

Introduction to  
Anthropology:  
Holistic and Applied  
Research on Being  
Human

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Department of Anthropology

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## MODULE 19: HUMAN RIGHTS AND ACTIVISM

### Anthropology and Human Rights

*“You can’t be neutral in the face of human suffering.”* – Nancy Scheper-Hughes

Human rights are defined as freedoms that all people are entitled to regardless of age, ethnic origin, geography, language, religion, or any other status. People are inherently entitled to values like fairness, dignity, equality, and respect simply because they are humans. These rights are always applicable everywhere and at any time. However, not all people are able to take advantage of their rights. For example, a woman may have the right to vote in her country, but if her husband doesn’t let her leave the house on election day, then her “right” is unobtainable. Or, in the case of “Operation Ashes,” the Guatemalan army razed villages and murdered indigenous peasants suspected of anti-government sympathies in the 1980s. **Human rights abuses** occur when people are denied the ability to access their rights. These abuses are complex and varied, and examples can be found in diverse settings (see Figure 19.1). Factors such as economic conditions, political perspectives, and socio-cultural beliefs contribute to these atrocities which are legitimized or rationalized as social or moral causes. Some anthropologists work to promote human rights through their work. As cultural observers and scholars, they feel that they are particularly well positioned to explain the origins, designs, and consequences of human rights abuses.



**Figure 19.1** Examples of human rights abuse protests. **19.1a** A protestor holds a sign that reads, "Decolonize this world." Image from EDRi. **19.1b** A protestor holds a sign that reads, "Am I Next?" Image from NewsClick.



**Video 19.1.** Check out the video from *TED* presenting *Kristen Wenz* discussing human rights.

As discussed in Module 2: A Brief History of Anthropology, anthropology was developed during and influenced by European colonialism. Early anthropological perspectives used scientific methods to “confirm” differences between races and cultural groups. However, much of this early work cherry-picked data and inaccurately used scientific methods to corroborate pre-existing beliefs. These results were used to endorse European intervention among other cultures, establish unequal policies and laws, promote economic and cultural domination, and exploit marginalized groups. These policies and perspectives came to be known as the **White Man’s Burden**. The White Man’s Burden describes how Europeans asserted that it was their duty and responsibility to “help” these “inferior” groups rise above barbarism and ignorance towards a more civilized state (see Figure 19.2). In other words, they rationalized their behavior by attributing it to a moral cause.



**Figure 19.2.** Depiction of Britannia carrying a white flag labeled “Civilization” advancing on an indigenous group bearing a “Barbarism” flag. Image from Picryl.

Later, these ethnocentric and domineering beliefs began to untangle, and approaches like **Franz Boas’s Historical Particularism** forwarded the idea that cultural patterns can only be understood within the history and context of that culture. Anthropologists tried to incorporate more objectivity into their work by providing neutral observations of other groups outside of European subjectivity. While this view does represent an improvement over Eurocentric perspectives, it fails to recognize that humans are not objective or rational creatures. By presenting a façade of objectivity, we lie and continue to misrepresent ourselves and groups under study.

In its most recent evolution, anthropology embraces **postmodern** theoretical approaches. These approaches deconstruct the idea of objective observation and instead promote recognizing subjectivity. This allows for biases brought into a study to be recognized and ensures that anthropologists hear and assist with the stories and concerns that are important to those groups.

Human rights are intertwined with political, economic, and social issues, such as race and gender. All people deserve the same rights, access to opportunities, and treatment in death, regardless of who they are. Human rights efforts around the globe work to combat the injustice and inequitable treatment of people based on dehumanizing stereotypes and long-held beliefs. However, not all humanitarian efforts receive comparable public interest, news coverage, or funding. This disparity has been dubbed **Missing White Woman Syndrome**, which refers to the excessive and emotional media coverage missing people from certain demographics (specifically, white women) receive versus others.

