

**Mistakes in constructing knowledge, and anthropological authority: Steckley  
Ch. 5**

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- Steckly: White Lies About the Inuit: Chapter 5, Elders on Ice, pp. 103-130
  - about claims of elder abandonment and elder altruistic suicide
- Wonderful imaginary example of “cultural relativism” in an Inuit classroom, using people of Toronto as the example (p. 103)
  - What is wrong with this?
- It is an example of some common errors in constructing knowledge
  - relevant in this class because...
    - we are concerned here with the construction of knowledge of the Other,
    - which plays a big role in interactions of people of different cultures
    - which is a primary feature and outcome of globalization
  - One common error: mistaking cultural constructs for cultural norms
    - **cultural construct**: an idea or category developed and shared by members of a culture
    - **cultural norm**: a practice that is...
      - common: people normally, routinely, often do it
        - this is the *statistical* sense of “norm” as that which is common
      - acceptable: it complies with the rules of the culture; it is not abnormal (deviant)
        - this is the sociological, *prescriptive* sense
      - prescriptive: concerning what you may or may not do; rules
  - Another common error: mistaking a statistical norm for a prescriptive norm
  - We have a cultural construct (or category) of “murder-suicide”, or one of “going postal” or being a “serial killer”
    - other cultures may not
    - we recognize murder-suicide as a kind of behavior that recurs, has a name, and has typical characteristics
    - presumably the existence of the construct makes the it easier for an individual to think of doing it
  - but murder-suicide is not a cultural norm in either sense
    - it is not commonly practiced
    - it is not acceptable
  - so even deviance may be culturally defined, or at least culturally influenced
    - this notion that deviance is culturally defined is a theme of sociology, which often analyzes societies in terms of norms and deviance
    - hence SSU’s department of “sociology and criminal justice”
      - can you imagine a department of “anthropology and criminal justice”?
  - In the case of supposed Inuit elder abandonment or altruistic suicide:
    - Abandoning elders and altruistic suicide were Inuit cultural *constructs*
      - they even had myths about elder abandonment
    - But they were not cultural *norms*

- in the myths, people who abandoned elders died awful deaths
- Steckley’s point:
  - Sure, Inuit know of elder abandonment and altruistic suicide
    - they are Inuit cultural constructs
    - but that does not mean that they approve of them, much less routinely expect them
      - they are not cultural norms
  - So quit claiming that Inuit culture requires these practices!
- Another common error: mistaking rare events that are so striking that they are frequently mentioned for events that are actually frequent
  - In the case of supposed Inuit elder abandonment or altruistic suicide:
    - a few cases have been generalized to imply a cultural norm
      - when they may have been extreme, unusual, difficult personal choices, as they would be in our culture
      - not cultural norms, expected, or common
  - Steckley’s point:
    - Sure, some Inuit have done these things when in dire straits
    - but that does not mean that they are common, much less routine and expected
      - they are not cultural norms
    - So again: quit claiming that Inuit culture requires these practices!
- Another common error: exaggerating “cultural relativism” into “cultural determinism”
  - leaping from “this practice makes sense in their culture” (cultural relativism)
    - to “their culture forces them to do this” (cultural determinism)
  - In the case of supposed Inuit elder abandonment or altruistic suicide:
    - going from “altruistic suicide makes sense given the harshness of the Inuit’s environment”
      - to “altruistic suicide is dictated by their culture”
  - assumes that everyone agreed that it was a good thing to do
    - rather than that some individuals made a tough choice to do it
  - implies that the people cannot think for themselves, but blindly follow cultural rules
    - people usually attribute this sort of helplessness to others,
    - but not to members of their own culture, who obviously think problems out for themselves
  - Steckley’s point:
    - even if it does make sense in some circumstances
    - again: quit claiming the Inuit culture requires it!
- Another common error: using post-contact events as though they represented pre-contact culture
  - exactly what Wolf noted and warned against in *Europe and the People Without History*
    - ignoring history
    - and instead attributing actions to the Other’s essence, rather than to the conditions they now find themselves in

