

# What Is Anthropology? A Definition Of Anthropology From Experts Around The World.

Updated on December 1, 2023 by [Meg](#)



Are you looking for a definition of anthropology that isn't the one you find in a dictionary? You made it to the right place!

Anthropology can be hard to define because of the variety of definitions that apply to it.

Generally, anthropology is defined as the study of humans, their culture and society, and their physical development.

However, the word anthropology has hundreds of other definitions.

Humans are complex, and the way we live is marked by differences and evolutions.

As a consequence, anthropologists do not practice anthropology the same way, and their focus is different depending on their area of expertise.

In a desire to bring a more diverse definition to “what is anthropology,” we gathered six anthropologists from around the world and asked them for their answer.

They are urban anthropologists, visual anthropologists or techno-anthropologists, all sharing their definition of “what is anthropology?”

As you will see, there are many different definitions for anthropology. What is yours?

**Ruxandra Păduraru, Anthropologist**

**Urban anthropologists, Bucharest, Romania**



"Ever since I decided to pursue anthropology in college, I have been pondering what the discipline is all about. Initially, I gave vague answers like "the science that studies people."

However, anthropological research is not a straightforward process and does not follow a linear path. To truly comprehend and advocate for the voices of those who are often invisible, anthropology requires a steadfast commitment to self-reflection, an insatiable curiosity, and an unyielding empathy.

It has become increasingly evident to me that no one prepares you for the emotional rollercoaster that comes with fieldwork research. You have to be your own emotional support. No one tells you to smile, but you know that sometimes you have to smile and look genuine.

Anthropologists do not have a specific job description, and there are no checklists or boxes to tick. Despite this, there are numerous hours of self-reflection, questioning, anxiety, thought, projection, hope, disappointment, struggle, and frustration outside the actual fieldwork. I am deeply passionate about anthropology, even though I struggle to define it succinctly. It involves a great deal of emotional labor and requires a commitment to understanding.

Academic research interests currently focus on the study of smell and olfactory disgust, aiming to establish a framework for rethinking perceptions of 'otherness' by reflecting on our own olfactory tolerance thresholds and their social origins.

What influence does smell exert on the formation of identity (personal, spatial, communal, and cultural)? How are hegemonic discourses on olfactory desirability adopted, and what implications does the olfactory factor have on the management of public spaces?

At UrbanizeHub and IntreVecini, I work towards creating more livable cities. My activities include studying, collaborating with communities, communicating with urban planners to identify the real needs and desires of residents in a specific area, organizing community engagement workshops, participating in



projects to empower marginalized voices in the city, and contributing to policy development.

I work in Romania, a country where anthropology was not part of the mainstream until recently. During my university years, many people I knew confused anthropology with [archaeology](#). However, anthropology has recently emerged as a fantastic field, and anthropologists are involved in projects not only in academia, but also in urban planning, medicine, gastronomy, organizational management, education, etc.

Working in academia and collaborating with civil society poses a challenge. Projects remain top-down, and some individuals remain resistant to alternative approaches. Nevertheless, I hold a positive view that we are moving in the right direction.

**Taha Ismail, Anthropologist**

**National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, Cairo, Egypt**





Anthropology is a multidisciplinary field that encompasses the study of humanity from its origins to its contemporary manifestations.

As a bioanthropologist working in an Egyptian museum, I am particularly interested in the branch of biological anthropology, which focuses on the evolution of humans, their physical traits, and their interactions with the environment.

This discipline plays a crucial role in unraveling the mysteries of ancient civilizations and understanding the rich tapestry of human history. At its core, anthropology seeks to answer fundamental questions about what it means to be human. It does so through a holistic approach, incorporating various subfields.

Cultural anthropology explores the diversity of human societies, their customs, beliefs, and practices. Archaeology delves into the material remains of past civilizations, unearthing artifacts and structures that provide insight into ancient lifeways.

Linguistic anthropology investigates the evolution of languages and their role in shaping human communication and culture. As a bioanthropologist, my focus lies in the biological aspects of human existence. This includes the study of human evolution, paleoanthropology, and physical anthropology.

One of the key areas of interest is hominid evolution, tracing the ancestral lineage of humans from our primate forebears. By examining fossil evidence, such as hominid skulls and skeletal remains, we can piece together the puzzle of our evolutionary past. In the context of my work in an Egyptian museum, my work takes on a unique dimension. Egypt, with its rich history dating back thousands of years, offers a treasure trove of anthropological insights.

Here, I have the privilege of studying mummies and human remains of ancient Egyptians, a tangible link to the past. Through the analysis of their remains, we can gain invaluable information about the health, lifestyle, and societal structures of ancient Egyptians.

