

Anthropological Contributions to the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence

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The last three annual conferences of the American Anthropological Association have included symposia on SETI, chaired and organized by this researcher. This paper reviews recurrent themes of these symposia, such as ways of estimating values for the last three terms of the Drake Equation.

Though mathematics and science have often been proposed by engineers and physical scientists as “universal languages” that would be understood by any technologically savvy ETI, many anthropologists consider mathematics and science to be cultural artifacts contingent on the morphologies and histories of the beings who employ them. The challenge of portraying diverse terrestrial cultures in interstellar messages is also addressed, and the plausibility of finding cultural universals shared by humans and ETI is reexamined, given that these species may differ significantly in dominant sensory modalities and environments.

The symposia also considered analogues for contact with ETI, examining anthropologists’ experiences in the field encountering other cultures—past and present. The methodologies of archaeologists provide analogies for making contact with temporally distant civilizations, based on reconstructions from fragmentary information. Case studies helped make such analogies concrete in the symposia. The challenges of comprehending intelligences with different mental worlds is explored through a study of the meetings of Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*, for example, while the decryption of Mayan hieroglyphics provides lessons on understanding others of our own species.

This paper concludes with a preview of the forthcoming volume *Archaeology, Anthropology, and Interstellar Communication*, edited by this researcher and to be published by NASA.