

TAKING SIDES



Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in **Cultural Anthropology**

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Issues in Cultural Anthropology

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McGraw-Hill/Dushkin

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For Sarah and Karen

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Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition

123456789BAHBAH6543

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Taking sides: clashing views on controversial issues in cultural anthropology/selected, edited, and with introductions by Robert L. Welsch and Kirk M. Endicott.—1st ed.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Anthropology, cultural. 2. Ethnology. I. Welsch, Robert L., ed. II. Endicott, Kirk M., ed. III. Series. 306

0-07-254863-0
ISSN: 1541-9207



Printed on Recycled Paper



Preface

Many courses and textbooks present cultural anthropology as a discipline that largely consists of well-established facts. In *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Cultural Anthropology* we present the discipline in quite a different light. Here we focus on active controversies that remain unresolved. These issues represent the kind of arguments and debates that have characterized cultural anthropology for more than a century. They show the varied ways that cultural anthropologists approach the subject of their research and the kinds of anthropological evidence needed to bolster an academic argument.

Generally, we have chosen selections that express strongly worded positions on two sides of an issue. For most issues, several other reasonable positions are also possible, and we have suggested some of these in our introductions and postscripts that accompany each issue.

Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Cultural Anthropology is a tool to encourage and develop critical thinking about anthropological research questions, methods, and evidence. We have selected a range of readings and issues to illustrate the kinds of topics that cultural anthropologists study. Another goal of this volume is to provide opportunities for students to explore how cultural anthropologists frame and defend their interpretations of anthropological evidence. We have chosen issues that raise questions about research methods and the quality or reliability of different kinds of data. All of these complex matters go into shaping the positions that cultural anthropologists debate and defend in their writings. We hope that in discussing these issues students will find opportunities to explore how cultural anthropologists think about the pressing theoretical issues of the day.

Plan of the book This book is made up of 17 issues that deal with topics that have provoked starkly different positions by different cultural anthropologists. We have divided the volume into three parts reflecting three major concerns of the discipline: Theoretical Orientations, Some Specific Issues in Cultural Anthropology, and Ethics in Cultural Anthropology. Each issue begins with an *introduction*, which sets the stage for the debate as argued in the YES and NO selections. Following these two selections is a *postscript* that makes some final observations and points the way to other questions related to the issue. In reading an issue and forming your own opinions, you should remember that there are often many alternative perspectives that are not represented in either the YES or NO selections. Most issues have reasonable positions that might appear to be intermediate between the two more extreme viewpoints represented here in the readings. There are also reasonable positions that lie totally outside the scope of the debate presented in these selections, and students should consider all of these possible positions. Each postscript also contains *suggestions for additional reading* that will help you find more resources to continue your study of

any topic. Students researching any of these issues or related ones for a research paper will find these additional readings (as well as their bibliographies) a useful place to begin a more intensive analysis. At the end of the book we have also included a list of all the *contributors to this volume*, which will give you information on the anthropologists and other commentators whose views are debated here. An *On the Internet* page accompanies each part opener. This page gives you Internet site addresses (URLs) that are relevant to the issues discussed in that part of the book. Many of these sites contain links to related sites and bibliographies for further study.

A word to the instructor An *Instructor's Manual With Test Questions* (multiple-choice and essay) is available for use with *Taking Sides*. Also available is a general guidebook, *Using Taking Sides in the Classroom*, which includes a discussion of techniques for integrating the pro-con format into an existing course. Instructors adopting this text also have access to an online version of *Using Taking Sides in the Classroom* as well as a correspondence service at <http://www.dushkin.com/usingsides/>.

Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Cultural Anthropology is only one of many titles in the Taking Sides series. If you are interested in seeing the table of contents for any of the other titles, please visit the Taking Sides Web site at <http://www.dushkin.com/takingsides/>.

