

Qualities and types of social anthropology



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Introduction

Social anthropology is the field of anthropology that studies how living human beings behave in social groups. This essay seeks to explore the history, meaning and essential qualities of social anthropology which distinguish it from other branches of anthropology.

In the UK, anthropology is usually primarily concerned with the study of culture. This area is termed 'social anthropology' and it is this designation which is used in England, and to some extent in America, to assign an area of a larger subject of anthropology, the study of humanity from a number of viewpoints. In England social anthropology was only introduced and studied relatively recently during the later decades of the nineteenth century. It became widely recognised as a discipline later on and it has been taught under that name since. However, its academic base goes back further.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard, (2004)

The beginnings of social anthropology lay in the nineteenth century.

Examining its roots, we can see an early definition of culture from one of the pioneers of social anthropology. Sir Edward Burnett Taylor (2 October 1832 - 2 January 1917), an English anthropologist, defined the term culture as, "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Evans Pritchard, (2004) Subsequent study has led anthropologists to determine that culture is not innate, rather it is learned by a person from family and society. Therefore, it does not have any genetic connection, because even if a person is brought up in a culture different from

that in which he was born, he absorbs the culture of the society later on. It has also been observed that people also feel the need to follow their beliefs and traditions of their own culture in adulthood, even though they might not agree with certain beliefs in it. Edmund Ronald Leach, (1982)

The refinement of theories of culture which are used today owes much to the work of the founders of the subject. However, social anthropology was also a product of its time; it was formulated at the time European societies had empires. Despite the fact there has been much controversial argument about the ways colonialism may have influenced anthropological study, at least one of the main aims of a foremost creator of the discipline stays vital to current anthropology study: “ the comparative study of the different forms of human social life and cultural experience”. Evans Pritchard, (2004).

From its early days, social anthropology has become an international discipline studied in universities around the world. There are differences globally in the study of social anthropology. For example, in America social anthropology is referred to as either ethnology or sociology. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, (2004). In general, the United States displays a different approach to anthropology.

Anthropology in North America is concerned with the study of human difference and adaptability. It is usually divided into four groups:

1. biological (physical) anthropology,
2. archaeological anthropology,
3. linguistic anthropology
4. Cultural anthropology.

Insa Nolte (2010)

I believe it is important to have a look at each subfield as each of them emphasise a different definition of anthropology and stress various approaches to this vast subject. This will demonstrate that the subject is not as what we know and study in the UK, but what the US, and due to its large postgraduate education programmes and cultural influence, a large portion of the global academic community sees the subject of anthropology.

Biological or physical anthropology

Biological Anthropology is an approach to evolution and adaptation of humanity. It seeks to compare humans and animals to understand human unlikeness and biological cohesion; examines comparative data across time to explain the evolutionary history of hominines over the last 5 million years; explores difference in human development and health, and the mechanisms that influence contemporary and historical population differences; and examines individual attitude in terms of evolution and adaptation and its intellectual blueprint. Angela P. Cheater, (1989)

Archaeological Anthropology

Archaeological anthropology is the study of ancient human societies through their physical remains and environment. It deals with the time during which humans built up their patterns of behaviour. It aims to make over the nature and development of specific societies and explain the difference that happened among past societies. Angela P. Cheater, (1989)

Linguistic Anthropology

Linguistic anthropology is a branch of anthropology which is concentrating on relation between language and culture and the place of language in the wider social and cultural framework.

Angela P. Cheater (1989)

Cultural anthropology

Cultural Anthropology is a method of studying worldwide cultures by observation and cultural group comparison (e. g. Japan and England).

Fieldwork is conducted on cultures around the world. A society's social and context environment is examined in an observational and participatory study.

Key questions in cultural anthropology include: How are we different or similar? However, the philosophy is to go above ethnocentrism, the superficial belief that one culture is better than others. When each society's balance and structure is considered, rules of moral care and patterns of social co-operation are examined in their own socio-cultural context, which provide meaning to what an outsider may otherwise consider to be strange. This practice of cultural relativism stresses that there are no better or lower cultures; all cultures are meaningful in their own context.

M. Fortes, (2003)

The approach and classification of anthropology in the United States shows that the subject is a product of the culture and societies in which it is studied, just as social anthropology in the late nineteenth century owed its outlook to colonial attitudes in society. Further evidence of varying

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interpretations can be found in Mexico where archaeology is the term given to what we call social anthropology in England.

Generally it is difficult to explain what anthropology is about and what anthropologists do due to the different interpretations of the subject. However, what social anthropologists share is an interest in different ways people have of looking at the world they live in. These different ways are not individual character, but different views of the world learned as people grow up in different societies.

Angela P. Cheater, (1989)

Conclusion

The world we live in today has changed since the nineteenth century and anthropology has changed with it. Distances between human beings have reduced due to the ease of communication, transport, advances in technology and migration. As Leach states, “ Globalisation does not seem to be making the world we live in less culturally assorted”. Whether we study anthropology, with its various definitions, in Britain or elsewhere, the study of different ways of living and seeing the world appear just as important as ever, if not more so.

Edmund Ronald Leach, (1982)

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