

# 1 *What Is Anthropology?*

## *Brief Chapter Summary*

Chapter 1 provides a basic introduction to the discipline of anthropology. It defines anthropology as the “study of human nature, human society, human language, and the human past,” and argues that its approach is distinct from other disciplines because it is “holistic, comparative, field based, and evolutionary” (p. 3). The authors explain that culture—“sets of learned behaviour and ideas that human beings acquire as members of society” (p. 4)—is fundamental to explaining why and how human beings are what they are and act in the ways that they do. They highlight that anthropology is a cross-disciplinary discipline and describe each of the four subfields—biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and archaeology—as well as the expanding fields of applied anthropology and medical anthropology. In conclusion, the chapter briefly considers the uses of anthropology, foregrounding the value that learning about unfamiliar cultural beliefs and practices can have in terms of broadening students’ perspectives and enabling them to be more open-minded.

## *Detailed Chapter Summary*

In this chapter, the goal of anthropology is defined as being able to understand as broadly as possible what it means to be human. Other disciplines have a similar goal, but anthropology is distinctive in that it is holistic, comparative, evolutionary, and field based. In other words, anthropologists look at all aspects of human life as interconnected, consider as wide a variety of human societies as possible (including their own), are interested in both biological and cultural change over time, and adopt a methodology that requires them to engage directly with the subjects of their study. The concept of culture is central to how anthropologists explain human diversity, but anthropologists also consider human biology, understanding humans to be biocultural organisms whose biological survival depends on cultural learning. In North America, anthropology is typically understood to have four subfields: biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and archaeology. Applied anthropology is often considered to be a fifth field.

The origins of biological anthropology are entwined with the nineteenth-century development of the concept of “race.” By the early twentieth century, however, anthropologists had begun to mount a critique of the concept of “race,” understanding it to have no scientific justification and objecting to how it was being used to justify racism. Contemporary anthropologists who focus on human biology work in subfields such as biological anthropology, primatology, and paleoanthropology. Cultural anthropology is contextualized as providing a critique of explanations for human behaviour based on biological determinism. Anthropologists are interested in a wide range of themes, from traditional subjects such as kinship, to contemporary issues such as transnational labour migration

and debates about human rights. Linguistic anthropology is the study of language as a carrier of important cultural information. Both cultural and linguistic anthropologists engage in participant observation and often publish their work in the form of ethnographies. Archaeology is the cultural anthropology of the human past centered on the analysis of material culture. Archaeologists are interested in how humans have lived, how societies have interacted, and how culture has changed over time, looking at material from the earliest known stone tools to contemporary landfills. Archaeologists are typically seen as stewards of the past with a responsibility to help protect archaeological remains. Applied anthropology is the use of anthropology to solve practical cross-cultural problems. Medical anthropology, a branch of applied, combines biological, cultural, and applied anthropology, in order to examine cultural perceptions of health and illness.

### *Discussion and Debate Questions*

1. Describe an encounter, in either Canada or another country, in which you were faced with a cultural belief or practice that was unfamiliar to you. How did you react in that situation?
2. What did you know about anthropology before signing up for this class?
3. How would you define anthropology?
4. What are the four subfields of anthropology, and how do they provide a holistic understanding of the human condition?
5. How is anthropology a “field-based discipline”? What are some possible challenges and benefits of using fieldwork as a methodological approach?
6. How might an anthropological perspective be valuable in Canada? How is it valuable when travelling abroad?
7. It is often said that Canada has little history and no culture. How might anthropology contribute to a fuller understanding of Canadian culture and of what it means to be human in Canadian society?
8. What role does archaeology play in modern cultural preservation?
9. How can anthropology help address colonialism in Canada?
10. What role could linguistic anthropologists play in language revitalization?

### *Activities*

- **Strange and Familiar**

Have students work with a partner or in small groups. Ask them to introduce themselves in the context of a casual conversation and to talk about what they ate for breakfast that morning. Encourage them to think about what their food choices—and their reactions to the food choices of others—might say about their culture. Ask them to also talk about the “strangest” food they ever ate or had the opportunity to eat and about their reactions to the experience.

- **Defining Anthropology**

On the first day of class, have students write a definition of what they think anthropology is in the form of a Tweet of no more than 280 characters. Have them then share and compare the Tweet with a fellow classmate.

