

Glossary of Anthropological Terms

Anthropology can often be difficult to understand, there is no shortage of jargon and it can leave readers or listeners completely confused. Hopefully this glossary of anthropological terms will be an effective “jargon buster”, so next time you’re lost during a lecture or having a hard time deciphering a difficult text you’ll be better equipped to understand. This list, or each definition, may grow or change over time, but we hope that this page will help if you are uncertain about anything.

Animism – A concept that non-human entities such as plants, animals and inanimate objects possess a spirit or spiritual energy.

Acculturation – The process of cultural change that occurs when cultures meet. This can be seen at group levels, with changes to culture and customs such as language and clothing, and at individual levels with not just daily behaviour but also psychology and physical well-being. See also *enculturation* and *transculturation*.

Assimilation – A quick or gradual process in which a culture changes to resemble another, or is culturally dominated by another society.

Biopolitics – A concept used to examine the strategies through which human life processes are managed under authority over knowledge, power and subjectification.

Biopower – The power of the body of a subject. Used to describe the power of nation states to regulate subjects through institutions such as public health in order to control populations.

Consanguinity – Being descended from the same ancestor as another, lit. “blood relation”; considered part of the same kinship as another person.

Diffusion – The spread of cultural traits from one society or ethnic group to another. Even though a trait is transferred, the meaning may not remain the same in the receiving group.

Discourse – In terms of social sciences, the discourse is the use of written or spoken language in a social context. Discourses unavoidably affect the way we think, for example two noticeable discourses can be used when talking about various activist groups, describing them as either “freedom fighters” or “terrorists”. So in essence the discourse decides the vocabulary and expressions needed to communicate about the world around us, they provide the social boundaries that decide what statements should be used for specific topics.

Emic and Etic – Two distinct viewpoints obtained in field research. *Emic* is the perspective of the subject (within the social group) and *etic* is the perspective of the observer (outside the social group).

Enculturation – The process by which people learn the cultural traits and values necessary for their surrounding culture. If enculturation is considered the process of learning one's first cultural values, acculturation could be considered the learning of the second, and so on. See also *acculturation* and *transculturation*.

Ethnocentrism – Judging another culture based on values and standards from one's own culture. There is usually a feeling of superiority of one's own culture above others for example people from a monogamous society may consider polygamy immoral and unnatural.

Ethnocide – Deliberate and systematic destruction of the culture of an ethnic group.

Ethnography – Learning about a culture through fieldwork and first hand observation. Ethnography also refers to the books etc. that record these experiences.

Ethnology – A branch of anthropology that analyses and compares different cultures and the relationships between them. Ethnology also considers the historical development of cultures, looking for similarities and differences between them.

Globalism – The gradual emergence of a single global economic system and simultaneous decrease of cultural and political differences. Globalisation would result in the merging of separate political entities whilst the power and influence of international institutions would grow.

Heterogeneous Society – A society which consists of many different ethnic groups, languages/dialects, social classes and cultural traditions. The United Kingdom or Canada are examples of heterogeneous societies. See also *homogeneous society*.

Holism – The concept that humans can only be understood as part of a whole; an analysis of society as a whole rather than as individual components.

Homogeneous Society – A society which consists of people who share the same ethnicity, cultural traditions, language etc. Most small-scale societies are homogeneous. See also *heterogeneous society*.

Informant – Someone who is knowledgeable about their own culture and agrees to communicate this knowledge with an observer. Usually a close, trusting relationship between an anthropologist and their informants.

Intersectionality – The study of overlapping social identities and systems such as domination, discrimination and oppression. The theory suggests that cultural categories such as class, gender and age interact on multiple, simultaneous levels.

Kinesics – The interpretation of body motion communication such as gestures and facial expressions (otherwise called body language).

Kinship – Connection by ancestry, marriage or adoption; culturally defined relationships that make up an important part of most peoples' lives.

Matrilineal Descent – A system by which an individual is considered to belong to the descent group of the mother. See also *patrilineal descent* and *unilineal descent*.

Modal Behaviour – Behaviour patterns that are statistically more common, which vary between societies. People who do not follow these patterns fall outside the social normative.

Moiety – One of two units into which a community is divided by unilineal descent (see *unilineal descent* below). Moieties have obligations to each other such as providing marriage partners.

Patrilineal Descent – A system by which an individual is considered to belong to the descent group of the father, also known as “agnatic descent”. See also *matrilineal descent* and *unilineal descent*.

Pidgin – Pidgin language is a grammatically simplified mode of communication that forms between two or more groups that do not share a common language. Pidgin is usually a simplified primary language with elements of other languages included that may be built from words, sounds and body language. Fundamentally, pidgin is a form of impromptu language that allows communication between groups that do not share a common language for the purpose of trade etc.

Proxemics – The study of human spatial requirements and the effects that population density has on communication, behaviour and social interaction.

Reciprocity – A social rule that suggests upon receipt of a gift, one should repay with goods, services or favours in a culturally appropriate manner. This allows the creation and maintenance of bonds between people, and the failure to reciprocate could end the reciprocal relationship. An adequate response is necessary but doesn't have to be mathematically equal.

Socialisation – Generally refers to the lifelong process of acquiring social norms, customs, values and ideologies. The culture is learned as well as the roles that individuals are required to fulfil.



Stimulus Diffusion – A culture receives an element from another, but gives it a new and unique form.

Stratified Sample – A population is divided into distinct subgroups (strata), then random or systematic sample is drawn from each group.

Subsistence Pattern – The methods used by a society to acquire its food resources, for example foraging or pastoralism. May be influenced by the natural environment and ecology of the surrounding region.

Syncretism – The incorporation of traditional and introduced, often contradictory, cultural elements or beliefs. By merging originally discrete traditions asserts an underlying unity and allows for an inclusive approach to other cultures.

Transculturation – The transition from one culture to another, which encompasses both the acquiring another culture and the losing of a previous culture merged together, in addition to the creation of new cultural phenomena. See also *acculturation* and *enculturation*.

Unilineal Descent – Tracing kinship through only a single line of ancestors (of one gender). See also *matrilineal descent* and *patrilineal descent*.