



Cultural Relativism

Culture > Cultural Relativism

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cognitive—they all have two features in common. First, they assert that one thing (e.g. moral values, knowledge, meaning) is relative to a particular framework (e.g. the individual subject, a culture, an era, or a language). Second, they deny that any standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others. While cultural relativism provides a reflexive and critical tool for sociology (and other social science disciplines), political and moral conservatives tend to despair over the influence of cultural relativism on intellectual thought and the shift away from objective, identifiable standards as the measure for all truth-claims. However, some researchers have argued that it is possible to adopt a cultural relativist stance without abandoning a commitment to the idea of universal standards, or to human rights.

Overview

Cultural relativism is a complex concept that has its intellectual roots in discussions about relativism in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of language. The general concept of relativism in sociology is associated with critiques of positivism in science and concomitantly, social science, which largely emphasize the differences between the focus and methods of inquiry associated with the natural and social sciences. Relativism is typically viewed in contrast to realism, which is the idea that what is true and real exists independently of the mind. This opposition between realism and relativism was influenced by the work of Immanuel Kant in his (1788) *Critique of Pure Reason*, who argued that the material and social world is mediated through our minds: that people's experience of the world is mediated through the knowledge and ideas they hold about the world. Consequently, this relative epistemology—or cognitive relativism—makes it difficult to identify universal experiences that hold true for everyone, because it is likely that one person's experience of an event or activity will not be the same as that of another person. Cognitive relativism, then, refers broadly to an intellectual stance that rejects the idea of an absolute viewpoint and the existence of objective criteria for making judgments about what is or is not real or true.

Cultural relativism is associated with a general tolerance and respect for difference, which refers to the idea that cultural context is critical to an understanding of people's values, beliefs and practices.

Abstract

Cultural relativism is a complex concept that has its intellectual roots in discussions about relativism in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of language. Relativism is typically viewed in contrast to realism, which is the idea that what is true and real exists independently of the mind. Where there are many different kinds of relativism—epistemological, moral, cultural,

Keywords

Difference
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Ethnocentric
Incommensurability
Objectivity
Positivism
Rationality
Realism
Relativism
Standpoint

It is viewed as a progressive stance that a researcher can take to make sure that she does not privilege her own understanding of the world in her explanation of what is happening in the context she is studying—a stance that ensures her portrayal of a culture to which she does not belong is faithful to its internal understandings.

Where there are many different kinds of relativism—epistemological, moral, cultural, cognitive—they have two features in common:

- They assert that one thing (e.g. moral values, knowledge, meaning) is relative to a particular framework (e.g. the individual subject, a culture, an era, or a language).
- They deny that any standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others.

This latter feature of relativism has implications for how people develop and test knowledge about the social world (methodology) and how people make judgments about what kinds of social practices are better than others.

While cultural relativism is celebrated by postmodernists and post-structuralists, it is viewed negatively by moral conservatives, who see cultural relativism as the demise of moral obligation; the transformation of scientific endeavor into a random series of quixotic, subjective decisions and choices and the end of participation in civic affairs (Horowitz, 2004). The logic that sustains a commitment to cultural relativism is itself based on a claim that is relative to local (Western) criteria and begs the question: given the cultural differences in the world, how is it feasible to motivate compliance and implement ethical norms, such as human rights (Li, 2007)? Here, cultural relativism is seen to have an ethical dimension (moral relativism) that neutralizes people's ability to criticize the beliefs and practices of other cultures (Johnson, 2007).

History

The intellectual roots of cultural relativism within sociology lie in philosophical debates about distinctions between reality and relativism. Although the concept of realism has a complex history, it is generally accepted that it refers to the existence of a reality that lies beyond our thoughts or beliefs about it (Marshall et al., 1994). The main point of focus in debates about reality is whether universal truths or standards exist that we can use to measure or judge whether something is real (or true). This focus has had particular implications for philosophers and sociologists of science, who have studied the ways in which science makes claims about what exists, what is true and what counts as knowledge.

Philosophy of Science & Cognitive Relativism

Debates about cognitive relativism developed in the work of sociologists who engaged with the philosophy of science, which examines what science is, what makes it a special kind of knowledge and how scientists make claims that have authority and credibility. Science, it is assumed, occurs within a laboratory context that is free from bias, and which proceeds as a disinterested endeavor that creates a neutral product—such as explanations for differences between men and women. The aim of the scientific method is to produce knowledge that can be trusted, because it is based on empirical observation that can be repeated and tested by other researchers. This approach to knowledge production is known as positivism, which rejects knowledge based on belief, speculation or faith in favor of knowledge based on systematic observation and experiment that involves testing ideas against reality (i.e. what we see). Moreover, conventional accounts of science suggest that scientific knowledge grows cumulatively; each new discovery adding to what is already known.