- **Careers**

Many students in an introduction to anthropology class ask the question, “What do you do with an anthropology degree?” or “Why should I even take an anthropology class?” They do not see the relevance of the discipline to their everyday lives and/or careers. After reviewing the subfields of anthropology, ask students to write down three to five careers they are either familiar with or are considering pursuing. Then ask the students how knowledge of anthropology could help in these particular careers.

Resources:

<http://www.aaanet.org/profdev/careers/index.cfm>

<http://www.cas-sca.ca/news-and-announcements/anthropology-in-canada>

<http://www.canadian-universities.net/Universities/Programs/Anthropology-Careers.html>

- **Anthropology in the News**

Have students find a story in a suitable news source (e.g., CBC, BBC, CNN, Globe and Mail, Guardian, New York Times) that references at least one field of anthropology. Ask them to summarize the story and explain the role that anthropology or anthropologist(s) played in relation to the larger topic being covered. How might other anthropologists (in the same or in a different field) contribute to the research or greater understanding of the topic?

## ***Annotated Further Resources***

### **Books and Articles**

Agbe-Davies, Anna S. 2011. “Archaeology and Anthropology: Tango, Pas de Deux, or Dance Dance Revolution.” *The SAA Archaeological Record* 11(4): 21, 47.

Agbe-Davies considers how well archaeology is integrated into the larger discipline of anthropology. She asserts that anthropology continues to have an influence on what archaeologists do. She also stresses that anthropology as a whole benefits from an archaeological perspective.

Ahronson, Kristján. 2011. “Old World Prehistory and Early Canadian Archaeology.” *Canadian Journal of Archaeology / Journal Canadien d’Archéologie* 35 (1): 1–17.

This short article considers the relationship between studies of prehistory in Britain and Ireland and early Canadian archaeology. It demonstrates how Scottish scholarship shaped early archaeological and ethnographic collecting in Canada, and how the interpretation of the objects collected, and the observation of contemporary Indigenous culture in Canada, shaped the interpretation of prehistoric culture in Britain and Ireland. The paper thus sheds light on the beginnings of Canadian archaeology, while also highlighting the connections between British and Canadian intellectual traditions, and between archaeology and ethnology.

Ashmore, Wendy, and Robert J. Sharer. 2013. *Discovering Our Past: A Brief Introduction to Archaeology*. 6th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

The ten chapters in this slim volume provide an excellent overview of archaeology, particularly as it is practiced by North American archaeologists. In addition to the typical chapters one might expect on archaeological field and analytical methods, Ashmore and Sharer also consider the personalities and events that shaped the development of contemporary archaeology. Another strength of this volume is the two chapters that consider the varying theoretical perspectives used by archaeologists to interpret the past. The final chapter on archaeology's relevance to today is perhaps too brief.

Blau, Soren, and Douglas H. Ubelaker, eds. 2009. *Handbook of Forensic Anthropology and Archaeology*. Walnut Creek California: Left Coast Press.

This text provides a thorough introduction to forensic anthropology and archaeology from a global perspective. The first part of the book examines the histories of forensic anthropology and archaeology in Canada, the United States, South America, the United Kingdom, Italy, France, Spain, Australia, and Indonesia. Mark Skinner and Kristina Bowie's chapter, "Forensic Anthropology: Canadian Content and Contributions," situates Canada within this global context. The next two sections of the book deal with current field methods and laboratory techniques in each respective discipline. The final sections examine key case studies in the investigation of domestic crime, natural disasters, conflict, genocide, and various ethical, legal, and professional considerations.

Boas, Franz. 1899. "Anthropology". *Science* 9 (212): 93–96.

Franz Boas is widely recognized as the father of American anthropology. Here, he lays out his vision for anthropology, focusing on the physical appearance of humans (biological anthropology), the languages humans speak (linguistic anthropology), and the customs and beliefs of humans (archaeology and cultural anthropology). Notable in Boas's discussion is that he does not separate archaeology and cultural anthropology into distinct disciplines but sees the former as an extension of the latter into the past.

Danesi, Marcel. 2012. *Linguistic Anthropology: A Brief Introduction*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars.

Danesi provides a short but detailed introduction to linguistic anthropology. The text focuses especially on the methods linguistic anthropologists use to study language.

Darnell, Regna. 2010. "National and Transnational Anthropology: The Canadian Exemplar." *Histories of Anthropology Annual* 6 (1): 18–30.

This essay is a personal account of Darnell's attempt to define a distinctively Canadian anthropology. Like Canadian culture in general, Canadian anthropology can be defined in terms of what it is not—American, British, French—as internally diverse, and as well adapted to a transnational context.

