



Anthropologists are interested in the total range of human activity. Here, children light clay lamps on the banks of the Ganges in Kolkata, India. What sorts of things would you like to know about them and what they're doing? What questions would you ask?

Photo by Avijit Ghosh/SOPA Images/Sipa USA/AP Images

1

## INTRODUCING ANTHROPOLOGY

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define anthropology, and explain how it differs from other academic disciplines.
2. List the major subdisciplines of anthropology and summarize their characteristics.
3. Describe some of the key reasons for studying anthropology, and explain their relevance to current problems.

## THE NACIREMA

ANTHROPOLOGISTS have become so familiar with the diversity of ways different peoples behave in similar situations that they are not surprised by even the most exotic customs. However, the magical beliefs and practices of the Nacirema are so unusual that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go. The Nacirema are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east.

Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy, but Naciremans spend a considerable portion of the day in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as dominant concerns in the ethos of the people.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and has a natural tendency to debility and disease. People's only hope is to avert these through the use of ritual and ceremony, and every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The rituals associated with the shrine are secret and are discussed with children only when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to establish sufficient rapport with the natives to examine these shrines and to have the rituals described to me.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest built into the wall in which are kept the many charms and magical potions no native believes he could live without. Beneath the charm box is a small fountain. Each day, every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows his head before the charm box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the fountain, and proceeds with a brief rite of purification. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.

The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Each day, Naciremans perform a complex set of rituals devoted to the mouth. Were it not for these rituals, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them.

In addition to daily mouth rites, the people seek out a holy-mouthman once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these objects in the exorcism of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. The holy-mouth-man uses these tools to scrape, prod, and cut particularly sensitive areas of the mouth. Magical materials believed to arrest decay and draw fluids are inserted in the mouth. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy-mouth-men year after year, even though their teeth continue to decay. One has but to watch the gleam in the eye of a holy-mouth-man, as he jabs an awl into an exposed nerve, to suspect that a certain amount of sadism is involved in these practices. And indeed, much of the population shows definite masochistic tendencies. For example, a portion of the daily body ritual performed only by men involves scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument.

Nacirema medicine men have an imposing temple, or latipsoh, in every community of any size. The more elaborate ceremonies required to treat very sick patients can be performed only at this temple. These ceremonies involve not only the priests who perform miracles but also a permanent group of vestal maidens who move sedately about the temple chambers in distinctive costume.

The latipsoh ceremonies are so harsh that it is surprising that sick adults are not only willing but also eager to undergo the protracted ritual purification if they can afford to do so. No matter how ill the supplicant or how grave the emergency, the guardians of the temple will not admit a client if he cannot give a rich gift to the custodian. Even after one has gained admission and survived the ceremonies, the guardians continue to demand gifts, sometimes pursuing clients to their homes and businesses.

Supplicants entering the temple are first stripped of all their clothes. Psychological shock results from the fact that body secrecy is suddenly lost. A man whose own wife has never seen him in an excretory act suddenly finds himself naked and assisted by a vestal maiden while he performs his natural functions into a sacred vessel. Female clients find their naked bodies are subjected to the scrutiny, manipulation, and prodding of the medicine men. The fact that these temple ceremonies may not cure and may even kill the patients in no way decreases the people's faith in the medicine men.

Mention must also be made of certain practices of the Nacirema that have their base in native aesthetics but depend on the pervasive aversion to the natural body and its functions. There are ritual fasts to make fat people thin and ceremonial feasts to make thin people fat. Other rites are used to make women's breasts larger if they are small, and smaller if they are large.

Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has shown them to be a magic-ridden people. It is hard to understand how they have managed to exist so long under the burdens they have imposed upon themselves. But even exotic customs such as these take on real meaning when they are viewed with the insight that Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the most important twentieth-century anthropologists, provided when he wrote, "Looking from far and above, from our high places of safety in civilization, it is easy to see all the crudity and irrelevance of magic. But without its power and guidance early man could not have mastered his practical difficulties as he has done, nor could man have advanced to the higher stages of civilization."

## INTRODUCING ANTHROPOLOGY

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The essay you've just read is adapted from a classic piece of American anthropology by Horace Miner (1912–1993). Despite being more than half a century old, it has lost none of its bite. The essay is good because it plays upon two critical themes that continue to draw people to anthropology: our quest to gain knowledge and to understand people who are vastly different from ourselves and our desire to know ourselves and our own culture better.

Miner's essay draws you in as you read about the strange and bizarre customs of people who at first appear utterly different from yourself. You're not only titillated by the details of exotic practices but also comforted by the scientific writing style that seems to assure you that somehow this all makes sense. At some point in your reading, you probably realized that Miner (1956) is describing American customs as they might have been seen fifty years ago from the point of view of an unknowing but perhaps perceptive observer. Your first reaction might be to chuckle at the narrator's misunderstandings and treat the essay as an example of just how wrong an outside observer might be about a culture. But if you're a reflective person, you might have also wondered if the narrator hadn't turned up some fairly penetrating insights about the nature of our society. Clearly, the narrator has misunderstood some of the ways Americans think about bathrooms, dentists, and hospitals. But is the narrator so far off in describing the American attitude toward disease, decay, and death? Finally, if you caught the joke early enough, you might have pondered the meaning of the quotation that ends the essay: Have we really "advanced to the higher stages of civilization?" What does that mean anyway?

Miner's essay deals with some of the critical questions and desires at the heart of anthropology: How do we understand other people and actions that seem different, odd, or strange? Why do people do what they do? And, perhaps more profoundly, how do we go about describing our own and other people's cultural worlds? How do we know if these descriptions are accurate? We will return to these issues in many places in this book. But first, a brief definition and description of anthropology: **Anthropology** is the scientific and humanistic study of human beings. It encompasses the evolutionary history of humanity, physical variation among humans, the study of past societies, and the comparative study of current-day human societies and cultures.