Acknowledgments We received many helpful comments and suggestions from many friends and colleagues, including Hoyt Alverson, Colin Calloway, Brian Didier, Dale Eickelman, Jana Fortier, Ridie Ghezzi, Rosemary Gianno, Paul Goldstein, Alberto Gomez, Robert Gordon, Allen Hockley, Judy Hunt, Sergei Kan, Steve Kangas, Kathryn Keith, Kenneth Korey, Christine Kray, Laura Litton, Marilyn Lord, Lynn MacGillivray, Deborah Nichols, Lynn Rainville, Kevin Reinhart, Jeanne Shea, John Terrell, Robert Tonkinson, Robin Torrence, John Watanabe, Lindsay Whaley, and J. Peter White. We also want to thank John Cocklin, Lucinda Hall, Francis X. Oscadal, Cindy Shirkey, Reinhart Sonnenberg, and Amy Witzel, members of the Baker Library Reference Department, all of whom have helped track down many of the sources we have used. Special thanks go to our student research assistants Tate LeFevre, Lauren Weldon, Whitney Wilking, and Rachel Yemini. We also want to thank Ted Knight and Juliana Gribbins at McGraw-Hill/Dushkin for their constant assistance, suggestions, patience, and good humor. We also wish to thank our wives, Sarah L. Welsch and Karen L. Endicott, for their support and encouragement during the preparation of this volume.

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Introduction

Studying Cultural Anthropology

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Anthropology is the study of humanity in all its biological, social, cultural, and linguistic diversity. It is the broadest social science, encompassing four major subfields—cultural anthropology, prehistoric archaeology, biological anthropology, and anthropological linguistics—and several smaller ones. Cultural anthropology, the topic of this book, is the comparative study of human ways of life. Cultural anthropologists try to explain why these ways of life—cultures—take the form they do and what they mean to the people who follow them. Historically, cultural anthropologists have focused on small-scale non-Western societies, especially tribes and peasant communities, but nowadays they apply their methods and concepts to the study of groups in complex societies as well, such as occupational groups in the United States.

Several features of cultural anthropology distinguish it from other social sciences, like sociology and political science. One feature is the basic method of data collection—*ethnographic fieldwork* or *participant observation*. Typically, cultural anthropologists live with the people they are studying for a year or more, learn their language, and participate in the daily life of the community as much as possible, thus enabling them to gain a personal understanding of the people and their world. Another feature is the cultural anthropologists' use of the concept of culture—which may be thought of as socially learned ways of acting, thinking, and feeling—both for describing specific ways of life and for analyzing and explaining particular practices and beliefs. Cultural anthropologists attempt to understand a wide variety of practices, ranging from child-rearing techniques to religious rituals, largely in terms of culture and cultural conditioning. Cultural anthropologists also try to understand a culture as a whole rather than focusing on only one or a few subsystems, such as a people's economy or religion. They are interested in how these subsystems fit together to form coherent—or sometimes discordant—wholes. Finally, cultural anthropologists use comparisons between different cultures to try to answer broad questions about similarities and differences in human behavior. They use cross-cultural comparison to look for patterns of association; for example, between certain religions and certain forms of government. Because cultural anthropologists study so many aspects of so many different cultures from so many different points of view, it may seem that no two anthropologists actually

study the same things, yet they all are working toward a greater understanding of the cultural capabilities and productions of the human species.

Cultural anthropology as we know it today (called *social anthropology* in Great Britain) developed in the late nineteenth century out of European scholars' attempts to understand the radically different ways of life of the peoples outside Europe who were encountered by explorers, traders, missionaries, travelers, and colonial administrators. The standard explanatory concept at that time was *social evolution*, the idea that civilization as known in Europe was the culmination of a series of incremental changes from simpler beginnings. Scholars proposed hypothetical evolutionary sequences leading up to all the major components of European civilization. One of the more general schemes, that of the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, divided human history into the stages of "Savagery," "Barbarism," and "Civilization," the first two having three subdivisions, based mainly on advances in technology, such as the invention of pottery. All societies were thought to have followed the same evolutionary path, but those outside Europe and North America suffered from arrested development, getting stuck at some lower stage of development. The Australian Aborigines, for instance, were commonly seen as living examples of the lowest stage of social evolution ("Lower Savagery" for Morgan), one that Europeans had passed through thousands of years before. The slow progress of non-Europeans was attributed to their inferior intellectual endowment, a racist interpretation used by scholars and laypeople alike. Yet the notion that such peoples could overcome their inherent limitations with help from more talented Europeans was one of the justifications given for colonialism, the so-called *white man's burden* to civilize and Christianize the "backward" peoples outside Europe and North America. Most cultural anthropologists today vehemently reject the idea that any society is superior to any other, but notions of cultural evolution are still used in some theories of culture change.

