

Anthropology



Second Canadian Edition

Anthropology

What Does it Mean to Be Human?

Robert H. Lavenda

Emily A. Schultz

Cynthia Zutter

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Preface

This original US version of this book emerged out of Robert Lavenda's and Emily Schultz's increasing dissatisfaction with all the available general anthropology texts. The authors found that these texts either overwhelmed beginning students with detail and the sheer volume of material or else provided overly brief introductions that failed to convey the richness of the field. They therefore set out to write a book that introduces this broad field concisely yet thoroughly, providing diverse perspectives and examples to foster not only an appreciation of anthropology but also a deeper engagement with it—one that helps students better understand themselves and the world around them. Anthropology professors (and their students) needed a general anthropology text that struck the right balance, fit into a 15-week semester, and came with a complete package of ancillary materials.

In preparing the Canadian edition, Cynthia Zutter has focused on two central themes, both of which Lavenda and Schultz strongly support. First, she has incorporated Canadian ideas and practices in as many ways as possible. Throughout the text, she has added discussions that focus on Canadian topics such as multiculturalism, bilingualism, same-sex marriage, and cultural resource management. She has also included many examples from across Canada, covering concerns such as how Canadian laws and policies affect people's everyday lives, how ethnicity and indigeneity are recognized, how Indigenous languages are being revitalized, and how French is being preserved in Acadia. In addition, Zutter has incorporated a wide variety of anthropological research carried out by Canadian anthropologists, both within Canada and in other regions—from Madagascar to Taiwan to Brazil. Second, like previous US editions of this text, this Canadian edition continues to address the central issues of the discipline, highlighting the controversies and commitments that shape contemporary anthropology in North America and around the world, and that make it interesting and exciting.

Approach

This book may be concise, but we cover the field effectively. We take a question-oriented approach that illuminates major concepts for students and shows them the relevance of anthropology in today's world. Structuring each chapter around an important question and its subquestions, we explore what it means to be human, incorporating answers from all four major subfields of anthropology—biological anthropology, archaeology, linguistic anthropology, and cultural anthropology—as well as from applied anthropology. We have made every effort to provide a balanced perspective, both in the level of detail we present and in our coverage of the major subfields.

The questioning approach not only sparks curiosity but orients students' reading and comprehension of each chapter, highlighting the concepts every student should take away from a general anthropology course. For example, students need to know about evolutionary theory, human variation, and the biological, social, and cultural critique of the concept of race, since knowledge in these areas is one of the great achievements of the discipline of anthropology. No other discipline (and possibly no other course) will teach about these matters the way anthropologists do, focusing on the idea of humans as biocultural organisms. Students need to know about the fossil evidence for the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, which they are not likely to learn about elsewhere. Students need to know what archaeology can tell us about the human past, as well as what ethnography can teach us about social complexity and inequality. They need to know that culture is more than just cultural festivals, regional foods, and interesting traditional costumes. They need to know about language and cognition and the central role of learning and play in human development. They need to understand the wellsprings of human creativity and imagination. It is valuable for them to see the many forms of human relatedness, and how people organize themselves. They need to know about globalization from the bottom up and not just the top down. They need to see how all the subfields of anthropology together can provide important, unique insights into all these topics, and how anthropology can provide a vital foundation for their university education.

The world we face as anthropologists has changed dramatically in the last quarter-century, and anthropology has changed, too. We have always felt it necessary to present students with a view of what contemporary anthropologists are doing; we therefore address the most current issues in the field and have thoroughly updated the text accordingly for this edition. Students will take away from the book an appreciation of how these areas of specialization have developed over time, and how they contribute to our understanding of the world in the twenty-first century.

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Organization

Divided into 16 chapters with four “Focus” features online, this book is the ideal length for a one-semester course. [Chapters 1 and 2](#) introduce the entire field and the concept of culture, which intersects all aspects of the discipline of anthropology. Following this comprehensive introduction, six chapters are devoted to biological anthropology and archaeology: evolution ([Chapter 3](#)); the primates ([Chapter 4](#)); the fossil record and human origins ([Chapters 5 and 6](#)); human variation ([Chapter 7](#)); the human past ([Chapter 8](#)); and the first farmers, cities, and states ([Chapter 9](#)). Topics in linguistic and cultural anthropology are covered in chapters on economics ([Chapter 10](#)); sex, gender, and sexuality ([Chapter 11](#)); kinship and marriage ([Chapter 12](#)); politics ([Chapter 13](#)); social inequality ([Chapter 14](#), covering gender, class, caste, race, ethnicity, and nationalism); language and communication ([Chapter 15](#)); and symbolic practices ([Chapter 16](#), covering play, art, myth, ritual, and religion). Throughout, the book incorporates discussions of indigeneity and gender, while paying special attention to issues of power and inequality in Canada and the contemporary world.

In the Canadian edition, Zutter placed the chapter on culture immediately after the introductory chapter to highlight the important role that culture plays in all aspects of anthropology, including biological anthropology and archaeology. She has also included additional emphasis on the biocultural nature of human organisms throughout, to facilitate the integration of biological and cultural approaches in anthropology.

In addition, the four brief “Focus” features (online) explore key concerns, methods, and approaches within each of the four major subfields of anthropology in greater depth, focusing on bioarchaeology and the stories that our skeletons hold (biological anthropology); methods for dating archaeological remains and hominin fossils (archaeology); the study of language use and the components of language (linguistic anthropology); and ethnographic methods commonly used in fieldwork (cultural anthropology).

—Robert H. Lavenda, Emily A. Schultz, and Cynthia Zutter

Acknowledgements

My thanks goes out to all of the many people who helped me throughout the development of this Canadian edition of Robert Lavenda and Emily Schultz’s *Anthropology: What Does It Mean to Be Human?* The editors at Oxford University Press have been a pleasure to work with, especially Tanuja Weerasooriya, Janice Evans, Leah-Ann Lymer, and Elizabeth Ferguson, who were patient and provided sage advice as they guided me through this project, and the entire production team. As well, I would like to extend a note of gratitude to Caroline Starr, who initiated and championed this project from its initial stages. Editorial assistance was provided by Rose Lorentzen, whose organizational skills were extremely helpful. My students at MacEwan University guided the project with their valuable comments and suggestions. In addition, I’d like to extend my gratitude to Robert Lavenda and Emily Schultz for providing me with such a wonderful opportunity to combine their exceptional textbook with Canadian content.

Individual contributions from Canadian anthropologists form some of the key additions to this text, and I am grateful to those who provided personal explanations of their current research. My thanks goes out to Nicholas Bala, Michel Bouchard, Martin Cannon, Leslie Dawson, Carly Dokis, Parin Dossa, Linda Fedigan, Nicole Gombay, Sarah King, Jennifer Liu, Roderick McInnes, April Nowell, Kathryn Reese-Taylor, Tanya Romaniuk, Christine Schreyer, Sarah Shulist, Treena Swanston, Kisha Supernant, and Andrew Walsh. I appreciate their generosity in sharing their work for this project.

I would also like to extend my thanks to the following reviewers, as well as those who wish to remain anonymous:

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Tara Tudor, Camosun College
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This edition is dedicated to my family, including my siblings and my children, Kris, Troy, and Matthew. Their support and understanding throughout this process has been enduring. I am grateful to my husband, Mike, as well, for sharing in my journey as a Canadian anthropologist.

—Cynthia Zutter

1

What Is Anthropology?



Anthropologists study artifacts to learn about the human past. This ceramic shard found at an early nineteenth-century site in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada, can help paint a picture of the local economy in the region at that time.

Photo by Brittney Richardson

Anthropologists study artifacts to learn about the human past. This ceramic shard found at an early nineteenth-century site in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada, can help paint a picture of the local economy in the region at that time.

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Chapter Outline

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

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

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

The following evening, soon after Lavenda and Schultz took up their usual places on the veranda, the watchman appeared at the steps bearing a tray with two covered dishes. He explained that his wife had prepared the food for them in exchange for their help in collecting termites. The anthropologists accepted the food and carefully lifted the lids. One dish contained *nyiri*, a stiff paste made of red sorghum, a staple of the local diet. The other dish contained another paste, substance with a crackled, salt and pepper appearance which Lavenda and Schultz realized was

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The night watchman waited at the foot of the veranda steps, an expectant smile on his face. Clearly, he did not intend to leave until the others tasted the food his wife had prepared. Lavenda and Schultz looked at each other. They had never eaten insects before, nor had they considered them edible in the North American, middle-class diet they were used to. To be sure, “delicacies” like chocolate-covered ants existed, but such items were considered by most North Americans to be food fit only for eccentrics. However, the anthropologists understood the importance of not insulting the night watchman and his wife, who were being so generous. They knew that insects were a favoured food in many human societies and that eating them brought no ill effects (Figure 1.1). So, they reached into the dish of *nyiri*, pulling off a small amount. They then used the ball of *nyiri* to scoop up a small portion of termite paste, brought the mixture to their mouths, ate, chewed, and swallowed. The watchman beamed, bid them good night, and returned to his post.



FIGURE 1.1 Many people around the world eat insects. Here, a restaurant worker in Bangkok, Thailand, prepares grubs for cooking.

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

What Is Anthropology?

The above anecdote illustrates some of the central elements of the anthropological experience. Anthropologists want to learn about as many different human ways of life as they can. The people they come to know are members of their own society or live on a different continent, in cities or in rural areas. Their ways of life may involve patterns of regular movement across international borders, or they may make permanent homes in the borderlands themselves. Archaeologists reconstruct ancient ways of life from traces left behind in the earth that are hundreds or thousands of years old; anthropologists who strive to reconstruct the origin of the human species itself make use of fossil remains that reach back millions of years into the past. Whatever the case may be, anthropologists are sometimes exposed to practices that startle them. However, as they take the risk of getting to know such ways of life better, they are often treated to the sweet discovery of familiarity. This shock of the unfamiliar

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Anthropology can be defined as the study of human nature, human society, human language, and the human past (adapted from Greenwood and Stini 1977). It is a scholarly discipline that aims to describe in the broadest possible sense what it means to be human. Anthropologists are not alone in focusing their attention on human beings and their creations. Human biology, literature, art, history, linguistics, sociology, political science, economics—all these scholarly disciplines and many more—concentrate on one or another aspect of human life.

