

*Why are human relationships and social structures as they are? What ways could they be?* These two questions are fascinating to me, and, even though I am a Computer Science student, they continue to animate me. Many disciplines tackle them and from very different perspectives. Economics would look at the way that systems of resource distribution and use manifest differently in human society. English may look at literature in different periods and places. Linguistics, the structural characteristics and features of different languages. I think I could realistically talk about any of them for this projects, but I've specifically chosen cultural anthropology.

The reason that I've chosen cultural anthropology is that, to me, it seems that the most cohesive and convincing way to demonstrate the variability of human behavior. Living in a society ingrains unconscious behaviors in us that are stabilized via tradition and ceremony and there's a certain closeness to it; so close that it is beneath, beyond, outside of conscious awareness. In the way that learning another language brings out the structural factors of your own, I think learning about another culture does something similar for your awareness of the structural factors of your culture.

Historical studies has a long history that can probably be extended back into antiquity, but modern cultural anthropology has its roots in the 1700s during The Enlightenment. It was the result of Europeans extending the principles of natural history to the practices of the indigenous people of that lived in European colonies. These studies were approached with a European exceptionalism that painted the native people in a bad light because their cultures were different, and it became a way to justify the colonialist, "civilizing" mission of the imperial powers. (National Geographic Society, 2024)

The 1800s were in large part an extension of the 1700s, but with the development of different notions of societal development in the form of two competing ideas; Evolutionism and Diffusionism. Evolutionism was the notion that all societies developed in the same way. It believed that they all went through the same stages of development and that non-European societies were at a lower level of development. Diffusionism believed

that cultures stemmed from specific “cultural circles” and you could determine them based on the characteristics. Both still considered European cultures better than others. (National Geographic Society, 2024)

Into the 1900s, there finally started to be internal pushback to the cultural superiority of previous anthropology. It was in this century that the notion of “cultural relativism” originated with Franz Boaz. It became accepted that you could only understand a person’s ideas and behaviors in relation to their specific culture. The notion that context was important in evaluating a society helped to oppose ideas of cultural superiority. There was also criticism of only focusing on non-white, non-European cultures, so anthropology became extended to those as well. (National Geographic Society, 2024)

Some big changes since then are the development of technology and the way that it allows cultural artifacts (material and not) to be preserved and shared with other people. Like with the development of audiovideo equipment, it’s become easier for knowledge of the cultural practices of people, even in the remote regions, to spread in ways they never could before. Also with the Internet and social media platforms, it allows people from different cultures to express themselves, unmediated by Western academics. It seems like the raw material of anthropology, the experiences and views of people, have been significantly democratized by these developments.

Now onto some of the methods that cultural anthropology uses. The methods of cultural anthropology revolve around ethnography (Saneda, Tori & Michelle Field, 29). Ethnography is the practice of a researcher interacting with people from within a certain culture or knowledgeable about it as a way to get information about it. There are different ways to go about that anthropologists have developed, there are many, so I’ll only name a few.

A simple one that’s probably familiar to most people is interviews (Saneda, Tori & Michelle Field, 29). The anthropologist just sits down with people from the specific culture/group and talk to them, asking questions and engaging in conversations in order to

glean information about their lives, family, cultural tradition, etc. This is kinda strange (and very amusing to me), but I actually have a favorite ethnologist who has works that operate largely based on interviews. Her name is Kristen Ghodsee and she specializes on Bulgaria and Eastern Europe and talks a lot about the changes post-1989, especially in terms of the state of women (Ghodsee, Kristen 2020). I really do recommend her works!

Another example of a method of cultural anthropology is Participant Observation (Saneda, Tori & Michelle Field, 29). It's when an anthropologist enters into a culture and operates as if they're a member of that culture. They will engage in social practices and rituals and try to get the internal experience of living within a culture (even if it's only temporary or limited in possibility). As with the last example, I actually have someone in mind that has engaged in this sort of practice. His name is Gregory Bateson and is someone I've been reading recently (not actually for his anthropological works though). He personally stayed with and interacted with various different indigenous tribes in New Guinea, and used that work to later speculate about the mechanisms that lead to societies segmenting into different groups (Schismogenesis) (Bateson, Gregory, 1958).

The final example is less of a practice but a view and approach; Interpretative Anthropology. It's to anthropology what The Observer Effect is to Quantum Physics. Interpretive Anthropology is an approach to anthropology that requires the anthropologist to reflect on the ways in which their presence may effect the practices of the tribe. To me it kind of coheres to a notion that I have about knowledge and experience. I feel like knowledge about experience is going to be fundamentally incomplete either because the experiences are only accessible to a certain group of people or, because, aspects of them may be more widely accessible but the experience is different in important ways. All attempts to know things are only partial and fragmentary.

My final thoughts on anthropology is that it seems really cool. I don't think it'd be something I'd personally want to do though. I more so like reading about the work that anthropologist do and their specific framing of their research. I think one thing about it that

fascinates me a lot is just the fact that if I were born in a different culture or in a different period that I would be a different person. Anthropology really gets at the contingent nature of human existence and the development of personal subjectivity. My subjectivity really likes anthropology.

## **Bibliography**

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