A **society** is a group of people who depend on one another for survival or well-being. **Culture** is the way members of a society adapt to their environment and give meaning to their lives. It includes ideas, beliefs, and values as well as behaviors.

Some critical goals of anthropology are to describe, analyze, and explain different cultures; to show how groups live in different physical, economic, and social environments; and to show how their members give meaning to their lives. Anthropology attempts to comprehend the entire human experience. Through human paleontology, it describes the evolutionary development of our species. Through archaeology, it reaches from current-day societies to those of the distant past. Through primatology, it extends beyond humans to encompass the animals most closely related to us.

Human beings almost everywhere are **ethnocentric** (Photo 1.1). That is, they consider their own behavior not only right but also natural. We often want other people to behave just like we do, and we feel troubled, insulted, or outraged when they do not. Indeed, part of our reaction to the



**PHOTO 1.1** Ethnocentrism, the notion that one's own culture is superior to any other, is the sentiment expressed in this 1930s era advertisement. A famous 1937 photo contrasted the well off smiling white family in the photo with a breadline of mostly Black people below it.

Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo

Nacirema essay stems from the fact that the Naciremans seem to do things that, to us, seem neither right nor natural. However, as the essay suggests, the range of human behavior is truly enormous.

For example, should you give your infant bottled formula, or should you breastfeed not only your own child but, like the Efe of Democratic Republic of Congo, those of your friends and neighbors as well (Peacock 1991, 352)? Is it right that emotional love should precede sexual relations? Or should sexual relations precede love, as is normal for the Manganian of the Pacific (Marshall 1971)? What should we have for lunch: hamburgers and fries or termites, grasshoppers, and hot maguery worms, all of which are commonly eaten in certain regions of Mexico (Bates 1967, 58–59)? Should we bring our baby into a shop or restaurant with us or leave it to snooze in a stroller outside, as is common in Denmark (Lodish 2014; Photo 1.2)?

For anthropologists, these examples suggest that what is right or natural for human beings is not easily determined and that attempts to understand human nature and theories of human behavior cannot be based simply on our own cultural assumptions. To reflect humanity accurately, they also must be based on studies of human groups whose goals, values, views of reality, and environmental adaptations are very different from our own. We can achieve an accurate understanding of humanity only by realizing that other groups of people who behave differently from us and have different understandings also consider the things they do and the ways they understand the world to be normal and natural.

One job of anthropology is to understand what actions and ideas mean within their contexts and to place these within the broader framework of human society, environment, and history. Anthropologists refer to the practice of attempting to understand cultures within their contexts as **cultural relativism**. It is important to understand that practicing cultural relativism does not mean that anthropologists believe all cultural traditions to be good or to be of equal worth or that all should be honored or preserved. People around the world, and indeed in our own society, do terrible things. Slavery, human sacrifice, and torture are all cultural practices. Anthropologists do not defend such customs on the basis of cultural relativism. However, anthropologists do believe that we need to understand even those practices that horrify us. Anthropologists study how they developed, how they work in society, and how they are



**PHOTO 1.2** In Denmark, it is common for shopping or dining parents to leave their babies outside.

AP Photo/Bjoern Kaehler

experienced by the people who live them. And, sometimes, how they might be changed. Both ethnocentrism and cultural relativism are examined in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Anthropologists bring a holistic approach to understanding and explaining. To say anthropology is **holistic** means that it combines the study of human biology, history, and the learned and shared patterns of human behavior and thought we call culture to analyze human groups. Holism separates anthropology from other academic disciplines, which generally focus on one factor—biology, psychology, physiology, or society—as the explanation for human behavior.

Because anthropologists use this holistic approach, they are interested in the total range of human activity. Most anthropologists specialize in a single field and a single problem, but together, they study the small dramas of daily living as well as spectacular social events. They study how mothers hold their babies or sons address their fathers. They want to know not only how a group gets its food but also the rules for eating it. Anthropologists are interested in how people in human societies think about time and space and how they see and name colors. They are interested in health and illness and the significance of physical variation, as well as many other things. Anthropologists study these things not only in other societies but in our own as well. Anthropologists maintain that culture, social organization, history, and human biology are tightly interrelated. Although we can never know absolutely everything about any group of people, the more we know about the many different facets of a society, the clearer the picture we are able to draw and the greater the depth of our understanding.

## SPECIALIZATION IN ANTHROPOLOGY

In the United States, anthropology has traditionally included four separate subdisciplines: biological (or physical) anthropology, linguistic anthropology, archaeology, and cultural anthropology. To these four traditional subfields, some may add a fifth, applied anthropology. Although professional anthropologists generally have training in all of the subdisciplines, they usually identify with one of them. In this section, we briefly describe each subfield.

### Biological or Physical Anthropology

People live in a broad range of ecological and social conditions. Our ability to survive and prosper in many different circumstances is based on the enormous flexibility of cultural behavior. The capacity for culture, however, is grounded in the biological history and physical makeup of our species. Humans are biocultural beings; that is, our lives involve both biological and cultural dimensions. Therefore, to understand fully what it is to be human, we need a sense of how the biological aspects of human adaptation came about and how they both influence and are influenced by human cultural behavior.

**Biological (or physical) anthropology** is the study of humankind from a biological perspective. It focuses primarily on the aspects of humanity that are genetically inherited. Biological anthropology includes numerous subfields, such as the analysis of skeletons; the study of human nutrition; the statistical study of human populations; the study of patterns of disease; and the study of primates, animals that are closely related to humans.

