They rejected his offer to take the sick woman to a doctor for medical treatment, so Kearney said he had some ointment that might help, and they eagerly agreed that he should use it. He got the ointment, which contained an anesthetic, and daubed it on the woman's sores. Much to the amazement of Doña Delfina, her sister-in-law immediately felt better. By that afternoon, her arms had greatly improved; the next morning scabs had formed, and by the day after, she had recovered completely.

Kearney was credited with a "miraculous cure." But the same day, an Ixtepejano friend asked Kearney what he had done, and he proudly explained. The friend replied, "Why did you do that? It was not a good thing to do." The sick woman, he said, had been the victim of black magic; another woman, Gregoria, was trying to take Delfina's brother away from his wife and was using black magic to make Delfina's sister-in-law sick. Delfina was using *her* magic to keep her brother in the household, but Gregoria was winning. Now, the friend explained to Kearney, he had intervened, tipping the balance of power back to Delfina but creating a powerful enemy in Gregoria. "Maybe you should leave town for a while until Gregoria calms down," Kearney's friend suggested. But Kearney didn't take the danger seriously and might never have done so if not for two incidents that occurred soon afterward.

A young doctor in town asked Kearney, who had medical training, to assist in an autopsy of a man who had died in a fall off a truck. It was a particularly long and gory autopsy, accomplished only with rusty carpenter's tools in a dimly lit room; images of the scene and the cadaver disturbed Kearney's sleep over the next few days. One night, about a week later, as the wind beat cornstalks against his

house, Kearney felt an itching on his arm. Rolling up his sleeve, he discovered several angry welts that seemed to be growing as he watched them. Immediately, he thought of the chancrous arms of Delfina's sister-in-law, realizing at the same time that Gregoria's house was only 50 yards from his and she could be trying to kill him. "She got me!" he thought. The image of the cadaver on the table jumped into his mind, followed by a wish that he had gotten out of town while there was still time. As Kearney put it, he was witnessing the disintegration of his scientific, materialist view of the world and grappling with forces with which he was unprepared to deal.

Kearney isn't sure how long his initial terror lasted—seconds or perhaps minutes. As he struggled against it, he realized that he was suspended between two worlds: that of the Ixtepejanos and his own. He was questioning a world of meanings that he had until then taken for granted. Kearney isn't sure how long he was able to truly believe that the world was as the Ixtepejanos saw it, but as he retrieved his own view of the world, the Ixtepejanos' worldview—filled with witchcraft and magic—ceased to be only intellectually interesting. It acquired a reality and a sense of legitimacy for him that it did not have before he experienced the real fear that he had been bewitched. Kearney came to realize through his experience that systems of belief are eminently reasonable when viewed from within or when we participate in the lives of people who hold those beliefs.

The Endangered Anthropologist

The risk of injury, disease, or hostile reactions has always been a feature of anthropological fieldwork. But as anthropologists increasingly work in areas where human rights violations are common, these risks are intensified. When the work of anthropologists such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes threatens the power, authority, or prerogatives of powerful groups, these anthropologists often expose themselves to violent retaliation. Working with crack dealers in New York City, Philippe Bourgois feared violent retaliation when he embarrassed a gang leader by accidentally calling the attention of others to the fact that the leader could not read.

At least four anthropologists have been murdered as a consequence of their fieldwork: In 1982, South African anthropologist and anti-apartheid activist Ruth First was killed by a mail bomb in her office at Maputo University in Mozambique. In 1984, Melanesian anthropologist Arnold Ap was tortured and killed by the Indonesian army and his body dumped by helicopter into the sea. In 1989, South African anthropologist David Webster was shot and killed by members of a pro-apartheid death squad. And in 1990, Guatemalan anthropologist Myrna Mack was stabbed to death by a soldier, ostensibly for her work with Mayan refugees and their experiences in the government's counterinsurgency war of the early 1980s that killed hundreds of thousands of people. In addition, at least two anthropologists—Ricardo Falla and George Aditjondro—went into exile under threat of assassination because of their work. These real dangers that anthropologists face may provide insights into how the people with whom they are working experience the threat of violence.

