Anthropology

A Beginner's Guide

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In order to consider what it means to be human from an anthropological perspective we start with the most physical manifestation of our humanity, namely our bodies. Whatever our language, social group, skin colour, or facial features, we all share most of the make-up of these bodies, and the way they act and perform. Our sharpest difference is that between ourselves and other animals. First, we will plunge you into the deep end, introducing the genetic research that biological anthropologists have conducted, quite recently, to demonstrate just how similar we all are, despite our physical variety. The evidence points to a unity of human life, illustrating both the declining importance of issues such as race and how we have evolved to differ from other living beings, notably the animals known as primates to whom we are most closely related in genetic terms.

We will then turn to examine the diversity found in the way human bodies are used, and although these differences are not big, in comparison with our shared unity, they offer a wealth of themes for understanding cultural variety. We will look at how our bodies become a canvas for expressing our long-term cultural allegiances, as well as our membership of the fashion-conscious modern world, and we will also begin to think about the variety of ways we use and modify our bodies in different social and cultural circumstances. That will introduce the subject matter that is more of interest to *social* and *cultural anthropologists*.

The biological body

From the perspective of biological anthropology, the twin influences of genetic transmission and environmental adaptation make up what our human bodies are today, and the technical term used to describe the outcome is *phenotype*. Essentially, this is the result of interactions between our genes and the environment in which we live, and the relationship can be expressed by the formula: *genotype* + environment = phenotype. The exact balance between genes and the environment varies massively from one human *trait* – or characteristic – to another. For instance, height is estimated to be seventy percent genetic and thirty percent environmental; you may have genes that can produce a height of six feet, but if your environment provides insufficient nutrition then your actual 'phenotypic' height will be shorter.

Many of the traits that create a person's observable phenotype, such as skin and hair colour, height and body shape, are well understood; yet some of what we consider to be the 'most human' are not. Intelligence, for example, is perhaps the most human quality, and like all other traits it is the result of the interplay between genes and the environment, but the interplay is not fully understood. Today, we estimate that a person's intelligence is a 50–50 split between their genes and their environment. In this analysis, 'intelligence' is measured by taking a standardized intelligence quotient (IQ) test, but many argue that IQ tests contain biases, such as assuming particular cultural knowledge. They are also said to ignore many aspects of intelligence, such as the ability to absorb and remember ways of living, being able to work harmoniously with others, and being proficient with money while still doing poorly on maths-test questions.

Regardless of the challenges involved in measuring the exact contribution of genes and environment, what is not debated is that humans, like all organisms, are the result of their interplay. In order to understand how human beings have evolved as

somehow different from all other members of the living world, we need to examine ourselves within the larger context of that world, and particularly as members of a group of our closest relatives, the apes, monkeys, and chimpanzees whom we also call primates. Our place cannot be really properly understood unless we have an appreciation of exactly how we relate to these other members of the primate order: what we share, both in terms of genes and behaviours, and what makes us all unique. We will examine this aspect of our evolutionary history first, and then return to look in more detail at the environment.

Life as a primate

It was the system of species classification developed in the eighteenth century by the Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus that defined our human species, technically known as *Homo sapiens*, as belonging to the order of primates. This means, in simple terms, that humans share more similarities with our fellow primates than we do with other organisms. For instance, all primates have broadly similar skeletons, including bulbous skulls or brain cases, fingernails, and mostly generalized dentition rather than teeth for specific purposes.

Primates have another feature which distinguishes us from other organisms in the way that we live in our environments, and that is that we are *generalists*. Rather than being *adapted* to one particular type of diet or habitat, as other living species usually are, we primates are capable of exploiting a wide variety of resources. In essence, primates' key *adaptation*, a technical term used to describe the way living beings live and thrive within a particular environment, is their very adaptability. And what makes humans so different from all the other primates is the huge extent to which we shape and change our environment – not always for the better – in order to suit our needs. Our ability to adapt is

unmatched. So while no other primate species has spread throughout the world from its original habitat, humans have populated virtually the whole globe. Our closest primate relatives, the chimpanzees and gorillas, are on the other hand exclusively found (unless in captivity) around the African tropical forests that have been home to their species for millions of years.

