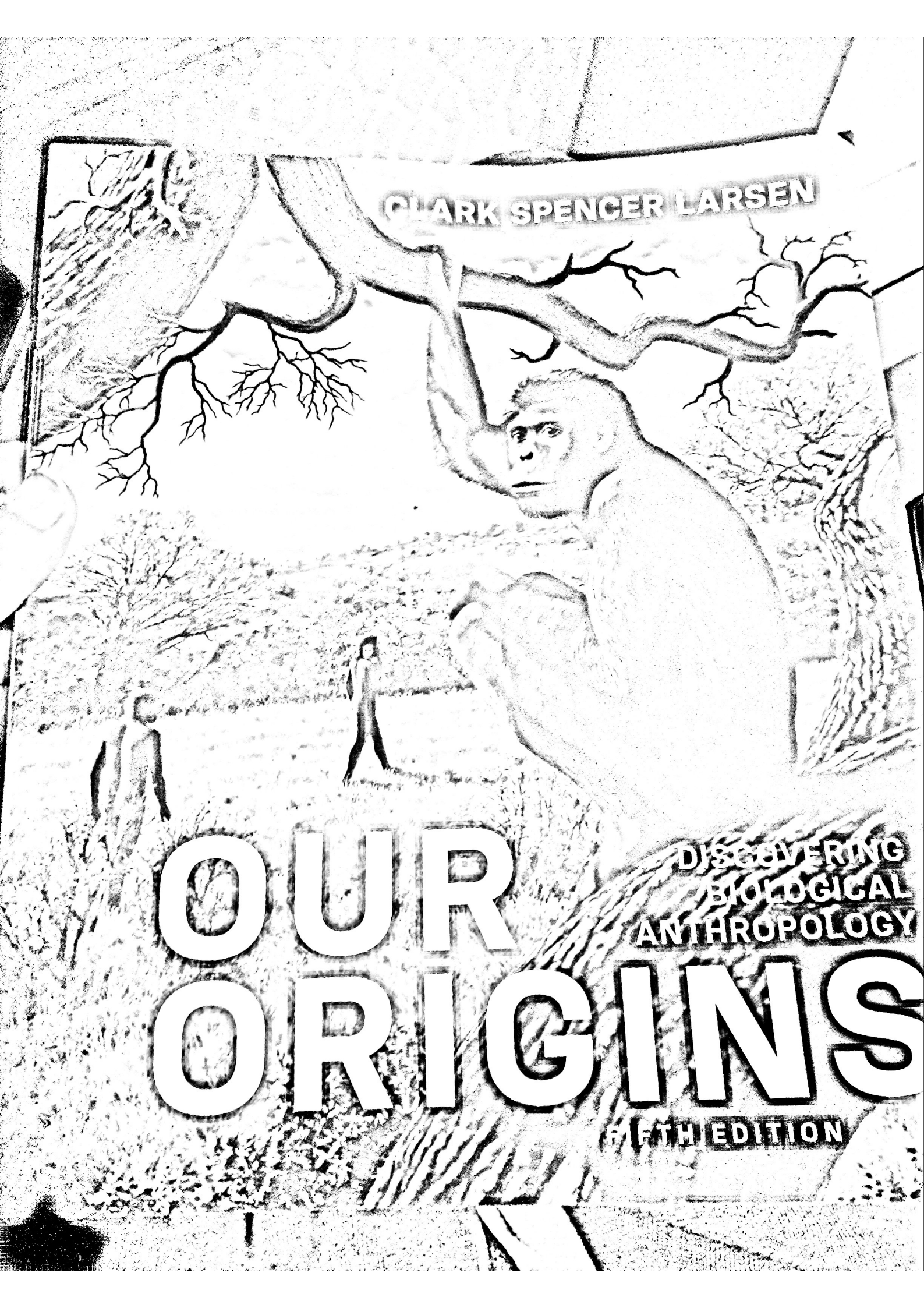




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# OUR ORIGINS

DISCOVERING  
BIOLOGICAL  
ANTHROPOLOGY

FIFTH EDITION

## 1.1 What Is Anthropology?

When European explorers first undertook transcontinental travel (for example, Marco Polo into Asia in the late 1200s) or transoceanic voyages to faraway lands (for example, Christopher Columbus to the Americas in the late 1400s and early 1500s), they encountered people that looked, talked, dressed, and behaved very differently from themselves. When these travelers returned to their home countries, they described the peoples and cultures they saw. Building on these accounts, early scholars speculated on the relationships between humans living in Europe and those encountered in distant places. Eventually, later scholars developed new ideas about other cultures, resulting in the development of the discipline of anthropology.

