Anthropological points of view

A reading for Cultural Anthropology (Adapted from Cultural Anthropology. Used under the educational "fair use" provision of the 1976 U.S. Copyright Acts.)

Scholars in many disciplines focus their studies on human beings. The main differences between the disciplines are not the objects of their study nor even the methods they use. The differences are in the points of view that guide their inquiries. Modern atomic physicists, for example, might view a person as a perpetual dance of atomic particles. Engineers working with automobile safety are concerned with the effects of mass and inertia on the human body in accidents; and microbiologists see the human being as a mass of corpuscles, cells, and bacterial organisms.

The questions scholars ask of their data are based in part on their own interests and experiences and in part on the kinds of questions other scholars in their fields are asking in conjunction with the theories that have developed within their disciplines. In short, a discipline is a point of view, a way of looking at things.

What questions do anthropologists ask? What are their primary interests and theoretical orientations? Anthropology shares with other disciplines many general interests in the nature of human beings and borrows heavily on the insights of others. Furthermore, the range of specific interests among anthropologists is so broad that it is virtually impossible to find a single common denominator that characterizes them all. Nevertheless, there are a few basic viewpoints that characterize much of the field of anthropology.

A holistic view of humanity

Anthropologists take a comprehensive approach to the study of humanity. They assume that no understanding of human beings is complete without study of the full range of the human phenomenon. As individuals, anthropologists may concentrate their studies on a specific society or aspect of the human being, but they put their findings into a broad theoretical perspective that seeks to include all of human experience. This "holistic" approach is reflected both in an interest in the broad variety of human beings and in a comprehensive approach to the study of human beings.

A comprehensive model of humanity

A person can be studied from many points of view. The body consists of matter that is subject to the physical laws of nature. It can, for instance, be studied as a machine, composed of levers such as arms and legs and of a data-processing system linked to sensory receptors. Or, one can analyze the stress on a body when it is shot into space.

A person can also be studied as a biological creature whose life processes, including the assimilation of food, reproduction, and excretion of wastes, are similar in many ways to those
observed in other animals. Biological investigation yields insight into the nature and operation of the human being and helps anthropologists see how such factors as diet, climate, aging, hormone balances, and sexual differences affect people’s behaviors.

People can be viewed as psychological beings, as products of conscious and subconscious drives, feelings, and ideas. They can be looked on as social beings, as parts of interactional systems and social groups, or as creators of culture. Each of these models is useful in understanding particular aspects of human beings.

MULTIPLE MODEL APPROACH Anthropology has taken a "multiple model approach" to its study of people; this accounts for the wide scope of the field.

Physical anthropologists examine the physical and biological processes of the human body and the relationship of these to cultural and historical factors.

Paleontologists and anthropologically oriented archaeologists are concerned with the origins and evolution of the human body and of culture. Cultural anthropologists, for the most part, analyze contemporary sociocultural systems around the world, while anthropological linguists specialize in studies of language, a major area of culture.

The breadth of anthropological studies is both its strength and its weakness. Through use of multiple complementary models, the anthropologist is able to gain an understanding of humanity which no single model can provide. But when discussing a problem, the anthropologist may display the disconcerting habit of switching from one model to another in an attempt to throw more light on the issue. The weakness of the multiple model approach is its potential for fragmentation resulting from the rapid growth of information and specialization and from the impossibility of keeping up with all areas of the discipline. How, then, is it possible to bring together all knowledge of humanity into a single, broad, analytical scheme?

Two common pitfalls must be avoided in a search to provide a broad analytical scheme that integrates a number of different approaches to the study of humankind. The first, which Clifford Geertz calls the "stratigraphic approach", simply stacks independent models, one on another, without any serious attempt to interrelate them. Each remains autonomous and self-contained. The result is a collection of fragmentary understandings gathered at various levels of analysis. Human beings, however, are more than collections of bits and pieces, and this approach fails to provide an integrated view of them. To state it graphically, people cannot be understood simply as sums of models:

Understanding

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Physical models

+ Biological models

+ Psychological models
A second error is "reductionism," the attempt to interpret all observations by reducing them to a single level of analysis. By this process, for instance, ideas are explained purely in terms of electron flows in the brain; life is defined only in terms of chemical equations; and human culture is described only by biological needs and instincts.

