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WHY study Anthropology?

Our contemporary world is complex. Anthropology confronts its challenges by seeking ways to understand the perspectives, values, experiences and practices of people and communities in parts of the world. Without this ability to comprehend where other people are “coming from”, the hope for active, creative solutions to social problems – be they managing diversity in the workplace or developing social policies that best suit changing needs – will remain unfilled. Anthropology seeks to contribute to these solutions by asking questions that are not generally asked, eliciting the profound complexity of ordinary life and common sense and the ways these impact on relationships.

Anthropology provides practical training in analysis and methods of discovery that are useful in any activity that demands insight, research, and communication. Contrary to the outdated image of Anthropology as the study of antiquarian "customs", the methods of anthropology are ideal for comprehending both past and present situations of social upheaval and transformation, such as those associated with industrial labour and labour migration, urbanization, political conflict and democratization, and the necessity of strangers to live productively and peacefully with one another.

HOW do Anthropologists work?

Fieldwork is the main component of an Anthropologist’s research tool-kit. It is applicable in every context, whether one studies the work of healers, conflict-resolvers, corporate actors, NGO workers, global capitalism, actors or soldiers.

Why is fieldwork so important? Well, the work of producing new insights into social life demands intensive study of social situations, practices and forms of knowledge, through close observation and participation in the daily life of those from whom we seek a local understanding.

Through fieldwork, Anthropologists are able to make discoveries (rather than make assumptions) about culture and human behaviour - and are able to reveal the extraordinary in the familiar and the familiar in the extraordinary.

Through comparison, Anthropology studies the way people use identity and frameworks of meaning in specific situations, and then uses the insights gained from one situation to understand practices and problems observed in others.

WHAT is Anthropology?

“The purpose of Anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences.” Ruth Benedict.

Anthropology is a form of disciplined curiosity about people’s lifeways and worldviews. It seeks to understand human interactions in all kinds of social groupings, including families, networks, communities, institutions, organisations, groups, societies, and nations. The concepts of “culture” and “society” are central to the discipline.

- culture: preconceptions, values, knowledge and norms that structure and give meaning to people’s relationships.
- society: linked institutions that structure and organise social behaviour

They help us to describe and understand how institutions and organisations work. Humanity is unique in the extent of its ability to absorb and create behavioural plans and in its capacity to change them. We are not born with culture in our heads – we learn it in social settings, adapt and modify it creatively throughout our lives. This means that there is tremendous variation in how we organise ourselves over time.

In the past Anthropology was largely the study of small-scale non-literate communities. No longer! Nowadays, Anthropologists study a complex range of modern institutions, popular culture, business organisations, contemporary religious forms – indeed, any sites in which identity and meaning are important. Anthropological knowledge and skills have become increasingly significant as we grapple to understand our complex and changing contemporary world.

You can find out more on our homepage.
WHAT can I do with Anthropology?

Unlike the so-called ‘hard sciences’ like engineering and computing which prepare students for broad careers in similar fields, Anthropology enables you to create your own niche of expertise by helping you to develop your fields of interest. Anthropology qualifies students for almost any job that requires intelligence, critical thinking and the ability to find information. Anthropologists are useful to prospective employers because they are able to draw on comparative information about societies across the globe to challenge conventional wisdom and therefore to provide creative alternatives.

Graduates of the Department of Anthropology at UCT work in fields as diverse as medical research, housing and energy policy, journalism, documentary production, drama, psychology, advertising, urban planning, tourism, environmental science, industrial relations – and of course as professional anthropologists. Some have remained in academia and are professors in universities in South Africa and abroad. Some work as academic researchers in the Medical Research Council and the Groote Schuur Hospital. Others have entered the NGO and consultancy fields, where they do research and advocacy work on, among others, maternal and child health, reproductive health, housing, nature resource management, environmentalism, conflict management, Medicins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), development work, social research agencies. Graduates also work in government – in municipal roles, as researchers on the Land Claims Commission, the Gender Commission, and in local government.

Core courses include the Following areas of study:

- Theories of culture and their historical development, using ethnographical examples
- Ethnographies and anthropological theory
- Field research
- Culture, ethnicity, race and gender
- Cultural relativism and social constructedness

Optional courses include:

- Political and Economic Anthropology – power, wealth and identity
- Comparative anthropological approaches to health, disease and health care
- Religious belief and ritual, symbols and practices
- The rural environment and responses to environmental disasters
- Understanding poverty and development through an anthropological perspective

WHAT students say about Anthropology

“Anthropology is an extremely diverse field that allows the fusion of a number of disciplines and interests. In Anthropology I have found space for dialogue between natures, cultures and the natural sciences. It has allowed me to bridge both my interest in environment and people”

“Anthropology has given me the research tools and critical perspective to gain a deeper and informed insight into both myself and the intricacies of the social world in which we live. It has completely changed the way I think about and approach the world”.

“One of my favourite ways to understand what anthropology does is captured in a quote by Margaret Mead, who said that “Anthropology demands the open mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder that which one would not be able to guess”

For further information Visit our home page: www.socanth.uct.ac.za email: san-admin@uct.ac.za Tel: (021) 650-3678