**The concept of culture and civilization/ Cultural Relativism**

Culture is explains as the way of life of a group of people. These ways can include arts, beliefs, and institutions pass from one generation to another. Cultural relativism is an important principle or rule of anthropology (given by Franz Boas), which is define as “the ability to view the beliefs and customs of other people within the context of their culture rather than one’s own.”

It was first given by Franz boas as a reaction against the classical evolutionists who suffers from western ethnocentrism and viewed Victorian culture as most evolve and supreme. Cultural relativism helps an anthropologist in engaging for an impartial study of people and societies.

Cultural relativism means that the function and meaning of a trait are relative to its cultural setting. A trait is neither good nor bad in itself. It is good or bad only with reference to the culture in which it is to function. Cultural relativism is helpful because it leads to the appreciation of other peoples’ way of life around the world.

For Example: Eating non vegetarian food is not accept in some communities while accept in some other communities. Fur clothing is good in the Arctic but not in the tropics. In some hunting societies which occasionally face long periods of hunger to be fat is good; it has real survival value and fat people are admire. In our society to be fat is not only unnecessary but is known to be unhealthful and fat people are not admire.

**Types of Cultural Relativism**

**There are two types of cultural relativism.**

Absolute cultural relativism indicates that whatever activities are practice within a culture, no matter how weird and dangerous they appear to be, should not be questions by other cultures.

Example: An example of absolute culture relativism is the tying of feet of Chinese women in the 19th and 20th centuries. Though this culture later became abolish, other cultures had no contribution to its practice. The practice appear torturous to women for the purpose of beauty. According to history, Chinese people found small feet in women as a symbol of beauty. Therefore, for women to get marry, they had to go through the process of feet beautification. The process involved tying a young lady’s feet to inhibit its growth. Women from rich families were mostly able to undergo this practice since it was difficult for a person with such tie feet to move around and make a living. Other cultures shunned this practice, but they had no influence over it.

Critical cultural relativism asks questions about cultural practices and why they are practice. It seeks answers about the cultural practices in line with who is accepting them and why they are doing so.

Example: An example of critical cultural relativism is when the residents of Spain practice El Colacho, which is a baby-jumping ritual practiced since 1620. It is said that jumping over the babies chases the devil and keeps them safe. This practice has been critique by people seeking answers as to its relevance in protecting the children.

Why the concept of cultural relativism is so dearest to anthropologists?

Cultural relativists uphold that cultures differ fundamentally from one another, and so do the moral frameworks that structure relations within different societies. Cultural relativists determine whether an action is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ by evaluating it according to the ethical standards of the society within which the action occurs. There is a debate in the field on whether value judgments can be made across cultures.

**Discus the historical and cultural contexts that led to superseding ethnocentrism with cultural relativism in anthropology**

* Ethnocentrism refers to considering one’s culture superior to other cultures and measuring others in terms of one’s own values and standards.
* Cultural relativism is the idea that outside standards should not be used to judge a particular behaviour in a given society but instead the behaviour should be evaluated in the context of the prevailing culture in the society.
* In other words, cultural relativism is an attempt to put oneself in the shoes of the society members and see things from their point of view.
* Both ethnocentrism and cultural relativism prevent anthropologist from gaining an objective understanding of other cultures.
* Ethnocentrism results in bias against other cultures and promotes negative stereotypes. Similarly, cultural relativism results in inferior view of other cultures and may even lead the anthropologists to believe that other cultures are backward and old-fashioned.
* Ethnocentrism leads to isolation in an increasingly diverse world. It discourages us from experiencing other cultures and interacting with those from different cultural backgrounds. Instead of promoting dialogue among cultures, ethnocentrism results in division and lack of tolerance for each other.
* Similarly, cultural relativism results in inaccurate perceptions of other cultures and we forget that some moral and ethical values are not universal but instead vary across cultures. We also become judgmental towards others and criticize others without attempting to understand their reasons or motivations.
* Cultural relativists will often appreciate cultural differences, opposing ethnocentrism in the understanding and education of different cultural practices and beliefs.
* Despite this understanding and the appreciatory behaviour of different cultures, cultural relativism can be problematic as someone who is a cultural relativist may not know how to determine a cultural practice or belief to be morally or socially right or wrong.
* cultural relativism, as one may want to appreciate the differences in culture but not understand that sometimes, a specific practice or belief can be harmful or damaging to many. They may believe a cultural practice, for example, to be an injustice but are unsure of how to morally respond without judging the culture based on these practices or behaviours.
* Ethnocentrism makes value judgments from their native culture, towards another one’s culture in order to judge their elements such as custom, trait, belief, activities and any other value or traditions. This can cause much room for decreasing the values of one’s culture. Judgments like “weird, strange, unethical and backward” are commonly made from using ethnocentrism.
* In Islam, females are required that they wear proper, decent, modest, and clean clothes and are instructed by Allah in the Quran to wear as a minimum Hijab, or head covering. When an Islamic woman is home however, she may free her beauty in front of immediate family such as her husband, children, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, and other males. An example of cultural relativism perspective would have a statement like such: “Islamic women cover their beauty with a clean, modest Hijab when in public.” This statement takes a step into the culture for the judgment, and that’s why it is Cultural relativism. An example of ethnocentrism would have a statement like such: “Islamic offensive tradition forces women to cover their face in a Hijab in public.”