Obviously a person is a physical creature, whose body can be analyzed in terms of physical equations; he also has a life which can be studied in biological terms. However, the biological concept of "life" cannot be reduced to purely physical terms and chemical equations without changing its meaning. Likewise, "ideas" can be thought of as electrical impulses within the nervous system; but in other contexts, it is meaningful to speak of them as "concepts" and as ways of thinking that are something more than electrical pulses. For instance, a young man does not say to his fiancee, "I love you. My heart rate is up forty beats a minute, and my adrenaline secretion is up 15 percent."

At another level of analysis, social institutions are composed of individuals, but they also retain an existence apart from any specific set of individuals and cannot be reduced to purely psychological processes. A school, for example, continues to operate in normal fashion when one group of students and faculty has been replaced by another.

One danger of reductionism is that it defines the essential nature of a person in physical and biological terms and treats his social and cultural behavior as mere accretions or modifications of this nature. Each man or woman is seen as a noble beast burdened with social and cultural restrictions. Reductionism fails to take into serious account the fact that at each level of mankind's development, new and more complex syntheses are found which cannot be fully explained by an analysis of their parts at a lower level. To study humanity as we know it today, we must have meaningful definitions for such concepts as "life," "reason," "personality," "society," and "culture." Reductionism, in the end, negates the meaning of human thought, including that of the scientists and scholars.

TOWARD A SYNTHESIS Any holistic approach to humankind must integrate various models into a broader framework without the loss of understanding that each model can bring. Anthropology tries to achieve this by accepting multiple models and then showing the interactions between them. (See Figure 2.1.) For instance, people's physical characteristics obviously affect the kind of culture they build and the ways in which they relate to fellow human beings. To see this, you need only imagine what the world would be like if even slight changes were made in the body. What types of buildings, furniture, cars, and cities would people build if they were ten feet tall, had a tail, or reached sexual maturation at twenty-four instead of twelve? What would social relationships be like if there were three sexes?
Anthropological points of view

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You do not have to depend only on your imagination to see the impact of physical characteristics on the way people view their world. We all too quickly forget how the outside world looks to a little child, to whom stairs may be mountains and toy counters are wonders beyond his reach.

On the other hand, a person's culture influences his physical being. People are remarkably imaginative in molding their bodies to fit their tastes. They drill holes into their ears, lips, cheeks, and teeth to support ornaments. They bind heads and feet to change their shapes. They put on glasses and hearing aids to improve their perceptions; and they ingest chemicals of all sorts to alter their minds. Even diets are influenced in part by ideals of health and beauty. In the West, where slim figures are thought to be attractive, women diet to stay slender; in Togo in the South Pacific, where beauty is measured by bulk, a woman eats to maintain her shape.

Similarly, the interaction of models must be studied in order to determine how a person's biological system affects him psychologically, how his psychological system affects him physically, and how both affect and are affected by his culture.

Finally, a comprehensive model of people must go beyond showing the interaction of various systems by which a person can be analyzed and their role in his formation. It must take into account the individual's responses to the pressures and constraints of these systems and the ways in which he alters and manipulates the systems to gain his own ends. In one sense, the integration of systems lies in each individual and in his responses to the world around him.

The concept of culture

Just as each discipline has its own points of view, each also develops its own concepts, which become the tools it uses to analyze data. A second characteristic or viewpoint of anthropology is its development of the term "culture."

As commonly used, the word "culture" is defined in terms of the behavior patterns of the rich and elite, a meaning derived from the German Kultur. It denotes the proper, sophisticated, refined way of acting. Because of their interest in all of humankind, anthropologists have broadened the definition of culture and freed it from value judgments, such as good or bad. There has been considerable debate about a precise definition of the concept, but for our purposes we can define culture as the integrated system of learned patterns of behavior, ideas, and products characteristic of a society.

