

Cultural Relativism

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Cultural Relativism

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Anthropology, Sociology, Ethics, Psychology, Philosophy

1. Core Definition

Cultural relativism is a foundational principle asserting that an individual's beliefs, values, and activities must be understood and evaluated strictly within the context of their own culture, rather than by the standards of another. This perspective posits that there is no universal standard by which to judge cultures, and thus, all cultural practices, beliefs, and moral systems hold intrinsic validity within their specific frameworks. It fundamentally challenges the notion of a single, objective truth or a universally applicable moral code, instead emphasizing the profound influence of cultural conditioning on human perception and behavior. The essence of cultural relativism lies in promoting an empathetic and non-judgmental approach to cultural differences, encouraging individuals to step outside their own cultural biases to genuinely comprehend and appreciate diverse ways of life.

This concept serves as a crucial methodological tool in anthropology, guiding researchers to adopt an insider's perspective, known as an **emic perspective**, when studying other societies. By doing so, it aims to counteract **ethnocentrism**, which is the tendency to view one's own culture as superior and to judge other cultures by one's own cultural norms. For instance, differing views on life, death, and the supernatural between various Indigenous cultures and Western Anglo-American societies are not to be categorized as right or wrong, but simply as distinct cultural understandings deserving of respect and consideration. Cultural relativism demands a suspension of judgment, allowing for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the intricate web of meanings and functions that underpin any given cultural practice.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The roots of cultural relativism can be traced to the burgeoning field of anthropology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emerging largely as a critical response to the prevailing evolutionary theories that ranked cultures hierarchically, often with European societies at the apex. Pioneering anthropologists like **Franz Boas** are credited with articulating and championing this principle. Boas and his students, including Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, argued vehemently against the idea of universal stages of cultural development, asserting instead that each culture has its own unique historical trajectory and internal logic that must be understood on its own terms. Their extensive fieldwork demonstrated the sheer diversity of human social organization, belief systems, and moral codes, underscoring the arbitrary nature of ethnocentric judgments.

Boas's work at Columbia University, particularly his emphasis on intensive fieldwork and the

collection of detailed ethnographic data, laid the methodological groundwork for the widespread adoption of cultural relativism within the social sciences. This shift marked a profound departure from earlier armchair anthropology, which often relied on secondhand accounts and speculative theories. By meticulously documenting specific cultural practices, such as the elaborate potlatch ceremonies of the Kwakiutl or unique kinship systems, Boas and his followers illustrated how seemingly irrational behaviors made perfect sense within their cultural context. This intellectual movement gained significant traction throughout the 20th century, profoundly influencing not only anthropology but also sociology, psychology, and international relations by fostering a greater appreciation for cultural diversity and challenging inherent biases ([Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)).

3. Key Characteristics

A primary characteristic of cultural relativism is its insistence on a **non-judgmental approach** to understanding cultural practices. This means refraining from imposing external moral or practical standards on another culture's behaviors or beliefs. Instead, the focus is placed entirely on comprehending the internal rationale and meaning of these practices from the perspective of the people who engage in them. For example, the belief in shape-shifters within Navajo culture, where seeing such a being is thought to bring a curse requiring special ceremonies for removal, is not to be dismissed as mere superstition by an outsider. From a cultural relativist standpoint, the fear of being cursed and the efficacy of the ceremonies are profoundly real and significant within the Navajo worldview, regardless of whether Anglo-American culture shares that specific belief. This approach fosters a deeper understanding of the experiential reality of individuals within their cultural matrix.

Furthermore, cultural relativism critically distinguishes between its methodological form and its more extreme ethical or moral applications. As a **methodological principle**, it is an indispensable tool for empirical research, guiding anthropologists to gather objective data by suspending their own cultural biases. This allows for an accurate description and analysis of cultural phenomena. However, when extended to **moral relativism**, it suggests that all moral codes are equally valid and that no universal ethical standard exists to judge actions across cultures. This stronger claim becomes a subject of intense debate, particularly when contemplating universal human rights or practices deemed harmful by global consensus. Nevertheless, its core tenet remains the paramount importance of **contextual understanding**: recognizing that the meaning and function of any cultural element are intrinsically tied to its specific cultural environment, making universal comparisons without context inherently flawed.