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

What is distinctive about the way anthropologists study human life? As we shall see, anthropology is *holistic*, *comparative*, *field-based*, and *evolutionary*. First, anthropology emphasizes that all the aspects of human life intersect with one another in complex ways and become integrated with one another over time. Anthropology is thus the **holistic** study of human nature, human society, human language, and the human past. This perspective draws together anthropologists whose specializations might otherwise divide them. At the most inclusive level, we may thus think of anthropology as the unified (or holistic) study of humans.

holistic A characteristic of the anthropological perspective that describes, at the highest and most inclusive level, how anthropology tries to integrate all that is known about human beings and their activities.

Second, in addition to being holistic, anthropology is a discipline interested in **comparison**. To generalize about human nature, human society, human language, and the human past requires evidence from the widest possible range of human societies. It is not enough, for example, to observe only our own social group, discover that we do not eat insects, and conclude that human beings as a species do not eat insects. When we compare human diets in different societies, we discover that insect eating is quite common and that our North American aversion to eating insects is nothing more than a dietary practice specific to our own society. Indeed, upon reflection we can identify some of our own dietary practices that may seem strange to people in other societies. For example, Canadians have a strong affinity for a gooey liquid that flows from certain trees. Every year, thousands of trees in Quebec and Ontario are tapped to make some of the best maple syrup in the world, yet not all societies would recognize processed tree sap as a part of their regular diet.

comparison A characteristic of the anthropological perspective that requires anthropologists to study similarities and differences across as many human societies as possible before generalizing about human beings and their activities.

Third, anthropology is also a field-based discipline. That is, for almost all anthropologists, the actual practice of anthropology—its data collection—takes place away from the office and in direct contact with the people, the sites, or the animals that are of interest. Whether they are biological anthropologists studying capuchins in Costa Rica, archaeologists excavating a site high in the Canadian Arctic, linguistic anthropologists learning an unwritten language in the rainforest of Colombia, or cultural anthropologists studying ethnic identity in small-town festivals in Quebec, anthropologists are in direct contact with the sources of their data. For most anthropologists, the richness and complexity of this immersion in other patterns of life is one of our discipline's most distinctive features. Field research connects anthropologists directly with the lived experiences of other people as the example from Cameroon suggests, or with other primates, or to the material evidence that humans have left behind. Academic anthropologists intersperse field research with the other tasks they perform as university professors. Other

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Lastly, anthropologists look for characteristics that unite all of humanity and that are valid across space and time. Because anthropologists are interested in documenting and explaining change in the human past, **evolution** is at the core of the anthropological perspective. Anthropologists examine both biological and cultural evolution of the human species. *Biological evolution* looks at how the physical features and life processes of human beings have changed over time. It also examines human origins and the genetic variation and inheritance in living human populations. *Cultural evolution* concerns change over time in beliefs, behaviours, and material objects that shape human development and social life.

evolution A characteristic of the anthropological perspective that requires anthropologists to place their observations about human beings and their activities in a temporal framework that takes into consideration change over time.

Early anthropologists' discussions of cultural evolution emphasized a series of universal stages. However, this approach has been rejected by contemporary anthropologists who talk about cultural evolution, including William Durham (1991) and Robert Boyd (e.g., Richerson and Boyd 2005). Currently, there are lively theoretical debates in anthropology and other related fields, such as evolutionary biology and developmental psychology, concerning culture change and whether or not it should be referred to as "cultural evolution." In the midst of this debate, one of anthropology's most important contributions to the study of human evolution remains the demonstration that biological evolution is not the same as cultural evolution. Distinction between the two remains important as a way of demonstrating the fallacies and incoherence of arguments claiming that everything people do or think can be explained biologically, for example, in terms of "genes" or "race" or "sex."

What Is the Concept of Culture?

A consequence of human evolution that had the most profound impact on human nature and human society was the emergence of **culture**, which can be defined as sets of learned behaviour, ideas, and material goods that human beings share as members of society. Human beings use culture to adapt to and transform the world in which they live.

culture Sets of learned behaviour, ideas, and material goods that human beings share as members of society.

Human beings are more dependent than any other species on learning for survival because we have no instincts that automatically protect us and help us find food and shelter. Instead, we have come to use our large and complex brains to learn from other members of society what we need to know to survive. Learning is a primary focus of childhood, which is longer for humans than for any other species.

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

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



For further discussion of how humans use culture to adapt to and transform the world in which they live, see Chapter 3, pp. 63–65.

What Makes Anthropology a Cross-Disciplinary Discipline?

Because of its diversity, anthropology does not easily fit into any of the standard academic classifications. The discipline is usually listed as a social science, but it spans the natural sciences and the humanities as well. What it is *not*, as we will see, is the study of the *exotic*, the *primitive*, or the *savage*, terms originally used in colonial times that anthropologists rejected long ago. Figure 1.2 illustrates the variety of interests that fall under the anthropological umbrella.

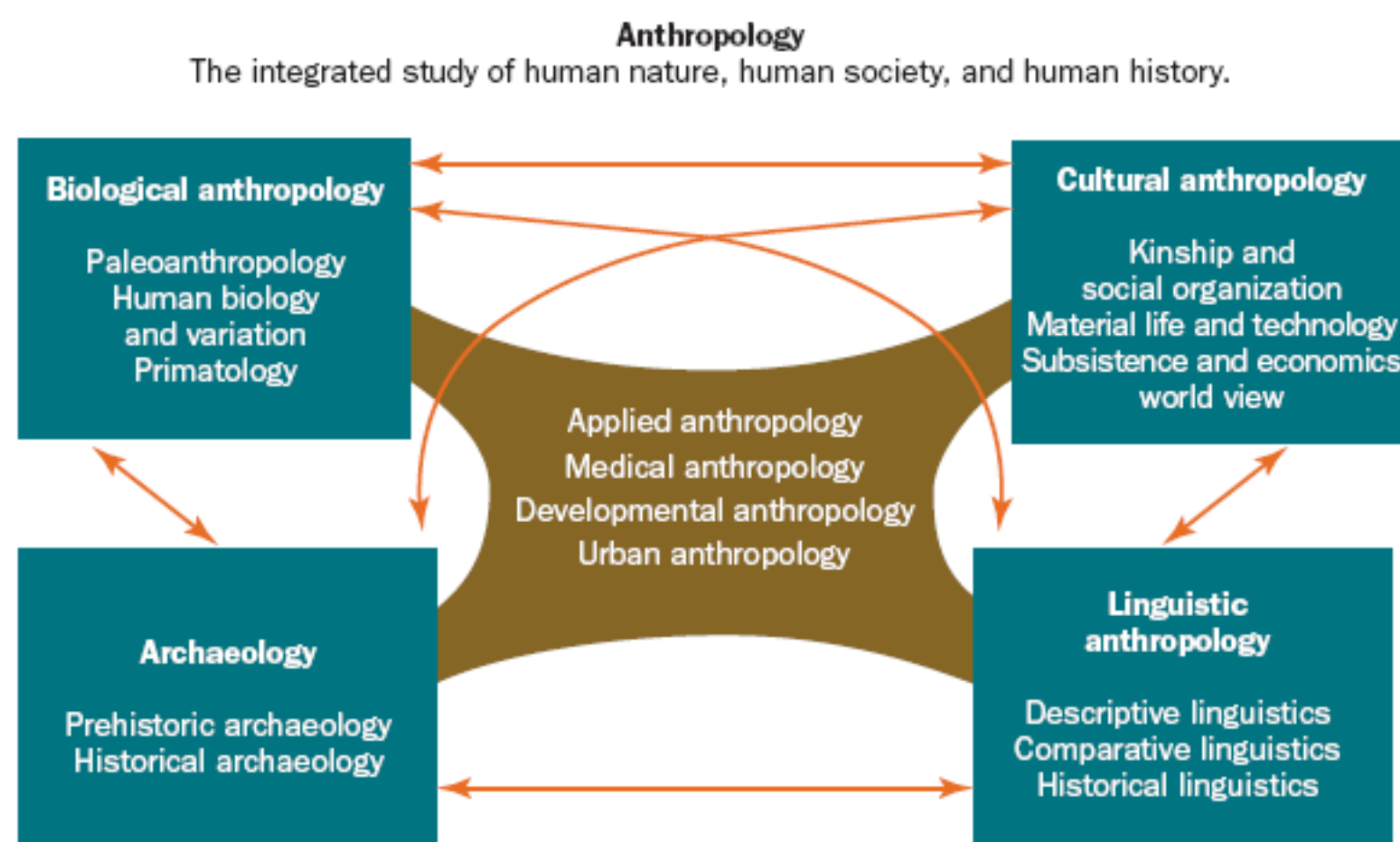


FIGURE 1.2 In the United States and Canada, anthropology is traditionally divided into four specialties: biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and archaeology. Applied anthropology draws on information provided by the other four specialties.

Traditionally, North American anthropology includes a holistic four-field approach: *biological anthropology*, *cultural anthropology*, *linguistic anthropology*, and *archaeology*. Many anthropology departments try to represent most or all of these subfields in their academic programs. However, universities in other parts of the world, such as Europe, usually do not bring all these specialties together. Many North American anthropologists, however, associate this holistic four-field North American anthropology with the successful repudiation of nineteenth-century scientific racism by Franz Boas and other early twentieth-century anthropologists. They also recognize and value four-field anthropology as a cross-disciplinary discipline, where anthropologists are encouraged to bring together fresh concepts and knowledge from a variety of research traditions. Canadian anthropologist Regna Darnell, a distinguished professor at Western University, has intensively reviewed,

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In Their Own Words

Anthropology as a Vocation

Michel Bouchard, an associate professor at the University of Northern British Columbia, describes his personal journey as an anthropologist. Moving throughout the circumpolar region and Canada, Bouchard's work is truly cross-disciplinary, investigating a variety of topics, ranging from individual and group identity formation to associations between language and status to interpretations of nationalism across different populations.

From a small town in northern Alberta to the distant tundra beyond the Arctic Circle of Russia, I have sought to understand identity, what makes us “Us,” and how and why we distinguish between this “Us” and an “Other.” This journey entailed trying to understand how language is used within communities, but also how the mundane rituals of daily life define us. Thus, I have analyzed Russian animated children’s movies and visited graveyards in a largely Russian-speaking community on the margins of the Republic of Estonia to understand Russian nationalism, and I have sought to understand why in my home community of Falher, Alberta, it is “natural” to speak to babies and dogs in French, while English is used whenever there is a unilingual English speaker within earshot because it is “polite.”