In 1989 and 1990, Linda Green was doing fieldwork in the Guatemalan community of Xe'caj. As with many similar communities, Xe'caj was only beginning to recover from some 35 years of violence. Beginning with a military coup orchestrated largely by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency against a democratically elected

government in 1954, Guatemala experienced regular violence as the militarized state tried to suppress attempts to overthrow the military regime. Hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans were killed—mostly by the government—in an attempt to suppress the revolt. The late 1970s and early 1980s were particularly brutal as the government embarked on a campaign to destroy peasant villages and relocate people to government-controlled towns. In addition, paramilitary groups—largely supplied and supported by the regular military—embarked on campaigns of terror and torture in an attempt to control the largely peasant population.

The people of Xe'caj lived in a state of constant surveillance from the military encampment located above the town. Many of the residents had husbands, fathers, or sons taken away by the military. There were rumors of death lists. They had difficulty sleeping and reported nightmares of recurring death and violence. Soon, said Green (1995), "I, too, started to experience nighttime hysteria, dreams of death, disappearances, and torture."

Green interviewed women who were widowed by the conflict. Without prompting, the women recounted in vivid detail their stories of horror—the deaths and disappearances of husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers as if they had happened last week or last month rather than six to eight years ago.

Then, one day, when Green arrived to continue the interviews, the women were anxious and agitated. When she asked what had happened, they told her that the military commissioner was looking for her and that people were saying that she was helping the widows and talking against other people in the community. When Green told the women that she was going to go see the commissioner, they pleaded with her not to go, explaining that they knew of people who had gone to the military garrison and never returned. Green decided to visit the garrison alone—a visit that would provide a vivid experience of the kinds of fears confronted by the villagers. Green (1995) writes that, as she approached the garrison,

I saw several soldiers sitting in a small guardhouse with a machine gun perched on a three-foot stanchion pointed downward and directly at me. The plight of Joseph K. in Kafka's *Trial* flashed through my mind, accused of a crime for which he must defend himself but about which he could get no information. I didn't do anything wrong, I must not look guilty, I repeated to myself like a mantra. I must calm myself, as my stomach churned, my nerves frayed. I arrived breathless and terrified. Immediately I knew I was guilty because I was against the system of violence and terror that surrounded me. (p. 116)

Fortunately, the comandante said he knew nothing about why she was being harassed and assured her that she could continue with her work. Everything went smoothly from then on, but Green gained a fuller understanding of the experiences of people who live under the constant threat of violence.

The experiences of these three anthropologists—Linda Green, Michael Kearney, and Richard Scaglione—highlight certain features of the ethnographic method. They especially illustrate the attempt of anthropologists to appreciate the views of others while questioning their own views of the world. They also illustrate what makes the ethnographic method unique. By participating in the lives of

others and in their cultural practices, anthropologists can take themselves as subjects of investigation. If one can succeed in seeing the world as others do—even if for a brief moment—then it becomes far easier to understand and describe that world. It also helps anthropologists to understand how others can believe what they do. Tanya M. Luhmann (1989) learned this when she studied contemporary witchcraft in England. After reading materials surrounding the practice of contemporary witchcraft and attending ceremonies, she found herself interpreting events in the world in much the same way as the people she was working with.

Claude Levi-Strauss (1974), one of the leading anthropologists of the 20th century, says that fieldwork and the attempts of anthropologists to immerse themselves in the world of others makes them “marginal” men or women. They are never completely native because they cannot totally shed their own cultural perceptions, but they are never the same again after having glimpsed alternative visions of the world. Anthropologists are, as Roger Keesing (1991) put it, outsiders who know something of what it is to be insiders.

Question 1.4 How Can the Meanings That Others Find in Experience Be Interpreted and Described?

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle first introduced his now famous detective hero, Sherlock Holmes, in 1887. In his adventures, Holmes had the unique ability to apply deductive reasoning to solve the most baffling of mysteries. In one Sherlock Holmes detective story, “The Sign of the Four,” Dr. Watson, Holmes’s assistant, decides to teach the great detective a lesson in humility. He hands Holmes a pocket watch owned by Watson’s late brother and challenges Holmes to infer from the watch the character of its owner. Holmes’s interpretation: “[Your brother] was a man of untidy habits—very untidy and careless. He was left with good prospects, but he threw away his chances and finally, taking to drink, he died.”

Watson, astounded at the accuracy of Holmes’s description of his late brother, asks if it was guesswork. “I never guess,” replies Holmes:

I began by stating that your brother was careless. When you observe the lower part of the watch case, you notice that it is not only dented in two places, but it is cut and marked all over from the habit of keeping other hard objects, such as coins or keys, in the same pocket. Surely it is no great feat to assume that a man who treats [an expensive] watch so cavalierly must be a careless man. Neither is it a very far-fetched inference that a man who inherits one article of such value is pretty well provided for in other respects.

