

Understanding Cultural Relativism in a Multicultural World
(Or Teaching the Concept of Cultural Relativism
to Ethnocentric Students)

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Understanding Cultural Relativism in a Multicultural World

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We live in a rapidly changing world society, which is increasingly bringing people of various cultures in closer interaction with each other. This interaction can be positive or negative depending on the level of sensitivity and respect people have for other cultural groups. These two types of behaviors are related to the two important concepts examined in this presentation—ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. Negative attitudes towards other cultures and/or ethnic groups arise out of ethnocentrism, while positive attitudes are the result of a culturally relativist approach. If people are going to be successful in today's multicultural, information age, world society, they will need to develop a culturally sensitive frame of reference and mode of operation. It is the purpose of this presentation to help people move from an ethnocentric, exclusive mindset to a culturally sensitive *modus operandi*, by clarifying what is meant by ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, how each operates, and what are the steps that move a person from one perspective to the other.

One of the most controversial challenges to the study of social ethics comes from a methodological approach of the social sciences called, *cultural relativism*. “Cultural relativism is in essence an approach to the question of the nature and role of values in culture” (Herskovits 1973, p. 14). If values are shared ideals which give rise to beliefs and norms of behavior around which a people or a group organizes its collective life and goals, cultural relativism declares that these values are relative to the cultural ambiance out of which they arise.

Because of this many ethicists believe that the concept of cultural relativism threatens the discipline of ethics since, if values are relative to a given culture than this must mean that there are no universal moral absolutes by which the behavior of people can be judged. Therefore, “if there is no observable control transcending all cultures, no eternal book of rules, then right and wrong are a matter of opinion and it doesn't matter what we do: anything goes!” (Ruggiero 1973, p. 17). Thus, we can't go around passing judgment on what other people do. For, “if all morality is relative, then what moral objection could one make to the Nazi holocaust, to the economic deprivation of a Latin American underclass, or to a militaristic nation's unleashing nuclear devastation on others? And what would be wrong with conducting painful experiments on young children, using them for case studies on the long-term psychological effects of mutilation? In a world where no moral court of appeals exists, might makes right. The only appeal can be to power” (Holmes, 1984, pp. 17,18).

But it is such a position that cultural relativism seeks to challenge. And the reason why cultural relativism has come under fire is “because it has been subject to divergent interpretation” (Ruggiero, p. 17). Anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn (1944, p. 43) declares:

The concept of culture, like any other piece of knowledge, can be abused and misinterpreted. Some fear that the principle of cultural relativity will weaken morality. “If the Bugabuga do it why can't we? It's all relative anyway.” But this is exactly what cultural relativity does *not* mean.

The principle of cultural relativity does not mean that because the members of some savage tribe are allowed to behave in a certain way that this fact gives intellectual

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warrant for such behavior in all groups. Cultural relativity means, on the contrary, that the appropriateness of any positive or negative custom must be evaluated with regard to how this habit fits with other group habits. Having several wives makes economic sense among herders, not among hunters. While breeding a healthy skepticism as to the eternity of any value prized by a particular people, anthropology does not as a matter of theory deny the existence of moral absolutes. Rather, the use of the comparative method provides a scientific means of discovering such absolutes. If all surviving societies have found it necessary to impose some of the same restrictions upon the behavior of their members, this makes a strong argument that these aspects of the moral code are indispensable.

Part of the problem has to do with *ethnocentrism*, the polar opposite of cultural relativism. Both concepts, ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, can be placed as polar ends of a continuum, each reflecting a different approach, either as exclusive or inclusive; a different mindset either closed or open to differences, and an attitude and behavior that is either insensitive or sensitive to another culture.