The defining features of cultural anthropology—the idea of culture and the modern fieldwork method—developed along separate paths, only becoming firmly joined in the twentieth century. The first influential definition of culture in the anthropological sense was that of the British scholar E. B. Tylor. As he writes in *Primitive Culture* (J. Murray, 1871), "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Since then anthropologists, especially in North America, have repeatedly defined and redefined what they mean by culture. In a 1952 survey of the literature, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn found over 157 different definitions of culture in print, reflecting numerous different emphases and points of view (*Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 47, no. 1 [Harvard University]). However, a few common threads run through the theorizing and debate about culture that went on during the first half of the twentieth century. Cultural anthropologists were trying to establish that culture was a thing in itself, a so-called *emergent phenomenon*, not something that could be reduced to the sum of the actions and ideas of the individuals making up a society and therefore not explainable in terms of individual psychology

or biological instincts. Culture was thought of as having an existence of its own, apart from the individuals who happened to carry it at any given time; it needed to be explained in its own terms, with distinctively cultural theories. The founder of American academic anthropology, Franz Boas, considered each culture to be a unique tradition or way of life, the result of a particular history of innovations and borrowings from other cultures. However, subsequent generations of cultural anthropologists were not content to view cultures as merely the outcome of the accidents of history. They attempted to explain the forms cultures took in terms of environmental adaptation or other forces. Cultural anthropologists like Margaret Mead (see Issue 4, "Was Margaret Mead's Fieldwork on Samoan Adolescents Fundamentally Flawed?") debated whether biologically inherited instincts ("nature") or cultural conditioning ("nurture") was the predominant influence on human behavior, with most cultural anthropologists coming down strongly on the side of nurture. The debate about the importance of instinct versus culture in shaping behavior continues today. (See Issue 8, "Do Sexually Egalitarian Societies Exist?"; Issue 10, "Has the Islamic Revolution in Iran Subjugated Women?"; and Issue 14, "Did Napoleon Chagnon and Other Researchers Harm the Yanomami Indians of Venezuela?")

Today anthropologists still argue about how best to conceptualize culture and even about whether or not such a concept is needed and useful. Nevertheless, in practice most cultural anthropologists treat all enduring social groups, from clubs to whole nations, as having a set of typical practices, ideas, and feelings that can be discovered and described in the form of a cultural description. Those practices, ideas, and feelings are shared because they are part of an interconnected—though not entirely coherent—tradition, which is learned, internalized, valued, and followed by each new generation. Cultures can change due to the innovations of creative individuals, but they also have great inertia, giving them a recognizable identity over time. For example, American culture can be defined as the set of practices, ideas, and feelings shared by all Americans, regardless of their ancestry, due to their learning and participating in a common tradition. Such a view does not deny that there are many layers of subcultures within the common American culture (e.g., working-class Mexican American culture) or that cultures continuously change.

