

Second Edition



ANTHROPOLOGY **IN THEORY**

ISSUES IN EPISTEMOLOGY

Edited by Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders

WILEY Blackwell

Anthropology in Theory

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Notes on the Editors

Henrietta L. Moore FBA is the William Wyse Chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Her work on gender has developed a distinctive approach to the analysis of the interrelations of material and symbolic gender systems, embodiment and performance, and identity and sexuality. She has worked extensively in Africa, particularly on livelihood strategies, social transformation, and symbolic systems. Recent research has focused on virtual worlds, new technologies, and the relationship between self-imagining and globalization. Her most recent monograph, *Still Life: Hopes, Desires and Satisfactions* (Polity, 2011), argues for a reconsideration of globalization based on ordinary people's capacities for self-making and social transformation.

Todd Sanders is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto, and has worked in Africa for two decades. His projects have had varied foci and share a common theoretical concern with social and scientific knowledge practices. His books include *Those Who Play with Fire: Gender, Fertility and Transformation in East and Southern Africa* (with Henrietta L. Moore and Bwire Kaare; Athlone/Berg, 1999), *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (with Henrietta L. Moore; Routledge, 2001), *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order* (with Harry West; Duke University Press, 2003), and *Beyond Bodies: Rainmaking and Sense Making in Tanzania* (University of Toronto Press, 2008).

General Introduction

Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders

Theory as Practice

This collection attests to the strength and diversity of anthropological theorizing in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. We use the term “theorizing” rather than the more usual noun form “theory” because the pieces collected here are intended to reflect the practice of engaging with theory, particular ways of thinking, analyzing, and reflecting that have emerged in the context of writings over this period. Anthropology as a discipline has a number of subdivisions or “traditions.” These may be broadly cast as national – as in British, American, Japanese, Brazilian anthropology – and regional – as in the particular theoretical concerns of specific regions, such as “persons,” “cross-cousin marriage,” “gift exchange,” and so on. The boundaries between these different “traditions” are far from fixed, and indeed are being constantly transcended. The writings collected here draw on a variety of perspectives. Our aim is not to provide a representative sample of any – and certainly not all – traditions, but to make available a flavor of the intellectual conversations and debates on specific epistemological issues that formed the practice of theorizing in twentieth- and early twenty-first-century anthropology.

No one collection could ever hope to be representative of anthropological theories per se. The question “What is anthropological theory?” is inextricably tied to the question “What is anthropology?” (Moore 1999: 2; Moore and Sanders, this volume). Anthropology has been variously defined as the study of “other cultures,” “cultural difference,” “social systems,” “world views,” “ways of life,” and “forms of knowledge.” Sometimes these abstractions are given more concrete referents, such as political systems, livelihoods, kinship systems, family structures, and religious beliefs. The only difficulty is that neither the more abstract conceptual categories nor the empirical entities are the exclusive domain of anthropology, which immediately raises the issue of how we would delineate specifically anthropological theories. This is obvious in the practice of anthropology, since most anthropology courses begin by teaching students about Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, whose writings have been formative for the discipline. Contemporary anthropological theorizing also engages in extensive theoretical borrowing, and recent examples would include the work of Bourdieu, Foucault, Gramsci, Bakhtin, Agamben, and many others. We make no attempt in this collection – it would in any case be impossible – to provide examples of all the theories from the humanities, social sciences, and sciences that have influenced anthropological theorizing. Rather, we have integrated extracts from writers outside anthropology where their thinking contributes to particular debates or discussion points within a specific set of epistemological difficulties under discussion within the volume. For example, in section 2 on *structure and system*, we have included an extract from Durkheim (5), not only because his writings had a profound

influence, albeit in different ways, on the work of Radcliffe-Brown (6) and Lévi-Strauss (8), but also because it discusses the relationship between the individual and society, which is one of the concerns of section 1. The extract from Durkheim thus provides both a context for readers engaging with the work of Radcliffe-Brown and Lévi-Strauss and an indirect commentary on the vexed question of what distinguishes social structures from social relations. Our intention throughout has been to portray anthropological theorizing as a set of dialogues – dialogues that are not only internal to the discipline, but also engage with writings outside the discipline from which anthropology has often sought inspiration. Thus we have included extracts that not only reflect a writer’s theoretical position – or at least one of her or his positions – but can also be maintained in a productive relation with positions taken by other writers elsewhere in the volume. Consequently, individual extracts should not be taken as necessarily representative of an individual’s entire oeuvre.

In designing a collection of this kind, it is evident that a plethora of organizational principles proffer themselves, all with strengths and weaknesses. It might have been feasible – if somewhat constraining – to have divided anthropological theorizing into anthropological theories of “kinship,” “politics,” “economics,” and so on. Equally, it might have been appropriate to divide disciplinary endeavor into “schools of thought,” such as functionalism, structural-functionalism, and structuralism. Another possible set of categorizations might have been suggested by reference to specialist sub-fields, such as the anthropology of cognition, art, nationalism, psychology, development, gender, the body, medical anthropology, and so on. All these sub-fields borrow extensively from other disciplines and many of them require specialist theoretical knowledge. Every one of these ways of organizing the collection was considered. They were ultimately abandoned not just because as categorizations and principles of organization they can be readily contested, but because we wanted to emphasize what might be distinctive about anthropological theorizing, that is, the *practice* of it.