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one’s own culture. Part of ethnocentrism is the belief that one’s own race, ethnic or cultural group is the most important or that some or all aspects of its culture are superior to those of other groups. Some people will simply call it cultural ignorance.

Ethnocentrism often leads to incorrect assumptions about others’ behavior based on your own norms, values, and beliefs. In extreme cases, a group of individuals may see another culture as wrong or immoral and because of this may try to convert, sometimes forcibly, the group to their own ways of living. War and genocide could be the devastating result if a group is unwilling to change their ways of living or cultural practices.

Ethnocentrism may not, in some circumstances, be avoidable. We often have involuntary reactions toward another person or culture’s practices or beliefs but these reactions do not have to result in horrible events such as genocide or war. In order to avoid conflict over culture practices and beliefs, we must all try to be more culturally relative.

Cultural relativism is the principle of regarding and valuing the practices of a culture from the point of view of that culture and to avoid making hasty judgments. Cultural relativism tries to counter ethnocentrism by promoting the understanding of cultural practices that are unfamiliar to other cultures such as eating insects, genocides or genital cutting. Take for example, the common practice of same-sex friends in India walking in public while holding hands. This is a common behavior and a sign of connectedness between two people. In England, by contrast, holding hands is largely limited to romantically involved couples, and often suggests a sexual relationship. These are simply two different ways of understanding the meaning of holding hands. Someone who does not take a relativistic view might be tempted to see their own understanding of this behavior as superior and, perhaps, the foreign practice as being immoral.

Despite the fact that cultural relativism promotes the appreciation for cultural differences, it can also be problematic. At its most extreme, cultural relativism leaves no room for criticism of other cultures, even if certain cultural practices are horrific or harmful. Many practices have drawn criticism over the years. In Madagascar, for example, the famahidana funeral tradition includes bringing bodies out from tombs once every seven years, wrapping them in cloth, and dancing with them. Some people view this practice disrespectful to the body of the deceased person. Today, a debate rages about the ritual cutting of genitals of girls in several Middle Eastern and African cultures. To a lesser extent, this same debate arises around the circumcision of baby boys in Western hospitals. When considering harmful cultural traditions, it can be patronizing to use cultural relativism as an excuse for avoiding debate. To assume that people from other cultures are neither mature enough nor responsible enough to consider criticism from the outside is demeaning.

Supporting points: Cultural relativism is the belief that the culture of people serves particular needs and must be looked at in terms of the world the people inhabit. This is often the perspective of social scientists who work with people and is the result of the work of anthropologist Franz Boas. Discussion: • The two concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism occupy key positions in socio-cultural anthropology. They are the most sensitive and controversial issues in sociology and socio-cultural anthropology. • Cultural Relativism/ Cultural determinism approach was first formulated by Franz Boas in North America in 19th century. He says no culture should be judged by the standards of another. • Cultural relativism views people’s behaviour from the perspective of their own culture. It places a priority on understanding other cultures, rather than dismissing them as “strange” or “exotic.” • Any part of a culture must be viewed from within its cultural context-not that of the observer or the notion that there are no universal standards by which all cultures may be evaluated. • Cultures must be analyzed with reference to their own histories and culture traits understood in terms of the cultural whole.