Anthropology arose in the nineteenth century as a result of contacts between the West and peoples of other lands. How were Polynesians related to other peoples and to Europeans? How does this drawing from the mid-1800s portray them?

Main Issues Today

The Emergence of Anthropology
- Late-Nineteenth-Century Unilinear Evolutionism
- A Science of Culture?

Anthropological Thought in the Early Twentieth Century
- Historical Particularism in the United States (ca. 1900–1940)
- British Functionalism, 1920s–1960s
- The Tradition of Fieldwork

The Rebirth of Evolutionism in the Mid-Twentieth Century

Anthropological Thought Today: Divisions

Scientific Approaches
- Evolutionary Psychology
- Materialism

Humanistic Approaches
- Interpretive Anthropology
- Postmodernism

Either, Or, or Both?
Why Can't All Those Anthropologists Agree?
Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:
1. Review the global forces that contributed to the emergence of anthropology.
2. Generalize the main ideas of the nineteenth century unilineal evolutionists.
3. Analyze the ways American historical particularism and British functionalism challenged unilineal evolutionism.
4. Examine the mid-twentieth century rebirth of evolutionary interests (neo-evolutionism).
5. Describe the main differences between the scientific and the humanistic approaches to modern anthropological thought.
6. Identify evolutionary psychology, materialism, interpretive anthropology, and postmodernism.
7. Argue why contemporary anthropology has no single unifying theoretical orientation.

Main Issues Today

Here it is impossible to discuss all the issues that concern cultural anthropologists in the twenty-first century. We must concentrate on only some of the major questions of today: Can and should cultural anthropology be a science, in the same sense that biology is a science? What are the most useful concepts and theoretical orientations to use in studying human cultural diversity? When we study another culture during fieldwork, whose representations should we use? Should the anthropologist/ethnographer decide what’s important, that is, should anthropologists define the questions and propose the answers? Or, should the views of the Others themselves take precedence, that is, should the native point of view take priority?

Generally, those who think cultural anthropology is a science try to collect “data” about the Others to describe and explain cultures, much as biologists collect data to explain the diversity of life. The primary goal of scientific anthropologists is to find the general principles that influence cultures—that cause them to be the way they are. Scientific anthropologists often claim that the main goals of their discipline are to explain cultural differences and similarities and the main patterns of cultural change. In addition to collecting data through fieldwork, scientific types believe we must compare and contrast cultures of the past and present to discover these general principles. For the most part, they think the aims of science ought to guide our investigations. Quite often,
they claim that the views of the people whose cultures they study are not adequate explanations for their own actions, thoughts, and feelings.

In contrast, other ethnologists today are less concerned—in many cases, not at all concerned—with making their field a science. They tend to treat each culture as a unique product of such a vast number of influences that there really are no “general principles” that “cause” differences and similarities. Rather, each culture is a product of its own unique and specific past. In conducting fieldwork, they tend to believe that descriptions of Others vary with the personality, gender, and other characteristics of the fieldworker. Objectivity is impossible, they feel, so the use of the term data is misleading at best. Although the phrase is not perfect, here we call them “humanistic ethnologists.” Humanistic types tend to focus on portraying specific cultures with sensitivity. One issue humanistic ethnologists are concerned with today is representation: Who can legitimately speak for the Others? Should the anthropologist’s account of a culture be based on her or his own questions, or should the anthropologist serve more as a translator whose writings allow the Voices of Others to be heard and understood by Ourselves?

The Emergence of Anthropology

Until a few centuries ago, the vast majority of Earth’s people had no knowledge of any people or any culture other than the one into which they themselves were born. Of course, there were some exceptions. In the fifth century B.C.E., the Greek historian Herodotus wrote about the peoples of Persia, northern Africa, and nearby regions. Much later, in the 1200s, the Venetian trader Marco Polo reached China (then called “Cathay”) via the ancient Silk Road that had connected Rome and China since before the time of Christ. Marco Polo’s descriptions of his adventures in China made his book popular among the European literary elite. Descriptions like those of Herodotus and Marco Polo were rare and often treated skeptically. Some parts of Marco Polo’s account were so surprising to his European readers that many of them did not believe his tales, such as the one about the Chinese burning black rocks as fuel.

In the 1500s, the nations of Europe began to send large numbers of traders, missionaries, military personnel, and officials to other continents. During the next 400 years, Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and other European nations established formal colonies in large parts of Africa and Asia and in most of the Americas. European visitors produced hundreds of written descriptions about the customs and beliefs of the peoples of the Americas, Asia, Africa, and scattered islands of the Pacific. From such books, articles, and letters sent back home, scholars learned that vast continents across the lands and oceans existed and that they were populated by people who were definitely Other in their customs and beliefs.

Between around 1500 and the mid-1800s, most Western scholars believed in the essential accuracy of the story of creation recounted in the Judeo-Christian Bible. In the biblical account, Earth was only a few thousand years old; one biblical scholar claimed that Earth was created in 4004 B.C.E. Because God created everything in only six days, humanity was the same age—as old as Earth itself. Further, the biblical creation story contained no substantial reference to any land occupied by the kinds of Others that Europeans were encountering. Who were all these people of the Americas and Africa? How could Western thinkers make sense of these “savages” and their ways of living? What implications did their existence have for the understanding of Ourselves? Did their existence challenge the worldview derived from Judeo-Christian teachings?

By the mid-1800s, other puzzles had sprung up. For example, in Europe and North America, people discovered stone tools and other signs that ancient people had lived there. Some tools were side by side with animals that were long extinct, suggesting that those people and animals were contemporaneous. In Germany’s Neander Valley, a partial skeleton of a humanlike creature was unearthed. Who made these ancient, prehistoric tools? Were they made by people like those of today? Were the Neanderthal bones human, and, if so, what did they mean?

In Europe, some people (early archaeologists) noted that there was a regular sequence of toolmaking: the earliest were made of stone, later tools included some of bronze, and still later iron was used. This sequence came to be known as the Three Ages: Stone, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. Each age had a greater variety of tools than the preceding age, and the materials used in each stage seemed superior to those of the earlier age. It looked like the lands where Western civilization now existed once contained “simpler, more primitive” peoples. In the United States, early Anglo settlers of Ohio and surrounding states commented on the existence of large earthen mounds, wondering who could have constructed these ancient monuments—certainly not the ancestors of the savage “Indians” who then lived in these regions! (Of course, future work showed conclusively that the
This painting by Raphael shows the expulsion of Eve and Adam from Paradise. Well into the nineteenth century, the biblical account of history provided the dominant framework explaining the existence of “natives” in other lands and the nature of their culture.

In geology, James Hutton and Charles Lyell demonstrated that Earth itself was not merely thousands but many millions of years old (today, we know that our planet is about 4.5 billion years old). In biology, Charles Darwin revolutionized popular ideas about life. Rather than each plant and animal being separately made by a Creator, Darwin proposed that one species arose out of another by an entirely natural process. He documented this process in his 1859 book, *On the Origin of Species*.

Darwin’s natural process is evolution. Evolution means that over a long period of time, one species changes into a new species or into several new species. Some species die out altogether, leaving no descendant species. But often, before its own extinction, a new species changes (evolves) into one or more other species. Thus, multiple new species evolve, and they eventually change into even more species. Given enough time, all the diversity of life on Earth can be explained by this process of natural transformation. From simple beginnings, the natural process of evolution created all the forms of life that surround us today. All it takes are slow changes and time—millions and millions of years of time. When geology demonstrated the age of Earth, it showed that our world was old enough for diverse and complicated life-forms to evolve from simple beginnings.
Of course, Darwin's main impact was on biology and the field now called paleoanthropology. Darwin established the possibility that the human species evolved from an ape-like ancestor, and his idea was confirmed in the twentieth century (see Chapter 1). Darwin's ideas about origins and changes in the natural world influenced how Western intellectuals viewed human cultural existence as well as biological existence. If biological life-forms could evolve, then could cultural forms also have arisen through a process of change? Simple forms of organic life had transformed into more complex forms of life. Analogously, in cultural existence, some scholars reasoned that more complex ways of life had developed out of earlier, simpler ways of life.

During these same centuries in Europe and North America, the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment (the Age of Reason) led to belief in progress—the notion that human life has gotten better and better over the course of many centuries. The idea of progress in the realms of technology and ideas led to optimism about the human future.

In summary, nineteenth-century scholars interested in human culture had access to two major kinds of information: (1) written accounts left by Westerners who visited other lands, including colonies of the European nations; and (2) tools that ancient, long-disappeared peoples from Europe and North America had left in the earth. Through Darwin's theories and the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment, scholars assimilated ideas about origins, evolution, and progress. They realized there was a relationship between the various peoples in the written accounts and the ancient people who had made the prehistoric tools and monuments. The long-disappeared prehistoric peoples of Europe and the Americas were similar to the peoples described in the accounts of Western visitors to other continents. Just as stone tools were the earliest form of technology, so "primitive" peoples still alive in the nineteenth century were living representatives of the earliest forms of culture.

**Late-Nineteenth-Century Unilinear Evolutionism**

In the late nineteenth century, a few scholars became interested in how and why cultures had changed over the course of many centuries and millennia. The ideas of evolution, progress, stages, and survival were the keys. Just like plants and animals, cultures had evolved. The earliest "simple" ("primitive") cultures had given rise to ever more "complex" ("more advanced") cultures. This cultural evolution represented progress or development: later cultures were, in some objective sense, superior to earlier cultures. (Here, objective means that there is a universal standard by which superiority can be judged, an assumption that later anthropologists questioned.)

The approach of these early anthropologists is called unilinear evolutionism. At the time, founders of this approach could not have known that future generations of anthropologists would challenge most of their goals and methods.

Briefly stated: as human cultures evolved, they passed through a series of stages. Examples of each stage could be found in the peoples described in all those written accounts and also in the artifacts that prehistoric people had left behind, in or on the ground. Although nineteenth-century Western civilization represented the highest stage of cultural evolution, on other continents lived peoples whose cultures remained in earlier stages. The cultures of these peoples had survived into the present because they had evolved at slower rates than the cultures of more advanced peoples. Such peoples were "survivors" of earlier stages of culture, meaning they were living relics ("survivals") from humanity's distant past.