How This Book is Organized

Anthropology is not anthropology because it studies kinship or cognition or politics or art, or because it has had practitioners who are structuralists or post-structuralists. What is distinctive about anthropology is the way it has created and constructed itself, the particular history of the formation of ideas that have given rise to a distinctive discipline and a set of associated practices. It is this process of theorizing that this volume seeks to capture. Today’s conversations are clearly different from those of the past, and while it is difficult to understand contemporary concerns without some knowledge of the origins of the debates, the volume is not organized on a purely historical basis. The aim has been to show the recursive and enduring nature of key questions, principally the lasting search for a more complete understanding of the anthropological object of inquiry; in other words, the extent to which anthropological theorizing has always been driven by the question “What is anthropology?” The volume thus aims to demonstrate both the variations and the continuities in the key questions anthropologists have asked: “what is the relationship between the individual and society”; “what is the difference between society and culture”; “what makes us distinctively human”; “how are we to comprehend cultural difference in the context of a universal humanity”; “what is the relationship between models and reality”; “what is the relationship between the models of the observer and those of the observed”?

The collection as a whole provides an introduction to these questions for readers inside and outside anthropology. It also builds up a dialogue about specific sets of assumptions on which theorizing in anthropology is based, the methods appropriate to address certain questions, and the theoretical frameworks through which they are received. So, for example, in section 2, *structure and system*, we have included extracts from different writers discussing the term “structure” and what it encompasses and entails. A concept such as “structure” not only defines the kinds of questions that can be asked of data, but also determines the methods used to collect data. The aim of each section is to provide a kind of minor “genealogy of knowledge” where the extracts explore through dialogue with each other not only what certain concepts and the pre-theoretical assumptions on which they are based reveal, but

also what they remain silent on, the questions that do not get asked. The overall structure of the book is, as we have said, not historically oriented, but is, rather, based on a series of counterpoints or questions, so that issues on which certain sections are silent get picked up later in subsequent sections. The contributions can, of course, be read in any order, but the volume's layout is intended to provide a pathway through a series of interlinked debates for readers less familiar with anthropology. We provide an overview of the theoretical development of anthropology in the twentieth and early twenty-first century and its epistemological concerns in the next chapter (Moore and Sanders, this volume).

In *part I*, the debates are animated by the question of the relationship between society and culture, and indeed the issue which divided British and American anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century: whether it was culture or society that formed the object of anthropological inquiry. Different writers in the sections in *part I* discuss the definition of these terms and how they relate to the individuals who comprise them. One major difficulty here is the fact of cultural difference and how it relates to our common humanity, to the environment in which we live, and to our individual natures. What is crucial is the way that cultural determinism and cultural relativism interact in the thinking of individual authors. While one could characterize the basic trend through the twentieth century as a move from strong forms of cultural determinism (humans are the products of their culture/society and its environment) to a view that emphasizes individual agency in the context of intersubjective relations with others (humans are biologically cultural beings who develop within a cultural world) (see Moore and Sanders, this volume), this would be to ignore the recursive nature of epistemological postulates in anthropological thinking. The extracts in this part demonstrate the differences between writers of similar historical periods, and the continuities and discontinuities between contemporary writers and those at the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly with regard to the mechanisms that link forms of abstraction – concepts such as “structure,” for instance – to forms of explanation. A perennial complication in anthropology is that since abstractions are created by the analyst, and they provide the building blocks for anthropological models, there is considerable debate about how such abstractions relate to the empirical data from which they are abstracted, and beyond that, how anthropological models qua models relate to those of informants (see Moore and Sanders, this volume).

Part II takes up these questions in a different guise and focuses on language, meanings, and interpretations, particularly with regard to the relationship of cultural meanings to actors' models. The pre-theoretical assumptions under interrogation in this part are those based on the idea that language is central to social life, that it is what defines us as human, and thus we must analyze social life as the creation and negotiation of meaning within which actors interpret their experience and order their actions. A focus on meaning inevitably raises queries about the degree to which individuals within a culture share meanings, how knowledge may be differentially distributed as a result of power, and how meanings and values get transferred from one generation or group to another. This connects work in this area to older debates about the relationship between culture and thought, not only with regard to the beliefs and thoughts of individuals, but also in relation to the pre-theoretical assumption that language is necessary for thought. Work on bodies, praxis, and phenomenology emphasizes that there are forms of knowledge that are non-linguistic, that the human body, for example, knows the world through its engagement with the world and with others in that world. However, if practical knowledge of the world is the result of engagement with that world, then what scope is there for individual creativity or for social change; how can we negotiate the apparent impasse between objective structures and subjective experience? Thus, *part II* takes up once again, albeit from a very different angle, the question of how to transcend the division between the individual and culture, what might be intended or encompassed by the term “structures” (as in linguistic structures/structures of meaning), and how the models of both observer and observed relate to knowledge and to power (see Moore and Sanders, this volume).

