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What is Anthropology? [1]

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Anthropology is the study of humanity. This broad field takes an interdisciplinary approach to looking at human culture, both past and present.

The Basics

In short, anthropology is the study of humankind. It is a holistic approach that looks at how different parts of society—including politics, economics, language, and many more—combine together to form different cultures around the world. Anthropologists bridge the gap between the sciences and the humanities, by using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

For example, one anthropologist might spend the day in the lab examining fossil specimens with the goal of trying to reconstruct the path of human evolution. In contrast, another anthropologist might study the ritual practices of a culture abroad. This diverse academic field aims to bring together a variety of knowledge to form a holistic picture of humanity and culture.

Different Fields

As an academic discipline, anthropology has classically been divided into four basic fields. First, [sociocultural anthropology](#) [3] looks at human variation in cultures across different societies. It asks questions, such as "Why does cultural variation exist?" and "Are there are [cultural universals](#) [4]?"

Second, [biological anthropology](#) [5] studies human biology, specifically focusing on human evolution and our relationship to primates. It includes the branches of primatology and forensic anthropology.

The third field of anthropology is [archaeology](#) [6]. Archaeology is the study of past human cultures and applies specific methods to material artefacts left behind by cultures, in order to learn more about them.

The final field is linguistic anthropology.

[Linguistic anthropology](#) [7] is the study of the interconnections between language and culture. It also focuses on the variation of languages and how they are used around the world, as well as the study of endangered languages.

Despite these four main fields of anthropology, there are also many sub-fields. One popular sub-field is applied anthropology, which looks at how the academic knowledge learned in anthropology can be applied to real-world issues.

Methods

Given the range of things that anthropologists study, there is also a range of methods for studying them.

Anthropologists—especially sociocultural anthropologists—often use participant-observation methods. This

involves going directly into the field and living within a cultural group, often for a long period to time. Anthropologists often produce ethnographies, which are detailed cultural accounts that attempt to present a holistic view of a specific culture.

Linguistic anthropologists tend to also use participant-observation and ethnography, but can also use other methods, like linguistic analysis.

Biological and archaeological anthropologists tend to use [methods](#) [8] that are more classically scientific. This can include analyses using technology, such as radiocarbon dating, which are used to age artefacts, bones, fossils, and other sources of data.

Anthropologists are trained to use the scientific method. Like many other academics, anthropologists take observations, form hypotheses, and test them through additional observation or even experimentation. Eventually, a theory regarding human or cultural behaviour can be created.

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