

Signifier Mapping

Dr Beth Meriam authored the following material to document the signifier design process for a Cultural Mapping project. Dr Meriam was the Principal anthropologist on the project team.

This research is grounded in the anthropological understanding that each individual is a unique 'energy source' (Bateson 1972) responsible for acting upon their socially and culturally inflected interpretations in an equally particular way. These indexes capture the actual moments of interaction, of the coming together of individuals in conversational and behavioural exchange (Rapport and Overing 2000). The indexes in this research focus on the socio-cultural field (rather than physical, archaeological or linguistic sub-disciplines), which has been a key element of the discipline since its establishment in the 19th century. Above all, this report highlights how this Cultural Mapping project will offer unparalleled global access into anthropology's own minimal definition: that is, a means to see the Other as Self, and the Self as Other.

Original concepts

According to Wrobel (1991), a concept is a 'generalised description of a set of objects.' Consequently, each triad and dyad is derived from 'meaningful clusters' (or, more accurately, overlapping fields) that reflect core themes in anthropology. As a starting point, we identify these fields and subfields as:

Art

Creative/drama/fiction/image/literature/dance/music/play

Behaviour

Experience/personality/age/gender/honour/shame/identity/memory/reflexivity/originality

Power

Politics/work/capitalism/bureaucracy/elite/status/exchange/liberal/equality/exploitation/underprivileged/hegemony/imperialism/institution/violence/wealth/work/standards /ideology/law/markets/money/property/slavery/state

Civilisation

Culture/masses/modern/popular/tradition/regional/society/race/taboo/time & space/history

Philosophy

Materialism/idealism/pragmatic/utilitarian/welfare/radical/romantic/rational/realism/socialism/rationality/cosmology/belief/life/death/dreams/ancestors/individualism/magic/religion

Alliance

Common/community/consensus/kinship/family/folk/house/household/friendship/status/private/sex/humanity/individual/mediation/marriage

Communication

Dialect/media/myth/language/literacy/(mass) media/jargon/names & naming/translation

Development

Learning/education/evolution/expert/progressive/genius/generation/improve/intellectual/revolution/cognition

Environment

Ecology/nature/technology/science/land & landscape/migration/technology

Use of concepts

The triads and dyads reference the discipline's key debates, such as nature versus culture (Lévi-Strauss, Strathern, Ingold), self and other (Geertz, Marcus and Fischer, Fabian) and universalism and relativism (Wilson, Todorov).

It is the holistic emphasis of cultural anthropology that distinguishes it most clearly from other related disciplines. For example, an anthropologist may focus his or her research on a particular dimension of culture, such as religion or political organization, but that dimension will also be described in terms of its relationship to the 'complex whole' of the local culture (Tylor 1871). The idea of the anthropological object being the 'complex whole' of human social existence has been updated regularly, most famously by Geertz.

In the essay, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', (1973) Geertz explains that he adopted the term from philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Ryle pointed out that if someone winks at us without a context, we do not know exactly what a specific action means. He also emphasized that, as the context changes, the meaning of the action changes, which is true for all human behaviour. Geertz distinguishes between a 'thin description' (describing only the action itself), and a 'thick description', which also explains the context of practices and discourse within a society. According to Geertz, the task of the anthropologist is to give thick descriptions. Geertz's work has a particular relevance to the Cultural Mapping project as a new, radically participatory and actor-led research methodology. It seeks

to generate volumes of high-quality, thick, quantifiable descriptions in an accessible, cost-effective and contextually valid way.

In a similar way to the discipline of anthropology as a whole, the ethnographic concepts employed here, are not bounded, internally coherent phenomena with a unitary meaning that can be effectively isolated from environmental influence. The concepts underlying the index sets are, in themselves, 'structures of process' that are not limited by fixed margins. Instead they imply a contextual situatedness that makes the boundaries of conceptual systems fuzzy and difficult to demarcate exactly (see Juarrero, Lewellen 2002). As such, the index sets work against the western tendency to maintain a categorical purity that does not exist in practice (see Carrier on 'Occidentalism').

