Anthropology of Sleep
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Anthropology aims to document and understand the full sweep of human diversity. As such, an anthropological account of sleep should include evolutionary, comparative, and descriptive cultural and biobehavioral evidence about the what, why, and so what of this most common of behaviors. Yet the account is incomplete because anthropology, so concerned with people's waking lives, has scantled sleep but now is waking up to its importance. Sleep is a product of biology and culture: emerging material on the diversity of human sleep practices questions some assumptions of sleep science and contrasts with Western sleep cultures even as it confirms others. Along with evolutionary analysis, this material provides new ideas about old problems concerning why we sleep, how it works, what it does, what affects it, and what can go wrong.

Evolutionary Considerations
A comprehensive anthropology of human sleep begins by looking at its place in the species’ adaptive complex. Humans flourish under widely differing conditions in an enormous range of environments, by relying on a suite of cultural and biological adaptations. Culture and social life are indispensable for human survival and integral to development and function. Consequently, culture shapes the worlds that humans inhabit. Children grow up and adults survive by living in social groups structured and operating through culture, composed of shared modes of thought, perception, and behavior, including beliefs, values, and practices. The dependence on culture is built in to organic design, as exemplified by the ability to acquire language. Thus, culture gets under the skin. Sleep is no exception, and a survey of key human features suggests how. First, intense sociality mandates that sleep is social, designed to accommodate and likely to rely on the presence of others for physical, social, and emotional security. Infants depend completely on adult care, for example, and the historic ethnographic record documents that cultures consistently placed babies in the bed or room with caregivers, in contrast to societies today that place infants in separate rooms, alone. Although the brain regulates sleep, and its development and function rely heavily on context, the effects of sleeping arrangements and patterns throughout life remain unstudied. Second, enormous cultural and ecological diversity requires behavioral flexibility, including sleep, that accommodates ongoing social, subsistence, and other survival demands. Humans can adjust sleep schedules or restrict sleep as demands or opportunities require. For example, documented cases of bush- or forest-living foragers relate that mobile groups stalked by big cats can collectively maintain 24-hour vigilance for days or weeks at a time. People stay up for positive reasons, too: virtually all societies observe festive occasions that curtail sleep, often for extended periods. Third, behavioral flexibility comes at a cost: curtailed sleep triggers a suite of adaptive stress responses that reallocate mental and physical resources. This is fine in the short
term, but can mount up from sustained sleep shortages to increased mental and physical health risks such as depression, obesity, or diabetes. Thus, lifestyles that erode sleep are sustainable but costly to health.

Sleep Ecology

Although cross-cultural systematic studies of sleep behavior are scant, ethnographic and historical accounts describe sleeping conditions (where, when, how, and with whom) as well as cultural, demographic, and climatic factors that pattern sleep behavior. Such cross-cultural evidence yields a general profile of sleep as integrated in the flow of daily life, as occurring in more than one daily episode if needed, and as best done in the same bed or room with others rather than alone. Relatedly, bedtimes are fluid rather than fixed and napping is common. Bedding (mattresses, coverings, pillows) commonly is minimized to curb pests or parasites and reduce cleaning burden. Fire usually is present for warmth, light, and safety; sleeping conditions could be relatively noisy from people, domestic animals, and little or no acoustic and physical barrier such as solid walls or sealed windows to shut out disturbances. Therefore, traditional sleep settings typically featured rich and dynamic sensory qualities including security and contact comfort from integration in social settings and relationships; fuzzy boundaries in time and space; and little climate control. Typical sleep settings in contemporary industrial societies, by contrast, appear to have more stable, comparatively impoverished sensory qualities, including solitary or low-contact sleeping arrangements; scheduled bedtimes and wake times with sleep compressed into a single block at night; padded bed and profuse bedding; absence of fire; darkness; silence; and high acoustic as well as physical boundaries to sleep spaces. Properties of the more static modernized sleep conditions that may make sleep regulation more difficult include sleeping alone or with limited contact from infancy onward; a lie down and die model of sleep that...
mandates a single nighttime block as normative; and sensory deprivation of physical and social
cues in sleep settings.
Sleep across the Life Course
Cross-cultural evidence documents sleep conditions throughout the life course that are common
across ethnographic records but different from prevailing Western practices. First, co-sleeping and
co-rooming is extensive and sustained for life. As noted previously, infants and most children are
normatively provided with sleeping partners from birth onward, and solitary sleep is an exception
rather than a rule. As family formation evolves across the life course, the elderly are most at risk
for losing sleep partners, so grandchildren or other kin often are recruited. Second, fixed bedtimes
are absent for children, as with adults: daily routines are usual, but also highly flexible. Sleep
commonly occurs as needed, interspersed with daily life. Thus, for instance, young children may
watch, listen, or snooze during family meal preparation and conversation, or elderly may drift
during community meetings or rituals. Third, the absence of fixed bedtimes and ability to
accommodate individual sleep needs around the clock support a lack of rules about specific, stage-
graded developmental needs for sleep. Thus, diverse and changing sleep patterns with age can be
accommodated, including people who do not sleep through the night or elderly who fall asleep and
wake up earlier.
Sleep Beliefs, Norms, and Values
That people devote a third of their time to sleep establishes it as a core element of daily life. The
diversity of sleep settings and practices across societies reflects their diversity in the shared
beliefs, values, and