Patterns of learned behavior

The first operational part of this definition is "learned behavior patterns." In describing a culture, the anthropologist begins by observing and listening to people in the society and by discerning patterns of behavior. He may note, for example, that American men shake hands in greeting, Mexican men embrace, and the Siriano of South America spit on one another's chests. Americans have another form of greeting between men and women, described by a Waunana tribal chief as "sucking mouths." (The accompanying extract, "The Natural History of a Kiss," takes a humorous look at this custom.)
by E. Royston Pike

What's so strange about a kiss? Surely kissing is one of the most natural things in the world, so natural indeed that we ... On the contrary, it is a deplorable habit, unnatural, unhygienic, bordering on the nasty and even definitely repulsive.

When we come to look into the matter, we shall find that there is a geographical distribution of kissing; and if some ... Western ways. But it is Africa which "has the sad distinction of being the largest non-kissing area in the world."

Such at least was the conclusion of the young English traveller Winwood Reade, and (to meet the objections of those who ... moments "in which the heart rises to the lips, and makes them do all sorts of silly things," he made to kiss her.

Not on first meeting, of course, but when for weeks they had been for hours each day in one another's company. He had ... mischief, as a girl of sixteen would have been in England. In a little while I found myself becoming fond of her.

So the thought came to him of a "new and innocent pleasure." To bestow a kiss upon &quot;And so, I kissed Ananga, the daughter of the king.&quot; And what happened?

&quo;She gave a shriek, and bounded from the house like a frightened fawn.&quot;

What Winwood Reade had forgotten, or perhaps had never realized, was that &quot;this mode of salutation is utterly unknown in ... infancy had returned to her. The poor child had thought that I was going to dine off her, and she had run for her life!"

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Not all behavior is learned. A boy, touching a hot stove, jerks his hand away and yells &quot;Ouch&quot;! His physical reaction may be instinctive, hence it does not derive from culture; but his exclamation is learned, for in other societies different expletives are used.

Nor is all behavior patterned. A teacher dropping his book or a student slipping on ice are events that may be important to the individual but, in most cases, are not part of learned behavior. Moreover, even when behavior is patterned, some of it is characteristic of a single individual and has no significance or meaning in the society. One person develops a taste for sour foods, another for brown ties. To the extent that these are personal styles with which an individual performs culturally defined behavior, they are part of his or her personality.

The terms &quot;culture traits&quot; and &quot;customs&quot; are used for simple behavior patterns that are transmitted by a society and to which the society gives recognition and meaning. The practice of some culture traits, however, is restricted to a single person at a given time. A king, for example, is unique in some of his actions, but these may be transmitted to his successors. It is important to note that all the subjects know what the king should do. So, in a sense, they all possess the cultural trait; they just do different things with it. Other traits are characteristic of smaller or larger segments of the society. Baseball players, secretaries, and students each have their own cultural behavior patterns. So do women and men in a particular society. At times, people must choose between &quot;cultural alternatives,&quot; for instance between single and married life, between various occupations, or between life on a farm or in a town or a city.

There also exist &quot;cultural universals&quot; traits that are characteristic of most or all of
the people in a given society. For example, in the United States, all people are expected to wear clothes in public and to respect the private property of others. A man in a city does not take the car closest to hand nor the best; from among hundreds in the parking lot, he takes the one that is his personal property.

It is not always easy to distinguish between patterned and unpatterned behavior, because cultures are constantly changing. Incidental or innovative activities become culturally accepted, and existing traits are dropped. The process can be illustrated by the American abroad who decided to treat the American children in his area to a Christmas celebration. Dressed as Santa Claus and riding a bicycle, he went to their homes with gifts, but on the way, he slipped in the mud while crossing an irrigation ditch. Each year thereafter, the children waited at the ditch to see him fall, and each year he did not disappoint them.

Just as people develop habits in life, so individual families, schools, and other institutions develop customs that are distinctly their own. So do societies, ethnic groups, and social classes.

Culture molds much of human behavior, and individual variations are permitted and tolerated only within limits set by a society. Even when a person rejects his society, he does so in the culturally accepted way, such as adopting certain styles of dress, hairdos, and actions. Suicide, the ultimate antisocial act, is also culturally patterned. American men seldom slash their wrists, nor do American women drown themselves in large open wells, which is the practice of women in South Asia.

