## Chapter 1: Culture and Meaning

### Problem 1: How can people begin to understand beliefs and behaviors that are different from their own?

The goals of Chapter 1 include:

--To introduce students to the anthropological use of the culture concept.

--To raise the issues of ethnocentrism and relativism.

--To provide materials for the discussion of anthropological fieldwork and the ways that anthropologists interpret the meanings that people ascribe to experience.

--To reinforce the idea that Americans, like others, are cultural beings worthy of anthropological study and analysis.

--To instruct students that learning about other cultures tells much about their own society.

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### Question 1.1:  Why do human beings differ in their beliefs and behaviors?

### *Suggested Exercises*

Exercise 1.1: The Meaning of Food

Food is a cultural creation; that is, human beings define what is and what is not food. For example, consider the items listed here—all of which serve as food for one group of people or another. Which of these would you eat, and which would you not eat? If there are any you would not eat, explain why.

**Yes                              No**eel  
kangaroo tail  
dog  
guinea pig  
raw squid  
sea urchin (sea slugs)  
ants  
monkey brains  
grubs  
possum  
rattlesnake  
iguana  
horse  
dolphin  
pickled pig's feet  
haggis (stuffed intestines)  
cow brains  
blood sausage  
raw steak  
rotten meat  
armadillo

Exercise 1.1 is a good first exercise because it asks students to think about their own perspectives on a cultural domain—food—that they easily identify with. It illustrates for students the impact of culture on the meanings people assign things and usually inspires some good anecdotes from students about new food experiences, while allowing the instructor to bring in some of her or his own experiences; my own favorite involved the Cree delicacy of aged (rancid) moose fat. I include rotten meat on the list because I later explain to students that, from a chemical perspective, cooking meat is simply a way of accelerating the rotting process.

As an individual exercise this shouldn't take more than about 5 minutes. As a group exercise in which members must reach some consensus on what they consider edible, it shouldn’t take much more than 10 minutes.

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### Suggested Films

*Bali: Creation of the Gods*. The Pennsylvania State University, Audio-Visual Services, Special Services Building, University Park, PA  16802. 60 minutes.

An excellent film about Bali, with a very good section on the meaning of death for the Balinese.

*The Public Mind*. PBS Video, 11858 Grange Ave., Los Angeles, CA  90025. 60 minutes.

A Bill Moyers special on the impact of advertising on the meanings Americans assign experience. The program is in four parts of 15 minutes each; the first, *Consuming Images,* provides an excellent illustration of the importance of symbols in America and how symbolic action reinforces particular views of the world.

*Invisible Walls*.  The Pennsylvania State University, Audio-Visual Services, Special Services Building, University Park, PA  16802.   12 minutes.

An excellent, brief illustration of the meanings Americans assign to part of their experience--space.

*India's Sacred Cow*.  Indiana University Audio-Visual Center, Bloomington, IN  47404.   28 minutes.

Illustrates the meaning of domestic cattle to Hindu people and how what may constitute food varies from culture to culture.

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### Internet Resources

The University of Manitoba maintains a site dealing with the culture concept and its history at:

<http://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/anthropology/courses/122/module1/concept.html>

YouTube. The ubiquity of the YouTube website has made it possible to find cultural “clips.” As with any investigation what is actual (empirically verified) from what is fabricated needs to be discerned. It is possible to find classic ethnographic film clips on YouTube simply by typing in keywords. It is more likely to find fabrications. As an instructor this is a good opportunity to teach about research and veracity of what is discovered. Students can easily find bizarre foods on YouTube (and the Food Network) for this exercise.

You may also wish to explore the question of true anthropological investigation and faked reports. The following link provides reported real footage of a first contact with a tribe in New Guinea (recall the Tasaday controversy and the Piltdown hoax).

<http://www.sciencedump.com/content/tribe-meets-white-man-first-time>

It would be good to compare this with documentary film *First Contact* (1983) by [Bob Connolly](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bob_Connolly&action=edit&redlink=1) and [Robin Anderson](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Robin_Anderson&action=edit&redlink=1) (DER Documentary).

