**Chapter 1**

**The Anthropological Perspective on the Human Condition**

## Summary of Key Points

The goal of Chapter 1 is to introduce students to the discipline of anthropology—particularly the four traditional fields and applied anthropology—as a way of exploring and gaining knowledge about our world and ourselves, while looking at the accomplishments of anthropology in Canada. The authors discuss the connections and relationships between the four major sub-disciplines of anthropology in North America and in Canada in particular, and then examine cultural anthropology in these contexts. They discuss the possibilities made available by holism as an anthropological approach and by fieldwork, the principal data collection process used by cultural anthropologists. Emphasis is given to both academic and applied anthropologists working in Canada. Among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, changing terms of Aboriginal Rights and Title as well as the application of UNDRIP (the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) within Canada have influenced fieldwork and ethnographic concerns in the Canadian context. After reading this chapter, students will be able to define anthropology and discuss the discipline’s aims and scope of study both in Canada and around the world.

The authors also discuss the historical context for how anthropologists have attempted to make sense of human cultural diversity. The importance of the concept of culture within anthropology is explained and there is particular emphasis on what it means to describe culture as a *concept.* The “In Their Own Words” section features Regna Darnell’s thoughts on “tradition” and “traditional culture.” Students will learn about the concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, and understand the limitations of cultural relativism under certain circumstances. Finally, the “Connecting Anthropology” section discusses the relevance of the anthropological perspective in understanding the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Chapter Summary

1. Anthropology can be defined as the study of human nature, human society, and the human past. It is a scholarly discipline that studies human circumstances in the broadest possible sense by focusing on human life ways. The anthropological perspective has four major foci: it is holistic, comparative, evolutionary, and grounded in fieldwork.
2. The anthropological perspective is holistic. Holism assumes that objects and environments interpenetrate and even define each other, and that there are no definable boundaries separating mind and body, nature and culture, individual and society, my ideas and your ideas, or our traditions and the traditions of others. Thus, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. According to many anthropologists, human societies are open systems that cannot be reduced to the parts that make them up. The parts and the whole, to a great extent, mutually define or co-determine each other and co-evolve. A holistic approach allows for human nature to be seen as embedded in a wider world and shaped through the dynamic of culture.
3. The anthropological perspective is comparative in that anthropologists consider a wide range of cross-cultural examples, similarities, and differences before making generalizations about human society, human nature, or human history. In order to do this, anthropologists look at the broadest possible range of human societies and challenge assumptions about what might be considered given, natural, or typical. Thus, anthropological research involves gathering data from many societies from both the present and the past, in order to investigate what if anything can be said about the human condition as lasting over time and space.
4. The anthropological perspective is evolutionary. Anthropologists place their observations about human nature, human society, or human history in a flexible framework that takes into consideration change over time. They explore how individual humans, their societies, and their cultures have changed.
5. In North America, anthropology is usually considered to have four major specialties: biological anthropology, archaeology, linguistic anthropology, and cultural anthropology. Some anthropologists consider applied anthropology to be a separate sub-discipline of professional specialization.
6. Biological anthropology began as an attempt to classify the world’s populations into unambiguous categories based on arbitrary biological characteristics, identified as different races. This was an undertaking that some people used to justify the social practice of racism. By the early twentieth century, however, most anthropologists, Franz Boas being one of the first, had rejected racial classifications as scientifically unjustifiable. Since the early twentieth century, anthropologists have used information about human biology and human culture to debunk racist stereotypes. Modern anthropologists who are interested in human biology include biological anthropologists, primatologists, and paleoanthropologists.
7. Archaeology is anthropology of the human past, but the material remains archaeologists recover can be of value to biological and cultural anthropologists. Archaeologists often work with other scientists who are specialists in specific areas of research like, for example, paleoanthropology and forensic anthropology. Canadian archaeologists work both locally and around the world while focusing on a broad range of topics that include paleoarchaeology, underwater archaeology, ethnoarchaeology, and more. Cultural resource management is a subject area within Canadian archaeology that develops research and policy for the management and protection of cultural and natural resources. It includes impact assessments that determine the impacts of economic development on both of these kinds of resources. Archaeologists in Canada have been very active in working with First Nations on the protection of their cultural heritage sites.
8. Linguistic anthropologists try to understand language in relation to broader cultural, historical, and biological contexts. They study historical or comparative linguistics, structural linguistics, and sociolinguistics (the way language differences frequently correlate with differences in gender, class, or ethnic identity). They also collaborate with communities whose languages are at risk.
9. Cultural anthropologists study human diversity by focusing on sets of learned behaviours and ideas that human beings acquire as members of different societies. Cultural anthropologists tend to specialize in specific domains of human cultural activity, and may undertake research in their own communities or in others.
10. Through fieldwork, cultural anthropologists gain insight into another culture, both by participating with research participants in social activities and by observing those activities as outsiders. Ethnographies are published accounts of what was learned during fieldwork. Ethnology involves comparing ethnographic information from two or more different cultures.
11. Applied anthropologists use information gathered from the other anthropological specialties to solve practical problems in areas such as health care and economic development. More particularly in Canada, applied anthropology is used to navigate the changing landscape of Aboriginal Rights and Title, applications of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the 94 Calls to Action of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
12. Most anthropologists emphasize that human beings are biocultural organisms with a biological makeup that allows us to make and use culture. As a result, human beings have produced a tremendous variety of distinct cultural traditions. The large complex human brain means that we are capable of symbolic thought, which allows us to make sense of our world through symbols.
13. The concept of culture has been essential to the anthropological perspective. It has illuminated the human condition while explaining why people are who they are and why they do what they do. The key attribute of human culture is that it is learned rather than acquired through biology. Over time, culture has come to mean different things to different people and as such has become contested. The critique of culture revolves around *culture* (singular), which refers to the human characteristic of being able to create and imitate patterned, symbolically mediated ideas and activities, and *cultures* (plural), which indicates a learned way of life specific to a particular group of human beings. Some anthropologists have criticized this plural use of the term *cultures*, arguing that it seems to endorse an oppressive or even racist view of culture, but other anthropologists see it as a productive concept that can be reconfigured to avoid such views.
14. Ethnocentrism is a form of reductionism that leads to an opinion that one’s own way of life is the only natural and correct way to live life. Anthropologists believe it can be countered by a commitment to cultural relativism, an attempt to understand the cultural underpinnings of behaviour within the context of the culture it is found in. Cultural relativism makes moral decisions more difficult because it requires us to take into account many things before we make up our minds. Cultural relativism does not require us to abandon every value our society has taught us; however, it does discourage the easy solution of refusing to consider alternatives from the outset.
15. Human history is an essential aspect of the human story, a dialectic between biology and culture. Culture is worked out over time and passed on from one generation to the next. While we cannot escape our history or culture, as human beings we have the power to act in our own interests; therefore, the story of our species involves human agency.

