

Overview of Nineteenth-century Evolutionism (Unilineal Evolution)

The theory of Nineteenth-century Evolutionism claims that societies develop according to one universal order of cultural evolution. The theorists identified the universal evolutionary stages and classified different societies as savagery, barbarian and civilization. The Nineteenth-century Evolutionists collected data from missionaries and traders and they themselves rarely went to the societies that they were analyzing. They organized these second-hand data and applied the general theory to all societies. Since Western societies had the most advanced technology, they put those societies at the highest rank of civilization.

The Nineteenth-century Evolutionists had two main assumptions that form the theory. One was psychic unity, a concept that suggests human minds share similar characteristics all over the world. This means that all people and their societies will go through the same process of development. Another underlying assumption was that Western societies are superior to other societies in the world. This assumption was based on the fact that Western societies were dominant because of their military and economic power against technologically simple societies.

The Nineteenth-century Evolutionists contributed to anthropology by providing the first systematic methods for thinking about and explaining human societies. Their evolutionary theory is insightful with regard to the technological aspect of societies. There is a logical progression from using simple tools to developing complex technology. In this sense, complex societies are more "advanced" than simple societies. However, this judgment does not necessarily apply to other aspects of societies, such as kin systems, religions and childrearing customs.

Contemporary anthropologists view Nineteenth-century Evolutionism as too simplistic to explain the development of various societies. In general, the Nineteenth-century evolutionists relied on racist views of human development which were popular at that time. For example, both Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Burnett Tylor believed that people in various societies have different levels of intelligence, which leads to societal differences. This view of intelligence is no longer valid in contemporary science. Nineteenth-century Evolutionism was strongly attacked by Historical Particularists for being speculative and ethnocentric at the early twentieth-century. At the same time, its materialist approaches and cross-cultural views influenced Marxist Anthropology and Neo-evolutionists.

Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917, Great Britain)

The founder of cultural anthropology was the English scientist Edward Burnett Tylor. He adapted Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution to the study of human societies. Tylor's own theory asserted that there is a progressive development of human cultures from the most primitive to the highest stages of civilization. He believed that societies evolve in much the same way as do biological organisms. In developing the concept of "survivals," he noted that ancient customs and beliefs often survive in modern cultures, although somewhat transformed.

Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881, The United States)

Lewis Henry Morgan is a unilineal evolutionist who claimed that societies develop according to one universal order of cultural evolution.

Morgan believed in a hierarchy of evolutionary development from "savagery" to "barbarism" to "civilization." According to Morgan, the crucial distinction between civilized society and earlier societies is private property. He described "savage" societies as communistic, contrasting with "civilized" societies, which are based on private property.

Although Morgan's theory has been criticized for being speculative and ethnocentric, his evolutionary theory influenced the development of anthropology. First, Morgan outlined the importance of the study of kinship systems for understanding the social organizations. Second, Morgan conducted cross-cultural research that attempted to be systematic and large-scale. Finally, Morgan organized anthropological data and formulated the evolutionary theory rather than simply collecting cultural data.

Overview of Historical Particularism

Historical Particularism claims that each society has its own unique historical development and must be understood based on its own specific cultural and environmental context, especially its historical process. Historical Particularists criticized the theory of the Nineteenth-century Evolutionism as non-scientific and claimed themselves to be free from preconceived ideas. They collected a vast amount of first-hand cultural data by conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Based on these raw data, they described particular cultures instead of trying to establish general theories that apply to all societies.

The Historical Particularists valued fieldwork and history as critical methods of cultural analysis. At the same time, the anthropologists in this theoretical school had different views on the importance of individuals in a society. For example, Frantz Boas saw each individual as the basic component of a society. He gathered information from individual informants and considered such data valuable enough for cultural analysis. On the other hand, Alfred Kroeber did not see individuals as the fundamental elements of a society. He believed a society evolves according to its own internal laws that do not directly originate from its individuals. He named this cultural aspect superorganic and claimed that a society cannot be explained without considering this impersonal force.