Biological anthropology is probably best known for the study of human evolution. Paleoanthropologists use the fossil record to trace the history of human evolution. They study the remains of creatures that were related to modern-day humans and those that are ancestral to humanity.

The study of human variation is another subspecialty of biological anthropology. It is concerned with physiological differences among humans. Anthropologists who study human variation map physiological differences among modern human groups and attempt to explain the sources of this diversity.

Our unique evolutionary history resulted in the development of biological structures such as the human brain, dexterous hands with opposable thumbs, and an upright posture that frees these hands from work in locomotion. This biology is the basis of our ability to invent, learn, and use cultural adaptations. Cultural adaptation, in turn, has affected human biology. For example, in *Catching Fire* (2009), Richard Wrangham argues that an aspect of culture, the ability to control fire and use it to cook food, led to dramatic biological and social changes in human ancestors. Cooked food was more digestible than raw, and this resulted in changes in human anatomy (far shorter digestive tracts than our closest primate relations). Cooking food required changes in social organization that led to much greater cooperation between males and females than is found among nonhuman primates. Wrangham thus shows that human culture is not simply social and cultural “software” running on biological “hardware.” Rather, the cultural and the biological are intimately related and ultimately inseparable. Human evolution is both a biological and a cultural process.

In addition to studying humans and their ancestors, biological anthropologists study non-human primates as well. These are members of the biological order that include monkeys, apes, and humans. We study monkeys and apes for the clues that their body structures, behaviors, and genetics provide about our own species. Much of the work of biological anthropologists involves studying these animals in the wild. Jane Goodall, who works with chimpanzees in Tanzania, is among the best-known anthropologists. Other well-known primatologists include Sarah Hrdy and Jill Pruetz.

## Linguistic Anthropology

Language is the primary means by which people communicate with one another. Although most creatures communicate, human speech is more complex and creative than the communication systems used by other animals. Language is an essential part of what it means to be human and a basic part of all cultures. **Linguistic anthropology** is concerned with understanding language and its relation to culture.

Language is an amazing thing we take for granted. When we speak, we use our bodies—our lungs, vocal cords, mouth, tongue, and lips—to produce noise of varying tones and pitches. And, somehow, when we do this (and if we speak the same language), we can communicate with one another. Linguistic anthropologists want to understand how language is structured, how it is learned, and how this communication takes place.

Language is key to cultural interaction and transmission. Thus, studying language helps us understand culture. For example, people generally talk about the people, places, and objects that are important to them. Therefore, the vocabularies of spoken language may give us clues to important aspects of culture. Knowing the words that people use for things and how these words are related to one another may help us to glimpse the ways they understand the world.

Language involves much more than words. When we speak, we perform. If we tell a story, we don't simply recite the words. We emphasize some things. We add inflection that can turn a serious phrase comic or a comic phrase serious. We give our own special tilt to a story, even if we are just reading a book out loud. Linguistic anthropologists are interested in the ways in which people perform language—in the ways they change and modify the meanings of their words.

All languages change. Historical linguists work to discover how languages have changed and how languages are related to each other. Understanding linguistic change and the relationships between languages helps us to work out the past of the people who speak them. Knowing, for example, the relationships among various Native American languages give us insight into the histories and migrations of those who speak them.

The technological changes of the past two decades have opened a new world of communications. The widespread use of cell phones, email, texting, and social networking create entirely new ways of communicating, changing both the occasions on which people communicate and the language they use. For example, 50 years ago, people who lived at great distances from each other communicated relatively rarely. The mail was often slow, and phone calls were expensive. Now, such people may communicate many times daily, texting each other, speaking on the phone, and interacting with each other using tools such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat.



Online and mobile games such as Warcraft, Minecraft, Words with Friends, and many others allow real-time interaction across vast distances. Cell phones have become extremely important in poorer nations. For example, in 1998, there were no cell phones in Botswana. But by 2006, there were more than 800,000, enough for half the total population and more than six times the number of landlines. By 2008, virtually the entire population had cell phones (Aker and Mbiti 2010). And by 2019, there were 1.7 cellular subscriptions for every person in Botswana (O’Dea 2020). In 2019, across sub-Saharan Africa, there were 477 million unique mobile phone subscribers, a number expected to rise to 1 billion by 2024 (GSMA 2020, 3). Studying these changes in communication is an exciting new challenge for linguistic anthropologists.

Understanding language is a critical task for people interested in developing new technology as well. We live in a world where computers talk to us and listen to us. We will be able to build machines that use language effectively only if we understand how humans structure and use language.

## Archaeology

**Archaeology** is the study of past cultures through analysis of their material remains (archaeologists don’t dig up dinosaurs or other ancient fossils; that is the job of paleontologists). Archaeologists add a vital time dimension to our understanding of cultures.

Many archaeologists study prehistoric societies—those for which no written records have been found or no writing systems have been deciphered. However, even when an extensive written record is available, as in the case of ancient Greece or Colonial America, archaeology can help increase our understanding of the cultures and lifeways of those who came before us.

Archaeologists’ goal is to reconstruct past culture from material remains or artifacts. An artifact is any object that human beings have made, used, or altered. Artifacts include pottery, tools, garbage, and whatever else a society has left behind.

In the popular media, archaeology is mainly identified with spectacular discoveries of artifacts from prehistoric and ancient cultures, such as the tomb of the Egyptian king Tutankhamun. As a result, people often think of archaeologists primarily as collectors. But contemporary archaeologists are much more interested in using their findings to understand past cultural behavior than in creating collections. Their principal task is to explain how people lived in the past based on the nature and the patterns of the artifacts those people left behind. Archaeologists work like detectives, slowly sifting through and interpreting evidence (Photo 1.3). The context in which things are found, the location of an archaeological site, and the precise position of an artifact within that site are critical to interpretation. In fact, these may be more important than the artifact itself.

