

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Because It Makes the World Safe for Cultural Differences

*By Anne Kelsey, Marketing and Communications Manager, American Anthropological Association
February 14, 2017*

They are cracking the culture codes of consumers and corporations (Intel, Pepsico, Target, Hormel), studying human-machine interactions (driverless cars anyone?), and unlocking the mysteries behind “superspreaders” – the people responsible for accelerating infectious disease epidemics. This week’s [Anthropology Day](#) celebration (Thursday, February 16th) provides persuasive answers to the question “why anthropology?”

Anthropology is a social science discipline that makes the world safe for cultural differences and is arguably more essential now than ever as it produces insight into the human component of many of this century’s most pressing problems.

Anthropology plays a critical role in improving natural disaster prevention and recovery, understanding the causes and impacts of global climate change, informing individuals about medical treatments, analyzing the need for and usability of new technologies, and so much more.

For example:

- ◇ Anthropologists’ work has been especially helpful in demonstrating how we can do better, all over the world, at preparing for and recovering from the worst effects of disasters. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, it was not an equal opportunity natural hazard. Nor was the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake in the San Francisco Bay Area, or the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. Some people fared worse than others, and anthropologists are demonstrating how and why one’s exposure to harm, as well as how long it takes to recover, is tied up in social position. Ultimately, the work of anthropologists like [Anthony Oliver-Smith, Susana Hoffman, and a number of colleagues](#) leads to concrete, actionable recommendations for reducing vulnerability to disaster, accompanied by measures to strengthen local and regional coping strategies.
- ◇ Severe floods that endanger their health and lives are a frequent reality for the coastal residents of Mozambique. Anthropologists from Arizona State University’s School of Human Evolution and Social Change are in the midst of [a five-year, USAID-funded effort](#) to develop strategies to help these coastal communities cope with extreme weather events. Through the use of social science methods, researchers are able to find smarter, more cost-effective ways to



help communities all over the world understand and adopt new strategies to prevent erosion, flood damage, and resource depletion.

- ◇ Anthropologists are actively engaged in research to understand the [implications and human causes of climate change](#). University of Connecticut anthropology professor Merrill Singer is working to develop a model that effectively communicates the health risks associated with climate change to low-income communities. In cities, heat tends to get trapped among the closely packed skyscrapers and multistory buildings creating what climatologists refer to as “urban heat islands.” The impact of these “heat islands” is particularly burdensome on those already struggling with other issues such as poverty, pre-existing health conditions, lack of access to health care, age, pregnancy, or lack of resources. Singer’s model can be applied in communities around the world to help mitigate the health impacts of climate change as well as drive home the necessity for human intervention to prevent further environmental destruction.
- ◇ Anthropology provides concrete insights into the factors that lead parents to make certain decisions about their child’s vaccine regimen. Medical anthropologist E.J. Sobo [has found](#) that even the most information-literate parents often make decisions about risk based on social norms in their communities. These findings are essential when developing information campaigns to combat anti-vaccination rhetoric as they indicate clearly that facts and education can at times take a back seat to social influences.
- ◇ The Center for Disease Control (CDC) called on anthropologists to develop basic protocols in medical labs to reduce patient specimen errors. Former procedures were known to misidentify, damage, or contaminate a number of specimens, delaying the time it took to target treatment. A team led by anthropologists was able to recommend evidence based best practices that reduce the need for retesting, eliminate medical errors, and improve the overall quality of lab results.

Anthropologists are everywhere! Our knowledge and observations are crucial pieces in this jigsaw puzzle we call Earth. This Thursday we’ll be celebrating the field and spreading the word – Happy Anthropology Day!



Anne Kelsey is the American Anthropological Association’s marketing and communications manager. Anne manages the association’s social media, advertising, communications and marketing activities to help strengthen member engagement and public outreach on AAA publications and programs. Before joining AAA, Anne served as communications coordinator at the Society for Neuroscience, facilitating the organization’s media relations and communications efforts as well as public engagement with scientific content from the society’s journals. Anne also worked in the public affairs office at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History. Anne has a Bachelor of Arts in anthropology from The College of William & Mary, and a master’s degree in public relations and corporate communication from Georgetown University.



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