

2 The Nature of Culture

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces readers to the concept of culture, defined as shared ideals, values, and standards of behaviour. Culture is examined from a variety of perspectives, and the chapter explores how anthropologists study culture in the field.

Distinctions are made between the terms “society” and “subculture.” Discussions about the Hutterites and Acadians are featured to illustrate pluralism in Canada. A key concept in anthropology is enculturation, the process by which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. Enculturative forces are examined from a Canadian perspective.

All cultures change and adapt over time. Cultural adaptation serves to meet the basic needs of a cultural group for food, shelter, procreation, and social order. Anthropologists examine a culture’s ability to meet these needs and to ensure the survival of a cultural group.

The challenge to anthropologists concerns the conflict between ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. The controversial nature of cultural relativism is put into question when faced with harmful or unnecessary practices.

IF NOTHING ELSE, MY STUDENTS SHOULD LEARN...

1. Culture is the cornerstone to anthropological research. Students need to realize that culture is not a static entity, but an entity that is constantly changing to meet new challenges. These challenges may come from alterations in the environment, from modifications in the values of the culture, or from the introduction of changes from outsiders.
2. A pluralistic society such as Canada must find a way to adapt to the different cultural values coming into the country. Inevitably, there will be differences in cultural values as, for example, in the issues relating to gender. Growing pains are to be anticipated as the various culture groups learn the norms of our society and learn to live together.
3. How relativistic should we be in accepting alternative cultural values? Anthropologists must weigh in on practices that violate what we consider to be universal human rights and our own Canadian values.

LEARNING OUTCOMES (INCLUDING BLOOM'S TAXONOMY)

Students should be able to:

- LO 2.1: Define culture and describe its characteristics. *[Remember/Understand]*
- LO 2.2: Define enculturation and identify enculturative forces in Canadian society. *[Remember/Understand]*
- LO 2.3: Recognize the unique nature of pluralistic societies. *[Apply]*
- LO 2.4: Recount the history of the women's movement in Canada. *[Remember]*
- LO 2.5: Explain how anthropologists study culture. *[Understand]*
- LO 2.6: Discuss how culture functions and the relationship between culture and adaptation. *[Analyze]*
- LO 2.7: Recognize the tendency for humans to evaluate other cultures, and explain the role of cultural relativism in anthropology and in everyday life. *[Evaluate]*

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

1. Culture—The shared ideals, values, and beliefs that people use to interpret experience and to generate behaviour and that are reflected by their behaviour. *(page 30)*
2. Society—A group of people who live in the same region, speak the same language, and are interdependent. *(page 31)*
3. Multiculturalism—Descriptor for a society, community, etc., made up of, involving, or relating to several distinct racial or religious cultures. Contrast with biculturalism or monoculturalism. *(page 31)*
4. Social structure—The relationships of groups within a society that hold it together. *(page 31)*
5. Subculture—A cultural subgroup differentiated by status, ethnic background, residence, religion, or other factors that functionally unify the group and act collectively on each member. *(page 34)*
6. Pluralistic societies—Societies that contain several distinct cultures and subcultures. *(page 36)*

7. Ethnicity—A group of people who take their identity from a common place of origin, history, and sense of belonging. (*page 36*)
8. Ethnic boundary markers—Those indicators or characteristics, such as dress and language, that identify individuals as belonging to a particular ethnic group. (*page 36*)
9. Enculturation—The process that transmits a society's culture from one generation to the next. (*page 39*)
10. Integration—The tendency for all aspects of a culture to function as an interrelated whole. (*page 40*)
11. Microculture—A group of people who share common interests and or experiences, from which they take their identity. (*page 40*)
12. Ethnocentrism—The practice of judging other cultures from the perspective of one's own culture. (*page 44*)
13. Cultural relativism—The thesis that one must suspend judgment on other peoples' practices to understand them in their own cultural terms. (*page 44*)
14. Human rights—A set of guidelines for the equal treatment of all people, regardless of gender, age, or ethnicity. (*page 45*)

WHY IS THIS CHAPTER IMPORTANT TO ANTHROPOLOGISTS?

- Culture is the foundation of our discipline. The role of anthropologists is to analyze culture in all of its facets. In many instances, this ability to see all perspectives is crucial to resolving issues between groups of people or between countries.

WHY SHOULD STUDENTS CARE?

- In a multicultural country like Canada, students must appreciate that the different behaviours they see in people coming from other cultures are learned. They must realize that these differences are, for the most part, superficial and that underlying them are people striving for the same goals and dreams for the future as the students themselves.

