

WHAT IS ANTHROPOLOGY?

Derived from Greek, the word “anthropos” means “human” and “logy” refers to the “study of.”

Literally, anthropology is the study of humanity. It is the study of everything and anything that makes us human. From cultures, to languages, to material remains and human evolution,

Anthropologists examine every dimension of humanity by asking compelling questions like:

How did we come to be human and who are our ancestors?

Why do people look and act so differently throughout the world? What do we all have in common? How have we changed culturally and biologically over time? What factors influence diverse human beliefs and behaviours throughout the world?

Anthropology is an expansive field of study. It is comprised of four subfields that cultural anthropology, archaeology, biological (or physical) anthropology, and linguistic anthropology. Together, the subfields provide a multi-faceted picture of the human condition.

❖ Cultural Anthropology:

Cultural Anthropology focuses on the living (or recently living) cultures. This subfield of anthropology identifies and analyzes the rules of social behavior and it studies the ways people recognize themselves in their societies and the world.

❖ Linguistic Anthropology:

Linguistic Anthropology focuses on human communication. This subfield of anthropology studies the ways we (human beings) structure our communication. It

includes components on how the brain and speech emerged together. Both psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics are the major subjects of linguistic anthropology. However, linguistics and applied linguistics are themselves become an autonomous discipline now and they are inseparable from linguistic anthropology.

❖ Biological Anthropology:

Biological anthropology studies the human being as a species. The focus of biological anthropology is the evolution of human beings as a species. Biological anthropology covers a lot of subjects which are associated with biology and history of human beings. One of the most important and valuable subjects of biological anthropology is **forensic anthropology**. It is a subfield of applied physical anthropology. Forensic anthropology studies the human remains to identify the human in a legal setting.

❖ Archeology:

Though archeology has emerged as an autonomous discipline itself like linguistics, it is still and always will be regarded as a subfield of anthropology because of its relation to humanity. Archeology studies humanity and the history of humanity through the remains left behind by the people of the past. It provides a unique view of culture, language, and physical forms according to the evidence it finds in different parts of the world. It explores the lost civilizations & cultures of the past.

These four fields are interconnected and you cannot leave one in the discussion of the others because they are all related to humans. Anthropology is a unique discipline of knowledge and education in the history of human development.

Why study social anthropology?

Anthropology is a broad discipline, linking many subjects including sociology, psychology, archaeology and biology. It covers the entire time-span of human history **from its origins to today** and aims **to understand social diversity and ideas**. For example social anthropology focuses in particular on the study of how contemporary human beings behave in social groups. Social anthropology can offer insight into the key political and social issues affecting the world today.

Origins of ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology traces its roots to ancient Greek historical and philosophical writings about human nature and the organization of human society. Anthropologists generally regard Herodotus, a Greek historian who lived in the 400s bc, as the first thinker to write widely on concepts that would later become central to anthropology. In the book History, Herodotus described the cultures of various peoples of the Persian Empire, which the Greeks conquered during the first half of the 400s bc. He referred to Greece as the dominant culture of the West and Persia as the dominant culture of the East. This type of division, between white people of European descent and other peoples, established the mode that most anthropological writing would later adopt.

The Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, who lived in the 14th century ad, was another early writer of ideas relevant to anthropology. Khaldun examined the environmental, sociological, psychological, and economic factors that affected the development and the rise and fall of civilizations. Both Khaldun and Herodotus produced remarkably objective, analytic, ethnographic descriptions of the diverse cultures in the Mediterranean world, but they also often used secondhand information.

During the Middle Ages (5th to 15th centuries ad) biblical scholars dominated European thinking on questions of human origins and cultural development. They treated these questions as issues of religious belief and promoted the idea that human existence and all of human diversity were the creations of God.

Beginning in the 15th century, European explorers looking for wealth in new lands provided vivid descriptions of the exotic cultures they encountered on their journeys in Asia, Africa, and what are now the Americas. But these explorers did not respect or know the languages of the peoples with whom they came in contact, and they made brief, unsystematic observations.