**Anthropology** is the study of humankind, viewed from the perspective of all people and all times. As it is practiced in the United States, it includes four branches or sub-disciplines: **cultural anthropology**, **archaeology**, **linguistic anthropology**, and **biological anthropology**, also called **physical anthropology** (Figure 1.2).

Cultural anthropologists typically study present-day societies in non-Western settings, such as in Africa, South America, or Australia. Culture—defined as learned behavior that is transmitted from person to person—is the unifying theme of study in cultural anthropology.

Archaeologists study earlier human societies, focusing mostly on their material remains—such as animal and plant remains and places where people lived in the past. Archaeologists are best known for their study of material objects—**artifacts**—from past cultures, such as weaponry and ceramics. Archaeologists study the processes behind past human behaviors; for example, why people lived where they did, why some societies were simple and others complex, and why people shifted from hunting and gathering to agriculture beginning more than 10,000 years ago. Archaeologists are the cultural anthropologists of the past—they seek to reassemble cultures of the past as though those cultures were alive today.

Linguistic anthropologists study the construction and use of language by human societies. **Language**—defined as a set of written or spoken symbols that refer to things (people, places, concepts, etc.) other than themselves—makes possible the transfer of knowledge from one person to the next and from one generation to the next. Popular among linguistic anthropologists is a subfield called **sociolinguistics**, the investigation of language's social contexts.

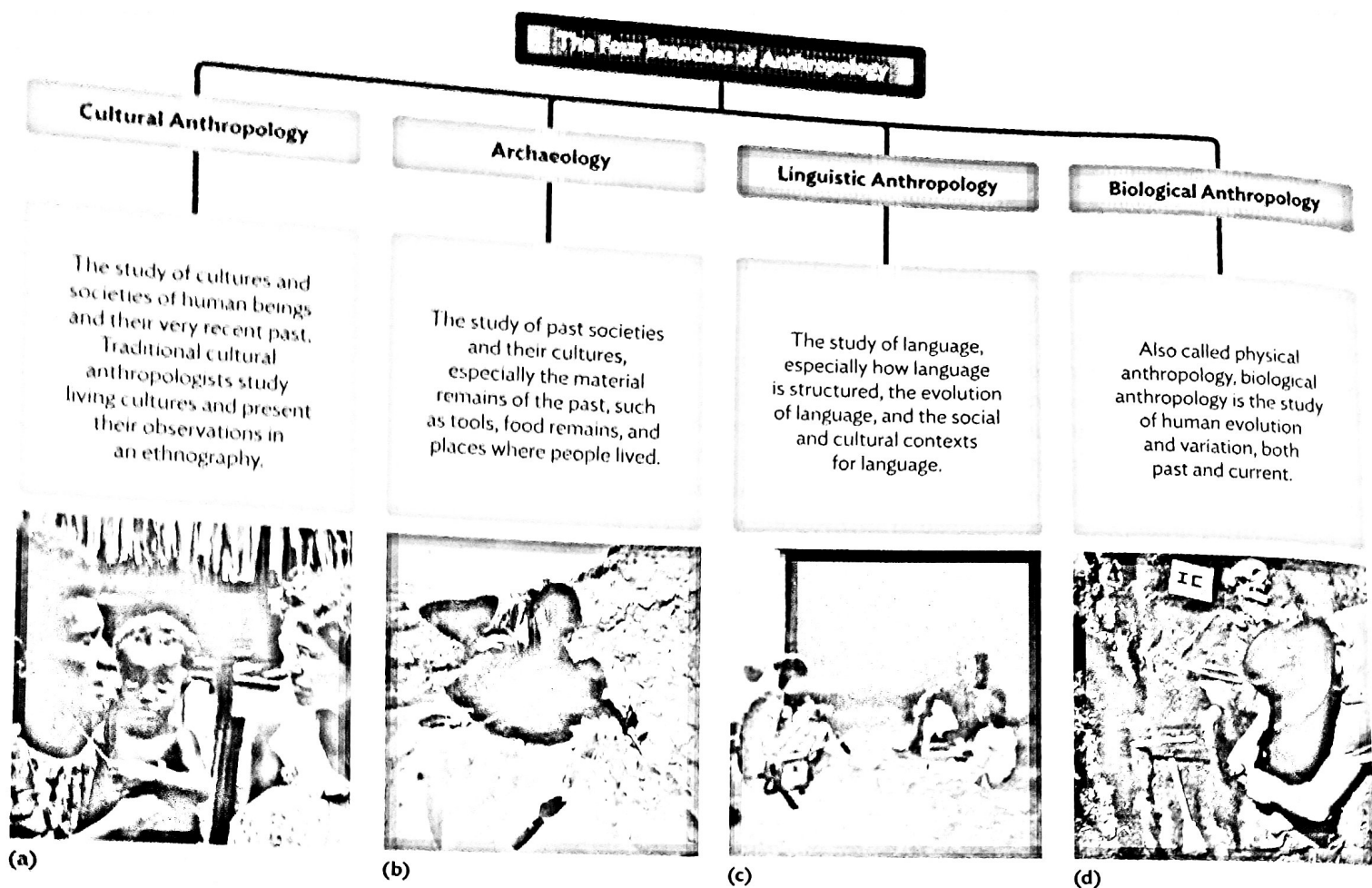
Biological (or physical) anthropologists study all aspects of present and past human biology. As we will explore in the next section, biological anthropology deals with the evolution of and variation among human beings and their living and past relatives.