- contact created new, dire circumstances due to disease, whaling, missionizing, changes to subsistence practices due to increasingly hunting animals for sale rather than food, etc.
- THESE led to desperate behaviors
- not the culture of the Inuit in itself
- Steckley's point:
  - even if some Inuit did do these things
  - quit claiming that it was due to Inuit culture!
- Why does Steckley care about these errors and the myths of elder abandonment and altruistic suicide?
  - because they convey negative implications about the Inuit
    - imply that they are bad, although one can devise reasons for their badness
    - “Of course they are heartless and primitive; but don't blame them, their culture makes them do it”
      - the claim superficially seems to excuse their behavior, while really accusing them of it
      - and adding the implication that they can't do anything other than what their culture supposedly demands
        - they are either too stupid to think for themselves
        - or too blindly controlled by tradition to modernize
- Steckley makes an empirical case against elder abandonment and altruistic suicide, and against Inuit expecting or encouraging it
  - based on the conspicuous respect and care they show to elders
    - they apparently genuinely see them as resources of knowledge and judgment
    - not merely burdens
      - that might be our own embarrassed ethnocentrism talking...
    - elder's decisions are final and binding
  - myths of cruel death as the payback to those who do abandon people
    - clearly not a culturally condoned practice
    - but also apparently known, like our murder-suicide
    - desperate people may do it, but it is culturally influenced deviance, not a norm
  - Jenness's report that it is normally never done
    - complete with cases of extreme measures taken to move and care for elderly
    - and of leaving people with food, intending to return later
  - the fact that some of the few documented cases really refer to *temporarily* leaving people in order to get food for them
    - not intending them to die at all
    - feeling remorse if they did
  - the early reports are clearly about euthanasia, not suicide for the good of others
    - people who were very sick
    - either they wished to die
    - or others felt that it was kinder for them to die
  - the practices were actually very rare
    - they were mistakenly thought to be common because

- the few stories of abandonment were frequently repeated
  - NOT because the practice itself was frequent
  - in fact, the number of actual stories was very few
  - stories of euthanasia and temporary leaving were incorrectly counted as abandonment
- the claim was “useful” to illustrate
  - the concept of cultural relativism
    - which was being used by anthropologists to counter racism
  - the relativity of deviance (a theme in sociology)
    - each culture defines its own rules of what you may not do
    - the Inuit supposedly do not have a rule against elder abandonment
    - a dramatic example of relativity of deviance... if it were true
    - relativity of deviance is a theme in sociology
  - the power of “mores” (customs, especially moral rules) to “dictate” actions that would otherwise seem incomprehensible
    - a theoretical theme in sociology
  - the power of environmental causation
    - elder abandonment is supposedly done due to harsh conditions, lack of food... except that it isn't.
    - a theoretical point in anthropology and sociology
- So these “useful” myths were widely repeated
  - and are difficult to eradicate
  - examples of textbooks perpetuating them as illustrations of claims
    - textbooks illustrating cultural relativism, citing other textbooks, never checking the facts (Steckley pp. 116-117)
      - My more recent copy of Gary Ferraro's Cultural Anthropology text (now Ferraro & Andreatta, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, 2010) finally has this claim removed
    - textbooks illustrating environmental causation, citing other textbooks, never checking the facts (Steckley pp. 120-121)
      - My more recent copy of Nanda's Cultural Anthropology textbook (Now Nanda & Warms, 10<sup>th</sup> ed.) finally has this claim removed
- Summary: this lie was created, promoted, and kept around because it served academic purposes
  - it was “useful”
  - it illustrated ideas academics wanted to explain
    - beware the really good example!
- And finally: the effect of anthropological authority
  - Inuit today have a high suicide rate
  - Steckley fears that this is in part due to Inuit learning in school, from the same misguided academics, that suicide for the good of the group was their social norm in the good old days
    - they are being taught an anthropological error
    - about their very own culture
    - by people the the dominant society considers experts

- even more expert than most living members of the culture they are teaching about!
- this may make suicide seem like a traditional solution
  - making it easier to think about and act on
  - making rules against suicide seem less legitimate
- may weaken outside and internal responses to the suicide problem
  - if Inuit and outsiders think that suicide for the good of the group is a cultural norm
  - which it never was
  - rather than a desperate, rare response to the bad results of colonialism and contact (in the past)
  - and a response today to specific, depressing conditions facing young Inuits
- Anthropological authority: anthropologists are usurping the authority of the very people they study
  - the anthropologists, who got only an imperfect understanding of the society
  - are now treated as more authoritative about it than the members of the society themselves!
- So: who gets to say what is true about a society?
  - its own members?
  - or members of a more powerful group who that group has granted the status of “expert”?
  - does this play a role in any of our class cases of cultures in contact?