- Students must understand how to be culturally relativistic in perspective. However, they also need to understand critical cultural relativism. That is, at what point do we determine that a cultural practice is harmful and violates the human rights of individuals? Where do we draw the line?
- Cultural anthropology teaches us tolerance and understanding by showing us that just as other cultural practices seem strange to us, our ways seem odd to others.

WHAT ARE COMMON STUDENT MISCONCEPTIONS AND STUMBLING BLOCKS?

- Students may still harbour the idea that non-Western cultures are primitive. The notion of complex technology leading to a “civilized” lifestyle is culturally embedded.
- The term “primitive” itself must be discussed. Students will refer to indigenous cultures as primitive. However, they need to realize where the term came from. They need to recognize the historical baggage associated with the term in order to understand it. Students then need to understand why they need to remove it from discussions of cultures that do not practise complex technology.

WHAT CAN I DO IN CLASS?

Introductory Exercises

- Start off with some slides of random cultural events or people from around the world. The emphasis should be on pictures that might make the students uncomfortable—perhaps a picture of someone eating grasshoppers, or of people with extreme body modifications. Ask the students how the pictures make them feel. Encourage them to be honest, and make sure you do not sound judgmental.
- Another option could be to read them a passage from Horace Miner’s “Body Ritual among the Nacirema.” Students will act repugnant over the very vivid descriptions painted by Miner, particularly when they learn that the descriptions are of our culture.

These exercises will lead you into a discussion of culture and anthropology and the nature of multiple voices.

- This amazing site has greetings from 1,715 languages—many indigenous languages included.
<http://users.elite.net/runner/jennifers/>

- Here is another great site that tells you how to say hello in many cultures.
<http://www.ipl.org/div/hello/>

Essay/Discussion Questions

- **Culture Shock**—The overwhelming experience of living in a culture (or subculture) very different from your own is sometimes called “culture shock.” Travellers, immigrants, and anthropologists often have difficulties adjusting to a new culture. Common reactions are confusion, disgust, homesickness, irritability, boredom, and withdrawal. Ask students to write about their own experiences (perhaps the first year of university in an urban centre or backpacking through Europe). How were their usual values and assumptions challenged? How did they feel, emotionally and physically? At what point did they finally make the adjustment? Or did they? What about when they returned home—was there a period of readjustment to their own culture?
- **Racism and Ethnocentrism**—Use Stephen Jay Gould’s film *Evolution and Human Equality* (1988, 60 minutes) and book *The Mismeasure of Man* (Norton, 1981) to spark a discussion on how the concept of race is a cultural, not a biological, construct. Consider the relationship between racism and ethnocentrism. Encourage students to express their opinions about whether ethnocentrism might be at the root of terrorist activities around the world. Alternatively, have students research major episodes of conflict that have led to genocide, for example, Nazi Germany, Tasmania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- **Subcultures**—Have your students write about their experiences with individuals from different subcultures. To what extent have they ever felt themselves members of a distinct subculture(s) (e.g., religious, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and gender)? What named groups existed in their high school? Is there such a thing as a “student subculture”? If so, how would they describe it to an international visitor?
- **Fieldwork**—Students write an evaluative report on a text on the practice of ethnography. What are some of the issues and considerations discussed? What difficulties do anthropologists often encounter, and how might they avoid these problems?

Some suggested titles are the following:

The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to the Practice of Ethnography by M.H. Agar

The Ethnographic Interview by James P. Spradley

Participant Observation by James P. Spradley

The Naked Anthropologist: Tales from Around the World by Philip R. Devita

Fieldwork and Families: Constructing New Models for Ethnographic Research, edited by Juliana Flinn and Jocelyn Armstrong

Being There: Fieldwork in Anthropology by C.W. Watson
Thinking Like an Anthropologist by John T. Omohundro
Taking Sides: Ethics, Politics and Fieldwork in Anthropology by Heidi Armbruster and Anna Lærke
Making Sense: A Student's Guide to Research and Writing by Margot Northey et al.
Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer
Thinking Anthropologically by Philip Carl Salzman and Patricia C. Rice

- The text discusses how uncontrolled reproductive rates can result in the depletion of resources. Discuss whether or not China's "one-child policy" is a successful adaptive response to its overpopulation.

Group Activities

Case Study Global questions: Is true objectivity possible? Is there a "real" truth to anything we observe?

Assign pairs of students to look at famous anthropologists and their interpretations of the same culture group¹:

Issue 1: Question: Was Margaret Mead's study on Samoan adolescents flawed?

Margaret Mead—*Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (1928)

Yes: Derek Freedman—*Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (1983)

No: Lowell D. Holmes and Ellen Rhoads Holmes—*Samoa Village: Then and Now* (1992)

Issue 2: Question: Are Trobriand women important to Trobriand economics?