**Form and meaning**

The second part of our definition of culture is "ideas." In addition to patterns of behavior, culture is made up of systems of shared concepts by which people carve up their worlds, of beliefs by which they organize these concepts into rational schemes, and of values by which they set their goals and judge their actions. Viewed in this way, culture is the model that provides the people in a society with a description and an explanation of reality. Obviously, there are many differences among the mental images people have of the world; nevertheless, there must be a great deal of consensus within a society if communication and organization are to be possible.

The relationship between ideas and behavior is complex. In the first place, as children, we learn the cognitive schemes of our society in behavior contexts. But in time these models become the maps whereby we set our goals and plan our courses of action. Patterned behavior takes on meaning only as it is linked to ideas, and learning to live in a culture involves not only learning new patterns of behavior but also the idea systems that lie behind them.

While behavior is linked to concepts and beliefs, the correspondence between them is by no means perfect. On the one hand, people do not always live up to their own ideals or to other people's expectations of them. On the other, they may acquire behavior patterns without learning their meanings or adopt patterns whose meanings have been lost. Cultures constantly change as new meanings are assigned to existing behavioral forms or as old meanings are forgotten. An illustration of this is the lapel buttonholes on men's business suits, which once
served the useful function of buttoning up the collar. Nowadays, they are almost meaningless
and are often omitted altogether. The result of such changes is often &quot;cultural lag,&quot; in
which forms and meanings change out of phase with one another.

**Material culture**

A third part of our definition of culture is &quot;products.&quot; Human thought and behavior
often lead to the production of material artifacts or tools. In this people are not alone; other
forms of life also make and use simple tools. Birds make nests; some ants use sticks as prods;
caged monkeys use sticks to get bananas. But in transmitting knowledge to successive
generations so that it becomes cumulative, humans are distinctive. And as human knowledge
and technology grow, human tools become increasingly complex, and growing bodies of
information stimulate an even more rapid rate of expansion.

Human artifacts are of particular importance to archaeologists. Since they deal with cultures
long extinct, they cannot observe the behavior of those who developed the culture nor study
their ideas, except as these may be left behind in writing and material artifacts. Archaeologists
must reconstruct past cultures as best they can from those physical remains that have survived
the ravages of time and nature. We are surprised not by the scantiness of their cultural
descriptions but rather by the large amount of information that can be gleaned from the little that
remains.

**Cultural configurations and integration**

Culture is an &quot;integrated system,&quot; not a random assortment of quaint customs.
Ideas, behavioral patterns, and material products are related to one another in cultural traits,
and these are linked to each other in broader patterns called &quot;cultural
configurations.&quot;

**PLATFORMS VERSUS FLOORS** An illustration of cultural configurations is American sitting
and sleeping habits. In an auditorium, Americans find small platforms on which to sit, while
latecomers stand along the walls or leave. In their homes, Americans spend a great deal of
money and effort on acquiring platforms suitable for the various rooms and occasions: couches,
recliners, rockers, dining room chairs, bar stools, and lawn chairs. At night, they are lost without
their beds and privacy. If delayed at an airport at night, slumping in a chair is preferred to the
indignity of lying on the floor. In short, platforms are everywhere. We build our houses on them,
store our goods on them, and put fences around them to protect our babies.

Why this obsession with platforms? Our normal response is to say that this is the
&quot;natural&quot; way for people to sit, given the shape of their bodies. But most people of
the world are comfortable without chairs, and there is no evidence that chairs are a more
healthful way of sitting. We might argue that using chairs is the civilized way to sit. But a little
thought would show us that this is only a rationalization of a behavior pattern and not its original
cause. The fact is that most of our cultural behavior is learned from our society and is not a
product of reasoned planning.

Our concern for platforms is closely associated with certain of our basic assumptions about the
nature of things, such as our notion that the ground, and its extension, the floor, are dirty, and
that dirt is bad. Consequently, we get away from dirt floors to raised floors, and then off floors to sit and sleep on chairs and beds. Consequently, we scold a child who eats food that has fallen to the floor, and we keep our shoes on when we enter a room.