What is ethnocentrism? There are three levels of ethnocentrism: a positive one, a negative one, and an extreme negative one. The positive definition defines ethnocentrism as “the point of view that one's own way of life is to be preferred to all others” (Herskovits, p. 21). There is nothing wrong with such feelings, for “it characterizes the way most individuals feel about their own cultures, whether or not they verbalize their feeling” (Herskovits, p. 21). It is ethnocentrism that which gives people their sense of peoplehood, group identity, and place in history—all of which are valuable traits to possess. Ethnocentrism becomes negative when “one's own group becomes the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it” (Sumner 1979, p. 13). It reaches its extreme negative form when “a more powerful group not only imposes its rule on another, but actively depreciates the things they hold to be of value” (Herskovits, p. 103). Apartheid, the holocaust, and the genocide of the American Indian are all examples of this third level of ethnocentrism.

Audrey Smedley gives us the key to understanding ethnocentrism—the importance of cultural differences—when she declares: “The important point about ethnocentrism is that it is grounded in the empirical reality and perceptions of sociocultural differences and the separateness of interests and goals that this may entail. There [can] be no ethnocentrism without *cultural* differences, no matter how trivial or insignificant these may appear to an outsider” (Smedley, 1993:31).

Vincent Ruggiero tells us that, “just as it is natural for us to read the behavior of others in terms of our own standards, so it is natural to view actions in other cultures from the codes of our culture. What seems fair to us we assume is fair to them; and when we see an action we regard as treacherous, we likewise assume that they have violated their code. Yet a deeper understanding

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of their code may reveal that they have not only not been violating it, but in fact observing it” (Ruggiero, p. 18).

How can one eliminate ethnocentrism? Vincent Ruggiero (p. 18) suggests three important steps to take which will enable us “to penetrate deception of appearance.”

1. “Study the cultural context in which the action occurs.”
2. “Determine the circumstances of time, place, and condition surrounding it.”
3. “Learn the reasoning that underlies it and the moral value it reflects.”

At the heart of these three steps lies the importance of learning to “take the role of the other,” the ability to see things, especially that with which we are not familiar, from the perspective of the other before any consideration of judgment is considered.

The Difference Between the Social Sciences and Ethics:

What makes this difficult is that whereas anthropology and sociology are empirical sciences, fields of study based on observations and facts, ethics is a normative discipline, based on judgments and moral values. The social sciences are limited to what can be observed, measured and verified. The question of what is right and wrong lies outside of the discipline, in the field of ethics. A scientist can only predict a certain outcome, and not pass judgment on whether that outcome is morally right or wrong. When a scientist makes a moral declaration, she or he is no longer speaking as a scientist but as a concerned citizen, who has recognized the separation of roles and has bracketed off his or her role as scientists, so as to speak as a moral citizen.

For example, a “physician is expected to treat patients he dislikes or whom she believes are a social menace with the same care with which she or he treats their other patients. A judge, in her role of citizen, vigorously condemns a defendant, but, in her role of judge, discharges the culprit. This is not regarded as inconsistent or schizoid behavior. An actor wins applause for the excellence of his enactment of the villain's role, not because of his personal approval or disapproval of the character portrayed. The latter question is recognized as a separate matter, of relevance in other contexts. Exactly the same is true of the scientist. He or she has performed their full function as scientist when they have clearly depicted the consequences of a proposed type of behavior—for example, when they have accurately predicted an explosion. Their applause or abhorrence of the explosion is not part of their scientific conclusion or function” (Lundberg 1965, p. 18).

On the negative side, ethnocentrism also implies the failure or refusal to view reality from the perspective of the other, thereby causing one to reject the other's contribution as valid, simply because it differs from one's own. This is one reason why ethicists, whose discipline arises out of philosophy (a metaphysical discipline), have difficulty with cultural relativism, which arises out of anthropology and sociology (both empirical disciplines). Each discipline approaches cultural relativism from a different paradigm or way of seeing the world. Thus ethicists approach cultural relativism from the perspective of philosophers and not from the perspective of social scientists. The result is a rejection of the concept, since it does not fit within the parameters of their discipline.