Since our primate genes and our lived environment interact, it is helpful to look at how this fork in each primate's evolutionary path has helped to define what we call human, even at the level of the body. In basic terms, the human body is that of a medium-sized African great ape. In keeping with Linnaean classification, the human skeleton shares a large number of traits with the other primates. For example, humans share with chimpanzees similar ways of sensing the world, including sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, as well as biochemical processes for activities ranging from the digestion of food to foetal development. Perhaps most startlingly, humans and chimpanzees share somewhere between ninety-six percent and ninety-nine percent of our DNA, the genetic code of life. Still, the differences between humans and chimpanzees appear large, and indeed they are. It is only when we think of humans and chimpanzees compared to a much more distant evolutionary relation, such as a horse, that we see how humans, as a great ape, share so much in common with chimpanzees.

But what of the DNA (like the genetic instruction booklet that controls how all organisms develop and function)? How can one to four percent of difference in the genes of the two species account for such fundamental differences in appearance and behaviour? We must beware the simple answer, for although so much DNA is shared there are also fundamental differences in the organization of those genes. (In fact, humans share forty percent of their DNA with bananas!) This organization is principally about the *order* in which genes (or even genetic bases that make up genes) are strung on chromosomes, which are coiled strands

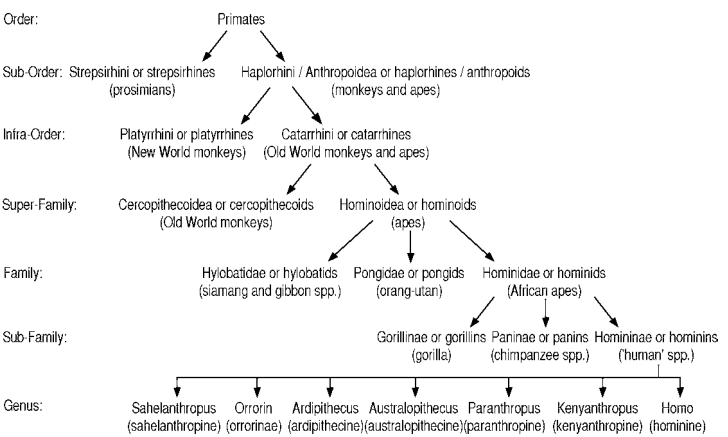
Table 1.1 Major differences between *Homo sapiens* and chimpanzee biology

	Homo sapiens	*Chimpanzee*
Forehead	Vertical	Low & sloping
Face	Flat	Jutting forward
Cranial vault	Widest at top	Widest at bottom
Brain size	Large	Small
Canine teeth	Small	Large
Base of skull	Angled	Less angled
Lumbar vertebrae	5	3–4
Limbs	Straight	Curved
Limb proportions	Long legs	Short legs
Wrist	Less flexible	More flexible
Hand	Cup-shaped with long thumb	Flat with long fingers & short thumb
Foot	Straight big toe & arched foot	Curved big toe & flat foot
Pelvis	Neonatal head is tight fit	Neonatal head is loose fit
Developmental Period	Slow	Fast

of DNA. While genes may appear on a particular chromosome in humans, they could be on another one in chimpanzees, which affects the way they are expressed as well as the way they combine into multi-gene complexes. Indeed, this is exemplified by the fact that humans have two chromosomes effectively fused into one: hence we have twenty-three pairs of chromosomes and chimpanzees have twenty-four pairs. Another factor is the critical regions of DNA that initiate the activity of other areas of our genetic material, and the presence or absence of these can make a massive difference in the phenotypic potential of a species.

So how has the human ape developed such wide-ranging skills and abilities? It is useful to start by looking at the evolutionary record of the *hominins*, a sub-group of organisms that includes modern humans and all of our related species who are now extinct. Hominin evolution is a story filled with trial and error, told over the span of seven million years. For the first five million years, our ancestors would have looked to our eyes very ape-like, more like an odd-looking chimpanzee. They include a character named *Sahelanthropus tchadensis*, who lived about seven million years ago, and another genus, *Australopithecus*, who lived from about five million years ago until about two million years ago. Yet these species gave rise to later human-like apes, so are considered to be part of the human family tree, or *phylogeny*. The different names of layers you can see in the diagram reflect the relationship between the groups on the family tree – a group of species belongs to a genus, a group of genera belongs to the same sub-family and so on. This structure is used to classify all life on Earth.

