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ANT 4931
29 April 2011

Defining Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is an amorphously defined term in anthropology. A heated subject of debate over the last eighty years, its definition has been left open as an idea, principal, tool and theory. This vague understanding of the term inhibits the growth of the undergraduate anthropologist, who is learning to observe and record ethnographic information, but all too often finds ethical dilemmas when attempting to draw conclusions from the data. In order to define cultural relativism, an analysis of the historical development of the term was conducted to establish a general definition. Then that template was applied to two case studies of ethical dilemmas faced by an undergraduate anthropology student. Cultural relativism is defined as an anti-ethnocentric tool utilized in conduction ethnographic research and in developing educational programs designed to install cultural change. However the tool should not be utilized when analyzing ethnographic data, at that point the anthropologist should rely on their personally defined self-critical thinking.

Introduction

Reminiscing over the long years that have led to this, graduating with my Bachelors of Arts in Anthropology, I have taken to reviewing old class notes, thinking of old lecture, PowerPoint presentations and group assignments. Analyzing the experiences that have truly shaped my understanding of the world, my understanding of how I can never fully understand the world, and my great desire to prove myself wrong.

Monday morning, the first class of my freshman year is Introduction to Anthropology. It's a field that I have signed up to major in, with little more than a chapter from a high school geography text book telling me what I have in store. Within minutes of the class I have decided that I like the field, but I am completely unsure if I have what it takes to be an anthropologist. Dr. Austin is telling us about the four subfields, the holistic approach to understanding humanity, things that make sense, ideas that fit together perfectly. The third point of her lecture is Cultural Relativism, the glue that binds the field together. It makes perfect sense, but I did not understand.

In my notes I define cultural relativism as: the opposite of ethnocentrism, and as common behaviors in a culture.

What I meant by the second part of the definition I do not have the slightest idea, but I feel that this really defines the way I understood cultural relativism through the majority of my undergraduate career. It was the obvious answer, and the key to understanding and conducting ethnographic research, but it was not until recently that I realized that I could not define it. I could not set up parameters to explain this generalized over encompassing term. I could practice cultural relativism and be culturally relativistic, or accuse a classmate of lacking a relativistic point of view. I could apply it to both my homework and my personal philosophy. Cultural relativism became a religion, a ritual that promised a better life of sound research; while ethnocentrism literally takes on the form of death, to fall into the temptation is guaranteed to destroy your academic credibility and livelihood.

Religion, however, is more than just a belief; it is a collection of rules and rituals that represent a belief. So how can I call myself a practicing anthropologist if I do not understand the rules by which I am to conduct my academic life?

The religious metaphors can stop here, but the argument is valid. Cultural relativism is a major theme in anthropological study and education, but it lacks a definitive and finite definition. The *Encyclopedia of Anthropology* loosely defines cultural relativism as an idea, theory and tool, three very different terms, with varying scopes of application (Ruhl 2006). Perhaps even more concerning however is the relative quiet surrounding the topic in academic circles. Without set parameters for this term anthropological study is limited in its scope and applicability, ultimately weakening the field as a valid scientific endeavor. Through detailed analysis of the term's point of origin and theoretical development a definitive scope and limitation can be determined, if not

at the very least brought to the foregrounds to be debated until a sufficient definition can be reached.

Methodology

Determining a conclusive definition is by no means an easy task, and the chances of creating an indisputable structure for cultural relativism are minimal. If anything, cultural relativism would suggest that relativism is in itself a culturally defined term. However for the sake of sound research and obtainable goals, a definition must be reached and the best way to do that is through a detailed study of the history and development of the term in anthropology.

In order to understand the development of the term, documents highlighting debate over relativism were collected and analyzed to create a literature review that traces the term's application over the last 60 years. The writings of key theologian were preferred because of their esteem in the anthropological community at the time of their research. The research focused primarily on the development of the term and concept, starting with the work of Franz Boas in the early twentieth century and following the work of his students who are accredited with coining the term.

After the origins of cultural relativism were established, literary research focused on the debate between prominent anthropologists over the scope and application of the term. This debate was popular up until the 1980s. However, since then the debate appears to have fallen dramatically, especially considering the recent growth of sustainable development initiatives around the world.

It was this lack of debate over sustainable development that prompted this research study, along with a few other key experiences from my undergraduate education. So to round off the review of cultural relativism, I conducted a constant comparison analysis of cultural relativism,

its strengths and weaknesses as I have observed them throughout my schooling, in order to establish real limitations and applicable definitions to the term. Further, contemporary undergraduate level anthropology textbooks were analyzed to get a better understanding of how cultural relativism is, or is not, defined.

