Ten concepts I learned from Cultural Anthropology 1010

1. Ethnography. When I read about Ethnography in chapter one I did not have a clear picture of all that it encompasses. However I soon came to deeper understanding primarily because of the Ethnography section contained in the text chapters. I like how ethnography combines both qualitative and quantitative data as well as field research. One ethnography section that stood out in my mind is located in chapter 5 titled “The American Beef Industry”. I was impressed though not entirely surprised about the amount of food wasted by the beef industry and the country as a whole. Today I saw a piece on the national news outlining a new documentary exploring food waste in the United States called “Just Eat It”. I have not seen the documentary yet but the news story said that while researching the documentary content the film makers discovered the average American family of four spends $2,275 on groceries that are never eaten. I now better understand ethnography and how it is useful to anthropologist, students, and others who want to understand themselves and others better.

2. Ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. I thought a lot about these two throughout the course. I found that it is in fact very difficult not to judge others from the scale of my own culture and experiences. Anthropologists should embrace cultural relativism however it seems that throughout the text examples were given where anthropologist did show more ethnocentrism than cultural relativism. For example, nearly every box titled “Anthropology makes a difference” outlined how anthropologist came into a culture and tried to change it based on their personal values. One example that I found interesting because I had just travelled to San Francisco is seen in chapter 2 “Anthropologist and drug use”. Bourgois and Schonberg studied drug user in San Francisco, they learned much about the drug culture but at the end of the study they were not just there to study and understand drug users but to gather some data that would hopefully “lead to suggestions that can greatly improve the effectiveness of programs designed to help addicts”. The desire to help or change addicts who appear to be perfectly content in their culture is a form of ethnocentrism. I want to clarify that this is an understanding that I came to understand, however I do not think that it minimizes the importance of anthropology and anthropologist desire to help people live better lives (even if those people, drug addicts, are happy with their current situation).

3. Interpretive Anthropology and deep play. I was fascinated by the texts description of American football and the perception that football has many sexual overtones. I enjoy watching football and have always considered it just sport without giving much thought to the symbolism behind the uniforms, pads, tacking techniques etc. Partnered with the idea of deep play I am looking at a variety of different activities that I participate in and watch through different eyes. I found that some things are more than just a game. For example a recent corporate foosball tournament at my work place turned into a display of power and aggression. Ultimately, this tournament was not that deep because no one got a raise or promotion. However, I see the value of something like bragging rights better due to this course and my understanding of interpretive anthropology and deep play.

4. Nonverbal communication. I enjoyed writing the paper about nonverbal communication. I found that across the United States there is not too much variance in nonverbal communication among those I interviewed. However, I found my cousin’s experiences with the Yupik people in Alaska very
interesting and was surprised that you did field work with this group. Writing this particular paper opened my eyes up to how different people communicate. I came to understand the part isolation plays in a group’s verbal and nonverbal communication. During my interview with my cousin I learned how outside forces effect verbal and nonverbal communication and got an idea of how the Yupik have adapted by merging their traditional communication patterns with that of other groups that are now living in their midst.

5. Anthropologist in the Corporate World. Soon after I started this course I learned that the global human capital management corporation I work for hired two full time anthropologist. One to study how employees interacted with technology and one to study trends in human capital management across nations and cultures. We were not too far into the class so I was rather surprised. Then in Chapter 6 I read about “Anthropologist in the Corporate World” in the Anthropology Makes a Difference box. Until this time my view of the scope of things anthropologist studied was limited. I am excited that my company is looking more at human interactions and culture than just corporate profit. Ultimately I think that my company’s corporate anthropologist will actually help increase profits over time.

6. Sex and Gender. Before this course I had never thought much about the differences between sex and gender. Although, I did not agree with all my class mates about some points discussed in the group discussion from Chapter 9 I did find that this discussion actually challenged my preconceived opinions. I was surprised by the part culture and traditions play in gender identification as well as the diversity of gender identifications across many cultures. The thing that had the greatest impact on me in chapter 9 is the realization that there are certain things that some cultures find acceptable that I never will. Moreover I do not care if I do view these practices through ethnocentric eyes because something within my own moral fiber will not allow me to view certain practices, particularly when applied to reproductive activities and health, as acceptable.

7. Assimilation. I was born, raised, and spent my entire adult life in Utah. Utah is not the most diverse place, as a result I never thought much about assimilation before this class. I was interested in the class discussion where some of the class members said that they began dressing more like their Mormon counterparts as teenagers in order to assimilate to the dominate religions views on modesty. I think the fact that I am a member of the dominate religion distanced me even further from thinking about assimilation before this course. As I learned more about assimilation I developed a better understanding of the benefits and downfalls of assimilation. In the end I think totally assimilation is undesirable and curbs creativity. Although I live and am part of a in a primarily monolithic culture I can see the beauty and interest in diversity and this is one I hope to be more aware of around me on a daily basis.

8. Anthropology and Religion. I used to watch a television program where the main character was a forensic anthropologist who regarded religion as somewhat ridiculous. I was a little leery of taking this course because I was nervous that my own religious beliefs would be mocked by the discipline. However, the opposite was true. I found the chapter on religion refreshing and insightful. I appreciated that the positive parts of religious practice and believe were included and that diverse religious practices were covered. After taking this course I find that religion and anthropology can be studied together
without conflict. Additionally, I wonder how long it will take for the world’s major religions to hire anthropologist to help them much like the corporate world has (Perhaps some already have?). Particularly as religions move into new countries and cultures.

9. Electronics, Apple, and Foxcom. In chapter 15 I was seriously shocked to hear about the unhealthy working conditions of foreign workers who produce Apple products. I guess I was naïve but I never thought a company like Apple would allow its contracted work force to be put in danger. Apple recently came out with a new watch, many are preordered and the initial supply is limited. I heard a story on the news that most people that preordered will not get their Apple watches for several weeks even though the release date is today (Friday). All I can think about is what kind of pressure and unethical practices are currently being used on the workers who produce these products by the companies they work for. It certainly makes me look at my own Iphone differently.

10. Finally I learned that I can do this. I went to University for one year after high school then dropped out due to major burn out and lack of direction. Every year for 21 years I considered returning to college, I registered twice over the years but never did attend a class. Fear of failure and still some uncertainty about direction held me back. Cultural Anthropology 1010 is my first step back into higher education and I enjoyed every part of it. I realized that the stresses and burn out that I felt 21 years ago are not part of my current life and personality. I have more confidence now and more drive to meet my academic goals. I am excited to move forward and learn more about the history and culture of the people who occupied this earth before me and those who occupy it with me. This class helped me to understand myself and the world around me better and I hope this trend continues as I go forward with my education.