Table 1.2 The relationship between extinct and all living primates



A number of hominin species – between twenty and thirty – followed. Today, there is one: *Homo sapiens,* also known as 'us'. It is not until two million years ago, with the arrival of *Homo ergaster* in the fossil record, that we see hominins that seem to have shared some of the abilities, behaviours, and genes of modern humans. Unlike earlier ape-like hominins, *Homo ergaster* boasted a skeleton very much like our own. This similarity, however, ended above the neck, since their brains were considerably smaller than ours – about 800 cubic centimetres for *Homo ergaster* versus 1250 cubic centimetres for us. Not surprisingly, their skulls were also very different. However, *Homo ergaster* started to exhibit much human-like behaviour, including fire use and complex stone tool making; they probably also used some form of vocal communication, and even perhaps cared for the sick.

Our understanding of human evolution is continually being updated, as new tools become available for studying fossils, the genetic code of DNA, and other sources of information. Originally, anthropologists thought that modern humans were descended from other apes in a single line of species – from *Australopithecus* to *Homo erectus* to Neanderthal to us. In the past fifteen to twenty years, however, amazing new finds and techniques have been used to fill in the picture. Today, anthropologists believe that multiple species existed side by side, though we do not yet know the exact relationships they had to one another. In 2004, one fossil find in Indonesia, the possible species *Homo floresiensis*, forced palaeontologists to question assumptions about what it means to be human – prompting a re-evaluation of human evolutionary development. *Homo floresiensis* demonstrates that although humans can manipulate our environment, we very much remain subject to its whims. It's always important to remember that in biological anthropology we should be cautious of the simple answer, since the story of human evolution is far from simple.

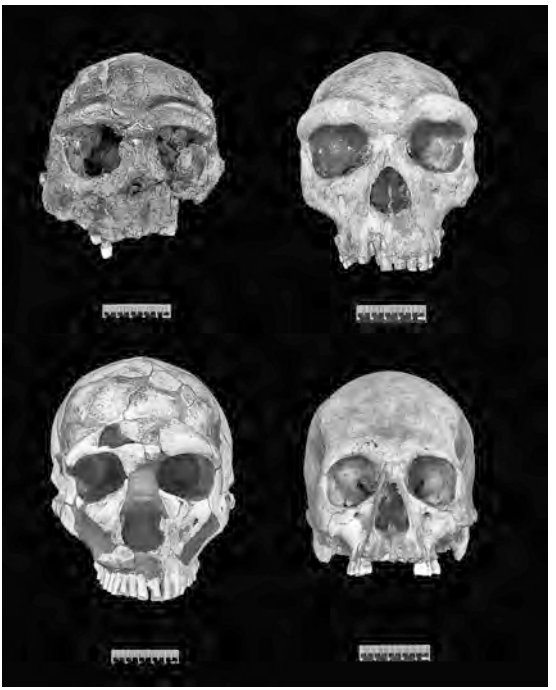


Figure 1.1 Skulls of various *Homo* species. Upper left is *Homo erectus*, around 1.2 millions years old; upper right is *Homo heidelbergensis*, around 300,000 years old; lower left is *Homo neanderthalensis*, around 70,000 years old; and lower right is *Homo sapiens*, or an anatomically modern human.
Natural History Museum, London / Science Photo Library

Evolving environmentally

The impetus for the host of dramatic changes among early humans – such as the use of fire and stone tools – appears to have been a change in the environment. This isn't surprising, since evolution is so dependent on the interplay between environment

and genes. One of the most dynamic areas in which we see this interplay in action among humans involves the development of *bipedalism*, or walking on two legs, a trait found only in hominins. If you compare the human body to that of the quadruped chimpanzee (which, as the term suggests, primarily walks on four limbs) and imagine the changes needed to make chimpanzees bipedal, you can see that almost no part of the body would escape change. Chimpanzees are evolved primarily to walk on four limbs (using their knuckles to act as 'feet') and are highly skilled climbers. We can determine the way in which our fossil ancestors moved by examining the way in which their skeletons supported the muscles of the body, which in turn reveal how locomotion occurred – bigger legs than arms suggests walking on two legs while roughly equal-sized limbs suggests using four limbs to move.