These well-preserved specimens provide a direct window into the lives of individuals who lived in this remarkable civilization. Beyond the physical examination of ancient human bones, my role extends to understanding the cultural and societal aspects of ancient Egypt.

I collaborate with archaeologists, linguists, and cultural anthropologists to piece together a comprehensive picture of life in the Nile Valley. By doing so, we can unlock the secrets of their beliefs, practices, and how they intersected with their biological realities.

My work revolves around understanding the physical and cultural dimensions of human existence, particularly in the context of ancient Egypt. This discipline is not just a scientific endeavor; it is a journey through time to illuminate the story of our species and the cultures that have shaped our world.

In conclusion, anthropology is a multifaceted field that seeks to answer the profound questions about humanity through a holistic approach.

**Kim Maruping, Anthropologist**

**Masters of Arts Degree in Anthropology at [Sol Plaatje University](#) in Kimberley, Northern Cape.**



Anthropology is more than just Social Sciences, it is a calling that propels one to understand the dynamics, situations, and dilemmas we deal with daily.

Through Anthropological studies I have learned the importance of understanding “the people”, and what they see as development outside the eyes of the perpetrator and acknowledging that their perspective matters when it comes to the manner they choose to exercise their agency.

As an Anthropologist my quest is to write on topics that seek clarity on whether earlier and current scholars have done justice to really try to understand societies that are “labelled” as being primitive and marginalized due to their ideologies surrounding the preservation, conservation and education of their heritage through the continuation of unapologetically practicing their culture and tradition.

I am currently working on a study which examines how Taung elders understand traditional initiation practices in Matlapaneng Village, North West Province, South Africa. While the dominant understanding of initiation



practices is that in some contexts it has been labeled as archaic, such labels are without an understanding of what constitutes cultural values within a specific context.

Therefore, there is a conspicuous lack of understanding on the ways that govern initiation and on the manner in which locals and especially elders who have gone through the same initiation practices. The paper is informed by Bourdieu (1990) ideas of how knowledge is habituated and transposed within particular individuals in specific 'fields'.

An ethnography of being in a place is critical for this study, that is being among the elders, asking them specific questions and listening to their responses, with a particular focus on the meanings they create through their telling of the stories. I understand Anthropology to be a beacon of hope that gives a voice to those who have been silenced and prejudiced due to the earlier bias of Armchair Anthropologists.

To me it is a gift that not only exists in solace but welcomes heritage, sociology and archaeology to be in a marriage together. The versatility of Anthropology makes it a study that will never be boring but ever evolving to unearth the stories within our immediate, national and international communities.

**Maica Gugolati, Anthropology of performance and art curator**

**Ghana**



Portrait made by Kelly Ann Bobb, Trinbagonian photographer, in Trinidad and Tobago (West Indies): my PhD's fieldwork.

Anthropology is, for me, a way of being and living that exceeds the profession itself.

It is a domain that allows an in-depth questioning of the social world and its subcultures that are displayed in any human interaction and context.

Social anthropology gives me the tools to pursue or reconsider questions and answers according to people's situated realities. Its holistic plasticity provides the possibility to borrow "tools" for understanding from different disciplines. It allows us to create relationships and cross intersectional boundaries. It is a complex and multifaceted discipline made to be exercised more than to be explained.

In my case, I find that anthropology goes hand in hand with the art-research-based domain. In my specific approach, anthropology allows the dwelling in

social nuances, and the artistic one offers a broader way of sharing in-depth information with the different public. I use qualitative research methodologies, and I find it meaningful to focus on oral histories and herstories with a shared embodied memory of meanings to integrate or challenge the established cultural production.

Combining a series of understandings between the state of the art of the phenomena and their possible bottom-up contradictions and diversities, my practice is based on the fieldwork approach. With its circumscribed dynamic of space-time of co-creation, the “field” is at the base of my methodology of living, working, and creating as a researcher, art curator, and artist.

Working in the “field” implies a challenging and intense learning process where hierarchical knowledge is usually inverted. Co-creating within fieldwork implies a mixed sense of excitement and exhaustion between displacements from un-comfort zones while creating new “meeting zones”. Learning, unlearning, and relearning: fieldwork is an exercise of violent deep solitude alternated with complete and overwhelming collectivity. Anthropology is a practice of adaptation. To me, it is a process more than a profession, where each mistake has the possibility of co-learning while maintaining the responsibility of words, actions, and approaches.

Being a social anthropologist means gaining an expertise on specific issues while being a perpetual student of human life independently from its language, generation, class, gender, ableism system, and geopolitical contexts.