## Suggested Lecture Topics

**What Is Anthropology?**

* Anthropology is the integrated study of human nature, human society, and human history.
* Terms: research participants; ethnography; ethnology

**Culture as a Concept**

* Culture refers to sets of learned behaviours and ideas that humans acquire as members of a society.
* We use culture to adapt to and transform the world in which we live.
* Consider the eight elements of culture as presented by Potts.
* Culture is symbolic, not only in the language we use but also in material items and aspects of how we conduct ourselves. Demonstrate this to the students by showing a list of edible items and asking the class if the item is considered to be food or not, and why. Also, use material items, such as a national coffee chain or restaurant, to demonstrate how aspects of culture can be read in the items and their consumption (e.g., what it means to be Canadian, male/female, a father, mother or child, a student, etc.).
* Terms: habitus; symbolic coding; co-evolution; biocultural organisms

**Principles of Anthropology**

* The anthropological perspective is based on *holism*. This assumes that mind and body, individual and society, and individual and environment interpenetrate and even define one another.
* Another characteristic of anthropology is the *comparative perspective*. This requires anthropologists to consider similarities and differences in as wide a range of human societies as possible before generalizing about human nature, human society, or human history.
* The anthropological perspective is *evolutionary*. Anthropologists place their observations about human nature, human society, or human history in a flexible framework that takes into consideration change over time.
* Anthropology is grounded in *fieldwork*.

**Consider “–isms”**

* Racism: the systematic oppression of members of one or more socially defined “races” by members of another socially defined “race” that is justified within the ruling society by the rulers’ faulty belief in their own biological superiority.
* Ethnocentrism: the opinion that one’s own way of life is the most natural, correct, or fully human way of life.
* Cultural relativism: the perspective that all cultures are equally valid and can only be truly understood in their own terms.
* Group work or class exercise that allows the students to recognize ethnocentrism. For example, write four ethnocentric statements, such as: “Foreigners should give up their ways and adapt to those of their new country as soon as possible.” Have the students as a group determine if they agree or disagree with the statements. If any student disagrees, the statement must be rewritten until they all agree.