A note on 'culture'

Many anthropologists now eschew the idea of separate 'cultures' (except in the political or 'discursive' sense, see Wright 1998), in recognition that identification and belonging are not concrete facts but shift contextually in practice. For example in *The Archaeology of Plural and Changing Identities Beyond Identification*, Conlin, Casella and Fowler highlight how social actors belong to multiple identity groups at any moment in their life, and may deploy one of many potential labels in describing the identities of such an actor. Furthermore, the process of researching 'a culture' often serves to produce that entity (Abu-Lughod, Handler, Keesing).

Ferguson's work on 'cultural styles' (or 'performative competences') offers a nuanced and realistic alternative (1999). The analytical lens of cultural styles removes the fixity and reification of the culture concept, and allows analysis to focus on culture as a continually evolving social process. 'Culture,' a core concept in anthropology, is understood here to be 'dynamically changing over time and space – the product of ongoing human interaction' (Skelton and Allen 1999).

Methodology

First, core concepts were clustered to reflect key elements of sociality identified by leading contemporary anthropologists (Barnard and Spencer 1996, Williams 1983, Rapport and Overing 2000). The resulting clusters summarised above that informed the subsequent indexes were interpreted as follows:

- ✿ **Arts** – common to human societies, but underpinned by differing rationalities
- ✿ **Behaviour** – relates to body and the thought processes and values underpinning embodiments and actions in the world
- ✿ **Power** – understood in the sense of the myriad micro-negotiations of interpersonal status and social influence, this perhaps the most pervasive feature of human social interaction, though different in its workings and expression worldwide
- ✿ **Civilisation** – the outcomes of organized society
- ✿ **Philosophy** – including the worlds of human meaning-making,
- ✿ **Alliance** – the actual forms of human sociality

- ❖ **Communication** – a central element of being human, the specific forms, protocols and communicational subtleties vary enormously
- ❖ **Development** – the urge to develop through learning is in-built, but furthered or frustrated by personal and social factors
- ❖ **Environment** – all human beings are influenced to degrees by environmental factors, though some societies develop or maintain their interrelations with the natural world to a greater extent than others.

Each index set (elaborated below) should be conceived as a field of analysis with a particular 'centre of gravity' drawn from a given anthropological concept or debate. These centres are discussed in turn, below.

SECTION ONE

Temporalisation

Temporality is the process of 'cultural time construction' whereby actors create and plan their activities and their temporal reference points during their life projects, thereby engaging the past and the future in the present (Munn 1992:104). Issues of time (which may be conceived and experienced as linear, cyclical, relative, part of a 'dreamtime' or 'dreaming,' social or 'emplaced') have often been secondary to other anthropological frames and issues, such as political structures, descent, ritual, work, narrative, history and cosmology, and to general theories of anthropological discourse. This triad recognises the centrality of temporal orientation in cultural life (see also Gell's Anthropology of Time).



Law

This triad looks at variance of legal sensibilities, which are embedded in different moralities and understandings about the relative locus of justice, be that formal or informal. This field focuses on how societies – with or without courts and constitutions – manage disputes, and involves finding out how various systems of justice really work in practice.

The modern anthropology of law began with Malinowski's Crime and the Savage Society in 1926. Malinowski proposed an ethnographic approach to the study of legal issues, calling for extended fieldwork in order to 'study by direct observation the rules of custom as they function in actual life' (1926: 126), which is one ethnographic component this triad extends and deepens.



This index does not merely detail a particular set of legal rules, but seeks also to explore the cultural context of law in a given situation, and to appreciate its rationality. As Malinowski put it, 'we are met by law, order, definite privileges and a well-developed system of obligations' (1926: 21). The spoken feedback channel available in this research offering answers Comaroff and Simon's (1981) call for illumination of the processes by which disputes are resolved and norms are elaborated. It also contributes to Riles (1994: 605) corollary about the alternative regimes and structures of law that inhere in any society.

