Course Companion

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

Every topic handout in one volume

exercises.lol

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# 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:

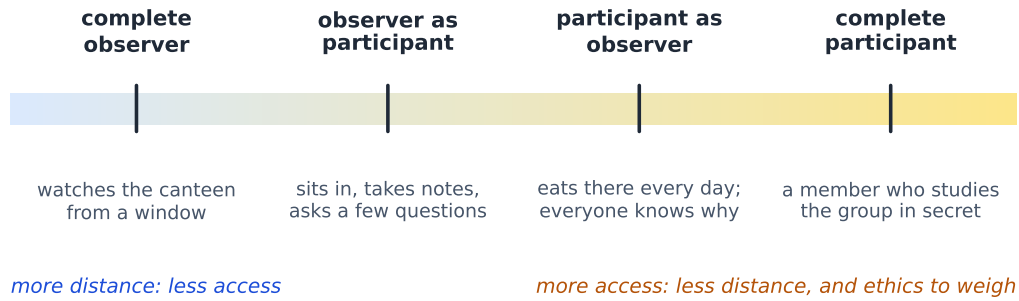
| Concept | Question it asks | Example |
|---|---|---|
| belief and knowledge | what do people take to be true, and how? | ideas about what causes illness |

| 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).*

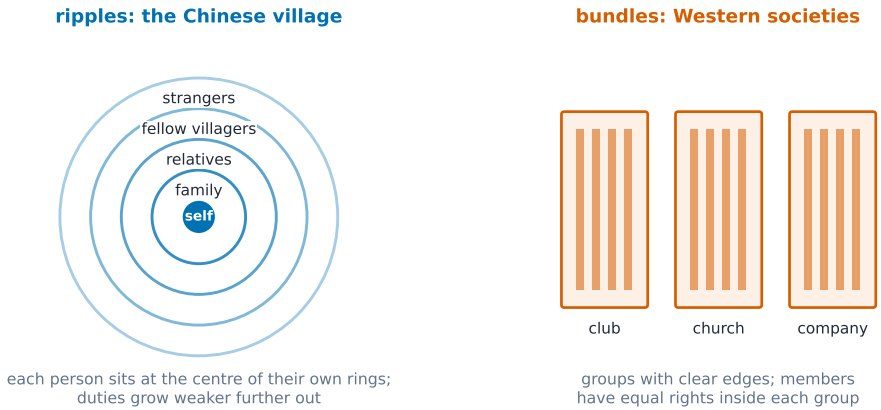
The written result is an **ethnography** : a detailed account of the life of one group, based on fieldwork. Anthropologists try to give two views:

- 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.




*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.

# Engaging with ethnography

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

IB Diploma Programme Social and Cultural Anthropology SL (first assessed in 2019; 2017 guide). This topic covers the **areas of inquiry** and how to read and use **ethnographic material**: the books and articles anthropologists write after fieldwork. It is examined in Paper 2 (2 hours 30 minutes, 45% at HL; 1 hour 30 minutes, 40% at SL).

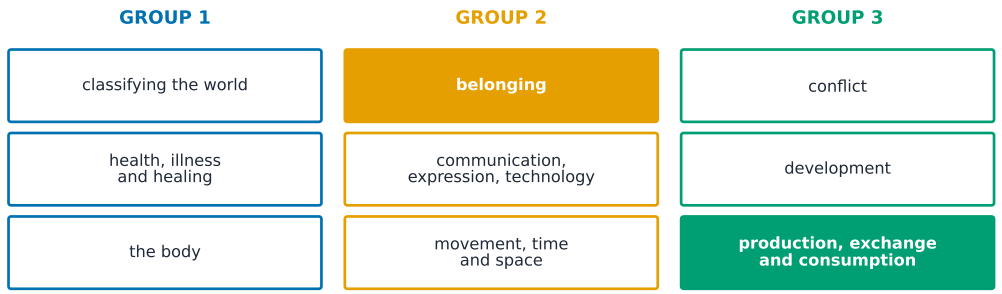
In the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski watched men sail for days across open sea in canoes, risking storms, to give away necklaces made of red shell. In return, months later, they received armbands of white shell. Nobody kept the objects: after a time, each one was passed on to the next partner. To a European economist this looked mad. Why risk your life for an object you cannot keep or use? Malinowski's answer, in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), was that the **kula** exchange is not about the objects. It builds partnerships between islands, and a man becomes famous by having held famous shells and giving them away generously.