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But lest one is too quick to judge ethics, one needs to realize that sociology does the same with religion. Since God does not fit the parameters of an empirical approach, many social scientists have tended to reject the divine aspect of religion. Each using a different instrument—the analogy of a telescope versus a microscope—is not able to include the perspective of the other (see graphic).

COMPARING METHODOLOGIES: ETHICS AND SOCIOLOGY

Discipline	Nature	Methodology	Analogous Instrument
ETHICS	Philosophy	Metaphysical	Telescope
SOCIOLOGY	Science	Empirical	Microscope

But this is because they have used the norms of one discipline to evaluate the findings of another, which is what cultural relativism is seeking to prevent in the first place. Each culture, each society, or, in this case, each discipline, must be evaluated in terms of its own structures, values and presuppositions, and not those of another. Only through such an approach will its contributions be understood.

This principle of evaluating other perspectives on their own merits is important for all disciplines and not just for ethics versus the social sciences. The usual approach is the fallacy of trying to explain all of reality from the narrow perspective of one discipline, usually one's own. More on this later.

Cultural Relativism Explained:

Understanding this difference of approach can help us to grasp the importance of cultural relativism and where ethicists have misunderstood its positive contributions. What is cultural relativism? *It is the idea that each culture or ethnic group is to be evaluated on the basis of its own values and norms of behavior and not on the basis of those of another culture or ethnic group.* The basic principle out of which cultural relativism emerges is a simple one: “Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his or her own enculturation” (Herskovits, p. 15). It is simply the process by which a culture is learned. This is because much of human knowledge tends to be socially conditioned. In other words, “our thinking is determined by our social position” (Mannheim 1936, p. 125). And “thought is directed in accordance with what a particular social group expects. Thus, out of the possible data of experience, every concept combines within itself only that which, in the light of the investigators' interests, it is essential to grasp and to incorporate” (Mannheim, pp. 273-274). For this reason, “people in different social positions [and cultural settings] think differently” (Mannheim). Thus, *where you stand determines what you see!*

We must therefore realize that, “the values by which [a people] live are relative to the particular kind of cultural learning they have experienced” (Herskovits, p. 93). Cultural relativism, of course, deals with more than just morals, ethics and values; it is also concerned with judgments of time and space and volume, differences in perception and cognition, as well as

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of conduct (Herskovits, p. 52). But it is in the area of ethics that controversy over its implications rages.

What gives ethicists difficulty is a failure to recognize two important factors integral to cultural relativism. The first and perhaps the chief area where ethicists fail to understand cultural relativism is *the failure to distinguish between intra-cultural and cross-cultural relativism*.¹ Cultural relativism does not imply that there is no system of moral values to guide human conduct. Rather, it suggests that every society has its own moral code to guide members of that society, but that these values are of worth to those who live by them, though they may differ from our own (Herskovits, p. 31). It is a failure to understand this difference that leads an ethicist like Abraham Edel to declare, "If cultural relativity is a sociological truth, then your morality is a function of your domicile. If moral assertions are simply expressive, it all depends on what you feel" (Edel 1955, pp. 27-28). But the problem here is the failure to realize that the principle of cultural relativism only has relevance across cultures and not within one culture. It is a *cross-cultural* principle and not an intra-cultural one. Failure to recognize that cultural relativism is a cross-cultural principle, leads ethicists to envisage an intra-cultural relativism, where the validity of any one society having any moral standards is denied, resulting in moral chaos and ethical anarchy (Herskovits, p. 64).