However, sociologists have criticized this view of science and in particular, the role of objectivity and rationality (e.g. Feyerabend, 1993). For instance, Thomas Kuhn (1996) argued that the history of science was less linear than depicted because social beliefs and personal interests shape the practice and context of science. Moreover, researchers become attached to particular explanations and theoretical traditions associated with the scientific communities to which they belong, which influence whether new ideas are accepted or rejected. Thus, scientific exchange is not necessarily objective or rational and indeed, the criteria for deciding the merits of a scientific theory could be philosophical, or indeed political, as much as rational (Boudon, 2002). These associations and attachments undermine the potential for objectivity in science and for value-free inquiry. Kuhn suggests that the truth claims underpinning scientific theories are relative to the values and practices that shape scientific practice. Cognitive relativism suggests that there is no objective knowledge, only interpretations of what scientists observe and that no theory can be said to be 'true,' only probable (Boudon, 2002). Contemporary versions of these arguments assert that the objects of study within science are socially constructed and have no existence beyond the instruments that measure them and the minds that interpret them (Latour & Woolgar, 1979).

Philosophy of Language & Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is linked to cognitive relativism through the claim that social science cannot identify truth, but only customs that vary from one society to another. While social scientists—such as anthropologists, geographers and sociologists—can observe and document such customs, explanations need to be grounded by reference to the contexts in which they develop and exist. This approach springs from applications of debates in the philosophy of language to the practice of sociology that rejected the universalist assumptions of classical theorists about the methods and assumptions of social science.

For instance, Peter Winch, a philosopher concerned with logic, reality and language, built on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and focused on developing an understanding of the categories available to social scientists to make distinctions between, among other things what is real and what is unreal. The *Idea of a Social Science* (1994) outlines some principles to guide how social investigation might proceed. Winch argued that the social sciences should not adopt the methodology of the natural sciences, but should instead focus their efforts on sensitively interpreting which concepts exist in non-Western cultures and how they are used by members of those cultures. He argued that some concepts are consistently inexpressible among the languages of various cultures (they are incommensurable) and as a result, the idea of rationality cannot be defined transculturally. Indeed, different cultures have different criteria for rationality, that is, for making judgments about what is true, real or good. For instance, one contemporary study of rationality in the context of decision making about child immunization after the publication of research that linked vaccinations with autism (Brownlie & Howson, 2005), noted that parents who did not immunize their children (or who thought about not immunizing) saw their choice as a rational response to what they viewed as a government that couldn't be trusted, despite the fact that child immunization is generally regarded as a beneficial and necessary public health practice.

Applications

Cultural Relativism in Practice

The ideas developed by Winch influenced the methodologies of ethnomethodology, phenomenology and ethnography, which all, to a degree, proceed on the basis that researchers can't really understand social practices, ideas and beliefs unless they look at and immerse themselves in the context in which they naturally occur. Moreover, fundamental to these approaches is the idea that a person's sense of reality is constructed through prevailing cultural frameworks and how these are expressed. Therefore, language plays a critical role in cultural relativism, since language is seen as a means of categorizing, and therefore constructing, experience, and actively shaping what counts as reality. In this view there is no social world, or reality, beyond or independent of a person's beliefs about it (Rosa, 1996). Moreover, what counts as reality, or the social, varies according to context.

The insight that knowledge claims need to be understood by reference to the cultural contexts that produce them is common, but has been interpreted in different ways by intellectual traditions such as continental philosophy and feminism. For instance, Michel Foucault, generally viewed as a poststructuralist, argued that what counts as truth is associated with particular forms of social power. His work focused on understanding how things come to be known as facts (for instance in medicine) and on the conditions and circumstances that enable some groups and not others to make claims that come to be regarded as truth. His approach emphasized the importance of understanding how language, practice and perception shape the world in ways that enable some groups and

Feminism & Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism provides a reflexive and critical tool for sociology (and other social science disciplines). Feminists have made common cause with cultural relativism because first, it provides a tool for criticizing rationality and rejecting objectivity in science as a masculinist ideal and second, it provides a way to challenge the seemingly fixed character of gender.

For many feminists, objectivity (which alludes to the neutral or value-free position of the researcher in relation to what is being researched) is problematic for women because it denies the subjective and emotional experiences of women and contributes to male dominance. Objectivity is based on a presumption that subject and object can be separated from each other, where subject refers to a male observer and object refers, generally, to nature. In this way, objectivity contributes to the objectification of nature and therefore women, who are viewed as part of nature (Jordanova, 1989). Further, some feminists have argued that investigation, whether scientific or social scientific, cannot be objective because objectivity itself reflects a predominantly white, middle class, male view of the world. Hence, inquiry is not a view from nowhere, since people occupy standpoints and as such, explain phenomena from 'somewhere' (Harding, 1986).

