

Cultural Relativism: Concept and Issues

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Introduction

Cultural relativism is one of the most important concepts in the field of sociology, affirming and recognizing the relationship between social structure and the day-to-day life of an individual. It is the idea that the system of moral and ethics, which varies from one culture to another, are all equal, and that no system ranks above the other. A person's belief and value system should be understood in the context of his own culture rather than against the criteria of another culture. Cultural relativism is based on the fact that there is no specific ground rule for what is good or evil. Thus, any judgment on what is true or wrong depends on the society's rules, culture, and belief system. Therefore, any opinion on morality or ethics is dependent on a person's cultural perspective. Ultimately, no particular ethical position can be considered the best.

Origin and Overview

The concept of cultural relativism as it is known and used today was developed as an analytic tool by Franz Boas, a German-American anthropologist, in the early years of the 20th century. The idea was subsequently popularized by some of his students. However, neither Boas nor the 21st-century relativist, James Wray-Miller coined the term "cultural relativism." The term was first recorded by Alain Locke in 1924, who used the term to describe Robert Lowie's cultural relativism. The concept of cultural relativism was an important concept in countering the

ethnocentrism that often tarnished research at the time. Ethnocentrism was often conducted by the wealthy white western men and focused on people who belonged to the lower economic class and other races. Ethnocentric judges other people's cultures based on their own values and beliefs. From their point of view, they frame other cultures as weird and exotic.

Cultural relativism creates an understanding that there are many cultures in the world and that each culture has its own values, beliefs, and practices that have been developed over time in a particular context, either historically, politically, or socially, and that none of the cultures are necessarily wrong or right. The modern world has widely embraced the concept of cultural relativism, with words such as tolerance and acceptance taking on a new meaning. In sociology, the concept is practiced to overcome the problem of cultural bias that has plagued research. It has also greatly influenced social sciences such as anthropology. It is linked to but always distinguished from moral relativism, a concept that views morality as relative to a given standard.

Examples of Cultural Relativism

The concept of cultural relativism covers a wide area of human interactions, beliefs, values, and practices. For example, it explains why what constitutes breakfast vary from place to place. In most African homes, it is never breakfast without a cup of tea, coffee, or porridge, whereas in the US a typical breakfast consists of cereals, milk, and sandwiches loaded with eggs and bacon.

In some parts of the world, nudity is considered an inherently sexual thing with people interpreting it as a sexual indicator. However, in some places, being nude in public is a normal part of life. In this case, being

nude is not considered a sexual suggestion but an appropriate bodily state. In places dominated by Islam, a thorough body covering is expected.

Other cultural differences that must be tolerated include the role of different members of the family, religion and religious practices, and community leadership. In some homes, women are confined to the kitchen and are proud to play their roles in such a setting while in some set-ups, women are encouraged to pursue leadership and engage in what would be considered “men’s fields.”

Importance of Recognizing Cultural Relativism

By recognizing cultural relativism, a person recognizes that his or her culture shapes what is considered beautiful or otherwise, funny or abhorrent, good or bad, tasteful or tacky. Understanding cultural relativism enables one to escape the unconscious bond of their culture which biases their perceptions and reaction to the world. It also helps one to make sense of a different culture. Cultural relativism gets people to admit that though their moral principles and values may seem evidently true and may form the basis for passing judgment on other people, the evidence of these moral principles is just illusions.

Adoption of Cultural Relativism

Several countries have used cultural relativism as a reason for limiting rights in the Universal Declaration of the Human Right. Some regimes around the world that have been installed by revolutions such as China and Cuba have outright denied the need for political plurality. Another group of nations like certain Islamic states that adhere to Sharia laws like Yemen and Iran also deny the need for political plurality. Some nations

like Malaysia and Colombia give special rights to specific groups of people.

Is Cultural Relativism Absolutely Possible?

A society that believes that there is no ultimate right or wrong loses a sense of making any rational judgment. Cultural relativism is for the notion that truth is relative, depending on the cultural environment. Those who choose to be different or intolerant to the idea of relativism are neither supported nor encouraged. Tolerance becomes the absolute “truth” in and of itself which contradicts the entire concept of relativism. While vices such as drug smuggling, stealing, and murder require a moral judgment, adherent to the concept of cultural relativism cannot outright denounce such as wrong.

Relativism, including cultural relativism, is considered to be self-contradictory and impossible, as it seems to reject the idea of a universal right and wrong. Critics of cultural relativism argue that there must be some unquestionable absolutes of right and wrong despite the culture of a society. Truths and wrongs cannot be generated by one specific group of people, but originate from something more universal and fundamental.

Some Issues regarding Cultural Relativism

1. Violation of Human Rights. For example: Tripple Talaq, Sati Pratha, Dowry system, Head Hunting or Human Sacrifice, Discriminatory personal Laws of different religions (Property rights which only available for son and not for daughter).
2. It creates the feeling of **Nihilism** (it is the belief that all values, religion are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is the rejection of all religion and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless.)

3. There is no bench-mark or standard form of culture. For example, recently Chinese President declared that China does not fit for democracy. The communist regime in China is best for her. The Cultural Relativists consider that whatever is present in today's culture is the best and there cannot be any improvement, which actually can create Nihilism (or hopelessness).