There are many different specialties within archaeology. Urban archaeology is a good example. Urban archaeologists delve into the recent and distant past of current-day cities. In doing so, they uncover knowledge of the people often left out of the history books, making our understanding of the past far richer than it was. For example, Elizabeth Scott’s work at Nina Plantation in Louisiana (Scott 2001) adds to our understanding of the lives of slaves and free laborers from the 1820s to the 1890s. Joseph Bagley’s excavation of a Boston outhouse belonging to a Puritan woman from the late 1600s unearthed a bowling ball and frilly lace, interesting



**PHOTO 1.3** Archaeologists reconstruct past cultures based on the material remains they leave behind. Here, archaeology students uncover a skeleton at a 3,000-year-old Philistine cemetery in Israel.

Dan Porges/Getty Images

because both were illegal at the time. This suggests that people's private behavior could be quite different from what was recorded in the official records (Bagley 2016).

Another important archaeology subfield is cultural resource management (CRM). Archaeologists working in CRM are concerned with the protection and management of archaeological, archival, and architectural resources. They are often employed by federal, state, and local agencies to develop and implement plans for the protection and management of such cultural resources.

### Cultural Anthropology

The study of human society and culture is known as **cultural anthropology**. Anthropologists define society as a group of people persisting through time and the social relationships among these people: their statuses and roles. Traditionally, societies are thought of as occupying a specific geographic location, but modern transportation and electronic communication have made specific locales less important. Societies are increasingly global rather than local phenomena.

As Chapter 2 will show, culture is an extremely complex phenomenon. Culture is the major way in which human beings adapt to their environments and give meaning to their lives. It includes human behavior and ideas that are learned rather than genetically transmitted, as well as the material objects a group of people produces.

Cultural anthropologists attempt to understand culture both as a universal human phenomenon and as a characteristic of a group of people. They use many different research strategies to examine the dynamics of individual cultures and to search for general principles that underlie all cultures. They may explore how different societies adapt to their environments, the

means by which they produce or acquire food, the structure of their economies, how their members understand the world and their place in it, or how members of different cultures interact with and change one another. Anthropologists are often particularly interested in the effects of differences of power both among cultures and within individual cultures. Research in cultural anthropology almost always involves participant observation, long-term fieldwork based on gathering data by observing and participating in people's lives.

Ethnography and ethnology are two important aspects of cultural anthropology. **Ethnography** is the description of society or culture. An ethnographer attempts to describe an entire society or a particular set of cultural institutions or practices. Ethnographies may be either *emic*, or *etic*, or may combine the two. An **emic** ethnography attempts to capture what ideas and practices mean to members of a culture. It attempts to give readers a sense of what it feels like to be a member of the culture it describes. An **etic** ethnography describes and analyzes culture according to principles and theories drawn from Western scientific traditions such as ecology, economy, or psychology.

**Ethnology** is the attempt to find general principles or laws that govern cultural phenomena. Ethnologists compare and contrast practices in different cultures to find regularities.

Cultural anthropology is a complex field with many different subfields. One index of this complexity is the more than 50 different sections and interest groups of the American Anthropological Association; the vast majority of these are concerned with cultural anthropology. Some examples include political and legal anthropology, which is concerned with issues of nationalism, citizenship, the state, colonialism, and globalism; humanistic anthropology, which is focused on the personal, ethical, and political choices humans face; and visual anthropology, which is the study of visual representation and the media.

Cultural anthropologists are often particularly interested in documenting and understanding how cultures change (Photo 1.4). They examine the roles that power and coercion play in change, as well as humans' ability to invent new technologies and social forms and modify old ones. Studies of culture change are important because rapid shifts in society, economy, and technology are basic characteristics of the contemporary world. Understanding the dynamics of change is critical for individuals, governments, and corporations. One goal of cultural anthropology is to be able to contribute productively to public debate about the promotion of and reaction to change, both in our own society and elsewhere.

### Applied Anthropology

Although anthropology is concerned with basic research—that is, trying to answer the big questions about the origins of our species, the nature of culture, and the meanings and functions of human social institutions—from the start, anthropologists have been interested in the application of their studies. Anthropologists such as Franz Boas contributed to debates on race and foreign policy at the turn of the twentieth century. Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and others did studies aimed at helping America's efforts during World War II. However, throughout much of the twentieth century, almost all anthropologists worked in universities. In the past 50 years, however, anthropology has increasingly become a full-time profession for people outside of universities. **Applied anthropology** is the use of cultural anthropology, linguistics,



**PHOTO 1.4** Anthropologists are often particularly interested in documenting culture change. Here a male dancer in a traditional costume speaks with a woman in contemporary dress at the San Fermin fiesta in northern Spain.

Tim Graham/Getty Images

archaeology, and biological anthropology to solve practical problems in business, politics, delivery of services, land management, and many other fields. There are anthropologists who analyze factory floors and decision-making structures for large corporations. There are those who try to determine the best ways to sell products or deliver services. There are anthropologists

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who work for hospitals and health care organizations, improving the ability of these agencies to serve their patients. Some anthropologists work in politics, performing foreign and domestic policy analysis for governmental agencies. Some are employed in trying to find effective ways to deliver aid to people in poor nations. Other anthropologists work in museums or on public lands, uncovering our archaeological heritage and both preserving it and making it available to the public.