**Must-know for engaging with ethnography**:

| Area | Key content |
|---|---|
| areas of inquiry | nine areas in three groups; SL studies three, HL four |
| ethnographic material | who, where, when, how, with which concepts |
| exchange | the kula ring; Mauss's gift; Yan's Chinese village |
| comparison | similar practices, different meanings |
| Paper 2 | Section A: concept + area of inquiry + real-world issue; Section B: SL one question, HL two |

## The nine areas of inquiry

The course groups its nine areas of inquiry in three groups. SL students study one area from each group; HL students study a fourth from any group.




SL: one area from each group; HL: a fourth from any group. Filled: the areas of this topic's worked ethnographies.

*SL takes one area from each group; HL adds a fourth.*

For each area you need ethnographic material from at least one real study, with the details that make it real: the anthropologist, the place, the time and the methods.

## Reading ethnographic material

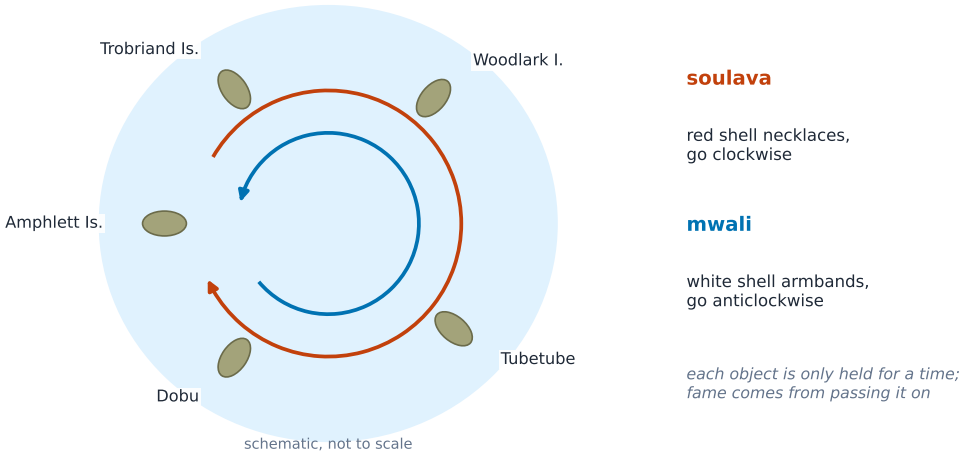
Ask five questions of every ethnography:

| Question | Example: Yunxiang Yan, *The Flow of Gifts* (1996) |
|---|---|
| who is the anthropologist, and what is their position? | Yan grew up in China and had lived in the village as a young man, so he was partly an insider |
| where and when? | Xiajia, a village in Heilongjiang, north-east China; fieldwork in 1989 and 1991 |
| how? (methods) | participant observation; interviews; families' own gift lists, which record who gave what at weddings and other events |
| what does it show? | gifts build and keep guanxi; many gifts flow upwards, from villagers to cadres, without being returned |
| which concepts? | social relations, power, materiality |

Yan's material is useful because it can test a theory. The French scholar **Marcel Mauss** argued in *The Gift* (1925) that a gift creates three duties: to give, to receive and to **reciprocate** (give back). The giver gains **prestige**, and the receiver is in **debt**. Yan found that in Xiajia, gifts to people of higher rank often went one way: the receiver did not give back and did not lose status. Here gifts followed **hierarchy** instead of creating it.

