Anthropology

Definition: anthropology from The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology

Lit., the study of mankind. Depending upon who is doing the defining, anthropology may include archaeology, linguistics, psychology, sociology and smatterings of biology, anatomy, genetics and comparative literature. Most practitioners tend to segment the discipline into CULTURAL *ANTHROPOLOGY and PHYSICAL *ANTHROPOLOGY.

Summary Article: Anthropology

From The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science

Anthropology is an outgrowth of the sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century European discoveries of the remains of ancient civilizations and fossil ancestors, as well as European encounters with contemporary cultures that differed greatly from those of Europe. The need to explain, understand, and deal with these discoveries as a means of better understanding their own cultures gave rise to anthropology as an academic and museum discipline. It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, that a coherent intellectual structure emerged for the discipline. In the United States Franz Boas, of Columbia University, helped combine four subfields into what we now see in most major United States university departments of anthropology: cultural anthropology, archaeology, anthropological linguistics, and physical (biological) anthropology. Together, research in these four subfields has achieved a broad coverage of human biological and cultural evolution in its study of the world's cultures, past and present, which is the most distinguishing feature of anthropology. The concept of culture has become the unifying theoretical framework that allows the subdisciplines of the field to interact in research and teaching.

Cultural anthropology deals with the description and analysis of the forms and styles of human social life. One subdiscipline of anthropology, ethnography, systematically describes societies and cultures. Another subdiscipline, ethnology, is the closely related theoretical comparison of these descriptions, which provides the basis for broad-based cultural generalizations.

Archaeology and its systematic excavation of the interred remains of the past reveal sequences of social and cultural adaptations and evolution under diverse natural and cultural conditions. Archaeology makes substantial contributions to the study of man in its quest to understand prehistory and in its investigation of the full cultural record of mankind. Anthropological linguistics provides yet another essential perspective with its investigation of world languages. A major objective of this field is reconstructing historical changes that have led to the formation of contemporary languages and families of languages. In a more fundamental sense, anthropological linguistics is concerned with the nature of language and its functions in human and prehuman cultures. Anthropological linguistics is also concerned with the relationships between the evolution of language and the evolution of cultures. Finally, anthropological linguistics is essential for the cultural anthropologist seeking to understand and to write heretofore unwritten languages.

The subfield of physical (biological) anthropology concentrates on man's prehuman origins and takes into account both genetically and culturally determined aspects of human beings. Physical anthropology

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seeks to identify the processes of human evolution by studying the fossil remains of ancient human and prehuman species and by describing and analyzing the distribution of hereditary variations among contemporary populations increasingly by means of genetic research. The emergence of biological anthropology as a main adjunct of forensic investigation has involved more biological anthropologists, a specialization that continues to grow within the framework of biological anthropology. The uses of biological anthropology in identifying military casualties has been yet another specialization at least since World War II.

The Relevance of Anthropology as a Discipline

Anthropology does not achieve its general and fundamental significance by organizing the data of other disciplines or by synthesizing higher-level theories from the other disciplines’ concepts and principles. Anthropologists are interested in the facts and theories of other disciplines that apply to the study of man. Certainly there are many collaborative efforts and fruitful exchanges between anthropologists and biologists, psychologists, sociologists, social psychologists, geologists, historians, and economists, as well as with scholars in the humanities. Cultural anthropology also shares a broad concern with postmodernism, the arts, and theoretical concerns of other social sciences.

It should also be noted that, as research and publications accumulate in each of the four subfields of anthropology, fewer and fewer anthropologists are masters of the entire discipline. In fact, anthropologists increasingly find themselves working not only with fellow anthropologists, but also with members of entirely different scientific and humanistic disciplines. For example, cultural anthropologists interested in the relationships between cultural practices and the natural environment must study the principles of ecology. Physical anthropologists studying the relationships between human and protohuman fossils may, because of the importance of teeth in the fossil record, become more familiar with dentistry journals than with journals devoted to ethnography or linguistics. Cultural anthropologists who focus on the relationships between culture and an individual’s personality are sometimes more at home professionally with psychologists than with archaeologists in their own university departments. Additionally, anthropology makes great contributions to museums, and many anthropologists spend their careers as museologists. In general it may be said that the working links between anthropological specialties and other disciplines are quite pragmatic. Ongoing specialization requires branching out in many directions in response to research opportunities, scholarly interests, and new discoveries and research techniques.

An important feature of anthropology as a discipline is that its scope is panhuman in its theoretical foundation. It is systematically and uncompromisingly diachronic and comparative in its insistence that the proper study of man can only be undertaken successfully through a general study of mankind. The anthropological impulse is, first and foremost, to insist that conclusions based on the study of one particular human group or civilization be checked against the evidence gleaned from other groups under both similar and different conditions. In this way the relevance of anthropology transcends the interests of American, Western, or any other culture. In anthropological perspective, all civilizations are particular, local, and evanescent; thus, anthropology opposes the ethnocentrism of those who would have themselves and none other represent humanity, stand at the pinnacle of progress, or be chosen by God or history to fashion the world in their own image.

Because of its diachronic and comparative perspectives, anthropology holds the key to answering the recurring fundamental questions of contemporary relevance to humanity. It lies peculiarly within the
province of anthropology to contextualize the place of man’s animal heritage in modern society, to define what is distinctively human about humans, and to differentiate between cultural and noncultural reasons for conditions such as competition, conflict, and war. Anthropological facts and concepts are essential to understanding the origins of social inequality, racism, exploitation, poverty, underdevelopment, and other human problems. Of decisive importance to the entire anthropological enterprise is the question of the nature and significance of human racial variation. Because of its combination of biological, archaeological, linguistic, and cultural perspectives, general anthropology is uniquely suited to address this problem.

In addition to its basic research mission, anthropology has become an applied science with applications in most areas of contemporary life. Techniques of applied anthropology may now be seen in problem solving activities across the spectrum of virtually all cultural and biological domains. Applied anthropologists in the United States alone number in the thousands and are employed as professionals and scientists in government (e.g., the State Department and Department of Defense), business (e.g., General Motors), health, education, and various other fields. Increasingly, anthropologists are employed by the CIA, FBI, ATF, and in the administration of prisons, because of the expanding ethnic groups that must be considered in the activities of such agencies. It is now predicted that half of all graduating doctorates in anthropology will pursue nonacademic careers. Many will join the emerging local practitioner organizations (LPOs) that have emerged in various parts of the U.S. and Canada and identify with these organizations rather than with academic departments of anthropology.

Underlying all of anthropology’s other contributions to the sciences, humanities, and society is its abiding search for the causes of social and cultural differences and similarities in the family of man. This enduring quest to understand both the biological and cultural nature of mankind in a diachronic and comparative framework continues to distinguish anthropology as an essential and vital component of a sound education for the modern world.

See also
Alcohol Use Disorders.

Suggested Readings

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