## USING ANTHROPOLOGY: FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Every chapter in this book has a section called “Using Anthropology,” in which we describe some of the different ways that anthropologists use their skills in effecting action in the world. Among other topics, we explore examples of how engaged anthropologists work for the communities they study (Chapter 3), linguistic anthropologists help solve crimes (Chapter 4), and nutritional anthropologists help stop hunger (Chapter 5). Our first section is about forensic anthropologists.

Popularized in television shows such as *Bones* and documentaries such as *The Decrypters*, forensic anthropology is a well-known example of applied biological anthropology. Forensic anthropologists use their anthropological training to identify skeletal or badly decomposed human remains (see Photo 1.5). Their goal is to discover information that can assist in the detection of crime and the prosecution of those responsible.



**PHOTO 1.5** Forensic anthropologists help discover information about victims of crime. Here, forensic anthropology students from Texas State University help law enforcement officials recover human remains near San Antonio, Texas.

Picture from TX ST Anthro

A case begins when a law enforcement agency or medical examiner's office calls for help in discovering the identity and cause of death of an individual whose remains have recently been found. Sometimes, the remains are nonhuman or very old. However, in many cases they are from a recent violent crime.

The next step is the recovery of the body. Anthropologists are frequently called upon to assist law enforcement personnel and supervise the procedure. Sometimes, bodies are found well preserved, but often they are burned, fragmentary, or in various stages of decomposition. Michelle Hamilton, a forensic anthropologist at Texas State University, has recovered bodies in caves, on mountaintops, in forests, down wells, under water, from burned homes, and in many other environments. In one tricky case, Hamilton was called in to excavate underneath a house. A family member who lived in this house had disappeared seven years previously. When she found the body, it was still fully fleshed and recognizable. Therefore, Hamilton concluded that it could not have been buried the entire time since the individual first disappeared. The mystery was solved when family members confessed that the individual had been killed seven years ago, but they had stored the body in a freezer and had only buried it that week.

After a body has been recovered, the anthropologist's job is to establish the individual's identity and to help interpret the events surrounding death. To do this, anthropologists analyze bones and other remains. They search for unique identifying marks. They also analyze trauma and fracture patterns that can provide information about how the person died. In some cases, facial reconstructions are made to provide a likeness of the deceased and to further aid in identification.

In every case, forensic anthropologists are required to produce a report of their findings. Law enforcement agencies use these reports to match bodies with missing persons reports and, if foul play is suspected, to prosecute the individuals believed to be responsible. Usually, the anthropologist's work ends with the delivery of the report, but on occasion, a forensic anthropologist is required to testify as an expert witness in a criminal trial.

In addition to working on individual criminal cases, forensic anthropologists have also played very important roles in identifying the dead in cases of political mass murder or genocide (Fondebrider and Wilson 2015). Some examples are excavations to find and determine the identity of those who "disappeared" during the "dirty war" in Argentina (1976–1983) and those who were murdered during the Bosnian genocide (1992–1995).

## Everyday Anthropology

Although there are many careers in anthropology, it is our conviction that applied anthropology consists of more than just people earning their living with the skills they gained through training in anthropology. Perhaps the most important aspect of anthropology (and the primary justification for its existence) is the way an anthropological perspective demands that we open our eyes and experience the world in new ways. In a sense, learning anthropology is like a fish coming to understand the meaning of water. How can a fish understand water? Water is all a fish knows, and it knows it so well it cannot distinguish it from the nature of life and reality itself. Similarly, all humans live in cultures, and our experiences are normally bounded by our cultures. We often mistake the realities and truths of our culture for reality and truth itself and think that the ways we understand and do things are the only appropriate ways of

understanding and doing. The fish understands the meaning of water only when it is removed from the water (usually with fatal consequences). If anthropology is not exactly about removing people from their culture, it is, in a sense, the conscious attempt to allow people to see beyond its bounds. Through learning about other cultures, we become increasingly aware of the variety of different understandings present in the world and of the social dynamics that underlie culture. This promotes awareness of the meanings and dynamics of our own and other cultures and encourages us to think creatively.

Applying anthropology isn't just getting paid to use your anthropological training. All of us do applied anthropology when we bring anthropological understandings and insight to bear on problems of inequality, education, war, violence, and peace. We don't apply anthropology only when we write a report. We apply anthropology when we go to the voting booth and the grocery store, when we discuss issues with our friends, and, if we're religious, when we pray. Anthropology provides no simple answers. There is no correct anthropological way to vote, shop, or pray. However, anthropology does inform our decisions about these things. Our attempt to understand other cultures and our own lets us look on our own with new eyes.

## WHY STUDY ANTHROPOLOGY?

If you're reading this book for a course at a college or university, and particularly if you are considering a major in anthropology, you've probably faced some strong questioning from friends and family members. Some may have known about anthropology and applauded your wisdom in taking this course. Others may have had no idea what anthropology is. Still others probably asked you what anthropology is good for and what you hope to do with it. You might have told them that you want to work in one of the many aspects of applied anthropology or to become a college professor, but we think there are other good answers as well.

### Some Honest Talk about College Majors and Jobs

Anthropology is, in most places, part of a liberal arts curriculum, which also generally includes English, geography, history, modern languages, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology, as well as other departments and programs. Some liberal arts departments have teacher-training programs. If you want to teach middle school English, in most places, you will probably need a degree in English. Some liberal arts programs involve training in highly technical skills that are directly applicable to jobs. For example, geography departments may offer training in remote sensing, the acquisition and analysis of aerial photography, and multispectral and infrared imagery and radar imagery for use by government and business. However, the vast majority of liberal arts programs produce generalists. An undergraduate degree in psychology does not generally get you a job as a psychologist. Most people who study political science do not go on to be politicians, and few who study sociology go on to work as sociologists. In fact, surveys consistently find that only about 30 percent of college graduates have jobs that are closely connected with their college major (Abel and Deitz 2015). For example, in a survey of 3,000 alumni from the University of Virginia School of Arts and Sciences, 70 percent reported that

there was little such connection. And this survey included many who had majored in subjects that taught very specific technical skills (University of Virginia 2008). Even more surprising, data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that, in 2011, only about a quarter of science and engineering graduates held jobs that were related to their degrees and that required at least a bachelor's degree to perform (Landivar 2013, 2).