However, like the Japanese, we might have started with the assumption that the floor is clean, in which case we would leave our shoes at the door, and sit and sleep on small pads on the floors.

INTEGRATION AND REINTERPRETATION At the highest level of analysis, configurations in a culture are integrated into a broad cultural system. (See Figure 2.2.) At the center are basic assumptions and value about the world and the behavior patterns most closely associated with them. Because they are considered very important, and because they are linked to and underlie a great many other traits, it is often difficult to change them. Marginal traits, those that are only loosely tied to the culture and to which people have little commitment, are more easily changed. For example, styles in Western dress change rapidly, but the idea that certain parts of the body must remain covered in public has persisted over long periods of time.

The concept of integration is crucial to the study of cultural change. New customs cannot be plugged into the system or old ones changed without affecting other traits to which they are linked and the system as a whole. An illustration of this is the automobile, which has had a profound effect on the organization of American life. Today we can only speculate on the ultimate impact of computers and nuclear energy.

On the other hand, new customs are not left unchanged as they are absorbed by a culture. They are selected on the basis of how well they fit the values and beliefs of the culture, and they are modified and reinterpreted to fit its patterns. An example of this is the identification, by the blacks in the Catholic countries of the New World, of African deities with the saints of the Church. Legba, a West African trickster who wanders around as an old man clad in tatters, reappears as Saint Anthony, patron of the poor. Damballa, the West African rainbow-serpent, is reinterpreted as Saint Patrick, who is portrayed with serpents around him.

Other examples of reinterpretation are umbrellas and pajamas. The umbrella was originally used in South Asia to shade kings from the sun and, as a symbol of royalty, was forbidden to commoners. Today they are used by everyone, more often than not as a shelter against rain. Pajamas were invented in the Near East for daytime wear, but Westerners have adopted them for use at night.

All cultures are changing constantly, some rapidly, some more slowly. New traits are being added, and in time, their impact is felt in other areas of the culture, while other traits are being dropped. Change is continual; no culture ever arrives at a state of perfect integration or internal harmony. Inconsistencies as well as conflicting and competing life-styles often exist side by side, but so long as minimal integration exists, organized social life is possible.

Culture and society

The final part of our definition of culture is the phrase "characteristic of a society."
Anthropological points of view

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With few exceptions, people live together in groups and societies. Processes associated with such bodies and with the interaction of people are referred to as "social." Thus, for example, "social organization" refers to the ways in which people in a society structure their relationships. But social organizations are learned patterns of thought and behavior and, therefore, part of the culture transmitted from generation to generation. In short, culture is the creation of a group of people, and society is the group of people, itself.

It is obvious from these definitions that the boundaries of a particular culture are determined by the boundaries of the society of people who practice it, but this does not really solve the problem of what constitutes a single culture or society. In the parts of the world first studied by anthropologists, the people were divided into more or less autonomous tribes, each having a single culture and language. Although these were rarely completely isolated, they could for most purposes be treated as distinct societies.

In more complex peasant and urban areas of the world that are of interest to many contemporary anthropologists, there are generally no clear boundaries distinguishing relatively self-contained bodies of people who share a single culture. In such cases, the analyst must modify his use of the words "society" and "culture." Thus, he may speak of "American society," or "urban society," of the "culture of the elite," of the "culture of poverty."

Cross-cultural comparison

The third major contribution of the field of anthropology to the understanding of humankind is its use of the method of "cross-cultural comparison." This viewpoint springs from the anthropologist's concept of culture and from his interest in a holistic approach to people. As we have seen, this method is important in studying both the variety of cultures and the basic unity of humanity. There are, however, several problems stemming from cultural differences that anthropologists face when they deal with cross-cultural studies.

The fundamental nature of cultural differences

In their study of various cultures, anthropologists have become aware of the profound differences among them. Not only are there differences in behavior and material culture (encompassing foods, eating patterns, houses, dress and language) and in beliefs and values (such as religious, political and social views), but also in the ways people perceive and organize their worlds. Edward Sapir (1884-1939) pointed out that people do not simply live in the same world with different labels attached but in different worlds.