### Suggested Readings

Spradley and McCurdy, *Conformity and Conflict*: *Ethnography and Culture*, James P. Spradley.

Angeloni, *Anthropology 08/09:* Where Fat Is a Mark of Beauty, Ann M. Simmons; Alcohol in the Western World by Bert L. Valee.

Podolefsky & Brown*, Applying Cultural Anthropology:* Chinese Table Manners: You Are How You Eat, by Eugene Cooper; Peter J. Brown, Culture and the Evolution of Obesity; Slumber’s Unexplored Landscape by Bruce Bower.

Phillip Whitten, Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives*:* Close Encounters, by Stephen Thayer,

Haviland, Gordon and Vivanco, *Talking About People:*  Anthropology: Distinguished Lecture by Laura Nader; Say “Cheese”! The Disney Order That Is Not So Mickey Mouse, by Clifford D. Shearing and Philip C. Stenning

Devita and Armstrong, *Distant Mirrors:* Encounters with the Elderly in America, by Yohko Tsuji; A Russian Teacher in America by Andre Toom.

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### Question 1.2:  How do people judge the beliefs and behaviors of others?

### *Suggested Exercises*

Exercise 1.2a: Recognizing Ethnocentrism

*Individually* write down whether you "agree" or "disagree" with each statement that follows. Then, going over each statement in order, check to see if anyone disagrees with each statement being considered.  If even one person disagrees, change the wording so that the statement is acceptable to *all.* You may not simply "agree to disagree." 

STATEMENTS:  
  
1.  The fact that the United States was able to place people on the moon proves its technological superiority.  
2.  Foreigners coming to live here should give up their foreign ways and adapt to the new country as quickly as possible.  
3.  Many of the world's populations do not take enough initiative to develop themselves; therefore they remain "underdeveloped."  
4.  Minority members of any population should be expected to conform to the customs and values of the majority.

This exercise is a modified version of one posted on the e-mail list XCULT-L by Kerry Kind of the University of Kentucky.  It is an effective way to introduce students to the subtleties of ethnocentrism.  It works very well in groups and takes about 15 minutes of group work, with another 10 to 20 minutes (depending on class size) for each group to present its views.

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### Suggested Films

*The Dervishes of Kurdistan*.  Indiana University Audio-Visual Center, Bloomington, IN  47404.   52 minutes.

A film that depicts the ceremonies and beliefs of the Dervishes.  A good way to promote discussion about the impact of the meanings people ascribe experience.  Good sequence on believers "taking electricity" and chewing glass to demonstrate their faith.  Part of the Disappearing Worlds series.

*Salamanders: A Night at the Phi Delta House*.  The Pennsylvania State University, Audio-Visual Services, Special Services Building, University Park, PA  16802.   13 minutes.

Fraternity members and female guests celebrate the end of the school year by eating live salamanders.  A discussion-provoking introduction to American culture, and a good discussion piece for ethnocentrism.

*Rites*.  Filmakers Library, 124 E. 40th Street, New York, N.Y.  10016. 52 minutes.

An excellent film for discussing the limits of relativism.  Discusses the contexts in which female circumcision is practiced, along with its history.  Also presents the attacks of Westerners on the practice and counteraccusations that critics are cultural imperialists.

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### Internet Resources

The American Anthropological Association maintains resources on ethics in anthropology at http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethics.htm

You can find lots of resources on the Nacirema at http://www.anthrosource.net/doi/abs/10.1525/tea.2003.10.1.22?journalCode=tea/.