After completing my BA at the University of Toronto, I continued on to the Université Laval in Quebec to pursue my graduate research. Not having much funding, I chose to return home to live in my parents’ basement while I conducted a study of my own community. I was a fourth-generation French speaker from Alberta who had grown up in a small region where the French language was still the dominant language throughout the community. Yet in other areas of Alberta, the province in which both my parents and I had been born, I was made to feel a stranger, as most Albertans believed that all French speakers lived in Quebec. As I conducted my research, I came to grips with issues of status and stigma, and how these issues influence the use of language and language maintenance. Even before they start school, children know which language is dominant, which group has high status, and they act accordingly. Today I continue to investigate such themes as I conduct new research, in an attempt to understand how such feelings of stigma can be countered to ensure that minority languages are not lost.

From Falher I pushed into the Baltics and then Russia to better understand issues of nation and nationalism. There, I hit a roadblock, as the existing theory did not truly allow a nuanced explanation of how nation was understood and identity formulated. For over a decade, I have been working to develop a new, more relevant theoretical construct of nation—one that recognizes how nations are continually reconstituted in narrative in an act that I call *curating*—while acknowledging that nations are not modern inventions, but rather constructs that took root during the medieval period.

Recently, I have begun exploring a new topic, Métis ethnogenesis (i.e., the process by which Métis people have formed—and continue to form—a collective ethnic identity). This latest research seeks to understand how the emergence of a Métis identity is tied to the earlier *Canadien* identity that was adopted by the French speakers born in the colony of New France in the seventeenth century. I continue to use historical documents with an anthropological gaze to see how communities emerge and are shaped over time.

Source: Courtesy of Michel Bouchard, Professor at the University of Northern British Columbia.

Biological Anthropology

Since the nineteenth century, when anthropology was developing as an academic field, anthropologists have studied human beings as living organisms in order to discover what makes them different from or similar to other animals. Early interest in these matters was a by-product of centuries of exploration and colonial expansion. Western Europeans found tremendous variation in the physical appearance of peoples around the world and tried to make sense of these differences. Some researchers developed a series of elaborate techniques to measure different observable features of human populations, including skin colour, hair type, and skull shape, hoping to find scientific evidence that would allow them to classify all the peoples of the world into a set of unambiguous categories based on distinct sets of biological attributes. Such categories were

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races Social groupings that allegedly reflect biological differences.

European scientists first applied racial categories to the peoples of Europe itself, but their classifications soon included non-European peoples, who were coming under increasing political and economic domination through colonial expansion by European and European American capitalist societies. These peoples differed from “white” Europeans not only because of their skin colour but also because of their unfamiliar languages and customs. In most cases, their technologies were also no match for the potent armaments of the West. In the early eighteenth century, using terms that are no longer in use today, the European biologist Carolus Linnaeus (Carl von Linné, 1707–1778) classified known human populations into four races (Amerindian, Caucasian, Asian, and Negro) based on skin colour (reddish, white, yellow, and black, respectively).

In the nineteenth century, influential natural scientists such as Louis Agassiz (1807–1873), Samuel George Morton (1799–1851), Francis Galton (1822–1911), and Paul Broca (1824–1880) built on this idea of race, ranking different populations of the world in terms of skull size; they found the brains of “white” Europeans and North Americans to be larger and saw the other “races” as representing varying grades of inferiority, with the two lowest grades being represented by Amerindians (i.e., Indigenous) and Africans ([Gould 1996](#)). These findings were used to validate the social practice of **rac**ism: the systematic oppression of members of one or more socially defined “race” by members of another socially defined “race” that is justified in terms of the supposed inherent biological superiority of the rulers and the supposed inherent biological inferiority of those they rule. For example, despite the fact that millions of Indigenous people were living and thriving in the Americas for thousands of years, racism and racist ideals supported the nineteenth-century colonial perspective that the land was nobody’s (*terra nullius*) and open to be settled. Consequently, thousands of Indigenous people were enslaved, removed from their land, and died as their land was settled by European colonizers.

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

In the recent past, the treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada exemplifies clear racist practices. By far one of the most devastating of these was the establishment of the residential school program in Canada. Indigenous children from across the country were taken from their families in an attempt to take the “Indian out of the Indian” and assimilate them into the Euro-Christian culture. As a result, these children were forced to live in boarding schools, subjected to horrendous living conditions, and not allowed to speak their Indigenous language; essentially, they had their Indigenous culture stripped away. These schools were in existence for over 100 years, impacting over 100,000 children, who essentially grew up without a connection to their culture. To redress the legacy of residential schools and this devastating loss of Indigenous culture, the Canadian government created a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was created to hear the stories of the survivors of the residential school system and to lay the foundation for reconciliation. Ten principles of reconciliation and 94 Calls to Action were put forward to guide the process of repairing the broken relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. The Calls to Action are to be used to change all levels of government, including sectors that deal with child welfare, health, justice, and education ([TRC 2015](#)).

 For further discussion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), see Chapter 13, p. 305, and Chapter 15, p. 366.

 For expanded discussion of the methods anthropologists use to study human variation without using the term *rac*e, see Chapter 7, pp. 137–9. For a discussion of

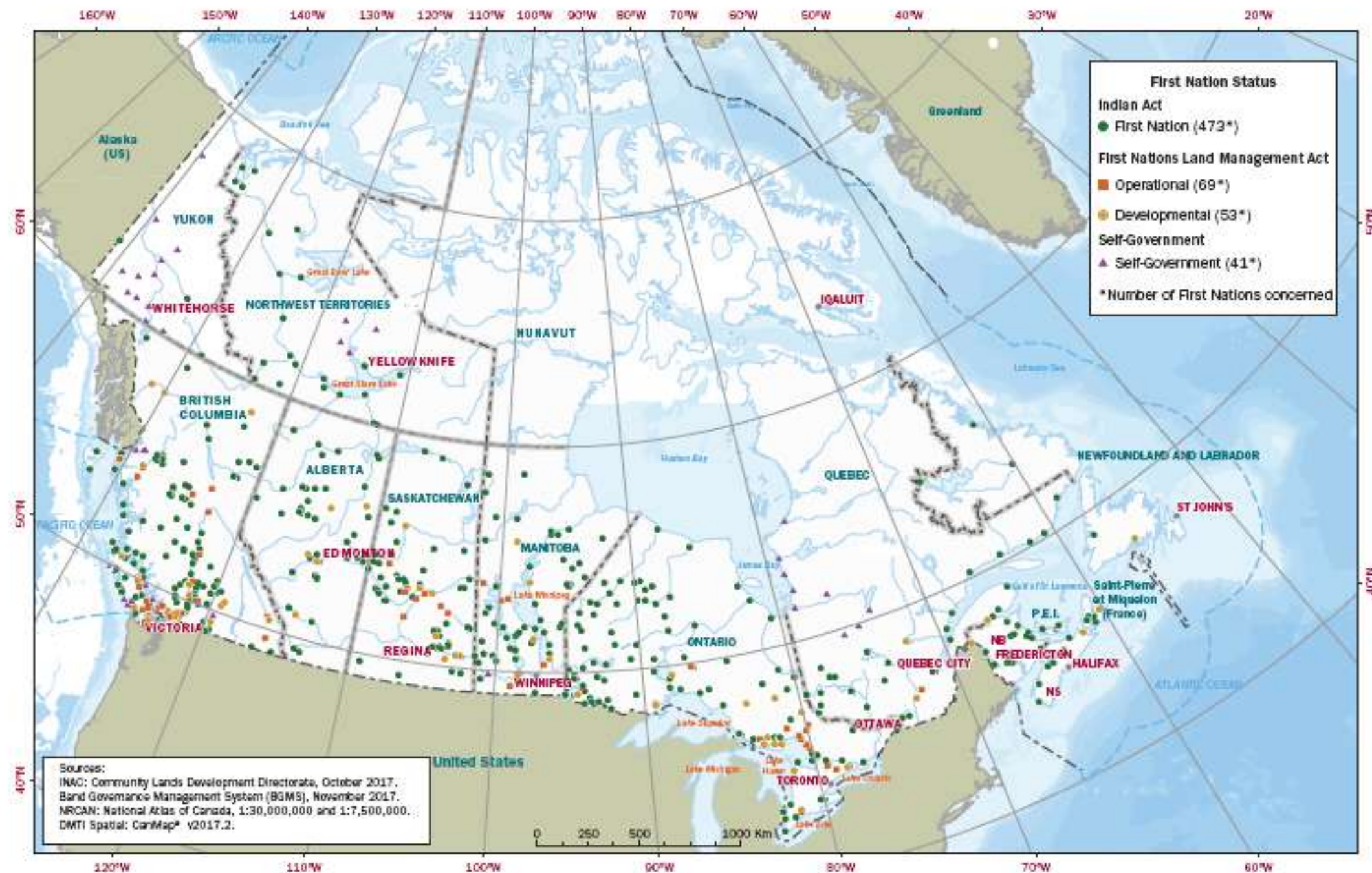
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For expanded discussion of the methods anthropologists use to study human variation without using the term *race*, see Chapter 7, pp. 137–9. For a discussion of present-day racism and associated social issues in Canada, see Chapter 14, pp. 332–3.



MAP 1.1 First Nations in Canada.

Sources: Geomatics Services, November 2017.

Biological or physical anthropology as a separate discipline had its origins in the work of scholars whose training was in some other discipline, often medicine. Johann Blumenbach (1752–1840), for example, whom some have called the “father of physical anthropology,” was trained as a physician. Blumenbach identified five different races (Caucasoid, Mongoloid, American, Ethiopian, and Malayan), and his classification was influential in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Molnar 2001, 6). He and his contemporaries assumed that the races of “mankind” (as they would have said) were fixed and unchanging subdivisions of humanity.

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

By the early twentieth century, some anthropologists and biologists were arguing that “race” was a cultural label invented by human beings to sort people into groups and that races with distinct sets of biological attributes simply did not exist. Anthropologists including Franz Boas (1858–1942), for example, who in the early 1900s founded the first department of anthropology in North America, at Columbia University in New York, had long been uncomfortable with racial classifications in anthropology. Boas and his students devoted much energy to debunking

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

Some biological anthropologists work in the fields of **primatology** (the study of the closest living relatives of human beings, the non-human primates), **paleoanthropology** (the study of the fossilized bones and teeth of our earliest ancestors), and human skeletal biology (measuring and comparing the shapes and sizes—or morphology—of human bones and teeth using skeletal remains from different human populations) (Figure 1.3). Newer specialties focus on human adaptability in different ecological settings, on human growth and development, or on the connections between a population’s evolutionary history and its susceptibility to disease (e.g., paleo-demography). Recent genetic studies in Quebec, for example, have investigated the link between certain medical issues occurring among current populations and similar issues among those who settled New France generations ago (Bhérier et al. 2011). In addition, forensic anthropologists use their knowledge of human skeletal anatomy to aid human rights investigations in places like Bosnia and Herzegovina (Skinner, York, and Connor 2002) or assist law enforcers with the identification of human remains (Mayne Correia and Beattie 2002). In both of these cases, biological anthropologists are participating in applied anthropology (see the discussion of applied anthropology later in this chapter).