TIME AND SPACE An illustration of just how deep cultural differences in behavior can be has been given by Edward Hall in his studies on the use of time and space (Hall 1959). All people live in time and in space, and you might, therefore, assume that in these areas, at least, there is a widespread agreement between cultures. Not so, says Hall.

Americans, for instance, place a premium on punctuality and define being "on time" as from five minutes before to five minutes after the set time. If someone arrives for an
appointment fifteen minutes after the appointed hour, an apology is expected but does not require a detailed explanation. Arrival more than fifteen minutes after the appointed hour needs an apology and a credible excuse.

In Egypt, Hall points out, only servants are expected to show up at the time set for an appointment, and then as an act of obedience. The proper arrival time for men of equal rank who want to show their independence and social status is roughly an hour after the set time. Only after an additional half hour are they considered "late." (See Figure 2.3.)

There is no confusion when two Americans agree on a meeting or when two Egyptians do so, because they understand one another. But when an Egyptian and an American arrange a meeting, confusion often results. The American arrives "on time" at the set hour, the Egyptian "on time" an hour later. Meanwhile, the American is frustrated at having to wait and complains that Egyptians lack a sense of time, and the Egyptian is perplexed by the subservient behavior of the American who arrived, as he sees it, an hour early.

Americans have different and complex concepts of punctuality for different occasions that often confuse foreigners in the U.S. To see this, one need only compare differences in concepts of punctuality for doctors' appointments, picnics, formal dinners, and concerts.

Space is another silent language that communicates ideas and feelings. According to Hall, people in the U.S. use physical distance to communicate social distance. In casual situations they feel free, even obliged, to speak to persons within about twelve feet of themselves; therefore, they readily introduce themselves to strangers next to them in buses and planes. On the other hand, people outside this "social zone" can be ignored as if they were merely part of the scenery.

Americans discussing general social matters stand about four or five feet apart, often at right angles to each other. It is important to avoid the smell of the other's breath. However, if they are discussing personal matters, they move closer to each other and drop their voices. Intimate communication takes place within the two foot zone. Americans feel at ease in the company of their fellow countrymen, for subconsciously both parties take a distance and a stance appropriate to the type of conversation going on. In the presence of Latin Americans, however, Americans often feel vaguely uneasy, for Latin Americans have smaller zones and stand closer to each other when they talk. The Latin American steps closer until he is comfortable and the North American is in his social zone. The North American, however, is uneasy because the Latin American is in his personal zone, and since their discussion is of a general social nature, he takes a step back and places the Latin American in his social zone. But now the Latin American is ill at ease, for he finds his friend from the North out in his public zone. He therefore steps forward to set what is for him the right distance for general conversation. Neither is aware of the conflict in the use of space, and each has a vague feeling that something is wrong. The North American has the impression that Latin Americans are pushy, while the Latin American feels North Americans are cold and distant. (See Figure 2.4.)

REALITY AND MORALITY Cultural differences are found not only at the level of behavior but exist also in the basic assumptions people make about the nature of the world around them and
in their concepts of right and wrong. An example of this is the differences between the American and Indian views of life. (See Figure 2.5.)

Many North Americans divide words for different forms of life (dogs, cows, demons, flies, people, sharks) into five or six general categories. At the top are supernatural beings: gods, spirits, angels, demons, nymphs, and so on. Even those North Americans who do not believe in the existence of such beings have words and a place in their conceptual scheme for them. In other words, for some people, the set of supernatural beings is a null set.

The second general category is that of people. Scientifically, people may be treated as animal forms, but in everyday life a sharp distinction is made. People readily kill and eat lower animals or harness them to their carts or plows, but to do so to their fellow men and women would be a criminal offense. On the other side, a sharp distinction is also made between people and gods, and it is sacrilegious for the former to claim to be the latter.

Below supernatural beings and people, Americans have general categories for animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Broadly speaking, animals are mobile and eat plants or other animals, and plants are stationary and do not eat animals. (Plants that catch and eat insects are confusing, because they disturb our common sense categories.)