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### Suggested Readings

Podolefsky & Brown, *Applying Cultural Anthropology:*  
Body Ritual Among the Nacirema by Horace Miner; Circumcision, Pluralism and Dilemmas of Cultural Relativism by Corinne A. Kratz

Angeloni, *Anthropology 08/09*  
Body Ritual Among the Nacirema by Horace Miner;

Devita & Armstrong, *Distant Mirrors:*  
A European Anthropologist's Personal and Ethnographic Impressions of the United States, by Emanuel J. Drechsel; Growing Up American: Doing the Right Thing, by Amparo B. Ojeda; Body Ritual Among the Nacirema by Horace Miner; One Hundred Percent American by Ralph Linton

Haviland, Gordon and Vivanco, *Talking About People:*Forms of Address: How Their Social Functions May Vary by Salikokoby   S. Mufwene; The Ugly American Revisted, by James L. Brain

John H. McDonald, *The Applied Anthropology Reader*:  The Fox Project by Sol Tax

Exercise 1.2b: The Wari attempt to obliterate the memory of the dead in their funeral

practices, as do many other societies. Others, however—such as ours—memorialize the dead; forgetting them would be an act of disrespect. Try to list the ways that we try to keep the memory of deceased persons alive, and speculate why we do that rather than trying to forget them.

### Suggested Reading

### Danforth, Loring M. 1982 *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

### Internet Resource

<http://www.religionlink.com/tip_050725.php>

Exercise 1.2c: You have been doing anthropological research in the United States with

a group of people who believe they must live the life described in the Bible—particularly the book of Acts. They live communally, sharing all property; they believe that women should be subservient to their husbands; they enforce rules against drinking alcoholic beverages and smoking. The group has lately come under attack by a group in the local community as being a “dangerous cult.” You know that although their beliefs and practices differ from those of the larger society around them, they are not dangerous

and in fact lead lives of harmony. They have asked you to speak in their defense. Can you do this without sacrificing your objectivity?

### Suggested Reading

### Rosen, Lawrence. 1977 The Anthropologist as Expert Witness. *American Anthropologist* 79(3): 555-578

### Question 1.3:  Is it possible to see the world through the eyes of others?

### *Suggested Exercises*

Exercise 1.3: Learning from Embarrassing Moments

Think of some awkward or embarrassing situation created by something you did or didn't do, said or didn't say. What was inappropriate about your behavior, and why did it lead to misunderstanding or embarrassment? What did you learn from the experience about the meaning of your or others' behavior?

This brief exercise can be done in groups or by asking students to prepare a statement of one paragraph or so. It illustrates the role of miscommunication in the process of learning about others.

Additional Exercise: Fieldwork among the Alphans and Betans

There are some simulations on the market that are intended to illustrate the difficulties of interpreting other cultures, the best probably being the cross-cultural simulation, "Bafa Bafa" However, most can be used only in classes of 30 students or less and require at least two class periods. I have used the following abbreviated version with classes of more than 60 students, and it works very well.

Divide the class into two groups, making one group the Alphans, the other the Betans, and give them the corresponding **written** instructions (below).  Ideally you should have a separate room or at least a hallway into which one group can be sent. You need chips or pieces of paper of the colors listed in the Alphan instructions to give the Alphans to exchange. I use poker chips and give each student four or five different chips to start with.

Once each group gets started enacting its culture (about 5 minutes), ask each group to select an observer to go and visit the other culture and report back on her or his findings. I generally give the observers 2-4 minutes to make their observations. After they make their reports, each group selects another observer to send and report back.  I generally repeat the observer exchange three times. Then I get the groups back together and ask them to report to one another their interpretation of the other's culture.

**INSTRUCTIONS TO THE ALPHANS:**  
  
**You are a member of the Alphans.  Your society is very egalitarian and resource oriented. The people freely interact with one another and are trade oriented.   They are obsessed with collecting colored tokens and believe it desirable to have tokens only of one color.  
  
Whenever you meet others you give them a gift (chip).   If they return a gift, you give them another; if not, you turn your back on them and try to find someone who will exchange with you.   
  
The Alphan language is very simple; it consists of four words: red, white, blue, gold.  Alphans use these words to seek appropriate trading partners.  
  
To summarize the rules:  
1. Freely give gifts of tokens, but expect tokens back.  
2. If you don't get what you want, seek another partner.  
3. Try to collect tokens of the same color.  
4. Speak only Alphan.**

Alphans inevitably react to the gender discrimination of the Betans and their propensity to stand very close, while Betans tend to focus on the trade orientation and "rudeness" of the Alphans. With very large classes, certain groups of students can be asked to enact the Betan and Alphan roles, with others being asked to record their observations of the interactions.

