Cultural relativism

Definition: cultural relativism from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1. the view that practices, attitudes, etc., can only be deemed good or bad within the context of the culture that produced them.

cultural relativist noun

Summary Article: Cultural Relativism  

Cultural relativism is a principle that postulates that an individual’s beliefs, cultural practices, and her or his whole way of life must be understood in relation to that individual’s culture.

Cultural relativism came to prominence in the early 1900s as an idea that led early anthropologists out of a colonial and imperial view of other cultures. As a form of counter colonialism, cultural relativism premised that all cultures are unique and that there are no superior cultures. At the time of its appearance this idea was extremely forward looking and progressive.

Although literature is not clear on where the term first originated, the origin is most often attributed to one of the founders of the discipline of sociology, William Graham Sumner (1840–1910), who is also credited with originating concepts of ethnocentrism and folkways (Shone 2004). Even though the origin of the term is not agreed upon, the literature seems to agree that the idea, method, and principle of cultural relativism were developed by the anthropologist Franz Boas and his students, mainly by Melville Herskovits and Alfred Kroeber. Although Boas himself never used the term, his teachings, as they were described by his students, after Boas’s death in 1942, are still known as describing the basic principles of cultural relativism. Those principles can be summarized as commitment to the objective observation and recording of different cultures and a refusal of Western claims to universality. In other words, the anthropologist’s responsibility is the accurate recording and reproduction of cultural artifacts and practices, including language, even when the anthropologist may disagree with all or some of these practices. Soon after World War II, epistemological and methodological premises of cultural relativism were outlined as an anthropological approach to the study of culture. Almost immediately, the controversy over the term’s true meaning emerged, and it still keeps scholarly communities engaged in heated debate: can or should cultural relativism be equated with moral relativism?

From an anthropological standpoint, cultural relativism is a method of investigation, a tool for the commitment to accurate and objective reporting on the cultures being observed. However, on epistemological and interdisciplinary levels, cultural relativism is not seen purely as “an attitude of objectivity toward another culture” (Johnson 2007: 800). Some social scientists from other disciplines and some philosophers view cultural relativism primarily as moral relativism, that is, a viewpoint that there are no universal moral standards upon which we can judge others’ actions and beliefs.

The understanding of *relativism* seems to be the key factor that could aid our understanding of possible reasons for disagreements. Feinberg (2001) has outlined three types of relativism: contextual, ethical, and epistemological. Boas outlined contextual relativism in 1896, and in its essence holds that
particular communities through manipulation of symbols determine what are the meanings of their beliefs and practices.

This version of relativism is the closest to cultural relativism as a methodological approach and hence it provokes little controversy. However, ethical relativism, according to Feinberg (2001), provokes lots of controversy because it proposes that we cannot attach attributes such as good or bad to cultural ideas, practices, values, and beliefs. In another words, this attitude towards different cultures takes out any possibility of a moral judgment. The problem grows deeper when differences in approaches arise from different disciplines. Anthropologists argue for their place in science and hence are not called upon to make value judgments. However, it is sometimes quite difficult to accept that anthropologists indeed manage to strip themselves of any value judgment just simply because they believe in value-free science. Historical evidence shows that as human beings anthropologists have been among the first to construct gross misconceptions of peoples, race, and cultures usually termed as Western imperialism. Finally, epistemological relativism holds that no culture could be understood or interpreted by outsiders because outsiders don't have the right tools, for example, systems of meanings and cultural symbols. Feinberg (2007) proposed that Boas developed this type of relativism and termed it “historical anthropology.” He further argues that Boas’s student Edward Sapir and Sapir’s student Benjamin Lee Whorf developed what was later named “Sapir–Whorf hypotheses” that proposed a language as an obstacle to understanding anyone’s culture because languages aren't simply tools for describing a world, they are tools of meaning and perception. An anthropologist is always engaged in a process of translation that inevitably distorts the realities of peoples under study. Hence the big question is the one between the objective scientific paradigm of attainable external reality and the social constructivist view of the absence of attainable and equally understandable reality for all.