For example, the disappearance of Gabby Petito in August 2021 led to national news coverage and a frenzy of armchair detective work over social media, even though approximately 90,000 people are missing in the United States. Petito went missing in Wyoming, but she was the only missing person in the state who garnered such attention; none of the 710 indigenous people missing from Wyoming over the last decade made such headlines. In the massive search for Petito that took place over the next month, the remains of nine other missing persons were recovered, including Miya Marcano. Marcano, a 19-year-old Black college student, went missing after Petito but wasn't featured in headlines nor prioritized by law enforcement the way that Petito was. This highlights the impact of race on media attention. Even when other socio-economic conditions are similar between two missing women, if one is white and the other is not, the white individual is much more likely to garner national attention. Further, as a whole, missing women are more likely to be covered than men. This inconsistent concern about missing people reflects deeply ingrained beliefs about personhood, race, gender, and politics, and this pattern can be observed beyond missing people cases. These patterns point to inequality amongst people of different backgrounds, and therefore, an unequal concern for human rights.



**Video 19.2. Check out the video from *TEDxYouth* featuring *Rosalie Fish* discussing missing and murdered indigenous women.**

## The Ethics of Being an Anthropologist

Anthropological work is rarely neutral, dispassionate, or rational. By learning about and interacting with other groups, an anthropologist becomes invested. They learn to view cultures through different lenses and may embrace new ideologies and beliefs. Anthropologist may even live among their study subjects and participate and become familiar with the daily rhythms of life (see Module 3: Research Methods). However, there will be times when anthropologists observe and/or experience sensitive or dangerous situations. When someone witnesses acts of violence, they cannot remain neutral bystanders. In such situations, even inaction is a response because unforgiveable acts have gone unchallenged.

This perspective led to the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**, adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1948 as a direct response to the atrocities of World War II. When the UDHR was first adopted, a group of anthropologists led by **Melville Herskovits** wrote a statement of concern regarding the new document. Herskovits and other anthropologists critiqued human rights doctrine on two fronts: 1) there is no universal human, and 2) the stated doctrine was reproducing Western political domination. To this day, a major critique of the human rights doctrine is that the criteria of a “right” is often formulated from the position of the nation state and those who govern. Beginning in the 1970s and in critical mass in the 1980s, anthropologists began to make substantial contributions to the international discourse on human rights, despite ongoing skepticism of a singular humanity. Despite the continued discussion of who defines the human, this declaration is critical for anthropologists who are actively working with marginalized groups. With these considerations in mind, we explore the idea of the anthropologist as an activist.

Anthropology is the study of humans and culture. In observing the sometimes-brutal realities of life, anthropologists are forced to reckon with what they study and why. Unlike many other scientific disciplines, anthropologists straddle the line between science and morality. Do anthropologists study humans scientifically by remaining dispassionate to the challenges and injustices many people face around the world? Should anthropologists design research based on scientific questions, with little



concern for how their study may adversely impact participants? Or do anthropologists incorporate humanity, morality, and ethical perspectives to conduct safe studies, while helping people find their voices? According to the American Anthropological Association's **Code of Ethics**, anthropologists must deliberately approach their research with the least harmful course of action for those they study, and they must reflect on their moral obligations as scholars. Every accredited university in the United States has a Human Subjects **Institutional Review Board (IRB)** that reviews all proposed research regarding human subjects. Studies are only approved if they are determined to be ethical and will not cause harm to the participants. These measures were enacted in response to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment conducted from 1932-1972 (see Module 16: The Issues with Race). The disregard that researchers expressed for their participants impacted the lives of participants and that of their families in inhumane ways that attested to the need for ethical protocol and review.

All studies require that participants provide **informed consent**. Prior to volunteering for a study, a potential participant must know as much as they can about the purpose of the research. This includes the methods used and how results will be disseminated. However, these moral and ethical concerns are not limited to anthropologists studying living people and primates. Archaeologists, typically, do not need IRB approval or informed consent since they study past remains, but archaeologists must consider how their research impacts living descendant groups. In the remainder of this chapter, we will examine cultural and archaeological examples that address human rights abuses.