Fuentes, Agustin. 2011. *Biological Anthropology: Concepts and Connections*. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Fuentes provides a strong and detailed overview of biological anthropology, beginning with the basics of evolutionary theory. He considers human biology and genetics, and discusses the behaviour and biology of non-human primates. The evolution of primates in general and hominins in particular are covered in four of the book's eleven chapters. Modern human biological diversity is explored in one of the closing chapters, including the issue of "race." The final chapter notes that human evolution is an ongoing process.

Gunn, Wendy, Ton Otto, and Rachel Charlotte Smith, eds. 2013. *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*. London: Bloomsbury.

This edited book provides an excellent overview of design anthropology with engaging accounts of practitioners in the academy and the field. The editors define the emergence of design anthropology as a field, while the chapter authors cover such topics as connecting anthropological theory to design prototyping, the role of anthropology in design research, digital culture, heritage design, and decolonizing design innovation.

Harrison, Julia and Regna Darnell, eds. 2006. *Historicizing Canadian Anthropology*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

This book examines the development of anthropology within the particular social and political contexts of Canada and the resulting distinctiveness of a Canadian tradition. This tradition is drawn from American, British, and French anthropology, but shaped by uniquely Canadian Indigenous-anthropological relations and by Canada's geographic isolation and commitment to multiculturalism. The book does not render this national tradition, but instead explores the diversity of Canadian anthropology, or anthropologies.

Hedican, Edward J. 2008. *Applied Anthropology in Canada: Understanding Aboriginal Issues*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Hedican illustrates the practical value that anthropology can have in Canadian society, arguing that anthropologists should take an active role in contemporary discussions related to land claims, self-government, and race relations. He explores some of the challenges of advocacy, ethics in applied research, and the historical and political contexts within which anthropologists work.

Kedia, Satish, and John van Willigen, eds. 2005. *Applied anthropology: Domains of application*. Westport: Praeger Publishers.

The editors have assembled a series of papers on the practice of applied anthropology across a wide-range of private and public sector scenarios. Some of the subject matter areas include anthropological practice in business and industry, development and migration, education, and the environment, as well as topics focusing on the elderly, health and nutrition, and the future state of the field. The texts are approachable and provide the reader with a sense of the kind of work an applied anthropologist can do.

Lavenda, Robert H., and Emily A. Schultz. 2020. *Core Concepts in Cultural Anthropology*. 7th ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

The slimness of this volume belies the information the authors present on the core concepts in anthropology. The first chapter introduces what anthropology is, and the next ten chapters succinctly discuss major concepts—and the major figures associated with various developments in cultural anthropology. A highlight of this volume is the twelfth chapter, which introduces the reader to the major theoretical approaches in cultural anthropology. Also key is an appendix that outlines how students should critically read and evaluate ethnographies.

Menzies, Charles R. 2015. “Oil, Energy, and Anthropological Collaboration on the Northwest Coast of Canada.” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 71 (1): 5–21.

Menzies, who is both an anthropologist and an Indigenous scholar, considers both the possibilities and challenges of collaborative anthropology, particularly in the context of resource exploration and development on the North Coast of British Columbia. He examines the history of collaborative research on the North Coast and concludes that a collaborative approach to anthropology is both more difficult and more necessary than ever before.

Selig, Ruth Osterweis, Marilyn R. London, and P. Ann Kaup, eds. 2004. *Anthropology Explored*. Revised and Expanded. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books.

This edited volume consists of 36 essays originally presented in the Smithsonian’s *AnthroNotes*, a newsletter for educators that summarizes key discoveries or issues from all aspects of anthropology. The engaging essays in this volume are organized into three sections: Investigations Origins and Variation; Examining Our Archaeological Past; and Exploring Our Many Cultures. Most of the essays have been updated by the authors with critical comments and new information discovered since they were originally written. Students will enjoy these short essays and the cartoons of Robert L. Humphrey scattered throughout the volume.

Strong, Veronica. 2009. *What Anthropologists Do?* Oxford: Berg.

Written for students, this book provides illustrations of many ways anthropology is being used in everyday life. The author defines what anthropology is and what students should expect to learn in anthropology courses. More importantly, the author discusses why students should study anthropology and considers the broad range of careers available to students who major in anthropology, including advocacy, human rights, environmental issues, museums, business, and marketing.

Wiley, Andrea, and John Allen. 2013. *Medical Anthropology: A Biocultural Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This text provides a thorough introduction to the field of medical anthropology, covering topics such as anthropological perspectives on health and disease, diet and nutrition, reproductive health, social inequality, and mental health. An epilogue on the relevance of medical anthropology considers different paths students might take if they are interested in this field.

