

Culture concepts

Outline Boas's and Tylor's concepts of culture. Discuss what you think are the major contributions to the culture concept since Boas and Tylor. Discuss who made these contributions and why you think they are significant.

Agency and structure

[QUESTION TO BE ADDED]

Idealism and materialism

Compare idealist and materialist conceptions of society. Are societies held together by shared ideas, values and symbols, or by material forces, including coercion and exchange? Include important figures and controversies in your answer.

Critique of anthropology

Some anthropologists believe they are in the business of discovering objective truths about the real world. This realist conception of anthropology has come under attack from a number of directions lately. Discuss and evaluate the critique of objectivity in anthropology, especially post-modern and post-colonial approaches.

Culture change

At first glance it might seem that culture change in any society is haphazard. What ethnographic evidence could be cited to suggest otherwise? Attempts to categorize regularities in culture change have led to such concepts as: culture area, culture type, diffusion and acculturation. Discuss these terms and their ramifications. Show how these concepts could be applied to ethnographic studies with which you are familiar.

Cultural evolution

Do cultures evolve? Is cultural evolution directional? In what ways is cultural evolution like or unlike biological evolution? Include classic treatments of evolutionism, such as Spencer and Tylor, and modern defenses and critiques of cultural evolution.

Nature and nurture

Discuss the nature-nurture controversy in anthropology, with special reference to two of the following:

- (a) incest avoidance, incest taboos, and rules of marriage.
- (b) the Mead-Freeman controversy.
- (c) linguistic relativism and linguistic universals.

Sex differences

Discuss two alleged universal behavioral sex differences. Are they universal? If so, what accounts for their universality? If not, what accounts for their variation? Make sure you consider a range of theoretical traditions, authorities, arguments, lines of evidence, and cultures in your answer.

Kinship

The study of kinship has long been an area of special concern to anthropologists, and it is still an area to which anthropologists can lay a special claim. Why has the study of kinship been so important to anthropology, and how has its study fashioned both the questions

anthropologists ask and the theories we use to interpret our data? Where are kinship studies positioned in contemporary anthropology, and why? Include (a) biological and cultural approaches to kinship, (b) descent and alliance theories, and (c) kinship skeptics.

Ethnicity

Anthropologists have taken two basic approaches to ethnicity, the primordialist approach (e.g. van den Berghe) and the situationist/constructionist view (e.g. Barth). How do each of these relate to the concept of race? Are these two approaches mutually exclusive or are they both important components of ethnicity? How can each contribute to our understanding of nationalism and ethnic conflicts in the era of globalization?

Globalization

Some anthropologists argue that the field has too often ignored the extent to which cultures -- in the past, and even more in the present -- are segments of a world system(s) characterized by processes of expansion, exchange, and domination on a large scale. To what extent does attention to larger systems force us to revise our conception of anthropology? Discuss with respect to major authorities and controversies.

Economics

Compare and contrast anthropological economics and mainstream economics.

Theories of religion

Religion seems to be a cultural universal. Durkheim, Malinowski and Geertz, coming from very different perspectives, argue that religion is critical in social decision-making. Contrast and compare their perspectives. By examining a society of your choice, show how these approaches can provide a variety of insights into religio-ideational systems.

Religion and society

Religion is often seen as conservative, promoting socio-cultural persistence and supporting the political status quo. There is also good evidence to show that religion can act as a major impetus for change. Discuss this conundrum with respect to at least two societies and situations you have studied, considering behavior such as: witchcraft accusations, shamanism, revitalization, sacrifice, prayer, etc.

Medical anthropology I

Medical anthropology was born after World War II in conjunction with the needs of public health programs. Since then it has been one of the fastest growing sub-fields of anthropology. Over its 50 year history, has medical anthropology developed theory of its own or does it only involve the application of broader anthropological theory to medical subject matter? There is no right or wrong answer, but be sure to back your arguments with examples.

Medical anthropology II

(a) Paul Farmer has argued that barriers to behavior that would promote good health can more often be attributed to broader economic and political structures than to cultural beliefs and practices. Do you agree? Give examples.

(b) Structures are slow to change while epidemics move quickly. In addition to identifying the sources of structural violence, what do you think anthropologists can do to alleviate suffering caused by three major epidemics: TB, AIDS, or malaria?

Comparing ethnographies

Choose three ethnographies from three different time periods and discuss how the authors collected data while doing fieldwork. How did a particular theoretical framework shape these anthropologists' choice of the questions they asked and the method they used?

Ethnographic study and restudy

It might be argued that ethnography is more an art or craft than a science. The restudy of a previously researched group might offer an opportunity to test this notion. Mead, Freedman, and Holmes on Samoa, Redfield and Lewis on Tepoztlan, Rivers and Anthony Walker on the Todas, Malinowski and Weiner in the Trobriand Islands, Redfield's own return to Chan Kom, and Mead on Manus are, among others, noteworthy examples. Choosing a study/restudy situation, what issues about description, analysis, theory and method are especially relevant to the example chosen? Is it fair in follow-up research to criticize earlier work? What are some caveats about doing so?

Cross-cultural comparison and ethnography

Boas suggests that generalizations about human societies and cultures can only be made after in-depth study of individual societies. Tylor, on the other hand, might be considered the father of modern cross-cultural methodology. What does this have to do with ethnography and ethnology? Use ethnographies you have read to illustrate your answer. How has cross-cultural study changed over the past century and how would you today respond to Boas's concerns? Discuss an example of cross-cultural research that you would consider particularly successful and significant.

Ethics

Why are ethical concerns a major issue in anthropology? Which ethical questions related to fieldwork have been debated in the controversy over Chagnon and other anthropologists and the Yanomamö? Which side would you choose and why?