The anthropological fieldwork method arose through a series of innovations by American and British researchers. The social evolutionists had generally been content to use the reports of European travelers, missionaries, officials, and so on rather than gathering their own data. Needless to say, the quality and accuracy of those reports were highly variable. The first systematic research into the customs of non-European peoples in North America were the studies made by officials of the U.S. government's Bureau of Indian Affairs on Indian reservations in the late nineteenth century. Typically an official would stay at the administrator's house and interview elderly members of the tribe about how they lived before they were defeated and placed on reservations, a process jokingly called "kitchen-table anthropology." Boas carried out his own research among Eskimos and the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia. He made numerous trips to the Kwakiutl and employed an educated Kwakiutl man

as a research assistant and correspondent. Boas emphasized the importance of face-to-face research to his graduate students.

The modern method of fieldwork, however, derives from the pioneering research of the Polish-born British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands, off the east coast of New Guinea, beginning in 1914. Malinowski began his studies in New Guinea in the typical fashion of the day—living with a white administrator, visiting villages during the day or interviewing informants “on the veranda” through interpreters. However, with the outbreak of World War I, the Australian governor of Papua limited the movements of Malinowski, technically an enemy alien since he was Polish, to the Trobriand Islands. Making a virtue of necessity, Malinowski moved into a village, learned the Trobriand language, and stayed for more than two years. His findings formed the basis for a series of important monographs on Trobriand culture. Because of the unprecedented depth and richness of information Malinowski was able to obtain, his procedure became the standard fieldwork method for British anthropologists. However, that method spread only slowly to the United States, finally becoming fully established in the 1960s. In part the question of whether or not Mead’s 1924 research in Samoa was flawed (Issue 4) is a question of whether or not her Boasian method of research was inferior to the Malinowskian approach followed by her critic, Derek Freeman. Today, most data used by cultural anthropologists are ultimately derived from observations, informal conversations, and interviews carried out by a researcher living within a study community. The fieldwork methodology distinguishes most anthropological research from that of sociologists, psychologists, economists, and other social scientists.

The information fieldworkers collect does not speak for itself; cultural data must be interpreted. Interpretation begins with the creation of the research questions themselves, for this reflects what investigators consider important to find out and directs their observations and questions in the field. At each step of data collection and analysis, the investigators’ theories and interests shape their understandings of other cultures. In their reports (called *ethnographic monographs*), anthropologists draw on theories to create and test hypotheses or to shape their interpretations. It is easy to see why cultural anthropologists can arrive at different conclusions, even when studying the same society.

Much explanation in cultural anthropology is based on comparison of cultural features in different societies. Some anthropologists explicitly make cross-cultural comparisons, using statistics to measure the significance of apparent correlations between such variables as child-rearing practices and typical adult personalities. Even anthropologists who concentrate on explaining or interpreting features of particular cultures use their knowledge of similar or different features in other societies as a basis for insights. By viewing cultures in a comparative framework, anthropologists become aware of what is “missing” in a particular culture—in other words, what is found in other similar cultures—as well as what is there. Comparison is fundamental to the anthropological perspective.

Recently, cultural anthropologists have begun asking questions about anthropologists and the culture of anthropology, specifically about possible bi-

ases in the ways anthropologists depict and represent other cultures through writing, films, and other media. This movement has been called *post-modern anthropology* or *critical anthropology*. Post-modernists ask, among other things: Do our theories and methods of representation inadvertently portray the people we study as exotic "Others," in exaggerated contrast with Western peoples? This is the question that lies behind Issue 3, "Do Museums Misrepresent Ethnic Communities Around the World?"

Theoretical orientations In Part 1 of this volume we look at controversies concerning general theoretical orientations in cultural anthropology. The first issue considers whether cultural anthropology should model itself on the natural sciences or view itself as an interpretive branch of the humanities. Although most cultural anthropologists consider themselves social scientists, much anthropological analysis comes from interpretations of cultural data rather than from the material basis of human societies. In this issue, Marvin Harris argues that anthropology is a science and should model itself directly on the natural sciences, especially biology and environmental studies. Clifford Geertz counters that anthropology is nothing without cultural interpretations of symbols, meaning, and behavior. But for him such interpretations come from the fact that in anthropology, unlike the natural sciences, the anthropologist is the instrument through which all understanding must emerge. Issue 2 asks whether or not native peoples continually invent and reinvent their traditions. This debate between the late anthropologist Roger M. Keesing and Hawaiian activist Haunani-Kay Trask concerns who is best able to speak about native culture. Do anthropologists have a privileged view that allows them to see native custom and beliefs more accurately or do native peoples themselves have a better understanding of their own culture? Clearly native peoples understand the nuances of their culture better than most foreign anthropologists, but do anthropologists bring an objectivity that allows them to see things that native peoples miss? Finally, Issue 3 questions the nature of anthropological interpretations. For more than a century, museums have been closely linked to anthropology, and until the 1950s most anthropologists made collections and studied various aspects of material culture in the course of their ethnographic studies. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s the role of the museum in anthropology was in decline, and few anthropologists were trained to work with museum collections. But since the mid-1980s there has been a growing interest among cultural anthropologists about how the peoples anthropologists study are represented in museum collections.

Some specific issues in cultural anthropology Part 2 considers a variety of controversies that are being debated in cultural anthropology today. Because of the great breadth of subject matter in cultural anthropology, most cultural anthropologists become specialists in one or a few topics or subfields of cultural anthropology. Major subfields include kinship and social organization, economic anthropology, political anthropology, anthropology of religion, ethnicity, gender and culture, language and culture, psychological anthropology,

and medical anthropology. We have tried to include at least one issue from each of these subfields.

Issue 4, which asks about the adequacy of Mead's fieldwork in Samoa, questions Mead's belief that the amount of sexual freedom offered to adolescents makes a difference in their transition to adulthood. Issue 5, "Does Language Determine How We Think?" concerns the question of whether a people's language shapes their culture. Issue 6, "Are San Hunter-Gatherers Basically Pastoralists Who Have Lost Their Herds?" and Issue 7, "Do Hunter-Gatherers Need Supplemental Food Sources to Live in Tropical Rain Forests?" deal with so-called hunter-gatherer societies, focusing specifically on their social organization and economic systems. Issue 8, concerning sexually egalitarian societies, and Issue 10, concerning the Islamic Revolution in Iran, deal with the question of gender and society. Issue 9, "Is It Natural for Adopted Children to Want to Find Out About Their Birth Parents?" concerns one of the most pressing contemporary issues in kinship studies. In the United States many adoptees feel driven to find their birth parents. However, the question is not whether American adoptees believe this urge is a natural one or not, but whether it is a universal—and thus a biological—urge or a culturally inspired one. Similarly, Issue 11, "Are Yanomami Violence and Warfare Natural Human Efforts to Maximize Reproductive Fitness?" raises the question of whether or not the violence observed by anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon among the Yanomami Indians of Venezuela is a natural drive inherent in men to maximize the number of sexual partners and thus maximize their biological offspring. Issue 12, "Is Ethnic Conflict Inevitable?" deals with Muslim-Hindu tension in India and ethnic violence in Bosnia specifically but raises questions about whether or not ethnic tension is universal. Finally, Issue 13, "Do Some Illnesses Exist Only Among Members of a Particular Culture?" raises a question from medical anthropology.

This set of issues is by no means exhaustive, either in representing the kinds of questions currently debated by anthropologists or the range of subfields in cultural anthropology. Nevertheless, these issues illustrate how cultural anthropology can and has weighed in on several pressing social issues of the day.

Ethics in cultural anthropology Part 3 looks at controversies concerning the ethics of research, a topic that has become increasingly important in contemporary anthropology. The American Anthropological Association has developed a Code of Ethics covering both research and teaching (see the American Anthropological Association Web site at <http://www.aaanet.org>). It recognizes that researchers sometimes have conflicting obligations to the people and animals studied, host countries, the profession, and the public. One basic principle is that researchers should do nothing that could harm or distress the people or animals they study.

