

Ethnographic Essays in Cultural Anthropology

**A PROBLEM-BASED
APPROACH**

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ETHNOGRAPHIC ESSAYS IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

A PROBLEM-BASED APPROACH

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*To the memory of James A. Clifton,
distinguished scholar, applied anthropologist, mentor, and friend*

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Undergraduate teaching, perhaps especially in anthropology, is characterized by individuality. We each have a sense of what works best for us. We each have our own fieldwork experiences to draw on. Each of our institutions has its particular resources. So we will not tell you how best to use this text. It will be used differently by each of you.

Nevertheless, some things do need to be said about using *Ethnographic Essays in Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach*. As the subtitle indicates, the text uses a problem-based learning (PBL) approach. Case Western University Medical School in the United States developed the PBL approach in the 1950s. It was later adopted at McMaster University Medical School in Canada. The idea behind the PBL approach is that an integrated curriculum structured around real-life problems better prepares students to face the challenges of medical practice than does the usual discipline-based curriculum. The PBL approach focuses on contextual and cumulative learning. That is, a subject is not learned in depth at a single point in time but is instead introduced repeatedly in various contexts and at varying levels of abstraction.

Several implications follow from these characteristics: (1) Teaching becomes less topic based. In PBL, we do not exhaustively cover one topic this week and another the next. Kinship is not over in the third week; it returns in different contexts. (2) Things keep coming up. Teaching is more about responding to student questions and less about imposing order on an untidy world. (3) Teaching becomes more inductive and less deductive. (4) Classroom activity is less about teaching than it is about helping students learn. (5) Greater responsibility is placed on the teacher. You are not working from a text that contains all the definitive answers.

Since its start in medical schools, the PBL approach has spread to many other disciplines. Richard Robbins' *Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach* was the first book to introduce the PBL approach to anthropology. This book differs from Robbins' book not in its approach, but in its content. Rather than drawing on a variety of ethnographic examples in order to examine a problem, our discussion of each problem is embedded in a specific ethnographic context. Each chapter is, in effect, a mini-ethnography. This allows students to explore each set of questions in the context of one particular society and to develop some appreciation for the richness of the society as a whole and for how institutional arrangements tend to support each other.

Is this approach antithetical to more traditional ones? We don't think so. *Ethnographic Essays in Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach* can be used with the Robbins' book, can stand alone, or can be used to supple-

ment other anthropological texts by exposing students to the same fundamental concepts within the problem-solving context.

For those intending to use both this and Robbins' books, a glance at the chapter headings will indicate that there is substantial overlap in the problems considered. Indeed, Robbins' table of contents was our starting point. But even those chapter authors using problems nearly identical to those used by Robbins were free to develop the problems their own way. The result is pedagogically interesting: two parallel and mutually interpreting expositions of a single problem.

In other cases, the connection between the two books is less obvious. We did not, for instance, match Robbins' Chapter 2 on the long-term transformation of human societies from hunting-and-gathering bands to industrial states. In its stead is a chapter on indigenous knowledge, both traditionally and in the modern world, a topic implied in Robbins' text. Additionally, our Chapter 5 directly addresses the way in which contemporary small-scale societies interact with states, and other chapters also feature discussion of the topic, so students are exposed to stereoscopic perspectives on complex realities.

The chart that follows illustrates the topical and conceptual range of the text. In reality each chapter's coverage is more complex than the chart indicates, but it does provide a sense of how the traditional topics are covered.

Robbins sought to address the learning process in the classroom by more actively involving students in problem-solving as a way to engage their imaginations as well as to integrate their knowledge. We believe this book also contributes to that process.

Topic-Chapters Correspondence Chart

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Chapter</i>
Agricultural society	3, 6, 10
Applied anthropology	2, 8
Art and aesthetics	1, 2, 9
Belief systems and values	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Colonialism	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10
Cosmology	2, 3, 6, 9, 10
Culture (concept)	1, 3, 8, 10
Culture change	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Death	1, 3, 10
Economic development	4, 5, 6
Economic relations	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10
Education	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10
Environmental relations	2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Ethics	2, 8
Ethnocentrism	1, 6
Ethnography/ethnology	1, 8, 9, 10
Ethos	3, 5, 6
Family organization	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10
Feuding	4, 5, 6

Fieldwork	1, 6, 8, 9, 10
Food production	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7
Gender roles	1, 4, 5, 6, 7
Gift giving	1, 2, 5, 10
Globalization	1, 3, 5, 7, 8
Health	2, 4, 5, 7, 9
Horticulture	1, 3, 4, 5, 9
Hunting and gathering	2, 5
Indigenous knowledge	2
Industrial/postindustrial society	7, 8
Kinship	1, 4, 5, 6, 10
Language and culture	1, 3, 5, 9
Marriage	4, 5, 6
Migrant labor	1, 4, 7, 10
Missionization	1, 5, 6, 9, 10
Oral literature	2, 3, 9
Organization anthropology	7, 8
Pastoralism	3, 4, 6
Political organization	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9
Religion	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10
Ritual	1, 2, 3, 9, 10
Sexuality	4, 6
Social structure	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10
Status and rank	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10
Systems of exchange	1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10
Witchcraft	3, 9

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Anyone who has struggled to put a book together knows that the scholarly effort reaches completion only with the dedication and cooperation of more people than could possibly be mentioned. Although we mention only a few, our appreciation extends to all who participated.