## The Dehumanized Other

*“Human Rights violations are not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect. Rights violations are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm.”* – Paul Farmer, founder of Partners in Health

Paul Farmer is an internationally renowned medical anthropologist and physician (see Figure 19.3) who founded Partners in Health, an international charity organization that provides health care, advocacy, and research on

behalf of marginalized groups, particularly, those sick and living in poverty. Partners in Health challenges policy makers and critics who contribute to inequality and uneven resource access for those in underserved and impoverished areas. Farmer began his work in Haiti with the goal of bringing modern health care to the region. His success—including a multiservice health complex with schools, hospitals, and training programs—is used as a model for efforts throughout the world.



**Figure 19.3.** Paul Farmer, medical anthropologist and physician. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Why do people mistreat other humans? Boas suggested that people stereotype and dehumanize other groups to establish their own identity, which is often established through opposition with other groups. As people determine their own values, cultural identities, and what it means to be a person, these notions are often characterized through perceived differences of the **Other**, or “us vs them” dichotomies. These dichotomies dictate who is deserving of status, privilege, or protection. Being a member of a community leads to moral status, but it also perpetuates and expands upon inequalities (see discussion of “guilty” versus “innocent” patients in Module 17: Health and Medicine). To be deserving of status, privilege, or protection, there must be others who do not receive these benefits, which leads to dominant and vulnerable groups interacting across society.

An ongoing example of “us vs them” is the perspective on immigration that pervades American politics. A large portion of the American public views migrants as a distasteful “Other,” seeking the “American Dream” ethos

at the expense of American citizens. Some political groups slander recent immigrants as indolent troublemakers and undocumented conspirators who take the jobs of hardworking citizens. Mesoamerican and Middle Eastern cultures, especially, are portrayed negatively in the media. This causes individuals to be treated poorly or dismissively based on their appearance, regardless of how they self-identify or citizenship status (e.g., the separation of children and their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border made national headlines in 2019 and 2020). These stereotyped perspectives don't consider the number of hardworking migrant individuals who are an integral component to the American economy. Nor do they often consider the reasons people would leave their homelands, risk death during a dangerous journey, and subject themselves to poor treatment upon arrival. Instead, the negative stereotypes pervade the media. Some anthropologists argue that the social and economic inequalities experienced by migrants represent human rights abuses and impact their health by inducing numerous psychological, physiological, and emotional responses.

Scholar, activist, and artist **Jason De Leon** documents the lived experience of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border through a mix of ethnography and archaeology. His work highlights the highly politicized, dangerous, and largely misunderstood experience of migration. De Leon lives among border towns, interviews migrants, follows migration routes, and documents the material culture and human remains found across the deserts. He tracks what types of materials people bring on the journey, what they discard along the way, and how these objects change over time as people strategize ways to maximize their chances of success on these perilous treks.



**Video 19.3.** Check out the video from *Jason De Leon discussing his research on undocumented border crossers in the Southwest U.S. and Mexico.*

Additionally, attaining citizenship is not a straightforward process that is often further impeded by the difficult realities of life. Undocumented migrants may also be subjected to substandard work conditions. Research suggests that people rarely complain about these conditions for fear of retribution or that their undocumented status will be used against

them. Additionally, many of these individuals may experience occupational downgrading and accept non-livable wages, while juggling multiple jobs and working long hours to make ends meet. These factors impact a migrant's ability to become a U.S. citizen because applicants must take tests and interview with government officials to determine their suitability for citizenship. The tests comprise detailed knowledge of the Constitution and judicial system that many "average" Americans cannot answer. However, with low wages, multiple jobs, and families to support, studying and paying for complex citizenship tests and interviews may be impossible for many people. Although the process should not be difficult, it is long, complicated, and expensive. In other words, the process is oversimplified, idealistic, impractical, and does not align with the realities of life.

