

Understanding and judging others

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- This class session covers a few new concepts, but much of the reading is review
 - Robbins pp. 1-15 reiterates some of the essential concepts we have already covered
 - the ideas are important, and Robbins gives them to you in a different voice, which I hope may be clearer or more convincing
 - but I will only comment on a few parts of this reading
- Robbins reviews (and so should you):
 - **ethnocentrism** (or the **ethnocentric fallacy**)
 - **cultural relativism**
 - **ethical relativism** (sometimes called the **relativistic fallacy**)
- Robbins also brings up the ethical dilemmas involved in being a cultural relativist
 - Should we judge the beliefs or practices of other cultures?
 - Should we try to change practices we feel are wrong?
 - Examples of ethical dilemmas of relativism:
 - Virginity testing in Turkey
 - also done by doctors and nurses by examination
 - still an issue; “compulsory” virginity testing was banned by decree only in 2002, and it is still done with women’s “consent”
 - 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?
 - Is it immoral if it is done by trained doctors and nurses who surely understand reproduction in the way we do?
 - 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
 - (no longer practiced)
 - 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)
 - now illegal, very rare, effectively eliminated, but still occurs: one case in 1987, one in 2002, two in 2006, one in 2008; other attempts stopped by police
 - is objecting imperialist?
 - what if the widow does it voluntarily, convinced that it is her honorable duty?

- 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 of moral wrongs is itself ethnocentric!
 - valuing relativism over morality is a cultural construct in itself
 - refusing to judge, letting our cultural rule about relativism outweigh our outrage or morality is just as arbitrary and ethnocentric as using our cultural rules about morality would be
 - it is impossible to think outside of any culture...
 - so we might as well apply some morality
 - rather than being paralyzed and condoning injustice
 - 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
 - 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
 - a good understanding often requires both