Final Anthropology Essay Essay, Research Paper

Anthropology Final Exam

Essay One

This course has provided interesting field studies of cultures that are drastically different than what I would consider “everyday life.” Anthropology examines not only who we are as a people, but also, importantly, who we were as a people. The studies of past cultures is a good place to start to answer questions about societies and cultures today, and to bridge together the gap between the past and present, and maybe even predict where we are headed in the future.

Anthropology spans millions of generations, examining the physical and cultural characteristics of humankind. Often the artifacts recovered from a past civilization can tell us a great deal about how those people lived, their level of technology, their patterns of subsistance, and so on. Anthropology uses methods and tools from multiple scientific disciplines, such as the scientific method which allows the testing of falsifiable hypotheses. This approach seems to be a strong basis for many of the different areas of anthropology, namely archeology, ethnology, and linguistics.

I had thought that male dominance and superiority (“man the hunter” model) was a highly conserved cultural characteristic in past societies, and even in many “less developed” areas of the world today. I was surprised by the case studies of the !Kung San (traditional foraging society, not sedentary), in which females were just as important as males in their culture. !Kung women controlled the food that they gathered, as well as any meat that was obtained through use of an arrow crafted by them. In a food foraging society, controlling the distribution of food is a definite sign of power.

Digs have uncovered many clues about the origin of man, and how we can more accurately trace our lineage back to a common ancestor. I was unaware of the Austrolopithicus species, and thought that Lucy belonged to Homo. It is interesting to examine how the mechanisms of evolution shape the cultures and species over the passage of time, especially natural selection and the law of competitive isolation.

Austrolopithicus began as bipedals with a small brain case and large physical features (strong jaw muscles, large thick-enamaled teeth, great muscle mass) which helped them to survive on the ground for a while while vegetation was lush. As the years past, the climate and surroundings changed into a more savannah-like environment, and Austrolopithicus began to “split” into two different forms of man, one retaining many of the larger, physical characteristics, and another with a larger brain case. Evolution selected for the larger brained species, but why? It seems that brain over brawn was a key to survival in the changing world, and you had to smart in order to survive. This new species, Homo, was probably better able to predict changes in seasons, as well as devise better means of obtaining plants and meat while not dying in the process. The species able to feed themselves and prevent injury/death increase their reproductive success, which is a possible reason why Austrolopithicus became extinct.

John Murphy

Anthropology

Essay Two

Cultures on this planet are infinitely diverse and quite different from each other as well. Many of the customs and rituals that are practiced in the United States are diverse in nature as well, but are similar in more ways to each other than to cultures in other regions of the world. It seems that a great deal of a culture’s core stems from their surrounding environment, and the pressures that this puts on those trying to live there. A culture’s physical and social characteristics are interrelated, and play an important role in the development of a society and the personalities of the people.

Marriage, jobs, and politics are all areas of a culture that are influenced by a person’s environment. In the U.S., monogamy is the “normal” structure of marriage, and is a logic choice considering the type of environment we live in. Independence training is emphasized to prepare people for obtaining the highest standard of living in the U.S. Being better than another is important in this society, and is stressed to most people from a very early age. Living away from one’s parents is not only expected but also often desired by both the child and the parents. Mobility is a huge factor in the work force, and the less one is “tied down” to, the easier it is to make the necessary transitions.

In other societies, forms of marriage other than monogamy make more sense, and make life easier. For example, the !Kung San live together in small groups, in which everyone takes care of all the children, and much of life is not privately shielded from the group. Their openness and sharing of childcare and lifestyles is also portrayed in their food gathering activities. The villagers gather food and then distribute it to not only their own “nuclear” family, but to others as well. It would be too hard to survive on your own in this environment, so the group structure works well.

Inheritance of lands and goods also plays an important role in the structuring of societies and families in other cultures outside of the U.S. Cultures such as the Inuit, Tibetans, and Marquesan Islanders of Polynesia, practice polyandry, the marriage of more than one man to a single woman. This is common for brothers who do not wish to divide up their father’s lands, so they will marry the same woman and both retain the entire estate. Polygyny is a far more common structure of marriage, which also has benefits to societies in which a large percent of the work is devoted to farming and caring of livestock. In the Turkana, and other societies similar to them, the more wives a man has, the more workers he has to care for his land and animals.

It is interesting also to consider the differences in kinship and descent across the world. In the U.S., bilateral descent is common, and kinship is rather unimportant, as are descent lines. In other societies, descent determines how you will live your life, what you will inherit and from whom, who you may marry, and how you will live after marriage. Many of these societies use dependence training as their driving force behind these cultural structures. It is often taught in these cultures that the good of the many outweigh the good of the one, and therefore living in large families, or working for one’s in-laws is accepted. This also helps these societies to maximize the potential work output of its people, and make life easier for everyone.

John Murphy

Anthropology

Essay Three

Before taking this class, I often thought that our advanced society was the standard in which to measure all other societies from, but after reviewing the material in this course, it is impossible to make such a comparison. Many of the people in a culture similar to the U.S. would probably find most of the cultures we have studied to be “slow”, strange, or undesirable. In fact, it seems that many of the societies actually prefer to live the way they do and accept it as normal. “Normal” is a relative term, and it is difficult to establish evidence to label a culture or its characteristics abnormal. What may seem to work here often would be disastrous to other cultures.

Our society stresses individuality and competition, to be the best you can be for yourself first. This works well for the structure of life that has developed in this country. I value my independence and privacy, something that has stemmed from living in this society. Trying to be the best often has rewards, whether prestigious or monetary, and is a good survival technique for a “doggy-dog” society. You have to stand out to get ahead.

Individuals living in a food-foraging or farming society would find life extremely difficult by trying to make it on their own. Here, by sacrificing yourself with the help of others, the work gets done and everyone benefits from it, because no one person could provide everything necessary to survive (over an extended period of time). This society flourishes with people that are willing to live together and help each other out, even at the expense of personal prosperity or privacy.

The behaviors practiced by a culture, especially those concerning the treatment of men and women in a society, are reflective of how a society views its members, both by age and gender. Many societies, such as rural China and Taiwana, view their women as inferior, and the men dominate them. Women are basically powerless and at the will of their husbands. Viewing women as inferior to men often stems from the idea that a man’s work is important and a woman’s work, mainly around the house, is unimportant. This severely hinders a woman’s ability to reach their potential in both the household and society. The !Kung San and the Mbuti hold a woman’s work as a great asset and value it. It is no surprise that these societies respect both men and women as one and the same. This is portrayed by the Mbuti’s tug-of-war games between the men and the women in which neither side dominates the other, and the game ends in a truce with laughter on both sides. This is to teach the children that men and women are both equally important.

In our society, women have come a long way to break out of the unimportant, submissive status that once was viewed as the norm. I believe this to be especially important to the advancing of our society, and to the way of life in this society. A married couple is expected to live on its own, and if both the men and women are significant contributors to the family, it increases that family’s success. It is unfortunate that in some societies women are still viewed as inferior and worthless, and I would have to say that this is an abnormal cultural characteristic. Women can contribute significantly to a society, increasing the available work force two-fold. By restricting a woman’s opportunities to work, a society restricts their prosperity. In my opinion, any society that restricts a member based on gender leaves much to be desired and that is one attitude that this course has influenced on me.

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