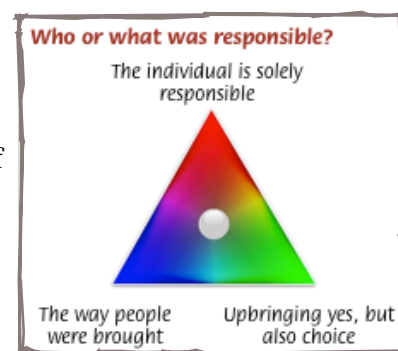
Hierarchy and equality

While issues of status are present in all societies, the social elements indexing social standing, as well as how status plays out in practice, are socially, politically and temporally specific. So-called 'hierarchical' societies or relations are characterized by differences in power, for example based on rank, class, education, gender, age and caste. These societies are the opposite of purported 'egalitarian' societies (see Bloch 1977). Dumont's concept of hierarchy focuses more on the ideological and meaningful sides of hierarchy and not so much on hierarchy as an expression of power differences. Dumont's emphasis on worldview is mirrored in the index included here.



Who or what was responsible

This triad looks at diversity of human ethics, political agency and senses of the locus of moral responsibility (for a discussion, see Edel and Edel 2000). As a wider field, it involves issues of conscience, obligation, duty, guilt and the structure of moral experience. In line with the general shift in anthropology, this triad does not focus on what should be but rather emphasises what is (ibid). While the 'law index' (above) probes a similar ethnographic-philosophical space, it does so at a different level of analysis, with the moral responsibility triad emphasising the personal rather than social.



Why did people act in that way?

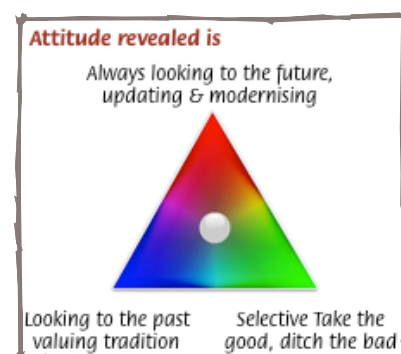
This index is derived from people's sense of rationality, their central belief and value system, which, in turn, influences what s/he deems as rational or plausible practice (Kuhn). Rationality (from the Latin 'rationari' meaning to 'think' or 'calculate') is a significant concept born out of the Enlightenment. During the 17th and 18th centuries many philosophers began to emphasize the use of reason as the best method of learning objective truth (Descartes, Locke). The ability to reason was believed to be the key faculty separating man from other animals - it is what makes us human (summed up as 'cognito ergo sum'), and therefore it is our job to utilise this benefit at all times. Issues of rationality (of ideas, action and social arrangement) have concerned anthropologists throughout the history of the discipline (notably, Evans-Pritchard, Levi-Bruhl, Winch, Sapir-Whorf). This section highlights a tension between tacit, impulsive-unordered and pragmatic rationales for action.



Other sources: M Bloch, *Prey into Hunter: the Politics of Religious Experience*; M Douglas, *Purity and Danger*; E Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic among the Azande*; D Lan, *Guns and Rain*; G Lewis, *Day of Shining Red*; C Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*; M Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence*; J Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance*; P Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*; F Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*; M Bloch & J Parry, *Death and the Regeneration of Life*; T Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*; V Raphael, *Contradicting Colonialisms: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under early Spanish Rule*.

Attitude revealed is...

Linked to the temporal index, this triad dives deeper into local researchers' personal orientation vis-à-vis each particular temporality and their agency - action on or towards particular time-oriented ends. Tradition and a focus on the past is linked with implicit or tacit knowledge (see Hobsbawm, Mumford). Modernity (which is linked to ideas of objectivity) is characterised by an overarching, universal and optimistic approach while a postmodern perspective (that links with subjectivity) highlights difference, recognises limitations and traces meaning in social context through usage (see extensive critiques by Lyotard (1979) and Appadurai).



What was it most important that people did?

Learning and development is one of the central aspects of being human – cultivation being the root of the word cultured in the sense of being learned, educated and scholarly (Lave and Wenger 1991). This triad takes learning styles analysis (Kolb) and synthesises them into a three-way index, probing people's relative weighting of their preferences. This triad mirrors a key tension within the discipline, that is, between cultural anthropology that studies norms of appropriate social behaviour (Geertz, Rabinow), cognitive anthropology that studies perception and thought (Toren, Atran) and behavioural anthropology that studies what people actually do. The latter is reflected in the ethnographic focus on 'praxis' (Ortner 1984).