Part III addresses issues of scale and comparison, but more than this, it provides a sustained reflection on a series of models for knowing the world. These models are all derived in one way or another from western philosophical traditions, and the question is the degree to which they are appropriate for knowing the worlds of other people, in other times and places. Underlying this question is a broader

concern about whether it is possible to know the world. Is anthropology an objective science or a subjective form of interpretation? What kind of instrument of knowledge is the anthropologist? Anthropology has developed a very clear critique of the relations between power and knowledge that have constituted the domain of anthropology itself and its associated practices. This debate acknowledges that knowledge is always a matter of ethics. Anthropology, like all disciplines, creates a world full of specific kinds of entities – societies, cultures – which is inhabited by particular kinds of agents – persons, individuals, etc. Much critical anthropology has served to work against the power relations that constitute the anthropological field of knowledge, and has criticized the comparative models of anthropology for occluding the perspectives, voices, and lived realities of the people being studied. This raises once again – but in the context of unequal power relations – how adequately anthropological models represent the lived reality of people’s lives. However, debates in this area go further than earlier debates because they question the nature of the theoretical itself, including the very project of western knowledge as it underpins anthropology (see Moore 1999; Moore and Sanders, this volume). Hence, the discussion focuses on whether and under what circumstances comparison is possible, appropriate, and powerful. Can we do without models? Can we have objective knowledge of other people’s worlds? What do we relinquish – and at what cost to ourselves and others – if we give up on the notion of anthropology as science?

Part IV discusses the shifts in the conditions of production of anthropological research and therefore of anthropological knowledge. Cultures – however they might have been represented in the past – have never been fixed, bounded, or unitary. In the context of globalization, migration, and transnational flows, anthropology has been forced to rethink not only the major concepts of anthropology – society, culture, kinship, and others – but also the very notion of cultural difference itself. This is in part because anthropology has “come home”; “other cultures” are no longer in “other places,” and anthropology is much less able to distance itself from the communities it studies. The nature of the academy has also changed profoundly, and it is not just the communities and cultures studied by anthropologists that are transnational and transcultural, but anthropologists themselves. This has had a major impact on both knowledge construction and critical politics within the discipline. Issues of perspective, power, positionality, and hybridity have been largely forced onto the agenda of the discipline by those scholars who most forcefully live hybridity and multiple positionality. Anthropology, like the world itself, is becoming simultaneously globalized and localized. One powerful irony here is that at the very moment anthropology appeared to want to abandon the organizing trope of culture, the rest of the world started to adopt it. International agencies, local civil society groups, management consultants, consumer researchers, and a host of other groups and institutions embraced it as the lens through which to understand difference in a globalized world. It has become a mobilizing concept for many indigenous and civil society groups around the world, and in some cases the explanation for power differentials, exclusions, and even hatreds and acts of violence. The result is that not only have the contexts for anthropological research shifted, but so has the nature of the relationship between observer and observed. Anthropology and anthropologists no longer command the high ground of representation – if indeed they ever did – and have had to recognize that their view on cultural difference is only one among many. New ways of imaging the anthropological object of inquiry have emerged: new images, metaphors, and concepts. This gives rise to new practices, new ways of doing field research, of combining advocacy and research, of imagining the very nature of the social itself (see Moore 1996, 1999; and Moore and Sanders, this volume).

Locating Anthropology

It has often been said that there is no single anthropology, but only a series of anthropologies. The perspective developed in this collection would see that statement as a question of scale, as a matter of position, of what one chooses to foreground, on the one hand, and consign to the background, on the other. The variety, diversity, and richness of contemporary anthropological theorizing are indisputable,

as is the existence of the vigorous debates which are its origin. However, when we speak of anthropology we should not lose sight of the fact that it is an intellectual endeavor, a discipline and a profession. In other words, it is not only about ways of thinking, but also about ways of doing in the context of specific institutions and power relations. All ideas are generated and communicated within particular historical, material, social, and political relations and processes. Styles of reasoning, as Hacking argues, create the possibility of truth and falsehood precisely because they are historically situated (Hacking 1982: 56–7). This is not to claim that truth is not the object of our inquiries or that the refinements and careful calibrations of thought, reasoning, and method that make anthropology a social science are unimportant. It is, rather, to draw attention to the circumstances, contexts, and practices within which the effects of truth are produced.

Contemporary anthropology as a discipline and as a set of practices is engaged in multiple ways with the world it reflects upon. This engagement is complex, frequently vexed, but always productive. Theorizing is not only about the nature, limits, and sources of knowledge. It is also about the process of self-reflection that constitutes the practice of theorizing on the grounds and contexts of knowledge production in a way that acknowledges their material and historical constraints and ambitions. This leads to contestation about the very nature of theory and the theoretical. In contemporary anthropology, this has been evident not only in the debate about objects, the question of what constitutes the objects of anthropological inquiry, but also in the parallel discussion about subjects and subject positions – that is to say, who speaks for other cultures, but more than that, who speaks for anthropology itself. These subject positions are geographically and institutionally framed, but they are also epistemological. It seems indisputable that, being a product of western culture and philosophy, anthropology has been constituted historically as much by its subject positions as by its objects of inquiry, as much by who speaks in its name and in what voice as by the question “What is anthropology?” The gaze of the anthropological observer has never been an unmarked one, but the question for the future is whether that gaze can be effectively unmoored not only from the traditions that gave rise to it, but also from the broader imaginary of the west and its relations to others.

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Anthropology and Epistemology

Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders

There are two kinds of question that guide social science inquiry: “What can I know about the world?” and “How can I know the world?” The first is properly the domain of metaphysics – philosophical inquiry into the nature of reality, existence, and being – while the second is the terrain of method. In general terms, however, they are both the stuff of what we term theory in anthropology because they cannot be easily or profitably separated. Anthropological difficulties with knowing the world rest on what we can know about other people, and this is a problem that has several dimensions.