For example, the evolutionists thought that survivors of the very earliest stages of cultural evolution still existed in remote places like Australia and Polynesia. In other places, remnants of later, intermediate stages can be found: the Fijian people of the Pacific and the Iroquois Indians are living representatives of the middle stage of cultural evolution, which the American scholar Lewis Henry Morgan called barbarism. In still other regions, later evolutionary stages exist: the Incas of South America and the Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese are "civilized" people. Civilization is a higher cultural stage than the stage represented by the Fijians and Iroquois. By carefully studying and comparing peoples who exemplified all the stages, evolutionists believed they could reconstruct the nature of the various stages and figure out what had led one stage to progress to the next.

The unilinear evolutionists are usually considered the first true cultural anthropologists. They had a subject matter that was by and large separate from that of other disciplines—the cultures and societies of peoples who lived in foreign lands (the "Others"). They had a
In their effort to see how all the other cultures related to one another and to the West, unilinear evolutionists arranged cultures into a sequence of stages. One scholar placed the Fijians of the Pacific in the middle stage called *barbarism*. This 1840 drawing is of a Fijian "Club Dance." Notice how the drawing does make the people of Fiji look barbaric.

reasonably coherent objective—to reconstruct and understand the stages through which human cultures had traveled along the road to civilization. They used a methodology that was then in its infancy—comparing and contrasting peoples in various stages of development to discover the nature of the stages and the relationships between them. In brief, cultural anthropology became an academic discipline in the West because it had its own subject matter, objectives, and methods.

Consider just one application of unilinear evolutionism. In 1871, the Englishman E. B. Tylor published the landmark book *Primitive Culture*. In it, he investigated the origins and development of religious beliefs. Where did religion come from? Tylor argued that religious beliefs originated out of peoples' attempts to explain certain experiences. For example, immediately after someone dies, the physical body still exists even though the life of the person has ended. What explains the difference between a living and a dead person? Being ignorant of the actual causes of death, early humans reasoned that living people have a spiritual essence (a "soul") that animates or gives life to the physical body. When the soul leaves the body, the person stops breathing and moving and, hence, dies. Also, people have dreams, trances, and visions in which they see images of all kinds of things and events. Logically, but falsely, early peoples concluded that the things are real and that the events actually occurred. Tylor called the form of religion that this reasoning produces *animism*. Peoples with animistic religions believe in spiritual beings, including nature spirits living in mountains, trees, water, heavenly bodies, and animals; spirits of deceased persons (ghosts); spirits that cause illness; spirits that possess someone and make them insane; and a multitude of other spirits.

Tylor thought animism was the earliest (primeval, most primitive) form of religion from which all others arose. He reasoned that living peoples who still had animistic beliefs were survivors of this earliest stage of religion. Therefore, anthropologists could learn about the earliest form of religion by studying living peoples who were still animistic. How did animism evolve into its later forms? Over time, early peoples reasoned that some spirits were more important or influential than others. Eventually, such spirits were elevated to higher positions. They became gods of various things and activities such as gods of sun, moon, sky, rain, earth, clans, war, agriculture, love, fertility, and so forth. There were many such gods, as well known from Greek and Roman mythology. This stage of religion is called *polytheism*, meaning religions that include a belief in many gods, each with his, hers, or its own sphere of influence.

What about *monotheism*? This form of religious belief was represented by the Judeo-Christian heritage of the West. It was also familiar from Islam, which had been known to Europeans for more than a millennium. Tylor argued that monotheism evolved when one of the gods of polytheism acquired dominance over other gods. Eventually, over centuries, the other gods came to be seen as false gods or not to exist at all. Not surprisingly, Tylor believed that monotheism was the most evolved form of religion.
Tylor’s three stages of religion—animism, polytheism, and monotheism—illustrate the main ideas of the unilinear evolutionists. Examples of each stage survived in many scattered places—in fact, on all continents. One stage evolved into another, not just in one region or continent, but in many. For example, animistic religions evolved into polytheistic religions among many peoples, and, in turn, polytheism evolved into monotheism several times. The fact that the same sequence of stages occurred again and again among widely scattered peoples seemed to imply that human cultures developed in regular, recurrent patterns. If so, then human cultural evolution followed some sort of “law,” meaning that similar processes were resulting in similar changes, analogous to Darwinian evolution.

A Science of Culture?

Following this logic, most unilinear evolutionists thought that the new field of anthropology could and should be a science. They believed the development of culture could be explained much as biology explains the evolution of living organisms. Tylor (1871, 2) wrote that human “thoughts, wills, and actions accord with laws as definite as those which govern the motion of waves, the combinations of acids and bases, and the growth of plants and animals.”

Few anthropologists of today agree with this statement because, unlike waves and chemicals, humans have active minds of their own. Many contemporary thinkers do not believe that what Tylor called a “science of culture” is possible. Some do not think it is desirable, because one kind of human should not treat other kinds of humans as “objects for study.”

The unilinear evolutionists made significant contributions to the development of anthropology. Thanks largely to their writings, by the early twentieth century, anthropology became a full-fledged academic discipline. Scholarly fields that investigate various aspects of humankind were already established in European and American universities as departments or schools of religion, theology, art, philosophy, classics, history, and so forth. But a discipline whose focus was the physical and cultural diversity of humanity was not recognized until the last decades of the 1800s. In the United States, the first anthropology course was taught in 1879 at the University of Rochester. In 1886, the first anthropology department was founded at the University of Pennsylvania. It was followed near the turn of the century by university departments at Columbia, Harvard, Chicago, and California (Berkeley).

Anthropological Thought in the Early Twentieth Century

Despite their contributions, many assumptions that the unilinear evolutionists seemed to take for granted were questionable. In the early decades of the twentieth century, their ideas were largely rejected, partly because their methods were flawed and much of their information was erroneous. In the English-speaking countries, anthropologists in America and Great Britain set out in different directions, as we now discuss.

Historical Particularism in the United States (ca. 1900–1940)

At the end of the 1800s and for the next three or four decades, the American anthropologist Franz Boas and his students questioned the methods and the findings of unilinear evolutionism. Boas was so influential in the United States that he is often called the “father of American anthropology.” In his view, each and every culture has its own separate past and each culture is “one of a kind”—that is, different from all others. Because each culture was affected by almost everything that had happened to it in the past, and because different things had happened to different cultures, each culture is unique.

This approach is usually called historical particularism (or historicism). Notice that if it is true that each culture is the distinctive product of its unique history, then it is difficult to identify any general principles that affect all cultures. Rather, each culture must be studied on its own terms.

Clearly, the unilinear evolutionists did not study each culture “on its own terms.” In making their comparisons and formulating their stages, they imposed their own “terms” (e.g., complexity, progress, stages) on other cultures. Take the notion of complexity, for example. In the realm of technology, most people might agree that guns and bullets are more complex than bows and arrows, which, in turn, are more complex than spears and throwing sticks. But what can complex mean when applied to other
As an example of Boas's point, consider American unilinear evolutionist Lewis Henry Morgan. Morgan identified three stages of cultural evolution, which he labeled "savagery," "barbarism," and "civilization." He viewed civilization as the highest form, of course. But many peoples, such as Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese, would have claimed—did claim—that it was Morgan's own people who were the "barbarians." So, although it might be possible to speak of progress in technology, it is difficult to do so for cultures as wholes. Does monotheism represent "progress" over animism or polytheism? Perhaps it does, but you are more likely to think so if your own religion is monotheistic. And if your criteria for defining "progress" is ethnocentric, then your concept of "stages of progress" obviously is almost useless.

These arguments seemed to mean that the unilinear evolutionists were wrong: cultures do not develop along a single series of progressive stages, culminating in nineteenth-century Western civilization. Instead, each culture changes along its own unique path, depending on the particular influences that affect it. To understand a culture, therefore, we must study it individually, not as a representative of some hypothetical stage, which Boas thought existed only in the minds of the evolutionists. Anthropologists must free themselves from preconceived ideas and assumptions and give up speculative schemes of evolution and ethnocentric definitions of progress.

The historical particularists also claimed that it is very difficult to place the customs and beliefs of different peoples into the same stage of progress. In most cases, the customs and beliefs of widely scattered peoples only appear to be similar. They are, in fact, different, the particularists believed. For example, Tylor probably would have said that Japanese Shinto and Chinese Daoism are both examples of animism because both religions believed in a multitude of spirits. In contrast, the ancient religions of both Greece and Polynesia had many gods and so would be classified as polytheistic. But are Shinto and Daoism the same "form" of religion just because Shintoists and Daoists believe in many spirits? And how can you claim that the religions of ancient Greece and Polynesia have the same "form" and therefore belong in the same "stage"? What would the Chinese and Japanese, or the ancient Greeks and the Polynesians have said about such comparisons? What do today's Muslims, Jews, and Christians say if someone claims their monotheistic beliefs are the same "form"?

In short, to say that the customs and beliefs of two or more Other cultures are the same or similar" because they look the same to Us is to ignore a host of differences between these cultures. The Greeks and Polynesians had
different gods, who did different kinds of things to and for people. For the historicists, this is enough to consider them different forms of religion. (Carried to an extreme, of course, this means that every religion has a different form from every other religion, which makes every religion unique.) The only way to get a valid notion of stage would be to study the development of each religion separately, which might lead to the discovery of the stages of evolution for each religion. But these stages, if found, would probably not be universal. The same applies to other elements of culture, Boas thought.

These simple points had major implications for how Westerners studied all those Others. If it is true that each culture is unique, then it is difficult to compare cultures. If every culture has a past that is fundamentally different from the past of every other culture, then it is not likely that general laws or principles exist that apply everywhere. This would make a genuine science of culture difficult because science attempts to find general principles or processes that explain the natural (or cultural) world.

Boas thought the basic assumptions of the evolutionists were flawed, mainly because their ideas about progress and stages were ethnocentric. But he also noted that the ways the evolutionists investigated other cultures—their methods—led them to errors. Today, nineteenth-century evolutionists often are called “armchair anthropologists” because they themselves had not lived among any of those “savages” and “barbarians” (with a few exceptions like Morgan, who actually studied the Iroquois firsthand). Instead, for the most part, they relied on descriptive accounts written by people who too often were untrained, who presented their “impressions” rather than “hard facts,” and who were biased in their perceptions of Others.

Boas thought that professional anthropologists must abandon the comforts of their office armchairs and engage in firsthand interactions with members of other cultures. The main need of the infant field of anthropology was more factual information about other cultures, not unsupported speculations in faculty offices and classrooms. Anthropologists themselves must conduct ethnographic fieldwork. This was the only way they can be somewhat confident that they have their facts correct. And only after anthropologists are sure that their facts are correct should they begin to even try to make general statements or to theorize about cultures. Boas, in brief, wanted more and better descriptions of more cultures.

