chapter 2

History of Anthropological Theory

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Historians of anthropology often trace the birth of the discipline to the 16th-century encounters between Europeans and native peoples in Africa and the Americas. For Europeans, these peoples and their practices often seemed bizarre or irrational, yet to live and work with them, it was important to understand their cultures. This need for cross-cultural understanding was one of the roots of anthropology. The other was the emerging focus on evolution. The recognition that species were not stable but changed over time emerged in parallel with the idea that societies changed over time. Together, these ideas launched the notion that other cultures could be changed, that they could and should be "civilized." The movement by Europeans to "civilize" others between the 16th and 19th centuries destroyed some of the world's cultural diversity, but the field of anthropology emerged out of those efforts. As we shall see, we have knowledge of those cultures that were changed or destroyed by the "civilizing" efforts of European explorers and colonists largely because of the efforts of early anthropologists.

While anthropology may have been born out of its largely colonialist background, anthropologists are now overwhelmingly inclined to support the value of other ways of life and try to support the needs of peoples formerly colonized or dominated by powerful nation-states.

As we review the history of anthropological ideas, keep in mind that, although many of the early points of view were later rejected and replaced, not all ideas suffer the same fate. Evolutionary theory, for example, has been modified substantially over the years, but much of the theory of natural selection put forward by Darwin in the mid-1800s has been supported by empirical evidence and has withstood the test of time. Also keep in mind that some of the ideas we discuss are more properly *theoretical orientations* rather than theories. A **theoretical orientation** is a general idea about how phenomena are to be explained; *theories*, as we discuss more fully in the next chapter, are more specific explanations that can be tested with empirical evidence.

THE EVOLUTION OF EVOLUTION

Older Western ideas about nature's creatures were very different from Charles Darwin's theory of *evolution*, which suggested that different species developed, one from another, over long periods of time. In the 5th millennium B.C., the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle believed that animals and plants form a single, graded continuum going from more perfection to less perfection. Humans, of course, were at the top of this scale. Later Greek philosophers added the idea that the creator gave life or "radiance" first to humans, but some of that essence was lost at each subsequent creation.[1] Macrobius, summarizing the thinking of Plotinus, used an image that was to persist for centuries, the image of what

came to be called the "chain of being": "The attentive observer will discover a connection of parts, from the Supreme God down to the last dregs of things, mutually linked together and without a break. And this is Homer's golden chain, which God, he says, bade hand down from heaven to earth."[2]

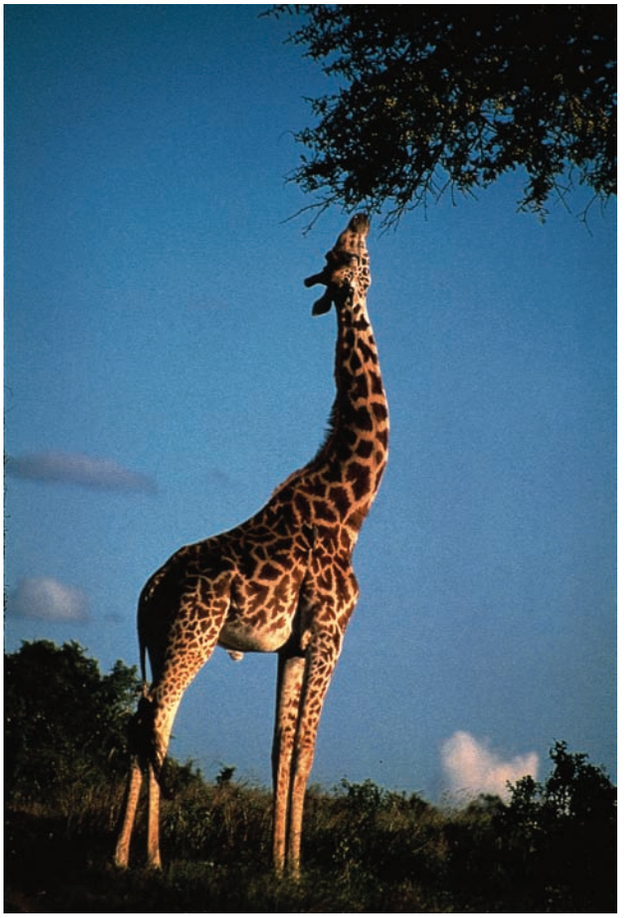
Belief in the chain of being was accompanied by the conviction that an animal or plant species could not become extinct. In fact, all things were linked to one another in a chain, and all links were necessary. Moreover, the notion of extinction threatened people's trust in God; it was unthinkable that a whole group of God's creations could simply disappear.

The idea of the chain of being persisted through the years, but philosophers, scientists, poets, and theologians did not discuss it extensively until the 18th century. Those discussions prepared the way for evolutionary theory. Ironically, although the chain of being did not allow for evolution, its idea that nature had an order of things encouraged studies of natural history and comparative anatomical studies, which stimulated the development of the idea of evolution. People were also now motivated to look for previously unknown creatures. Moreover, humans were not shocked when naturalists suggested that humans were close to apes. This notion was perfectly consistent with the idea of a chain of being; apes were simply thought to have been created with less perfection.

Early in the 18th century, an influential scientist, Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778), classified plants and animals in a *systema naturae,* which placed humans in the same order (Primates) as apes and monkeys. Linnaeus did not suggest an evolutionary relationship between humans and apes; he mostly accepted the notion that all species were created by God and fixed in their form. Not surprisingly, then, Linnaeus is often viewed as an anti-evolutionist. But Linnaeus's hierarchical classification scheme, in descending order from kingdom to class, order, **genus** (a group of related species), and species, provided a framework for the idea that humans, apes, and monkeys had a common ancestor.

Others did not believe that species were fixed in their form. According to Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829), acquired characteristics could be inherited and therefore species could evolve; individuals who in their lifetime developed characteristics helpful to survival would pass those characteristics on to future generations, thereby changing the physical makeup of the species. For example, Lamarck explained the long neck of the giraffe as the result of successive generations of giraffes stretching their necks to reach the high leaves of trees. The stretched muscles and bones of the necks were somehow transmitted to the offspring of the neck-stretching giraffes, and eventually all giraffes came to have long necks. But because Lamarck and later biologists failed to produce evidence to support the hypothesis that acquired characteristics can be inherited, this explanation of evolution is now generally dismissed.[3]

By the 19th century, some thinkers were beginning to accept evolution whereas others were trying to refute it. For example, Georges Cuvier (1769–1832) was a leading opponent of evolution. Cuvier's theory of catastrophism proposed that a quick series of catastrophes accounted for changes in the earth and the fossil record. Cataclysms and upheavals such as Noah's flood had killed off previous sets of living creatures, which each time were replaced by new creations.



The giraffe's long neck is adaptive for eating tree leaves high off the ground. When food is scarce, longer-necked giraffes would get more food and reproduce more successfully than shorter-necked giraffes; in this environment, natural selection would favor giraffes with longer necks.

Major changes in geological thinking occurred in the 19th century. Earlier, geologist James Hutton (1726–1797) had questioned catastrophism, but his work was largely ignored. In contrast, Sir Charles Lyell's (1797–1875) volumes of the *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833), which built on Hutton's earlier work, received immediate acclaim. Their concept of *uniformitarianism* suggested that the earth is constantly being shaped and reshaped by natural forces that have operated over a vast stretch of time. Lyell also discussed the formation of geological strata and paleontology. He used fossilized fauna to define different geological epochs. Lyell's works were read avidly by Charles Darwin before and during Darwin's now-famous voyage on the *Beagle.* The two corresponded and subsequently became friends.

After studying changes in plants, fossil animals, and varieties of domestic and wild pigeons, Charles Darwin (1809–1882) rejected the notion that each species was created at one time in a fixed form. The results of his investigations pointed clearly, he thought, to the evolution of species through the mechanism of natural selection. While Darwin was completing his book on the subject, naturalist

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) sent him a manuscript that came to conclusions about the evolution of species that matched Darwin's own.[4] In 1858, the two men presented the astonishing theory of natural selection to their colleagues at a meeting of the Linnaean Society of London.[5]

In 1859, when Darwin published *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection,*[6] he wrote, "I am fully convinced that species are not immutable; but that those belonging to what are called the same genera are lineal descendants of some other and generally extinct species, in the same manner as the acknowledged varieties of any one species."[7] His conclusions outraged those who believed in the biblical account of creation, and the result was bitter controversy that continues to this day.[8]

Although Darwin's idea of evolution by natural selection was strongly challenged when first published (particularly, as illustrated here, the idea that humans and primates shared a common ancestor), it has withstood rigorous testing and is the foundation of many anthropological theories.