Sameness and Difference

The first issue is whether and to what degree human beings share characteristics and capacities. In anthropology, these reflections on the nature of being have at different times been profoundly influenced by work in biology, psychology, and cognition. At the root of these reflections lies an important question: “Do all humans think in the same way?” This question underlies and forms the presuppositions for two others: “Is it possible to understand other worlds, how other people think?” and if the answer to this is affirmative, then “What is the relationship between culture and thought?” To a very significant extent the answer to these questions depends on the characteristics we assume human beings and indeed cultures to have. One of the factors that has driven change in anthropological theorizing has been variation in our pre-theoretical assumptions about the nature of being human and of being a culture-bearing human.

Twentieth-century anthropology explicitly set itself against nineteenth-century evolutionism, against the idea that all cultures were ranged along a line towards Progress and Civilization set by western values and understandings (Herskovits 1972; Sapir 1985 [1949]). Franz Boas and his students explicitly espoused the notion that cultures had to be understood in their own terms and as wholes (Boas, 1). Their presupposition was that human beings shared a common human condition, but one which expressed itself in diverse forms: underlying cultural difference was an essential human sameness. Boas was interested in using the science of culture to combat racism, but he was also passionately committed to ethnographic particularism, to the idea that cultures could not be understood according to universal standards and values (Boas, 1). In short, Boas was a cultural relativist and he was categorically opposed

to the analysis of cultural elements outside of their historical and cultural context (Boas 1982 [1940]). Each culture had to be treated as a unique way of life. Each culture had its own “genius” and there was no way that they could be ranked or valued against or in comparison with each other (Bateson, 3; Sapir 1924; Stocking 1968, 1974).¹ The result was that any judgement relating to behavior and behavior patterns must be made relative to the standards of the cultures producing them (Sapir 1985 [1949]). Hence, while the Kwakiutl, for example, may exhibit a constellation of characteristics which appear abnormal by western standards, this judgement is invalid since the behavior is normal by Kwakiutl standards (Benedict, 4).

The notion of “genius” was connected in other writings in the early twentieth century to the concept of *zeitgeist*, or, as it is sometimes glossed, “ethos” or “configuration”: the view that cultures had or were to be conceptualized as integrated “systems of thought” or “scales of value” (Bateson, 3). Edward Sapir distinguished between what he termed genuine and spurious culture and in so doing expunged the last of Boas’s historicism in favor of the notion of culture as an integrated whole. A genuine culture is one that is both consistent and harmonious; it is not a spiritual hybrid of contradictory patches, made up of a mere accretion of traits (Sapir 1924, 1985 [1949]). However, it was recognized that all thinking and feeling in a culture must be done by individuals, and it followed from this that there must be some way to specify how culture influenced the psychology of individuals, how it affected their thinking. The actual mechanisms through which culture affected individuals were not known, but general propositions were advanced that it “standardized” the potentialities and capacities of the individual, favoring some and suppressing others. The result was a series of behavior patterns characteristic of each society which conditioned the thoughts and emotions of that society’s members (Sapir 1985 [1949]). This process was recognized as a fundamentally circular one, since systems of values and thoughts influence not only individuals, but also cultural institutions, and these institutions in their turn shape individuals (Bateson, 3; Benedict, 4). The circularity of argument here depended on a particular pre-theoretical assumption: the idea that while human actions produced culture, human beings are always culturalized. In short, the human beings who make culture are themselves already the product of culture – hence Durkheim’s view that society is the origin of social facts (Durkheim, 5).

Different scholars gave different emphases to this process, but a widely accepted view involved a hierarchy of levels based on the assumption that culture presupposes society, society is based on individuals, and individuals have both minds and bodies (Kroeber, 2). The result was a four-“level” approach to the study of human beings based on body, psyche, society, and culture. A biological “level” existing before the operation of culture was assumed, but because of the all-powerful nature of cultural construction it was deemed “remote” from the point of view of the emerging discipline of anthropology. Biopsychological structures were given particular cultural form or content, but in the context of an assumption of the “psychic unity” of humankind, the idea was that culture is itself the product of a uniquely human set of psychological characteristics, and that each culture is a variant upon them. Thus the biological and the psychological were seen as setting constraints or limits on culture (Steward, 10; White, 11). Culture became understood as humanity’s unique form of adaptation, a way to meet needs that were simultaneously social and biological (Kroeber, 2; Malinowski, 9).

Among anthropologists in the first half of the twentieth century, there was much debate about the exact emphasis to be given to the relationship between culture and the individual, the social and the psychological. Sapir, for example, was critical of Benedict’s treatment of cultures as collective personalities (Benedict, 4). He remained committed to the idea that individuals could exercise independent creative autonomy and thus complete cultural determinism was an impossibility (Bateson, 3; Irvine 1994). These attempts to unravel what linked the development of individuals to the distinctive nature of the culture in which they lived gave rise to what became known as the “culture and personality school” in American anthropology. Nonetheless, while discussion focused on individuals and their psychology, the specific focus on cultures as integrated wholes tended to downplay differences between individuals within the same culture as a consequence of emphasizing the individual distinctiveness of cultures. Theorists were not always consistent in their positions, and circularity of thought was common in the strenuous effort to unravel complex issues. The overall position, however, was a strong

form of cultural determinism allied to cultural relativism, but one which was premised on a certain degree of cultural universality. The aim, then, was to understand what specific cultures in their particularity are able to tell us about themselves, but also about universal human capacities.