Further reading: B Shore, Culture in Mind; M Cole, Cultural Psychology; R D'Andrade, The Development of Cognitive Anthropology; D Holland & N Quinn, Cultural Models in Language and Thought; E Hutchins, Cognition in the Wild; J Lave, Cognition in Practice; M Bloch, How We Think They Think; D Sperber, Explaining Culture; P Boyer, Religion explained; R Astuti, G Solomon & S Carey, Constraints on Conceptual Development; M Tomasello The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition.

The reason for people doing this was...

This triad locates people's ethics of belief in terms of expediency, scepticism or belief-purpose (the latter sometimes being glossed as 'religion'). In the words of Apel, doubt is the irritation of a secure form of behaviour, and 'belief' is the reinstitution of security in behaviour. At heart, this index delves into territory discussed under the anthropology of religion, which has been one of the discipline's core and recurrent themes since its inception (Durkheim 1912, Geertz 1966).



Why did the event in this story happen?

This triad investigates the relative 'agency' (or 'purposeful action') people feel they have to create, change and influence the course of events. Agency relates to identity, personhood, experience, knowledge, multivocality and the negotiation of meaning. The concept contrasts with the belief that a given process is inevitable and determined, or random and beyond human control. Essentially, this issue is about autonomy, subjectivity and change, which keys into the anthropology and sociology of power, centring on the works of Michel Foucault. Foucault's term 'genealogy' can be used to probe and discuss the conceptual territory of this triad. In Foucault's terms, genealogy is not the search for origins or the construction of a linear development, but seeks to show the plural and sometimes contradictory past that reveals traces of the influence that power has had on truth.



SECTION TWO

Emotional intensity, felt response, temporal (remembered), resonance and transmission

Being experiential, user-led and participatory, the actual practice of indexing is congruent with key anthropological research principles, including flexibility for cross-cultural diversity, holism and participant observation. The method breaks new ground in inviting the radical, active and creative participation of interlocutors. The indexing experience is consciously set up to include visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile (so called VACT) elements, so as to benefit from different personal and cultural learning styles (Fernald, Keller, Orton, Gillingham, Stillman and Montessori).

SECTION THREE - Dyads

Also known as polarities, these signifiers present opposites, either positive or negative.

Attitude

Agency (see Power and Autonomy section, above)

Openness – Closedness

Relates to live issues such as globalisation (Tsing, Inda & Rosaldo, Appadurai) and, historically, to the creation of the new cultural and social genres, for example in art, literature and cultural life. Open relates to a relative welcoming of new influences, a willingness to learn, curiosity and high creative potential. Paradoxically, perhaps, it is

often at times of extreme change, that people attempt to define and guard identities and styles more rigorously than during periods of relative stability (Handler).

Logical versus intuitive

Personal responses reflect a core debate within the anthropological discipline. Namely, while humanistic anthropologists employ intuitive insight and empathic imagination in the attempt to evoke and interpret cultural variability, scientific anthropologists utilize logical analysis and empirical investigation in the effort to describe and explain cultural phenomena.

Situational / contextual

This dyad brings together a key debate about particularism (specificity, change, relative values) and universalism (basic commonality in people and systems) – see Charles Taylor, Richard Wilson and Levi-Strauss.

Nature / culture

One of the key debates circulates around nature versus nurture, and the relative weight given to these elements in shaping human personal and social behaviour. Some anthropologists have challenged and critiqued the nature-culture dualism. For example, Strathern, challenged this dualism in *No Nature No Culture: The Hagen Case*. In this illuminating critique, she highlights the Hagen people of Papua New Guinea's association between two pairs of contrasts: wild and domestic things, male and female (Strathern and Strathern 1971). Emerging fields also provoke a rethinking of nature and culture, for instance, genetics (see Franklin's critique on the social meaning of DNA, which contrasts 'objective' genetic facts and socially-forged identities).

Local / global

Describes the influence of territorial and localised phenomena relative to exotic and cosmopolitan influences (cf. Ferguson, Strathern). This issue is particularly salient in politicised fields such as postcolonial anthropology, the anthropology of globalisation and other movements that espouse a politics of dignity, cultural difference, democracy, dissent and tolerance (see Werbner's 2008 work, *Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism*).