Until 1871, when his *The Descent of Man* was published, Darwin avoided stating categorically that humans were descended from nonhuman forms, but the implications of his theory were clear. People immediately began to take sides. In June 1860, at the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Bishop Wilberforce saw an opportunity to attack the Darwinists. Concluding his speech, he faced Thomas Huxley, one of the Darwinists' chief advocates, and inquired, "Was it through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed descent from a monkey?" Huxley responded,

> If . . . the question is put to me would I rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather than a man highly endowed by nature and possessing great means and influence and yet who employs those faculties and that influence for the mere purpose of introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion—I unhesitatingly affirm my preference for the ape.[9]

Although Huxley's retort to Bishop Wilberforce displays both humor and quick wit, it does not answer the bishop's question very well. A better answer, and one we pursue in the chapter on genetics and evolution, is that Darwinists would claim that we descended from monkeys neither through our grandmother or our grandfather, but that both we and monkeys are descended from a common ancestor who lived long ago. Darwinists would further argue that natural selection was the process through which the physical and genetic form of that common ancestor diverged to become both monkey and human.

EARLY ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

In anthropology, as in any discipline, there is a continual ebb and flow of ideas. One theoretical orientation will arise and may grow in popularity until another is proposed in opposition to it. Often, one orientation will capitalize on those aspects of a problem that a previous orientation ignored or played down. In our survey of many of the orientations that have developed since the emergence of anthropology as a professional discipline, we follow an approximate historical sequence. As we discuss each school of thought, we will indicate what kinds of information or phenomena it emphasizes (if it does) as explanatory factors. Some of these orientations have passed into history by now; others continue to attract adherents.

Early Evolutionism

In the early years of anthropology, Darwinism had a strong impact on theory. The prevailing view was that culture generally develops (or evolves) in a uniform and progressive manner, just as Darwin argued species did. It was thought that most societies pass through the same series of stages, to arrive ultimately at a common end. The sources of culture change were generally assumed to be embedded within the culture from the beginning, and therefore the ultimate course of development was thought

to be internally determined. Two 19th-century anthropologists whose writings exemplified the theory that culture generally evolves uniformly and progressively were Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) and Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881).

Tylor maintained that culture evolved from the simple to the complex and that all societies passed through three basic stages of development: from savagery through barbarism to civilization.[10] "Progress" was therefore possible for all. To account for cultural variation, Tylor and other early evolutionists postulated that different contemporary societies were at different stages of evolution. According to this view, the "simpler" peoples of the day had not yet reached "higher" stages. Tylor believed there was a kind of psychic unity among all peoples that explained parallel evolutionary sequences in different cultural traditions. In other words, because of the basic similarities common to all peoples, different societies often find the same solutions to the same problems independently. But Tylor also noted that cultural traits may spread from one society to another by simple *diffusion*—the borrowing by one culture of a trait belonging to another as the result of contact between the two.

Another 19th-century proponent of uniform and progressive cultural evolution was Lewis Henry Morgan. A lawyer in upstate New York, Morgan became interested in the local Iroquois Indians and defended their reservation in a land-grant case. In gratitude, the Iroquois "adopted" Morgan.

In his best-known work, *Ancient Society,* Morgan postulated several sequences in the evolution of human culture. For example, he speculated that the family evolved through six stages. Human society began as a "horde living in promiscuity," with no sexual prohibitions and no real family structure. Next was a stage in which a group of brothers was married to a group of sisters and brother-sister matings were permitted. In the third stage, group marriage was practiced, but brothers and sisters were not allowed to mate. The fourth stage was characterized by a loosely paired male and female who still lived with other people. Then came the husband-dominant family, in which the husband could have more than one wife simultaneously. Finally, the stage of civilization was distinguished by the monogamous family, with just one wife and one husband who were relatively equal in status.[11] However, Morgan's postulated sequence for the evolution of the family is not supported by the enormous amount of ethnographic data that has been collected since his time. For example, no recent society generally practices group marriage or allows brother-sister mating. (In the chapter on marriage and the family, we discuss how recent cultures have varied in regard to marriage customs.)

The evolutionism of Tylor, Morgan, and others of the 19th century is largely rejected today. For one thing, their theories cannot satisfactorily account for cultural variation. The "psychic unity of mankind" or "germs of thought" that were postulated to account for parallel evolution cannot also account for cultural differences. Another weakness in the early evolutionist theories is that they cannot explain why some societies have regressed or even become extinct. Finally, although other societies may have progressed to "civilization," some of them have not passed through all the stages. Thus, early evolutionist theory cannot explain the details of cultural evolution and variation as anthropology now knows them.

"Race" Theory

Evolutionism also influenced another branch of anthropological theory, one that posited that the reason human cultures differed in their behaviors was because they represented separate subspecies of humans, or "races." This idea was also influenced by the fact that, by the 19th century at least, it became clear that few cultures were being "civilized" in the way Europeans expected. Rather than attribute this to the strength of cultural tradition, some attributed it to the innate capabilities of the people—in other words, to their "race." Members of "uncivilized

The 19th-century belief that progress was a universal in social change had a profound impact on early anthropological theorists such as Edward B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan.

races" were, by their very nature, incapable of being "civilized." Such ideas were widely held and supported during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and, as we shall see, American anthropology played a large role in showing that "race" theory was unsupported in a variety of contexts. Unfortunately, "race" theory persists in some disciplines.

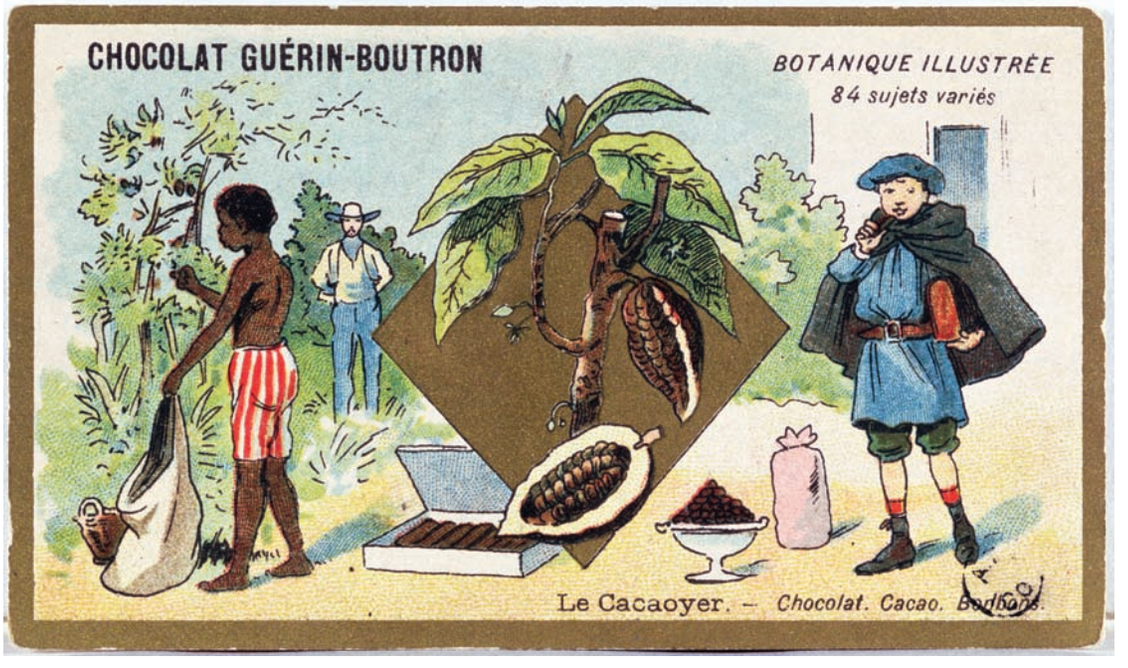
The roots of "race" theory are fairly easy to trace.[12] As discussed earlier, the classification of plants and animals into distinct biological groups began with the work of Linneaus. In his s*ystema natura,* humans are classified into four distinct "races" (American, European, Asiatic, and African), each defined not only by physical characteristics but also by emotional and behavioral ones. Similarly, Johann Blumenbach (1752–1840), a founder of the field of biological anthropology, divided humans into five "races" (Caucasian, Mongolian, Malayan, Ethiopian, and American). Interestingly, each of his races relates to peoples of recently colonized areas, and Blumenbach makes clear that the purpose of his division of humanity is to help classify the variety of humans that European colonists were encountering at the time.