experiences that form the culture of each society. People sleep alone or with others, experience
night fears or insomnia, or ration sleep or not, depending on what they understand about sleep, its
value, and its qualities in relation to shared goods about health, status, survival, development and
aging, gender, or spiritual and moral virtue. Hence, cultural perceptions, priorities, norms, and
practical constraints shape when, how, and how much people sleep, and how they experience it,
whether as restful, difficult, meaningful, or disturbed. Sleep science commonly overlooks this
critical fact and assumes its Western cultural views and practices are universal and normative.
Cross-cultural evidence can illuminate these assumptions.
Cultures differ in their accounts of what sleep is and how it happens. Sleep may be seen as
produced and regulated by countervailing forces that oversee flows in life or energy, as manifested
in diurnal light–dark cycles. Many regard this as a period of diminished energy and life force, to be
navigated until the energy of day returns. Sleep's association with low life force or
energy also may
increase accessibility or vulnerability to other realms of existence. This association, plus the
dramatic bodily changes in sleep, fosters linking sleep with death (Greek mythology and
contemporary Islam name sleep as the brother of death). Or it may be seen as a product of sheer
physical tiredness that wells up to overwhelm the sleeper, an assertion of physical needs like
hunger. Sleep also may be viewed as a delicate state requiring quiet and privacy (as in North
America) or as robust and compatible with noise and company. Exemplifying the latter, many
Balinese rituals occur when spirits are most active, at night, and communities may stay up for days
attending nightly performances of epic shadow plays. People attend from infancy onward and learn
to drowse amid the din. Western science provides materialist explanations regarding sleep
physiology and regulation that pervade globalizing views of sleep.
Cultural accounts also differ on what sleep does, what it is for. Sleep may serve spiritual, physical,
and even practical needs. For example, many societies see sleep as a time of enhanced connection
or vulnerability to nonhuman dimensions that can provide valuable information about existence
and human's place or action within it. Sleepers may walk in other spirit realms or witness scenes
that interpret the present or foretell the future. Dreams ground such views. Thus, sleep may
enable communication with totem animals, ancestors, or spiritual entities that can guide decisions or behavior (hunting, travel, conflicts), or provide a moral compass in personal or social life. Sleep also may be viewed as protective or restorative, a means to block out and rest from external demands, to save physical and emotional energy. Effects of sleep on waking performance (tasks, emotions, memory) reinforce perceived importance of sleep. Cultural accounts of how sleep happens and what it does also relate to what it means. Sleep commonly is allied with physical and spiritual vulnerability and danger, a time when low life-energy slides toward death or when inimical forces might consume or pervert the soul or life force. Many practices relate to sleep safety. Co-sleeping ties sleepers to the human world and reduces response time for illness or danger. Thus,

the Gebusi in New Guinea believed that the ill must have continuous attendants, and that sleeping alone risked soul loss or witchcraft. Amulets, prayers, and other practices to bolster moral strength and alliance with protective forces or deter evil ones also are common. Moreover, deep sleep may be viewed as particularly risky while lighter, more easily reversed sleep is more valued and is cultivated through dynamic sleep settings or extended rituals. The meanings and emotions associated with sleep (danger, fear, worry) also can foster insecurity and heighten vigilance and lighten sleep (analogous to when a bad storm is predicted, or fearing to miss the alarm clock). Contrarily, some Western societies, such as the United States, value deep, uninterrupted slumber and readily label inability to sleep through the night as insomnia. Sleep furthermore is imbued with morality. Sleeping arrangements and sleep behaviors, for example, are judged and sanctioned or pathologized based on local codes. Thus, sleeping with the wrong person may be punished, oversleepers may lose their jobs, sleep paralysis may be treated as possession, and infants who sleep through the night may be called good babies, depending on cultural norms. Similarly, a few societies value babies’ sleeping alone, while others regard it as child abuse.

Globalization and Culture Change
Globalization and the forces of rapid social change are transforming sleep in many ways. These forces include changing daily schedules for new forms of labor and universal schooling; introduction of mass media and technologies; shifts in family and household structure; altered settlement patterns (particularly urbanization), infrastructure, and housing; and uptake of Western scientific and biomedical accounts of human function, behavior, and health. Ever more people use Western beds, sleep alone, have alarm clocks, and stay up with TV, computer chat, or online games. Such structural, technical, and behavioral changes have altered beliefs, priorities, and practices related to sleep. What difference does this make for sleep behavior, sleep experiences, and health? Are sleep physiology and sleep needs everywhere the same? Anthropology is deeply interested in these questions. However, researchers lack a robust database on sleep before globalization to illuminate which characteristics are due to cultural diversity, lived experience, capabilities, welfare, and disparities. Opportunity to document sleep culture, behavior, biology, and their correlates before these changes is vanishing rapidly: systematic field studies of sleep in remote settings are needed now.

References


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