Here we consider four specific examples of ethical questions that affect cultural anthropologists. Issue 14 asks whether Chagnon and his colleagues actually harmed the Yanomami people (also spelled Yanomamö) with whom they worked. This issue rose suddenly in September 2000, when most American an-

thropologists received e-mails about charges leveled against the researchers by investigative journalist Patrick Tierney. This issue is thus timely, and it is also very important to the discipline because so many undergraduates have read one of Chagnon's books about the Yanomami or seen one of the ethnographic films he produced with Timothy Asch. Issue 15 asks whether it matters if Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú's memoir contains inaccuracies. In 1999 anthropologist David Stoll published a challenge to the literal veracity of Menchú's book *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (Verso, 1984). But the ethical issues involved also concern whether or not Stoll is himself guilty of an ethnical breach by undermining one of Guatemala's national heroes and the interests of Guatemalan peasants by challenging Menchú's account. Issue 16, "Should Anthropologists Work to Eliminate the Practice of Female Circumcision?" concerns whether or not anthropologists have an obligation to try to stop a traditional cultural practice that some see as at odds with international human rights. This is the practice of female circumcision, which some call female genital mutilation. Can anthropologists sit still while women in African and Middle Eastern countries are mutilated? Or do anthropologists have an obligation to help preserve traditional customs? Finally, Issue 17 asks whether anthropologists have a moral responsibility to defend the interests of "less advantaged" communities. At issue is whether "traditional customs" of aboriginal women were being violated by the building of a certain bridge in South Australia or whether anthropologists have actually encouraged their informants to create new versions of their traditional secrets for political reasons. Just how far should an anthropologist go to help protect the interests of disadvantaged native peoples?

Some Basic Questions

On the surface, the issues presented in this book are very diverse. What has attracted us to the issues presented here is that each raises much broader questions that affect the entire discipline. In this section we briefly describe some of the basic questions lying behind specific issues.

Is Anthropology a Science or a Humanity?

Science is a set of ideas and methods intended to describe and explain phenomena in a naturalistic way, seeing individual things and events as the outcome of discoverable causes and as conforming to general laws. Anthropologists taking a scientific approach are concerned with developing broad theories about the processes that lead to observed patterns of variation in human biology, language, and culture. The humanities, on the other hand, are concerned with understanding people's cultural creations in terms of their meanings to their creators and the motivations behind their creation.

Cultural anthropologists are sharply divided over whether cultural anthropology should model itself on the natural sciences or on the humanities. Issue 11 explores how sociobiologists and their critics approach explanations for certain patterns in human behavior. Here Chagnon argues that anthropologists can use biologically based models from sociobiology to understand why native

peoples behave the way they do. Anthropologist Brian Ferguson counters that Chagnon has misinterpreted his data, suggesting that Chagnon's own behavior during fieldwork created the native behaviors that he is trying to explain.

Is Biology or Culture More Important in Shaping Human Behavior?

Most anthropologists accept that both genetically transmitted behavioral tendencies (instincts) and cultural ideas and norms influence human behavior, thought, and emotion. However, anthropologists diverge widely over the amount of weight they assign to these two influences. *Biological determinists* believe that all human behavior is ultimately determined by the genes, and culture merely lends distinctive coloration to our genetically driven behaviors. At the other extreme, *cultural determinists* believe that any instincts humans may have are so weak and malleable that cultural learning easily overcomes them. The conflict between supporters of the two extreme views, called the *nature-nurture debate*, has been going on for many years and shows no sign of being resolved soon.

Several of the issues in this volume deal directly with the nature-nurture question, including Issue 8 concerning sexually egalitarian societies, Issue 11 concerning Yanomami violence and warfare, and Issue 13 concerning illnesses that may or may not exist only among members of a particular culture. In addition, Issue 4, about the Mead-Freeman controversy, concerns two diametrically opposed positions on whether adolescence is shaped more by biology or by culture.

Is the Local Development of Culture or Outside Influence More Important in Shaping Cultures?