Despite the statistics just cited, many private and public organizations look specifically to hire anthropologists. The U.S. government is probably the largest employer of anthropologists, followed by Microsoft (Wood 2013, 51). Companies that have hired anthropologists include Intel, Citicorp, AT&T, Kodak, Disney, General Mills, and many others. Additionally, there are numerous jobs for anthropologists in the public and nonprofit sectors, including positions in international development, social services, museums, national parks, and governmental organizations concerned with national security. In a 2015 article by George Anders in the business magazine *Forbes* titled "That 'Useless' Liberal Arts Degree Has Become Tech's Hottest Ticket," the chief information officer at a major tech firm argues that technical brilliance is not enough, firms need people who understand culture and processes. A recently published study by Harvard professor David J. Deming (2017) demonstrates that jobs requiring understanding of social interaction grew rapidly between 1980 and 2012 while the number of less socially informed jobs shrank. Culture, process, and social interaction are skills at which anthropology students excel.

However, like students with other majors, most anthropology graduates go on to more general positions in government, business, and the professions. Some become executives at large corporations, some are restaurateurs, some are lawyers, some are doctors, some are social service workers, some sell insurance, some are government officials, some are diplomats, and, no doubt, some may struggle financially and have to work at entry-level or temporary positions. And you could say the same for the vast majority of students majoring in most subjects.

### Asking Better Questions

To refocus our question about the use of anthropology, we might ask: What are the particular ways of thought that anthropology courses develop and that are applicable to the very broad range of occupations that anthropologists follow? How is anthropology different from other social science disciplines? Although there are certainly many ways to answer these questions, it seems to us that three are of particular importance.

First, anthropology is the university discipline that focuses on understanding other groups of people. This focus on culture is one of the most valuable contributions anthropology can make to our ability to understand our world, and to analyze and solve problems.

Although the United States has always been an ethnically and culturally diverse place, for most of the twentieth century, the reins of wealth and power were held by a dominant group: white Protestant men of northern European ancestry. Members of other groups did sometimes become rich, and there were certainly many poor white Protestants. However, wealthy white Protestants held the majority of positions of influence and power in U.S. society, including executive positions at most large corporations, high political offices at both state and national levels, and seats on the judiciary. As a result, if you happened to be born white, Protestant, and



male, you had an advantage. Of course, you might inherit great wealth. But, even if (as was far more likely) you were the son of a factory hand or a shopkeeper, you were a representative of the dominant culture. The ways of the powerful were, more or less, your ways. If members of other cultural groups wanted to speak with you, do business with you, participate in public and civic affairs with you, they had to learn to do so on your terms—not you on theirs. They not only had to learn to speak English, but they also had to learn the forms of address, body language, clothing, manners, and so on appropriate to their role in your culture. Because others had to do the work of changing their behavior, you yourself were probably almost completely unaware of this disparity and accepted it simply as the way things are. *Miami Herald* columnist Leonard Pitts has pointed out that “if affirmative action is defined as giving preferential treatment on the basis of gender or race, then no one in this country has received more than white men” (2009, 214). This is true whether or not such men wanted preference or realized they were getting it.

White, Protestant, northern European men still control most of the wealth in the United States. However, by the late twentieth century, their virtual monopoly on power had begun to break up. Members of minority groups have moved to stronger economic and political positions. Moreover, the United States increasingly exists in a world filled with powerful nations with very different histories and traditions. It is less and less a world where everyone wants to do business with the United States and is willing to do so on American terms. Instead, it is a rapidly globalizing world characterized by corporations with headquarters and workforces spread across the globe; by international institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization; and by capital and information flows that cross cultural boundaries in milliseconds. Americans who wish to understand and operate effectively in such a world must learn other cultures and other ways; failure to do so puts them at a distinct disadvantage.

By the way, some of the most important lessons anthropology has to teach concern the idea of race. Biological anthropology shows that humanity is composed of a single race. Biological differences between individual people are very small, and no agreed-upon scientific way of dividing humans into biological races has ever been found. Races are aspects of history and culture rather than of biology. These ideas are explored fully in Chapter 9 on race and caste.

At home, the United States is once again a nation of immigrants. In 2018, the United States had about 44.7 million foreign-born residents, more than 13 percent of the total population (Frey 2019; Photo 1.6). Until the late twentieth century, most immigrants were cut off from their homelands by politics and by the expense and difficulty of communication. Under these conditions, assimilation to the dominant American culture was essential. Although politics may sometimes prevent truly free communication, today’s immigrants can, in most cases, communicate freely and inexpensively with family and friends in their homelands and may be able to travel back and forth regularly. Thus, complete assimilation is far less necessary or desirable.

Some people may applaud multiculturalism; others may bemoan what they feel is the passing of the “American” way of life. What no one can dispute is that the world of today is vastly different from the world of 1950. Given the increasing integration of economic systems, the declining costs of communication and transportation, and the rising economic power of China and other nations, we can be sure that people of different ethnic, racial, and cultural back-



**PHOTO 1.6** The United States is a nation of immigrants. In 2018, the United States had about 44.7 million foreign-born residents, more than 13 percent of the total population. Here, newly sworn-in U.S. citizens celebrate in Lowell, Massachusetts, in January 2019.

