

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Because We Have a World of Knowledge the World Needs to Know

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By Jeff Martin, Director of Communications and Public Affairs, American Anthropological Association

“At its core, Anthropology is about a simple idea—that the world is a better place if people understand one another,” wrote Alec Barker, past president of the American Anthropological Association. “For some that means basic research, because knowing more about

people—their past, present, and prospects—is a worthy goal in itself. Others teach, helping students of all ages better understand the diverse ways of being human, and for others it means applying that knowledge in practical application. It’s the broadest of endeavors, encompassing scientific and humanistic approaches to people and their near kin, to how they communicate, come together, divide, develop and find meaning. That variety is its greatest strength.”

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For example:

- Anthropology provides concrete insights into the factors that influence decisions about vaccine regimens. Medical anthropologist E.J. Sobo has found that even the most information-literate citizens 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 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) called on anthropologists to develop basic protocols in medical labs to reduce patient specimen errors. Former procedures were known to mis-identify, 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

reduced the need for retesting, eliminated medical errors, and improved the overall quality of lab results.

- Anthropologists served as expert witnesses for the prosecution of war crimes during the genocide in Rwanda during the 1990s. Linguists were called in to interpret how the propaganda (e.g. radio broadcasts) would have been understood as a call for Hutus to kill their Tutsi neighbors.
- Anthropologists were instrumental in the development of a microchip that could be implanted into artifacts and tracked to prevent archaeological looting at historic cultural sites.
- *“If you’re worried about the robotic apocalypse coming, it’s going to come at ankle height.”*
Anthropologist Genevieve Bell, former Vice President at Intel, joked about the machines that comprise the majority of the existing robot population—vacuum cleaning robots! However, she also noted that robots still seem to cause a significant amount of anxiety, even among those who are creating them. Bell, who has been making sense of humanity and social sciences for a tech company for over a decade and a half, claims that robots are actually us—they mirror our history, power, body, anxieties. The job of anthropologists is to study robots in ways that shed light on questions about social and power relationships, and our relationships with and through technology. Bell is fiercely convinced that, if anything, anthropologists excel at posing (and answering) the questions that matter, and are thus morally obligated to do so whenever possible.

Anthropologists are everywhere! Our knowledge and observations help advance our understanding of the human condition, and contribute to a more just and sustainable world.

[Anthropology Day](#) is held every year on the third Thursday in February to celebrate this distinctive flavor of social science. AAA shares [resources](#) and [events](#) from Anthropology Day on its website so you can spread the word all year long!

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