Yet the culture of no society is marked by the kind of moral disintegration that intra-cultural relativism, if practiced, would bring on, for every culture has its own moral code of behavior for the members of its own society, without which no society would be possible. These values, however, only have worth and meaning to that society, and cannot be and should be used to measure the morality of another society. Our individual ethical behavior is shaped by our enculturative experience, by the manner in which we have been socialized to behave in a given social context. Every society has its own socialization process, which enculturates members as to how to behave morally. "Every society has its own rules of conduct, an ethical system, a moral code, that the individual members rarely question. Intraculturally, any act that falls outside the limits of accepted variation will be adjudged in terms of preexisting standards, and either rejected or reconciled with them. Those who make a society have no more difficulty in defining reality than they have in defining good conduct and bad. But this is within a society. Cultural relativism developed because the facts of differences in these concepts of reality or in moral systems, plus our knowledge of the mechanisms of cultural learning, forced the realization of the problem of finding valid cross-cultural norms. In every case where criteria to evaluate the ways of different peoples have been proposed, in no matter what aspect of culture, the question has at once posed itself: 'Whose standards?' The force of the enculturative experience channels all judgments. In fact, the need for a cultural relativistic point of view has become apparent because of the realization that there is no way to play this game of making judgments across cultures except with loaded dice" (Herskovits, p. 56).

In other words, "each culture must be examined in terms of its own structure and values, instead of being rated by the standards of some other civilization exalted as absolute—which in practice of course is always our own civilization" (Kroeber 1950, cited by Herskovits, p. 39).

Cultural relativism is not the same as ethical relativism. "Cultural relativism has an exclusive cross-cultural reference; whereas ethical relativism is essentially intra-cultural in its

¹See Erwin Lutzer, *The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), p. 24, for an example of this.

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focus. The first raises the question of the validity of applying the criteria that sanction the behavior and guide the thinking of the people of one society to the standards of another; the second raises the question of whether any standards can be drawn to direct individual conduct" (Herskovits, p. 88) within any one society. Cultural relativism does not advocate individual or ethical relativism. *So far anthropological and sociological studies show that no society tolerates moral or ethical anarchy.*

Which leads us to the second problem, *the failure of understanding the difference between absolutes and universals*. Absolutes are fixed values which are not admitted to have variation, but which differ from culture to culture, and from epoch to epoch. While universals are those values that transcend cultures, which all cultures manifest (Herskovits, p. 32). Absolutes derive from universals. While universals transcend cultures, absolutes are the way specific cultures implement universals in their particular societies. Take modesty, for example. Every society has the universal principle of modesty. But what passes for modesty in one society, say for example in Arab societies in the Middle East is not what passes for modesty in R o de Janeiro in Brazil or in Malibu Beach in California. Thus, "every society. . . has its moral code, which carries unquestioned sanctions for its members. But once we move into another society, we find a series of values differently conceptualized, differently phrased, but having sanctions of equal force. It is therefore apparent, by extending this observation to human society in general, that while the fact that every culture has an accepted code governing attitudes and conduct which has been empirically established, the absolute worth of any one of these codes" to other cultures, other than for the given society in terms of its own culture, has not been empirically validated (Herskovits, p. 89). Thus, "morality is a universal, and so is enjoyment of beauty, and some standard for truth. The many forms these concepts take, however, are but products of the particular historical experience of the societies that manifest them" (Herskovits). In other words, every society has its absolutes, but not all absolutes are universals.

Thus, in order to avoid the problem of ethnocentrism, where our culture serves as the standard by which to evaluate other cultures, the behavior of other cultures and societies must be evaluated in terms of the total structure of its social and cultural forms and the sanctions that it prescribes. The importance of this lies in "that the values every human group assigns to its conventions arise out of its own historical background, and can be understood only in the light of that background" (Herskovits, pp. 41 and 47).