In his important ethnography, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*, anthropologist and physician **Seth Holmes** studies and works among a group of Triqui Natives as they cross the border from their hometown of San Miguel in Oaxaca, Mexico to harvest fruit in Washington State and California. Like De Leon, Farmer, and other anthropologists studying human rights, Holmes focuses on the corporal experience of suffering: "Early in my fieldwork, I realized that an ethnography of suffering and migration would be incomplete without witnessing firsthand such an important site of suffering for Latin American migrants." On the berry farm, Holmes picked fruit once or twice a week, but the Triqui workers picked seven days a week, rain or shine, without a day off (see Figure 19.4). This took a heavy toll on their bodies: back and knee pain, slipped disks, and a prevalence of type 2 diabetes. As one Triqui worker, called Abelino, told him, "You pick with your hands bent over kneeling, your back hurts; you get knee pains and [hip] pains ... You suffer a lot." Through Holmes' focus on the lived experiences of Triqui migrant farmworkers, anthropology can engage questions of human rights and human dignity through **Pragmatic Solidarity** (working to reduce the suffering of others and promote human wellbeing).



**Figure 19.4.** Depiction of Mexican fruit pickers. Image from Wikimedia Commons.



**Video 19.4.** Check out the video from *TEDxYakima Salon featuring Seth Holmes discussing migrant farm workers and the food system.*

## Genocide and State-Sponsored Violence

Towards the end of the Second World War, when the full horror of the extermination and concentration camps became public knowledge, Winston Churchill stated that the world was being brought face to face with “a crime that has no name.” The crime Churchill referenced has a name now: **genocide**. This is thanks to the work of the Polish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, who worked for years to have mass murder recognized as an international crime by the state after learning about the coordinated mass murder of Armenians during WWI. He coined the term genocide to understand this new form of totalizing violence.

Genocide refers to premeditated destruction of the cultural patterns of a group. It is a political, economic, and ideological attack that results in the mass murder of a particular group of people. A legal definition is found in

the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (CPPCG). It is the “intention to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, including: (a) killing members of the group (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

In addition to a legal definition that is used to bring criminal charges against individuals in the international court of law, genocide scholars have widely studied genocides of the 19th and 20th centuries to understand their structure and process. **Genocide Watch** is a non-profit group of scholar-activists who have identified ten stages of genocide to recognize and defuse potential genocidal acts. The ten stages are classification, symbolization, discrimination, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, persecution, extermination, and denial.

Some historical acts have been retroactively assessed as genocide, including the mass murder of Native people by Europeans and the process of colonialism. Canada has formally recognized this amid growing outrage and grief of an unmarked burial site at a residential school in British Columbia. President Trudeau reiterated that he accepts the conclusion of the 2019 inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and that "what happened amounts to genocide."

Few people realize that the U.S. interned Japanese-American citizens in camps during WWII as a reaction to Pearl Harbor under Executive Order 9066. This discrimination and dehumanization has only recently been brought to the foreground in the U.S. These types of internment practices and worse persist around the world and represent some of the early stages of genocide classification. As of 2021, several nations have formally declared China's forced internment of the ethnic minority, the Uighurs, a genocide. Since it was first articulated as a crime in 1944 by Lemkin, dozens of genocides have been recognized, many of them occurring after WWII when the leaders of the newly formed United Nations promised “never again.”

In 2021, Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of Myanmar, was charged with genocide of the **Rohingya**, one of Myanmar's ethnic minority groups (see Figure 19.5). This is ironic given that she was previously renowned for her work on human rights. Myanmar is predominantly a Buddhist country, and the Rohingya are largely Muslim. These two groups speak different languages and have different cultures but have lived together in Myanmar for centuries. The Myanmar government routinely refuses to recognize Rohingya citizenship, and they are instead viewed as illegal immigrants. Since 2017, the Rohingya and Myanmar military have been involved in violent skirmishes. While the Myanmar military insists they are targeting Rohingya military rebels and not civilians, others argue that these actions are human rights abuse, and the claim that Myanmar military actions are only a response to rebel attacks is a façade legitimizing the ethnic cleansing of a marginalized group.