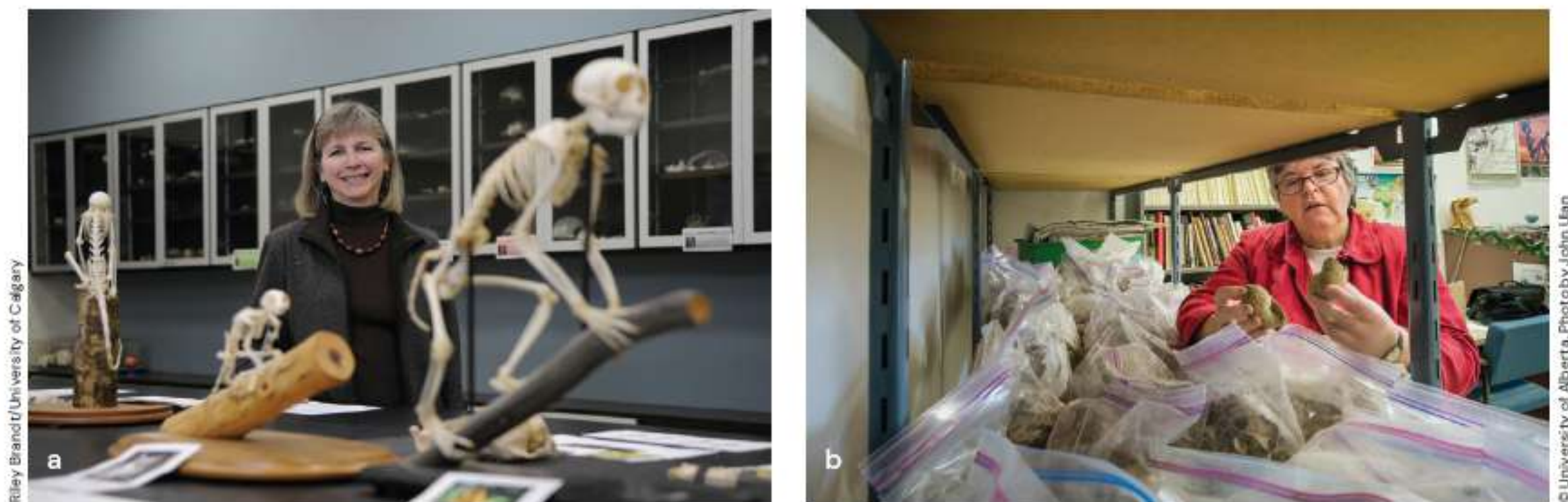


FIGURE 1.3 Some biological anthropologists are primatologists, such as Linda Fedigan, who studies capuchins, spider monkeys, and other primates in their natural habitats and is a professor emeritus at the University of Calgary (a). Other biological anthropologists are paleoanthropologists, such as Pamela Willoughby, who studies ancient human ancestors and teaches at the University of Alberta (b).

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

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

paleoanthropology The study of human fossils and associated remains to understand our evolutionary history.

 For further examples from primatology, see Chapter 4, p. 81.

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

Cultural Anthropology

The second specialty within anthropology is **cultural anthropology**, which is sometimes called *sociocultural anthropology* or *social anthropology*. Sociology and anthropology developed alongside each other during the early twentieth century and share similar interests in the study of culture and social organization. What differentiated anthropology from sociology was the anthropological interest in comparing varieties of human social life around the globe. In the racist framework of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European and North American societies, some people viewed sociology as the study of “civilized” industrial societies and labelled anthropology as the study of all other societies, lumped together as “primitive.” Today, by contrast, anthropologists are concerned with studying *all* human societies, and they reject the labels *civilized* and *primitive* for the same reason they reject the term *race*.

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

Because people everywhere use culture to adapt to and transform everything in the wider world in which they live, the field of cultural anthropology is vast. Cultural anthropologists tend to specialize in one or another domain of human cultural activity, such as gender or kinship but not limited to these. Others study the ways particular groups of human beings organize themselves to carry out collective tasks, whether economic, political, or spiritual. This focus within cultural anthropology bears the closest resemblance to the discipline of sociology, and from it has come the identification of anthropology as one of the social sciences.

Many anthropologists did significant research throughout the twentieth century to separate human biological variation from human cultural practices. By the latter part of the twentieth century, anthropologists also regularly distinguished between the biological **sex** of an individual and the culturally shaped **gender** roles considered appropriate for members of each sex in a given society. Many anthropological studies have highlighted how gender roles shape social changes in our global world; for example, Canadian anthropologist Marie-France Labrecque, at Université Laval, has spent many years researching the importance of women’s roles in Latin America (see Labrecque 2012, 222). As we shall see throughout the text, attention to gender has become an integral part of all anthropological work.

sex The physical characteristics that traditionally distinguish two kinds of humans, females and males (for example, body shape, distribution of body hair, reproductive organs, sex chromosomes).

gender The culturally constructed roles assigned to males or females, which vary considerably from society to society.

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For a more in-depth discussion of sex, gender, and sexuality from an anthropological perspective, see Chapter 11.

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

For more on kinship groups, see Chapter 12, pp. 263–4.

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

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

Cultural anthropologists, no matter what their area of specialization, ordinarily collect their data during an extended period of close involvement with the people in whose way of life they are interested. This period of research, called **fieldwork**, has as its central feature the anthropologists' involvement in the everyday routine of those among whom they live (Figure 1.4). People who share information about their culture with anthropologists have traditionally been called **informants**; however, some anthropologists object to the use of this term because it suggests a role that is limited to supplying information for the benefit of the researcher. Therefore, some contemporary anthropologists prefer to describe these individuals as *respondents*, *collaborators*, *teachers*, *friends*, or simply *the people I work with* because these terms emphasize a relationship of equality and reciprocity. Fieldworkers gain insight into another culture by participating in social activities with members of that culture and by observing those activities as outsiders. This research method, known as *participant observation*, is central to cultural anthropology.





Courtesy Robert Lavenda

FIGURE 1.4 Cultural anthropologist Robert Laughlin with members of the Sna Jtz'ibajom puppet theatre troupe in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico. Cultural anthropologists talk to many people, observe their actions, and participate as fully as possible in a group's way of life.

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

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

Cultural anthropologists write about what they have learned in scholarly articles or books and sometimes document the lives of the people they work with on film or video. An **ethnography** is a systematic study and description of a particular human culture; **ethnology** is the comparative study of two or more such groups (Radcliffe-Brown 1951). Thus, cultural anthropologists who write ethnographies are sometimes called *ethnographers*, and anthropologists who compare ethnographic information on many different cultural practices are sometimes called *ethnologists*. But not all anthropological writing is ethnographic. Some anthropologists specialize in reconstructing the history of our discipline, tracing, for example, how anthropologists' fieldwork practices have changed over time and how these changes may be related to wider political, economic, and social changes within the societies from which they came and within which they did their research (Harrison and Darnell 2006).

ethnography A systematic study and description of a particular culture.

ethnology The comparative study of two or more cultures.

People everywhere are increasingly making use of material goods and technologies produced outside their own societies. Anthropologists have been able to show that contrary to many expectations, non-Western people do not slavishly imitate Western ways. Instead, they make use of Western technologies in ways that are creative and often unanticipated but that make sense in their own local cultural context. These forms of cultural exchange were powerfully accelerated after the end of the Cold War in 1989, when advances in the technologies of communication, manufacturing, and transportation seemed to dissolve, or at least seriously reduce, previous barriers of space and time. All parts of the world were drawn into these processes of **globalization**: the reshaping of local conditions by powerful global forces on an ever-intensifying scale. Globalization suggests a world full of movement and mixture, contacts and linkages, and persistent cultural interaction and exchange (Inda and Rosaldo 2002, 2). Some people have clearly benefited from globalization, whereas others have suffered, and people everywhere struggle to respond to effects of globalization that seem impossible to manage. In a globalized world, it is no longer possible to presume that peoples and cultures are firmly attached to specific geographical locations. As a result, many cultural anthropologists now pay increasing attention to the migrations undertaken by peoples all over the globe and have often focused on regions like the borderland between northern Mexico and the United States, where struggles with contradictory social practices and ambiguous identities have long been the rule, not the exception.

globalization Reshaping of local conditions by powerful global forces on an ever-intensifying scale.

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Research projects by contemporary cultural anthropologists occur in all areas of our interconnected world, including business and information technology (IT). A perfect example of this is the recent work of **design anthropologists**, who work with companies to design products that are culturally appealing to consumers (Wasson 2016). For example, design anthropologist Gray Graffam (2010) at the University of Toronto works on how anthropological research can contribute to marketing in business. Other interesting research includes the move of cultural anthropologists into fields including computer engineering or into ethnographic settings such as scientific laboratories or the Internet. This interest has also stimulated new approaches to material culture, especially the ways human beings and their computerized devices connect with each other.

design anthropology The use of anthropological methods to develop new product ideas.

Linguistic Anthropology

Perhaps the most striking cultural feature of our species is **language**: the system of arbitrary vocal symbols we use to encode our experience of the world and of one another. People use language to talk about all areas of their lives, from material to spiritual. **Linguistic anthropology** therefore studies language, not only as a form of symbolic communication but also as a major carrier of important cultural information. In the early twentieth century, the focus of many anthropologists was to transcribe non-Western languages and to produce grammars and dictionaries of those languages as a means of preventing them from being lost. This sort of preservation remains important today as many languages are being lost around the world as modernization, colonization, and rapid globalization require the use of European languages in place of traditional languages.

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

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

In Canada, the residential school program of the early twentieth century had a devastating impact on Indigenous languages. Thousands of Indigenous children were forced to speak only English, and they experienced numerous other tragedies. In fact, today only 25 per cent of Indigenous people in Canada speak their traditional language, and only three Indigenous languages—Cree, Inuktitut, and Ojibwe—have enough people speaking and understanding them to ensure that future generations will be able to communicate using their traditional ways (Norris 2007). In response to this tragedy, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada enacted numerous Calls to Action that support Indigenous language revitalization. For example, Call to Action number 14 states the following:

We call upon the Canadian government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act that incorporates the following principles: i) Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture ... ii) Aboriginal language rights are reinforced by the Treaties; iii) The ... government has responsibility to provide sufficient funds for Aboriginal-language revitalization and preservation. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015)

Today, many of these traditional languages are being taught in schools to the younger generations of Indigenous peoples to revitalize and maintain traditional knowledge and cultural practices.