An important application where cultural relativism is explicitly taken into account is in the study and diagnosis of **culture-bound syndromes**. These are clusters of symptoms, illnesses, or patterns of behavior that are recognized as a disease or disorder only within a specific culture or group.

Without a culturally relativistic lens, these conditions might be misunderstood, misdiagnosed, or dismissed as entirely lacking validity. For instance, conditions like "koro" (a fear that one's genitals are retracting into the body, found in various Asian cultures) or "susto" (a folk illness attributed to a frightening event that causes soul loss, prevalent in some Latin American cultures) are legitimate health concerns within their respective cultural contexts. The recognition of these culturally specific conditions highlights the necessity of cultural relativism in medical and psychological fields, where understanding the patient's cultural framework is crucial for effective treatment. Notably, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, published by the American Psychiatric Association, includes a section on cultural formulation and descriptions of some culture-related diagnostic issues, reflecting the growing acknowledgment of cultural context in mental health diagnosis and treatment (American Psychiatric Association).

4. Significance and Impact

The significance of cultural relativism is multifaceted, extending its influence across academic disciplines and into broader societal discourse. At its core, it has profoundly shaped the social sciences, particularly anthropology, by establishing a framework for empirical research that prioritizes understanding over judgment. This methodological stance has been instrumental in dismantling ethnocentric biases and promoting a more inclusive view of humanity, emphasizing the inherent dignity and validity of diverse ways of life. By compelling researchers and individuals alike to appreciate the internal logic of different cultures, it fosters greater tolerance, empathy, and mutual respect among peoples. It also serves as a powerful intellectual tool for critically examining one's own cultural assumptions and recognizing that one's "normal" is just one of many possible "normals."

Beyond academia, cultural relativism has had a substantial impact on international relations, human rights discussions, and efforts to promote global understanding. It complicates universalist claims, prompting debates about the applicability of universal human rights standards across vastly different cultural contexts. While not advocating for the acceptance of all practices, it necessitates a deep engagement with local cultural values before proposing interventions or making judgments on a global scale. This approach has encouraged a more nuanced diplomacy and humanitarian aid that considers indigenous perspectives and practices, aiming for culturally sensitive solutions rather than imposing external models. The recognition of cultural differences, fostered by cultural relativism, underscores the complexity of global challenges and the importance of localized approaches.

5. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its profound contributions to understanding human diversity, cultural relativism has been subjected to significant debates and criticisms, particularly concerning its ethical implications. One

of the most prominent criticisms revolves around the potential for **moral relativism**, which suggests that if all cultures are equally valid, then there can be no objective basis for condemning practices widely considered harmful, such as genocide, slavery, or female genital mutilation. Critics argue that a strict adherence to cultural relativism could paralyze moral judgment, making it impossible to advocate for universal human rights or to critique oppressive cultural practices, thereby leading to ethical inaction. This line of argument contends that some universal moral truths or minimal standards for human well-being must exist, transcending cultural boundaries.

Another major point of contention centers on the limits of tolerance. Where does the imperative to understand and respect cultural practices end, and the necessity to intervene on ethical grounds begin? This is particularly salient when cultural practices are perceived to cause severe harm to individuals or violate internationally recognized human rights. Critics also point out that cultures are not monolithic entities; they are dynamic, often contested, and contain internal dissent. A rigid application of cultural relativism might overlook internal critiques, power differentials, and the voices of marginalized groups within a culture who may seek change. Furthermore, the very act of studying another culture, even with the most careful methodological relativism, can never be entirely free of the observer's own cultural lens, leading to questions about the true possibility of objective understanding without any form of judgment.

Further Reading

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Cultural Relativism](#)

[American Anthropological Association: Statement on Human Rights](#)

[American Psychiatric Association: What is DSM-5?](#)

[Britannica: Cultural Relativism](#)