“But what about his drinking habits?” asks Watson. Holmes responds:

Look at the innerplate which contains the keyhole [where the watch is wound]. Look at the thousands of scratches all around the hole—marks where the key has slipped. What sober man’s key could have scored those

grooves? But you will never see a drunkard's watch without them. He winds it at night, and he leaves these traces of his unsteady hand. Where is the mystery in all this?

Had Sherlock Holmes been an anthropologist, he might have also been tempted to draw some inferences about the society in which the watch was manufactured—particularly about their conceptions of time. For example, in some societies, time is task oriented, not clock oriented; time might be measured by how long it takes to cook rice, as in Madagascar. In other societies, time patterns depend on natural events, such as the rising of the sun or the ebb and flow of tides. In his classic account of the life of the Nuer of the Sudan, British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard noted (1940):

The Nuer have no expression equivalent to “time” in our language, and they cannot, therefore, as we can, speak of time as though it were something actual, which passes, can be wasted, can be saved, and so forth. I don't think they ever experience the same feeling of fighting against time because their points of reference are mainly the activities themselves, which are generally of a leisurely character. Events follow a logical order, but they are not controlled by an abstract system, there being no autonomous points of reference to which activities have to conform with precision. Nuer are fortunate. (p. 103)

An anthropologist might also infer that clocks are instruments of discipline; they tell us when to get up, when to go to bed, when to eat, when to start work, and when to stop work. Clocks define our work patterns themselves, and our wages may depend on the constant repetition over time of a particular task. Historian E. P. Thompson (1967) notes that until the institution of modern notions of time and the need to measure it with clocks, work patterns were characterized by alternating bouts of intense labor and idleness—at least whenever people were in control of their own working lives. He even suggests that this pattern persists today, but only among a few self-employed professionals, such as artists, writers, small farmers, and, he suggests, college students.

Watson's brother's watch was a product of Western society—part of its culture. Holmes “read” the watch as if it were a collection of symbols or words—a **cultural text** that revealed the character of its owner. He could just as easily have viewed it as a text inscribed with the symbols that revealed the ideas about time and work that characterized the civilization that produced it.

One way to think about culture is as a text of significant symbols: words, gestures, drawings, natural objects—anything, in fact, that carries meaning. To understand another culture, we must be able, as Holmes was with a pocket watch, to decipher the meanings of the symbols that compose a cultural text. We must be able to interpret the meanings embedded in the language, objects, gestures, and activities that are shared by members of a society. Fortunately, the ability to decipher a cultural text is part of being human; in our everyday lives, we both read and maintain the text that makes up our own culture. We have learned the meanings behind the symbols that frame our lives, and we share those meanings

with others. Our task in understanding another culture is to take the abilities that have enabled us to dwell in our own culture and use them to understand the cultures of others.

Deciphering the Balinese Cockfight

To illustrate how an anthropologist might decipher a cultural text, imagine yourself coming upon a cockfight on the island of Bali. You see a ring in which two roosters with sharpened metal spurs attached to their legs are set at each other until one kills the other. Surrounding the fighting cocks are men shouting encouragement to their favorites, each having placed a wager that his favorite will kill its opponent.

What do you make of this? Your first reaction might be shock or disgust at the spectacle of the crowd urging the cocks to bloody combat. After a while, you might begin to find similarities to events that are meaningful to you, such as some American sports. But what if, like Sherlock Holmes (or like Geertz, from whom this example is taken), you want to understand the meaning of what is happening and what that meaning tells you about how Balinese view their world? If you assume that the cockfight is a feature of Balinese culture—a Balinese text filled with symbols that carry meaning about what it is to be Balinese—how might you read and/or interpret this text?

You might begin by finding out the language the Balinese use to talk about the cockfight. You would no doubt discover that the double entendre of cock as a synonym for rooster and as a euphemism for penis is the same for the Balinese as it is for Americans. The double entendre even produces, says Geertz (1972), the same jokes, puns, and obscenities in Bali as it does in the United States. You would discover that *sabung*, the Balinese word for cock, has numerous other meanings and is used metaphorically to mean hero, warrior, champion, political candidate, bachelor, dandy, lady-killer, or tough guy. Court trials, wars, political contests, inheritance disputes, and street arguments are compared with cockfights. Even the island of Bali is thought of as being cock shaped. You would also find that men give their fowls inordinate attention, spending most of their time grooming them and even feeding them a special diet. As one of Geertz's Balinese informants put it, "We're all cock crazy."