Within the domain of the [arts](#) (visual and performative), anthropology offers to me a mental and embodied lived space, individual and collective, for reflection. Connected with the art and creative domains, they allow me to extend understanding by asking for a shared space of experience-empathy and sympathy, all with engaged critical thinking.

**Rupali Kapoor, Cultural anthropologist**

**Delhi, India**





The discipline of anthropology provides a lens with which to engage with the world. On a personal level, it offers me a unique perspective on the events happening around me. It enables me to appreciate the intricacies and complexities of everyday realities. Engaging with the discipline of anthropology can never happen in a detached or disconnected manner. Studying any theme demands a certain level of emotional depth, which often translates into empathy. The discipline trains individuals to be empathetic, as they learn to acknowledge another person's lived realities even if they stand in fundamental contrast to theirs.

I work as a cultural anthropologist and qualitative researcher in India. I specialize in the field of consumer insights and study the various ways in which consumers perceive their mundane. I explore the non-linear ways in which they relate to their worlds. As a researcher, I spend time listening to them, both in-person and virtually and explore how they perceive and connect with a category and product. I bring forth the cultural nuances that help understand the relevance of what makes a consumer behave a certain way. Often, this requires us to understand and learn about the lifeworld of our consumers. As an anthropologist, I constantly reflect upon my own

positionality and how that shapes my experiences with respect to the theme of the research.

Alongside this, I also engage with universities and conduct sessions around various connected themes such as the relevance of studying cultures, ethnography and qualitative research methods, digital cultures, etc. I am excited to create a wider conversation around these subjects within the [Indian](#) context.

**[Michela Maiorino](#), [Medical Anthropologist](#)**

**Madrid, Spain**



Anthropology is the science that studies the human being in all its complexity from both a biological and cultural perspective. It deals with understanding human diversity, both in the present and throughout history, and finding the similarities that unite us.

Anthropology is an interdisciplinary discipline that uses qualitative or mixed methods and approaches from different areas of knowledge, such as

sociology, psychology, history, linguistics, and biology.

But it doesn't stop there. Anthropology and its ethnographic research are characterized by questions more than answers, answers that are never short and require us to go slowly and always deeper.

Anthropology is a tool that allows us to give voice to other knowledge belonging to distant cultures and cosmovisions. It puts in relation different and similar perspectives of living the world and acting in the world to propose insights and reflections, new strategies or collaborations.

Anthropology is not just a set of theories, paradigms, and epistemologies useful for abstracting and conceptualizing the world. It is also action, and often political action. And the anthropologist is a moral actor in the field where he conducts research or observes.

The main areas of study in anthropology are varied, but I would prefer to focus on the one that characterizes me, namely, medical anthropology. Medical anthropology is a branch of anthropology that studies the relationship between culture and health.

The focus is on comprehending how culture influences our understanding of health and disease, how it affects our medical practices and our experience of disease. I am currently specializing in medical anthropology at the URV University of Tarragona.

I am currently collaborating with an NGO called Salud Entre Culturas. I promote and sensitize the migrant population to health issues through culturally and linguistically adapted seminars with a gender perspective. Also, seminars are aimed at health professionals to raise awareness of intercultural and gender perspectives during health care.

**Elizabeth K. Briody, Ph.D., Founder, and Principal**

**Cultural Keys LLC; United States**





Anthropology is a social science centered around the concept of culture. In my work as an organizational consultant, I diagnose and develop solutions to questions such as:

- "How do we improve relationships on the plant floor?"
- "We think our middle managers have too much on their plate? Can you find out?"
- "Can you help our hospital become more patient-centric?"
- "How can teams from different countries and/or firms work effectively to develop a joint product?"
- "Our culture is slipping. What do we do?"

Anthropological theory and the methods, along with a holistic approach to the context, position anthropologists like me to help solve difficult and often longstanding organizational issues.

My goals are to

1. Keep my eyes and ears open to learn from a cross-section of people.
2. Identify the patterns emerging from what people say and do.
3. Explain “what is going on” to project sponsors using my qualitative and quantitative data.
4. Develop a preliminary set of recommendations to address the issues.
5. Collaborate with project sponsors to validate and prioritize those recommendations, and 6) (if asked) implement the prioritized recommendations and evaluate their effectiveness.

What is the value of anthropological research in organizational settings? A business colleague once told me, “You pinpoint exactly what the problems are.” How is this possible? Sampling is purposeful and the sample size is relatively small, thereby permitting in-depth exploration.

Capturing study-participant perspectives ensures the data is reflective of local knowledge, and is credible and robust. Triangulating data through multiple methods (e.g., interviews, observation, documents) reveals connections within the data set so the research results can be delivered with confidence.

Explore my book for more information: [The Cultural Dimension of Global Business](#), 9th ed., 2023.