## Suggested Discussion or Debate Topics

1. How would you develop definitions of what it means to be human? How is your own culture reflected in this definition?
2. Before coming to this class, what was your understanding of “culture”? In what ways do you think the mass media have shaped this understanding? How has it changed (if at all)?
3. Does cultural relativism ask us to abandon any sense of morality? Why or why not?
4. Anthropology claims to be unique among academic disciplines that concentrate on what it means to be human. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
5. What does it mean to say that cultural relativism is a methodological concept? Are there potential dangers to being too relativistic?
6. Are there times in your life when you are being ethnocentric, either consciously or unconsciously? Explain.
7. Can anthropology be useful in the protection of First Nations’ cultural heritage sites?
8. How can archaeologists’ fixation on material culture be of use to First Nations in Canada?
9. Are there aspects of nonhuman primate behaviour that are useful in understanding human behaviour?
10. Can you think of ways that applied anthropology in Canada could be used to advance the rights of Indigenous peoples?

## Academic Articles

* Arnett, Chris. 2012. “Archaeological Investigations at TSeTSeQU (EbRk-2), an Nlaka’pamux Rock Painting Site on the Stein River, British Columbia,” *The Midden* 44, 3/4: 17-28.
* Boas, Franz. 1948. *Race, Language and Culture* (New York: Macmillan).
* Borofsky, Robert, Fredrik Barth, Richard A. Shweder, Lars Rodseth, and Nomi Maya Stolzenberg. 2001. “When: A Conversation about Culture,” *American Anthropologist* 103, 2: 432–46.
* Hudson, Douglas. 2013. “The Okanagan,” in C. Roderick Wilson and Christopher Fletcher (eds), *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience*, Fourth Edition (Don Mills: Oxford University Press).
* Klassen, Michael A., Rick Budhwa, and Rudy Reimer/Yumks. 2009. “First Nations, Forestry, and the Transformation of Archaeological Practice in British Columbia, Canada,” *Heritage Management* 2, 2: 199-238.
* Reimer, Rudy/Yumks. 2007. “Smaylilh or Wild People Archaeology,” *NEXUS* 20, 1: 8-30.
* Sahlins, Marshall. 1999. “Two or Three Things that I Know about Culture,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5, 3: 399–421.
* Smedley, Audrey. 1998. “‘Race’ and the Construction of Human Identity,” *American* *Anthropologist* 100, 3: 690–702.
* Stocking, George W., Jr. 1966. “Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective,” *American Anthropologist* 68, 4: 867–882.
* White, Leslie A. 1959. “The Concept of Culture,” *American Anthropologist* 61, 2: 227–51.

## Teaching Resources

* A Forensic Anthropologist on the Difficulties of Identifying Human Remains <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/a-forensic-anthropologist-on-the-potential-difficulties-of-identifying-remains-at-former-residential-school-sites-1.5842193>
* American Anthropological Association—Learning Resources for Higher Education <https://www.americananthro.org/LearnAndTeach/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2644>
* Applied Anthropology <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/applied-anthropology/>
* Archaeology at Parks Canada <https://parks.canada.ca/culture/arch/>
* Canadian Archaeological Association <https://canadianarchaeology.com/caa/>
* eHRAF World Cultures (Human Relations Area Files), Yale University <http://hraf.yale.edu/products/ehraf-world-cultures>
* Hidden from History—The Canadian Holocaust <http://canadiangenocide.nativeweb.org/>
* Informant (Debated Terminology) [www.anthrobase.com/Dic/eng/def/informant.htm](http://www.anthrobase.com/Dic/eng/def/informant.htm)
* Material Culture - Artifacts and the Meaning(s) They Carry: What Can the Material Culture of a Society Tell Scientists? <https://www.thoughtco.com/material-culture-artifacts-meanings-they-carry-171783>
* The Culture Concept <http://ak.vbroek.org/2014/01/03/the-culture-concept/>
* Wild Archaeology, TV Series, APTN. <https://www.aptntv.ca/wildarchaeology/>
* Your Questions Answered about Canada's Residential School System <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canada-residential-schools-kamloops-faq-1.6051632>