Having discovered the importance of cockfights to the Balinese



PHOTO 1.7 In Balinese society, cockfighting is a major sporting event that is closely tied to cultural interpretations of manhood, competition, and status.

and the connection they make between cocks and men, you next examine the cockfight itself. You learn that cockfights are public events held in arenas of about 50 square feet from late afternoon until after sundown. Handlers—expert in the task—attach sharp spurs to the cock's legs; for a cock thought to be superior to an opponent, the spurs are adjusted in a slightly disadvantageous position. The cocks are released in the center of the ring and fly at each other, fighting until one kills the other. The owner of the winning cock takes the carcass of the loser home to eat, and the losing owner is sometimes driven in despair to wreck family shrines. You discover that the Balinese contrast heaven and hell by comparing them to the mood of a man whose cock has just won and the mood of a man whose cock has just lost.

You find out that although the Balinese place odds on cockfights, there are strict social conventions that dictate the wagering. For example, a man will never bet against a cock that is owned by someone of his family group or village or a friend's family group or village, but he will place large bets against a cock owned by an enemy or the friend of an enemy. Rarely is a cockfight without social significance (e.g., between two outsiders), and rarely do cocks owned by members of the same family or village fight each other. Moreover, the owners of the cocks—especially in important matches—are usually among the leaders of their communities. You might learn that cockfights come close to encouraging an open expression of aggression between village and kin group rivals—but not quite because the cockfight is, as the Balinese put it, “only a cockfight.”

Given the social rules for betting and the ways odds are set, you might reason, as Geertz did, that the Balinese rarely make a profit betting on cockfights. Geertz says, in fact, that most bettors just want to break even. Consequently, the meaning of the cockfight for a Balinese has little to do with economics. The question is, what meaning does the cockfight have for the Balinese? What is the cockfight really about if not about money?

Geertz concludes that the Balinese cockfight is above all about status—about the ranking of people vis-à-vis one another. The Balinese cockfight is a text filled with meaning about status as the Balinese see it. Cocks represent men or, more specifically, their owners; the fate of the cock in the ring is linked—even if only temporarily—to the social fate of its owner. Each cock has a following consisting of the owner, the owner's family, and members of the owner's village, and these followers “risk” their status by betting on the cockfight. Furthermore, Geertz maintains, the more a match is between near equals, personal enemies, or high-status individuals, the more the match is about status. And the more the match is about status, the closer the identification of cock and man, the finer the cocks, and the more exactly they will be matched. The match will inspire greater emotion and absorption, and the gambling will be more about status and less about economic gain.

For Geertz, the cockfight is like any art form; it takes a highly abstract and difficult concept—status—and depicts it in a way that makes it comprehensible to the participants. The cockfight is meaningful to the Balinese because it tells them something real about their own lives in a way that doesn't directly affect their lives. They see the struggle for status that is part of everyday life vividly portrayed—even though, in the cockfight itself, no one really gains or loses status in any permanent sense.

A few words of caution are necessary concerning what you might learn about the Balinese from this particular cultural text. First, it would probably be a mistake to assume that the people gain status by being on the winning side or lose it by being on the side of the loser. The status outcomes of the cockfight don't translate into real life any more than the victory of your favorite sports team increases your status. Instead, says Geertz, the cockfight illustrates what status is about for the Balinese. The cockfight is a story the Balinese tell themselves about themselves. It would also be a mistake to assume that the character of the Balinese could be read directly from the cockfight; a conclusion that the cockfight is indicative of an aggressive, competitive, violent national character would quickly be dispelled. The Balinese are shy about competition and avoid open conflict. The slaughter in the cockfight is not how things are literally but how they could be. Finally, the cockfight reveals only a segment of the Balinese character, as Watson's brother's watch revealed only a segment of its owner's character. The culture of a people, like the possessions of a person, is an ensemble of texts—collections of symbols and meanings—that must be viewed together to provide a full understanding.

Question 1.5 What Can Learning About Other Peoples Tell Americans About Themselves?