Literature Review

The term cultural relativism was not applied to anthropological study until the early 1900s, but the theoretical foundations for the term take root in the late nineteenth century. Boas is famous for his theory of historic particularism, which developed as a counter to the popular evolutionary model that characterized anthropology up until this time (Darnell 1998). Evolutionists believed that human cultures evolved along a single path, from barbarians into civilized society. This antiquated and racially biased construct gave anthropologists permission to study human development through the examination of the less developed man (McGee and Warms 2008).

Boas countered the evolutionist theory by proposing that cultures evolved independently of one another, within the constructs of their specific environment and historic situation. For the greater part, his life's research focused on documenting the diffusion of cultural practices and beliefs, as diffusion would directly contradict any linear evolutionary theory. His work found that not only cultural practices, but language and genetics diffused and aggravated between all cultures (Darnell 1998). His teachings would go on to inspire a generation of relativistic anthropologists.

Relativism as an understanding of differing points of view originated in epistemology, the study of how humans think (Boghossian 2006). Originating as a means for defining religion and belief systems, epistemic relativism hold that "there are no absolute facts about what belief a

particular item of information justifies” (Boghossian 2006). In epistemology, relativism is seen as a mental aid for philosophic thought. Gordon D. Kaufman explains it best, claiming that “we become freed from the thought based on static, absolutistic model of truth thus we are able to grasp certain kinds of truths not otherwise comprehensible” (1960). In this field, it was believed that absolute truths about human thought processes existed, but to comprehend them the researcher must first free themselves of their culturally defined beliefs. It is this same philosophy that attracted Boas’ students to apply relativism to anthropology.

A. L. Kroeber, Boas’ first PhD student, was one of the first to use the term cultural relativism in his work. Much like Boas, Kroeber spent the majority of his academic years building up evidence against the evolutionary theory (McGee and Warms 2008). He defends cultural relativism as a necessary part of scientific study, claiming that “sweeping all-or-non, black-or-white judgments are characteristic of totalitarian attitudes and have no place in science, whose very nature is inferential and judicial” explaining that a relativistic point of view is essential while conducting historic studies (Kroeber 1949). Interestingly enough, he also identifies the limitations of this new concept. Kroeber argues that cultural relativism is a starting point from which scientists can go about to discover “a new set of absolute values and standards” (Kroeber 1949). This suggests that from the beginning, cultural relativism served as a method for the identification and propagation of universal ideals.

From Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, another one of Boas’ students, expanded the scope of cultural relativism. She saw it as more than just a means of understanding human development through historic studies, but as a necessity for examining extant contemporary cultures (Janiewski and Banner 2004). Benedict applied cultural relativism to her studies of living cultures, with the intent of identifying universal traits that run throughout the human species

(Ruhl 2006). She believed in universal human characteristics, but challenged her fellow anthropologists in suggesting that these universals were not the same as the established Western beliefs (Janiewski and Banner 2004). Benedict saw cultural relativity as a tool used to dig deeper into the human condition.

From this point on, debate over the validity of cultural evolution and the place of cultural relativism become common place. Leslie White, in the mid 1900s, begins to push for the acceptance of a neo-evolutionary theory, which suggests that cultures do evolve in the direction of greater complexity (McGee and Warms 2008). White was quick to recognize the ethnocentric premise of earlier evolutionary theorists, however he argued that by constructing definitive equations to measure a cultures productivity in harvesting and using resources, issues of cultural relativism could be circumnavigated altogether (McGee and Warms 2008, Pace 1983).

Countering White, Claude Levi-Strauss, in his book *Race and History*, argues that while it is possible to rank cultures in terms of productivity in a single area, such as energy production, every culture will excel in different ways (1958). He explains that the decision to use energy production as the scale for evolutionary fitness is in itself ethnocentric, because energy production is a key factor of western society (Levi-Strauss 1958, Pace 1983). Had the scale been set as the understanding and manipulation of the human body, then the “great theoretical and practical *summae* represented by Yoga in India, the Chinese ‘breath-techniques,’ or the visceral control of the ancient Maoris” would set western society years behind on the evolutionary scale (Levi-Strauss 1958).

Levi-Strauss’ structuralists theories pushed cultural relativism to the next level. He limited universal human traits to the mental structures that he believed composed the human brain. To this extent, he believed anthropologists should avoid cross cultural analysis if looking

for superficial similarities. His work can be attributed to the beginning of moral relativism in anthropology, as new anthropologists found themselves further restricted when it comes to identifying and enforcing universal human ideals.