JOSEPH PREZIOSO/AFP via Getty Images

grounds will meet more and more frequently in arenas where none has clear economic and cultural dominance. Thus, an understanding of the nature of culture and knowledge of the basic tools scholars have devised to analyze it are essential, and anthropology is the place to get them.

In addition to this first, very practical application, there is a second, more philosophical concern. Like scholars in many other disciplines, anthropologists grapple with the question of what it means to be a human being. However, they bring some unique tools to bear upon this issue. Within anthropology, we can look for the answer to this question in two seemingly mutually exclusive ways. We can look at culture as simply the sum of everything that humans have done, thought, created, and believed. In a sense, as individual humans, we are heirs to the totality of the cultural practices and experiences humans have ever had. Anthropology is the discipline that attempts to observe, collect, record, and understand the full range of human cultural experience. Through anthropology, we know the great variety of forms that cultures can take. We know the huge variation in social organization, belief systems, production, and family structure that is found in human society. This gives us insight into both the plasticity of human society and the limits to that plasticity. It shows humanity as capable of great works of art and intellect, but also of horror and violence.

Alternatively, we can answer the question by ignoring the variability of human culture and focusing on the characteristics that all cultures share. In the 1940s, George Murdock listed 77 characteristics that he believed were common to all cultures. These included such things as dream interpretation, incest taboos, inheritance rules, and religious ritual. More recent authors

(Brown 1991; Cleaveland, Jean and Maryanne 1979) have developed other lists and analyses. Brown (1991, 143) notes that human universals are very diverse, and there is likely no single explanation for them. However, thinking about such commonalities among cultures may guide us in our attempt to understand human nature.

Finally, a third interest of anthropologists is in creating new and useful ways to think about culture. One particularly effective way to understand culture is to think of it as a set of answers to a particular problem: How does a group of human beings survive together in the world? In other words, culture is a set of behaviors, beliefs, understandings, objects, and ways of interacting that enable a group to survive with greater or lesser success and greater or lesser longevity. At some level, all human societies must answer the question of how to survive together in the world, and to some degree, each culture is a different answer to it.

In the world today and in our own society, we face extraordinary problems: hunger, poverty, inequality, violence between groups, violence within families, drug addiction, pollution, crime. The list is long. However, we are not the only people in the world ever to have faced problems. At some level, all these problems are the result of our attempt to live together as a group on this planet. Learning how other peoples in other places, and perhaps at other times as well, solved or failed to solve their problems may give us the insight to solve our own; we might learn lessons, both positive and negative, from their cultural experiences.

In some ways, the cultures of today are unique. Societies have never been as large and interconnected as many are today. They have never had the wealth that many societies have today. They have never had the level of technology, ability to communicate, or capacity to destroy that our current society has. These characteristics make it naïve to imagine that we could simply observe a different culture, adopt its ways as our own, and live happily ever after. We can no more recreate tribal culture or ancient culture or even the culture of industrialized nations from 50 years ago than we can walk through walls. But it does not, therefore, follow that the answers of others are useless to us.

In Greek drama, the notion of **hubris** is critical. It is probably best understood as excessive pride or confidence that leads to both arrogance and insolence toward others. In Greek tragedy, the hubris of characters is often their fatal flaw and leads to their downfall. Heroes such as Oedipus and Creon were doomed by their hubris.

We surely won't find that the members of other cultures have provided ready-made answers to all the problems that confront us. But to imagine ourselves as totally unique, to imagine that the experiences of other peoples and other cultures have nothing to teach us, is a form of hubris and, as in tragedy, could well lead to our downfall.

The ancient Greeks contrasted hubris with **arete**. This characteristic implies a humble striving for perfection, along with the realization that such perfection cannot be reached. With the notion of *arete* in mind, we approach the study of anthropology cheerfully and with a degree of optimism. From anthropology, we hope to learn new ways of analyzing, understanding, celebrating, and coming to terms with the enormous variations in human cultural behavior. We hope to be able to think creatively about what it means to be human beings and to use what we learn to provide insight into the issues, problems, and possibilities of our own culture. We hope that, with the help of such understanding, we will leave the world a better place than we found it.

## BRINGING IT BACK HOME: THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF VIOLENCE

The holistic approach of anthropology can help us understand violence. To what extent is violence simply an ineradicable part of human nature, and to what extent is it a product of certain kinds of cultures? Have human beings always been violent, or was there an age when people lived in societies without violence? Can we hope for a future without violence, or are we condemned to ever-increasing cycles of violence?

There are no simple answers to these questions. Anthropologists, political philosophers, and others have sometimes imagined that people in early human societies led a peaceful, almost utopian existence. At other times, they have imagined such societies as a struggle of all against all: a constant battle for survival in which violence against nonfamily and nongroup members was the rule rather than the exception. Neither of these ideas seems to hold much validity.

There is no doubt that humans have often lived in societies characterized by high levels of violence. Further, violence is ancient: a recent analysis of skulls at a 430,000-year-old archaeological site in Spain shows evidence of humans killing other humans (Sala et al. 2015). But Dr. Nohemi Sala, the lead author of the study, also notes that finds at the same site also show that human ancestors cared for the sick and the dead (Gill 2015). Caring and killing are both part of the human heritage.

Cultural anthropologists have often documented violence, and sometimes warfare, in many different societies. However, anthropologists have documented societies that have extremely low levels of violence as well. These include the Chewong of the Malaysian peninsula (Howell 1989), the G/wi of central Botswana (Silberbauer 1982), and the Yanadi of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh (Kumar 1995). The Semai, a gardening society in the central Malay Peninsula, are one of the best-documented peaceful societies. Clayton and Carole Robarchek, anthropologists who have studied the Semai for more than 30 years, report that worldview is a key factor in Semai peacefulness. Semai see themselves as “essentially helpless in a hostile and malevolent universe” and believe that virtually all activities, even the most innocuous, are fraught with danger (1992, 201). In this frightening world, they depend vitally on one another, and anything that threatens discord or violence is understood as a threat to their survival itself. Although their society is peaceful, theirs is not a worldview that many would like to share.

