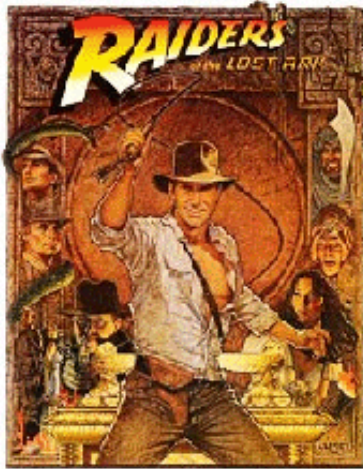


# Overview of Anthropology



The fiction of anthropology--a rugged adventurer who takes what he wants

Hollywood has given us a peculiar and misleading picture of what **anthropology** is about. What comes to mind is usually one of two stereotypical images, both of which are inaccurate at best. The first is that of an absent-minded, bookish eccentric who spends his life in odd corners of the world searching out strange customs. The other is the rugged, self-reliant, fictional adventurer archaeologist Indiana Jones in the *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The reality is that anthropologists are trained scientists who usually work as university professors or museum curators. Some have jobs in environmental analysis companies or government organizations such as national park services and agencies for indigenous peoples. Other anthropologists work in major corporations and even the police and the military.

Anthropological research covers a wide range of topics and is generally done by teams of scientists rather than lone explorers. Some anthropologists are interested in discovering, through the fossil record and DNA, how we evolved. Some focus on the nature of human biology in order to understand how we adapt to different environmental conditions and how we vary as a species. Some work with the police or the military to identify people from their skeletal remains. Others observe the behavior of monkeys and apes in their natural settings. Still others live in different societies around the world for months or even years to learn their language and to understand their customs and way of life. And, yes, some anthropologists excavate the archaeological remains of ancient cultures to find out what our ancestors did and how they lived.

Often anthropologists work with scientists from other fields of study such as public health, agronomy, zoology, and botany. This interdisciplinary approach to research has become particularly important in understanding the fossil record of early humans and their ancestors as well as the complexities of social interaction and motivations in contemporary [cultures](#) around the world.

The word "anthropology" was first used in English as early as 1593. However, anthropology as a distinct academic discipline is comparatively young. Its roots go back to the intellectual [Enlightenment](#) of the 18th and early 19th centuries in Europe and North America. As European nations developed colonies in distant parts of the world and Americans expanded west and south into the territories of Indians, it became apparent to them that humanity was extremely varied. Anthropology began, in part, as an attempt by members of scientific societies to objectively record and comprehend this variation. Curiosity about strange people and customs in far off parts of the world is what primarily motivated these early amateur anthropologists. By profession, they most often were naturalists, medical doctors, Christian clerics, or educated explorers. They asked such fundamental questions as whether or not the differences between human cultures are the result of genetic inheritance and if there is a relationship between the size of a human brain and intelligence. As a consequence of this pioneering research, we now understand that the answer to both of these questions is no. Another surprising question that was important at the beginnings of anthropology

came from early 19th century antislavery societies, especially in the northern United States. This was the question of whether or not African slaves were as fully human as people from Europe. Today, few if any would doubt that they are. Two centuries ago, however, most people of European ancestry would have disagreed.

It was not until the late 19th century that anthropology finally became a separate academic discipline in American and Western European universities. Today, it is an international science with anthropologists in most nations of the world. They are now asking fascinating new questions about the nature of humanity in all of our varied societies. The answers to many of these questions are the focus of this tutorial series.

The word anthropology comes from the Greek *anthropos*, meaning human being. Anthropology is a broad scientific study of human culture and biology. It strives to understand what defines us as humans and to explain how we got to be the way we are. History, philosophy, sociology, biology, and some other academic fields are also interested in learning what it means to be human. Anthropologists generally differ in their more inclusive **holistic approach**--they are interested in learning about both the biological and cultural aspects of humanity around the globe and throughout time. They recognize that the considerable variability of our human experience requires an unbiased [cultural relativity](#) approach and **cross-cultural comparisons** to comprehend it. They also have come to realize that people cannot be understood by studying either their biological makeup or their cultural traditions alone. It is necessary to take into consideration both genetically inherited and learned traits in trying to explain how we have become what we are and how we differ from one another.

When asked what they do, most anthropologists answer that they study cultural anthropology, archaeology, or some other subdiscipline of the field. The scope of anthropology is so broad today, that few if any consider themselves competent in all areas. In a very real sense, anthropology is a bridge between the sciences and the humanities in terms of its research focus and methods. At one extreme, biological anthropologists explore the relatively objective, quantifiable facts of molecular biology and the mechanisms of genetic inheritance and evolution. At the other, cultural anthropologists tackle the highly subjective reality of cultural attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs.

## Unifying Concepts of Anthropology

Regardless of their subfield, anthropologists share several major assumptions about humanity. The first is **human universalism**. This is the view that all people today are fully and equally human. An implication is that people from all societies of the world are intelligent, complex, and interesting to study. It may be surprising that this needs to be stated, but historically it was not widely accepted and still is not in many parts of the world. It has been common for people to consider those from other societies to be somehow different and inferior. Even the enlightened 19th century naturalist Charles Darwin held such views. In his journal of an around the world scientific expedition in the 1830's, he wrote about his encounter with Native Americans at the southern tip of South America. He said, "It was without exception the most curious and interesting spectacle I ever beheld: I could not have believed how wide was the difference between savage and civilized man: it is greater than between a wild and domesticated animal..."