###### INSTRUCTIONS TO THE BETANS You are a member of the Betans.  As a people you are very easy-going, and friendly, although there are interaction rules that must be followed.   Betans stand very close to each other when interacting--no more than about six inches apart.  Anyone who stands farther away is being impolite and should be ignored.  In addition, Betans initiate conversations with a light touch on the left shoulder.  Someone who fails to do that is being rude.  Betans like to talk about the weather. They value women more than men and eagerly recruit new women into their groups by trying to convince them that the weather for their group is better than that for others.  Foreign men are usually ignored. A woman (the oldest) leads each group.  A person who desires to speak to her must first ask her permission by tapping himself or herself on the left shoulder.  Failure to do so is a flagrant violation of the rules, and anyone doing that is immediately ostracized.  Sometimes the group leader will grant permission to speak, sometimes not.  To summarize the rules: 1. Initiate interaction with a touch. 2. Stand no more than six inches away from the person you are addressing. 3. Make sure to ask permission by tapping your left shoulder before addressing the group leader. 4. Avoid foreign men, but try to recruit foreign women to your group. 5. Talk about the weather.

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### Suggested Films

*Margaret Mead and Samoa*. Wombat Productions, 250 W. 57th St., Suite 2421, New York, N.Y.  10019. 51 minutes.

Focuses on the conflict over the accuracy of Mead's characterization of life in Samoa and Derek Freedman's contention that Mead's descriptions were biased by her desire to make specific points. Good film for discussion of the difficulty of accurately characterizing other cultures.

*Margaret Mead's New Guinea Journal*.  Indiana University Audio-Visual Center, Bloomington, IN  47404.   90 minutes.

Follows Margaret Mead on her return to the village of Peri in New Guinea in 1967.

*A Man Called Bee: Studying the Yanomamö*:  Documentary Educational Resources, 101 Morse St., Watertown, MA  02172.   43 minutes

Follows anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon during his fieldwork with the Yanomamö of southern Venezuela, noting the problems he encountered collecting information.

*To Find the Baruya Story*.  University of Minnesota, Media Distribution, Box 734 Mayo Memorial Bldg., 420 Delaware St. S.E., Minneapolis, MN  55455.   64 minutes.

The account of French Anthropologist Maurice Godelier's work among the Baruya of the eastern highlands of Papua New Guinea.

*Papua New Guinea: Anthropology on Trial*.  Indiana University Audio-Visual Center, Bloomington, IN  47404.   57 minutes.

A view of anthropology from the point of view of the people studied by anthropologists.  Examines the impact of anthropological studies on peoples in New Guinea.

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### Internet Resources

Narrated by Alan Macfarlane, Professor of Anthropological Science at the University of Cambridge, this 53-minute film takes the viewer through the fieldwork endeavour, from leaving one's own country through to getting back to it after fieldwork. Students of anthropology about to embark on fieldwork are the target audience.

http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/DO/filmshow/film30.htm

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### Suggested Readings

Spradley and McCurdy*, Conformity and Conflict:*  
Lessons from the Field by George Gmelch

Angeloni, *Anthropology 08/09;* Before: The Sixties by Conrad Phillip Kottak; Tricking and Tripping by Claire E. Sterk

Podolefsky & Brown, *Applying Cultural Anthropology:*  
Claire E. Sterk, Tricking and Tripping: Fieldwork on Prostitution in the Era of AIDS

Phillip Whitten, Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives*:*  
Henry Fountain, Now the Ancient Ways Are Less Mysterious.

