

Discussion Questions

A. EDWARD TYLOR & EVOLUTIONISM

1. What contemporary ideas did Tylor build on, and what contemporary ideas did Tylor oppose, in developing his ideas of evolutionism?
2. Consider the racism that prevailed at the time Tylor wrote. Do you think that Tylor reinforced such racism or that he rebelled and offered a more respectful interpretation of non-Western practices and beliefs?
3. Give some examples of the social institutions and practices to which Tylor applied his theory of evolutionism. Discuss whether his interpretations of these social institutions and practices were ethnocentric.
4. Discuss Tylor's methodology (how he collected data). Was this problematic in any way, leading him to make incorrect statements about non-Western peoples?

B. LEWIS H. MORGAN & EVOLUTIONISM

1. Morgan was the first social theorist to focus on kinship. How did he interpret the systems of kinship nomenclature that he discovered?
2. According to Morgan, what is the "force" that drives social evolution? Is it "materialist" or "idealist"?
3. What were Morgan's ideas about the evolution of the state, and why was his analysis novel and important?
4. Discuss and critique the notion of progress that underlies Tylor's evolutionist views.

C. FRANZ BOAS AND HIS MANY IDEAS

1. How does the idea of diffusion confound the ideas of social evolution?
2. Why does Sidky accuse Boas of being "anti-scientific"? Does this mean that Boas was lax in collecting empirical data?

3. How did Boas's studies of the cephalic index force scholars to rethink their ideas of race?
4. Discuss Boas's ideas of cultural determinism, along with Sidky's critiques of that idea.
5. Was Boas an idealist or a materialist? Why?
6. PRE-TEST QUESTION → What is cultural relativism and why was this idea so radical when first formulated?

D. ALFRED KROEBER

1. In Kroeber's ideas of the superorganic, how does he conceptualize the individual? Which of his peers (Boas's other students) most blatantly disagreed with him?

E. RUTH BENEDICT & EDWARD SAPIR (SCHOOL OF CULTURE & PERSONALITY)

1. Describe Benedict's ideas about the configuration of culture, and connect these with the examples she gives of "Appolonian" and "Dionysian" cultures.
2. Describe the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which includes the theory of linguistic relativity. Can you give examples?
3. Why are both Benedict and Sapir (along with Mead, who came later) identified as founding members of the "school of culture and personality," which later became known as psychological anthropology? In other words, how are their theories "psychological" and hence "idealist"?
4. How did both Benedict and Sapir attempt to provide theories about the integration of culture that would improve upon Boas's idea that culture is a loosely-organized entity (the problematic "shreds & patches" idea)?

F. MARGARET MEAD (SCHOOL OF CULTURE & PERSONALITY)

1. What were some potential reasons that Mead's work/results might have been inaccurate?
2. What were the differences between Mead and her interpretation of Samoan culture and Freeman and his interpretation of Samoan culture? Discuss.

3. Do you think that there is an ethical concern with the way that Mead studied the Samoa? What do you think modern anthropologists would think of her method?

4. How is Mead's work different from that of her teacher/role model Franz Boas?

5. Discuss the importance of cultural determinism to Mead's work as an anthropologist and her role as a political activist.

6. PRE-TEST QUESTION → What theoretical approach would lead a right-wing think tank to name Margaret Mead's book *Coming of Age in Samoa* as the single worst book of the 20th century? Why are her ideas—still espoused by many anthropologists—so threatening to some conservatives?

7. What problems are there with the following concepts that were developed by Boas and his coterie of students? You can give an original critique and/or you can draw on the Sidky and Moore readings as well as anything else you have read in an anthropology class.

salvage anthropology

cultural relativism

cultural determinism (gender constructionism)

configuralism/patterns of culture

the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis