

Engaging with anthropology

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

IB Diploma Programme Social and Cultural Anthropology SL (first assessed in 2019; 2017 guide). **Anthropology** studies how people live together: what they believe, how they make a living, how they organise families and power, and how all this changes. This topic covers the language, the practice and the way of thinking of the discipline. It is examined in Paper 1 (2 hours, 30% at HL; 1 hour 30 minutes, 40% at SL): three questions on an unseen text, the last one on one of the course’s “**big questions**” . HL students also answer a question on anthropological **ethics** (topic 04).

In 1956 the anthropologist Horace Miner published a strange report on the Nacirema, a people with unusual body rituals. Every house has a shrine, he wrote, where people look into a magic box and perform daily mouth rites with hog hairs and magical powders. They visit “holy-mouth men” who dig holes in their teeth. Readers were shocked by such odd customs, until they noticed that “Nacirema” is “American” spelled backwards: the shrine is a bathroom, the rite is brushing teeth and the holy-mouth man is a dentist. Miner’s joke makes a serious point. Our own habits look natural to us only because we are inside them. Anthropology tries to make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange.

Must-know for engaging with anthropology:

Area	Key content
key concepts	belief and knowledge, change, culture, identity, materiality, power, social relations, society, symbolism
method	participant observation; ethnography; emic and etic views
thinking	ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, reflexivity, comparison
example	Fei Xiaotong’s ripples: social relations in rural China
Paper 1	three questions on an unseen text; a big question; HL ethics question

The nine key concepts

The course uses nine **key concepts** . Each is a question you can ask of any social situation:

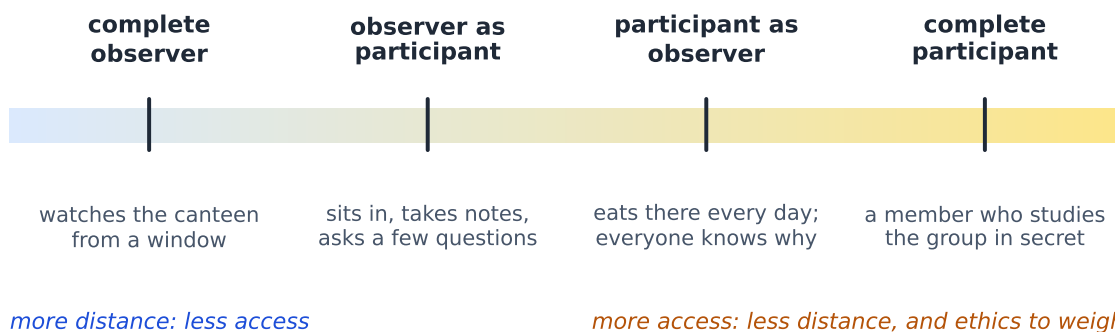
Concept	Question it asks	Example
belief and knowledge	what do people take to be true, and how?	ideas about what causes illness

Concept	Question it asks	Example
change	what is changing, and why?	young villagers moving to cities for work
culture	what ways of life are learned and shared?	table manners, ways of greeting
identity	how do people see themselves and others?	being a “local” or an “outsider” in a city
materiality	how do objects shape and carry meaning?	a red envelope (hongbao) with money at New Year
power	who can make others do things, and how?	who speaks first at a family meal
social relations	how are people connected, and with what duties?	the obligations between friends and relatives
society	how is a group organised as a whole?	a village, a school, a nation
symbolism	what do things stand for?	white clothes for mourning in China, black in Europe

An answer never names a concept alone: it uses the concept to explain real material (the passage, or an ethnography you have studied).

Participant observation and ethnography

Anthropologists are known for **participant observation** : living with a group for a long time, often a year or more, joining in its everyday life while watching and asking questions. Bronisław Malinowski made this the core of the discipline: from 1915 to 1918 he lived in the Trobriand Islands, off the coast of New Guinea, learned the language and pitched his tent in the village.



Participant observation runs from watching to taking part (Gold, 1958).

The written result is an **ethnography** : a detailed account of the life of one group, based on fieldwork. Anthropologists try to give two views:

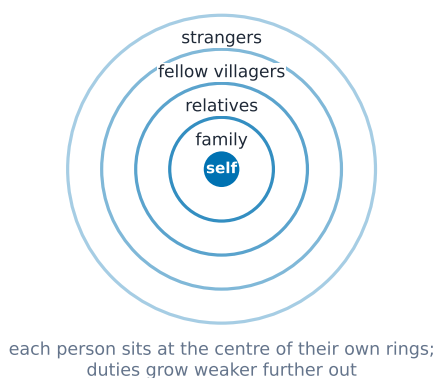
- the **emic** view: how members of the group understand their own world, in their own words;
- the **etic** view: the outsider's analysis, which compares the group with others.

Thinking like an anthropologist

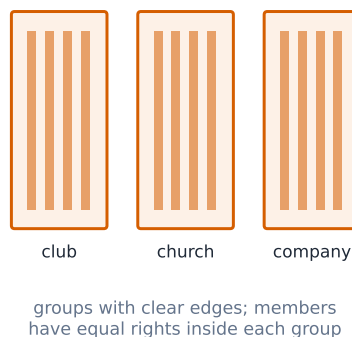
- **Ethnocentrism** : judging other cultures by the standards of your own, as Miner's readers did before they saw the joke.
- **Cultural relativism** : trying to understand a practice within its own cultural context before you judge it. (Understanding is not the same as approving.)
- **Reflexivity** : thinking about how your own background (age, gender, nationality, class) shapes what you see and what people tell you.
- **Comparison** : anthropology compares many societies, so that assumptions that seem natural in one place become visible.

A Chinese example. Fei Xiaotong , a student of Malinowski, became China's best-known anthropologist. In *From the Soil* (1947) he compared social relations in rural China and the West. In a Chinese village, he wrote, each person stands at the centre of circles of relationships, like the ripples that spread when a stone is thrown into water: close family first, then relatives, then neighbours, with duties growing weaker further out. In Western societies, he argued, people belong to groups with clear edges, like bundles of straw, and all members of a group have the same rights. The comparison helps explain why personal connections (**guanxi**) matter so much in Chinese life.

ripples: the Chinese village



bundles: Western societies



Fei Xiaotong's comparison: relations spread out like ripples, or are bundled into groups with clear edges.

Answering Paper 1

Paper 1 gives you an unseen text: an extract from an ethnography. The first questions ask you to identify and explain what the text shows; the last asks one of the course's big questions, such as the IB's sample: *How are we the same as and different from each other? Discuss with references to at least two sources of ethnographic material and examples from the passage.*

1. Read the passage for the scene: who does what, where, and why.
2. Mark what surprises you: a surprise often shows one of your own assumptions.
3. Name the concept that explains it (power, symbolism, social relations ...).
4. Bring in ethnography you have studied that shows the same concept in another place.

Worked plan. *A passage describes gift-giving at a wedding in a village.* Same: in every society studied, gifts create relationships and duties (Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, 1925; topic 02). Different: what is given, by whom, and what is expected back. In Fei Xiaotong's rural China, a gift's size depends on how close the giver is to the centre of the ripples. Conclusion: people share the need to build relationships, but the forms are learned, local and changing.

Checklist

- Paper 1: HL 2 hours, 30%; SL 1 hour 30 minutes, 40%; three questions on an unseen text; HL ethics question.
- The nine key concepts as questions, with examples.

- Participant observation (Malinowski, Gold's four roles); ethnography; emic and etic.
- Ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, reflexivity, comparison; the Nacirema.
- Fei Xiaotong's ripples and bundles; guanxi.
- The four steps and the worked plan for a big question.