Contemporary linguistic anthropologists and their counterparts in sociology (called *sociolinguists*) study the way language differences correlate with differences in gender, race, class, or ethnic identity. Some have specialized in studying what happens when speakers are fluent in more than one language and must choose which language to use under which circumstances. Others have written about what happens when

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FIGURE 1.5 Some linguistic anthropologists have helped to create new languages for movies and TV shows. Canadian linguistic anthropologist Christine Schreyer, shown here, developed a written form of Kryptonian for the 2013 movie *Man of Steel*.

In all these cases, linguistic anthropologists try to understand language in relation to the broader cultural and historical contexts that make it possible. For example, in Canada, the interplay between our two official languages is deeply affected by past and present tensions between French- and English-speaking Canadians. Contemporary linguistic anthropologists are trained in both linguistics and anthropology while many cultural anthropologists also receive linguistics training as part of their professional preparation.

Anthropology in Everyday Life

Language Revitalization: What Can We Learn from Conlang Communities?

It is not every day that an anthropologist finds herself on the set of a big-budget Hollywood movie production. Yet this is what happened to Canadian linguistic anthropologist Christine Schreyer, an assistant professor at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus. Schreyer was asked by the studio in charge of production to develop the written form of Superman's alien language, Kryptonian, for the 2013 movie *Man of Steel*.

Schreyer's training as an anthropologist equipped her with an intimate understanding of the interdependence that exists between language and culture, as each influences and shapes the other. Her work for *Man of Steel* was successful because she constructed the language in relation to the characteristics of Kryptonian culture that had been developed in past Superman comic books and movies. Yet the principles involved in creating and transmitting this

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For years before she became involved with *Man of Steel*, Schreyer had been studying conlangs (constructed languages) in order to grasp how and why these linguistic creations have become established forms of communication among fandoms the world over. Indeed, many conlangs—such as those used in *Star Trek* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy—have grown substantial user communities since their creation. Schreyer decided to focus on speakers of the Na'vi language, which was created to be spoken by the aliens in the 2009 movie *Avatar*. In addition to learning about the Na'vi-speaking community itself, Schreyer was interested in discovering what threatened or endangered language communities might be able to learn from the successful spread of Na'vi.

Schreyer quickly discovered that conlang users have made expert use of social media and IT to build up their communities. While these mediums have not always been useful to minority communities endeavouring to revitalize their traditional languages, Schreyer believes that there is potential for them to be more productive in the future. The key lies in analyzing why conlangs have been so successful and then applying the principles behind that success to endangered languages.

At least part of the answer seems to lie in the perceived prestige associated with each language. Conlangs draw their prestige from the lore surrounding the characters who use them in fictional realities. People generally wish to learn conlangs because of their attachment to a larger universe of wonder and fantasy. Similarly, a *lingua franca* such as English or Portuguese gains its prestige from dominating the economic marketplace—a realm that many people perceive as offering great economic and other benefits. Where do minority languages draw their prestige from? Predominately, this prestige originates in tradition and a sense of belonging to a culture—a sense of identity. Finding a way to increase the level of prestige attached to an endangered language, to increase its appeal to potential users, is vital to revitalization. How this can be achieved depends on the community in question.

Language revitalization is a very current, very critical issue in linguistic anthropology today. As different societies converge in the increasingly globalized marketplace, there seems to be little room for traditional languages. Yet these languages remain key to individual and group identities, and their preservation is important to the promotion of equal human rights across the globe. While not yet fully explored, the question of why some people are willing to spend so much time and energy learning conlangs may one day lead to new and creative solutions to this important issue.

Source: To read the original interview on which this piece is based, see <http://blog.wennergren.org/2014/08>. See also Schreyer 2011.

Archaeology

Archaeology is another major specialty within anthropology. It is sometimes referred to as the cultural anthropology of the human past. Archaeologists are committed to the discovery and systematic study of the remnants of our past—everything from piles of bones and stones to the foundations of early great cities like Teotihuacan in Mexico. Through the analysis of **material culture**, archaeologists focus on reconstructing our human past. Archaeologists seek to understand past human cultural activity using a variety of methods: they conduct surveys of areas to understand where people lived; they try to reconstruct the types of houses in which people dwelled; they study garbage from past societies to understand what people ate; and they look closely at and even recreate tools people made in the past to survive. And, of course, archaeologists also excavate or dig archaeological *sites* (i.e., areas with high concentrations of human cultural remains) to recover *artifacts* (i.e., portable objects created or modified by humans).

archaeology The specialty of anthropology that studies the human past by analyzing material remains left behind by earlier societies.

material culture Objects created or shaped by humans and given meaning through cultural practices.

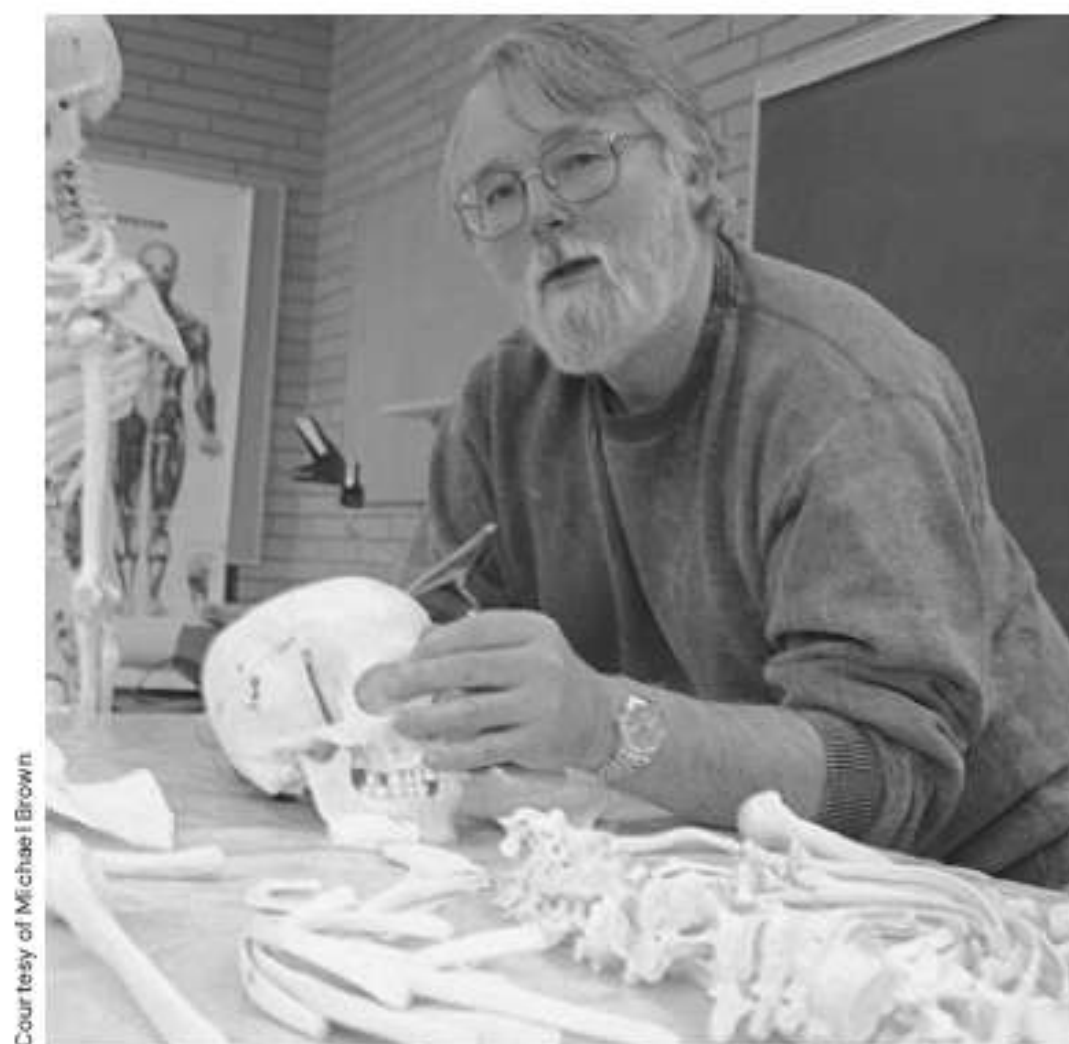
Archaeologists rarely work alone. The complexity and vastness of the human past often requires a large team (or crew) of specialists working alongside archaeologists to assist in carrying out archaeological research. These teams may consist of geologists, botanists, wildlife biologists, metallurgists, pottery specialists, or others. Together, these experts work to better understand how humans lived in the past, what they ate to survive, how they manufactured their tools, and even what the environment was like when the site was occupied.

Archaeologists often work alongside paleoanthropologists as well, especially where human remains or burial sites are discovered, and their findings often complement each other. For example, archaeological information regarding successive stone-tool traditions in a particular region

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Archaeologists often work alongside paleoanthropologists as well, especially where human remains or burial sites are discovered, and their findings often complement each other. For example, archaeological information regarding successive stone-tool traditions in a particular region may correlate with human fossils that indicate ancient humans' prehistoric occupation of that region. In order to make these correlations, archaeologists must establish a clear sequence of events, or a timeline, for the artifacts and sites. To do this, they use a wide variety of dating techniques to establish the approximate ages of the artifacts.

Surveys of geographical areas are also important to create distribution maps of sites and artifacts across space. From this information, archaeologists can generate hypotheses about when certain societies existed, what their territorial ranges were, and what patterns of sociocultural change they experienced. For example, archaeologists often compare the appearance of certain cultural artifacts, such as pottery or stone tools, at one site to the appearance of those artifacts at another site, which allows them to hypothesize about the nature and degree of social contact between different peoples in the past. The sites and artifacts that archaeologists investigate sometimes relate to relatively recent events in the human past. For example, some archaeologists study what remains of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century fur-trade posts or explorers' ships (see [Figure 1.6](#)) or abandoned nineteenth-century industrial sites. As well, many archaeologists use oral histories of Indigenous peoples to help enhance our study of the past ([Martindale et al. 2017](#)). Some contemporary archaeologists even dig through layers of garbage deposited by human beings within the last two or three decades, often uncovering surprising information about contemporary consumption patterns.