Haviland, Gordon and Vivanco, *Talking About People:* Going Native?, by William J. Klausner,  ; In the Disaster Zone - Anthropologists and the Ambiguity of Aid by   Alex de Woal; Fact Versus Fiction: An Ethnographic Paradox Set in the Seychelles by Marian Benedict; An Anthropologist Learns the Value of Fear by Elizabeth Garland

John H. McDonald, *The Applied Anthropology Reader*: Confronting Anthropological Ethics: Ethnographic Lessons from Central America by Philippe Bourgois; Informed Consent in Anthropological Research: We Are Not Exempt by Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban; The Pursuit of Social Knowledge: Methodology and the Practice of Anthropology by Timothy J. Finan and John van Willigen

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### Question 1.4:  How can the meanings that others find in experience be interpreted and described?

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### Suggested Films

*Ring of Fire: An Indonesian Odyssey*. Mystic Fire Video, P.O. Box 1092, Cooper Station, New York, N.Y. 10276.  58 minutes.

Mostly a travel film, but does contain a brief sequence of a Balinese cockfight.

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### Internet Resources

If you'd like to see a cockfight, here is the trailer to *Blood and Incense, a film about cockfighting and ritual in Indonesia:*

[*http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3L\_JsicztI&feature=related*](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3L_JsicztI&feature=related)

*See also:* [*http://hotdocsaudience.bside.com/2008/films/bloodandincense\_hotdocs2008*](http://hotdocsaudience.bside.com/2008/films/bloodandincense_hotdocs2008)

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### Suggested Readings

Spradley and McCurdy, *Conformity and Conflict:* Shakespeare in the Bush, by Laura Bohannan; Body Art as Visual Language by Enid Schildkrout

Angeloni, *Anthropology 08/09:* Shakespeare in the Bush by Laura Bohannan

Podolefsky & Brown, *Applying Cultural Anthropology:* Shakespeare in the Bush, by Laura Bohannan,

Phillip Whitten, Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives*:* Shakespeare in the Bush, by Laura Bohannan; Steel Axes for Stone-Age Australians, by Lauriston Sharp,  .

Devita & Armstrong, *Distant Mirrors*: Giving, Withholding, and Meeting Midway: A Poets Ethnography.

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### Question 1.5:  What can learning about other peoples tell Americans about themselves?

### *Suggested Exercises*

Additional Exercise:  A McDonald's Ethnography

Students should be able to begin to analyze portions of their own culture by this point. I have asked my students to use shopping malls and McDonald's restaurants as cultural texts, and relate what they can deduce about American culture from these settings. Here are the instructions I use for the McDonald's exercise.

###### Your anthropological expedition has beamed down from the planet Dune. The research director of your expedition has instructed your group to deduce from your surroundings the nature of the society in which you've landed, and you have ended up in a McDonald's restaurant. If you examine this setting as a text made of significant symbols that tells you something about the meaning Americans assign to certain areas of their life, what might you conclude about the following: FOOD GENDER FAMILY

###### ECONOMICS Be certain to specify the key symbols that carry the meanings you discern.

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### Suggested Films

*Winning and Losing (Some Notes on a High School Football Season)*. The Pennsylvania State University, Audio-Visual Services, Special Services Building, University Park, PA  16802.   59 minutes.

Documentary filmed in 1984 which follows a high school football team from Pennsylvania, and explores the role of sports in our society and the values expressed through them.

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### Internet Resources

If you'd like to see a good example of how to study U.S. culture, check out the Silicon Valley Cultures Project Website at:

<http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svcp/>

For a documentary on American football (high school) you may want to check out the film *Go Tigers!* Directed by Kenneth A. Carlson the film explores the lives of people in the town of Massillon, Ohio. Interestingly, in 1974 Peter Davis used clips from the Tigers football team in his award winning documentary *Hearts and Minds*. The clips were juxtaposed with American soldiers fighting in Vietnam.

<http://www.gotigersfilm.com/>

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### Suggested Readings

Spradley and McCurdy, *Conformity and Conflict:*Baseball Magic by George Gmelch; Japanese Hip-Hop and the Globalization of Popular Culture.

Angeloni, *Anthropology 08/09:* Baseball Magic by George Gmelch.

Phillip Whitten, Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives*:* Body Ritual among the Nacirema, by Horace Miner; Borderline Cases: Medical Practices and National Culture.

