Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 4

How diverse are we, and how do we deal with it?

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− Books arriving OK?
− Quiz
− Robbins pp. 4-15; reiterates some of the same essential concepts we covered in the previous class. Pardon me if I hammer on them a little more.
− supported by many examples of cultural differences
  − in conceptions of something all humans experience: death
    − Kwakiutl believe a dead person's soul enters a salmon, and is released to reappear in a person when the salmon is eaten
    − Chinese consult ancestors for advice
    − Italians placate the dead with gifts so they won't come back
    − Azande and many other Africans believe that death is usually or always caused by someone, leading to suspicions and revenge
    − Wari' (Brazil) ate the dead of other families to get rid of the body without having to bury it in the dirty ground, and to eliminate the painful memory for the surviving kin
    − and many others…
  − in conceptions of what is and is not edible
    − few or no humans eat everything that is actually edible
    − many things are arbitrarily excluded
    − each culture has a different set of "edible" and "inedible" items
    − dogs
    − guinea pigs
    − raw fish
    − insects
    − specific animal parts, like pancreas and thymus glands ("sweetbreads"), brains, or udder
    − pumpkin pie
− point: the various responses to death, the different limitations on what people eat, and many other concepts are arbitrary social constructs
  − they are not "out there" in the real world
  − instead, they are meanings ("edible", "inedible") laid on the real world by people
  − yet people consider them real, and they strongly affect behavior
    − as in a Dani in New Guinea cutting off a finger joint when someone dies
    − or a poor American spending lots of money on an expensive coffin and memorial for a parent
    − or an American starving to death when there were plenty of easily-squashed cockroaches to eat…
− ethnocentrism (or ethnocentric fallacy): assumption that our own beliefs and behaviors are the natural, normal, true, morally right ones, while different beliefs and behaviors are unnatural, abnormal, wrong, immoral, etc.
Middleton says much the same: the **ethnocentric** view is that: “one’s own way of life is the best, the most natural and right” p. 6

- example: “Those immigrants from (fill in the blank) eat dogs! There should be a law to stop them from such disgusting, immoral behavior!”
- problem: means that every culture considers all others wrong; no one can be right
- problem: means that studying different cultures is just studying others’ mistakes

**relativism** (more commonly: **cultural relativism**): beliefs cannot be judged wrong just because they differ from our own.

- Instead, we must understand them in the context of their own culture.
- Beliefs, behaviors, etc. must be understood **relative to** the culture they are embedded in.
- Middleton again says much the same of **cultural relativism**; “advocates understanding other ways of life in their contexts” p. 6
- cultural relativism does not advocate amorality, but unbiased description
- reporting behavior dispassionately is not the same as endorsing it
- understand in context first, then judge when you really have the whole picture (and understand your own biases)
- helps make interaction based on reality, not assumptions, prejudice, ignorance: cultural relativism is practical

**relativistic fallacy**: a misunderstanding of cultural relativism, taking it to mean that it is impossible to judge morality of another culture

- also called ethical relativism
- a cultural relativist (i.e. any anthropologist) does NOT have to be an ethical relativist
- one can understand something in cultural context and still find it immoral

Examples of dilemmas of relativism:

- Virginity testing in Turkey
  - explanation: semen is considered to be like seeds; may germinate at any time after planting. So virginity before marriage (and tight control after) is the only guarantee of paternity
  - Is this immoral?
  - Do we allow divorce for infidelity? Why?
  - Why would some people say that DNA paternity testing OK, but virginity testing not?
- Wari’ eating their own dead
  - and burning his/her house, possessions, even favored places
  - eliminates the memory, reduces the pain
  - also, the ground is considered unclean
  - so they find burying the dead in the filthy earth to be repugnant
  - claims of cannibalism have justified oppression by Europeans
  - even though they used human blood and parts in “medicine” that was eaten or drunk
  - Point: does understanding make it OK?
- Sati in India (burning widow on deceased husband’s pyre)
  - is objecting imperialist?
  - what if the widow voluntarily does it?
what if the motive is really to ensure that the land and possessions that the husband inherited from his parents do not go to the widow (who is not related to the parents), but instead go to his brothers, who have more claim to their parents' wealth?

