

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 6

**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. 2-15 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 some of you might find 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**)
    - Again: ethnocentrism is the attitude or assumption that practices that differ from those of one's own culture are misguided, ignorant, backwards, wrong, etc., without attempting to understand them
    - example: American tourists' responses to vertical furrows in the Andean highlands
  - **cultural relativism**
    - the working assumption that people's beliefs and actions make sense to them in their cultural context
    - that we get the best understanding of people, practices, and beliefs by understanding them relative to their culture
      - not relative to our own culture, as if that were some absolute standard
  - **ethical relativism** (sometimes called the **relativistic fallacy**)
    - the idea that morality (right and wrong) are defined relative to each culture
    - that we cannot judge things to be right or wrong outside of their cultural context
    - as we saw before, this is an extreme position
      - one can be a cultural relativist without being an ethical relativist
      - you can strive to understand the practices of another culture without necessarily approving of them
- Robbins also brings up some 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 since the 1960s)
  - also burn the deceased person's 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
  - Point: does understanding make it OK?
  - European claims that indigenous people practiced cannibalism have justified oppression by the Europeans
    - even though Europeans used human blood and parts in "medicine" that was eaten or drunk
  - Point: the fact that Europeans recognized other cultures' actions as cannibalism, but not their own, should make us worry that other moral judgments of other cultures might be similarly hypocritical and self-serving
- Sati in India (burning the widow on her 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 materialistic?
    - 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 should have more claim to their parents' wealth than the widow does?
- 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...
    - (thinking requires categorizing and naming things, and applying ideas about how things relate to each other, which are mostly learned culture)
    - since we cannot avoid thinking in some culture's terms, 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**; e**Mic**): 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** (ou**T**sider; e**Tic**): how an outside observer might explain what they do
    - Uses outsiders' terms and concepts
      - often “scientific” concepts that insiders might not recognize
      - or might even 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...
      - although that may never be fully possible
- anyone can express either viewpoint
  - an outsider who understands the culture can explain an emic (insider's) point of view
  - the point is not who actually says it, but rather..
  - what matters is whose cultural framework it employs
  - that is, whether the terms and ideas expressed are
    - those used within the culture (emic)
    - or those used by scientists or other outside observers (etic)
- Anthropologists use both perspectives
- Neither is more right or wrong
  - Both can be valid and correct, even when they are very different
    - an emic explanation tells you what is going on consciously in the members' minds – what they are thinking
    - an etic explanation tells you what a scientist or other outside observer thinks is happening at some cross-cultural or unconscious level
  - They simply address different aspects of understanding what is going on
  - a good understanding often requires both
- *Guests of the Sheik*
  - The chapters you read for last time and today (especially chapter 6, for last time, and 7, for today) are full of illustrations of understanding (or not understanding) others, and especially of judging others
  - good illustrations of culture shock, ethnocentrism, naïve realism
  - I won't point all of these out – I will leave it as an exercise you
    - for some of you in your concept papers
    - and for the rest of you as something to practice on
- This has been plenty of grounding about culture and the anthropological approach.

- next time we will start getting more specific, looking at how anthropologists actually do research
- the readings for next time might strike you as a bit more complicated, so allow plenty of time for them.
- the one by Malinowski is a bit dated in its language (1922), but is the beginning of a classic ethnography