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Anthropologies

KEY QUESTIONS
What is anthropology? What is culture? What is holism? In what ways could holism be important to anthropology? Is anthropology important for everyday life? How? Why/Why Not? How has the definition of anthropology changed over time from its first use?

Definitions

Our quest starts with etymology. The word "anthropology" has two roots from classical Greek: *anthropos* meaning "human," and *-logy* meaning "study of" or "knowledge of" (as in biology – study of living things, theology – study of god, and geology – study of Earth). In simplest terms, therefore, anthropology is the study of humans. But the study of humans can be carried out in many ways – anatomical, psychological, social, spiritual, genealogical, etc. – and all of them have been called anthropology by some people at some point (which is why the chapter title is in the plural). By the mid- to late-19th century, the bulk of anthropologists in Europe and North America were focusing on various aspects of the social behavior of humans, including the workings of actual social institutions among a number of populations, such as schools (education), courts (law), governments (politics), markets (economics), etc., as well as the ideologies and worldviews that were foundational to the ways in which these institutions operated.

In Britain, E. B. Tylor (1832–1917) wrote two books – *Primitive Culture* (1871) and *Anthropology* (1881) – which laid out what he conceived to be the basics of the discipline that would guide the directions that anthropology would take well into the future. The opening words of *Primitive Culture* are still cited by anthropologists:

> Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.
>
> *(Tylor 1871: 1)*

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This is a start at defining culture, though vague and ambiguous. Tylor sees culture as a phenomenon that is primarily mental, learned (that is, not biologically determined), shared (that is, social), and integrated. The idea that people in a culture are united in social bonds by a shared set of learned values was echoed by Émile Durkheim (1885–1917) in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) under his concept of *conscience collective* (or collective (un)conscious) and by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) through his hypothesized mental apparatus, the superego, which he saw as a component of the mind that regulated the behavior of individuals based on social norms (Freud 1933). In various ways they are all saying that humans internalize a set of rules and values during their childhood socialization that are shared by the members of their culture.

Tylor goes on:

> The condition of culture among the various societies of mankind, in so far as it is capable of being investigated on general principles, is a subject apt for the study of laws of human thought and action. On the one hand, the uniformity which so largely pervades civilization may be ascribed, in great measure, to the uniform action of uniform causes: while on the other hand its various grades may be regarded as stages of development or evolution, each the outcome of previous history, and about to do its proper part in shaping the history of the future.
>
> *(Tylor 1871: 1)*

Here Tylor develops a theory of cultural evolution that was generally accepted in the 19th century but is now rejected by anthropologists. Tylor's theory, similar to the one developed by Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881) in the United States, was that all cultures go through the same fixed stages of evolution that can be identified, much like layers of rock in the geologic column. He conceived of these cultural stages as uniform across the world.

From Tylor onward, culture became the basic unit of analysis for anthropology in the same way that species was for biology and element was for chemistry. But here we must distinguish between *culture*, as a generic term for the shared rules and values that are internalized by people, and *a* culture, meaning a specific group of people with those shared values. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, culture seemed as if it were an easily definable unit because travel was limited, and thus, communities remained relatively self-contained – relatively. Anthropologists could write about the Nuer or Tikopia or Salish without paying too much attention to the problems associated with delineating the boundaries of these supposedly well-contained units.

The boundaries between cultures are, in fact, fluid and impossible to draw, and always have been. Even so, we can still talk about Chinese or French culture, while recognizing that we are not referring to some stereotypical monolith, nor are we talking about nations or states or communities of various kinds (see Chapter 15). *Cultures are complex.* With a little effort you can note down the key features of your own culture. Start there and you will begin to understand that the idea of culture appears simple on the surface, but gets more complicated the deeper you dive into it. Not all the people within a perceived culture share exactly the same values, and they may vehemently disagree on some of them (although they may agree on which topics are important). All of the countries in the European Union, for example, have multiple political parties that express, sometimes radically, different views about how the country should be run, yet the people still share many values and beliefs, and they generally agree that political issues are important enough to get passionate about from time to time. Regardless of these complexities, all people have a sense of "us" and "them"; that is, they can fairly easily identify who belongs in the group called "us" and those who do not and so are "them."

Franz Boas

The German human geographer and mathematical physicist, Franz Boas (1858–1942), introduced a brand-new way of documenting and analyzing cultures at the turn of the 20th century, changing the face of anthropology forever (Figure 1.1).