Feminists (e.g. Oakley, 1985) have used cross-cultural studies of adolescence and gender (notably Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, 1950) to challenge gender stereotypes and to argue that gender is a social construct because different roles and ideas about femininity are ascribed to women in different cultural contexts. This insight has been developed within feminism as well. For instance, feminists of color have argued that the development of Western feminism has been based on the particular viewpoint of white middle class women who occupy a privileged place in the world. This viewpoint is connected with the development of Western thought, a privileged system tied up with the colonialization of non-Western societies. This process has contributed to a way of thinking that is ethnocentric; being unable to see differences and universalizing values and ideas from the subject's experience of his or her own ethnic group (Humm, 1989).

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism stems from the way that Europeans conquered and subdued the indigenous peoples of Africa, Central and South

America and Australasia through the spread of colonialism (Giddens, 1997). While Europeans, during periods of colonial expansion and beyond, mostly believed they were ‘civilizing’ and superior to the nations they colonized, this view has been trenchantly criticized by scholars such as Edward Said, who have used cultural relativism as a tool to highlight the social and cultural effects of colonialism. These scholars draw attention to the way that colonialists—through for instance art and literature—privilege Western values and ideas above indigenous values and beliefs and in so doing nullify indigenous culture. In this sense, cultural relativism is used as a tool to challenge ethnocentric Western views and practices and to promote an appreciation of cultural diversity.

Viewpoints

Conservatism & Cultural Relativism

Political and moral conservatives tend to despair over the influence of cultural relativism on intellectual thought and the shift away from objective, identifiable standards as the measure for all truth-claims. Their concerns center on the way that cultural relativism makes it difficult for people to assert how one set of practices, or truths, is better (morally) than others because, conservatives argue, cultural relativism asserts that systems of thought (or morality) are incommensurate and equal. For instance, Azar Nafisi, who wrote *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, has observed that no amount of political correctness can “make us empathize with a woman who is taken to a football stadium in Kabul, has a gun put to her head, and is executed because she does not look the way the state wants her to look” (Nafisi, 2006, p. 6).

Nafisi argues that we shouldn’t be tolerant of such practices, even though cultural relativism encourages tolerance of difference, which many liberals view as a socially desirable value in a democratic society. In fact, Nafisi goes further, as do other commentators, to argue that cultural relativism neutralizes political action because it discourages criticism of practices that are different from those associated with the culture that we inhabit (Rachels, 1993). And others have similarly denounced cultural relativism as anti-democratic (Perusek, 2007: 821) and view interpretive theories that emphasize the “local,” have abandoned the pursuit of truth and thus betray the canons of scientific inquiry (Ulin, 2007: 803).

One contemporary example of the dilemma posed by cultural relativism is that of female circumcision, frequently condemned by Western commentators as a barbaric, patriarchal practice. On the one hand, female circumcision is understood as a symbolic practice that signals a rite of passage embedded in culturally salient idioms of purity, embodiment, sexuality, and fertility, while on the other, it is viewed by many Westerners as a human rights transgression (Silverman, 2004). If female circumcision is viewed in its own, locally contextualized terms, then it is difficult to criticize the practice as unethical, because what is ethical in a Western context is not necessarily understood as ethical in another, non-Western context. Moreover, an extension of

this argument is that when Westerners criticize practices such as female circumcision, they do so not through any universal standards of morality or understandings of pain and suffering, but through a particular, local cultural framework (i.e. Western) that universalizes experience and standardizes what is considered right and what is not; that views its reaction as universally rational when, in the framework of cultural relativism, it is in fact particular and local.

Conclusion

While these concerns tie cultural relativism to moral relativism, some researchers, mainly anthropologists, have argued that it is possible to adopt a cultural relativist stance without abandoning a commitment to the idea of universal standards, or to human rights (Li, 2007). Cultural relativism needs to be seen as a methodological position that explains the practices and ideas of other cultures within the terms of their own cosmologies, without necessarily sanctioning them.

Terms & Concepts

Difference: Developed by feminists to highlight the different experiences, voices and psychologies of women in comparison to men and also to draw attention to the way these differences are part of power relations and used to oppress women.

Epistemology: The theory of how we know what know.

Ethnocentric: Unable to see difference and universalizing values and ideas from the subject’s experience of her own ethnic group.

Objectivity: A detached and impartial attitude associated with scientific inquiry.

Positivism: Scientific method is viewed as objective because its aim is to produce trustworthy knowledge based on empirical observation that can be repeated and tested by other researchers.

Rationality: A mode of action or decision-making that is technical in character and based on reason.

Realism: the idea that what is true and real exists independently of the mind.

Relativism: The idea that something (e.g. moral values, knowledge) is relative to a particular framework (e.g. a culture, a language) and that no standpoint is uniquely privileged over others.

Standpoint: Using the experiences of social groups as a ground for theory and explanation.

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