Historical Particularism was a dominant theoretical trend in anthropology during the first half of the twentieth century. One of the achievements of the Historical Particularists was that they succeeded in excluding racism from anthropology. The Nineteenth-century Evolutionists explained cultural similarities and differences by classifying societies into superior and inferior categories. Historical Particularists showed that this labeling is based on insufficient evidence and claimed that societies cannot be ranked by the value judgment of researchers.

Franz Boas (1858-1942, Germany-The United States)

Franz Boas is considered one of the founders of academic anthropology and is also credited with the theory of Historical Particularism. Until Boas presented Historical Particularism, many anthropologists believed that societies develop according to one universal order of cultural evolution. This belief, called the Unilineal Evolution, explained cultural similarities and differences among societies by classifying them into three sequential stages of development: savagery, barbarism and civilization. Boas criticized this belief as based on insufficient evidence. For example, Unilineal Evolution claims that matrilineal kin systems preceded patrilineal kin systems and that religions based on animism developed before polytheistic religions. Boas argued that this ordering is merely an assumption because there is no historical evidence or way to demonstrate its validity. He also criticized Unilineal Evolution for its method of gathering and organizing data. At that time many anthropologists relied on missionaries or traders for data collection and anthropologists themselves rarely went to the societies that they were analyzing. Boas argued that those armchair anthropologists organized that second-hand data in unsystematic manners to fit their preconceived ideas.

Based on his principle that cultural theories should be derived from concrete ethnographic data, Boas strongly advocated fieldwork. He developed the method of participant observation as a basic research strategy of ethnographic fieldwork. Based on this method Boas collected a vast amount of first-hand cultural data from Native American tribes in the United States. Using detailed ethnographic studies he argued that a society is understandable only in its own specific cultural context, especially its historical process. Boas did not deny the existence of general laws on human behavior and developed the position that those laws could be discovered from the understanding of a specific society. In later years Boas became skeptical about the possibility of deriving cultural laws because he realized that cultural phenomena are too complex.

Besides presenting the theory of Historical Particularism, Boas left a tremendous impact on the development of anthropology. By claiming that societies cannot be ranked by the degree of savagery, barbarity or civility, Boas called for an end of ethnocentrism in anthropology. Also because of his influence, anthropologists began to do ethnological fieldwork to gather sound evidence. His position that culture must be understood in its own context has been passed on to anthropologists as a basic approach to cultural analysis.

Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960, The United States)

Alfred Kroeber was familiar with many areas of anthropology, such as ethnology, linguistics and archaeology. He was a Historical Particularist, who claimed that each society has its own unique historical development. He was especially known for the idea of "superorganic" in cultural anthropology. Kroeber defined superorganic as certain cultural aspects that do not directly originate from individuals within the society. For example, he studied women's dress fashion over 300 years and discovered that skirt length changed in a periodic cycle. Kroeber considered various causes that might affect the skirt length, such as political instability, but failed to find any reason for the cycle. Therefore, he came to the conclusion that fashion cannot be explained by outside factors because it evolves according to its own internal laws. He named this independent cultural realm superorganic. Fashion is purely cultural since it is learned, shared, patterned and meaningful among individuals in the society. At the same time, fashion has its own cycle which is beyond the control of individuals. The idea superorganic was introduced to explain this kind of impersonal realm in cultures. This concept dominated anthropological discussion for several decades although it was criticized as being more metaphysical than scientific thought.

Overview of Functionalism

The theoretical school of Functionalism considers a culture as an interrelated whole, not a collection of isolated traits. Like a human being has various organs that are interconnected and necessary for the body to function correctly, so society is a system of interconnected parts that make the whole function efficiently. The Functionalists examined how a particular cultural phase is interrelated with other aspects of the culture and how it affects the whole system of the society; in other words, cause and effect. The method of functionalism was based on fieldwork and direct observations of societies. The anthropologists were to describe various cultural institutions that make up a society, explain their social function, and show their contribution to the overall stability of a society. At the same time, this functionalism approach was criticized for not considering cultural changes of traditional societies. The theory of Functionalism emerged in the 1920s and then declined after World War II because of cultural changes caused by the war. Since the theory did not emphasize social transformations, it was replaced by other theories related to cultural changes. Even so, the basic idea of Functionalism has become part of a common sense for cultural analysis in anthropology. Anthropologists should consider interconnections of different cultural domains when they analyze cultures.