− Elzbieta Zechenter: tolerance IS ethnocentric!
− letting our cultural rule about relativism outweigh their outrage and/or broadly accepted morality is as arbitrary and ethnocentric as using our cultural rules about morality
− problem: where do you draw the line?
  − if you can insist that sati or torture is wrong and must be stopped,
  − why can't you insist that the Islamic law allowing a man to have four wives is wrong and must be stopped?
  − who gets to decide what matters are OK to interfere with?
  − using what culture’s criteria?

− Emic vs. etic perspective/approach/point of view

  − Phonetics: methods for identifying and describing sounds of any language
  − Any given language uses only a small subset of all the possible vocal sounds a human can make
  − a native speaker is typically familiar only with the sounds of his or her own language
  − Spanish speakers have trouble even hearing the difference between "v" and "b" in English
  − English speakers have trouble hearing the differences between tones in Chinese
  − only a linguist trained in phonetics has the wider view that allows him or her to perceive and describe all possible human speech sounds
  − the linguist's technical description of the sounds of a language could be precise and accurate, but would be incomprehensible to an ordinary native speaker

  − Phonemics: analysis of the relationships or organizational rules of the sounds used by a given language.
  − Starts by identifying the minimal combinations of sounds used in the language: its phonemes, then goes on to look at rules for their order, combination, etc.
  − while a native speaker would not normally think about phonemics, he or she could easily understand it, since it is based on sounds the native speaker knows, and can easily distinguish and categorize

  − Emic (as in phonemic): Insider's viewpoint - an explanation in terms understandable to members of culture; their own explanation or understanding
  − Etic (as in phonetic): Outsider's viewpoint - an explanation in terms of the observer or scientist, maybe incongruous or even wrong to members of the culture

− Anthropologists use “emic” and “etic” to describe ways of analyzing cultures, although the analogy is not perfect.
− insider vs. outsider viewpoint
  − emic (inside; emic): how members of the culture would explain what they do.
    − Uses terms and concepts meaningful to insiders.
    − example: "Christians pray in order to get help from God"
    − point: to understand their point of view
  − etic (outside; etic): how an outside observer might explain what they do.
Uses outsiders’ terms and concepts that insiders might not understand or might disagree with
  - example: "Christians pray because it gives them psychological benefits: verbalizing problems releases tensions, and requesting help gives them a sense of control in their lives"
  - point: to explain in scientific, cross-cultural terms (trying to avoid bias of our own culture!)

- neither emic nor etic explanations are more correct
  - they are just different points of view
- Anthropologists use both emic and etic perspectives
  - they shed light on different issues

- Middleton pp. 1-7, Introduction
  - Diversity (differences) is an issue that is unavoidable, must deal with it
    - even in a single, seemingly homogeneous group, there may be cultural differences, as in those between men and women in our society (Deborah Tannen)
  - like Robbins and Kluckhohn: anthropologists find that we must not only look at others, but also look at ourselves in a new light
  - recognize that our way is just one of many, not inherently best

- Multiculturalism vs. diversity
  - Multiculturalism: “a social and political movement advocating the good of having different cultures in the same society” p. 3
  - Diversity: "biological and cultural variations and their significance" p. 3

- Goals of Middleton’s book (and to some extent, this class):
  - to think more clearly about differences and similarities between groups
  - to appreciate risks and rewards of engaging others
  - to understand the need to do so

- Argument of Middleton's book, and of anthropology in general
  - people all have same capacities (biology)
  - actualized differently by different cultures
  - it is difficult to escape the assumptions of one’s own culture, but possible

- We want to learn how the many profound differences between cultures were formed in the first place, and what maintains them over time

- Cultural diversity applies not only to different ethnicities or countries, but also genders, disabilities, etc.
  - understanding cultural differences and how to deal with them is practical and necessary even within schools, businesses, governments, etc.