It is sometimes said that walking on two legs separates humans from 'the animals' and this idea conforms to the fossil interpretations of biological anthropologists. Bipedalism is the earliest identifiable difference in the fossil record to mark the advent of hominins. Bipedal traits began to appear seven million years ago, with *Sahelanthropus tchadensis*, but these distant ancestors retained a high degree of climbing ability and spent much of their time in the trees. Based on the skeletal remains discovered by anthropologists, the modern form of walking only became possible with the appearance of *Homo ergaster*.

Why did such a drastic and intensive set of adaptations evolve? The answer seems to lie in the environmental conditions existing on the African continent during the Miocene period, a geological epoch that lasted from approximately twenty-four million to five million years ago. Around ten million to eight million years ago, global temperatures dropped, resulting in the fragmentation of the previously large forests of Africa and the development of the savannah, the wide open grassland that characterizes modern East Africa. Biological anthropologists believe this massive change in environment appears to have kick-started

human evolution, as our early ancestors ventured out of the now disconnected forests and onto the savannah. The ancestors of chimpanzees stayed in the forest habitat where chimpanzees remain today.

Bipedalism was foremost among human adaptations to the savannah, and one possible reason for the shift to walking on two legs was the scarcity of shade trees: standing means that less surface area is exposed to sunlight, which allowed our ancestors to forage during parts of the day that were too hot for their predators and competitors. Standing upright also left their hands free for other tasks, such as scavenging and butchering meat. These new ways of gathering food in turn provided extra fuel to the ancestral human body, permitting an expansion in human brain size. The brain is an extremely energy-hungry organ, and for ours to have grown so big – 1.5 kilograms on average – required a regular supply of calories. Some time after this expansion in brain size, anthropologists find the first sign of stone tools, around 2.5 million years ago. And these tools allowed early humans to be even more effective at butchering scavenged animal carcasses, and to provide even more energy to supply still bigger brains.

Homo ergaster's skeleton was also extremely well adapted in other ways for life on the open savannah grasslands that dominated East Africa during the Pleistocene period (a geological epoch from 2.5 million to 12,000 years ago). A thick ape fur is of no use in the dry heat of the open savannah, and would have been rapidly lost. As a result, humans developed two further adaptations: the pigmentation of skin to handle the high levels of ultra-violet radiation from the equatorial sun, and the development of sweating as a means of expelling heat from the body. Biologically, the human body is very well adapted to the trials of equatorial heat; that is why humans can proudly claim the title of being the 'best sweating animal'. The body handles cold conditions with less efficiency, which is why we resort to wearing substantial clothes and building extensive shelters in chillier latitudes and altitudes.

Later, we will see in greater detail how our move to bipedalism and the development of bigger brains shaped the human species. In any case, the basic contours of the human body have a deep evolutionary history and should lead us to question many of the assumptions we make about outward differences based on bodies alone.

WHAT IS RACE?

The subject of race spurs as much confusion as controversy. On the surface, we all know that there are different human races, people with different colours of skin and other physical features, don't we? But it's on the surface that the problem lies. The idea of categorizing humans into groups is an old one: who are the members of our family, extended family, village, tribe, religion, region, nation, and a number of other social categories? It's natural to create groups based on perceived differences and we do so based on a huge number of social categories.

But *race* has a specific biological meaning, where it is identical to the term 'sub-species', for groups of organisms within a species that are genetically distinct from one another. So what can we say about the different human 'races'? On the genetic level, there is next to no variation between a person from Africa, Europe, or Asia – pick any two people at random from anywhere on the planet and they will be very closely related when you look at their DNA, much more so than is normal for such a widely dispersed animal species.