The question of how values shape lives in the context of the biological and psychic unity of humankind invites a particular rhetorical form. If all humans share certain biological and psychological characteristics, then we should be able to specify what they are. One way to attempt this is to ask what differentiates humans from animals. The standard reply, at least in anthropology, has historically been that it is culture that makes human beings distinctively human, that “the creation of meaning is the distinguishing quality of men” (Sahlins 1976: 102). Humans are ranked over animals by virtue of their culture, and, by extension, their minds (including various arguments about the capacity for language and symbolism that are contentiously debated). Indeed, this ranking is subsumed within the more general hierarchy of mind over body, individual over organism (Ingold 1991). The result is a view of the relation of culture to individuals that depends upon the imposition of cultural meanings on an undifferentiated and underlying biological organism (Malinowski, 9; Ingold 1991; Toren 1999). Culture, in this view, is learnt as a consequence of socialization. Meaning is “dumped into the minds of children” (see Robertson 1996). The idea of humans as clever learners accounts both for the view of cultural diversity as characteristically human, and for the notion of humans as “plastic,” infinitely adaptive and innovative (Kroeber, 2; Gibson 2002).

The famous “neural plasticity” of humans which predisposes them to cultural creativity and diversity also shapes and is shaped by a particular notion of culture. There has been a long debate in anthropology about whether culture should be understood as socially patterned behaviors and/or as symbolic systems, values, and meanings. Socially patterned behaviors are common both in non-human primates and in non-primate mammals and depend upon the existence of certain sensorimotor and learning capacities (Gibson 2002). They are certainly not restricted to humans, and thus we cannot simply say that humans are programmed for culture in a way that non-humans are not and/or that culture depends on “neural plasticity” which is also common in non-human mammals. While there are divergent opinions as to whether non-human primates have the capacity for language and symbolism, what is clear is that culture understood as symbolic systems, values, and meanings is not widespread in non-human primates (Gibson 2002). Thus the question of whether or not humanity is premised on culture rather depends on the definition of culture. More crucially, our mental capacities, and those of other mammals, are developed in the context of social interaction and intense sociality. We actually know very little about the evolution of sociality in our own species – it must have taken place long before the evidence for culture in the archaeological record – but what is clear is that sociality and social relations can exist before language and collective representations as they do in non-primate mammals and non-human primates. It logically follows that language and related communicative and symbolic capacities must have evolved in a context of intense sociality, and that sociality is the likely bridge between the non-human primate and human worlds. Thus culture, understood both as social behavior and as symbolic systems involving communication and meanings, is a consequence of our humanity – our sociality – rather than a precondition for it (Ingold 1991; Toren 1999; Gibson 2002).

What this means is that humans are not, strictly speaking, socially constructed in the sense of culture acting upon a pre-given biological entity. But the problem of how culture relates to individuals still needs to be addressed. How does our understanding of our group history, of how we became human, relate to our understanding of individuals, of how we all individually become culture-bearing human beings? Anthropology has traditionally dealt with this by defining human beings as having “capacities.” These capacities have not always been very well defined, and have sometimes depended more on linguistic analogy than on empirical facts. Referring to culture as something “hardwired into the brain” is one example (Robertson 1996). The principal difficulty, however, with imagining culture as something “added” to a biological entity and/or imaging that entity as having pre-given modular (often neural) properties is that biology and culture are divorced from their mutual history (Robertson 1996; Toren 1999). For this reason a number of anthropologists are now arguing for a view of the relation between the individual and culture which sees them as ontogenetically related.² From this perspective,

humans are not biological entities with the capacity to acquire culture, but biologically cultural beings who develop as individuals through intersubjective relations with cultural others (Whitehead, 25; Robertson 1996; Toren 1999). This is a view that not only conceptualizes how the individual human mind develops as a product of ontogenetic growth in a specific cultural context, and signals how culture is reproduced across generations as a consequence of the reproduction of human individuals. It also provides an account of how individual agency – a life lived – is fulfilled within the context of a shared cultural and symbolic world.

Recent work in cognition and psychology has returned to the question of what humans share and what makes them distinctively human. Current thinking emphasizes that these are questions that cannot be answered by anthropology alone, but require interdisciplinary collaboration (Luhmann, 24; Whitehead, 25). However, psychology, anthropology, and neuroscience construct their objects of inquiry in different ways and seek very different kinds of explanation of the same phenomena (Stafford, 23). Part of the predicament here concerns scale and another concerns method. Anthropology's restless search for context – contexts in which behaviors, values, beliefs, etc., find meaning – drives data collection, analysis and interpretation towards the ideal of wholistic completeness. This is the "we must know everything before we can make sense of it" approach. Psychologists and neuroscientists, by contrast, tend to focus down, concentrating on specific functions and competences. Experimentation and falsifiability are key to the latter approaches, and impossible to apply to the former (Stafford, 23; Whitehead, 25). The key questions here are how do humans think and what drives the way they think? Is it culture or is it the biological structures of the brain? The relationship of culture to the individual mind – and the individual brain – is a contentious one, but psychologists, anthropologists, and neuroscientists alike believe that there are commonalities, universals, in the way humans think, and that these are likely connected to the manner in which we have evolved as biologically social and cultural beings (Whitehouse, 22; Whitehead, 25).