Samuel Morton (1799–1851), a Philadelphia physician, was the first to explicitly link "race" with behavior and intelligence. Morton collected and measured the skulls of Native Americans, and, in *Crania Americana* (1839), concluded that not only were Native Americans a separate "race," but their behavioral differences from European Americans were rooted in the physical structures of their brains. Expanding his study, he examined skulls of ancient Egyptians, and, in *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844), concluded that "race" differences were ancient and unchanging.

The presumed fixity of these "race" differences was essential, not only to justify the exploitive relationships of colonialism and slavery, but also to fight against Darwin's idea of evolution. If God created the world in a fixed and stable form, then "races" should be fixed as well. Thus, not surprisingly, one of the 19th century's strongest critics of evolution, Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz (1807–1873), was also one of the century's most outspoken supporters of "race" theory. Between 1863 and 1865, Agassiz measured thousands of Civil War soldiers, and used the data he collected to argue that significant and stable differences existed between people of African versus European descent. He implied that these differences illustrated God's creation of human "races."

By the turn of the 20th century, "race" theory was being used in attempts to shape the structure of society. Eminent British scientist Francis Galton (1822–1911) promoted a social and political movement aimed at manipulating "races" by selectively breeding humans with desirable characteristics and preventing those with undesirable ones from having offspring. **Eugenics**, as this movement was called, was widely accepted in Europe, and had strong supporters in the United States, support that continues to this day. For example, in *The Bell Curve* (1994), Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray assert that there are "race" differences in IQ (and, consequently, success in life), and suggest that social policies should discourage "races" deemed to have low IQs from having many children.

The scholarly use of "race" theory declined precipitously following World War II, when the Nazi genocide against "races" that they viewed as inferior exposed the idea's dangerous potential. At the same time, advances in biological anthropology began to demonstrate that "race" itself was an analytical concept with very little utility. By the 1970s, biologists were able to show that purely genetic races of humans are not clearly identifiable, and therefore



Race theory was used to justify the exploitive relationships of slavery and colonialism. In this 19th-century advertisement, a slave gathers cocoa beans to be made into chocolate for European consumption.

not applicable to humans.[13] Still, "race" theory has not disappeared completely.[14]

Diffusionism

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, although the cultural evolutionism of Tylor and Morgan was still popular and "race" theory was at its height, diffusionism began to take hold among anthropologists in several parts of the world. The two main schools with a diffusionist viewpoint were the British and the German-Austrian.

The main spokesmen for the British school of diffusionism were G. Elliott Smith, William J. Perry, and W. H. R. Rivers. Smith and Perry stated that most aspects of higher civilization were developed in Egypt (which was relatively advanced because of its early development of agriculture) and were then diffused throughout the world as other peoples came into contact with the Egyptians.[15] People, they believed, are inherently uninventive and invariably prefer to borrow the inventions of another culture rather than develop ideas for themselves. This viewpoint was never widely accepted, and it has now been abandoned completely.

Inspired by Friedrich Ratzel, Fritz Graebner and Father Wilhelm Schmidt led the early 20th-century German-Austrian diffusionist school. This school also held that people borrow from others because they are basically uninventive. In contrast to Smith and Perry of the British school, who assumed that all cultural traits originated in one place (Egypt) and filtered out to cultures throughout the world, the German-Austrian school suggested the existence and diffusion of several different cultural complexes (*Kulturkreise,* plural in German).[16] Like the British diffusionists, however, the *Kulturkreis* (singular) school provided little documentation for the historical relationships it assumed.

A separate American diffusionist school of thought, led by Clark Wissler and Alfred Kroeber, also arose in the first few decades of the 20th century, but it was more modest in its claims. The American diffusionists attributed the characteristic features of a culture area to a geographical *culture center,* where the traits were first developed and from which they then diffused outward. This theory led Wissler to formulate his age-area principle: If a given trait diffuses outward from a single culture center, it follows that the most widely distributed traits found to exist around such a center must be the oldest traits.[17]

Although most anthropologists today acknowledge the spread of traits by diffusion, few try to account for most aspects of cultural development and variation in terms of diffusion. For one thing, the diffusionists dealt only in a very superficial way with the question of how cultural traits are transferred from one society to another. The failing was a serious one, because one of the things we want to explain is why a culture accepts, rejects, or modifies a trait that one of its neighbors has. Also, even if it could be demonstrated how and why a trait diffused outward from a cultural center, we would still be no closer to an explanation of how or why the trait developed within that center in the first place.

LATER ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

The beginning of the 20th century brought the end of evolutionism's reign in cultural anthropology. Its leading opponent was Franz Boas (1858–1942), whose main disagreement with the evolutionists involved their assumption that universal laws governed all human culture. Boas pointed out that these 19th-century individuals lacked sufficient data (as did Boas himself) to formulate many useful generalizations. Boas also strongly opposed "race" theory, and made significant contributions to the study of human variation that demonstrated how supposedly "racial," and supposedly biological, characteristics actually varied depending on where a person grew up. Boas almost single-handedly brought about the decline of "race" theory in America, as well as trained the first generation of American anthropologists, including (among others) Alfred Kroeber, Robert Lowie, Edward Sapir, Melville Herskovits, and Margaret Mead.[18]

Historical Particularism

Boas stressed the apparently enormous complexity of cultural variation, and perhaps because of this complexity he believed it was premature to formulate universal laws. He felt that single cultural traits had to be studied in the context of the society in which they appeared. In 1896, Boas published an article entitled "The Limitation of the Comparative Method of Anthropology,"[19] which dealt with his objections to the evolutionist approach. In it, he stated that anthropologists should spend less time developing theories based on insufficient data. Rather, they should devote their energies to collecting as much data as possible, as quickly as possible, before cultures disappeared (as so many already had, after contact with foreign societies). He asserted that valid interpretations could be made and theories proposed only after this body of data was gathered.

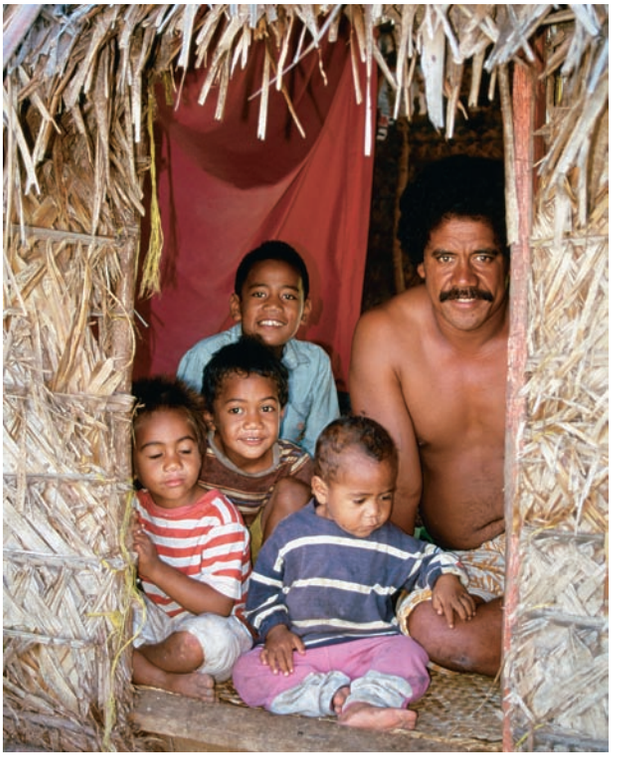
Boas expected that, if a tremendous quantity of data was collected, the laws governing cultural variation would emerge from the mass of information by themselves. According to the method he advocated, the essence of science is to mistrust all expectations and to rely only on facts. But, the "facts" that are recorded, even by the most diligent observer, will necessarily reflect what that individual considers important. Collecting done without some preliminary theorizing, without ideas about what to expect, is meaningless, for the facts that are most important may be ignored whereas irrelevant ones may be recorded. Although it was appropriate for Boas to criticize previous "armchair theorizing," his concern with innumerable local details did not encourage a belief that it might be possible to explain the major variations in culture that anthropologists observe.