The simple fact is that modern biology completely contradicts the way we have traditionally created different human races using skin colour – and European civilization – as the 'standard'. Both ideas are deeply flawed. Skin colour is controlled by a simple genetic switch that controls the production of melanocytes, the cells that produce melanin, which pigments the skin, but this difference is very slight. While the use of European culture as an absolute measure of sophistication simply does not reflect the range and diversity of human society. In short, the idea that there are separate 'human races' simply cannot be sustained in light of twenty-first century biology.

The social body

Because humans share the same basic physical body, it is a prime means for building *social* and *cultural constructions* of widely differing worlds. In this way, the human body is used as a *model* for explaining and understanding the world around us, including the relationships between people. Consider, for example, the way that the names of parts of the body are applied elsewhere in the English language. The *head* stands not only for the feature that tops our physical form, but is also used to describe the person at the top of a school, a family, or a company. The *foot*, on the other hand, can be used to refer to the bottom, say of mountains or of pages. We can extend the 'strong *arm* of the law', much as we would extend its physical equivalent, and the word *heart* is used to speak of central notions such as 'the heart of the matter'. It's also associated with romantic liaisons, of course, when it is depicted in all sorts of cute shapes that don't even look much like the organ that beats inside our chests.

In other languages and societies, parallel uses may be found, as well as stark differences. The word for *head* is used widely to describe aspects of a social or political hierarchy, but with interesting local modifications in its relation to power. In Japanese, for example, the centre of the body is associated with the *hara*, belly or stomach, a word that describes much more than a digestive organ; it is thought that control of the *hara* is essential in maintaining balance or composure. To have the *guts* to carry out a potentially dangerous task attributes another culturally constructed quality to a set of inner organs that again vary in different languages. In several other societies, particularly in the Pacific, the *face* is an important 'front' to present to the world, to conceal or soften inner feelings, and also to protect against insult or shame, as in a 'loss of face'.

These different usages alter the way we perceive the body and the people around us. Other parts of the body may be associated with danger or pollution, and therefore be regarded as

taboo – prohibited or banned – in some way. For example, for Hindus the right hand is for eating and the left is for cleaning, so to use the left for putting food in your mouth is to break a taboo. As it happens, an early study by the French sociologist Robert Hertz found that the right hand is widely believed to be superior to the left, and in English- and Latin-based languages, the word for *right* is associated with the law (*le droit*, *el derecho*) as well as with correctness, while *left* is associated with clumsiness (*gauche*) and evil (*sinister*), though these groups do not generally restrict the hand with which a person can eat.

Similarly, in many societies it is regarded as dangerous, and therefore also taboo, for men and women to reveal in public the parts of their body that distinguish them from each other. Yet which parts of the body are deemed taboo to reveal is not at all the same. For instance, a woman in many tropical societies of Latin America and South East Asia may only be required to wear a small apron or cap over her genitals, while in Islamic states, such as Saudi Arabia, a woman in public must wear a flowing robe that covers her whole form, save for her eyes. In nineteenth-century Europe it was regarded as risqué for a woman to reveal her ankles, whereas today in these countries there seems to be little of the legs that needs covering up at all.

These examples introduce the way in which reference to basic differences in the biological makeup of our bodies may be used to express various social systems of *classification*. The socially constructed distinctions between the male and female body, known as *gender* differences, underpin ideas about the abilities of men and women. In some cases, these gender-based abilities are nearly universal, such as the idea that women are defined by their capacity to conceive and feed babies, but there are also many cultural differences. For example, in most agricultural societies, women are thought to be strong enough for taxing physical work; in urban situations, roles that require physical strength were often – until recently – reserved for men. Likewise, the potential

for women to hold positions of political or religious power, or those involving or associated with healing skills, varies from one society to another. In fact, in some worldviews, people are divided by age as much as by gender, and in India, Laos, and some Pacific Island communities, certain people may be distinguished as belonging to neither male nor female, but to a third, fourth, or even fifth gender.