Boas was born in 1858, in Minden in Westphalia, which was at the time a province of the kingdom of Prussia before the state of Germany unified (in 1871). In secondary school he excelled at geography, but when he went to university he spent more time on mathematics and physics, although he kept geography in the mix. One of the prevailing theories back then was that the physical environment of a population strongly influenced their character, linking physical geography with human geography. Thus, people raised in perennially cold climates will have "cold" dispositions – introverted and antisocial – whereas those raised in equatorial regions will have "sunny" dispositions – open and hospitable. This speculation is called **geographic determinism**, and, although it is thoroughly debunked, it still pops up occasionally in popular discourse.

Boas wanted to do graduate research in mathematics but ultimately settled for working on the physics of light and color in relation to water, gaining the German equivalent of a doctorate in 1881. In the course of his research he became interested in how his perceptions of color changed according to his circumstances which, in turn, led him to take an interest in the relationship between the internal world of the mind and its perceptions, and the external world of quantifiable reality, a subject known as **psychophysics**. He was not able to pursue this interest further because of his lack of training in psychology, but in 1883 he got the opportunity to join an expedition to Baffin Island to conduct geographic research on the impact of the physical environment on native Inuit populations. Boas lived and worked closely with the Inuit and he developed a long-term interest in the way the people lived. Once, in the 24-hour darkness of the Arctic winter, Boas and

Figure 1.1 Boas demonstrating a Kwakwaka'wakw dance posture.
Source: Anonymous / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain.

his traveling companion got lost and they were forced to keep sledding for 26 hours through ice, soft snow, and temperatures that dropped below −46 °C. The following day, Boas wrote in his diary:

> I often ask myself what advantages our "good society" possesses over that of the "savages" and find, the more I see of their customs, that we have no right to look down upon them ... We have no right to blame them for their forms and superstitions which may seem ridiculous to us. We "highly educated people" are much worse, relatively speaking ... all service, therefore, which a man can perform for humanity must serve to promote truth.
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> *(Müller-Wille 1998: 79)*

Boas returned to Germany after a grueling year on Baffin Island and wrote up his notes in a habilitation dissertation – *Baffin Land* – which would allow him to teach in German universities, and he also wrote a book on the same subject – *The Central Eskimo*. In 1885, Boas went to work at the Royal Ethnological Museum in Berlin with anatomist and pathologist Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902) who, at the time, was publicly debating the strengths and weaknesses of Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) theory of evolution by natural selection (which was rapidly losing ground because of lack of knowledge of genetics as the mechanism of inheritance), and with ethnologist Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) who was loudly fighting against the theory of **geographic determinism** (a culture's physical environment controls the way its people think – cold climates produce "cold" people).

In 1886 Boas left Germany for a three-month trip to British Columbia to study the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest and, while in New York, was offered a job as assistant editor of the journal *Science*. Because he was getting increasingly disgusted by the growing antisemitism and nationalism in the newly united Germany, along with the limited academic positions for geographers there, Boas decided to relocate to the United States (probably also influenced by a romance with Marie Krackowizer, whom he married within the year). From the late 1880s onward he made repeated field trips to the Pacific Northwest, ultimately settling at the American Museum of Natural History (which still houses an enormous collection of his exhibits) and at Columbia University, where he founded an anthropology department and turned out scores of PhDs who went on to develop departments all across the United States.

Boas and Holism

In 1904 Boas published the now classic paper, "*The History of Anthropology*," in which he questioned all the norms of anthropology as they existed at the time. The paper is still cited, well over 100 years later, as the time when American anthropology was set on a completely new trajectory. For example, Boas was able to substantially debunk the prevailing kinship theories of the day, proposed by Lewis Henry Morgan, by using his own observations about kinship systems among peoples in the Pacific Northwest because they diverged significantly from what Morgan had predicted (just as you would question the existence of gravity if you went to a part of the world where heavy objects drifted upward).

Morgan had argued that kinship systems would naturally "progress" from matrilineal (female line) to patrilineal (male line) inheritance of property, and other things of value, as cultures evolved from social systems centered on women – the ones giving birth – to men – the ones with increasing power based on their mastery of weapons and complex modes of food production (such as plough agriculture). Boas' studies of the peoples of the Pacific Northwest revealed multifaceted patterns of

the evolution of kinship systems, with the Kwakwaka'wakw (whom he referred to as the Kwakiutl), the center of his study. They apparently evolved from patrilineal to matrilineal kinship patterns, seemingly for economic reasons. Therefore, the dominant theory of the day, namely, that there was one single, predictable line of evolution of all cultures, was wrong, and, instead, Boas suggested what is now called **historical particularism**. That is, each culture is the product of a unique convergence of multiple influences – environmental, historical, biological, and linguistic – and must be studied in its own right, rather than being based on where it sits on a monolithic evolutionary tree, as had been previously assumed.