Psychological Approaches

In the 1920s, some American anthropologists began to study the relationship between culture and personality.

Although there are varying opinions about how the culture-and-personality school got started, the writings of Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts were undoubtedly influential. Edward Sapir, one of Boas's earliest students, reviewed psychoanalytical books and seems to have influenced two other students of Boas—Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead—who became early proponents of a psychological orientation.[20]

In seminars at Columbia University in the 1930s and 1940s, Ralph Linton, an anthropologist, and Abram Kardiner, a psychoanalyst, developed important ideas for culture-and-personality studies. Kardiner suggested that there is a *basic personality* in every culture that is produced by *primary institutions* (such as type of household, subsistence, and childrearing practices). In other words, just as children's later personalities may be shaped by their earlier experiences, the personalities of adults in a society should be shaped by common cultural experiences. In turn, the *basic personality* gives rise to other institutions (such as art, folklore, and religion), called *secondary institutions*, which are viewed as projections from basic personality. John Whiting and Irvin Child independently put forward a similar and somewhat more elaborated theoretical framework somewhat later.[21] If similar primary institutions exist, it follows that similar personality outcomes and similar secondary institutions should be predicted. Indeed, as we will see in the chapter on culture and the individual, many subsequent cross-cultural studies have supported these connections.



The presence or absence of fathers has important consequences for psychological development, and some societies have much more father presence than others. This Tongan father in the South Pacific is shown with his family.

As time went on, the focus of the psychological approach broadened and diversified. There was more interest in diversity of personality within societies and in universals across human societies. Through this focus on universals, human development from infancy through adolescence, as well as thought processes and emotional responses, was examined to understand human nature. The interest in cultural differences did not disappear but focused more on particular societies—particularly their ethnopsychologies (native psychological concepts and theories), or concepts of the self and emotion.[22]

To generalize about the psychological approach to cultural anthropology, then, we may say that it explicitly employs psychological concepts and methods to help understand cultural differences and similarities.[23] In the chapter on culture and the individual, we discuss psychological approaches in more detail.

Functionalism

In Europe, the reaction against evolution was not as dramatic as in the United States, but a clear division between the diffusionists and those who came to be known as *functionalists* emerged by the 1930s. **Functionalism** in social science looks for the part (function) that some aspect of culture or social life plays in maintaining a cultural system. Two quite different schools of functionalism arose in conjunction with two British anthropologists—Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) and Arthur Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955).

Malinowski's version of functionalism assumes that all cultural traits serve the needs of *individuals* in a society; that is, they satisfy some *basic* or *derived need* of the members of the group. Basic needs include nutrition, reproduction, bodily comfort, safety, relaxation, movement, and growth. Some aspects of the culture satisfy these basic needs and give rise to derived needs that must also be satisfied. For example, culture traits that satisfy the basic need for food give rise to the secondary, or derived, need for cooperation in food collection or production. Societies will in turn develop forms of political organization and social control that guarantee the required cooperation. How did Malinowski explain such things as religion and magic? He suggested that, because humans always live with a certain amount of uncertainty and anxiety, they need stability and continuity. Religion and magic are functional in that they serve those needs.[24]

Unlike Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown felt that the various aspects of social behavior *maintain* a *society's social structure* rather than satisfying individual needs. By social structure, he meant the total network of existing social relationships in a society.[25] The phrase *structural-functionalism* is often used to describe Radcliffe-Brown's approach. To explain how different societies deal with the tensions that are likely to develop among people related through marriage, Radcliffe-Brown suggested that societies do one of two things: They may develop strict rules forbidding the people involved ever to interact face-to-face (as do the Navajos, for example, in requiring a man to avoid his mother-in-law). They may also allow mutual disrespect

current research and issues

Evaluating Alternative Theories

In working among the Abelam of New Guinea, Richard Scaglion was puzzled why they invest so much energy in growing giant ceremonial yams, sometimes more than 10 feet long. As well, why do they abstain from sex for six months while they grow them? Of course, to try to understand, we need to know much more about the Abelam way of life. Scaglion had read about them, lived among them, and talked to them, but, as many ethnographers have discovered, answers to *why* questions don't just leap out at you. Answers, at least tentative ones, often come from theoretical orientations that suggest how or where to look for answers. Scaglion considers several possibilities. As Donald Tuzin had suggested for a nearby group, the Plains Arapesh, yams may be symbols of, or stand for, shared cultural understandings. (Looking for the meanings of symbols is a kind of interpretative approach to ethnographic data.) The Abelam think of yams as having souls that appreciate tranquillity. Yams also have family lines; at marriage, the joining of family lines is symbolized by planting different yam lines in the same garden. During the yam-growing cycle (remember that yams appreciate tranquillity), lethal warfare and conflict become channeled mostly into competitive but nonlethal yam-growing contests. So yam growing may be functional in the sense that it helps to foster harmony.

Then again, ceremonial yam growing may have adaptive ecological consequences. Just as the Tsembaga pig feasts seemed to keep human population in line with resources, Scaglion thinks that ceremonial yam growing did too. Growing pig populations damage gardens and create conflicts, but pigs are also given away during competitive yam ceremonies, so the pig population declines. Wild animals that are hunted also have a chance to replenish themselves because hunting is frowned upon during the yam-growing cycle.

As Scaglion's discussion illustrates, theoretical orientations help researchers derive explanations. They do not have to be "rival" explanations, in the sense that one has to be right and others wrong; more than one theory may help explain some phenomenon. But we can't assume that a theory is correct and helps us to understand just because it sounds good. The important point is that we need something more to evaluate theory. As we discuss in the next chapter, we have to find ways to test a theory against evidence. Until we do that, we really don't know how many, or if indeed any, of the theories available are helpful.

Source: Scaglion 2009a.

and teasing between the in-laws. Radcliffe-Brown suggested that avoidance is likely to occur between in-laws of different generations, whereas disrespectful teasing is likely between in-laws of the same generation.[26] Both avoidance and teasing, he suggested, are ways to avoid real conflict and help maintain the social structure. (American mother-in-law jokes may also help relieve tension.)

The major objection to Malinowski's functionalism is that it cannot readily account for cultural variation. Most of the needs he identified, such as the need for food, are universal: All societies must deal with them if they are to survive. Thus, although the functionalist approach may tell us why all societies engage in food-getting, it cannot tell why different societies have different food-getting practices. In other words, functionalism does not explain why certain specific cultural patterns arise to fulfill a need that might be fulfilled just as easily by any of a number of alternative possibilities.

A major problem of the structural-functionalist approach is that it is difficult to determine whether a particular custom is in fact functional in the sense of contributing to the maintenance of the social system. In biology, the contribution an organ makes to the health or life of an animal can be assessed by removing it. But we cannot subtract a cultural trait from a society to see if the trait really does contribute to the maintenance of that group. It is conceivable that certain customs within a society may be neutral or even detrimental to its maintenance. Moreover, we cannot assume that all of a society's customs are functional merely because the society is functioning at the moment. Even if we are able to assess whether a particular custom is functional, this theoretical orientation fails to deal with the question of why a particular society chooses to meet its structural needs in a particular way. A given problem does not necessarily have only one solution. We must still explain why one of several possible solutions is chosen.

Neoevolution

The evolutionary approach to cultural variation did not die with the 19th century. Beginning in the 1940s, Leslie A. White (1900–1975) attacked the Boasian emphasis on historical particularism and championed the evolutionist orientation.

Though quickly labeled a neoevolutionist, White rejected the term, insisting that his approach did not depart significantly from the theories adopted in the 19th century. What White did add to the classical evolutionist approach was a conception of culture as an energy-capturing system.

According to his "basic law" of cultural evolution, "other factors remaining constant, *culture evolves as the amount of energy harnessed per capita per year is increased or as the efficiency of the instrumental means of putting the energy to work is increased.*"[27] In other words, a more advanced technology gives humans control over more energy (human, animal, solar, and so on), and cultures expand and change as a result.