- Anthro’s strategy involves
  - direct contact:
    - participant observation
    - requires good rapport with people
    - in turn, requires respect for them, no matter how foreign their ways may seem at first
  - informant: (not informER!): a person who helps an anthropologist understand a culture; usually a contact or friend who explains things to an anthropologist
– sometimes called a collaborator, teacher, etc.
– the only way to have good informants is to develop good rapport and show respect
– not only a moral imperative, but also a practical one
– extended contact: long enough time to really get it, in the language
  – ideally at least a bit more than one year, to get a sample of the entire range of seasonal
    activities
– comparative approach: compare to us and other cases, looking for regularities that might
  explain or highlight differences and similarities
– example of informant Malik, who becomes uncomfortable as anthropologist Rabinow asks
  about various people's total wealth
  – he is not used to thinking that way, and doesn’t like what he is discovering
  – his culture emphasizes general success, does not categorize people by class or wealth,
    covering up individual differences so much that he has never considered them carefully
  – point: noticing what makes people uncomfortable to talk about is often a big clue to
    deeply buried assumptions, ways of thinking, values
  – in this case, by noticing what made Malik uncomfortable, Rabinow learned something
    about how they think about their standing in life (or about categories we find natural but
    they do not normally think of)
  – noticing what makes yourself uncomfortable is similarly a clue about your own culture
    – if some subject is really irritating or touchy, that suggests that there is some assumption
      or value that conflicts with some other one or with outside evidence
    – a hint of something that you have not considered or resolved about your own culture
– The anthropological approach thus helps us to take a fresh look at both other cultures and
  our own
  – trying to describe not only what is supposed to be (ideal culture), but also what actually is
    (real culture)
  – so anthropologists frequently uncover and focus on contradictions between ideal and real
    culture
    – underlying beliefs or assumptions that may help us understand a culture are particularly
      obvious when they contradict reality or some other belief
    – the contradiction makes them easier to see and define
    – and also highlights the arbitrariness of the belief
  – example: many middle-class Americans believe that despite some inequities, by and large,
    people have an equal opportunity to succeed in life here
    – yet many studies find that a fairly limited number of families provide a disproportionate
      number of the politicians that run the country
    – that people born into some ethnic or "racial" groups have much lower incomes, poorer
      health, etc. than people born into others
    – that the surest predictor of a person's income as an adult is the income of their parents
    – that the children of the rich get richer, and those of the poor get poorer (see the US
      census report on incomes in 2004 and 2005, reported in the New York Times on August
      30, 2006 and elsewhere)
    – this aspect of "ideal culture" is contradicted by "real culture"
    – these contradictions highlight how factually incorrect the "equal opportunity" belief is
leads us to think about why it persists in the face of evidence
leads us to think about the role this belief plays in our culture
how does it relate to other beliefs? why does it seem so important not to question it?
contradictions like these often make people uncomfortable
they call into question the reality of comfortable cultural assumptions
by focusing on these contradictions, anthropologists often seem to be pointing out hypocrisy
they seem to be calling for outrage
of course, sometimes they really are…
this makes anthropologists seem like cynics, because they keep pointing out contradictions between the ideal and the real
except that all cultures have these contradictions, not only ours
the point is not to be cynical, but to become aware of what aspects of our perceived reality are actually arbitrary cultural constructs
which presumably could be changed
and which can only be understood and changed effectively by
understanding these beliefs as the cultural constructs they are
and understanding how they fit into the rest of the culture in the specific ways that they do
what the function or effect of a given belief is
what other aspects of the culture support these beliefs or depend on them
what other changes would have to ripple through the culture if a given belief changed

what does this mean?
makes the strange familiar: makes other cultures understandable
makes the familiar strange: makes us stop taking our own culture for granted, and look into our beliefs and behaviors more carefully