The European Age of Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries marked the rise of scientific and rational philosophical thought. Enlightenment thinkers, such as Scottish-born David Hume, John Locke of England, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau of France, wrote a number of humanistic works on the nature of humankind. They based their work on philosophical reason rather than religious authority and asked important anthropological questions. Rousseau, for instance, wrote on the moral qualities of “primitive” societies and about human inequality. But most writers of the Enlightenment also lacked firsthand experience with non-Western cultures.

❖ Imperialism and Increased Contact with Other Cultures

With the rise of imperialism (political and economic control over foreign lands) in the 18th and 19th centuries, Europeans came into increasing contact around the world, prompting new interest in the study of culture. Imperialist nations of Western Europe—such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, France, and England—extended their political and economic control to regions in the Pacific, the Americas, Asia, and Africa.

The increasing dominance of global commerce, capitalist (profit-driven) economies, and industrialization in late-18th-century Europe led to vast cultural changes and social upheavals throughout the world. European industries and the wealthy, elite classes of people who owned them looked to exotic foreign lands for sources of labor and goods for manufacturing. In addition, poorer Europeans, many of whom were displaced from their land by industrialization, tried to build new lives abroad. Several European countries took over the administration of foreign regions as colonies (Colonialism).

Europeans suddenly had a flood of new information about the foreign peoples encountered in colonial frontiers. The colonizing nations of Europe also wanted scientific explanations and justifications for their global dominance. In response to these developments, and out of an interest in new and strange cultures, the first amateur anthropologists formed societies in many Western European countries in the early 19th century. These societies eventually spawned professional anthropology.

Anthropological societies devoted themselves to scientifically studying the cultures of colonized and unexplored territories. Researchers filled ethnological and archaeological museums with collections obtained from the new empires of Europe by explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators. Physicians and zoologists, acting as novice physical anthropologists, measured the skulls of people from various cultures and wrote detailed descriptions of the people's physical features.

Toward the end of the 19th century anthropologists began to take academic positions in colleges and universities. Anthropological associations also became advocates for anthropologists to work in professional positions. They promoted anthropological knowledge for its political, commercial, and humanitarian value.

❖ **The Beginnings of Modern Anthropology**

In the 19th century modern anthropology came into being along with the development and scientific acceptance of theories of biological and cultural evolution. In the early 19th century, a number of scientific observations, especially of unearthed bones and other remains, such as stone tools, indicated that humanity's past had covered a much greater span of time than that indicated by the Bible.

In 1836 Danish archaeologist Christian Thomsen proposed that three long ages of technology had preceded the present era in Europe. He called these the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. Thomsen's concept of technological ages fit well with the views of Scottish geologist Sir Charles Lyell, who proposed that the earth was much older than previously believed and had changed through many gradual stages.

Anthropology and Other Social Sciences

Anthropology shares certain interests and subjects of study with other fields of social science, especially sociology, psychology, and history, but also economics and political science. Anthropology also differs from these fields in many ways.

Like sociology, **anthropology involves the study of human society and culture**. But anthropology began as the study of small-scale tribal societies, large-scale chiefdoms, and ancient civilizations, and later moved to include global-scale societies. Sociology, on the other hand, has always emphasized the study of modern and urbanized societies. Anthropology involves the comparison of different societies in order to understand the scope of human cultural diversity. Sociology, on the other hand, frequently examines universal patterns of human behavior.

Anthropology also examines certain **aspects of human psychology**. Anthropology studies **how people become enculturated**—shaped by their culture as they grow up in a particular society. Through **enculturation**, people develop culturally accepted ideas of what behavior is normal or abnormal and of how the world works. **Anthropology examines how people's patterns of thought and behavior are shaped by culture and how those patterns vary from society to society**. By contrast, psychology generally focuses on the universal characteristics of human thought and behavior, and studies these characteristics in individual people.

The study of history is also a part of anthropology. In its formal sense, the term history refers only to periods of time after the invention of writing. Anthropologists often study historical documents to learn more about the past of living peoples. Historical archaeologists, who specialize in the study of historical cultures, also study written documents. But all anthropologists primarily study people, their societies, and their cultures. Historians, on the other hand, primarily study written records of the past—from which they cannot learn about human societies that had or have no writing. See also History and Historiography.

