

Cultural relativism versus ethnocentrism philosophy essay



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One of the processes of anthropology is studying cultural relativism of society versus ethnocentrism. “ Cultural relativism asserts that cultural values are arbitrary and therefore the value of one culture should not be used as standards to evaluate the behavior of persons from outside that culture”.(Coogan) “ Ethnocentrism is the use of values, ideals, and mores from one’s own culture to judge the behavior of someone from another culture. They are two very different ways of thinking”. (Bohannon)

“ Cultural relativism asserts that cultural values are illogical and therefore the value of one culture should not be used as standards to evaluate the behavior of persons from outside that culture.”(Coogan) Cultural and ethical codes are superior to countries, cultures and religions, in a way that challenges the ideas of universal, unalienable individual human rights. Different societies have different moral codes and we do not have an objective standard that we could use to judge or rate which society is better or worse than another.

Cultural relativism resulted in rejection of the comparative school of the nineteenth century due to exact and specific ethnological information. This specific information ended with the rejection of the comparative school’s methodology as well as its evolutionary conclusions. Judgments on cultures are also rejected by cultural realism because of the fact that it is a scientific view of culture. “ The key to cultural relativism is that right and wrong can only be judged relative to a specific society.”([http://rosado. net](http://rosado.net)) Note, that when it comes to the point of judging culture there is no specific standard of right and wrong. With that said, every culture uses the behavior of its members in order to evaluate appropriate ethical judgments within it. While <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-relativism-versus-ethnocentrism-philosophy-essay/>

cultural relativism is distinguished by postmodernists and poststructuralists, it is viewed negatively by moral conservatives, who see cultural relativism as the failure of moral obligation; the transformation of scientific venture into a random series of unrealistic, subjective decisions and choices. “ Levi-Strauss talked about how culture is a system of symbolic communication.”(Leinaweaver)

Norms are the shared rules or guidelines that govern our actions in society. Although there might be many different established norms, the strongest of these are called taboos which can carry extreme punishments for anyone who violates rules that exclude specific behaviors. For those behaviors that fall into accordance to these norms, are giving sanctions or awards; however, those whose behaviors fall outside are ordained for punishment. Positions within a social structure are more often than not assisted on basing the definition of certain norms. Norms typically are expressions of societies held and shared values, these norms are specifically important for defining boundaries.

There are three types of norms that I will be talking about. The first one is folkway, which are norms that common people follow in everyday life, but not strictly enforced. These are learned customs that are passed down from generation to generation. If you happen to violate these folkways you may result in receiving mild punishments. Talking to strangers in the supermarket or waving at them is one example of a folkway to those resided in rural east Tennessee. With these folkways, Tennesseans believe that those who do not talk back are rude or different. Even if folkways are violated they do not

result in strict sanctions. A couple of examples of folkways are no shirt, no shoes, and no service.

The second norm is mores, mores are a more serious type of norm and when broken they have a harsher enforcement. Mores come from more of a traditional practice of society rather than a written law. Constant exposure to social mores is thought by some to lead to development of an individual moral core, which is pre-rational and consists of a set of inhibitions that cannot be easily characterized except as impending inhibitions against taking opportunities that the family or society does not consider desirable. They cannot be easily separated from individual opinions or fears of getting caught. A more deals with knowing right from wrong. Some examples of mores are flag burning and murder.

The last norm that I am going to talk about is taboo. Taboo is an unimaginable feat, and even the simple thought of violating it triggers social punishment. These types of norms are absolutely forbidden. “ Society holds these norms so strongly that violating it results in extreme disgust, and usually are found is unfit to live in society.”(Leinaweaver) They are also considered super mores. A taboo is hard for people to forget because they are of such seriousness. Some examples of taboo are cannibalism and incest, though in some countries these two things are not considered a taboo.

When it comes to the limits of cultural relativism every country in the world have different attitudes about certain things. What some in the United States might think is wrong; those in other countries do not see the wrong in it. “

The treatment and place of women in areas of fundamental Islam. Where women have a no vote, required to wear head to foot robes and so on.”(Coogan) These types of practices are considered normal therefore people are not offended. Even though in the United States women are allowed to vote and not told what they can wear or not wear, in other countries this is a normal thing.