## Exchange compared

**Exchange** is part of the area *production, exchange and consumption*. Compare two ethnographies:




*In the kula ring, necklaces and armbands travel in opposite directions; partners never keep them.*

| | **Kula, Trobriand Islands (Malinowski)** | **Gifts in Xiajia (Yan)** |
|---|---|---|
| what is given | shell necklaces and armbands | money and goods at weddings, births and funerals |
| who gives | trading partners on different islands | relatives, friends, neighbours, villagers to cadres |
| what it does | builds lasting partnerships and fame | keeps guanxi; shows and builds rank |
| concept | symbolism (the shells' histories) | social relations and power |

Same: in both places, giving creates relationships that last. Different: what counts as a proper return, and who is expected to give to whom.

A third area, *health, illness and healing*: Nancy Scheper-Hughes, in *Death Without Weeping* (1992), studied mothers in a very poor town in north-east Brazil, where many babies died. She found that some mothers did not **grieve** openly for babies who died young. She linked this to poverty and hunger, not to a lack of love: a way of surviving in a place where many children did not live.

## Answering Paper 2

**Section A** asks you to connect a key concept, an area of inquiry and a real-world issue. The IB's sample: *With reference to ethnographic material from one area of inquiry you have studied, discuss how either symbolism or materiality or society helps you to understand one of the following issues that is grounded in a contemporary, real-world example: inequality, violence, poverty, mobility, environment.*

**Section B** asks about the other areas of inquiry (SL one question, HL two), for example: *Discuss how the body is constructed through either symbolism or social relations.*

**Worked plan (Section A).** Concept: materiality. Area: production, exchange and consumption. Issue: inequality.

- Real-world example: the rising cost of wedding gifts in rural China, which many families report as a burden.
- Ethnography: Yan's gift lists show that gifts are material evidence of relationships, and that poorer families must still give to keep their place in the network.
- Comparison: the kula shows exchange creating equal partnerships; Xiajia shows exchange that can follow and widen inequality.
- Evaluation: Yan was partly an insider, which gave him trust and access, but may have made some habits seem normal to him.

## Checklist

- The nine areas in three groups; SL three, HL four.
- Five questions for any ethnography: who, where and when, how, what, which concepts.
- The kula ring (Malinowski, 1922); Mauss's three duties; Yan's Xiajia gifts flowing upwards.
- Scheper-Hughes on health and poverty in Brazil.
- Paper 2: HL 2 hours 30 minutes, 45%; SL 1 hour 30 minutes, 40%; Sections A and B; the worked plan.

# Anthropological practice

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IB Diploma Programme Social and Cultural Anthropology SL (first assessed in 2019; 2017 guide). The internal assessment asks you to do anthropology yourself: **fieldwork** in a real social setting near you. At SL it is limited fieldwork (about 30 hours, 20% of the grade); at HL it is a fuller fieldwork project (about 60 hours, 25% of the grade).

In 1958 the anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his wife arrived in a village in Bali, Indonesia. For days the villagers ignored them, as if they were invisible. Then they went to watch a cockfight, which was illegal at the time. The police arrived, everyone ran, and the Geertzes ran too, hiding in a villager's courtyard and pretending to drink tea. The next morning the whole village was talking about the foreigners who had run like everyone else. From that day, people talked to them. Fieldwork depends on **rapport** (trust between the researcher and the people studied), and you cannot plan exactly when it will come.