The British anthropologist Edmund Leach argued that the English language suppresses words that mark the boundaries of the body, either by forbidding their names in 'polite circles', or by enforcing the use of uncommon Latin terms. He illustrated his point by referring to the products of various bodily orifices as 'exudations', from the Latin word for *ooze*, but take a moment to consider the words commonly used in English for the products of elimination and nose-blowing or for the intimate parts of the body engaged during sex. Even inoffensive-sounding words like *spit* describe a liquid that can be used to express a strong, rude form of disapproval. Terms of abuse also include the names of animals that live in proximity with humans, such as dogs and cats, which he argued is a way of making clear the boundaries between human beings and animals.

Modifying the body

The human body is also a wonderful palette for dressing, decoration, and more permanent modifications such as piercing or tattoos. The variety within one cultural system is matched only by the creative diversity found across the earth. However, those aspects of human decoration that to television directors seem extraordinary enough to present in documentary form, undoubtedly have internal meaning within the cultures where they are found and for anthropologists they provide fascinating areas for investigation.

As we saw above, society imposes on its members expectations about the degree to which the body should be covered, and some basic differences that may be applied to men and women. Clothes and other temporary coverings are also used to distinguish people classified in different ways in any society, and the way people prepare themselves for different occasions. Consider, for example, a school uniform. This dress not only distinguishes humans of a certain age, it marks the particular school the student attends, as well as any differences in social or economic status that this school may imply. Within a school, subtle markers like a badge or a ribbon may express internal divisions like houses, clubs, or teams known only to members of that particular school.

Men who wear business suits are adhering to an almost worldwide directive about the appropriate attire for office wear, though a suit can also convey a great deal about a person, according to its fit or style and its likely cost. In contrast, women in the business world have retained more choice in their clothing, though they must usually conform to rules about how much of their physical body they are allowed to expose. When people dress for a special occasion, very precise rules of apparel may be imposed, for instance, whether a woman must wear a hat to a place of worship. When people have free choice in their clothing, they may be heavily influenced by the fashions of the day, and display expensive brand-name logos, jewellery, or other accessories to indicate a level of economic power, as well as notions of taste. Such distinctions in the selection of temporary coverings are found in all cultural groups, marking a person's position in the group's hierarchy as well as a person's age, occupation, and role at an occasion. In some societies, people wear very little to cover their bodies, but even then the things that they do wear express differences, as illustrated in a renowned study of penis coverings (called sheaths) published in 1969 by Peter Ucko, who detailed the range of coverings found in different locations.

Some of the most flamboyant bodily decorations are displayed at times when an individual is moving from one identity to another, such as when young people enter adulthood. In certain South American tribes, such as the Akwe-Shavante of the Xingu River, people in transitional stages paint their whole bodies, using colours and patterns to indicate family and political affiliations within the tribe. In Japan, there is a day in January when twenty-year-olds mark their entry into adulthood by dressing in kimonos, garments which for many centuries were designed to distinguish status, family allegiance, and between single and married women; the last indicated in the style of the sleeves. People also use their hair to mark such distinctions, and a feature of initiation into adulthood among East African tribes like the Maasai and the Samburu, is to follow a period of allowing youngsters to grow their hair long and unruly with a completely shaven head, painted with ochre to celebrate the attainment of adulthood. Such transitions from one stage of life to another are known as *rites of passage,* and these have often become a central subject area in anthropological studies. (For that reason, rites of passage will be covered in more detail in chapter 6.)

At times, people mark their membership in a group with more permanent modifications to the body. For example, scarification of the face offers a way to demonstrate publicly a person's membership of a clan, while more private modifications such as circumcision may mark acceptance into a religious group, as in Judaism, or the achievement of sexual maturity in the practice found in many societies, but disapproved of in the West, and so described as genital mutilation. In several Pacific societies, tattoos carry meanings, from a person's political position in the Marquesas Islands through commitment to an underworld gang (in Japan) to identity as a 'First', or Indigenous, people for the Māori in New Zealand. An interesting addition to the repertoire of bodily display is found when permanent scarification such as a tattoo is hidden except on special occasions, such as festivals, when Japanese

Figure 1.2 A Japanese man having work done on his full-body tattoo.

gangsters may reveal their otherwise hidden tattoos, also used as a way to instil fear in their opponents in times of conflict.