Anthropology has many different definitions, but in the end, what brings anthropologists together is their interest in humans and their differences.

Study of behavior from the past, or study of our influence on different matters, anthropologists are tied back to culture, and how it impacts our lives.

Anthropology is essential to understand but also discover our differences and celebrate them.





### **Maïna Durafour**

Maïna is a journalism student at the University of Connecticut and an intern for People Are Culture and Flip the Lens. She will be graduating in May 2024, and plans to become a documentarist in cultural journalism. She thinks culture is important because it is a way to connect to people, but also to learn constantly about the world, its differences and maybe about ourselves too. As a future journalist, she wants to help people to reconnect with culture, and everything that it involves.

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Greetings!



I'm [Meg](#), the founder of People Are Culture, which shares stories of people around the world who create and preserve culture.

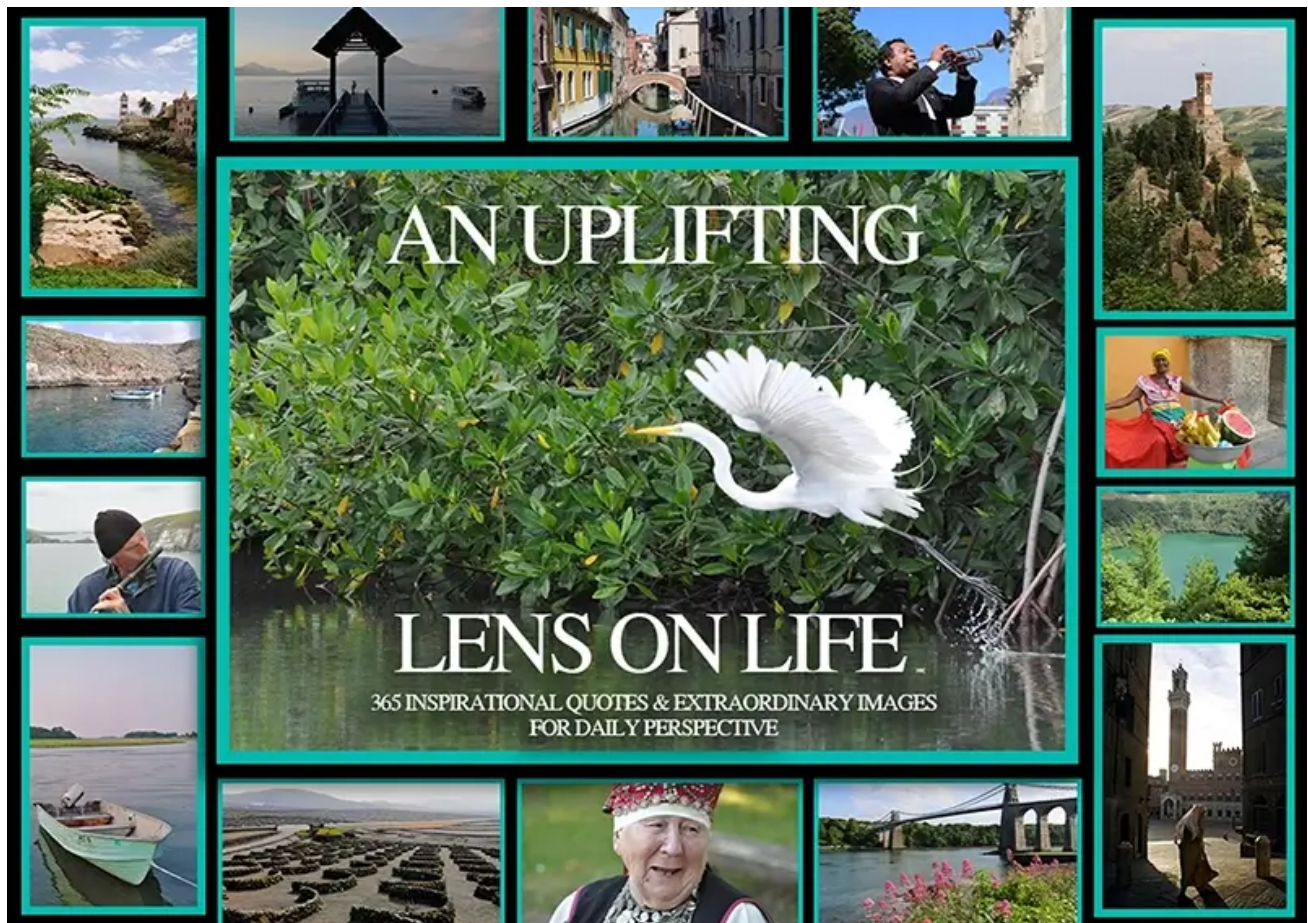
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