Boas' 1904 paper made this argument for historical particularism forcefully, calling for a completely new way of studying cultures. His line of investigation involved inquiring about all manner of aspects of culture – folklore, biology, archeology, linguistics, history, and ethnology – setting up a temporary, holistic academic structure for his immediate purposes. Although Boas did not train his students as holists, he did establish the anthropology department at Columbia University on what became known as the "four fields" and he did publish significant research in all four areas. In a 1908 paper titled "*Anthropology*" he wrote:

> We do not discuss the anatomical, physiological, and mental characteristics of a man considered as an individual; but we are interested in the diversity of these traits in groups of men[1] found in different geographical areas and in different social classes. It is our task to inquire into the causes that have brought about the observed differentiation and to investigate the sequence of events that have led to the establishment of the multifarious forms of human life. In other words, we are interested in the anatomical and mental characteristics of men living under the same biological, geographical, and social environment, and as determined by their past.
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> *(Boas 1908: 5)*

American anthropology had been defined. From this point on, it was a distinct manner of study that was demonstrably different from other ways of investigating human diversity historically, and in other lands. When Boas helped found the American Anthropological Association in 1902 it was separated into four branches – physical anthropology, archeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology – and remains so over 100 years later (with some tweaking here and there). These four subfields have mostly pursued their own agendas independently of one another but things have been changing in recent years. The original holistic vision that Boas had developed for his own limited purposes at the dawn of the 20th century is making a comeback (Forrest and Forrest-Blincoe 2022). This book is an example of this revitalized approach.

Boas advocated for the richness of holistic studies of culture in order to break down the simplistic theories of the general evolution of culture advocated by Morgan and others, but he and his students stopped short of pursuing holism into the future because individual ventures, such as charting human evolution, investigating intonation and meaning in multiple languages, historical archeology, and so forth, were technically challenging and required long and dedicated training in their own right. So, Boas' students abandoned holism in favor of specialized subjects. Specialization has been an invaluable tool, and will, no doubt, continue, but we believe that now is the time to revitalize holistic studies because they will enhance specialized ones.

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1 Boas followed the common practice of his day of using "men" to mean all humans. We no longer do this. We talk about "humans" and "humankind."

Academic Disciplines

If you are a university student in the United States, think back to your college applications, and your freshman orientation. When you applied to college, you might have been asked to indicate your intended major, and based on your experiences in high school or earlier, you may have already had a general sense of what you wanted to study even if you were unsure of exactly what discipline you would like to choose as a major. But why do you have to choose only one? And why do you have to take general education requirements at the start if, in the end, you will work on specializing in a single subject?

Consider for a minute, too, the various buildings around your campus. Each one is likely dedicated to either a specific subject, or an assortment of related subjects, along with a library, the contents of which are also likely divided into the same subjects as the buildings on campus. Until now, you may have never questioned these structural elements of your education, but here we pose the question: Why is education structured this way, and is this the only way that things could be?

Before the 20th century, scholars frequently did not limit themselves to studying a single, narrowly defined academic subject, but dedicated their intellectual efforts to a wide variety of phenomena, and prominent questions about how the universe works. By the 17th century in Europe, into the 18th, several prominent scholars such as Isaac Newton, Gottfried Leibniz, and Carl Linnaeus also sought to find underlying connections between various aspects of the world, and proposed several universal causes or explanations of these connections. That is to say, these scholars attempted to find unifying explanations of how the entirety of the world worked as a whole, rather than necessarily breaking down each area of study into a separate subject of inquiry. In fact, as will become clearer in later chapters, this was the same approach that many people throughout history and across the globe have taken in philosophy and religion to understand how the world works. This was the academic world that Boas lived in when he conducted his research on Baffin Island, although even by that time the academic disciplines as you find them in schools today were taking shape.

Note that at this point in the development of modern academic subjects, and modern educational institutions, there were two opposing tendencies in the ways that people produced knowledge: one which tended toward the production of universal laws applicable across a spectrum of subjects, and the other which created boundaries around some areas of study to allow for more minute study of the subjects within their purview. These opposing tendencies can still be seen in the structure of today's universities, with liberal arts colleges encouraging students to seek connections between a wide variety of subjects in the hopes of producing new insights into general topics, while technical and research colleges emphasize the teaching of specialized skills and knowledge within a particular field, which produces a deep knowledge of specific subjects, with limited attention to how that specialized knowledge might be applicable in other academic areas.