The major work by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality, published in 1967, has marked a stark change in the way social scientists understood reality. The concept or idea of socially constructed reality is in many ways connected to the idea of that knowledge is contextual. In another words concepts and knowledge are entirely relative to the context in which they appear. Berger and Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge enabled scholars to try to use relativism stripped of its ideological markup but rather as a way to look at cultural artifacts as relative to the context in which they appear. Johnson (2007) explains that relativism for anthropologists is the same as objectivity. If rational discourse, criticism, and objectivity are abandoned, the result may be ethnocentrism. Sumner explained that ethnocentrism is a result of our perceptive limitations in which we can only understand other cultures if we place our own culture at the center against which every other culture is judged (Shone 2004). Rachels (1993) argues that, from an anthropological standpoint, cultural relativism is the opposite of ethnocentrism and does not equate it to moral relativism. However, philosophers, as mentioned earlier, especially those who work in the field of human rights, do not share those sentiments. In fact they argue that cultural relativism clearly diminishes any talk of universalism and universal human rights, which argue that there exists a set of fundamental rights of people regardless of the context. Cultural relativists on the other hand disagree with universalists, arguing that talk of universalism diminishes any possibility of diversity and transculturalism, and further leads to potential Western moral imperialism. In the globalized world the talk of transculturalism and multiculturalism, however, becomes complicated and questioned by scholars and politicians who are growing aware that pure acceptance of other people’s ways of life is difficult to achieve without attribution of value judgments. In fact leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel argue that multiculturalism as a concept and practice “has utterly failed,” a sentiment which is shared by the scholarly community in
Germany as well. The meaning of culture is now challenged more than ever because the “Other” isn’t necessarily removed in distant places where the “Other” can be observed, described and abandoned at one’s convenience. The complexity of the globalized world has already shown that multiculturalism as a reaction to cultural prejudice has failed because cultures themselves, much like people themselves, are not value free. However, this does not mean that cultural relativism as a concept is dead. On the contrary it is up to the scholarly community to more clearly elucidate what is meant by cultural relativism. Sociologists such as Henslin (1999: 37) for example argue that sociologists must make the effort to study “a culture on its own terms” because no-one is separated from another’s culture completely. In addition culture itself should be redefined to incorporate other sociological categories such as class, race, gender, income, personal histories and family. Multiculturalism itself clearly identifies that people are often situated within multiple cultures at once. That seems to be the bigger problem with relativism, that is, not relativism so much as the concept of culture as it has so far been understood. Feinberg (2007) argues that culture is not a homogenous and easily rounded concept. Cultures are often enveloped in dialectics, contradictions that can and often do produce resolutions. Ulin (2007) argues that despite the long tradition of understanding cultures as homogenous, the visions of circumscribed cultures have been rendered by many scholars such as Wallerstein (1974) and his world-systems theory or Andre Gunder Frank’s (1969) theory of the development of underdevelopment. Both took into account economic, historical, and social factors of Western imperial expansion as factors in shaping the position of peoples around the world. Wallerstein’s world-systems theory contributed to understanding the ways the capitalist economy produced subaltern positions and rearranged power relations and ultimately influenced cultures, racial and gender relations. Considerations of hegemony, possibility of human agency and power relations make cultural relativism even more complicated. In the globalized world the cultural relativism debate will not cease to exist, but it will become ever more important. The resolution to the relativism problem might be within the reach if we reverse the way we ask questions. As Davis (2008: 270) argues, “Our problem is not that we overvalue cultural differences but that we underestimate them. Even in our multiculturalism, we imagine a sameness of outlook and aspiration, an unwitting projection of ourselves in the end.”

SEE ALSO: Civilization; Colonialism; Communities; Cosmopolitanism; Cultural Imperialism; Eurocentrism; Europeanization; Hybridity; Identities; Imperialism; Indigenous Peoples; Modern Imperialism; Periphery; Postcolonialism; Transnationalism; Westernization; World Culture; World-Systems Analysis.

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