In trying to explain the form a particular culture takes, different anthropologists place different amounts of emphasis on the local development of culture and on outside influence. Those who favor local development emphasize unique innovations and adaptations to the natural environment, while those favoring outside influences emphasize the borrowing of ideas from neighbors (*diffusion*) and changes forced upon a people by more powerful groups (*acculturation*). Most anthropologists recognize some influence from both sources, but some attribute overriding importance to one or the other.

Three issues in this volume are about the relative importance of local cultural development and external influences: Issue 6 concerning San hunter-gatherers, Issue 7 concerning hunter-gatherers and supplemental food sources, and Issue 12 concerning ethnic conflict.

Is a Feminist Perspective Needed in Anthropology?

Although female anthropologists—like Mead and Ruth Benedict—have been very influential in the development of anthropology, there was a bias in early anthropological studies toward emphasizing the social and political lives of men.

Over the past 30 years feminist anthropologists have argued that these male-biased accounts have overlooked much of what goes on in traditional societies because male anthropologists have been preoccupied with men's activities and the male point of view. Feminist anthropologists want ethnographers and theorists to give full weight to the activities and perspectives of women and to recognize that gender identities and values pervade all cultures.

Issue 8 concerning sexually egalitarian societies considers whether or not a feminist perspective is needed to recognize sexual equality. In a somewhat different way Issue 10 reassesses what a feminist anthropology might actually look like by presenting two opposed perspectives on what has happened to women's rights following the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Feminist anthropologists have also asserted that male bias affects anthropological methodologies as well. Issue 4 concerning Mead's fieldwork on Samoan adolescents hinges in part on different methods available to male and female researchers.

Some Theoretical Approaches

Cultural anthropologists draw on many theories of widely varying scope and type. We present brief summaries of a number of theoretical approaches used by authors in this book so that you will recognize and understand them when you see them. We have arranged these theories in a rough continuum from most scientific in approach to most humanistic.

Sociobiology Sociobiology is a theory that attempts to use evolutionary principles to explain all behavior of animals, including humans. The best-known practitioner is biologist E. O. Wilson, whose book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Harvard University Press, 1975) sets out the basic concepts. Sociobiologists believe that human behavior is determined by inherited behavioral tendencies. The genes promoting behaviors that lead to survival and successful reproduction are favored by natural selection and thus tend to become more common in a population over the generations. For sociobiologists such behaviors as selfishness, altruism to close kin, violence, and certain patterns of marriage are evolutionarily and biologically determined. They see individual and cultural ideas as mere rationalizations of innate patterns of behavior. In their view, no culture will persist that goes against the "wisdom of the genes."

Cultural ecology The theory of cultural ecology was developed by cultural anthropologist Julian Steward in the 1930s as a corrective to the overly simple schemes of cultural evolution. Emphasizing the process of adaptation to the physical environment, he postulated that societies in different environments would develop different practices, though the general trend was toward higher levels of complexity, a process he called *multilinear evolution*. His idea of adaptation, like natural selection, explained why some societies and practices succeeded and were perpetuated, while other less well-adapted ones died out.

Many archaeologists and cultural anthropologists use versions of cultural ecology to explain why certain practices exist in certain environments. Harris's widely-used theory of *cultural materialism* is a further development of cultural

ecology. The basic idea behind all versions of cultural ecology is that societies must fulfill their material needs if they are to survive. Therefore those institutions involved with making a living must be well adapted to the environment, while others, like religions, are less constrained by the environment.

Culture history Boas rejected the cultural evolution schemes of the nineteenth century, with their fixed stages of cultural development. He pointed out that all societies had unique histories, depending on local innovations and diffusion of ideas from neighboring societies. Also, change is not always toward greater complexity; civilizations crumble as well as rise. Boas advocated recording the particular events and influences that contributed to the makeup of each culture.

World system theory The world system theory, which has gained great prominence in the social sciences in recent years, asserts that all societies, large and small, are—and long have been—integrated in a single worldwide political-economic system. This approach emphasizes the connections among societies, especially the influence of politically powerful societies over weak ones, as in colonialism, rather than local development of culture.