This does not mean, however, that all cultural practices are equally valid. While each cultural practice may be understood against the backdrop of that culture, this does not mean that *each* cultural practice is appropriate, and therefore to be tolerated and respected. Some cultural practices are better than others. If you value cost-effective production, or the maximizing of profit with the minimum of effort, for example, than a steel ax and plow are better than stone and wooden ones, and Western medicine is more effective in eradicating disease than animal potions and witch's brews. This is not just an ethnocentric perspective on our part, but a pragmatic principle that "that which *works* is 'better' than that which *doesn't* work" (Bagish 1990, p. 34). But what does this mean? It means that "any belief or practice that enables human beings to *predict* and *control* events in their lives, with a higher degree of success than previous beliefs or practices did, can be said to 'work better.' Better *prediction* and better *control* of events—those are the two essential ingredients that enable human beings to adapt better to the world around them" (Bagish, p. 34). Thus, not all cultural practices and values are valid or of equal value and worth.

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While this position enables us to understand the absolute values of a given society, such as: the greed of Anglo-Americans in the genocidal efforts behind the doctrine and practice of Manifest Destiny which resulted in wiping out well over 75% of all American Indians; the mindset of Hitler and the Third Reich which eventually led to the annihilation of six million Jews; or the white supremacist ideology of South Africans that until recently denied Blacks many basic human rights, *it does not justify these values*. How then does one solve this dilemma and apparent conflict between absolutes and universals? Let me propose an operational principle. Whenever absolute values violate universal values, normally regarded as "human rights," such as the sanctity of life or respect for the dignity and well-being of other humans, then a people from another culture and society have the right and responsibility to object to such dehumanization and to work toward bringing about an end to such practices. Such efforts, however, must not come across with a sense of triumphalism or a we-are-better-than-you attitude. But must be approached with a sense of humility, since no country or culture have a "clean record" when it comes to the practice of human rights, or environmental concerns, for that matter.

Cultural Relativism, Religion, and Sources of Knowledge:

Cultural relativism, however, raises a problem for itself in that, as it is true of any discipline, it tends to view reality exclusively from its own narrow perspective. This is what Abraham Kaplan calls, "the law of the instrument" (Kaplan 1964, p. 28). It is based on the old adage: "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Let me illustrate. When my son was five years old my wife bought him a small Fisher Price wooden hammer and small bench with pegs, which pegs he could hammer down and then turn the bench over and hammer the pegs down again. After a few minutes of playing with this toy, my son got bored with the bench and pegs, but not with the hammer. Soon we began to discover things broken throughout the house—light bulbs, light switches, dishes, cups, yelps from the dog, you name it. My son had become obsessed with the hammer, defining his small world in terms of it. For him, the problems in his "world" were that things needed hammering. Solution? Hammer them! Hence we have the Law of the Instrument—*the instrument determines the problem as well as the solution*. Applied to any field of study, the law of the instrument exposes the fallacy of trying to explain reality exclusively from one disciplinary perspective. Thus as important as the cultural relativist perspective is, it is still only one perspective; it is only one way of looking at phenomena.

The basic premise of anthropology and sociology is that "all experience is culturally mediated. There is no reality known to [humankind] beyond, or in addition to, cultural [or social] reality. All reality as known is culturally [and socially] determined. Once this basic assumption is granted then it follows *a priori* that all modes of perception and all value judgments are also culturally conditioned since culture constitutes a closed, self-intelligible system. This thesis implies that culture is an *absolute reality* in the sense that culture alone is autonomous and independent, and that all modes of human experience and thought are *relative* thereto because they are functions of culture and dependent on it for their form and content" (Bidney 1959, p. 66).

But the social sciences provide only one perspective of looking at reality—the human perspective. The divine perspective, which lies outside of the realm of the social sciences, is lacking; and yet is most essential in order to comprehend human moral conduct. Therefore, "as against the uncritical assumption of cultural relativism that culture is the primary determinant of

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human experience and that all reality as known is cultural reality,” it is important to realize “that culture is *but one* of the conditions of human experience” (Bidney).

