HL extension: theory

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Social and Cultural Anthropology · HL

IB Diploma Programme Social and Cultural Anthropology HL (first assessed in 2019; 2017 guide). HL students go further in two ways. They use anthropological **theory** to explain and evaluate ethnographic material (in Paper 2 and the internal assessment), and they answer a question on anthropological **ethics** in Paper 1, based on one of two short stimulus texts.

In 2007 the United States Army began a programme called the Human Terrain System. It placed social scientists, including anthropologists, with army units in Iraq and Afghanistan to explain local culture to soldiers. Supporters said this would save lives on both sides. But the American Anthropological Association (AAA) said in 2007 that the programme went against the discipline's ethics: people could not freely refuse to take part when the researcher came with armed soldiers, and what they said might be used to target them. The programme ended in 2014. Anthropology's methods can be used for many purposes, so who an anthropologist works for, and who could be harmed, is always a question.

Must-know for the HL extension:

Area	Key content
theories	functionalism, structuralism, interpretive, practice, political economy, feminist
using theory	each theory asks different questions of the same material
evaluating	which reading does the evidence support?
ethics	informed consent, do no harm, anonymity, who the research serves
Paper 1 (HL)	one ethics question, on one of two stimuli

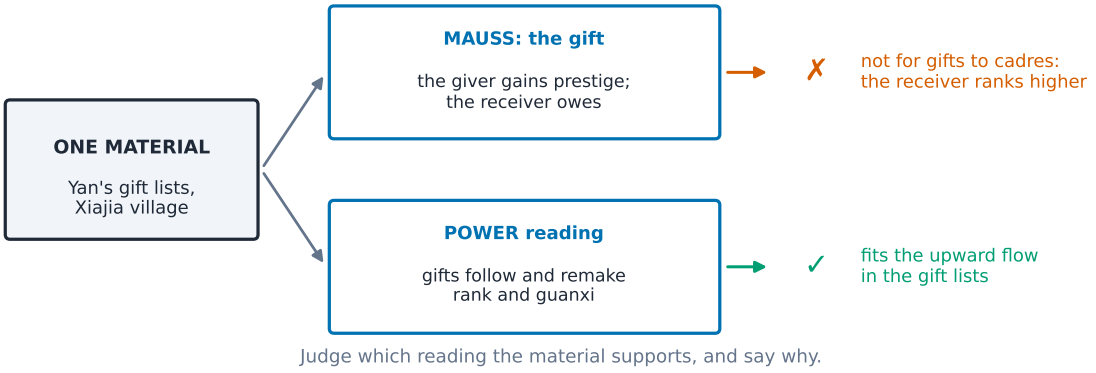
The theory kit

Theory	Key idea	Names	Asks of a gift
functionalism	every institution has a job that keeps society stable	Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown	what job does gift-giving do for the group?
structuralism	culture is built on pairs of opposites in the human mind	Claude Lévi-Strauss (raw and cooked)	what oppositions (giver/receiver, kin/stranger) does it express?
interpretive anthropology	culture is a web of meanings to be interpreted, through "thick description"	Clifford Geertz	what does the gift mean to the people who give it?
practice theory	people follow learned habits (habitus) but also bend the rules for their own ends	Pierre Bourdieu	how do people use gifts strategically?
political economy	culture is shaped by unequal wealth and power, locally and globally	influenced by Marx	who gains, and who pays?
feminist anthropology	gender shapes both social life and how it is studied	Annette Weiner	what do women give, and who noticed?

Annette Weiner, returning to the Trobriand Islands in the 1970s, found that women exchange bundles of banana leaves and fibre skirts in large ceremonies after a death. Malinowski had said little about this female wealth, because, as a man, he had spent his time with men. This shows how theory and the researcher's position decide what gets seen.

Evaluating material with theory

Use theory as a tool, not as a label: apply two theories to the same material, and ask which one the evidence supports better.



Judge each theory by what the material shows, and say why.

Worked example. Material: Yan's gift lists from Xiajia (topic 02).

- **Mauss**: a gift makes the receiver a debtor and gives the giver prestige. This explains exchanges between equals, where gifts are carefully returned.
- **Political economy / practice theory**: gifts follow and reproduce rank. This explains what Mauss cannot: villagers give to cadres without return, and the receiver's status rises, not falls.
- **Judgement**: Mauss fits the gifts between equals; the power reading fits the gifts up the hierarchy. The material shows that one theory rarely explains everything; the best answers say where each theory works and where it fails.

The ethics question

Anthropologists study real people, often less powerful than themselves. The main principles (the AAA's code of ethics sets them out):

- **Do no harm** : the people studied must not be put at risk.
- **Informed consent** : people must know what the research is for, and be free to say no.
- **Anonymity and confidentiality** : protect people's identities.
- **Openness about purpose and funding**: who pays, and who will use the results?
- **Responsibility to share**: the research should give something back to the people studied.

Another famous case: the American anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon described the Yanomami of the Amazon as a "fierce people" (1968). Later critics argued that this image was used against the Yanomami in debates over their land, and a book in 2000 (*Darkness in El Dorado*) made further accusations about the research. Some of those accusations were later rejected, but the debate showed that how a people is described can affect their lives.

Worked plan. *Stimulus: a company pays an anthropologist to study how families in a city use their phones, to design advertising.*

- Consent: do the families know who will use the findings?
- Harm: could the findings be used to sell to children or to vulnerable people?
- Purpose and funding: the company owns the results; can the anthropologist publish freely?
- Judgement: the research can be ethical if purpose and funding are open, consent is real and identities are protected, but the anthropologist must be ready to refuse work that harms the people studied.

Checklist

- Six theories with key ideas and names.
- Two theories applied to one material; a judgement on which fits.
- Weiner's correction of Malinowski: position decides what is seen.
- Ethics: do no harm, informed consent, anonymity, openness, sharing; the Human Terrain System and the Yanomami debate.
- The Paper 1 HL ethics plan.