By defining anthropology as a holistic discipline, Boas arguably took something of a middle ground between both of these tendencies. He recognized the value of the kinds of insights that could be gained from looking at the connections between academic subjects, but also the need to explore deeply the specific details of subjects like history, biology, and language, among other things, as they relate to human beings. Today the great majority of anthropologists devote their careers to studying highly specialized topics, and have tended to avoid research that spans more than one of the traditional four fields in US anthropology.

This state of affairs is something of a missed opportunity in at least two respects. First, as in any other academic field, multiple lines of evidence that all point to the same result only strengthen the original conclusions of a single study. In biology, for instance, genetic and fossil evidence both

reinforce each other as tools for learning about life in the past and the present, but they also both strengthen the theory of evolution, since they both give it support. So too with issues relating to human beings. Genetic, archaeological, and linguistic data, for example, all corroborate the hypothesis that the peoples of North and South America originally migrated to those continents from Eurasia. Many more topics such as the ones covered in this book could similarly benefit from insights drawn from multiple lines of evidence from the four fields, but until now this approach has rarely been attempted.

Second, insights drawn from multiple fields can lead to surprising results which are largely obscured when studying data from a single field alone. Medical professionals in the 1960s were baffled by outbreaks of kuru, a form of spongiform encephalopathy, that seemed to spread between closely related kin among the Fore of Papua New Guinea, and they initially hypothesized some kind of genetic cause or link for the disease because it ran in families. Then in 1961, medical researcher Michael Alpers visited the Fore to conduct medical tests and took with him cultural anthropologist Shirley Lindenbaum. Cultural inquiry revealed that when people died among the Fore their close kin ate their bodies – a practice called **endocannibalism** – as a way of keeping their life force within the village. The prions (abnormal proteins) that transmitted kuru lived in the brains of infected individuals; therefore, anyone eating the brains became infected. Thus, the transmission of the disease appeared to be hereditary – spread among family members – but was discovered to be a cultural artifact by widening research holistically (Lindenbaum 2008).

Holistic Anthropology

One way to think of holism is to imagine you have a camera tightly focused on something and then you pan out to see a much bigger and deeper picture that contextualizes the tighter image. Or imagine that you decide that your petrol-driven car is emitting carbon into the atmosphere every time you drive and you want to reduce your carbon footprint by changing to a car driven by electricity. You as an individual may be producing less carbon by using electricity as your energy source, but let's pan out from that tight focus. How is the electricity that your car is consuming being produced? If it comes from a coal-fired plant, then it may be putting more carbon into the atmosphere per mile driven on that electricity than if you were using petrol. What about a nuclear plant or one fired by natural gas to create electricity? Do they emit less carbon than coal? To avoid all such problems you decide to drive an electric car with solar panels on its roof to convert sunlight into electricity. Your mile-by-mile emissions are certainly lower than in a petrol car, but what about the emissions of the factory that makes the solar panels and/or the total car? What about the emissions of the cars driven by the workers getting to the factory to build your car? Holism is about seeing the BIG PICTURE. How big? It depends on how much you want to pan out. Carl Sagan once said, "If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe."

In 2005, Daniel Segal and Sylvia Yanagisako edited a volume of papers, *Unwrapping the Sacred Bundle*, that they thought would drive the final nail in the coffin of Boasian four-field anthropology by showing that its utility was limited, and its time had long passed. The authors argue that any effort to fit together the four fields by an individual researcher who has highly specialized research interests is futile.

The fieldworker knee deep in water in a rice paddy in Sarawak is not likely to be thinking about the archaeology of Egypt, nor finding the general analysis of human fossils relevant to the research topic at hand at that moment. The sheer number and variety of possible subjects covered by all of the four fields, when taken together, encompass an enormous range of specialized areas. The vast

majority of these topics are not going to be relevant to narrowly focused research questions in any of the fields. Therefore, starting from the totality of four-field anthropology as a whole and then trying to narrow down the field of vision to one question, while keeping an open mind to all possible avenues of approach, is not likely to be productive. Instead, we believe that it is better to start with a single topic question, such as: Why is first cousin marriage incestuous in some cultures, and mandated in others? Why did ancient Mayans use a number system with a base of 20? Why can some people digest milk as adults while others cannot? Why did ancient Greek lack a word for the color blue? – and from there consider how such questions can be answered using data and methods from all of the four fields, and not just from cultural anthropology. Consider history/archeology, genetics, folklore, and linguistics as potential contributors to any and all answers as well. This book is structured using this method.