**Must-know for anthropological practice**:

| Area | Key content |
|---|---|
| SL tasks | observation report; extension of fieldwork; second data collection and analysis; critical reflection |
| HL tasks | proposal form; critical reflection; research report and reflection |
| methods | observation, field notes, interviews, maps and counts |
| ethics | informed consent, anonymity, do no harm |
| reflection | your position as observer; what your methods could and could not show |

## The parts of the task

| SL (limited fieldwork, 20%) | HL (fieldwork, 25%) |
|---|---|
| 1. an observation report on a short observation | 1. a proposal form: setting, question, concept, methods, ethics |
| 2. an extension of the first fieldwork | 2. a critical reflection on the first fieldwork |
| 3. a second data collection, with analysis | 3. a research report and final reflection |
| 4. a critical reflection on the practice of anthropology | |

Both levels need the same skills: choose a setting and a concept, ask a focused question, select methods, collect and interpret data, consider ethics and reflect on your own position.

## Choosing a setting and a question

Choose a setting you can visit several times and where you can observe people legally and safely: a school canteen, a market, a bus stop, a park where older people dance in the evening, a basketball court. Link it to one key concept, and ask a question that observation can answer.

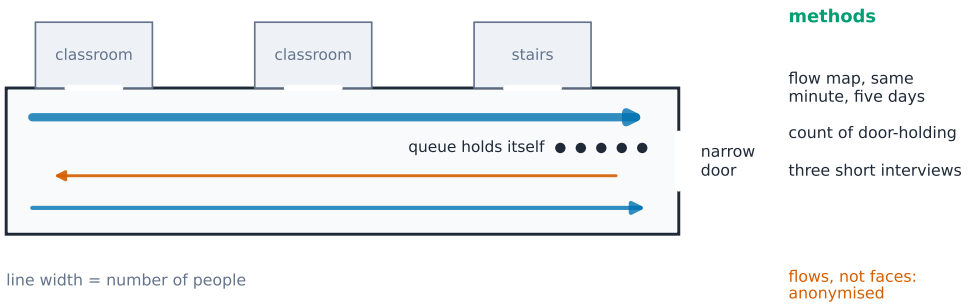
| Too wide | Focused |
|---|---|
| What is Chinese culture? | How do students share space at the narrow door of the teaching building between lessons? (power, social relations) |
| Why do people dance? | How do the dancers in one park decide who stands at the front? (power, identity) |

## Methods

- **Field notes** : write what you see (who, what, where, when) separately from what you think it means.
- **Observation**: the same place at the same time on several days, so that you see patterns, not one-off events.
- **Interviews** : short, open questions ("Can you tell me about ...?"), which bring in the emic view.
- **Maps and counts**: a plan of the space with flows of people; tallies of a behaviour.

**Worked fieldwork.** Question: how do students share the narrow door between lessons? Methods: a flow map at the same minute on five days; a count of who holds the door for whom; three short interviews. Finding: older students pass first and

younger students wait without being told; a queue forms by itself. Concept: power (age gives priority) and social relations (an unwritten rule everyone knows).




*A flow map records movements, not faces; the counts and interviews add what it cannot show.*

## Ethics and positionality

- **Informed consent** : tell people what you are studying and ask their permission before interviews; they can stop at any time.
- **Anonymity** : do not use real names or photographs of faces; record flows and numbers, not identities.
- **Do no harm**: do not observe private places, and do not report anything that could get a person into trouble.

**Positionality** means your position in the setting. At your own school you are an insider: you have easy access and understand the rules, but you may not notice things that seem normal to you, and other students may tell you what they think you want to hear. Name your position in the reflection and say how it affected your data.

## The critical reflection

The reflection is where you think like an anthropologist about your own work:

- What did each method show, and what could it not show? (The flow map showed who went first; only the interviews showed *why*.)
- How did your position shape what you saw and what people said?
- What ethical choices did you make, and why?
- What would you change in a second round of fieldwork?

## Checklist

- SL: four parts, 20%; HL: three parts, 25%.
- A setting you can revisit; one concept; a focused question.
- Field notes, observation, interviews, maps and counts.
- Informed consent, anonymity, do no harm; positionality.
- The worked corridor fieldwork; Geertz and rapport.
- A reflection that judges methods, position and ethics.