Viewing such men, one can hardly make one's self believe that they are fellow-creatures, and inhabitants of the same world." This sort of **ethnocentric** belief that other peoples are culturally and even biologically different and inferior in terms of intelligence, physical attractiveness, customs, and morals is still widespread today in even the most tolerant nations. It was incorporated into the German Nazi beliefs during the 1920's and had dreadful consequences in Europe during the 1930's and early 1940's. It led to the labeling of Jews, Gypsies, and Slavs as *untermench* (literally "under man" or "sub-human"). Once labeled as not quite fully human, it was psychologically a relatively easy step to rationalize their enslavement and extermination. Similar interpretations of other peoples led to several brutal wars of "ethnic cleansing" during the late 20th century, most notably in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo. It is easy to condemn these extreme cases of **genocide**, but it is important to realize that the ethnocentrism that led to them is found in all societies to some degree, including the United States. It has been conveniently forgotten by many Americans that attitudes about Indians during the 19th century were strongly colored by ethnocentrism. They ranged from considering these indigenous peoples to be simple-minded children who needed protection and education to remorseless savages who had to be exterminated. It is sobering to recall that a common saying in the United States in the last third of the 19th century was "The only good Indian is a dead Indian."

Another common assumption of anthropologists is related to the concept of **integration**. That is the view that all aspects of a culture are interrelated and that an understanding of any cultural trait or institution requires knowing how it impacts and is in turn impacted by other institutions. For instance, it would not be possible to fully comprehend the movement of the majority of North American women into the work place as full time employees during the second half of the 20th century without taking into consideration such factors as the development and widespread use of effective birth control measures. In addition, wives working full time inevitably led to changes in traditional complementary roles of husbands and wives and was a major factor in the shift in child care from family members to nursery schools and other institutions. These changes, in turn, made it easier for women to enter the work force.

Likewise, human biological traits do not evolve and function in isolation. In order to understand them, it is necessary to grasp how they are interrelated with other genetically inherited characteristics and how environmental factors might select for or against them. For instance, an attempt at understanding the human cardiovascular system (mostly the heart, blood vessels, and blood) would be inadequate without understanding the effect on it of chemicals in the body such as the "fight or flight" hormone adrenaline. This hormone is produced by the adrenal glands that sit on top of the kidneys. Within seconds of being injected into the blood, adrenaline can dramatically increase the rate that the heart pumps and cause the lungs to hyperventilate in order to get more oxygen into the blood. An injection of adrenaline occurs naturally as a consequence of signals from the brain, which in turn is responding to dangerous situations in the environment outside of the body. It is clear that there is a complex interrelationship between the cardiovascular system, other parts of the body, and the surrounding environment. It can only be fully understood as an interacting whole.

Another assumption of anthropologists is related to how we have flourished as a species through **adaptation**. Physically, humans are not particularly impressive members of the animal kingdom. We have relatively thin skin. We don't have claws or long, sharp killing teeth. We can't fly, run fast, or jump far, though we

can run farther than any other animal. Many other creatures can kill and eat us. Yet, we are now the unquestionably dominant large animal on land, and our population has grown explosively, especially over the last 10,000 years. While we began as tropical animals and physically continue to be so, we have been able to successfully colonize most environments on our planet. What has made this possible has been our ability to acquire knowledge and create technology to adapt to new environments. Any successful behavior, strategy, or technique for obtaining food and surviving in a new environment provides a selective advantage in the competition for survival with other life forms. For instance, we have learned how to survive the winters in such areas as Northern Canada and Alaska with their extremely cold temperatures by storing food and creating artificial tropical environments in the form of well insulated houses, fires for heating, and clothes. Over thousands of years we also slowly adapt genetically to different climatic conditions. This largely accounts for the variation in human skin color around the globe.

The most important core concept in anthropology is **culture**. While there have been many definitions of culture, anthropologists usually consider it to be the full range of learned behavior patterns and knowledge acquired by people as members of a society. Culture is not genetically hardwired in--we do not inherit it biologically. We learn it from our parents and other people who are around us as we grow up. Anthropologists have come to realize that what sets our species apart from most, if not all, others is our heavy reliance and even dependence on culture for survival. The progressive human development of cultural knowledge and technology over the last 2.5 million years has allowed us to transform ourselves from relatively insignificant African scavengers of plants and animal carcasses left by large carnivores to a truly global species capable of controlling the fate of all other species. Despite the power that culture gives us, it is a remarkably fragile phenomenon. It is constantly changing and easily lost because it exists almost entirely in our minds. You will learn more about what culture is in the [next tutorial](#) in this series.

## Research in Anthropology

Anthropology is a dynamic field of study. Important new discoveries are made almost every week. The source of virtually all of this fresh knowledge is **field work** rather than laboratory experiments. This method of learning and understanding by first-hand observation of people where they live is largely an inheritance from the naturalists of the 19th century. Because of the complexity of humans and their behavior in particular, it is extremely difficult to learn about them in any other way.

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