

ABOUT ANTHROPOLOGY

Definition and Distinctive Characteristics of Anthropology **Anthropology as an Integrative Interdisciplinary Discipline: The Four Fields** **Education for the 21st Century: The Need for Anthropology** **Real World Anthropology**

Definition and Distinctive Characteristics of Anthropology

- Anthropology is the study of humankind. Of all the disciplines that examine aspects of human existence and accomplishments, only Anthropology explores the entire panorama of the human experience from human origins to contemporary forms of culture and social life.
- Anthropology is a generalizing and comparative discipline with a concern for understanding human diversity on a global scale. Anthropologists engage in empirical research with established theories, methods, and analytical techniques. They conduct field-based research as well as laboratory analyses and archival investigations.
- A hallmark of Anthropology is its holistic perspective—understanding humankind in terms of the dynamic interrelationships of all aspects of human existence. Different aspects of culture and society exhibit patterned interrelationships (e.g., political economy, social configurations, religion and ideology). Culture cannot be divorced from biology and adaptation, nor language from culture. Contemporary societies cannot be understood without consideration of historical and evolutionary processes.
- Anthropological research is typically conducted via immersion within the community or context under study (including virtual communities and archaeological sites). The “participant-observer” method of research was developed early in the discipline of Anthropology and remains one of its cornerstones.
- Anthropology transcends such distinctions in research and applications as macro- and micro-scale (e.g., global-local), the exotic and the familiar, the past and the present. Its distinct epistemology respects the disparities between “our” views of the “other” and their views of us. Anthropologists typically engage in particularistic research that contributes to the “big questions” about the human condition: who we are as a species and a diversity of societies and cultures, how we came to be that way, and what are our future prospects.
- In recent decades Anthropology has become more self-reflexive and involved with communities and with social conflicts as anthropologists increasingly apply their findings to real world social issues and engage their subjects as colleagues and collaborators.¹
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- **Anthropology as an Integrative Interdisciplinary Discipline: The Four Fields**
- With its holistic perspective, Anthropology intersects the multiple approaches to the study of humankind—biological, social, cultural, historical, linguistic, cognitive, material, technological,

¹AnthroNotes 27(2) Fall 2006. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. p. 6.

affective, and aesthetic. This interdisciplinarity is integrated within Anthropology as a whole and formalized in the four major fields that compose the discipline—archaeological, biological, linguistic, and sociocultural anthropology—although many anthropologists also conduct research across these fields.

- Archaeological anthropologists are concerned with the evolution and historical changes to cultural and sociopolitical configurations, the materiality of human experience, and the stewardship and interpretation of cultural heritage.
 - Biological anthropologists are concerned with the physical and biocultural aspects of humans, including biological aspects of human health and well being; micro- and macro-evolutionary study of the human condition; relationships to other primates; human growth and development; pathology, mortality and morbidity; and population genetics.
 - Linguistic anthropologists examine the history and structure of human languages, the relationship between language and culture, cognitive and biological aspects of language, and other symbolic forms and media of communication and reasoning.
 - Sociocultural anthropologists are concerned with human social and cultural diversity and the bases of these distinctions, be they economic, political, environmental, biological; social roles, relationships, and social transformation; cultural identity; cultural dimensions of domination and resistance; and strategies for representing and analyzing cultural knowledge.
- Anthropology therefore transcends what are typically perceived as intellectual boundaries separating natural science, social science, and humanities. Anthropologists conduct research, and receive grants from funding agencies, in all three major areas.
 - While it is the case that many Anthropology departments across the country are experiencing internal divisions and fissioning, “four-field” trained anthropologists continue to be sought for employment, especially for academic positions.

Education for the 21st Century: The Need for Anthropology

- Anthropology students benefit from the holistic approach that intersects natural science, social science, and humanistic perspectives on the human condition. The spatial field of anthropology is global, and the temporal scale extends millions of years into the past, examining evolutionary and historical changes alongside concerns for our shared future.
- Anthropology students become adept at understanding the cultural, biological, environmental, and historical bases for behaviors and precepts in their own and other societies. The self-reflection that results from applying the holistic approach and comparative method provides a broadened world view, one that rejects naive ethnocentrism and is more open to acceptance of other ways of living. Students develop as global citizens, aware of the world around them—their similarities, differences, and inequalities with other peoples or groups.
- Anthropology students are trained in the full suite of liberal arts skills—oral and written communication, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, research, and critical thinking—needed for success in a variety of careers. These skills provide flexibility in career mobility, forming a foundation for life-long learning as employment possibilities are continually transformed.

- Anthropology further provides specific training in **all** of the skills recently identified as critical to education in the 21st century:²
 - “*knowing more about the world*”: global literacy, sensitivity to other cultures
 - “*thinking outside the box*”: creative and innovative skills, finding patterns in complex and chaotic configurations; being able to cross disciplinary boundaries
 - “*becoming smarter about new sources of information*”: being able to process and critically evaluate increasingly rapid and changing information flows; understanding different forms of representation and avenues of communication
 - “*developing good people skills*”: communication proficiency, especially across cultural and social difference; emotional intelligence; ability to work in teams.
- Anthropology undergraduate students have a variety of career options because of their broad preparation and focus on fundamental knowledges and skills. The bachelor’s degree is an entree to professional careers in law, medicine and public health, urban planning, educational administration, international relations and business, social work, and development. MA and PhD graduates are more likely to achieve positions as “anthropologists,” yet their career options are also quite open.

Real World Anthropology

- Anthropologists conduct academic and applied research as a means to understand individual human lives within larger socio-political contexts and to ameliorate human problems. Although traditionally archaeologists made their careers within academia, over half of new Anthropology PhDs in the US are employed in non-academic settings (government, non-governmental organizations, business firms). Anthropologists engage many different publics, including those in the private sector.
- Anthropologists, both academic and applied, are engaging many contemporary issues that have global, national, and community implications for policy-making and advocacy for individuals and groups. The following few examples illustrate the interconnectedness of these issues and the need for the holistic, interdisciplinary, macro-micro, and long-term perspectives of Anthropology to successfully tackle them:
 - *Environmental Change*: Ecological Sustainability, Global Warming, Water and Land Resources, Biodiversity, Anthropogenic Landscapes
 - *Health and Nutrition*: Infectious Disease (e.g., HIV/AIDs), Health Care Policy, Resource Depletion and Famine, Bio-medicine, Alternative Medical Practices, Impediments (age, gender, race, class) to Health Care Access
 - *Globalization*: Global Economies, Sovereignty, Transnationalism, Development,

² As reported in *Time* Dec. 18, 2006 (Vol. 168, No. 5, pp. 50-56) “How to Bring Our Schools Out of the 20th Century” by Claudia Wallis and Sonja Steptoe; a report on the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce.

Diaspora, Migration and Citizenship, Preservation of Cultural Heritage

- *Social Justice and Human Rights*: Democratization, State-Society Relations, Community Organizing, Inter-Ethnic Relations, Racism, Sexism, Cultural Minorities, Indigenous Peoples
- *Cultural Dimensions of Civil and Religious Conflict*: War, Militarism, Ethnocide, Religious Movements, Displaced Peoples
- Although practitioners in other disciplines are also examining these same issues, anthropologists take into consideration how these topics and problems are embedded within material and institutional structures. Anthropologists consider the worldviews, practices, and the cultural, physical, and institutional constraints of the peoples affected. They seek workable empirically-derived “bottom up” rather than “top down” solutions to local problems that can have global impacts.