These restrictions spurred much debate in academic circles; one of the biggest voices against cultural relativism was I. C. Jarvie. First, as clarification, Jarvie was not a proponent of ethnocentrism in anthropological study. In fact, he makes one of the best defenses for the understandings that cultures cannot be compared to one another in terms of fitness or evolutionary progress. In *The revolution in Anthropology*, Jarvie argues that the determining factor of a culture's standing compared to another culture is based upon societal functioning (1964). Since survival is the ultimate goal of any society, all extant populations are achieving their primary goal and are therefore equally successful, and only extinct cultural groups can be considered less developed because they failed their primary objective (Jarvie, *The Revolution in Anthropology* 1964).

That said, Jarvie has made a career of critiquing social sciences in general, but has focused heavily on the shortcomings of the theory of cultural relativism. First of all, he argues that no anthropologist can ever truly obtain a culturally relativistic perspective, most simply because the field of anthropology is in itself a creation of West European culture (Jarvie Unpublished). Further, he warns that overemphasizing cultural relativism can cripple anthropologists when it comes to understanding and taking sides in cultural revolutions, even within their own culture (Jarvie Unpublished and 2000). So instead of practicing cultural relativism, Jarvie suggests that anthropologists should reject both ethnocentrism and cultural relativism and pursue a middle ground of "self-critical thinking" (Jarvie Unpublished).

Clifford Geertz counters Jarvie's relative distaste for relativism by establishing his own self-proclaimed position as an Anti-anti-relativist (Geertz 1984, Inglis 2000). In this ideology, Geertz identified himself as disagreeing with anti-relativists, without whole heartedly ascribing to the practices of relativists (Geertz 1984). His argument is that an anthropologist practicing cultural relativism is not inhibited in making culturally specific decisions, but instead making a psychological effort to avoid contaminating their data (Geertz 1984). Geertz proposed that practicing cultural relativity is absolutely necessary when conducting ethnographic research, and he even went as far as to suggest that anthropologists should never focus in one region, but study a variety of cultures in order to avoid "tunnel vision" (Inglis 2000). Ultimately he pushed for limiting relativism to research, and believed that the individual researcher is responsible for drawing fair conclusions from their research, but their conclusions will undoubtedly reflect all aspects of the research and the researcher.

Over the last eighty years, cultural relativism has been used to examine cultural histories, to find universal human truths, to free researchers from the confines of universal truths, to understand the world as a whole and to both power and hinder anthropological pursuits. With such a muddled past, it is little wonder that the term has gained an open-ended and generalized definition in contemporary instructional texts.

The *Encyclopedia of Anthropology* loosely defines cultural relativism as an idea, theory and tool (Ruhl 2006). And the *Dictionary of Anthropology* explains cultural relativism to be a principle (Winick 1977). These are four very different terms, with varying scopes of application.

An idea is amorphous; it varies from individual to individual, and is always defined by the cultural background of the individual who first thought it. To that end, cultural relativism is specific to the field of American anthropology, since that is where it originated, and it cannot be

assumed that anthropologists from different cultural backgrounds would utilize relativism in their research. Having worked with anthropologists who hail from cultural backgrounds far from my own, I can assure you that cultural relativism is not limited to American anthropology.

Defining relativism as a theory greatly expands the scope and applicability of the term. It goes to suggest that relativism is a way in which an entire school of thought can view and understand the world. This is most likely the conclusion that most undergraduate anthropology students leave with. As a theory, cultural relativism offers the explanation that ethnocentrism is a naturally occurring phenomena. It operated to help members of a culture identify behaviors or individuals who do not operate in a manner that is conducive to societal functioning. However, once these outlying behaviors have been identified, they can be understood to function normally in their originating cultural context. In this way cultural relativism offers an understanding of how individual operate inside and outside of their culture, and gives anthropologists a structure with which they can comprehend the world.

However, as a theory cultural relativism can often be stretched too far. It begins to fall into the field of moral relativism, where morality is defined by individual cultures and are held relative to one another (Ruhl 2006). This sort of relativism endangers the anthropologist of falling into an academic stagnation, where concrete decisions and findings are forgone in pursuit of universal toleration. Kroeber wrote that “it is only by starting from relativism and its tolerations that we may hope to work out a new set of absolute values and standards” (1949). By this he is trying to emphasize that cultural relativism is not a universal theory, but instead a means to an end.

Kroeber would most likely have agreed with Winick’s definition of cultural relativism as “the principal... that that there is no single scale of values applicable to all societies” as this

definition is smaller in scale, compared to the relativistic theory (1977). Unfortunately, this definition still fails to explain how and when cultural relativism should be applied in anthropology.