Courtesy of Michael Brown

FIGURE 1.6 Canadian anthropologist Owen Beattie's work in the Canadian Arctic has led to a greater understanding of what became of the members of the "lost" Franklin expedition, which disappeared only months after beginning its search for the Northwest Passage in 1845.

Unlike most fictional archaeologists like Indiana Jones and Lara Croft, anthropological archaeologists have ethical responsibilities to maintain and conserve the artifacts of humans. Looting of archaeological sites to remove artifacts to sell for profit along with the destruction of archaeological sites caused by industrial development are still very common, especially in countries with political unrest and widespread poverty. To combat such harmful actions, historic preservation laws exist throughout the world; these laws require archaeologists to seek government permission to excavate sites and to follow specific protocols for preserving and curating artifacts. Archaeologists are considered stewards of the past and accountable to the public for the interpretation, conservation, and preservation of the human past. Shared ethics and methods regarding the discovery of archaeological sites and artifacts are explicitly outlined on the websites of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) and the Canadian Archaeological Association (CAA). A final note: the majority of professional archaeologists work in the field of cultural resource

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Applied Anthropology

Applied anthropology is the subfield of anthropology in which anthropologists use information gathered from the other anthropological specialties to propose solutions to practical cross-cultural problems (Figure 1.7). Some may use a particular group of people's ideas about illness and health to introduce new public health practices in a way that makes sense to and will be accepted by members of the group. Others may use knowledge of traditional social organization to ease the problems of refugees trying to settle in a new land. Yet others may apply this knowledge to help communities adapt to changing local circumstances. A great example of this is the work being done by Mark Nuttall, from the University of Alberta, regarding the varied perceptions of northern Indigenous peoples to climate change and how policy-makers can work with these groups to facilitate their successful adaptation to their changing environments (2009; see also [Crate and Nuttall 2009, 2016](#)). Still other applied anthropologists may use their knowledge of traditional and Western methods of cultivation to help farmers increase their crop yields. Given the growing concern throughout the world with the effects of different technologies on the environment, this kind of applied anthropology holds promise as a way of bringing together Western and non-Western knowledge in order to create sustainable technologies that minimize pollution and environmental degradation. In addition, some applied anthropologists have become management consultants or carry out market research, and their findings may contribute to the design of new products.



REUTERS/Dado Ruvic

FIGURE 1.7 Some applied forensic anthropologists use their knowledge of skeletal anatomy to aid in human rights investigations. Here, a forensic expert working with the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) checks human remains found in a mass grave near Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

applied anthropology The subfield of anthropology in which anthropologists use information gathered from the other anthropological specialties to solve practical cross-cultural problems.

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In recent decades, some anthropologists have become involved in policy issues, actively participating in social processes that attempt to shape the future of those people among whom they work (Moore 2005, 3). This development has involved a change in our understanding of what applied anthropology is. Anthropologists in Canada have a long history of working with Indigenous peoples to assist with government negotiations regarding land use and resource development as well as self-government. In fact, this focus on collaborating with Indigenous communities is what makes Canadian anthropology unique in North America (Waldram 2010). In his overview of the intersection between applied anthropology and Indigenous issues in Canada, Edward Hedin (2008) describes the many instances in which anthropologists have been employed by various bands to mediate development issues, such as the James Bay hydroelectric dam in Quebec (Salisbury et al. 1972) and the proposed Mackenzie Valley Pipeline through the Northwest Territories (Salisbury, Elberg, and Schneider 1974). Additionally, in Canada and elsewhere, applied anthropologists often work in the legal arena, providing their expertise to support tribal groups' efforts to claim official self-government status (e.g., Weaver 1997) or to defend Indigenous peoples' land rights and territorial land claims (e.g., Asch 1984, 2014).

Although many anthropologists believe that applied work can be done within any of the traditional four fields of anthropology, increasing numbers in recent years have come to view applied anthropology as a separate field of professional specialization (see Figure 1.2). More and more universities in Canada and the United States have begun to develop courses and programs in a variety of forms of applied anthropology. Anthropologists who work for government agencies or non-profit organizations or in other non-university settings often describe what they do as the *anthropology of practice*. In the twenty-first century, it has been predicted that more than half of all new PhDs in anthropology will become applied or practising anthropologists rather than take up positions as faculty in university departments of anthropology.

Medical Anthropology

Medical anthropology is one of the most rapidly growing branches of applied anthropology. Over the past half-century or so, it has developed into an important anthropological specialty that has offered new ways to link biological and cultural anthropology. Medical anthropology concerns itself with human health—the factors that contribute to disease or illness and the ways that human populations deal with disease or illness (Baer, Singer, and Susser 2003, 3). In many cases, medical anthropologists have cross-appointments with schools of medicine and may have been trained as either nurses or medical doctors. Some early work done in Canada in this field was led by Emőke Szathmáry (1986), who examined the high incidence of diabetes among the Dene in Northwest Canada, suggesting that there is a connection between the introduction of processed, Westernized foods and the rise of diabetes in this population. Medical anthropologists may consider the physiological and cultural variables that are involved with the perception of human health and disease, the environmental features that affect human well-being, and the way the human body adapts to various environments. Contemporary medical anthropologists engage in work that directly addresses the anthropological proposition that human beings must be understood as biocultural organisms (Figure 1.8). A great example of this is the work of Leslie Dawson of MacEwan University, who has tracked birth practices among the Tlicho in the Northwest Territories (NWT), Canada, noting how colonialism and Western medicine shaped perceptions of health and pregnancy (see “In Their Own Words” box).





FIGURE 1.8 Medical anthropologist Mary Hayden works with traditional healers to track the spread of plague in Uganda. Working directly with informants in the field gives medical anthropologists the opportunity to study both the cultural and biological factors that impact human health.

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

In Their Own Words

Birth Places, Embodied Spaces: Tlicho Pregnancy Stories across Generations

Working with the Tlicho women of NWT, Canada, Leslie Dawson of MacEwan University explores the impact of colonization on maternal health through birthing stories.

Colonization of the Tlicho (formerly Dogrib) region in the Northwest Territories (NWT) is relatively recent, and the profound changes to the lives of the Tlicho can be heard in the stories across the generations. Grounded in women's narratives, particularly of Tlicho Elders and a traditional midwife, their stories reveal changes in the lived experiences of pregnancy and birth as reflecting different socio-historic locations within histories of colonization—from birth on the land with community and midwives, to the beginnings of settlement and birth in the mission hospital in Rae, and to lone evacuation to Yellowknife for medicalized birth in a biomedical hospital.

Birth, however, is not solely a physiological event but is shaped by cultural values and meanings; nor is a birth place simply a location in which a physiological event occurs. Birth places may be seen as social and cultural spaces endowed with cultural values and meanings fundamental to the rituals of birth. Similarly, the body may be seen as biological and social and cultural. Through the intersection of space, place, and the body, a space becomes embodied, or an *embodied space*, in which meaning is inscribed on the body. By considering Tlicho birth places as embodied spaces, I explored the social transformations in time and space brought about by the processes of missionization and medicalization to reveal how colonial histories of controlling birth experiences have become inscribed on Tlicho maternal bodies.

Birth on the Land: The Female Body as Powerful

In the traditional setting, birth on the land reflected the interconnected nature of humans, animals, and spirituality. The relationship to the land informed the rituals of birth and emplaced Tlicho birth experiences. Birth on the land was guided by midwives and saw women's knowledge around pregnancy and birth transmitted from mothers and grandmothers. Ritualized treatment of the umbilical cord and placenta reflected the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and spirituality, and the female body was seen as powerful. However, these rituals of birth were suppressed as Tlicho spirituality came under the missionaries' agenda of assimilation with aspects of Indigenous spiritualities. With suppression of Tlicho spirituality came a new interpretation of the female body.

Missionized Birth: The Female Body as Suffering

Missionization in the North, as with other areas of Canada, began with a desire to save Indigenous "souls" through conversion to Christianity. In response

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Missionization in the North, as with other areas of Canada, began with a desire to save Indigenous "souls" through conversion to Christianity. In response to the epidemics of infectious disease, the Faraud Mission Hospital was established in Fort Rae (Behchoko) in 1940. As part of the Roman Catholic Mission, the hospital setting revealed a shift in the transfer of women's knowledge of birth, as well as the imposition of Christian morality and the understanding of labour as the "curse of Eve," leading to views of the female body as suffering. As a mission hospital, Faraud was run by nuns who reinforced this view of suffering through prayers during labour as well as a moral interpretation of single mothers in labour: "No needle for you." Closure of the "Indian hospitals" began in the 1960s, and the full extent of the medicalization of birth began with the evacuation policy in the North. Spiritualities, both Tlicho and Christian, eventually gave way to dominant biomedical discourse with its emphasis on technology and risk, which led to new emplaced birth experiences and meanings inscribed on the female body.

Evacuated Birth: The Female Body as Risk

Beginning in the 1970s and still policy today, pregnant Tlicho women at 36 to 38 weeks gestational age—or sooner if a high-risk pregnancy—are evacuated to Yellowknife to wait to give birth. (This practice also occurs with other Indigenous women in rural and remote communities.) Contemporary childbirth for Tlicho women is medicalized and institutionalized predominately based on the idea that these babes and mothers are "at risk." With pregnancy no longer viewed as a natural process, the female body becomes inherently at risk, as well as "a site on which colonial goals of assimilation and civilization could be realized" (Lawford and Giles 2012, 332).

Revitalized Birth Places: The Female Body Decolonized

By considering birth places as embodied spaces, I revealed how colonial histories of missionization and medicalization created new birth experiences and inscribed Eurocentric meanings on Tlicho maternal bodies. Colonization became integrated into the lived experiences and rituals of birth and created birth places structured by the cultural values of the colonizer, whether saving souls or saving bodies. In order to decolonize this process and the female body, it is imperative to return birthing to the community. This would allow for traditional Tlicho customs of care by women during labour and childbirth to be revitalized and for perinatal care to be delivered in the women's language. Furthermore, attention to traditional practices would demonstrate respect, bolster Tlicho identity, and, in turn, improve overall health and wellness.

Source: Dawson, L. (2017). "Birth Places, Embodied Spaces: Tlicho Pregnancy Stories Across the Generations." In *Indigenous Experiences of Pregnancy and Birth*, edited by Jaime Cidro and Hannah Tait Neufeld, 144–62. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press.