There are two schools of thought in functionalism: the bio-cultural approach and the structural-functionalism approach.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942, Poland-Britain-The United States)

Bronislaw Malinowski is credited with bio-cultural Functionalism, which explains a culture as an interrelated whole, not a collection of isolated traits. Based on his fieldwork in various areas of the world, particularly the Trobriand Islands in New Guinea, Malinowski established the theory of Functionalism. A culture is composed of many different elements, such as food acquisition, family relationships, and housing. Malinowski believed that all of these elements are connected and work together for one purpose, which is to meet the needs of individuals in the culture. In other words, culture exists to satisfy the basic biological, psychological, and social needs of individuals.

Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955, Britain)

Alfred Radcliffe-Brown is credited with Structural Functionalism, which analyzes particular social systems in a wider context of many different societies. Radcliffe-Brown was concerned with what keeps societies from falling apart. He identified similar customs in different societies and compared them in order to discover the customs' inherent functions. Through this comparative method, he attempted to explain underlying principles that preserve the structure of each society.

Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973, Britain)

Edward Evans-Pritchard is known for his approach in analyzing non-western belief systems, especially those in Africa. He believed that anthropologists should analyze societies by considering the local people's views and should not entirely rely on presupposed ideas about that society. In other words, an anthropologist needs to understand people's behaviors and thoughts in their own context, which is based on their local reality. Since Evans-Pritchard valued contexts and meanings in cultures, he saw societies as moral systems rather than natural systems. He argued that anthropology should be modeled on humanities, especially history, rather than on science that searches for universal laws. He outlined three steps of anthropological analysis, each with direct parallels in historical methods. First, an anthropologist attempts to understand another society and translate it to his own. The only difference between anthropology and history is that the anthropologist's data is produced from direct fieldwork while the historian relies on written record. Second, the anthropologist and historian use analysis to transform their raw data into sociological explanations of a society's structure. Finally, the anthropologist compares the social structure that his analysis has revealed with that of other societies. Prior to Evans-Pritchard, Functionalists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown had eliminated historical methods from anthropology, in order to make the discipline scientific. However, Evans-Pritchard reintroduced historical thinking back into anthropology by valuing local logic and value systems in his cultural analysis.

Evans-Pritchard and his work have made a great impact on the study of African societies in particular and the study of non-western systems of thought in general. His approach, which forces an anthropologist to step into local people's shoes, is regarded as necessary by those who study different societies and cultures.

Overview of the Theory of Culture and Personality

The theory of Culture and Personality explained relationships between childrearing customs and human behaviors in different societies. Through examination of individual personalities, we can gain an understanding of a culture. There were two main themes in this theoretical school. One was about the relationship between culture and human nature. The other was about the correlation between culture and individual personality.

The theory of Culture and Personality was based on Boas' cultural relativism and Freud's psychoanalysis about early childhood. If we premise that all humans are hereditarily equal, why are people so unique from society to society? The theoretical school answered this question by using Freud's psychoanalysis: the differences between people in various societies usually stem from cultural differences installed in childhood. In other words, the foundations of personality development are set in early childhood according to each society's unique cultural traits. Based on this basis, the theoretical school of Culture and Personality researched childrearing in different societies and compared the results cross-culturally. They described distinctive characteristics of people in certain cultures and attributed these unique traits to the different methods of childrearing. The aim of this comparison was to show the correlation between childrearing practices and adult personality types.

The Culture and Personality school (of thought) was on the cutting edge when it emerged in the early 20th century. Using clinical interviews, dream analysis, life histories, participant observation, and projective tests (e.g., Rorschach), the culture and personality analysis of the correlation between childrearing customs and human behaviors was, at that time, a practical alternative to using racism explanations for analyzing different human behaviors. In fact, the culture and personality school was responsible for greatly limiting the number of racist, hierarchical descriptions of culture types common during the early to mid-20th century. This approach to understanding culture was instrumental in moving the focus to the individual in order to understand behaviors within a culture instead of looking for universal laws of human behavior.