White's orientation has been criticized for the same reasons that the ideas of Tylor and Morgan were. In describing what has happened in the evolution of human culture, he assumed that cultural evolution is determined strictly by conditions (preeminently technological ones) inside the culture. That is, he explicitly denied the possibility of environmental, historical, or psychological influences on cultural evolution. The main problem with such an orientation is that it cannot explain why some cultures evolve whereas others either do not evolve or become extinct. White's theory of energy capture sidesteps the question of why only some cultures are able to increase their energy capture.

Julian H. Steward (1902–1972), another later evolutionist, divided evolutionary thought into three schools: unilinear, universal, and multilinear.[28] Steward believed that Morgan and Tylor's theories exemplified the unilinear approach to cultural evolution, the classical 19th-century orientation that attempted to place particular cultures on the rungs of a sort of evolutionary ladder. Universal evolutionists such as Leslie White, on the other hand, were concerned with culture in the broad sense, rather than with individual cultures. Steward classified himself as a multilinear evolutionist: one who deals with the evolution of particular cultures and only with demonstrated sequences of parallel culture change in different areas.

Steward was concerned with explaining specific cultural differences and similarities. Consequently, he was critical of White's vague generalities and his disregard of environmental influences. White, on the other hand, asserted that Steward fell into the historical-particularist trap of paying too much attention to particular cases.

Marshall Sahlins (born 1930) and Elman Service (1915–1996), who were students and colleagues of both White and Steward, combined the views of those two individuals by recognizing two kinds of evolution—specific and general.[29] **Specific evolution** refers to the particular sequence of change and adaptation of a particular society in a given environment. **General evolution** refers to a general progress of human society, in which higher forms (having higher-energy capture) arise from and surpass lower forms. Thus, specific evolution is similar to Steward's multilinear evolution, and general evolution resembles White's universal evolution. Although this synthesis does serve to integrate the two points of view, it does not give us a way of explaining why general evolutionary progress has occurred. But, unlike the early evolutionists, some of the later evolutionists did suggest a mechanism to account for the evolution of particular cultures—namely, adaptation to particular environments.

Structuralism

Claude Lévi-Strauss (born 1908) has been the leading proponent of an approach to cultural analysis called **structuralism.** Lévi-Strauss's structuralism differs from that of Radcliffe-Brown. Whereas Radcliffe-Brown concentrated on how the elements of a society function as a system, Lévi-Strauss concentrates more on the origins of the systems themselves. He sees culture, as expressed in art, ritual, and the patterns of daily life, as a surface representation of the underlying structure of the human mind. Consider, for example, how he tries to account for what anthropologists call a *moiety system.* Such a system is said to exist if a society is divided into two large intermarrying kin groups (each called a *moiety,* probably derived from the French word *moitié,* meaning "half"). Lévi-Strauss says that moiety systems reflect the human mind's predisposition to think and behave in terms of *binary oppositions* (contrasts between one thing and another).[30] Clearly, a moiety system involves a binary opposition: You are born into one of two groups and you marry someone in the other. The problem with Lévi-Strauss's explanation of moieties is that he is postulating a constant—the human mind's supposed dualism—to account for a cultural feature that is not universal. Moiety systems are found in only a relatively small number of societies, so how could something that is universal explain something else that is not?

Lévi-Strauss's interpretations of cultural phenomena (which tend to be far more involved and difficult to follow than the example just described) have concentrated on the presumed cognitive processes of people, the ways in which people supposedly perceive and classify things in the world around them. In studies such as *The Savage Mind* and *The Raw and the Cooked,* he suggested that even technologically simple groups often construct elaborate systems of classification of plants and animals, not only for practical purposes but also out of a need for such intellectual activity.[31]

Structuralism has influenced thinking not only in France; Britain too has been receptive. But the British structuralists, such as Edmund Leach, Rodney Needham, and Mary Douglas, do not follow Lévi-Strauss in looking for panhuman or universal principles in the human mind. Rather, they concentrate on applying structural analysis to particular societies and particular social institutions.[32] For example, Mary Douglas discusses an argument that took place in her home over whether soup is an "appropriate" supper. She suggests that meals (in her household and in culturally similar households) have certain structural principles. They have contrasts—hot and cold, bland and spiced, liquid and semiliquid—and various textures. They must incorporate cereals, vegetables, and animal protein. Douglas concludes that, if the food served does not follow these principles, it cannot be considered a meal.[33]

Some structuralist writings have been criticized for their concentration on abstruse, theoretical analysis at the expense of observation and evidence. For example, it is not always clear how Lévi-Strauss derived a particular

structuralist interpretation, and in the absence of any systematically collected supporting evidence, readers must decide whether the interpretation seems plausible. Thus, Lévi-Strauss's studies have come to be regarded by many as vague and untestable, as self-contained intellectual constructs with little explanatory value. Moreover, even if some universal patterns underlie cultural phenomena, universals or constants cannot explain cultural differences.

Ethnoscience and Cognitive Anthropology

Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach involves intuitively grasping the rules of thought that may underlie a given culture. An ethnographic approach known as **ethnoscience** attempts to derive these rules from a logical analysis of ethnographic data that are kept as free as possible from contamination by the observer's own cultural biases. Rather than collecting data according to a predetermined set of anthropological categories (referred to as an *etic* view), ethnoscientists seek to understand a people's world from their point of view (an *emic* view). Studying their language using systematic elicitation techniques, ethnoscientists try to formulate the rules that underlie the cultural domains. The rules are believed to be comparable to the grammatical rules that generate the correct use of the language. Research commonly focuses on kinship terms, plant and animal taxonomies, and disease classification. Ethnoscience was an early kind of *cognitive anthropology.*[34] Later researchers developed techniques to test whether the rules presumably uncovered were being followed by other members of the society and how much "cultural consensus" there was on these rules. (As we will see later, techniques for evaluating cultural consensus also provide ways of choosing the best people to interview, who are likely to be most knowledgeable about the culture.) Cognitive anthropologists also branched out to studying decision making, cultural goals and motivations, and discourse analysis.[35]

Many ethnoscientists think that, if we can discover the rules that generate cultural behavior, we can explain much of what people do and why they do it. Probably individuals do generally act according to the conscious and unconscious rules they have internalized. But we still need to understand why a particular society has developed the particular cultural rules it has. Just as a grammar does not explain how a language came to be what it is, an ethnoscientific discovery of a culture's rules does not explain why those rules developed.

Cultural Ecology

Some anthropologists are concerned mostly with the influence of environment on culture. Julian Steward was one of the first to advocate the study of **cultural ecology**—the analysis of the relationship between a culture and its environment. Steward felt that the explanation for some aspects of cultural variation could be found in the adaptation of societies to their particular environments. But rather than merely hypothesize that the environment did or did not determine cultural variation,

Sometimes you can have too many pigs. A pig feast solves this problem and maintains or creates close ties between groups. Here we see preparations for a pig feast on the island of Tanna in the New Hebrides.

Steward wished to resolve the question *empirically*—that is, he wanted to carry out investigations to evaluate his viewpoint.[36]

Steward felt, however, that cultural ecology must be separated from *biological ecology,* the study of the relationships between organisms and their environment. Later cultural ecologists, such as Andrew Vayda and Roy Rappaport, wished to incorporate principles of biological ecology into the study of cultural ecology to make a single science of ecology.[37] In their view, cultural traits, just like biological traits, can be considered adaptive or maladaptive. Cultural ecologists assume that cultural adaptation involves the mechanism of *natural selection*—the more frequent survival and reproduction of the better adapted. Environment, including the physical and social environments, affects the development of culture traits in that "individuals or populations behaving in certain different ways have different degrees of success in survival and reproduction and, consequently, in the transmission of their ways of behaving from generation to generation."[38]

Consider how culture and environment may interact among the Tsembaga, who live in the interior of New Guinea.[39] The Tsembaga live mainly on the root crops and greens they grow in home gardens; they also raise pigs. The pigs are seldom eaten; instead, they keep residential areas clean by consuming garbage, and they help prepare the soil for planting by rooting in it. Small numbers of pigs are easy to keep and require; they run free all day, returning at night to eat whatever substandard tubers are found in the course of their owners' harvesting of their daily rations. But problems arise when the pig herd grows large. Often there are not enough substandard tubers, and then the pigs must be fed human rations. Also, a large herd is likely to intrude upon garden crops. If one person's pig invades a neighbor's garden, the garden owner often retaliates by killing the offending pig. In turn, the dead animal's owner may kill the garden owner, the garden owner's wife, or one of his pigs. As the number of such feuds increases, people begin to put as much distance as possible between their pigs and other people's gardens.