One of the entailments of the term "culture" is the idea that humans share inner lives. Culture is not something external to us, but is part of our phylogenetic and ontogenetic development (Whitehead, 25). It is part of us and we share it with others. How to proceed here is complicated by a number of factors. We know, for example, that the definition, expression, and experience of emotions are culturally variable, and in this sense they must be common to a group of people. However, we also know that different members of that group have different feelings, experiences, and dispositions, both over their lives and in any specific moment (Luhmann, 24). But, if culture shapes our inner worlds, how could this be possible? The answer to this conundrum is very often historical, in the sense that analysis tries to sort out those factors that are cultural or social from those that are biological. For example, the physiological changes and facial expressions associated with anger appear universal, but the understandings, appropriate manifestations, and cultural discourses concerning anger in any particular historical circumstance are specific. Individual variation within any cultural group or historical epoch comes down to the interaction in the context of the circumstances of a life lived between physiological responses and feelings, and culturally specific constructions and dispositions. This may also explain certain other conundrums, such as why East Asians are better at numbers than Europeans and Americans. Counting systems and number words specific to East Asia have a demonstrable impact on numerical cognition – fewer counting errors, grasp of basic concepts at an earlier age, ability to do mental arithmetic – but so too do schooling and parental pressure (Stafford, 23). Culture is not a simple determinant, but rather a dynamic matrix within which individual lives are lived in interaction with others, institutions, and distributions of resource.

The challenge lies with language and representation. Much recent work in the cognitive sciences has focused on how complex, explicit representations, such as religion, are influenced by implicit and unconscious cognitive processes. These processes are sometimes described as "modules" or "domain-specific" systems, and they are assumed to have evolved in response to evolutionary pressures (Barrett and Kurzban 2006). However, research in this domain does not set out to explain Christianity or religious systems in their totality, but rather focuses on specific aspects of religious behavior amenable to experimentation. The task is to try to determine what effect these unconscious processes have on

religious thought and behavior, and its transmission through time. For example, could there be a single underlying cognitive mechanism that produces features of ritualized behavior common to societies around the world? The available evidence suggests that such underlying cognitive processes may account for repeated features of aspects of ritualized behavior, but this is not, of course, the same thing as providing an explanation of a specific ritual or of ritual taken as a feature of human societies in the larger sense (Whitehouse, 22).

Forms of Abstraction and Forms of Explanation

In anthropology, as in all forms of academic inquiry, theories frame questions, and such theories may be both implicit and explicit. They are also embedded in analytic terms, and the degree to which they are so embedded will depend on how deeply those terms have become implanted in everyday usage within the academic discipline, and/or in ordinary life in different parts of the globe (Moore, 36). Two of the most salient terms in this regard are “society” and “culture.” Both are widely used inside and outside the academy, and their meanings are assumed to be so generally understood that there is little apparent controversy about their referents. However, terms like these have evident histories (Kroeber, 2), and the frustrating fact from the point of view of social science is that the more generally understood such terms appear to be, the less theoretical purchase they appear to have. Recent discussions in anthropology have suggested that we should abandon the concept of culture altogether, that it has become meaningless as a category of analysis because it is not clear what it refers to (Brightman 1995; Lambek and Boddy 1997). At first glance, this seems curious because from a commonsense perspective it seems clear that cultures self-evidently exist, that there are other cultures, and that anthropology studies them.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the term “culture” was increasingly identified as the object of study in anthropology (see Kuper 1999), but this was not a straightforward process. Nor was it uncontested. Whereas most American anthropologists adhered to the view that the object of study was culture, many of their British colleagues insisted that it was social relations and, later, social structures. One of the major points of disagreement derived from the idea that while social relations based on behavior could be observed and recorded, culture could not because it did not refer to any concrete reality. It was simply an analytical abstraction (Radcliffe-Brown, 6; Holy and Stuchlik, 14). The underlying point of contention here was the difference between behavior that could be observed and values and meanings that could not. Many writers were quick to point out that a simple division or distinction between behavior and ideas was untenable.³ For instance, one might take social relationships as the object of study. But since this involves looking at behavior between individuals, one has to consider not only what they do, but also who they are. While the first might be directly observable, the second would not, since it would depend on ideas, expectations, and meanings existing in actors’ minds about the kind of people these individuals are meant to be and how they should relate to each other (mothers to sons, for example, or chiefs to commoners). Social relations make no sense outside the intentions, ideas, and expectations within which they make sense to historically situated actors (Beattie, 13). It was thus recognized that social relations and culture were mutually determining, although the one could not be reduced to the other. Much depended here on what might be meant by the term “abstraction.” Cultural values and beliefs, since they are held to influence social behavior and social relations to varying degrees depending on the theoretical position of the analyst (compare articles 2–4, 9, and 6–8), cannot logically be seen as less material, concrete, or real than social relations, the way people interact with each other. Hence, culture is not more abstract than behavior if by abstraction it is implied that it is more ideal, less material. However, if by “abstraction” we mean the construction of a model or concept or notion that allows us to order, compare, and analyze data, then both culture and social relations are forms of abstraction.