Ruth Benedict (1887-1948, The United States)

A student of Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict finished her doctoral work in three years at Columbia University. Her dissertation on documenting the rapidly deteriorating Native American societies provided the impetus to pursue culture and personality studies. Through her work on the patterning of culture at an individual level, Benedict opened anthropology into a much larger discussion between the disciplines of anthropology and psychology. In her more famous monograph, *Patterns of Culture*, Benedict seeks to define various cultures in terms of four types Apollonian, Dionysian, Paranoid and Meglomanic. These represented ways of living, or cultural configurations (Bernard and Spencer 1996:137). Benedict admits that not all cultures will fit into these four types; however, she uses these types to characterize the Pueblo, Plains Indians, Dobu Islanders, and Kwakwaka'wakw (in that order). Another famous work by Benedict is *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946). This monograph was based on the national character of Japan; however, Benedict, herself, never visited Japan. Instead, she gathered material for her monograph from her readings of Japanese life and interviews of Japanese immigrants (Bohannon and Glazer 1988:174). Benedict's approach to studying cultures centered on the ethos or the characteristic moral, aesthetic, and emotional tones of specific cultures).

Margaret Mead (1901-1978, The United States)

Margaret Mead is known for the approach called Culture and Personality. This approach answers the fundamental question in cultural anthropology of, "why are we the way we are?" by explaining the relationship between childrearing customs and human behaviors. She saw an individual as a product of culture that shape the person in unique manners. These cultural traits are learned by the individual as an infant, and they are reinterpreted and reinforced as the individual goes through its stages of life. In short, the differences between people in different societies are usually cultural differences imparted in childhood. This interaction between individual and culture is dynamic and a complex process by which humans learn to be humans.

Overview of Neoevolutionism

The theory of Neoevolutionism explained how culture develops by giving general principles of its evolutionary process. The theory of cultural evolution was originally established in the 19th century. However, this Nineteenth-century Evolutionism was dismissed by the Historical Particularists as unscientific in the early 20th century. Therefore, the topic of cultural evolution had been avoided by many anthropologists until Neoevolutionism emerged in the 1930s. In other words, it was the Neoevolutionary thinkers who brought back evolutionary thought and developed it to be acceptable to contemporary anthropology.

The main difference between Neoevolutionism and Nineteenth-century Evolutionism is whether they are empirical or not. While Nineteenth-century evolutionism used value judgment and assumptions for interpreting data, the new one relied on measurable information for analyzing the process of cultural evolution. The Neoevolutionary thoughts also gave some kind of common ground for cross-cultural analysis. Largely through their efforts, evolutionary theory was again generally accepted among anthropologists by the late 1960s.

Julian Steward (The United States, 1902-1972)

Julian Steward is an Neoevolutionist who focused on relationships between cultures and the natural environment. Although Steward learned Historical Particularism when he was a graduate student of anthropology, his interests later turned to environmental influences on cultures and cultural evolution. He argued that different cultures do have similar features in their evolution and that these features could be explained as parallel adaptations to similar natural environments.

Steward began his ethnographic career among the Shoshone, a Native American tribe in the Great Basin in the West of the United States. Through studying the Shoshone society in the dry harsh environment, he produced a theory that explained social systems in terms of their adaptation to environmental and technological circumstances. Steward's evolutionary theory, cultural ecology, is based on the idea that a social system is determined by its environmental resources. Steward outlined three basic steps for a cultural-ecological investigation. First, the relationship between subsistence strategies and natural resources must be analyzed. Second, the behavior patterns involved in a particular subsistence strategy must be analyzed. For example, certain game is best hunted by individuals while other game can be captured in communal hunts. These patterns of activities reveal that different social behaviors are involved in the utilization of different resources. The third step is to determine how these behavior patterns affect other aspects of the society. This strategy showed that environment determines the forms of labor in a society, which affects the entire culture of the group. The principal concern of cultural ecology is to determine whether cultural adaptations toward the natural environment initiate social transformations of evolutionary change.