Rappaport suggests that, to cope with the problem of pig overpopulation, the Tsembaga developed an elaborate cycle of rituals involving the slaughter of large numbers of surplus pigs. The cultural practice of ritual pig feasts can be viewed as a possible adaptation to environmental factors that produce a surplus pig population. But it is hard to know if the ritual pig feasts are more adaptive than other possible solutions to the problem of pig overpopulation. For example, it might be more adaptive to slaughter and eat pigs regularly so that pig herds never get too large. Without being able to contrast the effects of alternative solutions, a cultural ecologist studying a single society may find it difficult to obtain evidence that a custom already in place is more adaptive than other possible solutions to the problem.

More recent ecological anthropologists have criticized the earlier ecologists for having an overly narrow view of a bounded culture in an isolated environment and have considered the environment in a broader context—moving well beyond the local ecosystem to national and even international levels.[40] As we will discuss shortly, hardly any people on earth are unaffected by larger political, social, and environmental forces.

Political Economy

Like cultural ecology, the school of thought known as **political economy** assumes that external forces explain the way a society changes and adapts. But it is not the natural environment, or the social environment in general, that is central to the approach of political economy. What is central is the social and political impact of those powerful state societies (principally Spain, Portugal, Britain, and France) that transformed the world by colonialism and imperialism after the mid-1400s, and fostered the development of a worldwide economy or world system.[41] Scholars now realize that imperialism is at least 5,000 years old; most, if not all, of the first civilizations were imperialistic. Imperialistic expansion of the first state societies was linked to expanding commercialization, the growth of buying and selling.[42] Today, of course, the entire world is linked commercially. Not surprisingly, the political economy orientation grew in importance as the global reach of capitalism accelerated.

Some of the earliest figures associated with the political economy approach in anthropology were trained at Columbia University when Julian Steward was a professor there. For those students, Steward's cultural ecology was insufficiently attentive to recent world history. For example, Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz argued that the communities they studied in Puerto Rico developed as they did because of colonialism and the establishment of plantations to supply sugar and coffee to Europe and North America.[43] And Eleanor Leacock, who studied the Montagnais-Naskapi Indians of Labrador, suggested that their system of family hunting territories was not an old characteristic, present before European contact, but developed instead out of the Indians' early involvement in the European-introduced fur trade.[44]

Central to the later and continuing intellectual development of political economy in anthropology are the writings, published in the 1960s and 1970s, of two political sociologists, André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein. Frank suggested that the development of a region (Europe, for example) depended on the suppression of development or underdevelopment of other regions (for example, the New World, Africa). He argued that, if we want to understand why a country remains underdeveloped, we must understand how developed nations exploit it.[45] Frank is concerned with what happened in the underdeveloped world. Wallerstein is more concerned with how capitalism developed in the privileged countries and how the expansionist requirements of the capitalist countries led to the emergence of the world system.[46]

The political economy or world-system view has inspired many anthropologists to study history more explicitly and to explore the impact of external political and economic processes on local events and cultures in the

underdeveloped world. In the past, when anthropologists first started doing fieldwork in the far corners of the world, they could imagine that the cultures they were studying or reconstructing could be investigated as if those cultures were more or less isolated from external influences and forces. In the modern world, such isolation hardly exists. The political economy approach has reminded us that the world, every part of it, is interconnected, for better or worse.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

In recent years, anthropology has seen a range of new approaches incorporated into anthropological theory. Many of these approaches have been adopted from other disciplines, such as evolutionary biology and literary criticism. They are providing anthropology with an increasing breadth of thought from which to address the many questions of interest to anthropologists today.

Evolutionary Ecology Approaches

The various approaches discussed here share the idea that natural selection can operate on the behavioral or social characteristics of populations, not just on their physical traits. If so, some of the human behavior we observe, including those behaviors that vary by society, might be explained by evolutionary principles. Two important works by biologists introduced these ideas to anthropology: Edward O. Wilson's book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* and Richard D. Alexander's article "The Search for a General Theory of Behavior."[47] **Sociobiology** was the term for this evolutionary approach. More recently, scholars have introduced varying theoretical modifications. The main theoretical perspectives are **behavioral ecology**, **evolutionary psychology,** and **dual-inheritance theory.**[48]

Before looking at how these orientations differ from each other, let us first see how evolutionary ecological theories, particularly behavioral ecology and evolutionary psychology, differ from cultural ecology. Although both orientations assume the importance of natural selection in cultural evolution, they differ in important ways. Cultural ecology focuses mostly on what biologists would call **group selection:** Cultural ecologists talk mostly about how a certain behavioral or social characteristic may be adaptive for a group or society in a given environment. (A newly emergent behavioral or social trait that is adaptive is likely to be passed on to future generations by cultural transmission.) In contrast, evolutionary ecology focuses more on what biologists call **individual selection:** Evolutionary ecologists talk mostly about how a certain characteristic may be adaptive for an individual in a given environment.[49] *Adaptive* means the ability of individuals to get their genes into future generations. This viewpoint implies that behavior is transmitted in some way (by genes or learning) to people who share your genes (usually offspring).[50] If a certain behavior is adaptive for individuals in a particular environment (or a particular historical context in which these individuals are able to reproduce more than others), it should become more widespread in future generations as the individuals with those traits increase in number. Whereas a cultural ecologist such as Rappaport might consider how ritual pig feasts were adaptive for the Tsembaga as a whole, evolutionary ecologists would insist that to speak of adaptation it must be shown how the pig feasts benefited individuals and their closest kin.

Behavioral ecology typically tries to understand the relationship of human behavior to the environment.[51] In addition to the principle of individual selection, behavioral ecologists point to the importance of analyzing economic tradeoffs because individuals have limited time and resources. As we will see later in the economics chapter, the theory of *optimal foraging* is used to explain the decision-making behavior of recent hunter-gatherers. Evolutionary psychology, on the other hand, is more interested in universal human psychology. It is argued that human psychology was primarily adapted to the environment that characterized most of human history—our hunting-gathering way of life.[52] Dual-inheritance theory, in contrast to the other evolutionary perspectives, gives much more importance to culture as part of the evolutionary process. Dual inheritance refers to both genes and culture playing different but nonetheless important and interactive roles in transmitting traits to future generations.[53]

The behavioral ecological approaches have led to an active program of research in anthropology. However, these approaches have aroused considerable controversy, particularly from those cultural anthropologists who do not

Women have recently become a more important focus of research in anthropology. A Trobriand Island woman in Papua New Guinea stacks yams during the yam harvest festival.

applied anthropology

The Relationship Between Theory and Practice

Applied anthropology in the United States goes back to the late 1800s, when the government focused on "applied ethnology" to help with the administration of programs dealing with Native Americans, but it was only during and after the Great Depression and World War II that applied anthropological work increased significantly. Applied work during this earlier time usually involved research and consultation, with no active role in bringing about change. However, by the 1950s and afterward, applied anthropologists began to be more involved in directed social change.

Applied anthropology came to maturity at the same time that anthropology was re-discovering the importance of theory. As the influence of Boas and historical particularism waned, American anthropologists began to explore new areas of theory, and began to collaborate with ecologists, economists, and others to develop the variety of theoretical perspectives that populate the discipline today. In putting anthropology to use, applied anthropologists draw upon theoretical orientations and specific theories within those orientations. To illustrate this, we will draw upon examples from nutritional anthropology, a field that involves anthropologists from all the major subdisciplines.

Applied nutritional anthropologists are actively engaged in matters of public health, such as how infants are fed and grow, gender inequality in access to food, dietary insufficiencies, and serious malnutrition and starvation. Three of the most important theoretical perspectives involve ecology, evolutionary adaptation, and political economy. The ecological perspective not only emphasizes the effects of the physical and social environment on what people grow, the technology they use, and their patterns of consumption, but also considers the effects of these patterns on the environment. Adaptation can involve genetic changes, such as the ability of some populations to digest raw milk, or cultural adaptations such as developing processing techniques to make certain plants edible (i.e., bitter manioc that contains toxic amounts of cyanide prior to processing). The political economy perspective points to inequalities in nutrition due to class and status differences within societies and the increasing disparity between the developed and undeveloped societies around the world. In working on change programs to improve nutrition, applied anthropologists have to be pragmatic—to try to find theories that may help understand and therefore help solve some problem. They often work with practitioners from different fields and are not likely to be dogmatic about which theoretical orientation to draw upon.