Local and global are also important in debates around identity formation, subject positions and the agency granted, assumed or denied on that basis. Focusing on the cultural implications of transnational capital, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has tendered a useful set of terms for a world that has undergone what he calls, after Deleuze and Guattari, 'deterritorialization.' In Appadurai's understanding, a variety of 'scapes' (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes) are constantly at play. Most crucial and human among these post-territorial scapes are the ethnoscapes 'who make up the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest-workers and other groups and persons [that] constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to an unprecedented degree.' This area is the focal 'scape' of the

Cultural Mapping project, and will be the field where the project will have the greatest social influence and personal impact.

Metaphor / directness

This dyad probes people's relative inclination towards more symbolic and interpretive understandings (Geertz, Schneider, Turner, Douglas), and concrete and evident knowledges, which is sometimes glossed as 'scientific' anthropology (see, for example, Harris).

SECTION FOUR

This section elaborates the triads, including references.

TIME

Present – In *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian presented a cogent argument about how, through temporalising strategies in current written and oral communication, temporality is used to systematically 'other' certain people/s, and present 'them' as different, alien or exotic to 'ourselves', the unmarked Self.

Past – In 'The Past Is a Foreign Country', Lowenthal meditates on the misuse of the past in contemporary culture, and in so doing, makes a brilliant contribution to our understanding of the present.

Future – Formerly a somewhat forgotten theme in anthropology, future became a hot topic in 1996 with an ASA conference and book entitled *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge* (Moore 1996, see especially the chapter by Strathern, see also Jedrej and Nuttall 1996).

One ethnography that unites all aspects of this triad is Lan's seminal work, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*. This work also links with studies of rationality, morality, justice and higher cause, as probed in the Cultural Mapping project. In the context of a guerrilla war, Lan's work highlights the astonishing collaboration that was forged between ancestors and their descendants, the past and present, living and dead.

JUSTICE

Revenge – discussed, famously and controversially by Napoleon Chagnon, whose 'Yanomamo: The Fierce People' is the best selling anthropological text of all time (see also *Life Histories*, *Blood Revenge*, and *Warfare in a Tribal Population*). Chagnon's work sparked a long-running and famous debate in anthropology, regarding his contention that homicide and warfare were common in the indigenous society in which he worked, and that the most violent men were able to gain the most wives and children. In Chagnon's view, the Yanomamo – and, by extension, all humans – fought not because fighting was essential to survival, but because they were programmed for violence in a lawless society. Harris and Ferguson have challenged this view robustly.

Restorative justice / reconciliation – a highly salient topic in the anthropological analysis of Truth and Reconciliation interventions in transgressions of human rights (see, for example, Wilson 2003), and in cases of post-trauma and state violence (Coxhall).

Deterrence – a form of ‘negative peace’ symbolised by the phrase: ‘a good fence makes good neighbours’ (Thomas Gregor, Haas on The Anthropology of War and Evans Pritchard’s 1940 discussion of ‘ordered anarchy’ in stateless societies).

POWER / CIVILISATION

Equality – as discussed in the landmark text, ‘The Equality of Human Races’ by Firmin.

Hierarchy – Louis Dumont is a key scholar of concepts such as individualism, hierarchy and equality. Dumont investigated the Indian caste system. He was not interested in whether certain forms are universal, but with the Principles of sociological engagement. The Cultural Mapping initiative will be able to shed light on his first order assertion that our values are but particular instances of a universal. See also Dumont, Hierarchy and Society by Gerald M. Britan and Ronald Cohen (eds), 1980

Diversity – in ‘Why Humans Have Cultures: Explaining Anthropology and Social Diversity’, Michael Carrithers presents a critique of a central issue in anthropology, arguing that it is the ways in which people interact, rather than technological advances, that have been of crucial importance in human history.

BIOLOGY / SOCIETY / DEVELOPMENT / ALLIANCE / ENVIRONMENT

Individual responsibility – has been discussed by Torry in Culture and individual responsibility: Touchstones of the culture defense (2000)

Culture / nurture – discussed famously by Mead, whose study of Samoa sought to discover whether adolescence was a universally traumatic and stressful time due to biological factors or whether the experience depended on one’s cultural context and upbringing (see also Benedict, Boas).

Nature and nurture combined – see Wachs, ‘The nature of nurture’ in the Individual Differences and Development Series.