Cultural interpretation Humanist anthropologists emphasize their role as interpreters, not explainers, of culture. They focus on the task of describing other cultures in ways that are intelligible to Western readers, making sense of customs that at first glance seem incomprehensible. The most prominent practitioner of cultural interpretation is Geertz, who coined the term *thick description* for this process. This approach is used especially for dealing with aspects of culture that are products of human imagination, like art and mythology, but even the institutions involved in physical survival, like families and economic processes, have dimensions of meaning that warrant interpretation.

Feminist anthropology Feminist anthropology began in the 1970s as an approach meant to correct the lack of coverage of women and women's views in earlier anthropology. It has now developed into a thoroughgoing alternative approach to the study of culture and society. Its basic idea is that gender is a cultural construction affecting the roles and meanings of the sexes in particular societies. The aim of feminist anthropology is both to explain the position of women and to convey the meanings surrounding gender. Feminist anthropologists emphasize that all social relations have a gender dimension.

How Anthropologists Reach Conclusions

None of the issues considered in this volume have been resolved, and several are still the subject of heated, and at times, acrimonious debate. The most heated controversies typically arise from the most extreme points of view. When reading these selections students should bear in mind that only two positions are presented formally, although in the introductions and postscripts we raise questions that should guide you to consider other positions as well. We encourage

you to question all of the positions offered before coming to any conclusions of your own. Remember, for more than a century anthropology has prided itself on revealing how our own views of the world are culturally biased. Try to be aware of how your own background, upbringing, ethnicity, religion, likes, and dislikes affect your assessments of the arguments presented here.

In our own teaching we have often used controversial issues as a way to help students understand how anthropologists think about research questions. We have found that five questions often help students focus on the most important points in these selections:

1. Who is the author?
2. What are the author's assumptions?
3. What methods and data does an author use?
4. What are the author's conclusions?
5. How does the author reach his or her conclusions from the data?

For each issue we suggest that you consider what school of thought, what sort of training, and what sort of research experience each author has. We often find it useful to ask why this particular author finds the topic worth writing about. Does one or the other author seem to have any sort of bias? What assumptions does each author hold? Do both authors hold the same assumptions?

For any anthropological debate, we also find it useful to ask what methods or analytical strategies each author has used to reach the conclusions he or she presents. For some of the issues presented in this book, authors share many of the same assumptions and are generally working with the same evidence, but disagree as to how this evidence should be analyzed. Some authors disagree most profoundly on what kinds of data are most suitable for answering a particular research question. Some even disagree about what kinds of questions anthropologists should be asking.

Finally, we suggest that you consider how the author has come to his or her conclusions from the available data. Would different data make any difference? Would a different kind of evidence be more appropriate? Would different data likely lead to different conclusions? Would different ways of analyzing the data suggest other conclusions?

If you can answer most of these questions about any pair of selections, you will be thinking about these problems anthropologically and will understand how anthropologists approach controversial research questions. After weighing the various possible positions on an issue you will be able to form sound opinions of your own.

On the Internet ...



Cultural Materialism

The Cultural Materialism Web site, created by Dr. M. D. Murphy of the University of Alabama, features an explanation of cultural materialism, a summary of the history of cultural materialism, and a list of pertinent scholars. This site also gives links to other relevant Web sites.

<http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/cultmat.htm>

Exhibitions at the Smithsonian: National Museum of the American Indian

This Web site of the National Museum of the American Indian was created by the Smithsonian Institution and provides images of current and recent exhibits about Native American art and society. The links provided on this site allow students to evaluate how this museum represents the Native American community.

<http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibits/index.html>

Exhibitions at the Smithsonian: National Museum of African Art

Students can compare this Web site of the National Museum of African Art, also created by the Smithsonian Institution, with that of the previous Web site. How is this ethnic community represented differently?

<http://www.nmafa.si.edu/exhibits/currexhb.htm>