Anthropologists do not limit themselves to the study of cultures that are different from their own. Rather, they often apply concepts and techniques that are useful in understanding and interpreting other cultures to understand and interpret their own. One of the objectives of studying other cultures is to help us recognize the meanings we impose on our experiences. When Renato Rosaldo (1989) asked the Ilongots why they cut off human heads, they replied that rage born of grief drives them to kill others; by severing the heads of their victims, they are able to throw away the anger born of bereavement. Rosaldo found it difficult to accept the ideas that the death of a kinsperson could cause anger or rage and that such rage in itself could drive a person to kill another. He questioned the Ilongots further but could obtain no other reason for their headhunting; he devised other theories to explain it, but none were satisfactory. Only his own experience of grief and anger at the accidental death of his wife Michelle while both were doing fieldwork among the Ilongots helped him realize how grief can generate rage and how grief drove the Ilongots to hunt the heads of their enemies. At the same time that he began to understand the Ilongots, he began to understand his own grief and reaction to death.

A Balinese Anthropologist Studies Football

Whether we approach other cultures as anthropologists, as travelers, or as professionals who need to communicate with people of other cultures, the confrontation with other ways of believing and behaving should cause us to reflect on our own way of viewing the world. To illustrate, let's try to step outside ourselves and objectify an experience whose meaning we take for granted. Pretend you are



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PHOTO 1.8 A highly popular North American spectator sport, football conveys cultural messages about how to achieve success in the business world.

a Balinese anthropologist who suddenly comes upon a spectacle as important in its way to Americans as the cockfight is to the Balinese: a football game.

As a Balinese, your first reaction to this American text might be one of horror and revulsion at seeing men violently attacking one other while thousands cheer them on to even more violent conflict. However, as you settle in, you soon find some obvious

similarities between the football game and the cockfight with which you are familiar at home. Both are spectator sports in which the spectators sort themselves into supporters of one side or the other. In fact, in football, the sorting is even more carefully arranged because supporters of one team are generally seated on one side of the arena and fans of the other team are seated opposite them.

Your next step (as in interpreting the cockfight) is to examine the language Americans use to refer to the football game. You discover that they use similar expressions in talking about football and war: *defensive line*, *blitz*, *bomb*. Coaches talk about getting “revenge” for defeats, as generals might talk about getting revenge on the battlefield. You conclude that Americans seem to feel the same way about football as they do about war.

One of the words Americans use to refer to players is *jock*, a term also applied to an athletic supporter worn only by men. Because you see only men attacking one another, you might assume that the gender meanings of cockfights and football games are also similar. *Cocks* stand for men; football players are men. Moreover, football players dress to emphasize their maleness: large shoulders, narrow hips, big heads, and pronounced genitals. You might test your interpretation with an American spectator, who would argue that football gear is simply protective but, if pressed, would have to admit that it is used offensively as much as defensively. Furthermore, you see young women participating in the spectacle as cheerleaders, dressed to highlight their femininity in the same way the players dress to accent their masculinity. This contrast between male and female in American society leads you to conclude that football is also a story about the meanings that Americans ascribe to gender differences.

You soon discover that winning and losing football games is as important to Americans as winning and losing cockfights is to Balinese. Winners engage in frenzied celebrations called *victory parties*, and losers are often despondent in defeat. As anthropologists know, this is not always the case in other societies. When the Gahuku-Gama of the New Guinea Highlands started playing soccer, they always played until a committee of elders decided that the score was tied and then the match was considered completed. So you speculate that football is

also about the meanings that Americans give to the idea of success. You learn that success in America (like status in Bali) is a highly abstract idea; because it is abstract, its meaning is embedded in activities whose meanings are shared by members of the society. You need to find answers to certain questions about the meaning of success in American society: How is success defined? How is it obtained? Why does everyone who follows all the rules for gaining success not attain it?

Through your fieldwork, you find that Americans believe that “all men are created equal” and every person has (or at least should have) an equal opportunity to succeed. People compete for success, and they ought to compete on an equal footing—on a “level playing field,” as some put it. Success, Americans believe, comes from hard work, sacrifice, and self-denial. But you wonder how Americans know that hard work, sacrifice, and denial bring success. Aren’t there instances when that’s not the case? How do Americans explain why women and minorities succeed less often than White males do? And why do some people achieve more success than others? You conclude that it is, in fact, impossible to prove directly in real life the correctness of this American success model, which maintains that hard work and sacrifice lead to success. Faith in the value of work and self-denial must be generated in other ways. As a Balinese anthropologist studying the American custom of football, you thus conclude that in addition to its meanings relative to war and gender, the meaning of American football also lies in its demonstration of the American success model as it is supposed to work.