There is a “*meta-cultural reality*” which “exists independent of human experience and which is gradually discovered but never fully comprehended in the course of human experience” (Bidney). Thus, the way one experiences reality never truly exhausts the nature of that reality. This does not deny the contribution made by cultural relativism, for the truth of cultural conditioning and the importance of cultural relativism in understanding human experience is now an accepted principle of human interaction in a global, multicultural world society. “The criticism offered here concerns only the *degree* of this cultural determinism and cultural relativism. Culture is not the only or primary factor in human experience; it is but one essential condition of human experience”(Bidney, p. 67).

Let me explain this further drawing from a typology on sources of knowledge which Jonathan H. Turner discusses in his book, *The Structure of Sociological Theory* (1986, p. 3). Turner declares:

The typology asks two basic questions: (1) is the search for knowledge to be evaluative or neutral? and (2) is the knowledge developed to pertain to actual empirical events and processes or is to be about nonempirical realities? In other words, should knowledge tell us what *should be* or *what is?* and should it make reference to the observable world or to other, less observable realms? If knowledge is to tell us what should exist (and by implication, what should not occur) in the empirical world, then it is *ideological* knowledge. If it informs us about what should be but does not pertain to observable events, then the knowledge is *religious* or about forces and beings in another realm of existence., If knowledge is neither empirical nor evaluative, then it is a formal system of *logic*, such as mathematics. And if it is about empirical events and nonevaluative, then it is *science*.

What Turner's statement can best be illustrated with the following graphic, a 4 by 4 table which visually explains the importance of Turner's typology.

		Is knowledge to be empirical?	
		Yes	No
Is knowledge to be evaluative?	Yes	<p><i>IDEOLOGIES:</i></p> <p>Beliefs that state the way the world should be.</p>	<p><i>RELIGIONS:</i></p> <p>Beliefs that state the dictates of super-natural forces.</p>
	No	<p><i>SCIENCE:</i></p> <p>The belief that all knowledge is to reflect the actual operation of the empirical world.</p>	<p><i>LOGICS:</i></p> <p>The various systems of reasoning that employ rules of calculation.</p>

Source: Jonathan H. Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, Fourth Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishign Company, 1986.

What Turner is suggesting with this typology is that:

There are different ways to look at, interpret, and develop knowledge about the world. Science is only one way. It is based upon the presumption that knowledge can be value free, that it can explain the actual workings of the empirical world, and that it can be revised on the basis of careful observations of empirical events.

And yet this view of science is itself faulty, for none of us sees the world objectively. Reality is not so much what is in front of us, but what is in our heads. Even the questions that we raise about our world are filtered through our experiences. However, the point of this topological discussion is to suggest that our knowledge of the world come to us from different sources, science being only one of them.

For the religious, divine revelation is another source. The divine speaks to humankind in sacred writings, such as the Bible, the Torah, the Koran or Bhagavad-Gita, out of which emerge diverse cultural values. Even here, however, these sacred writings, like other realities, are

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understood by human beings through their own cultural experience. Nevertheless, these moral teachings, many of which transcend cultures, must be culturally perceived.

The Christian, for example, when confronting social ethics, must recognize the importance of cultural relativism, as well as the fact that God speaks to humankind within their own specific cultural context. Thus the Word, both living and written, takes on flesh—socioculturally conditioned flesh—in order to meet the needs of humankind.

Thus, cultural relativism, as a new way of seeing, is a necessary optic to perceive the socio-cultural reality in today's multicultural, world society. It is "new" in the sense that most people tend to be socialized within an ethnocentric perspective. To move away from such a view and encompass a culturally relativistic one can be rather traumatic for most people. Yet such a perspective is necessary if a person is to become a "world citizen"—a person who is able to transcend his/her own racial/ethnic, gender, cultural and socio-political reality and identify with humankind throughout the world, at all levels of human need. S/he is a *transcending* person who is not limited by the usual social boundaries, but whose operating life-principle is compassion—the ability to take the role of the other in order to help remove suffering.

This is the goal to attain as a cultural relativist to become a world citizen. The needs of the 21st century demand nothing less. And a multicultural approach to education is the process that will make it possible.

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