Boas thought it essential that fieldworkers remain objective as they observe and record the customs and beliefs of other cultures. Fieldworkers must enter the communities and lives of the Others with an open mind. Above all, they should not be ethnocentric because ethnocentrism inevitably leads to errors. If a fieldworker visits another people with an attitude of superiority, he or she is not likely to come away with accurate, objective information. Fieldworkers who go into the field with preconceived notions are likely to observe and report on things consistent with their own preconceptions and not notice or report on contradictory things.

According to Boas, fieldworkers should adopt an attitude of cultural relativism. While living among Others, we must be methodological relativists (Chapter 2), temporarily suspending our own values, morality, standards of hygiene, ways of interpreting actions, and so forth. Not only does a relativistic attitude help us fit into the community, but it also minimizes the chances that we will misinterpret or misunderstand people because we see them through the filter of our own culture’s perceptions and biases.

Boas himself conducted firsthand fieldwork among two Native American peoples, the Inuit (“Eskimo”) and the Kwakiutl. He sent many of his students at Columbia University out for fieldwork experiences, including Margaret Mead, who became famous for her 1928 book, Coming of Age in Samoa. For decades, Margaret Mead was the one anthropologist most people knew about. Again and again, she discussed how different the various peoples of the world are, so much so that the idea that there was a Human Nature became widely questioned. Mead also was one of the intellectual founders of modern feminism, because she emphasized the multitude of differences in how cultures regard relations between the sexes.

Because of the influence of Boas and his students, in American anthropology today, living among and participating in the lives of the people under study is the main method by which one becomes a professional and acquires a positive reputation in the discipline. The tradition of fieldwork is one of Boas’s lasting legacies.

In addition to learning more about cultures, firsthand fieldwork has another benefit. The traditional customs, beliefs, and languages of many of the world’s peoples had already disappeared because of diseases, genocide, assimilation, and other effects of global contacts. Surviving cultures and languages were vanishing or changing rapidly. Boas believed it was the duty of anthropologists to record disappearing traditions before they were gone forever. Many students of Boas, like A. L. Kroeber and Robert Lowie, did fieldwork among Native American peoples, whose cultures they believed were especially endangered.
Finally, Boas did as much as anyone to show that biological differences and cultural differences are largely independent of each other, that is, the culture of a human group is a product of social learning and tradition, not of genetic heritage (see Chapter 2).

In sum, historical particularism made four enduring contributions to modern anthropology: (1) it discredited the overly speculative schemes of the unilinear evolutionists; (2) it insisted that fieldwork is the primary means of acquiring reliable information; (3) it imparted the idea that cultural relativism as a methodological principle is essential for the most accurate understanding of another culture; and (4) it demonstrated and popularized the notion that cultural differences and biological differences have little to do with each other. These contributions helped to shape modern cultural anthropology.

Historical particularism gave rise to other movements in the first half of the twentieth century, all of which shared its emphasis on cultural uniqueness and relativism. One of the most influential is called configurationalism. One of Boas's students was Ruth Benedict, whose 1934 book, *Patterns of Culture*, is considered a classic. Benedict argued that, from the vast array of humanly possible cultures, each particular culture develops only a limited number of "patterns" or "configurations" that dominate the thinking and responses of its members. Each culture develops a distinctive set of feelings and motivations that orient the thoughts and behaviors of its members. (Note the emphasis on cultural uniqueness.) These configurations give each culture a distinctive style, and the thoughts and actions of its members reflect its configurations. Behavior that one person consider crazy or abnormal might be acceptable or even ideal among another people. (Note the emphasis on cultural relativism.)

For example, Benedict wrote that the Kwakiutl of the Northwest Coast of North America are individualistic, competitive, intemperate, and egoistic. This cultural configuration affects Kwakiutl customs. They stage ceremonies known as potlatches, in which one kin group gives away enormous quantities of goods to another. The aim is to shame the rival group because if the rival is unable to return the presentations on certain occasions, its members suffer a loss of prestige. In fact, to avoid losing prestige, the recipient group is obliged to return gifts of even greater value. Over time, the presentations might snowball until the members of one group, in their ceaseless quest for prestige, are materially impoverished (or so Benedict imagined). The whole complex of behaviors connected to the potlatch reflects the cultural configuration of the Kwakiutl—the Kwakiutl are so caught up by the prestige motivation that groups impoverish themselves to achieve this goal. To describe the Kwakiutl, Benedict used the term Dionysian, after the Greek god known for his drinking, partying, and other excesses.

Benedict contrasted the Kwakiutl configuration to the Zuni of the North American Southwest. Zuni control their emotions, she claimed. They are moderate, modest, stoical, orderly, and restrained in their behavior. They do not boast or attempt to rise above their peers but are social and cooperative. This "Apollonian" cultural theme, as Benedict called it, permeates all of Zuni life. Unlike a Kwakiutl leader, a Zuni man does not seek status; indeed, a leadership role practically has to be forced on him. So, according to Benedict, each culture has its unique patterns and themes, which makes it possible for a person that culture A labels a megalomaniac to be culture B's ideal person.

Although modern anthropologists agree that different cultures emphasize different themes or patterns, most think that Benedict overemphasized the effect of culture on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of its members. It is misleading to characterize cultures in simple terms, such as that Kwakiutl are Dionysian (prone to excess), whereas Zuni are Apollonian (moderate in all things). To do so easily leads one people to develop stereotypes about the "personality" or "character" of another people. For example, some Americans say the Japanese have conformist personalities because they seem to submit to the authority of their bosses and appear devoted to their companies. In most such opinions, one's own culture is assumed the standard, and others are judged on the basis of that reference point. Thus, according to common American stereotypical labels, Irish have fiery tempers, Italians are "excitable," Swiss are humorless, and Swedes are sensual. But "the" Zuni, "the" Irish, and "the" members of other human communities are not simple products of their culture's "configurations." Rather, the personality and character of the members of a culture are highly variable, and the relationship between culture and the behavior of individuals is complicated (see Chapter 2).

Historical particularism changed the way anthropologists thought about culture and conducted research, but it has limitations. Think about the claim that each culture is unique—like no other. Certainly, if differences between

configurationalism Theoretical idea that each culture historically develops its own unique thematic patterns around which beliefs, values, and behaviors are oriented.
cultures are what we are interested in, we can easily find them then legitimately claim that no two cultures are alike. So at some level, the claim that "each culture is unique" is correct. So also is the claim that no two individuals brought up within the same culture are exactly alike. Yet they are alike in some ways. It is true that in some ways, no culture is like any other. But also, in some ways, a given culture does have things in common with some other cultures. More generally speaking, there are similarities as well as differences between ways of life. Historical particularists tended to overlook the similarities and to neglect the investigation of factors that might explain them.

Consider also the claim that, because each culture is the unique product of its particular history, one cannot generalize about the causes of cultural differences. According to historicism, there are no "general causes" of cultures. Rather, there are multiple causes, whose relative importance are impossible to disentangle. Besides, causation varies from people to people, depending on their particular history.

But others disagree. To say that the natural environment is important in culture X, religion in Y, values in Z, and so forth, is to say little more than that everything is related to most everything else. The holistic perspective (see Chapter 11) assumes that culture is "integrated." However, it is possible that some influences are more important than other influences in all or most human populations. For example, some scholars claim that how people interact with their natural environment is generally more important than religion or values in causing people to live the way they do. Recognizing interrelationships and integration does not imply that every factor has equal weight as a causal influence.

By the 1940s, the interests of many American anthropologists returned to discovering the general principles of human cultural existence. Meanwhile, another way of studying human societies and cultural diversity developed in Europe.

**British Functionalism, 1920s–1960s**

At about the same time that historicism was popular in the United States, a very different approach developed in Great Britain. Generally called functionalism, its main tenet was that social and cultural features should be explained mainly by their useful functions to the people and to the society—that is, by the benefits they confer on individuals and groups. Because humans are above all social beings who live in families, communities, and other kinds of organized groups, most aspects of their culture and society serve to help individuals meet their needs and/or to contribute to the maintenance of the society itself.

One British functionalist was Bronislaw Malinowski. He emphasized the needs of individuals. To Malinowski, the main purpose of culture is to serve human biological, psychological, and social needs. What are these needs? Most biological needs are rather obvious: nutrition, shelter, protection from enemies, maintenance of health and—if the society is to persist—biological reproduction. Humans also have psychological and social needs such as love and affection, security, self-expression, and a sense of belonging. The purpose of culture is to fulfill these needs. Unlike other animals, humans have few inborn instructions or instincts that tell us how to meet our needs. Instead, as we grow up in our culture, we learn the behaviors, social rules, values, and ways of perceiving the world that guide our actions and our thoughts (see Chapter 2).

Some parts of culture meet individual needs directly, such as knowledge of how to acquire food or make shelter. Other aspects function to raise and socialize new generations of group members such as educational practices and family life. Still others encourage people to adhere to group values and rules that make cooperation possible such as religious beliefs and practices and creative arts. Thus, even if a given feature of culture does not directly serve individual needs, it still contributes to the maintenance of the entire cultural system without which human survival would be difficult.

No one can deny that an important function of culture is to help people meet their "needs." However, in some kinds of societies, some individuals and groups have their needs met more completely than others. Further, culture itself can create perceived needs (you can think you need something when you don’t really). And the social and economic conditions under which people live make them need some things that people of other times and places did not need. If you were an attorney in Britain or a college student in Japan in the 1970s, you would not need a computer, but you would today, if you are to be successful. Finally, it is likely that perceived "needs" grow as the capacity for meeting them increases, as all economists know. Thus, the idea of "needs" is more of a problem than it appears to be: "needs" do vary from place to place and time to time.
Bronislaw Malinowski was an influential British functionalist. He is best known for his ethnographies about the Trobriand Islanders. Like the American Franz Boas, Malinowski insisted that cultural anthropologists conduct firsthand fieldwork themselves.

Another influential functionalist from Great Britain was A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. Instead of emphasizing the needs of individuals, Radcliffe-Brown focused on the needs of societies. For him, maintaining orderly social relationships—between family members, friends, members of the same village or town, leaders and followers, and the like—is the main function that must be met if societies are to exist and persist. He imagined that a human society is like a living organism in which each organ has a function to fulfill that contributes to the life of the whole body. In studying a body, a physiologist not only looks at each organ individually, but also considers its role in the life process of the whole organism. Just as organisms cannot stay alive for long unless their organs function properly, so a society cannot persist unless its various institutions play their proper roles in social life. Radcliffe-Brown felt that most customs and beliefs a people share help their society remain in equilibrium (a steady state, with not too much conflict or rapid change).

From today’s perspective, it is clear that societies are not very much like living organisms. Individuals have minds and motives of their own, unlike cells and organs. And few societies are in equilibrium for very long. Societies change constantly. The rate of change and the direction of change vary, and functionalism had relatively little of lasting value to say about change.

Despite these shortcomings, the British functionalists did make lasting contributions to anthropology. Emphasizing the importance of social relationships between individuals and of living in organized groups leads us to pay more attention to how groups are organized and how they relate to one another. Radcliffe-Brown’s emphasis on equilibrium led us to pay more attention to how the parts of a society and culture fit together, and therefore made us attentive to cultural integration.

The Tradition of Fieldwork

Like the American historicists, the British functionalists helped establish the tradition of firsthand fieldwork. Malinowski is famous mainly because of his fieldwork and ethnographic writings about the Trobriand Islanders of the western Pacific. Some of his books, like Argonauts of the Western Pacific and The Sexual Life of Savages, are ethnographic classics. Not only is fieldwork the best means of obtaining reliable information about a people, but it is also a necessary part of the training of anthropologists, Malinowski believed. We cannot claim to understand people, or the diverse cultures in which people of various places grow up, until we have immersed ourselves in the experience of some culture other than our own.

Malinowski thought the main objective of fieldwork is to see the culture as an insider to the culture sees it. In an often-quoted passage from his famous 1922 ethnography Argonauts of the Western Pacific, Malinowski (1922, 25) wrote: “[T]he final goal, of which an Ethnographer [sic] should never lose sight … is, briefly, to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world.” This idea of
what fieldwork is all about remains influential—though controversial—today.

In order to “grasp the native’s point of view,” fieldworkers usually make visits that last at least a year, and they often return to the community many times. Also, fieldwork involves deep involvement in the daily lives of the people. Where possible, fieldworkers should master the local language, live with the local people, participate in games and voyages, become familiar with how members of families relate to one another, observe lots of ceremonies and rituals, record myths and legends, and—generally—learn all they can about a culture from interacting with people and participating in their lives. This way of learning about another culture is generally called participant observation, and it is the most important method for many fieldworkers.

Because of the influence of early-twentieth-century anthropologists like Boas and Malinowski, the fieldwork experience is today an essential part of the graduate training of almost all cultural anthropologists. Fieldwork demonstrates that you can do anthropology yourself as well as study the anthropological research and theories of your teachers. It shows that you can contribute original knowledge about Others, and in most colleges and universities, making new contributions is essential for success in one’s academic career.

Until 20 or 30 years ago, most fieldworkers were from either North America or Western Europe. As a consequence, most ethnographies describing the ways of life of diverse peoples were written by Western anthropologists, who for the most part were trained in Western universities. But anthropology today has gone global. People of many nationalities representing many cultures are now anthropologists, interested in writing about the very people whom Western ethnographers used to monopolize. This has led to new issues, and in the future new ways of representing Other cultures are likely to emerge (see the Globalization box).

For many, fieldwork transforms them as persons. After being intensively exposed to another way of living, we often come away with a different perspective on Ourselves. Even anthropologists have trouble overcoming their own biases and not looking at Others through ethnocentric lenses. Fieldwork is the closest

neoevolutionism “New evolutionism,” or the mid-twentieth-century rebirth of evolutionary approaches to the theoretical study of culture.

most of us come to dissolving the differences between Us and Others. This is another reason most professional anthropologists conduct fieldwork. That, and the fact that most of us like it.

The Rebirth of Evolutionism in the Mid-Twentieth Century

The objections of Boas to unilineal evolutionism were powerful ones, but other approaches to cultural evolution came back into fashion in the 1940s and endure today. The problems with the “old” (unilineal) evolutionism were its flawed assumptions and inadequate methods. Some mid-twentieth-century scholars thought they corrected the assumptions and adopted more sophisticated methods. They developed a “new evolutionism,” or neoevolutionism, so called because their objectives were much the same as the objectives of the nineteenth-century evolutionists, but their methods and specific theories were different. Two North American anthropologists were the most influential neoevolutionists.

Writing mostly in the 1940s–1960s, Leslie White thought that the nineteenth-century evolutionists got some things right after all. The technologies (tools, technical knowledge, skills) that people use to acquire nature’s resources have, in fact, improved over the centuries. “Improved” how? Improved in the sense that people with better technologies are able to harness more energy per person per year. That is, some technologies are more productive or efficient than others, so people can produce more useful products with them. White held that it is, in fact, possible to measure cultural evolution objectively: cultural evolution occurs as the amount of energy harnessed from the natural environment increases. So, in principle, it is possible to define cultural evolution without resorting to questionable criteria, which, if true, overcomes one of historical particularism’s objections.

White went further. Over long periods of time, as humans discovered and invented new technologies that increased the quantity of energy captured, changes in the organization of societies and in the ideas and beliefs of their members followed. To use White’s own terminology, changes in the “social system” and the “ideological system” occur as a consequence of improvements in the “technological system.” Generally speaking, over time, the social and ideological systems have grown more complex. What does complex mean?
As we've seen, anthropology arose after Western Europeans contacted Other peoples—natives, the British often called them—of Africa, Asia, Australia, the Americas, and the Pacific. For nearly a century, the theoretical and field research of most Western anthropologists occurred with little regard for how the Natives would react to the research and its publication. For the most part, the neglect of local reactions was not because researchers did not care about the people, but because so few of them were literate enough to read our writings. Most theorists, of both the scientific and humanistic camps, were interested in what Malinowski called the "native's point of view," but they did not worry too much about the natives' views of the scholarly books and articles anthropologists wrote about them.

Today, anthropology itself has globalized. Countries whose peoples we study have universities with their own anthropologists who write about their own country or their own people. National or regional governments are sometimes reluctant to allow Western fieldworkers to come in. Many people who appear in our ethnographies now read what we write and are often critical of our findings and, occasionally, of how they are used. Some are resentful because their customs, beliefs, opinions, and Views are represented by outsiders rather than by themselves. Some believe (usually mistakenly) that anthropologists grow wealthy by writing about them, while they are paid relatively little when they assist us. To phrase the general point as a question: What happens to anthropology when its subjects begin investigating themselves? (One answer: Invite them to investigate Us—Our families, religions, politics, education, medical practices, and the like.)

Anthropologist Takami Kuwayama discusses these and related issues in his 2004 book, Native Anthropology. He points out that most academic disciplines have spread across national boundaries, thus becoming global. As this happens, unequal relationships develop between those scholars born in Western nations in which the disciplines originated and scholars from other regions.

A major issue for a global anthropology is representation: Who is best qualified to describe the culture of a people, to translate their customs and beliefs into a form that is intelligible to outsiders? Some anthropological scholars from the West are reluctant to give up their claim to represent the Others, even when educated Others challenge their findings. Kuwayama notes that because the most well-endowed and prestigious universities are in Western Europe and North America, the representation that prevails may be based on political concerns rather than accuracy or completeness.

For example, simply because Western ethnographers are outsiders to local cultures, they sometimes claim to be more objective than Native anthropologists, who tend to see their own customs and beliefs through their own cultural lenses. Or, Westerners may say that Native anthropologists have an interest in making their own people look good to outsiders, so they romanticize local customs by de-emphasizing facts that they fear will leave readers with negative impressions. In brief, some claim that a Native is more likely to have a political agenda to pursue, while outsiders supposedly are more interested in accuracy.

You can imagine what most Native anthropologists think of such opinions. The dilemma—who speaks for the Natives?—seems unresolvable. As we discuss later in this chapter, some modern anthropologists say that the Voices of the Natives should usually carry more weight. Others claim that anthropology is a science that seeks to generalize through comparisons, and there is no reason to think that any Native is better qualified to compare than an outsider.

Kuwayama offers a solution to the dilemma of writing about cultures in a global community. He proposes that anthropology develop a forum in which all opinions about an issue of fact or interpretation can be aired on an equal footing. At present, if you are to speak authoritatively (have others take your views seriously), you must publish. You must write scholarly books and find someone to publish them. Better, you must get your articles published in scholarly journals that are peer reviewed (that is, the article is critically analyzed by others who are recognized experts in the subject, who decide whether your article is meritorious enough to be published). Many Native anthropologists have less access to the world of publishing than most scholars in the major universities. Therefore, the information they gather and the opinions they offer are usually underrepresented in the global community of anthropological scholars. The fact that English has become the primary language of discussion does not help the situation. Finally, in publishing as in other realms of life, sometimes it's whom you know rather than what you say that determines whether something you write appears in print.

Kuwayama suggests that more people be given an opportunity to have their Voices heard. Exactly how this opportunity will be offered is unclear, even to Kuwayama. But he notes that worldwide access to the Internet is increasing dramatically and that it is more inclusive than other forums because anyone can post to it. (Interestingly, this is exactly the reason so many scholars mistrust the Internet: except for the restrictions placed on content from countries such as China, there are few controls over it, so "anyone can post to it," which is why so much of it is "garbage."). Someday, there may be a wiki-anthropology.

It means that the scale (size) of societies increases dramatically, occupational specialization develops, large-scale trade and long-distance exchange grow, political centralization occurs, and inequality between classes becomes greater. Again, White argued that all these social changes are largely independent of the anthropologist’s own prejudices and preconceptions, so they also are objective measures of evolution.

White believed that improvements in technology and the resulting increase in the ability of people to harness energy caused most important changes in human cultures. For example, he argued that the transition to agriculture caused civilization to develop in some regions, and the discovery of how to harness the energy of coal caused the rise of industrial society in Great Britain. For this reason, White is often called a technological determinist, meaning he believed that technology causes (“determines”) most everything else in culture that is important. What causes changes in aspects of culture like family organization and political structures? To White, these were part of the “social system” and largely responded to changes in technology. What about aspects of culture like religion, philosophy, worldview, and art? To White, these were part of the “ideological system,” and by and large they changed to reflect and justify changes in the social system.

In summary, White boldly generalized that as technology develops, the social system evolves to take advantage of the increased energy available and new ideologies arise to explain and justify the new technological and social arrangements. So, cultural evolution is in fact a regular, patterned process about which anthropologists can generalize by making objective comparisons and contrasts. Each culture is not entirely unique, and we can legitimately provide explanations that do not depend on the “native point of view.” White agreed with E. B. Tylor that anthropology should be “the science of culture,” and White made this the title of a book he published in 1949.

Another neoevolutionist, Julian Steward, agreed with White that how people acquire natural resources and cope with their environment is the most important part of a people’s way of life. But, more than White, Steward’s theory emphasized the natural environment, which provided food and other necessary resources. Steward’s ideas eventually gave rise to the modern field of cultural ecology, which studies how humans relate to the environment. We discuss such studies in Chapter 6.

Men like White and Steward made attempts to explain culture in scientific terms respectable again. For White, the general principle needed to explain cultural evolution is technological determinism. For Steward, interactions between humans and their environments are the most important causes of cultural differences and similarities (although these interactions are quite complicated). White and Steward are two of the most important intellectual ancestors of the various scientific approaches in Western anthropology today.

**Anthropological Thought Today: Divisions**

Boas’s early criticisms of the unilineal evolutionists illustrate a division that continues to this day. First, the evolutionists thought that anthropology should be like the natural sciences in its goals. But Boas thought it was mainly a “historical science” or a “descriptive science.” By these phrases, Boas meant that anthropologists should try to give complete and objective descriptions of different cultures, but that developing general theories about culture was premature and possibly would never happen.

Second, the evolutionists wanted to establish the general principles that governed cultural development. But the historicists mistrusted most generalizations, especially broad and sweeping ones like “all cultures pass through similar stages.” The closer you come to getting inside another culture, they argued, the more details you perceive and, hence, the more different it looks from other cultures. Most similarities are only superficial, like the “similarity” between polytheism in ancient Polynesia and Greece.

Third, the evolutionists uncritically placed similar cultures in the same stage of progress (like the Iroquois and the Fijians, both in “barbarism”). But the historicists insisted that the evolutionists’ idea of progress was ethnocentric and that therefore stages were artificial creations. If there are no universal stages, or even widespread stages, then the regularities of cultural development that the nineteenth century scholars perceived were not real, but only the result of their assumptions and methods.

Fourth, the evolutionists compared and contrasted cultures from all parts of the world and found the “same” customs among widely scattered peoples. But the historicists reasoned that because each culture’s history is different from the history of every other culture, it follows that each culture is unique and distinctive. This means that it is very misleading to place several cultures into the same category because there are always differences between them. For example, if you say that the ancient Polynesians and Greeks have the “same form” of religion, which you label as polytheism, then that label is yours, not theirs. To call the two religions the same is to misrepresent and distort them. It denies the religions, and the people who
COMPARISON OF THE SCIENTIFIC AND HUMANISTIC APPROACHES

Scientific Approach

Primary goals are explaining cultural differences and similarities and why and how cultures change.

Humans are part of nature, different only in degree from other animals; emphasizes relationships with environment.

Regularities and consistent cross-cultural patterns exist, which can be discovered through empirical observations and systematic comparisons.

Methods emphasize observation of group patterns and comparisons; the ethnographer determines what is important for the purposes of scientific generalization.

Humanistic Approach

Main goal is describing and interpreting particular cultures, to achieve an insider’s view and/or represent the Voices of the people themselves.

Humans are unique because they are cultural and linguistic beings, different in kind from other mammals; emphasizes symbols.

Particular cultures are so complex that each must be understood on its own terms; comparisons distort the cultures that are compared.

Field methods emphasize participation and relationships with local people; descriptions emerge out of interactions between fieldworkers and so are never completely objective; comparisons distort, mislead, and falsely objectify.

believe and practice it, their distinctiveness. It denies the Others their own Voices. It privileges the voice of the anthropologist, meaning that it assumes the anthropologist’s ideas are more valid than the ideas of Others about what they do and how they think.

The Concept Review compares some of the main differences between the scientific and the humanistic approaches. Notice that they differ in their conceptions of goals, human uniqueness, the validity of comparisons among cultures, and the methods used in fieldwork.

The same general kinds of issues persist today. There are many, many contemporary schools of thought, which we cannot cover. Despite this diversity, one important division today is between cultural anthropologists whose interests and methods are more similar to science and those whose interests and methods are more humanistic.

Given the complexity of humanity, and even of a single culture, the answer is always going to be: “It all depends.” Scientifically oriented scholars ask, “On what, mainly?” If the answer turns out to be “on everything else” (and this is exactly what some modern scholars say), then the scientific approach probably will not be able to achieve its goals. There can never be a “general theory” that answers their big questions because the word theory implies that only a small number of general principles are responsible for most of the important differences, changes, relationships, and other phenomena. Theory implies only a few underlying causes or principles or forces. If societies are indeed products of “everything that happened to them in the past,” then we cannot point to a few events or processes and say that these are generally important in most societies most of the time. Human existence would be too chaotic and random to be explained by any general theory.

Scientific Approaches

Those who adopt one of the scientific approaches to the study of Other cultures seek to discover the general forces that make cultures the way they are, that is, they want to explain human ways of life. They are interested in big questions: What are the primary causes of social and cultural differences and similarities? What makes societies and cultures change and/or change at different rates? What are the relationships among the major components of a peoples’ way of life such as resource acquisition, family organization, political structure, and religious beliefs and rituals? When two cultures come into contact, what kinds of forces affect the outcome?

Evolutionary Psychology

As our first example of the scientific approach, in the late 1970s, some anthropologists adopted a theory then known

scientific approaches. Theoretical notion that human cultural differences and similarities can be explained in the same sense as biologists explain life and its evolution.

evolutionary psychology (sociobiology). Scientific approach emphasizing that humans are animals and so are subject to similar evolutionary forces as other animals; associated with the hypothesis that behavior patterns enhance inclusive fitness.
In the 1970s, the work of Harvard’s Edward O. Wilson and other sociobiologists became influential in ethology. Famous for his work on ants and other social insects, Wilson argued that human behaviors and beliefs are shaped by natural selection. Human societies and cultures therefore can be explained by evolutionary processes similar to those operating in other animal species.

as sociobiology. Social scientists now usually call it evolutionary psychology. It emphasizes the similarities between humans and other animals, arguing that humans are subject to the same kinds of processes that operate in other parts of nature. Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson was instrumental in the development of this theoretical framework in the biological sciences. He was interested in animal social behavior. For example why do so many animals (e.g., lions, ants, many ungulates) live in herds or other groups whose members help one another by cooperating in hunting or emitting alarm calls that warn the group of a nearby predator?

Why are such behaviors puzzling? In the animal kingdom, most biologists have long believed that natural selection usually produces organisms that are genetically selfish, meaning that unselfish (altruistic) behavior in animals is rare, existing only under very special circumstances. For instance, most cooperative social behaviors such as alarm calls are costly to the individual animal, yet the benefits accruing to the entire group. A prairie dog calling to alert its neighbors to a predator might call the predator’s attention to itself and thus stand a greater chance of getting eaten. How could natural selection produce animals that act altruistically, when altruistic behavior is so costly to the altruistic animal? Natural selection should select against altruism because an altruistic animal will have less chance of survival and reproduction than the selfish ones.

Wilson, along with other biologists such as Richard Dawkins and William Hamilton, solved this puzzle by noting that the beneficiaries of altruistic behaviors are not individual organisms, but genes. Because genes are the units that are transmitted to offspring through reproduction, only genes that make more copies of themselves in the next generation can survive. Sociobiologists argue that genes tend to program the bodies that temporarily house them to act in ways that improve their biological fitness—that is, in ways that increase their frequencies in the next generation. To paraphrase Dawkins, a body and its behavior are a gene’s way of making more copies of itself. Some evolutionary psychologists claim that this statement applies to humans as well as to other animals. Taken seriously, this means that your body and behavior are your genes’ ways of making more copies of themselves.

The main contribution of sociobiology was the insight that related individuals share a greater proportion of their genes with one another than they do with nonrelatives of the same species. For example, a female can potentially increase the fitness of one or more of her genes if she aids her brother, if that brother carries the same genes. By helping her brother, she herself may reproduce less, but this cost can be more than offset if her help improves her brother’s fitness enough to offset her own loss of fitness. Thus, natural selection increases the fitness of any gene that programs its body to help a relative if the cost in fitness (to the gene) is lower than the benefit to the same gene housed in the relative’s body. So, an individual animal can behave altruistically after all, but only if the benefit of the altruism helps a relative far more than it costs the
"altruist" (note that the behavior is not truly altruistic because it increases the fitness of the gene).

Some anthropologists believe that such ideas contribute to explaining human social behavior. For example, you and I have a genetic interest in the welfare of our relatives. All else equal, the more closely related we are, the more we care for them, and people care most for those individuals who are the main vehicles for transmitting their genes—their own offspring and offspring's offspring. We care little, or less, for nonrelatives and will assist them only if they somehow return benefits to us or to our relatives. They do this mainly by reciprocity, that is, they return our help immediately or at some later time if we can count on their presence in the future. Evolutionary psychologists claim that selfishness motivates most human actions, although the selfish motive is sometimes disguised when we help family members or friends in expectation of future returns.

More generally, evolutionary psychologists note that, for most of human history, the most important social groups (bands, discussed in later chapters) were largely composed of relatives who cooperated in foraging, food sharing, child care, and other activities. They also point out that far more human societies allow a man to have several wives than allow a woman to have several husbands, which is consistent with sociobiology, for reasons we discuss in Chapter 8. They claim that evolutionary psychology explains many of the following widespread human behavioral and mental predispositions:

• Xenophobia—We may hate or mistrust strangers because, as obvious nonrelatives, they cannot be trusted.
• Warfare—Braver men who protect the group are more likely to attract more wives and/or have more sex and hence more offspring.
• Male unfaithfulness to wives or promiscuity—Males get more children and therefore more fitness without the costs of raising the children.
• Female preference for marrying high-status/wealthy males—Women get access to more resources through such marriages, thus improving the fitness of their offspring.

Critics of such ideas charge that these and other so-called predispositions are more the product of socialization than of genes because they vary markedly from people to people. Even if evolutionary psychology "helps" in understanding such widespread patterns, critics say that it tells us little or nothing about the reasons different peoples exhibit them strongly, only weakly, or not at all. So, this "help" is minimal at best and may even be harmful if it makes us falsely believe we now understand something. And, at any rate, the insights of sociobiology apply mainly if "all else is equal," which it never is in human societies. Finally, many self-sacrificial acts of devotion by individuals, such as suicide bombers and kamikaze pilots who kill themselves because of devotion to their faith, values, or homelands, are problematic for evolutionary psychology.

Numerous other arguments exist both for and against evolutionary psychology, some of which we cover in later chapters. For now, note that it is an excellent example of the scientific side of cultural anthropology: it holds that people are subject to the same principles and pressures as other animals—most important, to the forces of natural selection.

**Materialism**

Another modern scientific approach—more popular than evolutionary psychology—is materialism. It claims that the satisfaction of human material needs and desires is the most important influence on how societies are organized and what people think and believe. People face the same kinds of material needs as all mammals: we must receive adequate intakes of food and water, regulate our body temperature (by building shelters and wearing clothing), reproduce, cope with organisms that cause disease, compete successfully, and so forth. To satisfy these needs efficiently, people have to organize their societies in certain ways to cooperate or to succeed in competition with other societies. Many other elements of a people’s culture are determined by or are greatly influenced by how people organize their activities to survive and persist in their environments. In essence, materialists think that how a people make their living in their environment is the most important influence on the rest of their cultural existence.

If one thinks that relationships with the environment and acquisition of material resources are primary, then those aspects of culture that help people acquire resources will strongly affect all other aspects. More than any other animal, people depend on technology to exploit resources, compete, and cope with other problems of environmental adaptation. Technology includes not just the physical instruments (the tools) used to produce food, provide shelter, and generally manipulate the environment. Equally important, the

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**materialism** Theoretical orientation claiming that the main influences on cultural differences and similarities are technology, environment, and how people produce and distribute resources.
technology includes the knowledge (skills) about the environment, about resources, and about the manufacture and effective use of tools that people have acquired by learning from previous generations.

Because humans rely on tools and knowledge to acquire food and harness other resources, technology is among the most important aspects of culture everywhere. Materialists believe a people's technology strongly affects other parts of their culture, including family life, political organization, values, and even worldviews, much as White argued in the 1940s. Yet most materialists of today disagree with White's view that increased energy capture made possible by technological improvements has generally made human life better, leading to cultural progress. In contrast to White, most modern materialists believe technological changes have improved the lives of some people in some respects, but that changes in technology have had mixed results overall.

Population size and the rate of population growth are also important causal forces because they affect technology, resources, conflicts, working hours, and other things. Some materialists believe that long-term population growth and the changes it forces groups to make in their relationships with the environment and with other human groups are the most widespread cause of cultural evolution (see A Closer Look).

In their emphasis on the importance of physical/biological needs, technology, environment, and population size, modern materialists resemble earlier thinkers such as Malinowski, White, and Steward. However, modern materialists are more sophisticated than their precursors. For example, for the most part, early theories about causation were linear, meaning that one thing makes another thing the way it is; thus, A "causes" B, or A "determines" B. But modern materialists are more likely to view technology, environment, population, and culture as having feedback relationships with one another. That is, as their numbers increase and people interact with their environment using their technology, they change the environment. In turn, these changes lead people to alter their technology and continue population growth, which then further alters the environment, and so on. For example, as people exploit a resource, they may deplete its supply. Future genera-

tions must then either work harder to acquire the resource, develop a new method of acquiring it, or switch to an alternative resource. Other cultural changes accompany these changes in resources.

We discuss some of these processes in later chapters. For now, note three of the main arguments of materialists: (1) many customs and beliefs of a particular culture can be explained by how they help people live in the natural world; (2) population growth and intensification are major factors that drive cultural evolution; and (3) generally, and in the long run, material forces like overall environment, resources, technologies, and population densities are more important than ideas and beliefs like religion and worldview, values, and symbols.

Humanistic Approaches

Many ideas of both evolutionary psychology and materialism are not seriously questioned. Most people do transmit their genes by having children, and most of us are more likely to help relatives than strangers. But whether the biologically determined "predispositions" identified by evolutionary psychology are all that important is debatable. Some deny that such universal human predispositions exist at all. Or, if they do exist, then trying to explain them has the effect of "justifying" (in the disguise of "explaining") racial hatreds, violence, sexual inequalities, and the like. The notion that human beings are innately selfish is odious to many and probably to most anthropologists.

Likewise, no one denies that people have material needs. But whether such needs are "basic" and "shape" all of human existence is debatable. Some think humans differ from other animals in that these needs can be satisfied in such a multitude of ways that cultural differences cannot possibly be "reduced to material need and want satisfaction." They deny that material factors can explain any specific culture, much less cultural differences and similarities and long-term changes. In fact, they doubt that culture has any general explanation. Many believe that any scholar who tries to "explain" culture or cultures dehumanizes people by treating them as objects.

Most scholars who adopt the humanistic approach doubt or deny that any general theory can "explain" culture in the same way that evolutionary theory explains life or that Einstein's relativity theory explains the physical world. Humanistic anthropologists are skeptical of general theories for many reasons. One is that humanity's social and cultural worlds are just too

humanistic approach Theoretical orientation that rejects attempts to explain culture in general in favor of achieving an empathetic understanding of particular cultures.
any materialists argue that growth in human numbers was and is a major source of long-term changes in human ways of life. Until about 10,000 years ago, humans were hunters and gatherers, eating only wild plants and game animals. The human population was sparse and people spread out over the land in small, mobile groups to exploit food and other resources without interfering with other groups. There were individual quarrels and violence over personal grievances, but relatively little serious, prolonged conflict between groups over valuable resources.

When human numbers increased over many decades or centuries in a given region, each local group had less and less food and fewer resources unless they took steps to cope with their growing population. Materialists call this population pressure, which exists whenever population numbers increase enough to force people to change how they use resources and to invent different technologies. Any given generation is unlikely to notice population growth and the changes that result from it, but over a long period of time these changes cause great transformations.

In most regions during humanity’s prehistoric past, population growth leveled off when the available land could not support more people: group members died from disease or inadequate food, migrated out, and/or limited the number of children they had. In some regions, though, the natural environment was able to provide more resources. People made more resources available by working harder or longer, discovering new technologies to increase production, or domesticating plants and animals. In brief, in some places, the environment responded to human work, or to technological innovations, or to efforts to control the food supply. There were five or six such regions (discussed in Chapter 6) where people responded to population pressure by developing new technologies and devoting most of their work to cultivate only a few species of plants and animals. After many centuries, these plants became crops and these animals became livestock. Thus, agriculture began.

Once agriculture developed, the land could support even more people, so populations continued to grow. Again, only a few environments were able to sustain growth for many centuries. These environments were most commonly the valleys of large rivers that flood seasonally and deposit fertile silt carried downstream from highlands and mountains. These included the river valleys of ancient Mesopotamia, the Nile of Egypt, the Yellow River of China, and the Indus River of Pakistan and India. Flooding renewed the soil, so by careful management and irrigation, people of these regions produced enough food to feed their ever-growing numbers.

In such places where population growth continued for many centuries, the land filled up with more people and more settlements. Eventually, some group or its leaders calculated that they could benefit by engaging in threats or aggressive fighting with their neighbors in order to add new territories and acquire more resources. Organized group fighting (warfare) became more frequent and intense and eventually led the cultures of the entire region to change. Once one local group engaged in aggressive warfare, others had to take defensive measures to protect themselves. They began living in even larger settlements so they could mobilize more warriors more quickly. They made alliances with some neighboring groups to deter aggression from enemies, thus enlarging the size of the social unit whose members cooperated for purposes such as warfare and trade. Political leaders became more powerful to control the allocation of resources or to assume leadership in warfare or both. Chiefs and eventually kings and emperors rose to power, and strong class distinctions emerged. This process led to the cultural evolution of the form of society we know as civilization. The effects of civilization on human life were mixed: some classes and individuals grew wealthy and powerful, while the majority in lower classes suffered deprivation, forced labor, war deaths, and diseases.

Notice that the word progress does not apply to the development of civilization in this materialist theory: some people became better off, some worse off than in precivilized societies. Notice also that this particular theory of cultural evolution holds that one force—population pressure—caused most of the important changes in human ways of living. As we shall see, other contemporary anthropologists believe that theories like this one are far too simple and dehumanize people by seeing them as "results" of some larger process rather than as active agents in creating their own cultures.

Other animals live in the natural world, with its food sources, predators, mates and potential mates, and so forth. Of course, humans also eat, drink, sleep, and engage in sex. But, humanists point out, we also live in a cultural world: what, when, and how we eat, drink, sleep, and have sex are largely determined by the culture into which each of us happens to have been born. People live in the natural world, but they also "culturally construct" their worlds and have a "worldview" (Chapter 2). Their constructions and worldviews are about as important in affecting their behaviors, thoughts, and feelings as living the real world itself.

Language also makes us unique, humanists say. Language provides words with which we classify and categorize objects, people, events, actions, qualities, and so forth. Because of language, we construct categories of events, people, groups, objects, plants, and so on. These categories vary from culture to culture and are entirely learned, not at all natural. Language even provides us with words for things that have no material existence at all, such as ghosts and demons. If the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis (see Chapter 3) has any validity and generality, then our language conditions our perceptions of the world itself, so every person exists in a perceived world that is like that of no other people. Last, language allows us to lie to one another, which makes it possible for some people to manipulate and control other people. These features of language are all unique to humankind, and because of them we create our own reality as well as respond to actual reality.

All of this means that human reactions to the world (to nature) and human beliefs about the world are products of culture and language. If true, this implies that, at most, material factors like environment, technology, and population affect culture only by limiting (constraining) how a people act, think, and feel. Material factors cannot determine (cause) actions, thoughts, and feelings because these factors themselves are in part products of actions, thoughts, and feelings. Neither causes or "explains" the other, which makes untangling causes and effects pretty much impossible, humanistically inclined anthropologists argue.

When materialists claim that nature's resources are important influences on cultures and societies, a critical humanist may respond that resources are not entirely natural. Consider food resources, for instance, which materialists think are so important. Influenced by religious prohibitions and cultural notions of what's edible and what's too disgusting to consume, various peoples of the world refuse to eat cattle, pigs, dogs, horses, and insect larvae—exactly the same flesh considered so delicious by many other peoples. If food and other resources are culturally defined and culturally meaningful as well as simply biological nutritious, then in human life resources are both cause and effect. Long ago, our cultural ancestors built (culturally constructed) the cultural world in which we live our lives. We live within this cultural world as well as within the natural one.

Thus, some humanistic anthropologists think that Tylor's and White's "science of culture" is not possible: humans and their societies are too complex and too diverse, and humans live partly in worlds that their language and culture construct for them.

Other humanists do not believe that anthropology should even try to be scientific. In their view, scientific anthropology "objectifies" cultures; that is, in its efforts to generalize, science places cultural features into categories (e.g., forms of marriage, types of religions) that are the categories of the anthropologist, not those of the people themselves. Humanists often make this point by saying that scientifically oriented anthropologists "rob people of their voices." They mean that scientific anthropologists are arrogant to the extent that they believe they know better than the Other people themselves what is important in their lives and what was important in shaping their culture.
A similar objection by some humanists is that scientific approaches "deny that people are agents." This means that scientific anthropologists by and large view people and groups largely as responding (in predictable ways) to conditions, not as actively trying to come up with new ways of responding to conditions. Materialists treat people, and especially "Other People," as automatons who pretty much act in ways that are determined by their natural environment and other people around them.

Thus, some humanistic anthropologists believe that the scientific perspective is not only mistaken but also not desirable. It treats Others as mere objects, often ignoring their views of what they are doing and falsely treating them as automatons rather than agents. In a sense, they say, the scientists deny the Others their humanity. At least, these are some things that many humanistic anthropologists claim is true for materialists and other scientific anthropologists.

You might well wonder: If all this is true, how is it that materialist scholars have been so misguided about the importance of environment, technology, adaptation, and so forth? Some humanists claim that materialist thinking is a product of Western cultural values and beliefs. Because the West places such high value on material welfare and consumption, materialists mistakenly impose these same values and beliefs on other cultures. Living in a competitive and capitalist society predisposes materialists to see "economic man" in cultures where he does not exist. The materialist theory is a kind of ethnocentrism, they claim.

Some materialists respond in kind. They point out that most academics are members of the privileged class, in status, wealth, or both. Because most academics (including humanistic anthropologists) so seldom have to worry about filling their stomachs, or sheltering themselves from heat, snow, and rain, or protecting themselves from enemies, it is easy for them to believe that such concerns are not important in other cultures either. The humanists' failure to realize the broad importance of material factors is related to their own wealth and privilege. The humanistic approach is a kind of ethnocentrism, some claim.

Even more than the scientific approach, it is difficult or impossible to collapse humanistic anthropology into a few schools or ways of approaching Others. Here, we discuss only two. Interpretive anthropology has been around for several decades, whereas postmodernism has become popular in anthropology only since the 1980s.

Interpretive Anthropology

Interpretive anthropologists emphasize the uniqueness and individuality of each human culture. Every culture has its own ways of doing things, its own worldview, its own values, and so forth. Even if two or more cultures look similar, close examination usually shows that the meanings they attach to behaviors, objects, and concepts are different. This uniqueness makes comparisons between different cultures misleading. In this and other respects, interpretive anthropology is similar to historical particularism. And because science attempts to generalize through comparisons and contrasts, it follows that anthropology is more of a humanistic discipline than a scientific one. It has more in common with literature and art than with biology or psychology, according to the interpretive approach.

Interpretive anthropologists emphasize the symbolic dimensions of culture. All social behavior has a symbolic component, in the sense that participants constantly must behave in ways that others will understand. All social interaction, therefore, is symbolic and meaningful. Meanings exist only by virtue of common agreement among the parties to the interaction—whether the interaction involves making conversation, making change in a store, or making bumpers in an auto plant. Neither participant can tell an observer how he or she knows what the other participant "means" by this or that behavior. Yet participants consistently behave in ways that others understand, and they consistently interpret the behavior of others correctly.

The job of the anthropologist is not to explain elements of a culture but to explicate one element through others. That is, the anthropologist shows how one thing in a cultural system makes sense in terms of other things in the same system, because interpretation is seeing how things make sense when understood in their context. (Analogously, a dictionary explicates the meanings of words in terms of other words. Only if one knows the meanings of many words in the dictionary can one use them to decipher the meanings of unknown words.) We seek to understand a people's way of life as they understand it. In the words of the late Clifford Geertz (1983, 58), who shaped the entire approach, we seek to grasp "the native's point of view," "to figure out what the devil they think they are up to." This involves acquiring intimate knowledge of a

Interpretive anthropologists Contemporary theorists who analyze cultural elements by explicating their meanings to people and understanding them in their local context; generally emphasize cultural diversity and the unique qualities of particular cultures.
particular culture so that the ethnographer can make sense of the culture for those who do not know it.

According to many interpretive anthropologists, the search for generalized explanations of human ways of life is futile. So many factors contributed to the formation of a culture, and these factors interacted in such complex and unpredictable ways, that we must concentrate on understanding the unique elements of each way of life. In this respect, interpretive anthropologists exemplify the humanistic perspective.

**Postmodernism**

Postmodernists generally believe that the methods and assumptions of all science—including fields such as biology—are themselves culturally situated and culture bound. This means that science, as most people understand it, is not objective in its theories and even in its facts ("data"). Rather, it is carried out by scientists who are products of a particular cultural upbringing. Like all knowledge, scientific theories are affected by conditions in the scientists’ own culture.

For example, a postmodernist might say that evolutionary psychologists were socialized in cultures that practically celebrate selfishness. In free-market economies, everyone is supposed to be looking out for themselves and consuming commodities and competing. So the evolutionary psychologists raised in this economic system think people everywhere act this way and claim that these alleged biological imperatives apply to humanity in general. Such theories are culture bound, in the same way Boas showed that unilinear evolutionism was culture bound (ethnocentric).

How can the proponents of science be so misguided? Postmodernists point out that scientific thinking and methods became prominent during the Enlightenment period (also called the Age of Reason) of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western Europe. Enlightenment philosophers emphasized rational thought as the key to advancing knowledge about the world, from the solar system to humanity. Tradition and especially religion were viewed as impediments to discovering Truth. Emotions could also get in the way, especially if they keep otherwise rational thinkers from accepting the reality of a fact or principle just because they don’t like it or its implications.

For example, if you are a male, you might refuse to accept evidence showing that not all societies are patriarchal. You reject or discount the evidence because it is not consistent with what religion has taught you and it makes you feel guilty or other kinds of emotional distress. Your refusal to accept the evidence is not “rational,” so it gets in the way of improving your knowledge. This would not matter very much for your society unless, of course, men hold the power in that society and most of them feel and believe as you do. Enlightenment thinkers tried to free thought from the shackles of religion and emotion, so that Reason and Science could reveal the world to us as it really is.

Postmodernists do not think there is anything very special about the Enlightenment version of rational thought. They say that all of human knowledge originates in a particular social, economic, and political context. Scientific knowledge is no exception. Science is a product of a particular cultural tradition—that of the West—and therefore reflects the economy, family organization, political ideology, worldview, and so forth of Western society. Science, in fact, is just one among hundreds of other systems of cultural knowledge. At the extreme, postmodernists hold that science has little more claim to absolute Truth than the ideas and beliefs of other peoples. All are valid on their own terms, but none is “privileged” or has any exclusive claim to objectivity. If scientists themselves don’t realize this, it is because they are inside their own knowledge system and so do not grasp the implicit assumptions of their rationalistic and mechanistic worldview.

Postmodernists also think the most important thing about the context of knowledge is power relationships. Prevalent beliefs and ideas in a community reflect lines of power, largely because those with power have the most influence on which ideas and beliefs become “prevalent.” To illustrate with a modern example, most North Americans attach positive value to abstractions like private property, free-market capitalism, democracy, and various individual rights and freedoms. These values reflect, and support, the interests of some people over other people. Much scholarly knowledge—the kind taught in colleges and universities—is like this, postmodernists claim. For example, evolutionary psychology is often taught as a credible or even correct theory in biology courses, although many postmodernists believe its theories support sexism and patriarchy.
In anthropological fieldwork, there is often a power dimension to the relationship between the fieldworker and the local people. Most fieldworkers are able to command more resources and thus can influence people to talk about things they’d rather not discuss (although there are ethical standards in fieldwork, covered in Chapter 5). Postmodernists mistrust most older ethnographies, and generally they prefer accounts in which the fieldworkers openly discuss their personal relationships with members of the community. They also prefer ethnographies in which the ethnographer gives her or his readers access to the local Voices.

As mentioned, postmodernism penetrated anthropology in the 1980s and has attracted more converts in our discipline than in any other social science. One reason for the popularity of this perspective in anthropology is its apparent consistency with cultural relativism. However, critics of the approach became vocal in the late 1990s. Do postmodernists adopt the tenets of their own ideas in their personal lives? If science is “just another” kind of knowledge, do postmodernists refuse to ride in airplanes or use microwaves? How have their own ideas escaped the influence of power relationships? And are their ideas also culture bound?

Postmodernism reminds us that rationality and science do not provide all the answers and do not ask all the necessary questions. It leads us to ask where our ideas come from and who might gain and lose from them. Perhaps most important, it warns anthropological thinkers of the dangers of becoming arrogant about our objectivity. Scientifically oriented theorists can easily forget that they are cultural beings and that their own ideas about the human world are culturally conditioned. So, in part, the diversity of modern approaches reflects the fact that human beings and their cultures are complex and multifaceted, so the orientation most useful to understand one facet (e.g., subsistence) may not prove very useful to understand another (e.g., worldview).

In the interest of balance, in the remainder of this book, we try to avoid choosing between the two orientations by taking the following approach. Like evolutionary psychologists and cultural materialists, we think it is important that people are part of nature. But we recognize that different elements of a culture are influenced to different degrees by material conditions. The way an economy is organized is greatly influenced by the local environment, climate, technology, and the size and density of the human population. But the ways the members of a culture resolve their disputes, raise their children, perform their rituals, or act toward their fathers-in-law are less influenced by material conditions or are influenced by them only indirectly. The legends they recite, the specific objects they use as religious symbols, and the way they decorate their bodies may have little to do with material forces. Such elements of a cultural system may be only loosely tied to the natural world and to material needs and wants. If so, we cannot account for them without considering people's desires for a meaningful existence, an emotionally gratifying social life, an intellectually satisfying worldview, creative self-expression, and so forth.

So, we avoid the either/or dilemma by pointing out that different orientations are useful for studying different dimensions of culture. Still, people who are new to anthropology are often puzzled by the diversity of approaches within the field. We therefore conclude this chapter by suggesting answers to the question posed in the following section.

**Either, Or, or Both?**

The differences between the scientific and humanistic orientations are sometimes presented as conflicting: Humanists often accuse scientists of dehumanizing people in their effort to explain them, whereas scientists claim that humanists are deceiving themselves if they think they can get inside some Other culture.

To some extent, different approaches exist because of the differing interests of anthropologists. For example, scholars whose research areas include subjects such as human-environment relationships, economic systems, or long-term evolutionary changes in societies are likely to find a materialist approach useful. Those who study dimensions such as mythology, art, oral traditions, or worldviews are more likely to fall into the humanistic camp.

**Why Can’t All Those Anthropologists Agree?**

Physicists, geologists, and other natural scientists generally agree on a set of laws or principles that govern the world. In geology, for example, processes such as sedimentation, plate tectonics, volcanic eruptions, fossilization, and so forth are fairly well understood and account for the main geological features of our planet. Biologists, likewise, believe that the process of evolution produced the diversity of all life on Earth, although the relative importance of natural selection and random events in this process remains uncertain.

Cultural anthropology lacks a comparable set of general principles (as do the other social sciences except
economics. Consider one basic question of the scientific orientation: What are the important causes of the differences and similarities among the world’s known cultures? If you could ask 100 anthropologists this question, you would get a multitude of answers. Materialists would mention forces such as climate, resources, population sizes, and technology. Humanistically oriented scholars would say the question itself is wrongheaded because anthropologists should be trying to interact with members of particular cultures and gain an insider’s view of them—not to “explain” them. Many would respond that there is no generalized explanation because cultures are so complex and diverse that the most important causes in culture X are not at all important in culture Y. Still others would hold that the question is ethnocentric, and in some cases racist, because it reduces people in other cultures to the status of “objects” of our explanations.

Why don’t anthropologists agree about the answer to this question and numerous other basic questions about humanity? Several factors contribute to the absence of consensus.

First, we humans are conscious and self-aware beings who state a variety of reasons for why we do and think what we do and think. The zoologist studying an animal’s behavior observes and records the behavior, and then typically tries to identify the elements of the natural and social environment to which the behavior is adapted. But anthropologists must listen to the reasons people themselves give for their behavior. People talk back, and anthropologists must take their talk, as well as their actions, into account.

Second, for ethical reasons, anthropologists do not set up controlled experiments to study how people respond. Suppose—following Steward’s lead—we want to study how the natural environment affects cultures. We cannot hold everything constant except the supply of food, water, or shelter and then see how people react when the supply of food, water, or shelter is varied. The only way the anthropologist can “control” conditions is by looking around the world for “natural experiments”—places where the natural environment is similar and peoples with different histories live. We can choose a sample of peoples who live in environments that appear to be similar and then see whether the peoples who live in these places have similar cultures. For example, we might compare indigenous peoples who live in the world’s deserts: the Sahara of northern Africa, the Kalahari of southern Africa, the American Southwest, the Gobi of northeast Asia, and so forth. To conduct such a comparative study, we would have to rely on the ethnographic reports written by a multitude of earlier ethnographers, whose reports resulted from their observations and discussions with peoples in the various deserts.

Suppose our comparative study finds, as it will, that the cultures are similar in some respects but different in others. Then other problems arise: natural environments are only similar, never identical. Did we fail to detect a small but critical difference in the environment that might explain the cultural differences? Or, are the differences due to nonenvironmental factors? Likewise, cultures are only similar, never identical. Shall we call customs and beliefs that differ in minor ways between the cultures the “same,” or are the subtle differences between them sufficient to call them “different”? Suppose we decide that some behavior, like sharing food within a village, is the “same” behavior in the cultures. But then we discover that people in several of the cultures give different reasons for the behavior—in culture X, people say they want to help one another, whereas in culture Y, they say they give only because they expect to get something back later. Are both of these behaviors still “sharing food”? Or, should we consider them different because people’s stated motivations differ? Such questions are inherently difficult to answer when dealing with human beings, and anthropologists cannot sort them out in laboratories or other experimental settings.

Third, fieldworkers study members of their own species. Because they are human, fieldworkers enter their research experience with a culture of their own. This culture inevitably affects their objectivity and, hence, their interactions with the community, their perceptions of what is important, and so forth. Conversely, individuals in the community have their own perceptions, opinions, and biases about the fieldworker. Among the many factors that affect how the community reacts are the fieldworker’s physical characteristics, gender, and personality as well as the kinds of questions asked and the historical experience of the community with individuals of the anthropologist’s own society. Although most fieldworkers attempt to overcome their own cultural biases and to fit into the community, complete objectivity is impossible. In fact, some contemporary anthropologists think that any ethnography is a “construction”—built out of interactions that another fieldworker would not experience—not a simple report on “facts” about a given group. (We have more to say on such issues in Chapter 5.)

Another possible reason anthropology lacks a common theoretical orientation and an agreed-upon set of principles is quite likely because people become anthropologists for a wider variety of reasons than people become, say, physicists. Some of us study anthropology because of our curiosity about why the human species is so diverse culturally. Others go into the field to further
the cause of social justice—by educating themselves and others about racism, ethnocentrism, colonialism, or sexism, for example. Some want to immerse themselves in travel and interaction with people who are different from themselves, and they become anthropologists because the field provides them with such opportunities. The very broad scope of anthropology (see Chapter 1) helps account for the variety of reasons people choose it as a career: you can study agriculture, family life, political organization, medicine, art, religion, folklore, and almost anything else having to do with mankind. Naturally, people who study topics as diverse as these are unlikely to agree on their theoretical orientations to the field as a whole. Indeed, many of them consciously reject any form of theoretical orientation, preferring to concentrate on researching particular cultures.

In sum, there are four major reasons modern cultural anthropologists have such varied orientations to the study of culture:

1. Our subjects—other human beings—are conscious beings who are aware of their own behavior and state their own reasons for why they do what they do. Human subjects talk back.
2. Anthropologists cannot set up experiments that enable them to control the conditions under which people live, allowing their behavior to be manipulated. Anthropologists observe people as they live their everyday lives.
3. Complete objectivity is impossible to achieve when a researcher is studying humans, both because researchers are culture-bearers and because the subjects of the study react to fieldworkers in varied ways. Ethnographers are different, and they encounter different problems as they work in different places.
4. The broad scope of the field and the enormous diversity of reasons people study anthropology make it unlikely that consensus will emerge. Cultural anthropologists are among the most diverse of scholars.

**Summary**

1. **Discuss the global forces that contributed to the emergence of anthropology.** Anthropology originated as a distinct academic discipline in the late nineteenth century, after colonialism intensified contact between peoples of European ancestry and the indigenous peoples of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific. Darwin’s theory of evolution was one of the main notions that allowed Western intellectuals to make sense of the peoples and cultures of other lands. It seemed to imply that the history of life on Earth was progressive, with simpler organisms evolving into more complex ones.

2. **Describe the main ideas of the nineteenth century unilineal evolutionists.** The nineteenth-century unilineal evolutionists applied the notion of evolution to cultures. Using written accounts as their main source of information about other cultures, they arranged cultures into a sequence of progressive stages, from simple to complex, with Western civilization at the pinnacle. Anthropology thus began as the academic field that studied how humankind progressed out of rude beginnings into a more “civilized” cultural existence.

3. **Understand the ways American historical particularism and British functionalism challenged unilineal evolutionism.** In the early twentieth century, both American and British anthropologists developed new approaches. The American historical particularists, led by Boas, demolished the speculative schemes of the unilineal evolutionists by arguing that concepts such as “complexity” depend on one’s point of view and thus have little objective meaning. Boas popularized the notion of cultural relativism that remains a hallmark of ethnology today. In Great Britain, functionalists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown tried to show how the various parts of a culture and its social system serve to meet the needs of individuals and society. Both the historical particularists and the functionalists emphasized the importance of firsthand fieldwork as the surest path to objectivity and as essential for the training of anthropologists.

4. **Describe the mid-twentieth century rebirth of evolutionary interests (neoevolutionism).** In the middle decades of the twentieth century, neoevolutionists like White and Steward returned to cultural evolution, avoiding most mistakes of the nineteenth-century scholars. White emphasized the importance of technology, Steward of adaptation to the local environment, in making cultures the way they are. Both men thought that a people’s methods of acquiring resources (energy, food, and so forth) from nature are the main influences on culture. Both also believed that anthropology should and can be a science.
5 Discuss the main differences between the scientific and the humanistic approaches to modern anthropological thought. One very broad division among modern anthropologists is whether their field is primarily a scientific enterprise or a humanistic study. Scientifically oriented scholars believe that people are subjected to the same kinds of natural forces as other animals and that genuine explanations of differences and similarities and long-term changes are possible and desirable. Humanistically inclined anthropologists believe that humanity is such a very unique kind of animal that special tools are required to understand our species and that attempts to explain humans are futile and dehumanizing.

6 Describe evolutionary psychology, materialism, interpretive anthropology, and postmodernism. Evolutionary psychology (sociobiology) and materialism are examples of scientific approaches. Evolutionary psychology emphasizes that humans are part of nature and that, like other animals, most of our behavior helps us transmit our genes to future generations. Materialists argue that how a given people organize their groups and pattern their activities to acquire energy and materials from their natural environment is the major explanation for other aspects of their cultural system. In contrast, humanistically oriented anthropologists mistrust all generalized explanations of cultural phenomena. Interpretive anthropologists emphasize the uniqueness of each culture and favor studying, appreciating, and interpreting each culture individually. Postmodernists think that science in general has no particular claim to Truth and that many scientific ideas taught by schools and colleges reflect power relationships in the wider social and cultural context.

7 Analyze why contemporary anthropology has no single unifying theoretical orientation. Contemporary anthropologists do not agree among themselves on many fundamental questions, including even the major objectives of their field. Their lack of consensus is understandable, given that their (human) subjects are self-conscious and willful beings; that anthropologists cannot experiment with people’s lives; that total objectivity in fieldwork is impossible; and that the field studies such diverse subjects that a single theoretical orientation is unlikely to be able to encompass all of them.

Media Resources

The Wadsworth Anthropology Resource Center
ttwww.cengagebrain.com

The Wadsworth discipline resource website that accompanies Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, Ninth Edition, includes a rich array of material, including online anthropological video clips, to help you in the study of cultural anthropology and the specific topics covered in this chapter. Other material includes a case study forum with excerpts from various Wadsworth authors, map exercises, scientist interviews, breaking news in anthropology, and links to additional useful online material. Go to www.cengagebrain.com to access this valuable resource.