Although Steward did not believe in one universal path of cultural evolution, he argued that different societies can independently develop parallel features. By applying cultural ecology, he identified several common features of cultural evolution which are seen in different societies in similar environments. He avoided sweeping statements about culture in general; instead, he dealt with parallels in limited numbers of cultures and gave specific explanations for the causes of such parallels. Steward's evolutionary theory is called multilineal evolution because the theory is based on the idea that there are several different patterns of progress toward cultural complexity. In other words, Steward did not assume universal evolutionary stages that apply to all societies. For example, he traced the evolutionary similarities in five ancient civilizations: Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, Mesoamerica, and the Andes. These cultures shared parallels in development of form and function because all of them developed in arid and semi-arid environments where the economic basis was irrigation and flood-water agriculture. He argued that these similarities stem not from universal stages of cultural development or from the diffusion of civilization between these regions, but from the similar natural environments.

Leslie White (The United States, 1900-1975)

Leslie White developed the theory of cultural evolution, which was ignored by most anthropologists at that time. White's attempts to restore the evolutionary topic started in the 1920s, when he was impressed by Morgan's model and logic of his evolutionary theory. White decided that whatever problems the theory had, it could not be dismissed. His main contribution was that he provided scientific insights to the evolution of culture. He created a formula that measures the degree of cultural development.

First, White divided culture into three components: technological, sociological and ideological, and argued that the technological aspect is the basis of cultural evolution. The technological aspect is composed of material, mechanical, physical and chemical instruments, as well as the way people use these techniques. White's argument on the importance of technology goes as follows:

1. Technology is an attempt to solve the problems of survival.
2. This attempt ultimately means capturing enough energy and diverting it for human needs.
3. Societies that capture more energy and use it more efficiently have an advantage over other societies.
4. Therefore, these different societies are more advanced in an evolutionary sense.

Based on the logics above, White expressed the degree of cultural development by the formula: $E \times T = C$. In this method, E is the amount of energy harnessed per capita per year, T shows the efficiency of the tools used for exploiting the energy, and C represents the degree of cultural development. Presenting this measurement, White asserted that developing effective control over energy is the prime cause of cultural evolution.

As shown in his theory of cultural evolution, White believed that culture has general laws of its own. Based on these universal principles, culture evolves by itself. Therefore, an anthropologist's task is to discover those principles and explain the particular phenomena of culture. He called this approach culturology, which attempts to define and predict cultural phenomena by understanding general patterns of culture.

Overview of Materialism and Neomaterialism

Materialism is one of the major anthropological perspectives for analyzing human societies. Materialism is a position that the physical world can impact and set constraints on human behavior. The materialists believe that human behavior is part of nature and therefore, it can be understood by using the methods of studying natural science. Materialists do not necessarily assume that material reality is more important than mental reality. However, they give priority to the material world over the world of the mind when they explain human societies. This doctrine of materialism started and developed from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marx and Engels presented an evolutionary model of societies based on the materialist perspective. They argued that societies go through the following stages in order from tribalism to feudalism to capitalism to communism. Their work drew little attention from anthropology in the early twentieth-century. However, since the late 1920s, anthropologists have increasingly come to depend on their materialist explanations for analyzing societal development and some inherent problems of capitalist societies. Anthropologists who heavily rely on the insights of Marx and Engels include neo-evolutionists, neo-materialists, feminists, and postmodernists.

The theoretical school of Neomaterialism developed soon after Neoevolutionism emerged in the late 1930s. Neomaterialism was strongly influenced by Neoevolutionism, which asserted that material conditions determine other aspects of societies. Although both theories focus on surrounding environments of societies, they took different approaches. While Neoevolutionists considered environments to be independent forces that shape culture, Neomaterialists examined relationships between populations and environments. The Neomaterialists claimed that societies function to maintain a balance between human activities and the productive capacity of the environment. Neomaterialism was extremely popular in the 1970s and 1980s. This approach continues to be the most powerful and enduring theoretical positions within modern American anthropology.

Marvin Harris (1927-2001, The United States)

Marvin Harris, developed the approach of Cultural Materialism (a form of neo-materialism), which explains culture based on the practical problems of earthly human existence. Cultural Materialism identifies three universal components in all societies: infrastructure, structure, and superstructure.