Applied anthropologists do not see themselves as simply borrowing theory; they see their work as central to the task of theory building. For one thing, the work of applied anthropologists provides a "natural laboratory" for evaluating theory, where hypotheses can be tested empirically. Further, in applying new aspects of or challenges to the theory, ones not encountered in more academic or pure research settings, are often brought to light. Finally, because theory is closely linked to methods (as the information that a theory identifies as being important will shape the way researchers collect information), applied anthropologists are often at the forefront of methodological innovation.

Sources: Eddy and Partridge 1987; C. Hill 2000; Himmelgreen and Crooks 2005; Pelto et al. 2000; Van Willigen 2002, 25–30.

believe that biological considerations have much to do with understanding culture.

Feminist Approaches

Women have played an important role in the history of anthropology. Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Mary Douglas are just a few of the women who have made lasting contributions to the discipline. Yet the study of women and women's roles in other cultures was relatively rare, and, by the 1960s, women anthropologists began asking why women were not a more important focus of research. It was not accidental that this movement coincided with the "women's movement" in the United States. One group of scholars argued that women were in subservient positions in all cultures, and hence were largely "invisible" to anthropologists studying those cultures. Another group argued that, although women historically held positions of power and authority in many cultures, the impact of colonization and capitalism had moved them into subservient positions. In either case, it became clear to these scholars that a focused effort on studying the roles of women was necessary, and feminist anthropology was born.

Feminist anthropology is a highly diverse area of research. Feminist anthropologists share an interest in the role of women in culture, but vary widely in how they approach this common interest. Some feminist anthropologists take an overtly political stance, seeing their task as identifying ways in which women are exploited and working to overcome them. Others simply try to understand women's lives and how they differ from

those of men. Despite the diversity, feminist anthropology shares a critical assessment of traditional scholarship and understanding the importance of power.[54] In these ways, feminist anthropology shares a good deal with the political economy perspective as well as postmodernism, which we discuss shortly. In some cases, entirely new understandings of other cultures have come from feminist scholarship. For example, Annette Weiner studied the same culture that Malinowski had, in the Trobriand Islands, and found that Malinowski had overlooked an entire women-run economic system.[55] Similarly, Sally Slocum pointed out that, although hunting was a focus for paleoanthropologists interested in human origins, the gathering of wild foods, typically a female activity, was hardly discussed at all, even though gathered foods are more important than hunted foods in the diets of some recent foragers. Slocum's work forced paleoanthropologists to consider the role of gathered foods and, consequently, of women, in human evolution.[56]

One of the most important effects feminist research has had on anthropology is the recognition that perceptions of other cultures are shaped by the observer's culture and how the observer behaves in the field. Male researchers may not be able to ask about or observe some women's roles, just as women may not be able to ask about or observe some men's roles. More broadly, feminist scholarship suggested that the scientific approach was only one way of studying other cultures, and that different ways of studying other cultures might lead to different understandings. From this insight grew two powerful theoretical agendas that continue to affect anthropology today.

One agenda stemming from feminist scholarship is that science is inherently male in its orientation and that its impact on the world has been to further the subjugation of women. But female scientists would strongly disagree: Science is neither male nor female. A second agenda, less radical than the first, is to experiment with alternative ways of studying and describing other cultures, ways that give more voice to the people being studied and that allow for the feelings, opinions, and insights of the observer to be openly expressed in anthropological writing. Many of these feminist anthropologists have used personal narratives, storytelling, and even poetry as ways to express their understanding of the cultures they have studied.[57]

Interpretive Approaches

The "literary turn" in anthropology, in which anthropologists began to experiment with fiction, personal insights, and even poetry as forms of ethnography, did not come solely out of feminist anthropology. Since the 1960s, writers in the field of literary criticism have influenced the development of a variety of "interpretive" approaches in cultural anthropology, particularly with respect to ethnography.[58] Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) popularized the idea that a culture is like a literary text that can be analyzed for meaning, as the ethnographer interprets it. According to Geertz, ethnographers choose to interpret the meaning of things in their field cultures that are of interest to themselves. Then they try to convey their interpretations of cultural meaning to people of their own culture. Thus, according to Geertz, ethnographers are a kind of selective intercultural translator.[59]

For many interpretive anthropologists, the goal of anthropology is to understand what it means to be a person living in a particular culture, rather than to explain why cultures vary. The task of understanding meaning, these scholars claim, cannot be achieved scientifically, but can only be approached through forms of literary analysis. Among the most important of these is **hermeneutics**—the study of meaning. Using hermeneutics, anthropologists might examine a particular behavior, closely examining the interactions of people, the language they use, and the symbols they employ (both physical and linguistic) to derive what that behavior means to the people engaged in it. One of the most famous examples is Geertz's analysis of cockfighting on the Indonesian island of Bali, which he suggests reflects, and thus allows us to comprehend, the Balinese worldview.[60]

A key facet of interpretive analyses is that they are openly subjective and personal. Geertz's interpretation of the Balinese cockfight is neither right nor wrong—it is simply his. Another anthropologist viewing the same phenomenon might come to a completely different interpretation. Interpretive anthropologists accept this as part of the nature of being human. They suggest that no human sees the world in quite the same way, so that no interpretation of human behavior can or should be the same. Anthropology, then, becomes a reflection of the anthropologist as much as it is a description of other peoples. For many anthropologists, this self-centered approach makes interpretive anthropology very unappealing; for others, it is the only truthful way to work.

Some anthropologists think that interpretation is the only achievable goal in cultural anthropology because they do not believe it is possible to describe or measure cultural phenomena (and other things involving humans) in objective or unbiased ways. Scientific anthropologists do not agree. To be sure, interpretive ethnographies might provide insights. But we do not have to believe what an interpretation suggests, no matter how eloquently it is stated. (We are rarely given objective evidence to support the interpretation.) Scientific researchers have developed many techniques for minimizing bias and increasing the objectivity of measurement. Thus, interpretative anthropologists who deny the possibility of scientific understanding of human behavior and thinking may not know how much has been achieved so far by scientific studies of cultural phenomena, which we try to convey in the chapters that follow.

As Dan Sperber has suggested, the task of interpretation in cultural anthropology is clearly different from the task of explanation.[61] The goal of interpretation is to convey intuitive understanding of human experiences in a *particular* culture (intuitive in the sense of not requiring

conscious reasoning or systematic methods of inquiry). Thus, interpretative ethnographers are like novelists (or literary critics). In contrast, the goal of explanation is to provide causal and general understanding of cultural phenomena (causal in the sense of mechanisms that account for why something comes to be shared in a population, and general in the sense of applying to a number of similar cases).

Does the goal (interpretation vs. explanation) preclude or invalidate the other? We don't think so. We share Sperber's view that interpretation and explanation are not opposed goals: They are just different kinds of understanding. Indeed, an intuitive interpretation described in causal and general terms might turn out, when scientifically tested, to be a powerful explanation.

Postmodernist Approaches

Postmodernism in its broadest sense rejects "modernism." There are many postmodern movements—in the arts, in literature, in philosophy, in history, and in anthropology, among others. In anthropology, *post-structuralism* is a closely related term. It is difficult to summarize what postmodernism is in anthropology because postmodernism itself rejects authoritative definitions and any one narrative of events.[62] Not only is all knowledge subjective in the postmodern view, it is also actively shaped by the political powers-that-be. One of the most influential postmodern theorists is the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Foucault argued that those in political power were able to shape the way accepted truths were defined. In the modern age, truth is defined through science, and science, in turn, is controlled by Western political and intellectual elites.[63] Science, then, is not only a way of understanding the world, it is a way of controlling and dominating it. Many of the others who had an influence on post-structuralism or postmodernism also were important French intellectuals—for example, Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida. Whereas structuralism was implicitly comparative—looking for similarities in underlying structure—post-structuralism emphasizes extreme relativity, not only between, but also within cultures.