Tattoos and piercings have become common in many urban societies, with a wide range in style and location, but meaning is still embedded in their adoption. There is, of course, the meaning associated with the design itself, but the act of choosing such a bodily modification is also likely to express a fashion, and possibly an assertion of adulthood. Young people thus individualize their bodies as they gradually gain control of them in a society where individual difference is valued. Other examples of bodily

modifications include hair colouring, muscle building, and breast implants, all of which allow a person to conform to culturally variable ideas of beauty and attractiveness. In high-tech societies, people may pay to have facelifts to arrest the appearance of the ageing process; it is now even possible to change the biological basis of a person's gender classification, which may have been culturally expressed through cross-dressing, though this kind of practice evokes mixed reactions among different cultural groups.

Using the body

Despite the knowledge that different peoples are brought up to think in other ways about their bodies, it is hard to suppress or hide the shock we experience when we personally come across evidence of different uses, especially in basic matters such as washing, eating, and eliminating waste. These basic reactions are usually triggered on a physiological level by our senses, such as smell and taste, when the familiar feels good, or at least right, and the unfamiliar uncomfortable. Indeed, the emotion of disgust probably exerts the clearest boundary between what diverse people consider to be normal practice in their everyday lives. Notions of dirt and cleanliness are learned so young, and are so intimate, that it is hard to comprehend that other people might have completely alternative views of them, let alone to share or adopt them.

Ways of washing provide a good example. Even where similar technology is available, people may choose to arrange it in quite different ways, and for that reason the bathroom is an advantageous place to examine, as an anthropologist. The relative location of a bath, toilet, and shower is one cultural variable. In some societies, the toilet is kept quite separate from washing areas, as the two are seen to serve distinct purposes; in others, a source of running water is placed right beside the toilet because it is

considered unhygienic to use paper to clean yourself after elimination. A popular Japanese toilet has a small jet for washing right inside the bowl! In China, the shower is sometimes located immediately above the toilet, as the same pipe can carry away the used water from both conveniences, but standing on the footprints of a hole-in-the-floor toilet may seem an unclean way to wash for others.

The degree to which the bathroom is a private place is another interesting marker. Within one family, people may wander in and out of the bathroom freely, but lock the door for visitors; in another, each member of the family may prefer their own private space; in yet another case, the bathroom may be open for visitors to use as and when they need it and shutting the door may seem an unfriendly act. This last example may be perceived as overly personal, an idea which could be mirrored in public toilets, which have varying degrees of privacy built in to their overall construction: some have a row of open stalls; others are firmly enclosed in compartments. There are also plenty of places around the world where the open countryside is used for these practices, and it may be a cheerful daily routine to go out with friends or family members to attend to bodily hygiene.

Ways of eating provide another lens for observing different uses of the body, alongside the variety of things that are regarded as edible at all. Because humans are so adaptable, we have been able to select quite distinct diets from the foodstuffs available locally and eat them at different times and in different ways. Peoples have also found a variety of ways of gathering, cultivating, preparing, and refining their daily sustenance. Some regard as delicious plants – like seaweed – that others leave for different species. Likewise, some eat animals that others regard as sacred or polluting that have therefore become taboo for the table, such as the sacred cows of Hinduism or the polluting pigs of Islam and Judaism. In fact, using a table at all is itself a culturally variable feature! A characteristic of the multicultural, urban societies in

which many people now live, is that so many foodstuffs are available that our bodies rebel, and grow sick or obese, notably from snacks and fizzy drinks that have replaced natural sustenance like nuts, berries, milk, or coconut milk. An interesting turn of fate is the way that those with most choice of cheap, refined food are turning to their gardens or allotments to grow fresh food, while others choose 'organic' foods free from the chemicals that were developed to protect them.

All these aspects of the use, abuse, and embellishment of the human body come with social and cultural meanings, and in subsequent chapters of this book, we will seek to explain and interpret features we have raised here within the wider contexts of the activities of specific social groups.