The infrastructure consists of fundamental elements for human survival and has two subcomponents: the mode of production and the mode of reproduction. The structure consists of domestic and political economy. The superstructure consists of shared cognitive and ideological patterns and behaviors in the society. Harris analyzed relationships among these three components of societies and argued that they are related through the "Principle of Infrastructural Determinism." This principle asserts that the infrastructure is the basic foundation of sociocultural life and that it determines the formation of the structure. Then the structure asserts a strong influence on the formation of the superstructure. Harris stressed that the flow of these causal relationships could operate in the reverse direction, from superstructure to infrastructure. However, opposite flow happens with less frequency and is less significant. Harris also explained an explanation on why the infrastructure is so important for sociocultural life. In his view, the infrastructure has priority over the other structures because it directly relates to human survival and physical well-being. Only after basic needs are met, can humans become concerned with social organization and ideology. Harris' Cultural Materialism approach was based on his belief that anthropology is a science. Since science is based on laws, anthropology should focus on infrastructures because they are governed by laws.

Roy A. Rappaport (The United States, 1926-1997)

Roy A. Rappaport was a cultural materialist who explained cultural phenomenon in terms of material factors among people and the surrounding natural environment. One of his famous books, *Pigs for the Ancestors*, was an example of his cultural materialistic approach. This book describes the role of a religious ceremony among Tsembaga, a community of horticulturalists in New Guinea. This community conducted a ritual, called *kaiko*, when they won new land from warfare. In the ceremony, the Tsembaga planted ritual trees on the border of new territory and slaughtered a large number of pigs for pork. The Tsembaga explained to Rappaport that they slaughter pigs in order to offer the pork to their ancestors, and they plant ritual trees in order to create a connection with ancestral souls on their new land. In addition to describing Tsembaga's point of view, Rappaport calculated caloric exchanges among the community, the natural environment, and neighboring populations.

As a result of this calculation, Rappaport found that the *kaiko* ritual was articulated with the ecological relationship among people, pigs, local food supplies, and warfare. Warfare and the succeeding *kaiko* ritual occurred every couple of years and this cycle corresponds with the increasing pig population. In other words, the ritual kept the number of pigs within the capacity of the natural environment and prevented land degradation. At the same time, the *kaiko* ceremony distributed surplus wealth in the form of pork and facilitated trade among people.

Rappaport's analysis on *kaiko* ritual is typical of cultural materialist point of view. In general, religious ceremonies are strictly cultural and can be explained in terms of values and other non-material concepts. However, Rappaport revealed how the *kaiko* ritual is interrelated with material aspects of the Tsembaga society and their surrounding natural environment.

Overview of Structuralism

The structuralist paradigm in anthropology suggests that the structure of human thought processes is the same in all cultures, and that these mental processes exist in the form of binary oppositions (Winthrop 1991). Some of these oppositions include hot-cold, male-female, culture-nature, and raw-cooked. Structuralists argue that binary oppositions are reflected in various cultural institutions (Lett 1987:80). Anthropologists may discover underlying thought processes by examining such things as kinship, myth, and language. It is proposed, then, that a hidden reality exists beneath all cultural expressions. Structuralists aim to understand the underlying meaning involved in human thought as expressed in cultural acts.

Further, the theoretical approach offered by structuralism emphasizes that elements of culture must be understood in terms of their relationship to the entire system (Rubel and Rosman 1996:1263). This notion, that the whole is greater than the parts, appeals to the Gestalt school of psychology. Essentially, elements of culture are not explanatory in and of themselves, but rather form part of a meaningful system. As an analytical model, structuralism assumes the universality of human thought processes in efforts to explain the "deep structure" or underlying meaning existing in cultural phenomena. "...structuralism is a set of principles for studying the mental superstructure" (Harris 1979:166, from Lett 1987:101).

Structuralism has been influential, especially in the analysis of kinship and marriage, and that of myth and symbolism. It also helped the emergence of contemporary theoretical schools, such as Symbolic Anthropology, Cognitive Anthropology, and Postmodernism. However, Structuralism has not been applied to other fields of anthropology. In order to claim that Structuralism constitutes a general science of communication and sociocultural behavior, it would be necessary to apply this approach to other areas, such as economic or political anthropology.

Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-Present, France)

Claude Levi-Strauss is credited with Structural Anthropology, which assumes that cultural forms are based on common underlying properties of the human mind. Levi-Strauss believed that human minds have certain characteristics which stem from the functions of the brain. These common mental structures lead people to think similarly, regardless of their society or cultural background. Since culture is formulated by human minds, which follows the same pattern of functions, all cultures are based on common general rules.

According to Levi-Strauss, among these universal mental characteristics is the need to classify: to impose order on aspects of nature, on people's relationships with nature, and on relations between people. Levi-Strauss argued that a universal aspect of classification is opposition, or contrast. Furthermore, he discovered that one of the most common means of classifying is by using binary opposition, such as good and evil, white and black, old and young, high and low. He argued that a fundamental characteristic of the human mind is the desire to find a midpoint between such oppositions.

Overview of Symbolic Anthropology

The theoretical school of Symbolic Anthropology assumes that culture does not exist beyond individuals. Rather, culture lies in individuals' interpretations of events and things around them. With a reference to socially established signs and symbols, people shape the patterns of their behaviors and give meanings to their experiences. Therefore, the goal of Symbolic Anthropology is to analyze how people give meanings to their reality and how this reality is expressed by their cultural symbols.

Symbolic Anthropology emerged in the 1960s and is still influential. Symbolic Anthropology does not follow the model of physical sciences, which focus on empirical material phenomena, but is literary-based. This does not mean that symbolic anthropologists do not conduct fieldwork. It refers to the practice of drawing on non-anthropological literature. The Symbolic Anthropologists view culture as a mental phenomenon and reject the idea that culture can be modeled like mathematics or logic. When they study symbolic action in cultures, they use a variety of analytical tools from psychology, history, and literature. This method has been criticized for a lack of objective method. In other words, this method seems to allow analysts to see meaning wherever and however they wish. In spite of this criticism, Symbolic Anthropology has forced anthropologists to become aware of cultural texts they interpret and of ethnographic texts they create. In order to work as intercultural translators, anthropologists need to be aware of their own cultural basis as well as other cultures they research.

An important contribution of symbolic anthropologists, specifically Geertz, is the "thick description," which is an interpretation of what the natives are thinking made by an outsider who cannot think like a native. The classic example of thick description is the difference between a wink and a blink. A blink is an involuntary twitch (thin description) while a wink is a conspiratorial signal to another person (thick description). The physical movements are identical, but the meaning is different. The major accomplishment of symbolic anthropology has been to turn anthropology towards issues of culture and interpretation rather than grand theories.

Clifford Geertz (1926-Present, The United States)

Clifford Geertz is credited as one of the principal Symbolic Anthropologists. He researched and examined the meaning of cultural behaviors by his interpretations. Geertz viewed culture as an organized collection of symbolic system. He saw people's cultural behaviors based on these signs and symbols. With a reference to socially established signs and symbols, people shape the patterns of their behaviors and give meanings to their experiences. In other words, people rely on meanings in order to sustain their social life. According to Geertz, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs." (1973:5)

Geertz believed that each culture is unique and refused to seek universal laws among different cultures. Therefore the task of anthropology is to figure out signs and symbols in a specific society and to sort them out according to their significance. This method requires anthropologists to read meanings not only as the native people do but also beyond that level. The goal of this method is to determine the patterns of meanings in the society and make people's behaviors interpretable to outsiders. This method implies that anthropologists are intercultural translators who use ethnography to convey the meanings of different cultures.

Victor Turner (Britain- The United States, 1920-1983)

Victor Turner is one of the symbolic anthropologists, who examine how people give meanings to their reality and how this reality is expressed by their cultural symbols. Turner mainly studied rituals in non-western societies and looked at the roles of the symbols in specific social situations. He believed that people in a particular society have their own symbolic system to make sense of their lives. He analyzed rituals and demonstrated the symbolic meanings that derived from social contexts. What mattered to Turner was not the symbols themselves, but the roles of the symbols in specific social situations

Turner considered symbols as mechanisms for the maintenance of societies. He argued social solidarity needs to be continually reinforced and ritual symbols play important roles by keeping social orders. He believed that anthropologists are neutral observer and therefore, they can interpret customs of other cultures. He concluded that the following three kinds of information are all legitimate for symbolic analysis: observed data, informants' interpretations, and anthropologists' analysis.