In the Indian/Hindu view of things, there is only one reality, Brahman, and the universe, so to speak, is only a dream or fantasy in the mind of Brahman. It is difficult, therefore, for people, who are a part of this illusory universe, to know about ultimate reality. Within the universe there is only one kind of life, and it is found in all things: gods, demons, people, animals, and plants. The differences among them are quantitative, not qualitative. Some have more of this life than others, but all life is of the same kind.

Given this assumption, it is clear why Indian villagers can worship saints as gods, for there is no categorical distinction between them, and gods are constantly visiting the earth in human forms to save mankind. On the other hand, one can understand why Indians oppose the killing of higher forms of life such as cows, particularly for food. Their response to an American expert who suggested that they slaughter cattle for consumption was similar to what our response might be if such an expert advised us to solve our poverty problem by shooting the poor.

One of the problems facing an anthropologist is to discover and comprehend the basic differences that exist between the behavior patterns, values, and conceptual categories between cultures. As you can see, that is quite a demanding task.

Cross-cultural misunderstandings

Cultural differences lead to misunderstandings, as people move from one culture to another, particularly when the same behavior has different meanings in the new setting. In the West it is not uncommon to see young men and women holding hands or putting their arms around each other in public. In other parts of the world, this is considered highly improper, even obscene. South Asian men, on the other hand, show their mutual friendship by walking down the street hand-in-hand, a practice often misinterpreted as a sign of homosexuality by Westerners.
Actions that mean one thing to the performer may mean something else to observers from another culture. The result is often confusion or worse.

Misunderstandings can lead to unforeseen side effects, particularly as people are taught new ways of life. A missionary concerned with modesty introduced blouses into a society where the women wore none, only to find a marked increase in adultery. Only later did he discover that in this society prostitutes used blouses as a sign of their trade!

**Ethnocentrism**

Misunderstandings can often be resolved by careful analysis of the situation. It is more difficult to deal with our attitudes and with differences in learned and ingrained values and assumptions.

Human beings are at the center of their own perceptual worlds, resulting in a basic egocentrism in which everything is judged in terms of the self. As they grow up and interact with other members of their society, they generally acquire a broader view by learning to look at life from the perspectives of others and temper their actions accordingly.

On another level, people everywhere seem to look on their own culture as most suitable or best and on that of others as less civilized. This becomes the source of ethnocentrism; the tendency of people to judge other cultures by the values and assumptions of their own culture. Of course, by one's own culture's criteria, all other cultures appear inferior. (See Figure 2.6.)

Ethnocentrism is a two-way street. We judge other peoples' customs as crude, and they feel the same about ours. Americans abroad frequently show contempt for those who eat with their fingers. On the other hand, a foreign student in an American restaurant expressed disgust at the idea of having to use spoons and forks that had been inside the mouths of others. Or, to take another illustration, Americans are often shocked at what they consider to be a lack of regard for human life in other societies. Foreigners, however, are struck by the American's inhumanity to the aged and the sick, who are sent away from friends and relatives and left to the care of strangers, and that even in death, the body and grave are prepared by strangers.

Ethnocentrism occurs wherever cultural differences are found. In times of rapid change, parents are raised in one culture and often are critical of their children who grow up in another, and vice versa. People from one ethnic or racial group set themselves above another; urban folk look down on their country cousins; and the upper classes are critical of the lower.

The solution to ethnocentrism is to try to understand another culture in terms of its own values and assumptions and its members as fellow humans. But cultural differences can be very great indeed, and when these are coupled with deep-seated attitudes and beliefs, change comes slowly, if at all. For anthropologists, the history of their discipline has been one of unearthing layers of ethnocentrism at the observational, conceptual, and theoretical levels.

**Culture shock**
Life in a foreign culture leads to misunderstandings and ethnocentric responses and also to culture shock. This is a period of confusion and cultural disorientation in which people who move from one culture to another may find it hard to cope with even the simple tasks required to stay alive.

