

# Basic anthropology essay

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The etymological root of the word Anthropology is from the Greek – anthropos - ‘ human being’ and ology – study of.

What does anthropology literally mean? The Oxford English dictionary states that Anthropology is ‘ the study of humankind, especially the study of societies and cultures and human origins. ’ Anthropology can be broken down into different disciplines, cultural, linguistic, biological and social. Throughout the history of Anthropology as a recognized method of studying humankind, different anthropologists have given different definitions of ‘ culture’, i. e. the English anthropologist, Edward Tylor (1832-1917) said “ Culture is or civilization... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man (sic. ) as a member of society.

“[sic] Polish born Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) defined culture thus: “ Culture is a well organized unity divided into two fundamental aspects – a body of artifacts and a system of customs. ”, and the American anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978) said, “ Culture is the learned behaviour of a society or a subgroup”. Ultimately, the essence of all three definitions is the same, that ‘ culture’ is the result of the developing human behavioural patterns in any environment created by people living together. In the long standing debate between those who advocate ‘ nature’ (biology etc) as the primary source of human behaviour, and those who argue that ‘ nurture’ (culture etc) is a more important influence on the way human beings conduct themselves, Anthropology stands firmly on the side of ‘ nurture’. Most experts agree that human behaviour is influenced by both nature and nurture, however, there is consensus among Anthropologists that <https://assignbuster.com/basic-anthropology-essay/>

human behavioural patterns are determined by reacting to the environment in which they live, thus, nurture being the main influence.

Putting it rather simplistically, anthropologists will argue that, whilst it is true that your brain telling you that you are hungry is a biological process, that doesn't explain how one might prefer a cooked breakfast to cereal. The preference for a cooked breakfast can only be derived from learned behaviour. On a wider scale, Anthropology argues that human beings agreeing upon the meanings of language, and developing the power to communicate successfully, has given rise to great feats of organisation, which could only have come from learned behaviour. We have learned how to build new societies, with incredibly complex cultures and subcultures where the flow of life is constantly changing and developing.

This can only be achieved through learned behaviour. The American anthropologist Marvin Harris (1927-2001) put the 'nurture' argument most succinctly when he said, "humans cannot eat, breathe, defecate, mate, reproduce, sit, move about, sleep or lie down without following or expressing some aspect of their society's culture." 1 [sic] To understand why Kathleen Gough described anthropology as 'a child of Western imperialism', one must first understand the growth and development of anthropology as a recognized science over the last 150 or so years. As empires expanded and countries were colonized by Western civilizations, changes in the cultures of the countries being colonized were being brought about. As the empires grew, so did the reach of the anthropologist.

Undeniably, the rapid spread of imperialism facilitated anthropological fieldwork across the globe. Of course, pre-colonization, countries had already developed their own cultures, customs and way of life, however, post-colonization, a new way of life was forced upon these countries under a framework of imperialism. Gough pointed out that any anthropological study of colonized cultures carried out within this framework actually overlooked the impact and effects that imperialism had brought with it. Consequently, she surmised that all the findings of any such studies were only the result of learned behaviour that was adapted to the imperialism being imposed by the dominant country. Gough recognized this context, and it is for these reasons that she described anthropology as ‘ a child of western imperialism. ’