Anthropologists have found that football, like the Balinese cockfight, is carefully controlled by fixed rules so that there is only one outcome: Almost always, there is a winner and a loser. As a text that carries meaning about success, *who* wins is unimportant; it’s only important that *someone* wins. (“A tie,” it has been said, “is like kissing your sister.”) But more than that, football tells Americans what it takes to win or lose. Success in football not only takes hard work and sacrifice, but as American anthropologist William Arens (1976) points out, it requires teamwork, specialization, mechanization, and submission to a dominant authority: the coach. Two other American anthropologists—Susan P. Montague and Robert Morais (1976)—note that the football team looks very much like one of the most important settings in which Americans seek success: business corporations. Football teams and corporations are compartmentalized, hierarchical, and highly sophisticated in the coordinated application of a differentiated, specialized technology, and they both try to turn out a winning product in a competitive market. Football coaches are sometimes hired to deliver inspirational lectures to corporate groups on “winning”; they may draw analogies between football and corporate life or portray the sport as a means of preparing for life in the business world.

Anthropologists therefore can conclude (as did Montague and Morais) that football provides for Americans, as the cockfight does for the Balinese, a small-scale rendering of a concept (status in the case of the Balinese; success in the American case) that is too complex to be directly comprehended. Football is compelling because it is a vivid demonstration of the validity of the value of success as well as a dramatic set of instructions on how to attain it. Consequently, the audience for a football game is led to believe that if the rules that govern the world

of football are equated with those of the business world, then the principles that govern success on the football field must also apply in the world of work. That is, if hard work, dedication, submission to authority, and teamwork lead to success in a game, they will lead to success in real life. The rules by which success is won in football can also be applied to win success in the real world.

Of course, football is also a game that people enjoy. Analyzing it shouldn't reduce our enjoyment of it but rather heighten our fascination with it. By looking at football from the same perspective as Geertz viewed the cockfight, we should gain an understanding of why the meaning carried by the game is important. Although understanding the cockfight heightens our appreciation of the football game, it also helps us to see similarities between Americans and Balinese. If you were shocked by the cockfight, seeing the similarities to football should lessen that shock while also making football seem just a bit more exotic.

An Anthropologist Looks at a “Happy Meal”

Nothing is too mundane to provide some insights into the culture of which it is a part. Take the Happy Meal advertised by one of the many fast-food establishments in the United States. It usually consists of a hamburger, french fries, a cola drink, and a plastic toy—often a Barbie doll or a Hot Wheels car or something related to a current popular movie. What can we learn about the culture of the United States by looking beyond the taken-for-granted quality of this meal? Among other things, we can get some idea of American demographic and ecological patterns, agricultural and industrial history, and gender roles.

Why, for example, is meat the center of the meal? Most cultures have diets centered on some complex carbohydrate—rice, wheat, manioc, yams, taro—or something made from these—bread, pasta, tortillas, and so on. It is the spice, vegetables, meat, or fish that when added to these foods give cuisine its distinctive taste. But meat and fish are generally at the edge, not the center, of the meal. Why is beef the main ingredient rather than some other meat, such as pork?

Anthropologists Marvin Harris and Eric Ross (1987) note that one advantage of beef is its suitability for the outdoor grill, which became more popular as people moved from cities into suburbs. Suburban cooks soon discovered that pork patties crumbled and fell through the grill, whereas beef patties held together better. In addition, to reduce the risk of trichinosis, pork has to be cooked until it is gray, which makes it very tough.

Beef producers as well as the farmers who grow the corn fed to beef cattle to achieve a desirable fat content benefit from the definition of a hamburger set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture:

“Hamburger” shall consist of chopped fresh and/or frozen beef with or without the addition of beef fat as such and/or seasonings, shall not contain more than 30 percent fat, and shall not contain added water, phosphates, binders, or extenders. Beef cheek (trimmed Beef cheeks) may be used in the preparation of hamburgers only in accordance with the conditions prescribed in paragraph (a) of this section. (quoted in Harris & Ross, 1987, p. 125)

As Harris (1987) notes, we can eat ground pork and ground beef, but we can't combine them and still call it a hamburger. Even when lean, grass-fed beef is used for hamburger and fat must be added as a binder, the fat must come from beef scraps, not from vegetables or a different animal. This definition of the hamburger protects both the beef industry and the corn farmer, whose income is linked to cattle production. Moreover, it helps the fast-food industry because the definition of hamburger permits the use of inexpensive scraps of fat from slaughtered beef to make up to 30 percent of its hamburger. Thus, an international beef patty was created that overcame what Harris calls the "pig's natural superiority as a converter of grain to flesh."

