

Cultural relativism in anthropology is a key methodological concept which is universally accepted within the discipline. This concept is based on theoretical considerations which are key to the understanding of "scientific" anthropology as they are key to the understanding of the anthropological frame of mind. Cultural relativism is an anthropological approach which posit that all cultures are of equal value and need to be studied from a neutral point of view. The study of a and/or any culture has to be done with a cold and neutral eye so that a particular culture can be understood at its own merits and not another culture's. Historically, cultural relativism has had a twin theoretical approach, historical particularism. This is the notion that the proper way to study culture is to study one culture in depth. The implications of cultural relativism and historical particularism have been significant to anthropology and to the social sciences in general.

The roots of cultural relativism go to the rejection of the comparative school of the nineteenth century on the basis of exact and specific ethnological information. This information rejected the comparative school's methodology and as a result its evolutionary conclusions. Furthermore, as the basis of cultural relativism is a scientific view of culture, it also rejects value judgments on cultures. There is, in this view, no single scale of values which holds true for all cultures and by which all culture can be judged. Beliefs, aesthetics, morals and other cultural items can only be judged through their relevance to a given culture. For example, good and bad in are culture specific and can not be imposed in cultural analysis. The reason for this view is, of course, that what is good in one culture may not be bad in an other. This indicates that every culture determines its own ethical judgments to regulate the proper behavior of its members. A result of this view is that it assumes that most individuals would prefer to live in the culture in which they have been enculturated. It must be added to the discussion above that the cultural in cultural relativism and historical particularism is about specific cultures and not about a more abstract, singular and general concept of culture.

The reasoning behind all this comes from two distinct sources, one of them is the reaction to the inaccuracies of the evolutionary schemes of the comparative school, the other the desire to study culture from an objective value perspective. To be a scientific concept culture has to be studied as an object without evaluative consideration. When we are not able to do that we no longer have a science of culture. Some anthropologist associated with this point of view are France Boas and, his students, Alfred Kroeber, Robert Lowie, Melville Herskovits, Ruth Benedict, Paul Radin, Margaret Mead, Ruth Bunzel and many others. Franz Boas is the key theoretician in this group.

Boas published his views on the comparative method in 1896. The article, "The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology," was the first exposition of cultural relativism. According to the tenets of cultural relativism, there are no inferior or superior cultures; all cultures are equal. To order cultures in an evolutionary scheme is unfeasible. All premises of good and bad and/or upper and lower are culture bound and ethnocentric. Put that way, we can see that schemes of evolution are ethnocentric not objective.

Here are four major limitations to the comparative method according to Boas: 1. It is impossible to account for similarity in all the types of culture by claiming that they are so because of the unity of the human mind. 2. The existence like traits in different cultures is not as important as the comparative school claims. 3. Similar traits may have developed for very different purposed in differing cultures. 4. The view that cultural differences are of minor importance is baseless. The differences between cultures are of major anthropological significance. Boas did not stop his critique of the comparative school at that point he also delineated a methodology to replace it. His new method emphasized the following: 1. Culture traits have to be studied in detail and within the cultural whole. 2. The distribution of a culture trait within neighboring cultures should also be looked at. This suggest that a culture needs to be analyzed within its full context.

Boas thought that this approach would help the anthropologist (1) to understand the environmental factors that shape a culture, (2) to explain the psychological factors that frame the culture, and (3) to explain the history of a local custom. Boas was trying to establish the inductive method in anthropology and abandon the comparative method. Boas emphasized that the primary goal of anthropology was to study individual

societies and that generalizations could come only on the basis of accumulated data. His importance within the discipline is that anthropology should be objective and inductive science. In an age when the scientific method was important, this change in the discipline resulted in the establishment of anthropology in universities. Boas' students were among the first to establish some of the most important anthropology programs on American campuses.

A point which must be added to the above discussion is that Boas attacked racism throughout his career; he summarizes his views on racism in The Mind of Primitive Man (1911). According to Boas the sweep of cultures, to be found in association with any sub species, is so extensive that there can be no relationship between race and culture.

Following Boas and his emphasis on studying as many societies as possible, Alfred Kroeber, the best known anthropologists of the period produced a good deal of ethnography. In his "Eighteen Professions" (1915), which is a credo, Kroeber affirms some of the basic tenets of cultural relativism: (1) all men are completely civilized, and (2) there are no higher and lower cultures. Much later in his career, Kroeber makes three additional points on cultural relativism, 1)that science should begin with questions and not with answers, 2)that science is a "dispassionate" endeavor which should not accept any ideology, and 3)that sweeping generalizations are not compatible with science. Another major cultural relativist of the period is Robert Lowie whose work is most significant among for cultural relativism.

Lowie probably came closer to Boas' views on the proper practice of anthropology than any other anthropologist of his time. He was deeply rooted in the philosophy of science and accepted cultural anthropology as a science. His views and criticism of theoreticians such as Morgan, are based on this scientific world view. His critique of Morgan's evolutionary theory is based on epistemology. Namely, that Morgan's evolutionary scheme of kinship had no proof. Furthermore, Morgan's data was often erroneous. One of the most important practitioners of cultural relativism was Ruth Benedict.

For Benedict cultural anthropology is the discipline that studies the differences between cultures. This approach is fully Boasian in character. In this approach the plural "s" that was added to "culture" by Boas and others, becomes crucial. The interest has now shifted from culture to cultures. The focus has shifted to a particular culture and what happens to the individual in that culture. Furthermore, a culture is integrated, and it is more than the sum of its parts. Every culture is different from other culture. Benedict takes the Boasian program a step ahead. She does this through the concept of cultural configurations or patterns. Although her use of this approached is extremely reductionistic it represents a new direction in cultural relativism by transcending the data collection of historical particularism and attempting to organize the data in an explanatory manner.

The attempt to understand cultures at their own terms and the attempt to an objective ethnography are the major accomplishments of cultural relativism. These have sometimes led to a lack of theoretical depth and an undervaluation of the ethnographer's own culture. However, the battle against ethnocentrism and the objective view of cultures remain permanent contributions of cultural relativism.

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