## Websites

- The Canadian Anthropology Society/Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA)  
<http://www.cas-sca.ca/>

CASCA was originally founded in 1974 as the Canadian Ethnology Society. Today it has over 500 members. Its main goals are to ensure continued funding for anthropological research, maintain excellence in anthropological teaching, and provide support for anthropologists working outside of academia. It publishes the journal *Anthropologica*.

- The Canadian Archaeological Association/Association Canadienne d'Archéologie (CAA)  
<http://canadianarchaeology.com/caa/>

The Canadian Archaeological Association was founded in 1968. Some of its goals are to promote and disseminate archaeological knowledge and discourse and to foster cooperative relationships, especially between archaeologists and Indigenous peoples. The CAA publishes the *Canadian Journal of Archaeology*. Its website also has many useful resources, including lots of information for students.

- The Canadian Association for Physical Anthropology/Association Canadienne d'Anthropologie Physique (CAPA/ACAP)  
<http://www.capa-acap.net/>

CAPA was founded in 1972 with the goal of promoting the understanding of physical or biological anthropology.

- The American Anthropological Association (AAA)  
<http://www.aaanet.org/>

Founded in 1902, AAA is the world's largest organization of anthropologists. It publishes the journal *American Anthropologist* and has a number of affiliated groups, such as the Society for Medical Anthropology, that cover all aspects of anthropology in North America and across the world. The AAA is an advocate for anthropology as a way of improving the lives of people across the world. It also maintains a list of jobs for professional anthropologists.

- The Society for American Archaeology (SAA)  
<https://www.saa.org/>

Founded in 1934, the SAA is an international organization intended to promote research, interpretation, and protection of archaeological heritage in the Americas. Its publications include *American Antiquity*, *Latin American Antiquity*, *Advances in Archaeological Practice*, and a magazine, the *SAA Archaeological Record*, which has useful information on careers in archaeology. In particular, Volume 11(2) includes a Special Forum on careers in archaeology, which shows the range of opportunities available in this field, while Volume 3(2) contains an entertaining article by Lynne Sebastien, "The Awful Truth about Archaeology," which contrasts what anthropologists actually do, with what the public typically thinks they do.

- The Society for Applied Anthropology

<https://www.sfaa.net/>

The SFAA was founded in 1941. Its aim is to promote the “investigation of the principles of human behaviour and the application of these principles to contemporary issues and problems.” It sponsors two journals: *Human Organization* and *Practicing Anthropology*.

- “VisualAnthropology.Net”  
<http://www.visualanthropology.net/>

This website focuses on visual anthropology. It provides links to various media, including the journals *Visual Anthropology* and *Visual Ethnography* and documentaries.

- *Open Anthropology Archives*  
<http://www.aaopenanthro.org/>

Maintained by the AAA, this journal collects previously published articles from various journals according to different themes.

- *Current Anthropology*  
<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/ca/current>

*Current Anthropology* publishes articles on all topics related to anthropology. Articles published in the journal include feedback from other anthropologists and responses from the original authors, providing a dialogue that addresses multiple facets of a topic.

- *Dialectical Anthropology*  
<http://www.springer.com/social+sciences/anthropology+%26+archaeology/journal/10624>

This international journal is designed to encourage discussion on a wide variety of anthropological topics, particularly those related to current debates in society.

- Parks Canada  
<http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/index.aspx>

This website provides useful resources for students, including job listings for students wishing to work in heritage and cultural institutions.

- The Canadian Heritage Information Network  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/heritage-information-network.html>

This website provides useful resources for students, including job listings for students wishing to work in heritage and cultural institutions.



## Films

LW Hasten. 2009. "What Is Anthropology and Why Should We Teach It?" YouTube video, 2:01. Posted July 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMFsgPy1H5M>

This film is a brief look into the four fields of anthropology, perceptions of the subject, and what it means to use the holistic perspective.

### Question

What perspective is anthropology taught from, and how does that particular point-of-view work to alter human interpersonal relationships?

Strong, Adrian. 2010. *Bitter Roots: The Ends of a Kalahari Myth*. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources. DVD, 71 min.

This film is an update from the 1950s version shot by John Marshall. In this more contemporary version, we see the dramatic shift in the domestic economy of the region, a shift in communal relationships, and a change in the primary patterns of subsistence.

### Question

In what ways does this film depict the Ju/'hoansi from a holistic perspective?