Particularly significant has been the development of *critical medical anthropology*, which links questions of human health and illness in local settings to social, economic, and political processes operating on a regional, national, or global scale. A good example is the work of Dr [Sandra Hyde \(2007\)](#) from McGill University, who has studied the spread of HIV/AIDS in China, including how political forces in China have shaped public perception and response to the disease, and how the rise of HIV/AIDS has affected various groups throughout the country. Critical medical anthropologists have been among the most vocal in pointing out how various forms of suffering and disease cannot be explained only by the presence of microbes in a diseased body but may depend on—or be made worse by—the presence of social inequality and a lack of access to health care. According to anthropologist Merrill [Singer \(1998, 195\)](#), critical medical anthropology "is committed to the 'making social' and the 'making political' of health and medicine." Thus, critical medical anthropologists pay attention to the way social divisions based on class, "race," gender, and ethnicity can block access to medical attention or make people more vulnerable to disease and suffering. They draw attention to the way Western biomedicine "encourages people to fight disease rather than to make the changes necessary to prevent it," for example, by linking low birth weight in newborn babies to poor nutrition, but failing to note that poor nutrition "may be a major health factor among impoverished social classes and oppressed ethnic groups in developed countries despite an abundance of food in society generally" ([Singer 1998, 106, 109](#)).

The Uses of Anthropology

Why take a course in anthropology? An immediate answer might be that human fossils or broken bits of ancient pots or the customs of faraway peoples inspire a fascination that is its own reward. But the experience of being dazzled by seemingly exotic places and peoples carries with it a risk. Anthropology is a discipline that has been used to justify colonialism, to support the idea of racial hierarchy, and to promote the idea of cultural relativism. It has been used to justify the exploitation of indigenous peoples and the destruction of their cultures. It has been used to justify the oppression of women and the marginalization of minority groups. It has been used to justify the exploitation of the poor and the rich. It has been used to justify the exploitation of the environment. It has been used to justify the exploitation of the future. It has been used to justify the exploitation of the past. It has been used to justify the exploitation of the present. It has been used to justify the exploitation of the world.

The Uses of Anthropology

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

The contemporary world is increasingly interconnected. As people from different cultural backgrounds come into contact with one another, learning to cope with cultural differences becomes crucial. Anthropologists experience both the rewards and the risks of getting to know how other people live, and their work has helped to dispel many harmful stereotypes that sometimes make cross-cultural contact dangerous or impossible. Studying anthropology may help prepare you for some of the shocks you will encounter in dealing with people who look different from you, speak a different language, or do not agree that the world works exactly the way you think it does.

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

Chapter Summary

1. Anthropology aims to describe in the broadest sense what it means to be human. The anthropological perspective is holistic, comparative, and evolutionary and has relied on the concept of culture to explain the diversity of human ways of life. Human beings depend on cultural learning for successful biological survival and reproduction, which is why anthropologists consider human beings to be biocultural organisms. Anthropology is also a field-based discipline. In North America today, anthropology is considered to have four major subfields: biological anthropology, archaeology, cultural anthropology, and linguistic anthropology; many people also consider applied anthropology to be a fifth major subfield.
2. Biological anthropology began as an attempt to classify all the world's populations into different races. By the early twentieth century, however, most anthropologists had rejected racial classifications as scientifically unjustifiable and objected to the ways in which racial classifications were used to justify the social practice of racism. Contemporary anthropologists who are interested in human biology include biological anthropologists, primatologists, and paleoanthropologists.
3. Cultural anthropologists study cultural diversity in all living human societies, including their own. Linguistic anthropologists approach cultural diversity by relating varied forms of language to their cultural contexts. Both gather information through fieldwork, by participating with their informants in social activities, and by observing those activities as outsiders. They publish accounts of their research in ethnographies.
4. Over the past quarter-century, many anthropologists and other scholars have become involved in the interdisciplinary field of science studies, which subjects scientific laboratories and their activities to ethnographic investigation and has shown how successful science in action differs from traditional idealized accounts of scientific research. Science studies research highlighting the productive interconnections among human beings, non-human organisms, and technical apparatus has inspired anthropologists from many subfields to revise our understanding of relationships between nature and culture, people and artifacts, and people and other living species.
5. Archaeology is the cultural anthropology of the human past, with interests ranging from the earliest stone tools to twenty-first-century garbage dumps. Archaeologists focus on understanding how humans lived in the past, how past societies interacted with one another, and how cultures changed over time. Archaeologists are stewards of the human past, and they rely on historic preservation laws to protect archaeological remains from looting and destruction.
6. Applied anthropologists, who are frequently referred to as practising anthropologists, often use information from the other anthropological specialties to solve practical cross-cultural problems. Medical anthropology connects biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, and applied anthropology, focusing on cultural perceptions of health and illness, suffering, and well-being.



online

For more information about different ethnographic practices used to study and understand other cultures, see the Focus on Four Fields passage “Cultural Anthropology: Ethnographic Methods” on the companion website.

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online

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For Review

- What is anthropology? What makes it different from the other social sciences? What do the qualities of being *holistic*, *comparative*, *field-based*, and *evolutionary* contribute to the discipline?
- How do anthropologists define *culture*? In what ways is this definition different from other, less specialized definitions of *culture*? How would the anthropological definition of *culture* inform the way that anthropologists view data?
- What makes anthropology a cross-disciplinary discipline? Why is a cross-disciplinary approach advantageous to anthropologists?
- Describe the main subfields of modern anthropology. Include one area of study for each subfield. What sorts of research projects might require anthropologists from two or more of these subfields to work together?
- Identify three aspects of biological anthropology that appeal to you, and describe why you think they are interesting.
- What are some of the main topics of interest in cultural anthropology? Which of these topics appeal to you the most? Why?
- Summarize the difference between ethnography and ethnology.
- How do linguistic anthropologists learn about human languages? What types of research do these anthropologists conduct? What knowledge and skills would you need to develop in order to create a new language as Christine Schreyer did for *Man of Steel*?
- What are some of the topics or things archaeologists study? Which of these topics or things do you find most interesting? Why?
- What are the connections between applied anthropology and the other branches of anthropology? Outline the advantages of applied anthropology.
- Why is critical medical anthropology an important area of focus within applied anthropology? What are some examples of this type of research?

Key Terms

anthropology

applied anthropology

archaeology

biocultural organisms

biological anthropology (or physical anthropology)

comparison

cultural anthropology

culture

design anthropology

ethnography

ethnology

evolution

fieldwork

gender

globalization

holistic

informants

language

linguistic anthropology

material culture

medical anthropology

paleoanthropology

primatology

races

racism

sex

[informants](#)
[language](#)
[linguistic anthropology](#)
[material culture](#)
[medical anthropology](#)
[paleoanthropology](#)
[primatology](#)
[races](#)
[racism](#)
[sex](#)

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2

Why Is the Concept of Culture Important?



Maasai women in Kenya wearing traditional Maasai clothing. Beadwork, body ornamentation, hair length, and clothing are symbolic of identity and cultural position within Maasai society.

Photo: hadynyah/iStockphoto

Maasai women in Kenya wearing traditional Maasai clothing. Beadwork, body ornamentation, hair length, and clothing are symbolic of identity and cultural position within Maasai society.

Photo: hadynyah/iStockphoto

Chapter Outline

- How Do Anthropologists Define Culture?
- Culture, History, and Human Agency
- Why Do Cultural Differences Matter?
- Does Culture Explain Everything?
- How Can Cultural Relativity Improve Our Understanding of Controversial Cultural Practices?
- The Promise of the Anthropological Perspective
- Chapter Summary
- For Review
- Key Terms
- References

In this chapter, we will examine in greater detail the concept of culture, one of the most influential ideas that anthropologists have studied and defined for many decades. While there are disagreements on how the concept is defined, all do agree that it consists of these five key elements: it is learned, it is shared, it has patterns, it is adaptive, and it is symbolic.

Human beings who develop and live together in groups are shaped by culture and are deeply affected by shared cultural experiences. They become different from what they would have been had they matured in isolation; they also become different from other people who have been shaped by different social and cultural patterns. Social scientists have long known that human beings who grow up isolated from meaningful social interactions with others do not behave in ways that appear recognizably human. Social living and cultural sharing are necessary for individual human beings to develop what we recognize as a human culture.

How Do Anthropologists Define Culture?

In [Chapter 1](#), we defined *culture* as sets of learned behaviour and ideas that humans acquire as members of a society, together with the artifacts and structures we create and use. Culture is not reinvented by each generation; rather, we learn it from other members of the social groups we belong to, although we may later modify this heritage in some way. Children use their own bodies and brains to explore their world. At the same time, other people actively work to steer their activity and attention in particular directions. Consequently, children's exploration of the world is not merely trial and error. The path is cleared for them by others who shape their experiences. We use two terms in the social sciences to refer to this process of culturally and socially shaped learning. The first, **socialization**, is the process of learning to live as a member of a group. This involves mastering the skills of appropriate interaction with others and learning how to cope with the behavioural rules established by that group. The second term, **enculturation**, refers to the cognitive challenges facing humans who live together and must come to terms with the ways of thinking and feeling considered appropriate in their respective cultures.

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

The second term, **enculturation**, refers to the cognitive challenges facing humans who live together and must come to terms with the ways of thinking and feeling considered appropriate in their respective cultures.

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

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

Because children learn to act, think, feel, and speak at the same time, we will use the term *socialization/enculturation* to represent this holistic experience. Socialization/enculturation produces a socially and culturally constructed individual capable of functioning successfully in society. So, culture is *shared* as well as *learned*. But many things we learn, such as table manners and what is good to eat and where people are supposed to sleep, are never explicitly taught but rather are absorbed in the course of practical daily living. *Habitus*, according to French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, is the result of learning and is heavily influenced by our interactions with material culture. The cultural practices shared within social groups always encompass the varied knowledge and skills of many different individuals. For example, driving is part of North American culture, but no individuals could build a car in their backyard without the assistance of parts manufactured by others in our culture.

Human cultures also appear *patterned*; that is, related cultural beliefs and practices show up repeatedly in different areas of social life. Language is a good example of these patterns. Cultural patterns can also be traced through time: the fact that English and French are widely spoken in Canada, but not Fulfulde (a West African language), is connected to the colonial conquest and domination of Canada by speakers of English and French in past centuries. Cultural patterns also vary across space: for example, the English of Newfoundland and Labrador differs from the English of other provinces in style, rhythm, and vocabulary (Figure 2.1).



FIGURE 2.1 A street sign in St John's, Newfoundland, poses a friendly question to passersby. While the language on this sign would seem perfectly natural to most Newfoundlanders, it would seem strange to people living in other parts of Canada.