We can label the four fields of anthropology thus:

A Archeology/history
B Biological anthropology
C Cultural anthropology
L Linguistic anthropology/folklore.

These four fields can be represented on a diagram as four overlapping ellipses as in Figure 1.2.

Diagrams like this one are used in set theory to show how sets of things are interconnected (a set being a group of things with shared properties – odd numbers, deciduous trees, boys whose names begin with B). The individual members of each set make up the total set, but some of the members reside in more than one set. As an example in this case, the study of vocal production involves both biological anthropology (actual vocal apparatus in the body) and linguistic anthropology (how sounds convey meaning at minimum, and can also include cultural values such as social preferences for certain vocal ranges or intonations for certain communicative purposes). On our diagram, therefore, vocal production would be a member of sets B, C, and L, and would sit in the zone labeled BLC – the intersection of three sets.

For our purposes in this book the area labeled ABCL is the most important one – the zone of holism. Medical anthropology, for example, may sit in C because concepts of health and illness as well as appropriate curing practices are driven by cultural values, but the other three fields are also

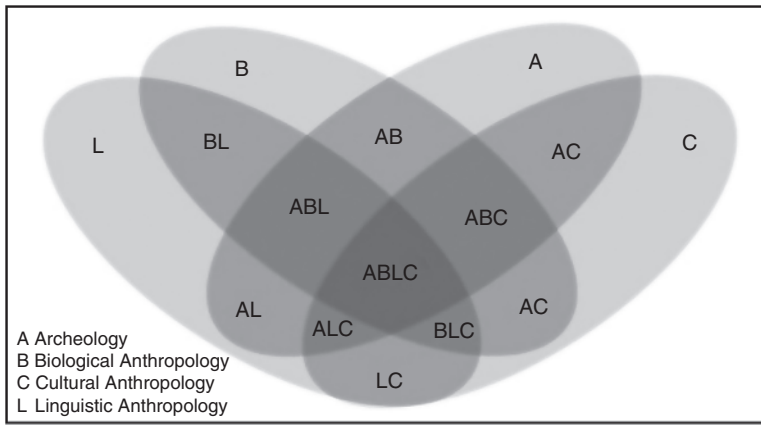

Figure 1.2 Four fields as sets.

relevant to questions in this area. Medical anthropology is concerned with the physical nature of the human body (B), the numerous archeological discoveries probed by bioarcheologists (A), and the complex vocabulary and grammar associated with medicine (L). Analyzing systems of medicine in culture from all these points of view together – not just one – results in what we are calling holistic anthropology, and the substantive chapters in this book will follow this general course of action.

Back in 1904 Boas had a very specific point to make when he proposed using biology, archeology/history, linguistics/folklore, and social analysis as tools to investigate cultures, namely, that cultures are exceedingly complex entities that cannot be reduced to a few variables placed on an evolutionary timeline. If you describe a human simply as a collection of chemical elements (oxygen 65%, carbon 18%, hydrogen 10%, nitrogen 3%, etc.), you are missing several important points. Your description is accurate at only one level. Those elements are combined in the body into complex molecules which have a variety of functions – carbon alone forms numerous organic compounds vital for life. But even thinking in terms of molecules rather than atoms is simplistic. The chemicals also form cells, which, in turn, form organs, and so on. Furthermore, some functions of the organs are still mysterious. What is consciousness and where is it? Why do we dream? Looking at the human body as a collection of chemicals limits understanding, although it does have a part to play. When looking at irregularities of heart functions, for example, one test doctors perform is an analysis of a patient's blood to find out the levels of sodium and potassium because these elements play a vital role in maintaining heart rhythms. Sure – but there is much more to cardiac functions than levels of electrolytes.

Looking at cultures from only one perspective is as limiting as looking at bodies only as chemicals. The more perspectives, the richer the analysis. But there is a caution. Boas himself understood that analyzing a whole culture using all four subfields was a monumental, perhaps impossible, task, and would require the efforts of multiple specialists working together to succeed. Hence the four fields split off into their own units. But, we are proposing something quite different. We are not advocating a four-field study for every aspect of whole cultures or even identifiable communities. Rather, we are saying, let's take a topic of interest – a specific marriage ceremony for example – and look at it from every angle possible, including, but not limited to, its history and traditions, the biology of sexual attraction, the words used in marriage rituals, the clothing worn, religious aspects, and on and on. That will be our approach here.