

Chapter 14: Theory and Evidence in Cultural Anthropology **REVIEW**

Major Points For Review – Chapter Summary

Facts. Over the last century anthropologists have collected an awful lot of them. This chapter deals with the various ways in which those facts are organized. As is evident from reading the chapter, there are numerous methods for dealing with facts in anthropology. When facts are assembled into a model or pattern of reality we call that pattern a theory. These various systems for assembling facts are the many theoretical approaches anthropologists take in the attempt to understand human cultural behavior.

Julian Steward first proposed the approach labeled cultural ecology. He separated cultural ecology from biological ecology. Later, Roy Rappaport and Andrew Vadya integrated the two areas into one field: ecology. In this view, cultural traits, just like biological traits, can be adaptive or maladaptive.

Political economy explains social change because of external forces also. This approach discounts the social and natural environment and suggests that the social and political impact of powerful state societies is the central factor in social change and adaptation.

Sociobiology, or behavioral ecology, is similar to cultural ecology. This approach is mostly the invention of biologists and focuses on individual behavior and adaptation rather than the adaptation of the group to its environment as in cultural ecology. It is the individual who must adapt to the environment (through behavior) or he or she will not be able to pass on his or her genes and thus not be able to pass on his or her behavior (through learning).

Clifford Geertz has proposed the idea that a culture is like a literary text that can be analyzed for meaning, as the ethnographer interprets it. This approach espouses that interpretation is the only achievable goal of ethnography and that no one can describe cultural behavior in objective scientific terms.

Many modern anthropologists would deny any particular theoretical approach to their studies. Rather, they use hypothesis testing to try to explain cultural behavior. Any theory may have useful parts. They feel that in the absence of testing any conclusions reached should be viewed skeptically.

One of the goals of anthropologists is explanations, or the answer to a “why” questions. One way to answer why questions is through the association of two variables. By going through the process of explanation scientists generate theories. Theories are more complex than an association. Some parts of theories cannot ever be observed. It is because of this last statement that theories can never be proved. While they may be based on factual data and evidence no theory can be said to be unquestionable true.

The research anthropologists perform varies tremendously depending upon the spatial and temporal scope of the study. Spatial scope refers to how many societies are to be studied while temporal scope refers to whether the study is historical or nonhistorical. The various combinations of these two possibilities lead to ethnography, within-culture comparisons, nonhistorical comparisons, cross-cultural research, and historical research.

Terms / Ideas You Should Know

Behavioral Ecology

Theoretical Construct

Cultural Ecology

Theories

Sociobiology

Ethnography

Political Economy

Within-culture Comparisons

Fieldwork

Nonhistorical Comparisons

Laws

Cross-cultural Research

Participant Observation

Historical Research

Check Your Understanding (think about the following questions):

- Compare the various types of research in anthropology: ethnography, within-culture comparisons, nonhistorical controlled comparisons, cross-cultural research, and historical research. Also note at what level they are in a spatial and temporal context.
- Select a modern urban center in American (a major city). What sociological problem would you like to study? How would you set up the study? What type of research approach would you take? Why?