Overview of Postmodernism

The theoretical school of postmodernism claims that it is impossible for anyone to have objective and neutral knowledge of another culture. This view comes from the notion that we all interpret the world around us in our own way according to our language, cultural background, and personal experiences. In other words, everybody has their own views based on his or her social and personal contexts. Because of this aspect of human nature, anthropologists can never be unbiased observers of other cultures. When postmodern anthropologists analyze different societies, they are sensitive to this limitation. They do not assume that their way of conceptualizing culture is the only way.

The postmodernists believe that anthropological texts are influenced by the political and social contexts within which they are written. Therefore, it is unreasonable when authors try to justify their interpretations and underlying biases by using the concept of objectivity. The postmodernists claim that the acceptance of an interpretation is ultimately an issue of power and wealth. In other words, we tend to legitimize particular statements represented by those with political and economic advantage. In order to heighten sensitivity towards those who are not part of mainstream culture, the postmodernists often promote unpopular viewpoints, such as those of ethnic minorities, women and others through their works. Postmodernists also re-introduced a focus on individual behavior, which has become known as agency theory. Agency approaches examine how individual agents shape culture.

The postmodern anthropologists gave other anthropologists an opportunity to reconsider their approaches of cultural analysis by ushering in an era of reflexive anthropology. The anthropologist tries to become sensitive to his or her unconscious assumptions. For example, anthropologists now consider whether they should include in ethnographies different interpretations of culture other than their own. Furthermore, anthropologists need to determine their own standards for choosing what kind of information can be counted as knowledge. This reflection leads anthropologists to enrich their work.

At the same time, the challenges by postmodernists often result in backlash from those who feel their understandings are threatened. Some anthropologists claim that the postmodernists rely on a particular moral model rather than empirical data or scientific methods. This moral model is structured by sympathy to those who do not possess the same privilege that the mainstream has in Western societies. Therefore, postmodernism will undermine the legitimacy of anthropology by introducing this political bias. Another typical criticism on postmodernism comes from the fear of extremely relativistic view. Such critics argue that postmodernism will lead to nihilism because it does not assume a common ground of understanding. Some opponents claim that postmodernism will undermine universal human rights and will even justify dictatorship. Postmodernism is an ongoing debate, especially regarding whether anthropology should rely on scientific or humanistic approaches.

Renato Rosaldo (1941- Present, The United States)

Rosaldo's work includes the following points which are considered Postmodern approaches. First, rather than writing a conventional anthropological report, Rosaldo focuses on the process of doing fieldwork. He describes his personal experiences that lead him to understand Ilongot head-hunting. The Postmodernists value the process of understanding another culture and often write about their fieldwork experiences. This reflexivity includes the analysis of their own cultures, which is necessary to understand other cultures. Therefore, the Postmodernists see their fieldwork as the opportunity to reflect upon and analyze their own cultures as well as to analyze other cultures.

Secondly, the Postmodernists do not assume there are absolutely objective ways of analyses. When Rosaldo tried to apply the classic exchange theory to the Ilongot head-hunting, he realized this model was invalid under the local contexts of the Ilongot. Even though the theory explains observed behaviors, Rosaldo did not see it as absolute because its ideas were totally incomprehensible to the Ilongot themselves. Social scientists usually give special credibility to certain types of explanations and dismiss others in order to justify their theoretical positions. Reacting against this general trend, the Postmodernists argue that Western social science has favored a theoretical model used in physical sciences. This preference has led anthropologists to forcefully apply "objective" explanations to non-Western societies. In other words, the Postmodernists claim that anthropologists should consider local contexts of their fields and give legitimacy to explanation by the people.

Thirdly, the Postmodernists break the distinction between anthropologists and those who are observed by the anthropologists in fieldwork. In conventional situations, anthropologists' interpretations have priority over the views of the observed. Rosaldo did not count on this kind of authority and left room for other interpretations by the Ilongot themselves. When anthropologists do not assume this authority, they are simply individuals who are trying to know certain things about another culture.