The contributors to this volume have endured a great deal of editorial constraint and comment from us. Yet they have managed to produce manuscripts of exceptional quality. We sincerely thank them.

Anthropologists doing fieldwork depend on the goodwill and hospitality of ordinary people who are really extraordinary. They share their lives with us, and they become our teachers. We owe them a great debt and extend our heartfelt appreciation for their support.

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The wholehearted support of our families has made the task of putting this book together both easier than it might have been and also a wonderful adventure.

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*A*nthropology literally means the study of mankind or, in contemporary terms, the study of humanity. Anyone watching the evening news on television is aware of the amazing variety of societies around the world. While we notice that these societies have many things in common, we are also aware that differences in beliefs have spawned widely divergent ways to organize our lives. Historically, anthropology has asked questions about what it means to be human in these varied contexts.

A central feature of cultural anthropology is its emphasis on understanding other peoples who live in these varied contexts from an insider's viewpoint—as they themselves understand things. Given that every anthropologist already has a functioning culture, this is not always easy to do, but it is part of what makes doing anthropology challenging and exciting.

Anthropologists have a holistic perspective, meaning that they try to get the big picture that incorporates all the relevant factors. As you will see in this book, most anthropologists pay special attention to one, two, or three aspects of societal interaction. Nevertheless, while examining specific details, their mindset is to keep a broad perspective. You might get some sense of all this by noting the kinds of places in which cultural anthropologists do their fieldwork.

Cultural anthropologists are joined by other anthropologists with different specializations but the same overall orientation. In North America, there tend to be three different specializations besides cultural anthropology. There are

- ① archaeologists, who examine cultures of the past. Their methods of data collection are different (it's hard to talk to a skeleton), but they share the belief that much in the present has been shaped by the past. There are also physical anthropologists. Some physical anthropologists study our very ancient evolutionary past, and others study our nonhuman but biologically related "cousins." We share the conviction that our behaviors are to some extent rooted in our biological past as well as in our cultural past, and that it is useful to make comparisons between groups. Finally, there are linguistic anthropologists, who study human languages and who remind us that language—the words we use and the way we use them to think about things—is also a central feature of all cultures.

Anthropologists assembled an amazing amount of information about different societies around the world during the 20th century. In the beginning, they usually studied small-scale societies. Doing anthropological research or fieldwork often involved living and working within the community being studied. In the case of social or cultural anthropologists, they were like chil-

dren who had to learn a culture from the ground up. They usually learned the language in order to ascertain how one should behave in that particular society. The process often took several years. The accounts of their study were known as **ethnographies**.¹ These early ethnographies were usually comprehensive in nature; that is, they more or less described a complete way of life, including such things as how people made a living, what they believed in, and how they related to one another. As time went on, anthropologists became more focused on specific problems, partly in order to fill in gaps in what was already known. In addition, they began to study more-complex and larger-scale societies.

Whether problems are formally stated at the beginning of the research or become recognized only as fieldwork unfolds, problem formulation is at the heart of anthropological research. This means asking questions. These questions, or some of them, may be asked out loud, or they may be asked silently to oneself, but they need to be asked. Why does one person sit with that other person at a particular event? Why do some people defer to other people? Who makes what kind of decisions? Why are children encouraged to act in a certain way, or why are the dead cremated rather than buried? The number of questions generated in the course of a study sometimes seems endless, but the questions are tools that lead to understanding why the people in a particular society act the way they do.

This book is intended to provide an introduction to the fundamental ideas anthropologists use in understanding cultures around the world. These ideas are presented within the context of descriptions of specific cultures. In each chapter, the authors pose a problem as well as a number of questions that relate to the problem, much in the way one would pose problems and questions in the course of doing research. Just as the field researcher becomes totally engaged in pursuing the answers to the questions and problems, so we hope to engage you in an exciting learning enterprise that is more than just sitting down and learning a bunch of facts about a group of people.

The peoples you will be learning about live in many parts of the world. They possess vibrant cultures that have creatively dealt with a myriad of social, political, economic, and religious issues over time. They, like all cultures everywhere, are changing, albeit at different rates. To get an idea of the range of ideas you will encounter while reading this book, turn back to the table that appears at the end of "To the Instructor."

¹Key terms appear in boldface in the text and are defined in the Glossary at the end of the book.

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