

Good example of biography on anthropologist franz boas

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One cannot talk about cultural anthropology without the mention of the man popularly referred to as the “ Father of American Anthropology,” Frank Boas. Frank Boas, a German-born anthropologist, was born on 9th July, 1858 and lived till 21st December, 1942 when the cruel hands of death took him away. He is accredited with founding the culture-centered, relativistic school of American anthropology that dominated the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A preview of his work reveals that he came up with arguments against contemporary theories that centered on racial distinctions between humans. His theory of relativism sought to downplay the notion that Western civilization was greater than simpler societies (Senft, Östman, and Verschueren 41).

He was born in Minden in Germany located around the greater Westphalia region of Germany. Boas started showing interested in natural sciences as young as five years old. As a student at the Gymnasium in Minden, Boas had already started taking a passionate root towards the history of culture. Boas attended the Universities of Kiel, Heildberg, and Bonn. In 1881, he received a Ph. D. in physics as a major, with a minor in geography awarded to him by the University of Kiel (Senft, Östman, and Verschueren 41).

Boas then undertook a year-long military service then proceeded with his studies in Berlin. His fascination with culture and language took root during his first expedition in northern Canada 1883-34. He was specifically amazed by the language of the Inuit living in the Baffin Island. During his short stint in the Baffin Island, Boas studied the non-Western culture intensively which led to his book, *The Central Eskimo* in 1888. Boas also collected ethnographic data of the Inuit culture that he took to the University of Berlin

and the Royal Ethnological Museum in Berlin as artifacts (Senft, Östman, and Verschueren 42).

On his return journey to Berlin in 1886 after studying the tribes of British Columbia, Boas stopped in New York City and decided to live there. His first job was an editor for a Science magazine. He took a teaching job at Clark University in Massachusetts whereas a part time job; Boas engaged in bringing the Native Americans cultures to the public. During this time, Boas started to formulate theories regarding anthropological relativism. Later on in 1896, Boas took a lecturing job in Columbia University where he became the first anthropology professor. After lecturing for nine years, he came up with the first department of anthropology at Columbia, and the first in the United States. Boas published many books including *The Mind of a Primitive Man*, *The Handbook of North American Indians*, *Race and Democratic Society*, *Primitive Art*, and *The Methods of Ethnology*. With over thirty publications centered on cultural anthropology, Boas was to be later christened the “Father of American Anthropology.”

During his lifetime, Boas did research and collected a wide array of information on linguistics, race, dance, art, and archeology. From the research, the foundations of the theory of relativism began. The theory sought to demystify the belief that the Western civilization was superior to the simpler societies. All along his lifetime, Boas rejected the grand narratives and always stressed on the significance of diversity and historical contingency. He always advocated equality among all persons and fought battles against ethnocentrism and racism. Boas also popularized the historical particularism approach to offer an alternative to the socio-cultural

development worldwide theories. He believed that this was achievable through carrying out comprehensive local studies of individual cultures to help discover the culture traits distributions. The approach also sort explain the individual process of change of culture at work. The approach was meant to provide reconstruction to the histories of cultures. Boas sought to clarify that every culture was the creation of a distinctive and specific history, and not merely coming from the environment or race. Boas' historical particularism concept is a significant approach in the field of anthropology. It has enabled me learn that it is important to understand a particular culture by first surveying its mythology, social taboos, religion, marriage customs among others before making generalized conclusions. The approach set the standards for future anthropologists to follow rigorous scientific standards in studying the particular cultures (University of Alabama - Department of Anthropology).

In his book titled *Race and Democratic Society*, Boas talks a lot about racial prejudice, class consciousness among others. Quoting from the book, “ the existence of any pure race with special endowments is a myth, as is the belief that there are races all whose members are foredoomed to eternal inferiority (Boas 20).” Boas explain that globally, there is no race that is superior to the other. However, if members of a particular race feel that they are inferior; chances are that they will remain so for eternity. Boas (21) reiterates that the belief of organic differences in different races has been a fundamental factor in the establishment of social and political relations between the different races. Boas spent quite a lot of his time trying to debunk the mythology that there existed inferior and superior races in the

world. Boas also did his research with the fundamental view that race was very central in understanding human beings.

I chose this particular author because of his outstanding contributions to the world of anthropology. Senft, Östman, and Verschueren describe Boas as an “unquestionable preeminent figure in the twentieth century North American Anthropology (41).” Boas’ work is important in anthropology since he established the four-field structure of the discipline around archeological, cultural, linguistic and physical studies of the American Indians. We could learn a lot from Boas’ theoretical contributions centered on his critique of evolution, his historical particularism and his rejection of rationalist theories of human nature. The studies are essential for students who want to be future successful anthropologists.

Works Cited

Boas, Franz. *Race and Democratic Society*. New York: J. J. Augustin, 1945. Print.

Senft, Gunter, Jan-Ola Östman, and Jef Verschueren. *Culture and Language Use*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Co, 2009. Print.