In addition, anthropology examines some topics also studied in economics and political science. But anthropologists focus on how aspects of economics and politics relate to other aspects of culture, such as important rituals. Anthropologists who specialize in the study of systems of exchange in small-scale societies may refer to themselves as economic anthropologists.

❖ ** Evolutionary Theory

In **1859** British naturalist **Charles Darwin** published his influential book ***On the Origin of Species***. In this book, he argued that animal and plant species had changed, or evolved, through time under the influence of a process that he called **NATURAL SELECTION**.

Natural selection, Darwin said, acted on variations within species, so that some variants survived and reproduced, and others perished. In this way, new species slowly evolved

even as others continued to exist. Darwin's theory was later supported by studies of genetic inheritance conducted in the 1850s and 1860s by Austrian monk **Gregor Mendel**. Evolutionary theory conflicted with established religious doctrine that all species had been determined at the creation of the world and had not changed since.

English social philosopher **Herbert Spencer** applied a theory of **progressive evolution** to human societies in the middle 1800s. He compared societies to biological organisms, each of which adapted to survive or else perished. Spencer later coined the phrase "**survival of the fittest**" to describe this process. Theories of social evolution such as Spencer's seemed to offer an explanation for the apparent success of European nations as so-called advanced civilizations.

Anthropological Evolutionary Theories

During the late 1800s many anthropologists promoted their own models of **social** and **biological evolution**. Their writings portrayed people of **European descent** as biologically and culturally **superior** to all other peoples. The most influential anthropological presentation of this viewpoint appeared in *Ancient Society*, published in 1877 by American anthropologist **Lewis Henry Morgan**.

Morgan argued that European civilization was the highpoint (Best) of human evolutionary progress, representing humanity's highest biological, moral, and technological achievement. According to Morgan, human societies had evolved to civilization through earlier conditions, or stages, which he called **Savagery** and **Barbarism**. Morgan believed these stages occurred over many thousands of years and compared them to geological ages. But Morgan attributed **cultural evolution** to moral and **mental improvements**, which he proposed were, in turn, related to improvements in the ways that people produced food and to increases in brain size.

Morgan also examined the material basis of cultural development. He believed that under **Savagery and Barbarism** people owned **property communally**, as groups. Civilizations and political states, he said, developed together with the private ownership of property. States thus protected people's rights to own property. Morgan's theories coincided with and influenced those of German political theorists **Friedrich Engels** and **Karl Marx**. Engels and Marx, using a model like Morgan's, predicted the demise of state-supported capitalism. They saw **communism**, a **new political and economic system** based on the ideals of communality, as the **next evolutionary stage for human society**.

Like Morgan, Sir **Edward Tylor**, a founder of British anthropology, also promoted the theories of **cultural evolution** in the late 1800s. Tylor attempted to describe the development of particular kinds of customs and beliefs found across many cultures. For example, he proposed a sequence of stages for the evolution of religion—from **animism** (the belief in spirits), through **polytheism** (the belief in many gods), to **monotheism** (the belief in one god).

In 1871 Tylor also wrote a still widely quoted definition of culture, describing it as *“that complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.”* This definition formed the basis for the modern anthropological concept of culture



Cultural Evolution, Colonialism, and Social Darwinism

The colonial nations of Europe used ethnocentric theories of cultural evolution to justify the expansion of their empires. Writings based on such theories described conquered peoples as “backward” and therefore unfit for survival unless colonists “civilized” them to live and act as Europeans did. This application of evolutionary theory to control social and political policy became known as social Darwinism.

Theories of cultural evolution in the 19th century took no account of the successes of small-scale societies that had developed long-term adaptations to particular environments. Nor did they recognize any shortcomings of European civilization, such as high rates of poverty and crime.

Furthermore, while many proponents of cultural evolution suggested that the people in small-scale societies, such as Africans, were biologically inferior to people of European descent, no evidence actually supported this position. But not all anthropologists believed in this type of cultural evolution. Many actually rejected all evolutionary theory because others misused and abused it.