The cola drink that accompanies our hamburger is the second part of the fat-and-sugar-centered diet that has come to characterize our culture. People in the United States consume, on average, about 60 pounds of sugar a year. Why so much? Sugar, as anthropologist Sidney Mintz (1985) suggests, has no nutritional properties, but it provides a quick and inexpensive energy boost for hardworking laborers with little time for a more nutritious meal. Sugar also serves as an excellent complement to the fat in hamburgers because it has what nutritionists call *go-away qualities* that remove the fat coating and the beef aftertaste from the mouth.

We can also learn from the Happy Meal that the fat and sugar diet is highly environmentally destructive. Raising beef cattle is among the most environmentally inefficient and destructive forms of raising food. For example, half the water consumed in the United States is used to grow grain to feed cattle, and the amount of water used to produce 10 pounds of steak equals the household consumption of a family for an entire year. Fifteen times more water is needed to produce a pound of beef protein than an equivalent amount of plant protein.

Cattle raising plays a major role in the destruction of tropical forests in Brazil, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras, where forests have been leveled to create pasture for cattle. Because burning is used to clear most of the forest, the creation of cattle pasture also creates carbon dioxide and, according to some environmentalists, contributes significantly to global warming.

Sugar is no less destructive a crop. Sugar production alters the environment in a number of ways. Forests must be cleared to plant sugar; wood or fossil fuel must be burned in the evaporation process, wastewater is produced in extracting sucrose from the sugarcane, and more fuel is burned in the refining process. Contemporary sugar production in Hawaii not only has destroyed forests, but waste products from processing also have severely damaged marine environments. "Big sugar," as the sugar industry is called in Florida, is largely responsible for the pollution, degradation, and virtual destruction of the Everglades.

Thus, one of the texts that anthropologists can read from a Happy Meal relates to the extent to which consumption patterns associated with our culture create waste and environmental damage. Because of these consumption patterns, the average child born in the United States will in the course of his or her lifetime do twice the environmental damage of a Swedish child, three times that of an Italian child, 13 times that of a Brazilian child, 35 times that of an Indian child, and 280 times that of a Chadian or Haitian child.

And what about Barbie dolls and Hot Wheels? Clearly, there is a message about the definition of gender roles because girls are expected to choose dolls and boys, cars. But one can deduce, if one looks closely enough, even more about our culture from this meal.

Exercise 1.4

The Happy Meal

We have examined some of the lessons we can learn about our culture from the Happy Meal. But there are obviously others. See what you might deduce about the following dimensions of life in the United States from the Happy Meal:

What can you say about gender roles in the United States?

What can you deduce about race relations?

What can you say about the physical attributes of people favored in the United States?

Case Study in Doing Anthropology #1: Why We Post

Social media use will destroy your brain. Or, it will drive you into depression and then to suicide. Or, it will draw you into extremist politics. Or, at the very least, you won't sleep. These, loosely, are some of the claims made by parents, educators, and even researchers about the influence of smartphones and social media on U.S. adolescents, teenagers, and young adults.

Smartphones and access to social media have become ubiquitous. Just count the number of people at the beginning of class who are glued to them. Smartphone ownership in the United States rose from 36 percent in mid-2011 to 85 percent in mid-2019. Ninety percent of 18–29 year olds used social media and, of those, 45 percent said they're online “almost constantly.”

Historically, new communication technologies such as telephones, television, computers, and the Internet were met by the consuming public with all sorts of fears and moral panic. Many thought that telephones were intrusive, and even Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, refused to have one in his workshop. American author Mark Twain sent a Christmas greeting in 1890 that wished that all the peoples of the world might one day be gathered together in heaven, “except the inventor of the telephone.”

As late as the early 1930s, when less than 40 percent of U.S. households had phones, people thought that telephones were dangerous; they might explode, or people who stood near one during a thunderstorm could get hit by lightning. Even without a storm, the electrical wiring might give them a shock.