The shock does not arise from sights of poverty or a lack of sanitation but stems rather from the fact that those in an unfamiliar culture do not know the language or even the simplest rules of social behavior. Suddenly, they have become children who must begin again to learn a whole new way of life. To add to the confusion, cultural landmarks that appear familiar may in fact be foreign, because the same behavior has a radically different meaning in a different society.

In time, a person learns to operate in a new society; his level of adjustment rises; and he is acculturated into the new culture (See Figure 2.7). In the process, he becomes a bicultural person, who has come to grips with the issues of cultural parochialism and relativism.

Many people respond with contempt for the new society and separate themselves into their own cultural ghettos. Some, however, involve themselves in their new cultural surroundings, and learn to appreciate it, and in doing so, become more aware of their own cultural assumptions and of alternate life-styles. They acquire an international perspective and the ability to adapt to more than one culture, but at the price of being fully adjusted to none of them. They are often happiest when they are flying from one country to another.

The potential for culture shock is present each time a person changes cultures, and even the seasoned bicultural person, aware of the hazard, faces disorientation in a new society and a reverse culture shock when he returns to his parent culture.

**Summary**

Three approaches characteristic of anthropologists' study of people have been: 1) an emphasis on a holistic theoretical model of man, 2) the use of the concept of culture as an analytical tool, and 3) the use of the method of cross-cultural comparison.

One of the value assumptions behind these three approaches is the desire to understand all people as fully human. Alicja Iwanska, a Polish anthropologist, pointed out how difficult this can be. In a study of Americans of the Northwest coast, she concluded that they divide their world into three broad categories: "scenery," such as the mountains, weather, and strange places, which provide the staple for most conversations; "machinery," such as tractors, cars, books, pencils, and other items used to do a job; and "people." She found, however, that they tended to see American Indians as "scenery"; and transient laborers as "machinery." Only friends and relatives were really "people;"

But this ethnocentrism is not unique to Americans. Humans in a great many societies call themselves by words that can be roughly translated as "people;" and refer to all other humans by terms that mean "enemy," "devils," or "evil spirits;" in other words, as something other than human beings. **The variety and unity of humankind**
Most scholarly studies of people have dealt with "modern, civilized humankind" -- those people who have lived in the great literate civilizations of the past four or five millennia. Within this frame, the focus has been on Western civilization. This emphasis can be seen in any catalogue of courses offered in an American college or university. There are few courses on the literature of sub-Saharan Africa, the South Sea Islands, or tribal South America. China and India have fared little better, even though they have extensive literatures, much of which is available in translation or was originally written in English.

The study of history has also focused its attention on Western society. Until recently, comparatively few courses on the history of black Africa, North America prior to 1492, or preliterate societies were taught in colleges. Moreover, the histories that were taught were essentially records of the elite and powerful, with little reference to the common man or woman and to their everyday lives.

In their search for a comprehensive understanding of humankind, anthropologists emphasize the need to look at the full range of human variety, to study people in all parts of the world, at all times, and at all levels of society. Anthropology's hallmark has been gathering data on nonliterate societies, peasants, common people, and others who seldom have been objects of scientific study.

Behind this effort is the assumption that any general theory of humanity must account for this variety. For example, from a study of Western society, we might conclude that early child rearing is largely in the hands of mothers. However, until we test this hypothesis in societies around the world, we cannot be sure whether this is a Western custom or is a characteristic of all human beings. The result is an emphasis in anthropology on the "comparative method," in which theories based on data from one part of the world are tested against data from other areas to test their validity. (Only rarely is the anthropologist able to conduct experiments in which he controls the variables, but with the world as a laboratory, he can often find situations where his hypotheses may be tested.)

But anthropologists are interested not only in human variety; they are also concerned with human universals. Are there properties and processes biological, psychological or social that are characteristic of all males, all females, all adults, all people? Do all digest food in the same way? Do all have the same psychological drives, make tools, organize families, or believe in a god? Are human languages based on the same principles of thought? Is human reasoning universally logical? If there are no human universals, how is it possible for human beings to communicate with one another or from one language or society to another?

Questions of human variety and unity and the extent to which they can be explained in terms of man's biological or social nature have remained central issues in anthropology since its inception.