Devita & Armstrong, *Distant Mirrors:* My American Glasses, by Francisco Martins Ramos; A Cross-Cultural Experience: The Test of Real Participant Observation, by E. L. Cerroni-Long; The American Cultural Configuration by Lowell D. Holmes and Ellen Rhoads Holmes; America and I by Hervé Varenne.

Haviland, Gordon and Vivanco, *Talking About People*: The Refrigerator and the American Ideas of Home.

### Case Study in Doing Anthropology # 1: The Consumer Experience

### *Suggested Exercises*

The following exercise is suggested by Paco Underhill’s work in retail anthropology and is designed to encourage students to look at familiar things in new ways.

Exercise 1.6: Researching a Store

Paco Underhill has what he calls a self-exam where he asks the owner or CEO of a store to just stand with him for 30 minutes and observe. Inevitably they see things they never even thought about. In this exercise you are going to play CEO or Owner or manager of a store. You pick the store, but what you need to do is this:

1. As you approach the store, what do you see? Do you know from a distance what is sold in there?

2. Stand right outside the store. What do you see in the windows? Can you see anything?  Are the windows clear?

3. Go in the store.  Are there baskets to put things in? Are they positioned near the door (A bad idea) or are they scattered around the store (better)?

4.  What strikes you as you transition into the store? What attracts your attention? Are there signs? How does the merchandise appear to you?

5.  What is the register set-up? Do people have to wait, and, if so, are there any distractions to help time go faster?

6. Are there any opportunities to touch or feel or try the merchandise?

7. How is the merchandise grouped? Are things that are adjacent to each other arranged so that the sale of one might prompt the sale of the other? Are they arranged in ways that would appeal to women, men, kids, the elderly?

8. How are non-public spaces designed? What are the rest rooms like? If it’s a clothing store, are the dressing rooms likely to add to or detract from the likelihood of a sale?

### Suggested Readings

Spradley and McCurdy, *Conformity and Conflict:* Using Anthropology by David W. McCurdy; Career Advice for Anthropology Undergraduates by John T. Omohundro

Podolefsky & Brown, *Applying Cultural Anthropology:*Corporate Anthropologists by Jennifer J. Laabs; Using Cultural Skills for Cooperative Advantage in Japan by Richard H. Reeves-Ellington; Coming of Age in Palo Alto by Katie Hafner

John H. McDonald, *The Applied Anthropology Reader*: Proprietary Research and Anthropological Ethics by William O. Beeman; Organizational Problems in Industry by Eliot Chapple; Business Anthropology in a Work Subculture: Korean and Japanese Young, Single Working Women by Nancy Rosenberger; Anthropology and Social marketing by Christopher A. Brown; Shopping Spies by Carrie McLaren

**Glossary of Key Terms**

**Anthropological fieldwork** (p.15): Firsthand or direct immersion and observation of the people or culture a researcher is trying to understand.

**Cultural Anthropology** (p.2): One of the four major subfields of anthropology, with the others being physical or biological anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics.

**Cultural Text** (p.22): A way of thinking about culture as a text of significant symbols—words, gestures, drawings, natural objects—that carries meaning.

**Culture** (p.4): The system of meanings about the nature of experience that are shared by a people and passed on from one generation to another.

**Ethnographic Method** (p.15): The immersion of researchers in the lives and cultures of

the peoples they are trying to understand in order to comprehend the meanings these people ascribe to their existence.

**Ethnocentric Fallacy** (p.8):The mistaken notion that the beliefs and behaviors of other

cultures can be judged from the perspective of one’s own culture.

**Ethnocentrism** (p.8): The tendency to judge the beliefs and behaviors of other cultures

from the perspective of one’s own culture.

**Participant Observation** (p. 15): The active participation of a researcher or observer in the lives of those being studied.

**Relativism** (p.9): The attempt to understand the beliefs and behaviors of other cultures in terms of the culture in which they are found.

**Relativistic Fallacy** (p.10): The mistaken idea that it is impossible to make moral judgments about the beliefs and behaviors of members of other cultures.