More recently, Steven Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011) argues that humanity as a whole is becoming less violent. He claims that acts of violence, torture, and cruelty of all types, which were common in humanity’s past, are far less present today. Pinker argues that the decline in violence is the result of a combination of factors including the political dominance of large state societies whose governments monopolize the use of force, the emergence of humanitarian thinking in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, and the spread of commerce. Using a phrase from philosopher Peter Singer, Pinker talks of an “escalator of reason” that we use to discover that our interests are similar to those of other people, and thus, we develop empathy with them.

It is certainly true that public cruelties such as executions and animal fights, common in Europe in the nineteenth century, have become rare. However, many anthropologists are deeply skeptical of Pinker’s claims. For example, anthropologist Rahul Oka and his collaborators have argued that the changes that Pinker documents are simply related to the size of societies. People, they argue, are neither more nor less violent than they have been in the

past. However, the larger a society is, the smaller the percentage of people who are involved in violence (Oka et al. 2017, E11109). Anthropologists Dean Falk and Charles Hildebolt (2017) make a similar argument, noting that evidence shows humans to be more violent than chimpanzees and human violence to be more a function of the size of a society rather than the way it is organized or the beliefs of its members. There is no “escalator of reason,” merely a demographic effect.

Claims that society has become more peaceful must also confront many disturbing examples of institutionalized violence in our own society. There is little doubt that, in terms of total numbers of people killed, the twentieth century was the most violent in the history of humanity. Much of this death occurred in various forms of state-sponsored violence, from warfare to famines caused by political actions. Even when physical violence is not present, state society includes the pervasive violence of inequality and, in many cases, outright oppression. The use of torture remains an important political issue. At a news conference in early 2017, then-president Donald Trump said that torture “absolutely works” (Masters 2017), and Gina Haspel, whom he appointed director of the CIA in 2018, is widely believed to have supported torture at secret prisons in the 2000s (Shankar 2018).

Anthropology does not provide any easy answers to violence. Instead, it shows that both violence and reconciliation are very basic aspects of human and indeed nonhuman primate behavior. The sources of both peace and violence may ultimately lie in human nature. However, the ways that violence is expressed and the amount of violence present seem to be determined both by demographics and by culture. Humans will probably always have violent thoughts and desires. But we can hope to create societies in which violence is rare or, perhaps, even entirely absent.

### You Decide

1. Do you believe that humankind is getting more or less violent and cruel? What evidence can you bring to support your position?
2. The Robarcheks’ analysis of the Semai shows that their peaceful lifestyle is a product of both the way their society is structured and the worldviews they hold. What kind of social structures and worldviews do you think promote peace?
3. Do you believe in the possibility of a society and a world without violence? What do you think is the relationship between physical violence and less obvious forms of violence such as discrimination, inequality, and oppression?

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. What critical themes presented in Horace Miner’s essay “Body Ritual among the Nacirema” continue to draw people to anthropology? Miner’s essay encourages us to think about our quest to gain knowledge and understanding of people who are different from ourselves, and our desire to know ourselves and our own culture better.
2. What is anthropology? Anthropology is a comparative study of humankind. Anthropologists study human beings in the past and the present and in every corner of the world.

3. What does it mean to say that anthropology is holistic? Anthropologists study the entire range of humans' biological, social, political, economic, and religious behavior as well as the relationships among the different aspects of human behavior in the past and present.
4. What are the main subfields of anthropology? Cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, archaeology, biological (physical) anthropology, and applied anthropology.
5. Does anthropology stress biological or cultural adaptation? Anthropology stresses the importance of culture in human adaptation. It asserts that critical differences among individuals are cultural rather than biological.
6. How do forensic anthropologists apply anthropology? Forensic anthropologists use their specialized knowledge of biology and culture to excavate and analyze human remains. They prepare reports that may aid in law enforcement or help bring closure to the survivors of deceased individuals.
7. What sorts of jobs do anthropology majors usually get? Anthropology is part of the liberal arts curriculum. Both the job prospects and the careers of those who study anthropology are similar to those who study other liberal arts disciplines.
8. What critical problems and ways of thinking do anthropology courses address? Anthropology courses develop three important ways of thought that apply to the broad range of occupations followed by anthropologists: (1) Anthropology focuses on understanding other groups of people within their own historical and cultural context; (2) anthropologists grapple with the question of what it means to be human by observing, collecting, recording, and attempting to understand the full range of human cultural experience; and (3) anthropology encourages us to use our understanding of other cultures to think about our own.
9. What does anthropology tell us about humans and violence? Anthropology tells us that violence is ancient and part of our human heritage. However, peacemaking and reconciliation are also part of that heritage. Nonviolent societies do exist, and we can hope to build societies with low levels of violence.

### KEY TERMS

anthropology (p. 4)

applied anthropology (p. 11)

archaeology (p. 9)

arete (p. 19)

biological (or physical) anthropology (p. 7)

cultural anthropology (p. 10)

cultural relativism (p. 5)

culture (p. 4)

emic (p. 11)

ethnocentrism (ethnocentric) (p. 4)

ethnography (p. 11)

ethnology (p. 11)

etic (p. 11)

holism (holistic) (p. 6)

hubris (p. 19)

linguistic anthropology (p. 8)

society (p. 4)