**Figure 19.5.** Depiction of Rohingya refugees. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

The United Nations described the Rohingya as the world's most persecuted people due to the unprecedented brutality committed against people. These brutalities include murder, rape, and destruction of villages. The Rohingya are alienated in society, unable to find employment,

and experience mental and sexual abuse, in addition to deprivation of basic human necessities. More than one million Rohingya have been forced to migrate to Bangladesh, where they are interred in the world's largest refugee camps. Within Myanmar, many other groups support these military actions, believing that these actions are ridding the country of illegal immigrants and terrorists. However, researchers have described this treatment as subhuman and work to raise awareness and find solutions for the plight of the Rohingya.



**Video 19.5.** Check out the video from *United Nations video describing the Rohingya Crisis in 90 seconds.*

## Forensic Anthropology and Human Rights

While many sociocultural anthropologists document ongoing atrocities, other types of anthropologists focus on expounding and resolving past misdeeds. **Forensic anthropology** plays a critical role in the response and resolution of humanitarian and human rights work throughout the world. Agencies such as the **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)**, **Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF)**, **Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation**, and **Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA)** were created to draw forensic anthropology into the investigation, recovery, and identification of individuals missing from conflicts or natural disasters. Although the dead have had their most basic human rights violated through their death, and even though this cannot be changed or amended, the return of their remains to living loved ones and families is a powerful form of acknowledgment and activism.

Forensic anthropologists are often trained to work in the field and laboratory. In the field, forensic anthropologists are trained to carefully unearth, document, and recover human skeletal materials using archaeology-based methods (see Module 3: Research Methods). Their documentation efforts help investigators answer questions like when and how an individual died, how their body was buried, if the body was moved or disturbed, and the number of individuals in a burial. Recovery must be completed with care



to ensure bones are not damaged or mixed up (see Figure 19.6). Small teeth, ribs, finger, and toe bones can be easily lost, so anthropologists must work diligently to ensure that all possible pieces of a human body are recovered and protected. When multiple people are combined in a single grave, the anthropologist must document burial positions and carefully separate the bones to prevent additional commingling and assist with the association of bones to the correct individuals in the laboratory.

In the laboratory, forensic anthropologists must assess the number of bones and individuals present, make sure that the bones are assigned to the correct individuals, and document the biological profile and any trauma of each individual. The biological profile is used to understand the demographics of the dead. Are the victims juvenile or adult aged? Are they predominantly male, or are females present, too? Demographics can help investigators understand the nature of the crimes. Additionally, anthropologists must be able to differentiate trauma, such as gunshot wounds or impacts by blunt objects, from damage that occurred after death. However, identifying the number of individuals, interpreting their biological profile, and documenting trauma patterns is not enough to put names to missing individuals.



**Figure 19.6.** Depiction of commingled human skeletal remains. Image from U.S. National Archives and DVIDS.

For example, the DPAA is tasked with the recovery and identification of missing U.S. service members from past conflicts. When a soldier crashed on an aircraft, was lost on a battlefield, or died in captivity, it was often impossible to recover their remains for proper burial and accounting. Further, with the dangers of an ongoing conflict, there are many cases when service members were hastily buried or not recovered. However, the axiom “no man left behind” extends beyond death. Decades later, families are still waiting to learn what happened to their loved ones and find answers, and the DPAA is uniquely situated to resolve these cases.

On 7 December 1941, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, was bombed by Japanese forces. Among the casualties were hundreds of individuals stationed on battleships, such as the USS *California*, *West Virginia*, *Arizona*, *Oklahoma*, and others. The USS *Oklahoma* was struck by a torpedo and sustained severe damage and capsized, resulting in more than 400 casualties. After the USS *Arizona*, this is the largest number of casualties from the attack. Recovery and salvage efforts began the day after the attack until May 1944, but in all this time, only 35 individuals were identified. The other nearly 400 individuals were buried as “unknowns.” In 1947, the American Graves Repatriation Services (AGRS) disinterred the remains to attempt identification again, but they believed that the remains would be identified as a group instead of individuals. As was the practice in many situations, the AGRS prepared the remains as a group burial, which included separating the remains by element to reduce the number of caskets needed for burial.

