Cultural Relativism & Ethnocentrism
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Questions:

▪ How do we remain objective when studying other cultures?
▪ Are there elements (universals) that exist in all cultures?
▪ What makes cultures completely different?
▪ Are some cultures better than others?
Ethnocentrism

- Judging other cultures by the standards of one’s own culture rather than by the standards of that particular culture.
- We are ethnocentric when we use our cultural norms to make generalizations about other peoples’ cultures and customs.
Examples:

- We often talk about British drivers driving on the “wrong side” of the road. Why not just say “opposite side” or even “left hand side”?

- We talk about written Hebrew or Arabic as reading “backward”. Why not just say from “right to left” or “in the opposite direction from English”.

- We consider certain types of art “naïve” or “primitive”.

While ethnocentric views are not necessarily intended, they have led to major human disaster through history causing bullying, discrimination, intolerance, war, genocide...
What are the causes of cultural misunderstanding?

- Conflicting Value / Belief Systems
  - Political regimes that are at odds with one another
  - Conflicting religious doctrine

- Views of Superiority
  - Cultural Evolutionism
  - First World vs. Third World
  - Developed vs. Undeveloped
  - Civilized vs. Uncivilized
- Lack of exposure to other ways of being / living
  - Ignorance

- Tendency to fear what you don’t understand
  - Knee jerk reaction
Cultural Relativism (Boas)

- The idea that each culture must be understood in terms of the values and beliefs of that culture and should not be judged by the standards of another culture.

- It explains human diversity as a logical outcome of the diverse environments in which humans live.

- There is no fixed truth; everything it relative.
Female Beauty: Is it universal? Why or why not?
Ideas of “Good” and “Bad” are assigned and are psycho-emotively attached to beliefs and actions by the culture in which you live.

- Good: socially approved of in a culture by the majority over time and is therefore a social convention... acceptable

- Bad: socially disapproved of... taboo
Food?
Why don’t we eat insects?
- Can you think of examples of universal values that supersede the particularities of cultures?
- What are the challenges associated with determining international standards for morality within cultural relativism?
- What are the benefits of cultural relativism?
- What would you say are the deficiencies or dangers of cultural relativism?
Examples:

- Abortion
- Arranged Marriages
- Female Circumcision
- Female Infanticide
- Capital Punishment
- Women’s Rights
Where should the line be drawn between being tolerant of other peoples’ ways of life and access to basic human rights?

Who decides?
Universalism vs. Cultural Relativism

- The UDHR enshrines, by definition, rights that apply to all humans equally, whichever geographical location, state, race, or culture they belong to.
- Proponents of cultural relativism suggest that human rights are not all universal, and indeed conflict with some and threaten their survival.
Female genital cutting
- Occurs in different cultures in Africa, Asia, and South America
- It is not mandated by any religion but has become tradition in many cultures
- It is considered a violation of women’s rights by much of the international community
Read the article “The Forest is Ours”

The Kenyan government views the Mukogodo forest as a strategic national resource worthy of protection whereas the indigenous Yiaaku view the Mukogodo as a cultural heritage and as inseparable from Yiaaku life. In your opinion, who should have access to the forest? Why?
Cultural Constructionism

- A position that says that human behaviour and ideas are best explained as products of culturally shaped learning.

- Ideas of what behaviours are culturally accepted or taboo are both assigned and psycho-emotively determined.
How do people(s) construct categories as “the natural” and “the commonsensical”?

How do social phenomena develop in particular cultural contexts?
What types of assumptions do you make in everyday life that affect the ways in which you view life in other societies?
Do you agree or disagree with the following statements...

- No group has the right to stand in the way of “the greater good for the greater number”.

- Immigrants to Canada should give up their foreign ways and adapt to their new country as quickly as possible.

- Many of the world’s populations do not take enough initiative to develop themselves; therefore, they remain undeveloped or underdeveloped.
To what extent are your views regarding the questions given influenced by the culture in which you live? Or, by your life experience?

In what ways do you manifest your views in your behaviour?

How do you regard people who hold views that differ sharply from your own?

How do your views “fit” with the anthropological concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativity?