

Benefits of Anthropology.

What does Indiana Jones have in common with Barack Obama's mother? They were both fascinated by culture. Indiana Jones studied human culture by analyzing artifacts through archeology. Obama's mother, Ann Dunham Sutoro, received her PhD in Anthropology for her work on rural development.

Many academics are saying that we now live in a multicultural society and that society is becoming even more pluralistic. Obama's victory made history, making him the first African-American to hold the highest office in the United States. Aside from his shrewd political maneuvers, could it be that his worldwide appeal stems from the fact that his character was shaped from a multicultural background? A mother from Kansas. A father from Africa. Siblings of different nationalities, childhood memories from Indonesia. And finally finding himself in the United States. The fact of the matter is that culture has indeed demonstrated its significance in the global market, the political realm, in academic discussions, mass media and even in the make-believe world of Hollywood movies and TV shows. But what is culture? In 1952 Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn compiled a list of 164 definitions of culture. Many claim to be experts in culture, but they tend to have different approaches in their analysis of culture creating diverse and vibrant viewpoints.

Eric Wolf once described anthropology as the most scientific of the humanities and the most humanistic of the sciences. Most academic programs' approach to anthropology encompasses physical anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and cultural anthropology or social anthropology. Cultural anthropology illustrates how many subjects are interrelated -- analyzing historical, political and psychological aspects of humanity so that one can better understand the interrelationship of issues and understand human nature and how it got to be a certain way.

There are arguments that anthropology is a discipline with its roots in colonialism, that early anthropologists typically had more power than the people they studied and that the knowledge learned is seen as a form of theft in which the anthropologist gains at the expense of informants. Regardless of its origin, anthropology has developed into a discipline and its fascination with culture spans from the exotic to the ordinary and from the study of deeply isolated societies to the study of modern business organizations.

Typically, anthropologists are often portrayed as real-life Indiana Joneses obsessed with their mummies or researchers mingling with indigenous people on an isolated tropical island. In reality, that is no longer the case. Many anthropologists have replaced their curriculum vitae for resumes and are increasingly seen not just within academic circles, social services, government work and NGOs, but are increasingly active across a multitude of disciplines including organizational studies, corporate settings, advertising, administration, market research, sales management, public relations, banking, merchandising, medical, journalism and management consulting.

Anthropology is no longer confined to analyzing bounded and isolated societies, but it has been proven that anthropological approaches and theories have been successful in understanding the humanity of borderless communities and contemporary societies. As a result, over the years various emphases within anthropology have developed, such as lingual anthropology, urban anthropology, visual anthropology, corporate anthropology, medical anthropology and forensic anthropology -- to name just a few.

What is so appealing about anthropology that it attracts a diverse and broad spectrum? How does anthropology give a better understanding about a certain culture, about humanity, about how people think and view the world around them? In my humble opinion, anthropology has been quite successful across different fields due to its basic scientific approach and research methodology.

Deeply rooted in humanities and social science, anthropology is exceptionally qualitative. The primary aim of quantitative research is to measure, whereas through qualitative research and analysis, anthropology attempts to understand culture.

Anthropologists study and analyze artifacts in order to grasp its significance and meaning for the associated people and society. They take a more emic view compared to an etic view, where the points of view of the people being researched are more significant than those of the researchers. Anthropologists are trained to avoid bias as so to lessen any misconceptions the researcher may bring reflecting his/her own cultural standpoint.

Other unique tools anthropologists use are participant observation and ethnography. Participant observation is the involves the anthropologist in the activities of the people, so that instead of just observing them, the anthropologist is able to have a hands-on experience of how they live their lives.

The main advantages of participant observation is that it allows the anthropologists to obtain a deeper and more experienced insight of the activities performed in a society, how people think and it also allows them to gain a good overview of how and why a society functions.

Anthropologists study and interpret cultural diversity through ethnography based on fieldwork.

Ethnography provides an account of a particular culture, society or community. The fieldwork usually involves spending a year or more in another society, living with the local people and learning about their way of life.

Ethnographers are participant observers. They take part in events they study because it helps with understanding local behavior and thought.

As the global economic crisis continues, countries are struggling to preserve their economies through various means. Last October, President Bush signed the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008. Commonly referred to as the "Bailout Plan", this Act authorizes the United States Secretary of the Treasury to spend up to US\$700 billion to help the ailing economy. In December, the CEO's of General Motors, Ford and Chrysler showed up on Capitol Hill to plead for US\$34 billion from Congress. They said the funds were needed to save the automotive industry. Among their plans to Congress that detailed how they would use

loans to return to profitability, one CEO stated that they have learned from past mistakes and are planning to make the company more customer driven: To be sensitive towards the market and consumers.

Anthropological approach and research is increasingly appealing to business as it helps answer academic questions about consumers and consumption and attempts to gain an understanding on how people use products and services. Major consumer product companies such as Procter & Gamble, Whirlpool, Volvo and Electrolux have utilized anthropological research in marketing to understand consumer behavior, segmenting out different social, ethnic or racial groups and marketing products specifically to these target markets. In business, anthropology is not just a useful marketing tool but it can help one understand the corporate culture of a business entity.

By analyzing different social groups or peer groups, an understanding of employee's behavior, thought, and perception at an office or factory may eventually increase individual performance and creativity as well as organizational output. Advancements in technology, communication and transportation have accelerated globalization at a rapid rate. What happens in one part of the world will consequently affect another part faster than ever before. Traditional borders are almost obsolete as people are able to easily move from one place to another.

In today's global society, we don't live in isolated communities. In fact, in a single location, people of all backgrounds, cultures and languages interact in a single space all the time. People are never void of culture; they ultimately have their own distinct customs, language, food, beliefs and way of life. This phenomenon is apparent in almost all communities and even organizations, thus confirming the idea of a multicultural and plural society. In this globalized economy and in this multicultural and pluralistic society, culture is constantly present across a variety of fields. As a consequence, the significance of culture should never be disregarded as it is able to act as a gateway into understanding humanity and human nature.

E Mulawarman, Jakarta, provided an interesting insight into the benefits of anthropology in light of the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States.

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