Postmodernism questions the whole enterprise of ethnography. Ethnography is viewed as being "constructed," almost as a work of fiction.[64] For anthropologists who accept the postmodern view of science, anthropology is just another tool used by dominant powers to control others. By studying others "objectively," we dehumanize the people being studied. Turning people into objects for study allows them to become objects that can be molded and used by the political powers-that-be. Postmodern anthropologists have not given up writing about other cultures, but have experimented with different styles of ethnography, such as having a variety of different people speak for themselves.[65]

Not surprisingly, the postmodern movement in anthropology, which effectively questioned all the descriptive work from the past and present, as well as all the attempts to test and evaluate theory, created an enormous schism in anthropology, one that is still present today. How can anthropology continue to exist if its efforts contribute to the domination and control of others? Postmodern scholars answer that anthropology must transform itself into a purely activist discipline that seeks to express the voices of the dominated rather than to study or interpret them. Anthropology should be a conduit for the disenfranchised and subjugated to be heard. Even so, does that preclude anthropology from being scientific?

The Pragmatic Approach

Many, perhaps most, anthropologists do not have a particular theoretical orientation that drives their research agenda. In the interest of being honest about our own orientations, we consider ourselves to be in this category. We do believe that anthropology can strive for humanistic understanding and be scientific at the same time. The important priority for us is the research question. Whatever the research question you ask, it is important to see what others have said about that question. The various theories may come from different orientations, but the important thing is not where ideas come from, but where they lead you and what you can predict. Similarly, for us, there is also no one correct method of conducting research. Different strategies have advantages and disadvantages, and progress is most likely by examining theoretical ideas from different vantage points. To be sure, it is not likely that any one researcher will be completely open to all points of view. It is all the more important then for different researchers with different perspectives to tackle the same research questions.

To a great extent, the scientific study of human behavior depends upon the belief that it is possible to find answers to puzzling questions about humans. If you do not believe that there are answers, you will not waste your time looking. Our belief that the scientific study of humans and their cultures is possible is bolstered by the many patterns we have already discovered. Although postmodern, interpretive, and some feminist approaches have challenged the very foundations of anthropology, anthropology as a discipline continues to thrive. In part, this is because anthropologists have learned important lessons from the work of feminist, interpretive, and postmodern scholars. No anthropologist working today could ignore women's roles, for example. It is no longer possible to ignore half of humanity. Understanding meaning, along with explaining variation, is now a parallel goal of anthropology. Anthropologists realize that their knowledge of others is possibly subjective and imperfect, but that doesn't mean it is impossible to study humans and their cultures scientifically.

The Future

It is difficult to predict what anthropological theory will be like in the future. Some ideas are likely to be discarded or ignored, and others revised. Scholarly disciplines and

theories are very much the products of their times, and understanding how and why ideas have changed is part of what we need to understand. But some theoretical approaches and theories lead to greater understanding because they are more predictive of the world around us. In the next chapter, we examine the logic of explanation and evidence and how theory can be tested by anthropological research.

SUMMARY

1. Which aspects of life anthropologists concentrate on usually reflects their theoretical orientation, subject interest, or preferred method of research.
2. A theoretical orientation is usually a general attitude about how cultural phenomena are to be explained.
3. Ideas about evolution took a long time to take hold because they contradicted the biblical view of events; species were viewed as fixed in their form by the creator. But in the 18th and early 19th centuries, increasing evidence suggested that evolution was a viable theory. In geology, the concept of uniformitarianism suggested that the earth is constantly subject to shaping and reshaping by natural forces working over vast stretches of time. A number of thinkers during this period began to discuss evolution and how it might occur.
4. The prevailing theoretical orientation in anthropology during the 19th century was based on a belief that culture generally evolves in a uniform and progressive manner; that is, most societies were believed to pass through the same series of stages, to arrive ultimately at a common end. Two proponents of this early theory of cultural evolution were Edward B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan.
5. The diffusionist approach, popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was developed by two main schools—the British and the German-Austrian. In general, diffusionists believed that most aspects of high civilization had emerged in culture centers from which they then diffused outward.
6. During the early 20th century, the leading opponent of evolutionism was Franz Boas, whose historical particularism rejected the way in which early evolutionists had assumed that universal laws governed all human culture. Boas stressed the importance of collecting as much anthropological data as possible, from which the laws governing cultural variation would supposedly emerge by themselves.
7. The psychological orientation in anthropology, which began in the 1920s, seeks to understand how psychological factors and processes may help us explain cultural practices.
8. Functionalism in social science looks for the part (function) that some aspect of culture or social life plays in maintaining a cultural system. There are two quite different schools of functionalism. Malinowski's version of functionalism assumes that all cultural traits serve the needs of *individuals* in a society. Radcliffe-Brown's felt that the various aspects of social behavior maintain a *society's social structure* rather than satisfying individual needs.
9. In the 1940s, Leslie A. White revived the evolutionary approach to cultural development. White believed that technological development, or the amount of energy harnessed per capita, was the main driving force creating cultural evolution. Anthropologists such as Julian H. Steward, Marshall Sahlins, and Elman Service have also presented evolutionary viewpoints.
10. Claude Lévi-Strauss has been the leading proponent of structuralism. Lévi-Strauss sees culture, as it is expressed in art, ritual, and the patterns of daily life, as a surface representation of the underlying patterns of the human mind.
11. Whereas Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach involves intuitively grasping the rules of thought that may underlie a given culture, an ethnographic approach known as ethnoscience attempts to derive these rules from a logical analysis of data—particularly the words people use to describe their activities. In this way, ethnoscientists try to formulate the rules that generate acceptable behavior in a given culture. Cognitive anthropology has its roots in ethnoscience.
12. Cultural ecology seeks to understand the relationships between cultures and their physical and social environments. Cultural ecologists ask how a particular culture trait may be adaptive in its environment.
13. The theoretical orientation called political economy focuses on the impact of external political and economic processes, particularly as connected to colonialism and imperialism, on local events and cultures in the underdeveloped world. The political economy approach has reminded us that all parts of the world are interconnected for better or worse.
14. Evolutionary ecology involves the application of biological evolutionary principles to the social behavior of animals, including humans.
15. Feminist approaches were born from the realization that the study of women and women's roles in other cultures was relatively rare. Some feminist anthropologists take an overtly political stance, seeing their task as identifying ways in which women are exploited and working to overcome them. Others simply try to understand women's lives and how they differ from those of men.
16. For many interpretive anthropologists, the goal of anthropology is to understand what it means to be a person living in a particular culture, rather than to explain why cultures vary. The task of understanding meaning, these scholars claim, cannot be achieved scientifically, but can only be approached through forms of literary analysis.
17. Postmodernists take the interpretative idea that all knowledge is subjective, further arguing that knowledge is actively shaped by the political powers-that-be.

18. There are anthropologists who do not follow any particular theoretical orientation or prefer any particular subject matter or method of research. These anthropologists think of themselves as having a pragmatic orientation, using different methods and theories to answer different research questions.

GLOSSARY TERMS ○●○

behavioral ecology **26**
cultural ecology **24**
dual-inheritance theory **26**
ethnoscience **24**
eugenics **19**
evolutionary psychology **26**
functionalism **21**
general evolution **23**
genus **16**
group selection **26**
hermeneutics **28**
individual selection **26**
political economy **25**
sociobiology **26**
specific evolution **23**
structuralism **23**
theoretical orientation **14**

CRITICAL QUESTIONS ○○●

1. Does a theoretical orientation enhance one's way of looking at the world, or does it blind one to other possibilities? Explain your answer.
2. In anthropology, as in many other fields, one theoretical orientation will arise and may grow in popularity until another is proposed in opposition to it. Is this kind of rejection healthy for a discipline? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. Although anthropology is holistic in including the study of humans as both biological organisms and as cultural or social organisms, cultural and biological theories are rarely considered together. Why do you think? Explain why you think that this helps or hinders anthropology.

Read Richard Scaglion, "Abelam: Giant Yams and Cycles of Sex, Warfare and Ritual" on MyAnthroLab and answer the following questions:

1. Describe what Scaglion means by the "ethnographic present." Does using that concept allow for studying cultural change?
2. Pick two of the theoretical orientations you have read about in this chapter, then indicate how they might point toward an explanation of some aspects of the yam-growing cycle."