It is this patterned cultural variation that allows anthropologists (and others) to distinguish different “cultural traditions” from one another. But separate cultural traditions are often hard to delineate. That is because, in addition to any unique elements of their own, all contain contradictory elements, and all also share elements with other traditions. First, customs in one domain of culture may contradict customs in another domain, as when religion tells us to share with others and economics tells us to look out for ourselves alone. Second, people have always borrowed cultural elements from their neighbours, and many increasingly refuse to be limited in the present by cultural practices of the past. Thus, cultural patterns can be useful as a kind of shorthand, but it is important to remember that the boundaries between cultural traditions are always fuzzy. Ultimately, they rest on someone's judgment about how different one set of customs is from another set of customs.

So far we have seen that culture is learned, shared, and patterned. Cultural traditions are also reconstructed and enriched, generation after

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So far we have seen that culture is learned, shared, and patterned. Cultural traditions are also reconstructed and enriched, generation after generation, primarily because human biological survival depends on culture. Thus, culture is also *adaptive*. Human newborns are not born with "instincts" that would enable them to survive on their own. On the contrary, they depend utterly on support and nurturance from adults and other members of the group in which they live. It is by learning the cultural practices of those around them that human beings come to master appropriate ways of thinking and acting that promote their own survival as biological organisms. Moreover, as [Figure 2.2](#) illustrates, appropriate ways of thinking and acting are always scaffolded by artifacts and features of a particular local setting. In the 1970s, for example, young girls in Guider, Cameroon, promoted their own and their families' welfare by fetching water for their mothers, who were forbidden by propriety from leaving their household compounds alone during the day. The presence in town of public water spigots, only a few years old at the time, lightened the chore of bringing water back to homes that did not have plumbing. Imported metal basins and pails were more reliable than large calabashes for carrying water, especially for young water carriers who had mastered the impressive skill of balancing heavy loads on their heads (sometimes atop a flat fabric pad). Public spigots, together with recycled metal containers, a pole, and a rope, also afforded young men the opportunity to earn money by selling their services to residents who could not rely on young relatives to bring water to them. In such ways do tradition and innovation shape each other over time, mediated by material culture.



Courtesy Robert H. Lavenda

FIGURE 2.2 Of all living organisms, humans are the most dependent on learning for their survival. From a young age, girls in northern Cameroon learn to carry heavy loads on their heads and also learn to get water for their families.

Finally, culture is *symbolic*. A **symbol** is something that stands for something else. Consider a red hexagon or a red triangle. For those who drive, these shapes are recognizable as meaning "stop" or "yield" at an intersection, even if they are written in a different language ([Figure 2.3](#)).



Finally, culture is *symbolic*. A **symbol** is something that stands for something else. Consider a red hexagon or a red triangle. For those who drive, these shapes are recognizable as meaning “stop” or “yield” at an intersection, even if they are written in a different language (Figure 2.3).



FIGURE 2.3 Stop sign in Morocco. The shape of the sign signals drivers to stop even if they are unable to read the language on the sign.

symbol Something that stands for something else.



For more on human biological and cultural evolution, see Chapters 5 and 6. For more on how researchers use archaeological techniques to learn about these past cultures, see Chapter 8, pp. 155–65.

Everything we do in society has a symbolic dimension, from how we conduct ourselves at the dinner table to how we bury the dead. It is our heavy dependence on symbolic learning that sets human culture apart from the apparently non-symbolic learning on which other species rely.

Human culture, then, is *learned, shared, patterned, adaptive, and symbolic*. And the contemporary human capacity for culture has also evolved over millions of years. Culture’s beginnings can perhaps be glimpsed among Japanese macaque monkeys, who invented the custom of washing sweet potatoes; and among wild chimpanzees, who invented different grooming postures or techniques to crack open nuts or to gain access to termites or water (Leca, Huffman, and Vasey 2012; see Figure 2.4). Our ancestors likely shared similar aptitudes when they started walking on two legs some 6 million years ago. By 3.3 million years ago, their descendants were making stone tools. Thereafter, our **hominin** lineage gave birth to a number of additional species, all of whom depended on culture more than their ancestors had. Culture, then, is not something that appeared suddenly with the arrival of *Homo sapiens*. Rather, culture had long been an integral part of our evolutionary heritage by the time *Homo sapiens* appeared some 300,000 years ago. As such, paleoanthropological and archaeological work can offer startling insight into how past cultures functioned, survived, and changed.





© Mark Higgins / Dreamstime.com

FIGURE 2.4 A chimpanzee uses a stick to get termites out of a hole in a large rock.

hominins All bipedal apes.

As Rick Potts (1996, 1997), a paleoanthropologist, suggests, human culture has its roots in primate culture. Monkeys and apes possess many basic abilities, such as learning how to wash sweet potatoes or bickering for status in troops, which is the reason they may be said to have simple cultural traditions. Certainly, our earliest hominin ancestors were no different.

Apes apparently also possess a rudimentary capacity for symbolic coding, or symbolic representation, something our ancestors undoubtedly possessed as well. But new species can evolve new capacities not found in their ancestors. This occurred in the human past when our ancestors first developed a capacity for complex symbolic representation, including the ability to communicate freely about the past, the future, and the invisible. Complex symbolic representation apparently was of great adaptive value for our ancestors. It created selective pressures that increased human symbolic capacities over time. Put another way, culture and the human brain coevolved, each adapting to key features of the environment (Deacon 1997, 44). We have used our complex symbolic abilities, moreover, to create institutions—complex, variable, and enduring forms of cultural practice that organize social life, also unique to our species. As a result, for *Homo sapiens*, culture has become “the predominant manner in which human groups vary from one another ... it swamps the biological differences among populations” (Marks 1995, 200). It is because of this coevolution of human biology (in particular, the human brain) and culture that anthropologists refer to humans as *biocultural organisms*.

 For a more thorough description of human language and other communication systems, see Chapter 15.

In Their Own Words

The Nature/Culture of Genetic Facts

Anthropology can tell us a lot about human biology and heredity. However, as biological anthropologist Jonathan Marks testifies, it is important to realize that “natural facts” have cultural information (values, meanings) integrated into them.

Anthropology is positioned to try to explain why groups of scientists do and say the things they do, in parallel with why groups of Indigenous people do and say the things they do (Franklin 1995). The basic explanation lies in a significant contribution of twentieth-century anthropology, namely, the discovery that human facts are fundamentally biocultural.... Consequently, we are now understanding the facts of human biology not so much as facts of nature, but as facts of “nature/culture.” ... After all, “innate” and “learned” are not antonyms, for the most fundamentally hard-wired human adaptations—walking and talking—are actively learned by every person, every generation.

The facts of human biology are, of necessity, facts of human culture in three ways. First, our evolutionary lineage has been coevolving with technology for millions of years, and consequently the environment into which our own species evolved and adapted was necessarily a cultural one.... Second, as individuals, we develop within environments that are profoundly cultural. ... And third, these facts have always been produced in a context of conflicting

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Source: Marks 2013, 249. © 2013 by Annual Reviews, <http://www.annualreviews.org>

Culture, History, and Human Agency

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

This realization, however, raises another question: Just how free from limitations are humans? In Western societies, humans are recognized as agents who cannot escape the cultural and historical context within which they act but must frequently select a course of action when the “correct” choice is unclear and the outcome uncertain. Some anthropologists liken human existence to a minefield that we must painstakingly try to cross without blowing ourselves up. It is in such contexts that human beings exercise their **human agency** by making interpretations, formulating goals, and setting out in pursuit of those goals (Figure 2.5).



Courtesy of Daniel Lavenda

FIGURE 2.5 People regularly struggle, often against great odds, to exercise some control over their lives. During the “Dirty War” in Argentina in the 1970s and early 1980s, women whose children had been “disappeared” by secret right-wing death squads began, at great personal risk, to stand every Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo, the central square of Buenos Aires, with photographs of their missing children. Called the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, they continue their weekly vigil today. They were a powerful rebuke to the dictatorship and to subsequent governments that were not forthcoming about providing information about the disappeared.

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human agency Human beings’ ability to exercise at least some control over their lives.

Many anthropologists insist that it is possible to develop a view of human beings that finds room for culture, history, and human agency. The anthropological point of view called **holism** assumes that no sharp boundaries separate mind from body, body from environment, individual from society, my ideas from our ideas, or their traditions from our traditions. Rather, holism assumes that mind and body, body and environment, and so on, interpenetrate each other and even define each other. From a holistic perspective, attempts to divide reality into mind and matter are unsuccessful because of the complex nature of reality, which resists isolation and dissection. Anthropologists who have struggled to develop this holistic perspective on the human condition have made a contribution of unique and lasting value.

holism A perspective on the human condition that assumes that mind and body, individuals and society, and individuals and the environment interpenetrate and even define one another.

In anthropology, holism is traditionally understood as a perspective on the human condition in which the whole (for example, a human being, a society, a cultural tradition) is understood to be greater than the sum of its parts. For example, from a holistic perspective, human beings are complex, dynamic living entities shaped by genes, culture, and experience into entities whose properties cannot be reduced to the materials out of which they were constructed. To be sure, human organisms are closed off from the wider world in some ways by how our cells, tissues, and organs are bound into a single body. At the same time, like all living organisms, human beings are open to the world in other ways: we breathe, eat, harbour colonies of intestinal bacteria to aid our digestion, excrete waste products, and learn from experience (see [Deacon 2003](#), 296–7). Similarly, a society is not just the sum of its individual members; people in groups develop dynamic relationships that facilitate collective actions impossible for individuals to bring about on their own. And cultural traditions are not just a list of beliefs, values, and practices; rather, different dimensions of cultural activity, such as economics and politics and religion, are knotted together in complex ways. To understand any human community requires untangling those cultural threads in order to reveal the full range of factors that shape particular cultural practices in that community.

One useful way of thinking about the relationships among the parts that make up a whole is in terms of **coevolution**. A coevolutionary approach to the human condition emphasizes that human organisms, their physical environments, and their symbolic practices codetermine one another; with the passage of time, they can also coevolve with one another. A coevolutionary view of the human condition also sees human beings as organisms whose bodies, brains, actions, and thoughts are equally involved in shaping what they become. Coevolution produces a human nature connected to a wider world and profoundly shaped by culture. These connections make us vulnerable over the courses of our lives to influences that our ancestors never experienced. The open, symbolic, meaning-making properties of human culture make it possible for us to respond to those influences in ways that our ancestors could not have anticipated.

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

Why Do Cultural Differences Matter?

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

In the early 1970s, the Peace Corps office in Botswana was concerned by the number of volunteers who seemed to be “burned out,” failing in