The most concrete definition, that appears to fit the most theoretical molds, would be to identify cultural relativism as a tool of ethnographic research. It acts as a mental template that could be applied for the duration of ethnographic research, but escaped when necessary. This would allow anthropologists to conduct sound research while also freeing them to make the critical decision required by the modern world.

Discussion

It is the lack of agreed upon application that has created this exact problem with defining anthropology. Should an anthropologist use a relativistic approach only when conducting research, or should an anthropologist, as an educated member of society, apply relativism in their daily lives, even within their own culture? Perhaps a more poignant query would ask if an anthropologist, trained to employ cultural relativism, ever has the ability to forgo its constraints as a general understanding of the world.

As an undergraduate, cultural relativism is huge. It seems to encompass the whole field of study, only to overflow and seep into every crevasse of my life, inside and out of academics. Defining it as a tool of ethnographic research is useful, however it is the application of that tool that becomes the issue. From this point on the examples of challenges to cultural relativity are drawn from my own educational background. However, I truly believe these experiences have far reaching philosophic lessons, which can be applied to any anthropologist's own work.

Interdisciplinary Work

In the fall semester of my senior year, I took a course in medical anthropology. By this point in my academic career I knew most of my fellow classmates, many of whom were also studying anthropology and, like me, had been thoroughly indoctrinated with the principals of cultural relativism.

The day's discussion was focused on child birth and rearing, and the topic had moved to in vitro fertilization and other non-traditional methods of conception. Not surprisingly, or at least I was not surprised, one student voiced a concern that she felt these methods were unnatural. The student's opinion was immediately challenged and in the midst of the debate the student made a claim along the lines of: if lesbian wanted to have children then they would be lesbians. The student was quickly attacked by a number of her fellow classmates and accused of being small minded and lacking a relativistic point of view.

I found this situation to be highly hypocritical. First of all, the student who made the claim had no earlier background in anthropology, and in all likelihood, had probably never encountered the term before. Secondly, many of the students accusing her of lacking a relativistic perspective were trained in anthropological theory. I had to wonder, what were the defining factors that set this person apart so that my fellow classmates did not feel that she deserved the same level of cross-cultural understanding that they employed when discussing the birthing process in northern India.

To the best of my understanding, the student was held to a higher standard because she was believed to be a peer instead of a subject. This brings forward an immediate concern surrounding the average undergraduate's understanding of cultural relativism. It is being used to establish a dichotomy between the informed researcher, and the unknowing research subject.

Budding anthropologists need to learn that cultural relativism can be applied to understanding all cultures, including their own, and that just because they know the term and claim to practice it, they are just as bound to their cultural beliefs as the subject they are observing.

On to applying relativism in a workplace, this is another skill that the undergraduate is going to need to learn. In only the rarest of situations will an anthropologist be working only with other anthropologists, in most cases they will find themselves as part of a team of researchers, each with a unique background and point of view. Further, this diversity is usually identified as a key to gaining a holistic understanding of any social group, which is one of anthropology's sole objectives. To operate in these multidisciplinary research teams, the anthropologist must learn to operate with a sense of cultural relativism, understanding that the perspective of the fellow researcher, or in this case classmate, can actually be beneficial to gaining an insight into the issues being researched.

Sustainable Development

Much of my schooling has focused on ideas of sustainable development, either by course design or through self-guided study. During the winter of my senior year I had the opportunity to try my hand, working on a series of sustainable environmental initiatives in Ghana. It was not until my return to the States that I began to question my own ethics regarding the work I was assisting in. One of the series of experiments we conducted were fishermen interviews that we administered in small artisanal fishing villages along the coastline. We were investigating the average fisherman's knowledge base and understanding of sea turtles and the laws that protect them.

In conducting my research I feel strongly that I did my very best to approach the subject with a sense of cultural relativism. However I now recognize yet another hypocritical aspect to

my research. Working toward a goal of a sustainable economic structure, I realized, is a culturally constructed ideal that was developed largely within the western society. To encourage another culture to pursue this goal is to push my own beliefs onto another culture, under the assumption that their economy is flawed and that they need, and want, to change. Further, approaching any society with the intent of helping them develop begins with the assumption that they need to develop, and that they need assistance in achieving that goal. Both of these counter the general pretenses of cultural relativism, in that they make assumptions that the culture has a direction in which it should develop, and this direction should mirror that of the more financially successful global economies.

To the later point, the argument can be made that all cultures are in contestant state of development, and that ethnographic understanding of the culture can assist with any developmental project. The problem is that in these situations the anthropologist is approaching the subject matter from a perspective that is looking for faults or weaknesses in the culture's economy, particularly those that do not fit a western economic structure. In order to obtain data of the best quality, anthropologists must approach their subject without the preexisting notions that there are issues that need to be addressed, otherwise defined as a culturally relativism.

