

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS ANTHROPOLOGY?

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Adaptation, Variation, and Change

- A.** Anthropology is the study of the human species and its immediate ancestors.
 - 1. Anthropology is holistic in that the discipline is concerned with studying the whole of the human condition: past, present and future, biology, society, language, and culture.
 - 2. Anthropology offers a unique cross-cultural perspective by constantly comparing the customs of one society with those of others.
- B.** People share both society and culture.
 - 1. Society is organized life in groups, a feature that humans share with other animals.
 - 2. Cultures are traditions and customs, transmitted through learning that govern the beliefs and behaviors of the people exposed to them.
 - 3. While culture is not biological, the ability to use it rests in hominid biology.
- C.** Adaptation is the process by which organisms cope with environmental stresses.
 - 1. Human adaptation involves interaction between culture and biology to satisfy individual goals.
 - 2. Four types of human adaptation
 - a. *Cultural (technological)* adaptation.
 - b. *Genetic* adaptation.
 - c. *Long-term physiological or developmental* adaptation.
 - d. *Immediate physiological* adaptation.
- D.** Humans are the most adaptable animals in the world, having the ability to inhabit widely variant ecological niches.
 - 1. Humans, like all other animals use biological means to adapt to a given environment.
 - 2. Humans are unique in having cultural means of adaptation.
- E.** Through time, social and cultural means of adaptation have become increasingly important for human groups.
 - 1. Human groups have devised diverse ways in order to cope with a wide range of environments.

II. The Subdisciplines of Anthropology

- A.** The four subdisciplines of American Anthropology.
 - 1. The academic discipline of American anthropology is unique in that it includes four subdisciplines: cultural anthropology, archaeological anthropology, biological or physical anthropology, and linguistic anthropology.
 - 2. This four-field approach developed in the U.S., as early American anthropologists studying native peoples of North America became interested in exploring the origins and diversity of the groups that they were studying.
 - 3. This broad approach to studying human societies did not develop in Europe (e.g. Archaeology, in most European universities, is not a subdiscipline of anthropology; it is its own department).

- B. The four subdisciplines share a similar goal of exploring variation in time and space to improve our understanding on the basics of human biology, society, and culture.
 - 1. Variation in “Time” (diachronic research): using information from contemporary groups to model changes that took place in the past; and using knowledge gained from past groups to understand what is likely to happen in the future (e.g. reconstructing past languages using principles based on modern ones).
 - 2. Variation in “Space” (synchronic research): comparing information collected from human societies existing roughly at the same time, but from different geographic locations (e.g. the race concept in the U.S., Brazil, and Japan).
- C. Any conclusions about “human nature” must be pursued with a comparative, cross-cultural approach.

III. General Anthropology

- A. Cultural Anthropology combines ethnography and ethnology to study human societies and cultures for the purpose of explaining social and cultural similarities and differences.
 - 1. Ethnography produces an account (a book, an article, or a film) of a particular community, society, or culture based on information that is collected during fieldwork.
 - a. Generally, ethnographic fieldwork involves living in the community that is being studied for an extended period of time (e.g. 6 months to 2 years).
 - b. Ethnographic fieldwork tends to emphasize *local* behavior, beliefs, customs, social life, economic activities, politics, and religion, rather than developments at the national level.
 - c. Since cultures are not isolated, ethnographers must investigate the local, regional, national, and global systems of politics, economics, and information that expose villagers to external influences.
 - 2. Ethnology examines, interprets, analyzes, and compares the ethnographic data gathered in different societies to make generalizations about society and culture.
 - a. Ethnology uses ethnographic data to build models, test hypotheses, and create theories that enhance our understanding of how social and cultural systems work.
 - b. Ethnology works from the particular (ethnographic data) to the general (theory).

IV. Applied Anthropology

- A. Anthropology, as defined by the American Anthropological Association (AAA), has two dimensions: 1) theoretical/academic anthropology and 2) practicing or applied anthropology.
 - 1. Theoretical/academic anthropology includes the four subfields discussed above (cultural, archaeological, biological, and linguistic anthropology).
 - a. Directed at collecting data to test hypotheses and models that were created to advance the field of anthropology.
 - b. Generally, theoretical/academic anthropology is carried out in academic institutions (e.g. universities and specialized research facilities).
 - 2. Applied anthropology is the application of any of anthropological data, perspectives, theory, and techniques to identify, assess, and solve contemporary social problems.
 - a. Some standard subdivisions have developed in applied anthropology: medical anthropology, environmental anthropology, forensic anthropology, and development.

- b. Applied anthropologists are generally employed by international development agencies, like the World Bank, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations.
- B.** Applied anthropologists assess the social and cultural dimensions of economic development.
 - 1. Development projects often fail when planners ignore the cultural dimensions of development.
 - 2. Applied anthropologists work with local communities to identify specific social conditions that will influence the failure or success of a development project.