No: Bronislaw Malinowski—*Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922)

Yes: Annette B. Weiner—*The Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea* (1988)

(Have students initially read the "Original Study" by Weiner in the textbook. Focusing on women's economic roles led Weiner to reassess some of Malinowski's assumptions and to reinterpret the Trobriand Islander's kinship system.)

¹ An excellent resource for the instructor is Robert L. Welsch and Kirk M. Endicott, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views in Cultural Anthropology* (McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2005); many controversies to explore.

Issue 3: Question: Did Napoleon A. Chagnon negatively impact the Yanomami people?

Napoleon A. Chagnon—*Yanomamo: The Fierce People* (1983)

Yes: Terence Turner—*The Yanomami and the Ethics of Anthropological Practice* (2001)

Yes: Patrick Tierney—*Darkness in El Dorado* (2001)

No: Edward H. Hagen, Michael E. Price and John Tooby—**Preliminary Report** (United States—China Commission Hearings)

Issue 4: Question: Were the Ju/'hoansi people originally pastoralists who lost their herds?

Yes: James R. Denbow and Edwin N. Wilmsen—Advent and Course of Pastoralism in the Kalahari, *Science*, December 19, 1986

No: Richard B. Lee—*The Dobe Ju/'hoansi* (2003)

Students explore the factors that may have affected the perceptions and interpretations of the anthropologists in their analysis, such as historical moment, gender, ethnographic data, and historical development. Students discuss their findings with their partners and debate the global questions.

Book Report As an alternative to the usual research paper, invite the students to write a book report instead. Perhaps they could analyze a modern book and report what the book depicts about the culture. Does the student feel the depiction to be fair? Why or why not? What has the student learned about the culture? Students might want to write a report on the status of women, for example.

Suggested titles are the following:

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini

Life of Pi by Yann Martel

Secret Daughter by Shilpi Somaya Gowda

Memoirs of a Geisha by Arthur Golden

The Color Purple by Alice Walker

Not Without My Daughter by Betty Mahmoody and William Hoffer

Prisoner of Tehran by Marina Nemat

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See

The Star People: A Lakota Story by S.D. Nelson

I Am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced by Nujood Ali

In the Name of Honor: A Memoir by Muktar Mai and Linda Coverdale

Burned Alive: A Survivor of an "Honor Killing" Speaks Out by Souad

Sold by Patricia McCormick

Tears of the Desert: A Memoir of Survival in Darfur by Halima Bashir
Anil's Ghost by Michael Ondaatje
Mayada Daughter of Iraq by Jean Sasson
The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri
Crosswinds: The Way of Saudi Arabia by Fouad Ajami

Internet Exercises for Pairs

Research subcultures on the Internet.

- Visit the Jade Dragon tattoo and body piercing parlour online in Chicago, and view the examples of body modifications offered there. What are the social and cultural contexts of body modification in U.S. culture? What factors of age, sex, group identity, social status, symbolic communication, and ritualism are involved?
<http://jadeddragontattoo.com>
- Visit this popular gamers' site. What can you determine about the status, ethnic background, residence, and other factors of gamers?
<http://www.purepwnage.com/>
- Who are the Goths, and what is the nature of their subculture?
<http://gothic-portal.awardspace.com/>
- Who are the trekkies? Why has this television show-based subculture been so successful?
<http://www.sfi.org/portal/index.php>
<http://www.trekfederation.com/>

Students may wish to choose the subculture they research.

Student Online Activities for Small Groups

- Explore concepts of “culture” through *National Geographic*:
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/lessons/g912.html>
Interesting websites and excellent guided lesson plans are provided. They can be altered to suit university classes. Students can search for additional websites if necessary.

1. *Jimmy Chin's Extreme Photography: Both Sides of the Lens*—a look at the concept of world view and how our previous experiences affect our interpretation of what we are seeing or doing.

2. *Is a Smile Always Just a Smile?* explores the concept of ethnocentrism by discussing whether it would be better if all culture differences disappeared through cultural homogenization.

For a lighter moment to conclude the lesson:

- Use the following websites to construct crossword puzzles, word searches, and other word games. These could be used as quizzes to assess student learning or as summary activities to reinforce concepts.

<http://www.discoveryeducation.com/free-puzzlemaker/?CFID=15042377&CFTOKEN=68087128>
<http://www.puzzle-maker.com/CW/>

- Students identify where tribal groups are located on the map.
<http://www.coedu.usf.edu/culture/Activities/Puzzle/TribalOrigins.htm> (requires Authorware plug-in)
- This website has a variety of light games focusing on aspects of culture.
<http://www.coedu.usf.edu/culture/activity.htm>

For a movie night, consider the following:

Generational Clashes:

Bend it Like Beckham—A talented young Sikh girl would like to play soccer against her parents' wishes.