The group burial request was denied, and the AGRS analysts were tasked with resorting the remains back to individuals. Advanced techniques like DNA did not exist in the 1940s and ‘50s. Faced with this impossible task, the AGRS did their best under the supervision of **Mildred Trotter**. However, she only certified a few sets of remains as properly sorted. The remainder, she ascertained, represented commingled bundles. In 2015, the USS *Oklahoma* remains were brought to the DPAA laboratory. With an extensive sorting plan, including large-scale DNA analysis, the laboratory analysts began the tedious project of inventorying, analyzing, and sorting the bones into single individuals. Putting names to these individuals, however, wasn’t possible for the anthropologists. After all, most of the bones belonged to young white males of similar height. While the anthropologists could

confidently present hundreds of sets of properly sorted remains, there was no way to determine who was who and ensure that remains were sent to the correct family.

Luckily, forensic anthropologists do not work alone. Conflict, human rights, and casualty resolution cases are necessarily interdisciplinary. It is critical that DNA family reference samples, antemortem documents (hospital or dental records), and other personal information from family members are available to compare against the skeletons. For example, if someone has records of dental work or broken bones from earlier in life, evidence may still be visible on the skeleton, which can help identification efforts. Through these efforts, 92% of the individuals were named and returned to their families.



**Video 19.6. Check out the video from *DPAA scientists and historians discussing the identification of missing U.S. servicemembers from the USS Oklahoma after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941.***

Although death may have occurred decades ago, families do not move on. They don't forget the loss of loved ones or the dangerous conditions that may have led to this loss. Forensic anthropology contributes to efforts to resolve years of grieving over mysterious losses and uncertainties about the fate of a loved one. Forensic anthropologists have been instrumental in recent cases as well, including missing persons and terrorist attacks like 9/11. They help the world understand the extent of domestic violence, genocide, other disasters, and help return humanity when it has been ignored or lost. Forensic analyses offer a powerful healing capacity to families torn apart by war, genocide, natural disasters, and other events.

In another example, Argentina was governed by a military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983 that led to the mass genocide of thousands of Argentinians. Known as the **“Dirty War,”** this atrocity was committed in the name of eradicating communism, and civilians were dehumanized as dangerous rebels to justify mass deaths. **Clyde Snow**, a prominent U.S. anthropologist, helped raise awareness of this human rights issue in the 1980s and founded the non-profit Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team

(EAAF). The EAAF consists of a team of trained forensic anthropologists who have been able to support justice for human rights victims in Argentina and beyond, including more than 60 countries around the world. Within their home country, they continue working tirelessly to recover and analyze small bone fragments from the Dirty War. In his *Atlantic* article, Daniel Loedel documents his sister's loss, the absence of any grave or remains, and how this impacted his family for 43 years until her remains were returned. Forensic anthropology offers families a tangible sense of closure that may not be achieved otherwise.

However, in cases such as undocumented border crossing deaths or genocide among the Rohingya, wherein the dominant governments revile or refuse to acknowledge the humanity of the victims, who is advocating for these people? Who is raising awareness of these atrocities? Anthropologists are an important component in these types of work, whether they work with living peoples or the remains of victims.

## No Neutral Bystanders

Anthropology is uniquely situated to be an advocate for marginalized groups and expose the complicated situations that lead to human rights abuses. At the beginning of this chapter, you read a quote by the anthropologist **Nancy Scheper-Hughes** who began her intellectual interest in cultural difference, as many anthropologists have, as a Peace Corps volunteer. She lived in a place called Bom Jesus, Brazil in the 1960s during a time when a drought and extreme poverty led to the massive death of infants. As Scheper-Hughes was living and working in this community, she would regularly hear the bells of the church ring throughout the day. She was shocked to later find out that the ringing of the church bell signaled the death of another infant.

