

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 5
How diverse are we, and how do we deal with it?

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- 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 various examples of cultural differences
 - for example, people of different cultures differ greatly in their understanding 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 cold, dirty ground, and to eliminate the painful memory for the surviving kin
 - and many others...
 - cultures differ in conceptions of what is and is not edible, as we have discussed before
- 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 an 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...
- Recap of some terms from earlier classes, but just in case:
- **ethnocentrism** (or the **ethnocentric fallacy**): assumption that our own beliefs and behaviors are natural, normal, true, best, most sensible, morally right
 - while cultures or practices that differ from it are inferior, abnormal, unnatural, irrational, the result of ignorance or superstition
 - example: "Those immigrants from (fill in the blank) eat dogs! There should be a law to stop them from such disgusting, immoral behavior!"
 - intellectual problems with ethnocentrism
 - means that every culture considers all others wrong; no one can be right
 - means that studying different cultures is just studying others' mistakes
- **cultural relativism**
 - view that cultures and practices are best understood in their own context, in their own terms, from the point of view of the people of that culture and the circumstances they are in
 - Beliefs, behaviors, etc. must be understood *relative to* the culture they are embedded in

- **ethical relativism** (sometimes called the **relativistic fallacy**)
 - ethics and morality are completely culturally determined, so there is no basis for judging the morality of a practice other than in the terms of the culture that practices it
 - if a society practices slavery, or murder as a means of conflict resolution, and they think it is moral, it is moral
 - this is obviously an extreme position
 - and it is not required by cultural relativism
 - which simply says that we should not allow our culture's values to prevent us from getting the complete picture of what is going on
 - we must fully understand in local context before judging
- Examples of ethical 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?
- distinguishing naïve realism vs. ethnocentrism
 - naïve realism is similar to ethnocentrism, but not identical

- ethnocentrism emphasizes a judgmental attitude
- naïve realism emphasizes unrecognized assumptions
- **Emic** vs. **etic** perspective/approach/point of view
 - The terms come from linguistics; don't worry about their origin now
 - Anthropologists use “emic” and “etic” to describe ways of explaining features of cultures
 - insider (member of the culture) vs. outsider viewpoint
 - **emic** (insider or Member; eMic): how members of the culture would explain what they do
 - Uses terms and concepts meaningful to insiders
 - "Christians pray in order to get help from God"
 - An emic approach is used to understand their point of view
 - **etic** (ouTsider; eTic): how an outside observer might explain what they do
 - Uses outsiders' terms and concepts that insiders might not understand or might disagree with
 - "Christians pray because it gives them psychological benefits: verbalizing problems releases tensions, and requesting help gives them a sense of control in their lives"
 - An etic approach is used to explain an aspect of culture in scientific, cross-cultural terms
 - trying to avoid bias of our own culture, of course...
 - Anthropologists use both perspectives
 - Neither is more right or wrong
 - Both can be valid and correct, even when they are very different
 - They simply address different aspects of understanding what is going on
- Middleton pp. 1-3, 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
 - 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.