Another example of limits of cultural relativism is female circumcision. Female circumcision is when there is cutting away parts of the external female genitalia. There are three types of female circumcision. The mildest form is clitoridectomy, where either all or part of the clitoris is removed. The second mildest form is excision, this is when the clitoris is removed and the labia minora are cut. The last form of female circumcision is the most extreme, it is infibulations, both the clitoris and labia minora are removed and the labia majora is stitched together. After the infibulation is done, there is a small opening that both urine and menstrual fluids can pass through. Not only do women go through this in some countries but after the infibulations is done their legs are binded together until after the stitches come out, which is usually on a woman’s wedding night. Even though in the United States we think of this as an atrocious, there are places that do practice this. Places like Somalia and Djibouti out of Africa, and some religion of Islam. Some people will argue that female circumcision is no different than breast augmentation or tattooing. But I think because tattooing and breast augmentation is a choice, then this makes a big difference.

Another limit of cultural relativism is cannibalism. Cannibalism is where a person eats humans either for a sacrifice or for good. Like in the movie “
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Alive” those people ate the bodies of those that had died while being stranded in the Andes Mountains. They did not eat the bodies because they were inhuman but in order to survive. Once again just like female circumcision just because one culture thinks this is wrong does not mean that another culture does.

“ Because the limits are whatever a culture accepts, people should not judge the behavior of others using the standards of their own culture, and that even culture must be analyzed on its own terms.”(Turner, Terence and Nagengast, Carole) Who are we to say what is right or wrong when it comes to a different cultural. And this is due to that we have no universal rights or wrongs. “ Cultural rights are vested in groups and include a group’s ability to preserve its cultural tradition.”([http://rosado. net](http://rosado.net)) The limits of cultural relativism vary depending on the individual. What is acceptable to me may not be tolerable by another individual or an entire culture. My own personal limit of cultural relativism is the point when it directly threatens me. This is the universal standard for all individual and cultures. We can respect other cultures but fully understand them is impossible because we already have a distorted view, stemmed from our own beliefs. “ Cultural rights do not justify torture, murder, genocide, discrimination on grounds of sex, race, language or religion, or violation of any of the other universal human rights and fundamental freedoms established in international law.”(Turner, Terence and Nagengast, Carole)

“ Ethnocentrism is the use of values, ideals, and mores from one’s own culture to judge the behavior of someone from another culture.”(Coogan)

Ethnocentrism is cultural universal and it does contribute to social solidarity.
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It basically refers to judging other groups from our own cultural point of view. People are naturally centered on themselves and their experiences because it is all they know and all they can truly understand. “ Every one of us is ethnocentric, and there is no way not to be. It cannot be avoided, nor can it be willed away by a positive or well-meaning attitude.”(Bohannon) The most common example of ethnocentrism is the idea of racism, a system of prejudice based on race; one race is typically in power over another race.

When it comes to ethnocentrism there are three levels: a positive one, a negative one, and extreme negative one. “ The positive definition defines ethnocentrism as “ the point of view that one’s own way of life is to be preferred to all others”. (<http://rosado.net>) “ The negative features or imperfections of a culture are to be put down to the limitations of the human intelligence that may give rise to false or defective theories and beliefs.”(Coogan) It reaches extreme negative form when “ a more powerful group not only imposes its rule on another, but actively depreciates the things they hold to be of value”. (<http://rosado.net>). Patriotism is one example of ethnocentrism that is known to be viewed very highly.

Occasionally extreme nationalism can possibly lead to wars, and having pride in your country is always good for society. Ethnocentrism can be Extreme ethnocentrism can breed racism, hate crimes, and even wars. “ Ethnocentrism can lead to social assimilation and strong personal, patriotic, and group ties.”(Bohannon) While some people tend to get upset that there are those out there that can be a little bit ethnocentric, they need to step back and look at themselves and all the ethnocentrisms that they possess of their own. These ethnocentrisms are actually what a person’s biases are.

A very popular, traumatic example of ethnocentrism is history to occur happened during Nazi Germany. During Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler had harmless, innocent people brutally slaughtered in concentration camps on the sole basis that he simply hated Jews and a few other groups of people. “They did not deserve the torture that they received, and this was clearly an extreme case of ethnocentrism.”(Coogan) Another good example of this is racism. How systems of discrimination are based is on race. And that one race is typically in power over another race.

Throughout my research I came across many different practices that should be condemned. Other than female circumcision which I talked about earlier in my paper, the killing of new born is another one. In China, parents want boys rather than female babies therefore they kill the new born in order to stay within the guidelines of how many children they can have. Because of the one child policy parents want boys, because boys can work when they get older and carry on the family name.

Anthropologist comes from one of the two different concepts, ethnocentrism or cultural relativism. In this paper I have showed how they are very different in the way that they value things and what they believe. But I have also showed that everyone in one way or another has the concept of ethnocentrism.