In her heart wrenching ethnography of mothering in extreme poverty, Scheper-Hughes uses her craft as an anthropologist (interviewing mothers, priests, and others) and her commitment to human rights to understand why the women in this community besought by death rarely expressed outward grief when their infants died. Her epic ethnography, *Death Without Weeping*, illuminates something difficult to understand in our context of first-world

parenting and what she calls **mother love** (postponing emotional attachment of a child). After publishing the ethnography, Scheper-Hughes went on to conduct ethnographic research on the black-market organ trade which targets economically disenfranchised communities, such as the favela community she worked with in Brazil and squatter communities in the Philippines. Scheper-Hughes and other anthropologists (before and after her) challenge the idea of the neutral observer that was promoted by Malinowski, Boas, and other founders.

Some anthropologists and other people in the academy may see the scholar-activists as “unsavory,” as Scheper-Hughes has said. She and other anthropologists who have embraced human rights ideologies in their practices understand that ethics are not always clear-cut and working among and for people can be a complicated business. Whether an anthropologist is directly engaging issues of human rights and suffering or asking questions about the human experience, all anthropologists must consider the impact their research will have on the communities in which they work. Overall, the best “sounding-board” for ethics in anthropology is often other practicing anthropologists as ethical considerations in the study of cultures, past and present, may be very specific to a community or research project.

## Summary

Human rights are freedoms to which all people are entitled. However, not all people are able to take advantage of those rights. Human rights are intertwined with political, economic, and social issues, which can make them difficult to challenge. Often, through the idea of the “other,” people are dehumanized to justify inhumane acts. Anthropologists observe practices, behaviors, and cultures around the world. Indubitably, they will sometimes observe or experience sensitive or dangerous situations. When someone witnesses such acts, they cannot remain neutral bystanders, and inaction is considered a response because it allows an unforgivable act to go unchallenged. In such situations, we see the importance of the anthropologist as an activist who can challenge appalling conditions, raise awareness of important issues, or subsequently reconstruct past events and assist in identifying victims.

## Review Questions

- **T/F.** The White Man's Burden represents an ethnocentric and domineering belief system used to exploit marginalized groups.
- **T/F.** When atrocities are witnessed, even inaction is a response; there is no such thing as a neutral bystander.
- **T/F.** Genocide is a political, economic, and ideological attack that results in the mass murder of a particular group of people.
- **T/F.** Casualty resolution is completed by forensic anthropologists alone.
- **T/F.** People everywhere can take advantage of their human rights.

## Discussion Questions

- What is your country's stance on human rights, and what do you like or dislike about it?
- Why is it important to learn about past genocides and what caused them?
- What is the role of Forensic anthropology in humanitarian and human rights work throughout the world?
- Do you think organizations like Genocide Watch have been successful in identifying and deterring future atrocities?

## Activities

### 1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights

- Read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>(opens in a new tab)
- Try to come up with positive and negative examples from the past where the issues stated in the preamble relate to.
- What Articles stood out to you and how are any of them relevant to matters currently taking place around the world today?
- Can you think of things you can actively do to aid those affected by human rights abuses?

## Key Terms

**Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF):** A non-governmental, non-profit organization that applies forensic sciences to the investigation of human rights violations and humanitarian crises in Argentina and worldwide.

**Boaz, Franz (1858-1942):** Considered to be the father of American anthropology, he introduced the concepts of cultural relativism and historical particularism.

**Code of Ethics:** Professional standards set by the American Anthropological Association that provide guidelines for anthropologists to approach and conduct their research in the most ethical and least harmful way to those they study.

**Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA):** An agency within the United States Department of Defense whose mission is to provide the fullest possible accounting for missing personnel for their families and the nation.

**De León, Jason:** A scholar, anthropologist, activist, and artist, who documents the lived experience of crossing the US-Mexico border through a mix of ethnography and archaeology.

**"Dirty War":** The mass genocide of thousands of Argentinian civilians while governed by a military dictatorship from 1976 and 1983. This atrocity was committed in the name of eradicating communism, dehumanizing civilians into dangerous rebels to justify their deaths.