This point hits home hard, because I was genuinely surprised when I realized that many Ghanaian fisher folk were knowledgeable about the ecological importance of sea turtles, and were taking active measures to protect sea turtle populations, even though there was evidence that this often included immediate costs to the fishermen such as broken nets and lost catch. In general, to be surprised by cultural phenomena implies that the observer had a previous assumption that had been disproven. Of course, it is only human to make assumptions given the limited amount of data available in any particular situation, I am not arguing that anthropologists

should be above this. Merely pointing out that a key for recognizing a laps in one's own relativistic point of view can be identified when the researcher feels surprised by a finding.

Moving on, when it comes to pursuing universal ideals, like a sustainable economy, the issue becomes far more muddled. As an anthropologist, approaching a culture with the intent of establishing a new, or improved, economic structure is not too far a cry from fifteenth century colonization. There are only two suggestions I have for the fair establishment of any sustainability project; one, the researcher must be morally assured that they are working for the betterment of human kind, and two, the researcher must incorporate the indigenous population in the restructuring plans as much as possible.

First of all, we have entered into an era where all cultures function, to some extent, within the globalized economy. If a culture wishes to remain outside of the web of international money flow, it is their own decision and the anthropologist must recognize their autonomous position in the subject matter. However, when a culture is involved in the larger global economy, which by this point includes a great majority of human populations, an anthropologist must take a stand as an individual on where they believe their research should be applied.

To this end I will argue my own belief; it is the moral responsibility of anthropologists to assist with the creation of an environmentally sustainable economic design in all cultures. The global economy is in constant fluctuation, and the best way for any culturally specific economy to hold its own in the international monetary flow is to be able to adapt and alter its economic design. In order to achieve this economic flexibility, economies should retain as much access to natural resources as possible. By assisting in structuring a sustainable use of natural resources, anthropologists help to assure that a population will continue to have access to those resources in

the future, when the economic pressures change and the economy must adapt to a new environment.

Ultimately, an anthropologist should approach their subject with the intent of assisting to empower them for the long run. One of the best ways to ensure the success of any sustainable development project is to incorporate the target culture in all aspects of research, design and implication of any developmental project. With the advent of Participatory Action Research anthropologists have made great headway in involving the subject in conducting and collecting research, the next step is to involve the host culture in designing the developmental project.

Back to Ghana, the reason so many fisher folk have taken to protecting sea turtles is because the Ghanaian Wildlife Department (GWD) has taken the initiative by developing educational radio talk shows. Ghanaian fishing communities have been using the radio as a major source of information dispersal for the last eighty years (McKay n.d.). The GWD has used this form of mainstream media to teach fisher folk about the importance of protecting keystone species, like the sea turtle. By informing the public, they have given the individual fishermen the power to choose if they want to assist in helping maintain turtle populations.

Conclusions

The best fitting definition of cultural relativism is as a tool to be employed in ethnographic research, designed to assist the researcher in avoiding ethnocentric contamination of data. The scope of ethnographic research however, does not have to be limited to the researcher-subject dichotomy. Anthropologists have the training to employ their research methods in all fields of inter-human relations, not limited to gaining information from within the work environment or from within one's own culture.

Cultural relativism can also be employed if and when an anthropologist is working for social change. Be it to change public opinion in a matter of human rights, such as the right of homosexual couples to have children, or when encouraging sustainable economic practices, like releasing captured sea turtles, anthropologists must avoid forcing change. Instead, they can work with the target population through the development of educational programming. Teaching people about identified problems and potential solutions will empower the culture at the individual level to make the changes they feel are the best for themselves. This helps to remove the researcher and their inherent bias from the final product.

The place where cultural relativism should be kept in check however is when the researcher analyses their data for the sake of drawing conclusions. Anthropologists must act as scientists, and a relativistic perspective does inhibit the development of conclusive findings. Of course, the researcher must still avoid ethnocentrism; however they must operate within an appropriate level of their own cultural understanding of the world in order to recognize patterns and points of interest. Each anthropologist, in the earlier stages of their academic career, should develop their own form of self-critical thought, with which they can understand the world as having absolute values and truths.

It is the analysis of data, which I feel confuses the average undergraduate, as many, in my own experience, are quick to state their opinion on matters of their own cultural and political points of view, but are usually hesitant when making observations of subject material. By redefining cultural relativism as an important tool in data collection and project implementation, but as a drawback of data analysis, budding anthropologists can have a more concrete understanding of their place as researchers and scientists.

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