Mulan—An animated tale of a young Chinese girl who wishes to fight with the men against the Mongols.

Joy Luck Club explores the relationships between Chinese American women and their Chinese mothers.

Coming to America—A humorous story about an African prince who wishes to find his bride in the slums of America.

Gran Torino—A prejudiced, grumpy old Korean War veteran finds himself living next to an Asian family.

Culture Contact:

First Contact—The initial encounter between people of New Guinea and white prospectors.

Black Robe—Jesuit missionaries meet the Huron peoples.

Amazon Journal—Cultural confrontations in Amazonia romanticizing rainforest peoples.

The Last Refuge: The Aetas of the Philippines—The declining fortunes of a Philippine people.

Dances with Wolves—A Civil War veteran embraces Lakota culture.

HOW WILL I KNOW THAT MY STUDENTS HAVE LEARNED THE LOs?

- **Focused Listing**² has students list key concepts from the readings, lectures, and videos that they believe to be important. Students are given a handout with two columns. In the left column, students list concepts that they feel are important. In the right column, students describe how that concept is going to be used in the future. Students should be encouraged to also list concepts that they will want to remember for their future careers or success in the workplace.
- **On Target!**³ asks students to reflect on the content or skill that was important to them. Students record their thoughts and share them with a partner. This exercise enhances the retention of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the lesson. This can also be used by the instructor for assessment purposes.
- Human Culture
<http://anthro.palomar.edu/intro2/default.htm>
Provides a glossary of terms and related Internet sites. Flash cards are available to use in assessment.

HOW CAN I ASSESS MY OWN PERFORMANCE?

- Generate your own checklist or survey to give to the students to assess their learning of this material. Ask them to identify what worked and what did not.
- How well did the students do in their respective projects such as the book reports, research projects, and case studies?

WHAT OTHER RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?

- **Book Review**—Have students choose from a list of readable accounts of anthropological fieldwork, which might include the following:
Guests of the Sheikh by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (Doubleday, 1989)
Amazon Journey by Dennis Werner (Prentice Hall, 1990)
First Fieldwork by Barbara Gallatin Anderson (Waveland Press, 1989)
The Harmless People by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas (Knopf, 1965)
The Forest People by Colin Turnbull (Simon and Schuster, 1961)
The Hutterites in North America by John A. Hosteller and Gertrude E. Huntington (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967)
Return to Laughter by Eleanor Smith Bowen (Doubleday, 1964)

² Idahlynn Karre, *Busy, Noisy and Powerfully Effective: Team-based Learning in the College Classroom* (2011).

³ Ibid.

Never in Anger by Jean Briggs (Harvard University Press, 1970)
The Bamboo Fire by William Mitchell (Waveland Press, 1987)
Nest in the Wind by Martha Ward (Waveland Press, 1989)
La Zandunga by Beverly Newbold China (Waveland Press, 1993)
The White Man Will Eat You by William E. Wormsley (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993)
Into the Heart by Kenneth Good (Simon and Schuster, 1991)
Friends, Brothers, Informants by Nita Kumar (University of California, 1992)

Students can briefly report on their choice to the class, focusing on key areas such as culture shock, problems in obtaining information, daily life in the field, and ethical dilemmas. Ask students to consider how the experiences of the researchers differed and how what they learned from other cultures changed the anthropologists' own lives.

- ***The Human Relations Area Files***—Introduce students to the HRAF Archives if your library has them. Two relevant publications are *Instructor's and Librarian's Guide to the HRAF Archive* by D. Levinson and *Guide to Cross-Cultural Research Using the HRAF Archive* by C.R. Ember and M. Ember (HRAF, 1988). Major universities, such as University of Toronto, have the HRAF online.
<http://www.yale.edu/hraf/>
- A Kalahari Family
<http://www.der.org/films/a-kalahari-family.html>
[The truth about the state of the San people.](#)
- TEDtalks with Thandie Newton
http://www.ted.com/talks/thandie_newton_embracing_otherness_embracing_myself.html
[Embracing otherness, embracing myself.](#)
- TEDtalks with Sam Richards
http://www.ted.com/talks/sam_richards_a_radical_experiment_in_empathy.html
[A radical experiment in empathy.](#)
- National Geographic Education
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/>
[Outstanding collection of videos, photos, and activities about culture for students of all ages.](#)
- National Geographic
http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/0204/story.html#story_2
[Additional information on Napoleon Chagnon.](#)
- National Film Board of Canada
<http://www.nfb.ca/>
[Over 800 superb videos related to culture.](#)