No anthropologist is expected to be an expert in all four branches of the discipline. Anthropologists in all four areas and with very different interests, however, acknowledge the diversity of humankind in all contexts. No other discipline embraces the breadth of the human condition in this manner. In fact, this remarkably diverse discipline differs from other disciplines in its commitment to the notion that, unlike other animals, humans are biocultural—both biological and cultural beings. Anthropologists are interested in the interrelationship between biology and culture. Anthropologists call this focus the **biocultural approach**. Anthropology also differs from other disciplines in emphasizing a broad comparative approach to the study of biology and culture, looking at all people (and their ancestors) and all cultures in all times and all places. Anthropologists are interested in people, their ancestors, and their living and past biological relatives, wherever or whenever they lived. Simply, you are studying a field that is holistic, unlike any you have studied before.

**artifacts** Material objects from past cultures.

**sociolinguistics** The science of investigating language's social contexts.

**biocultural approach** The scientific study of the interrelationship between human biology and culture.



**FIGURE 1.2**

**The Four Branches of Anthropology** (a) Cultural anthropologists, who study living populations, often spend time living with cultural groups to gain more intimate perspectives on those cultures. The American anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901–1978), one of the most recognizable names in cultural anthropology, studied the peoples of the Admiralty Islands, near Papua New Guinea. (b) Archaeologists study past human behaviors by investigating material remains that humans leave behind, such as buildings and other structures. This archaeologist examines remnants from a pyramid in the ancient sacred city of Caral, Peru. (c) Linguistic anthropologists study all aspects of language and language use. Here, Leslie Moore, a linguistic anthropologist working in a Fulbe community in northern Cameroon, records as a teacher guides a boy in memorizing Koranic verses. (d) Biological anthropologists study human evolution and variation. Some biological anthropologists study skeletons from the past to investigate evolution and variation throughout human history, especially the past 10,000 years of human evolution. Those working in forensic anthropology, a subarea within biological anthropology, examine skeletons to identify who they were in life. Such an identification may be of a single person or of thousands. For example, the forensic anthropologist pictured here was called on to help identify the estimated 30,000 victims of Argentina’s “Dirty War,” which followed the country’s 1976 coup.

Anthropology is a remarkably diverse discipline and has considerable overlap between its subdisciplines. For example, a number of anthropologists pursue a biomedical path, combining their knowledge of health and disease in collaborating with doctors and other health professionals to address serious issues involving new and returning epidemic diseases. In this regard, medical anthropologists are key in addressing disease outbreaks in a range of settings worldwide, such as in remote communities in West Africa hit hard by the Ebola outbreaks over the past decade. Simply, the knowledge of health in its larger cultural context gives the discipline a unique perspective on the importance of the interlinkages between our well-being and the myriad culturally based behaviors that influence it. You will learn about health connections throughout the text, including but not limited to disease (chapters 2 and 13), growth and aging (chapter 5), diet (chapter 13), and the challenges to health associated with global warming (chapter 14).