**Farmer, Paul:** An internationally renowned medical anthropologist and physician who founded Partners in Health.

**Forensic anthropology:** The analysis and identification of human skeletal remains for legal purposes.

**Genocide:** Premeditated destruction and physical extermination of an ethnic group in a society. A political, economic, and ideological attack that results in the mass murder of a particular group of people.

**Genocide Watch:** A non-profit group of scholar-activists who have identified ten stages of genocide to help recognize, prevent, defuse, and punish potential or ongoing genocidal acts.



**Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG):** An autonomous, non-profit, scientific, and technical non-governmental organization that applies forensic sciences to investigate, search, exhume, and identify the victims of Guatemala's Internal Armed Conflict.

**Herskovits, Melville (1895-1963):** An American anthropologist known for his pioneering efforts with African studies.

**Historical particularism:** The approach to studying human societies and culture in which each society or culture must be understood as a unique product of its own history.

**Holmes, Seth:** A cultural and medical anthropologist and physician, whose work focuses on social hierarchies, health inequalities, and the ways in which such asymmetries are naturalized, normalized, and resisted. Also known for his study on migrant farmworkers in Mexico.

**Human rights:** Universal, inherent freedoms that all people are entitled to regardless of their age, gender, ethnic origin, geography, language, religion, or any other status because they are human beings.

**Human rights abuses:** Occur when people are denied the ability to access their human rights or when these rights are violated.

**Informed consent:** An ethical and necessary step in a study where anthropologists explain the goals, methods, funding, outcomes, and potential risks and benefits to all potential study participants to ensure that their participation is voluntary and fully informed.

**Institutional Review Board (IRB):** A committee established to review applications and monitor biomedical research and studies conducted at academic research institutions that involve human subjects to protect their welfare.

**International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC):** Based in Geneva, Switzerland, this impartial, neutral, and independent organization's exclusive humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict, internal crisis, and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance.

**Missing White Woman Syndrome:** The perceived disproportionate media coverage of missing white women over other demographics.

**Mother Love:** A term created by Nancy Scheper-Hughes in her book, *Death Without Weeping*, to describe Brazilian mothers in poverty postponing emotional attachment to their children, to emphasize that the existence of a biological basis for maternal emotions is a myth, and a mother's emotional commitment to their offspring is not natural but shaped by political agendas and goals.

**The Other (Otherizing):** Human tendency to alienate and treat a group of people differently based on perceived differences that these groups do not represent normal behaviors or cultures.

**Partners in Health:** An international charity organization that provides health care, advocacy, and research on behalf of marginalized groups, particularly those sick and living in poverty.

**Postmodern theory:** A viewpoint that questions and is critical of modern scientific and philosophical perspectives.

**Pragmatic solidarity:** Working to reduce the suffering of others and promote human wellbeing.

**Rohingya:** An ethnic minority group from Myanmar, currently stateless. Conflicts escalated in 2017, primarily based on religious tensions, when the Myanmar government committed genocide and other atrocities on the Rohingya people. The Myanmar government continues to refuse to recognize Rohingya citizenship, forcing over one million Rohingya to migrate to Bangladesh where they are interred in the world's largest refugee camps.

**Scheper-Hughes, Nancy:** A cultural and medical anthropologist, and author, best known for her work and writing on schizophrenia in Ireland, and the effects of extreme poverty on Brazilian motherhood.

**Snow, Clyde (1928-2014):** A prominent U.S. forensic anthropologist known for his examination of thousands of skeletal remains, including the remains of human rights abuse victims.

**Trotter, Mildred (1889-1991):** A pioneer in the fields of autonomy and physical anthropology, known for her contributions to many fields based on her studies of bones and the human body.

**Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR):** The first legal document to outline the fundamental human rights and freedoms to be universally protected. It was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1948 in direct response to the atrocities of World War II.

**White Man's Burden:** The alleged duty and responsibility asserted by white people to “help” nonwhite groups they believe to be less developed, to bring the “inferior” groups towards a more civilized state; rationalizing ethnocentrism and exploitation by attributing their (white people's) actions to a moral cause.

## Suggested Readings

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## Videos

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