Radcliffe-Brown argued that human beings are connected by a complex web of social relations which he termed “social structure.” Societies can be identified as being characterized by certain social

structures. Just as anatomy and physiology deal with the structures of organisms, anthropology deals with the structures of society. The social structure of a society would be directly observable as the actually existing relations between people at a given point in time (Radcliffe-Brown, 6). Arguing against this position, Leach pointed out that social structures are things created by the analyst from what she or he observes. They are abstract models that are the product of a particular way of looking at and characterizing social data (Leach, 7). Most often, the purpose of these abstract models is to allow comparison between societies or social institutions; and thus societies or cultures or social institutions are classified into types (Holy and Stuchlik, 14). However, as Beattie points out, anthropologists do not actually study whole societies – nor can they, by extension, study whole cultures or even whole social systems or structures. Instead, they study certain things which they observe and which they abstract or draw out of the data according to some particular interest (Beattie, 13; Thornton, 37). The most evident example of this in anthropology is the study of kinship systems. Leach's criticism was really directed at how anthropological analyses create "entities" by lifting them out of the space and time of real social interaction. When the anthropologist uses a term like "society" or "social system" or "social structure," she or he is effectively describing a model of social reality, a way of understanding how things fit together and work together (Strathern, 39). While this model necessarily forms a coherent whole, social reality itself is never coherent because of its countless inconsistencies and the indeterminate nature of life lived (Leach, 7; Thornton, 37).

As Leach correctly identified, this leaves the rather interesting problem of what, exactly, the relationship is between the anthropologist's model and the empirical reality she or he observes. This question cannot be answered in a single straightforward fashion because it turns out that the relationship of model to data very much depends on what kind of question the analyst is seeking to answer in the first place. Different kinds of questions require different kinds of data, and different kinds of data require different forms of explanation. This is why theory and method remain absolutely intertwined in the social sciences, as in all fields of academic inquiry. This is particularly evident in anthropology in the debates that went on in the first half of the twentieth century about the relative merits of functionalism, structural-functionalism, and structuralism. These theories all had methodological consequences and sought to provide very different forms of explanation.

The functionalism espoused by Malinowski (9) and to a significant extent by American cultural materialists (Steward, 10; White, 11; Vayda and Rappaport, 12) started with the idea of the human being in a natural environment, influenced by it and in turn transforming it in co-operation with others. Culture in this view is seen as an instrumental reality which allows humans to meet their biological and cultural needs, and to transform their environment. Specific cultural traits are thus explained when their function or purpose within the overall system of humans and their environment has been determined. This form of explanation was fundamentally different from that of nineteenth-century evolutionists, for whom explanation was a matter of demonstrating progress and position on a historical chain, and from the sociology of Durkheim, which decried the notion of "function" as valid explanation and sought to show how social facts beget social facts (Durkheim, 5). The notion of function employed in this work depends in large part on a definition of "needs," not just the biological needs of humans, their need for food, and shelter, and so on, but their socially or culturally defined needs, those needs that arise out of the achievements, intentions, and theories of previous generations. Theorists in this framework inevitably hierarchized the different types of needs, and saw "basic" needs as more determining than "social needs," especially in small-scale societies. Discussions of cultural change were therefore focused on how societies progressively met and developed their needs over time, encouraging a view of cultural systems as integrated organic wholes with functionally related component elements (Malinowski, 9; Steward, 10; White, 11; Vayda and Rappaport, 12).

The notion of "function" was crucially dependent on the conceptualization of humans in their environment as a system with interrelated parts. The function of any cultural trait or element was thus demonstrated either when it could be shown that elements in the system were interconnected and affected each other and/or when the existence of certain elements could be demonstrated by reference to their ends or purposes (Beattie, 13). The result was a particular kind of method of data collection

and recording which involved amassing huge amounts of empirical data to demonstrate that everything was connected to everything else. Consequently, without the idea of the system, “function” as an explanatory concept could not have any analytical purchase. The analogy which linked functionalism to the structural-functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown and the post-1940s school of British anthropology was that of the living organism. The idea was that society and its human members could be seen as a social system which is – like a living organism – constantly being renewed. The notion of function here was restricted to the specific contribution that a particular trait, element, or behavior makes to the existence and continuity of the social system and the social structures from which it is derived. Radcliffe-Brown was heavily influenced in his thinking by the sociology of Durkheim and the idea that societies are orderly and have structures that can be formally analyzed (Radcliffe-Brown, 6).

The notion of “structure” was later developed in the works of Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Firth, and Schapera.⁴ They believed that social structures were abstractions from social behavior (see above) and that the main purpose of their identification was comparison, classification, and generalization between societies. These scholars did not believe – as they claimed Malinowski had done – in the idea that analytical concepts were inherent in the observed data. Social structures had to be drawn out of observations; organizing principles had to be identified, and comparative frameworks established. Perhaps the most salient of these in British social anthropology was the notion of a “lineage society” (Beattie, 13; Holy and Stuchlik, 14). In this form of analysis, data from observations, informants’ reports, recollections, and theories were all mined to illustrate the structures devised by the anthropologist. Data were very selectively collected and deployed. In this work, much hinged on what exactly the term “structure” meant and how it related both to the anthropologist’s data and to social reality (see above). Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Fortes (1945) both took the view that lineage systems were the basis of informants’ models as well as those of the anthropologist. This might have been less problematic if it could be shown that these local models governed behavior, that social relations followed the principles of social structure. Unfortunately this was far from obvious (Holy and Stuchlik, 14). There was thus considerable dispute both about how structures related to the empirical data from which they were abstracted, and about how structures qua anthropological models related to informants’ models. This problem was further compounded by a tendency to treat structures as if they were both institutional regularities and underlying principles, both the pattern of relationships between persons and the relations between the logical principles of cultural systems.