RATIONALITY / PHILOSOPHY / ACTION

No logic / chaotic – vis-à-vis gender, see Lutz 1990. Irrationality has also been discussed by Ankarloo, Bengt and Clark, Stuart (see ‘general introduction’ in Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Biblical and Pagan Societies). Chaos is not an anthropological tenet per se, as mostly anthropologists take a relativist perspective, and strive to show that behaviour has a logic within a given context – it is only outside the situation, that an action may look illogical or unfounded in any rationality.

Unconscious - Antze, Michael Billig, Don Kulick have analysed and discussed how pre-conscious assumptions shape and rule actions

Adaptive - Change is such an inescapable reality of anthropological and other research (and, by extension, people's continually evolving responses to those modifications) that it is instead apparent stasis that is peculiar. Adaptive patterns have been explicitly analysed in Adaptive responses of Native Amazonians by Raymond Hames, and are a feature tracked explicitly by the SenseMaking research intervention.

TEMPORAL ORIENTATION / DEVELOPMENT

Modernising - This concept was taken on in Bruno Latour's 1993 foundational critique, *We Have Never Been Modern* (see also Parkin, Arce and Long's *Anthropology, Development and Modernities* critique).

Traditionalist - discussed extensively in Hobsbawm and Ranger's celebrated work, *The Invention of Tradition*.

Selectivist - Hartley analyses the different subject positions people take (radical-modernising, traditional, and selectivist) in relation to development and Tibetan culture in Amdo, China.

ART / SCIENCE / LEARNING & COMMUNICATION STYLES

Intuitive, instinctive - associated with symbolic / interpretive and cognitive anthropology. Here, the modules of the mind provide an intuitive ontology, an instinctive categorisation of the contents of the world.

Analytical, logical - significant both in terms of the study of the rationality of other (seemingly 'irrational' beliefs, see Winch) and also as a reaction within the discipline against interpretive anthropology, which some anthropologists believe betrayed its promise to search for scientifically grounded knowledge (see critique by Lett, *Science, Reason and Anthropology*, the *Principles of Rational Inquiry*).

Reflective - related to 'reflexivity' in anthropology, this core concept has been constantly redefined and refined since the beginning of the study of anthropology. Malinowski was an early critic, believing that anthropology was scientific and could produce 'concrete evidence'. As Mayfair Yang points out, reflexive anthropology challenges the Archimedean point of view in anthropology (cf. Levi Strauss) and has shown how the universal subject which speaks as the omniscient narrator of traditional, 'objective' anthropology is, in the end, merely a localised Western point of view.

BEHAVIOUR IN THE WORLD

Pragmatic - see Kant: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Louden & Kuehn eds

Mission-driven - analysed in depth in religious and political anthropology (Comaroff and Comaroff). Particularly important in alerting anthropologists as to how important contextual cues may be missed, overlooked or systematically forgotten by anthropologists and other social researchers is Orin Starn's 'Missing the Revolution'

work on revolutionary movements in the Andes (1991). As a means of gathering and monitoring local voices and moods directly, the Cultural Mapping database will add particular social and political value in this area.

Doubting and sceptical – An important tenet, in terms of a basis attitude of contemporary anthropologists to grand claims, metanarratives and all-encompassing social Truths, and in terms of an increasing awareness of the reflexivity and ambiguity within local subject positions.

CIVILISATION / ENVIRONMENT

Shaped by action – this is a question of agency. Linguistic anthropologists have made significant contributions to the understanding of agency as it emerges in discourse. Subfields include language and gender, literacy practices, and the dialogic construction of meaning and agency (for examples, see Giddens, Bourdieu, de Certeau, Sahlins and Ortner).

Preordained – this links with the key nature-culture debate in anthropology. Preordainedness links to nature and biology, which are politicised issues in subfields such as feminist anthropology. Anthropology as a whole tends to disrupt western understandings of preordained or 'natural' behaviours, as many societies have developed practices and concepts that do not conform to western assumptions of social norms.

Circumstantial – this relates to the anthropological theme of context and contextually embedded or situated knowledges (see writings on situated cognition Wittgenstein 1958, Heidegger and, in anthropology, Geertz). This perspective takes a holistic contextual understanding and looks at effective participation of an individual within a particular social circumstance.

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