As a type of explanation, structural-functionalism focused more on comparisons between societies rather than on the empirical description of a total system that was the object of inquiry in functionalism. Although structures were abstracted from social relations and behavioral data, there was little room analytically for the individual or for any discussion of how culture or society affected individual behavior. The analysis was more firmly settled at the level of the group. It is true that structural-functionalists were interested in beliefs and values, but this was primarily in terms of how they functioned as social systems (the elements of which were systematically interrelated) and the degree to which they could be linked to social relations. It is the idea of the logic behind the system, the underlying structures from which systems are generated, and the rules of transformation which govern how elements will change in relation to each other that links structural-functionalism to structuralism proper in anthropology. Thus, Lévi-Strauss’s notion of structure had both continuities and discontinuities with the older concept, and these are in large part due to the influence of Durkheim and Boas on his work (Lévi-Strauss, 8).

If the relationship between norms and actions, between social structures and social relations, had been at the heart of structural-functionalism, the idea of structural analysis that Lévi-Strauss introduced was concerned with modes of thought, classification, and symbolic logic. It drew on particular aspects of Durkheim’s work, especially on the idea that social facts determine individuals’ behaviors and the collective consciousness, and on the axiomatic principle that social facts must be treated as systems where the meaning and purpose of individual elements can only be understood with reference to the total set of relevant social facts. Durkheim used his interest in classification to put forward the view that societies should be studied as moral systems, as systems of thought. Lévi-Strauss also drew

on the Boasian school of cultural anthropology and on the belief that cultures form patterned, integrated wholes. These ideas found an easy congruence with his interest in structural linguistics (Lévi-Strauss, 8, 19). Structuralism as it was developed in anthropology was concerned not with the actions of individuals or groups, but with the underlying logic of social and symbolic systems. What it took from structural linguistics was the distinction between speech (*parole*), the medium of day-to-day communication, and language (*langue*), the system of objective elements or underlying structures from which speech is produced (Bourdieu, 15). Structuralism used this distinction to claim that social and symbolic systems should be analyzed with regard to their underlying principles or structures, that they should be treated as systems in which the elements only come to have meaning with reference to their relation with other terms, and that analysis should strive towards the elucidation of general laws (Lévi-Strauss, 8, 19). Thus, in his analysis of kinship systems, Lévi-Strauss showed that the diversity of marriage rules and kinship systems could be explained with reference to a small number of structures or general principles which could then provide the basis for comparative study (Lévi-Strauss, 19). These structures or principles, however, were unconscious; they remained unknown to the people living in those systems (Lévi-Strauss, 8).

Lévi-Strauss was interested in classification, which is to say, in the way humans impose order on their social and environmental worlds. His view was that the categories created were always arbitrary, but that they formed pairs of oppositions grouped together in systems. This was a study of how humans think by creating sets of oppositions with concrete references and then connecting and correlating those oppositions in systems. Radcliffe-Brown had also been interested in classification and how people create patterns, but his assumption was that these patterns and oppositions were present in the environment and that people simply seized upon them (Radcliffe-Brown, 6). Lévi-Strauss took a very different view, seeing classification and opposition as the product of the structures of thought and the mind, as being symbolic systems that operated according to certain formal properties that could be analyzed independently of their elements. Thus, different cultural forms could be compared and analyzed on the basis that they were transformations of the same basic structures. Lévi-Strauss, it might be said, was more interested in *how* people think than in *what* they think. The notion of structure he employed was therefore significantly different from that used by British anthropologists following Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. In order to identify and elucidate the “structures” he had in mind it was necessary to ask quite different sorts of questions, and to collect rather different kinds of data. Leach encapsulated the difference by contrasting Lévi-Strauss with contemporary British anthropologists: “His ultimate concern is to establish facts which are true about ‘the human mind,’ rather than about the organization of any particular society or class of societies. The difference is fundamental” (Leach 1970: 7–8).

One of the major critiques of structuralism is its inability to deal with human agency and social change. This is a logical entailment of privileging *langue* (language as system) over *parole* (speech), since analysis focuses on the interrelations between elements in the language system and their relations with each other rather than on how people use language in day-to-day contexts and what they say. When applied to anthropology more generally, this means that analysis focuses on the logic of symbolic systems, their transformations, and the principles underlying cultural forms rather than on what people do and how they use, transform, and manipulate cultural forms in everyday life (Bourdieu, 15). Bourdieu demonstrates most elegantly how the privileging of structures over agency creates a gap between the analyst, who establishes a theoretical relation to language and its underlying structures, and the informant, who speaks the language and uses it as a lived tool of communication. The result is that anthropologists generate an objectified model of the world as outside observers which is quite different from the world as it is lived, and from the model of the world created by the people who live in it. This is what Bourdieu describes as the privileging of logos over praxis (Bourdieu, 15, 33).

The more general point, however, is that particular concepts and theories not only frame the questions to be asked, but actually construct objects of inquiry. What functionalism, structural-functionalism, and structuralism have in common is a concern with how theory relates to data, with how forms of abstraction relate both to the analyst’s model and to that of the informant, and with how anthropology