

Judging Cultural Practices

Pitfalls in Judging Cultures

Can we ever judge another culture—that is, can we legitimately make value judgements about the merits (superiority or inferiority) of cultural practices? Can we not say, for example, that some Aboriginal groups were excellent environmental guardians, or that the pottery and other crafts of the earliest humans were inferior to those developed by later groups? While it seems permissible to make these kinds of assessments, there are two pitfalls associated with judging the practices of other cultures. We will refer to these as cultural superiority and cultural relativism.

- Cultural superiority suggests that whatever “we” do is always better than what other cultures do and when we judge other cultures, we rely solely on our own values. Those cultures that do things similarly to the way we do them are often seen to be superior, e.g., they are sophisticated and advanced, and those who do things differently are often thought to be inferior; e.g., they are odd or primitive. For example, in North America we might be tempted to judge a culture as backward if it did not have elaborate information technologies; e.g., computers, video games, Internet access, e-mail. This assessment would be an example of cultural superiority because we are applying our preoccupation with technological sophistication to judge that culture. They, on the other hand, might be tempted to judge our culture as backward by looking at how socially isolated and detached people have become because our technological preoccupation has greatly reduced face-to-face human interaction. Cultural superiority fails to recognize that various cultures may legitimately value and prioritize different things. Cultural superiority tends to evaluate differences from our ways as negative or inferior because of an inclination to view one’s own culture as the best and only measure of cultural practices.
- Cultural relativism suggests that whatever any culture does is acceptable and we must positively judge other cultures’ practices—it is “right” for them. Who am I to judge differently? Cultural relativism arises out of a concern not to impose our cultural values on other cultures; i.e., to avoid cultural superiority. The problem with believing that all values are

completely relative to the group that holds them is that it leaves no room to make judgements in cases that seem obviously unjust or that fail to respect human life and other basic rights. For example, a cultural relativist would say that the practices and beliefs of the Nazi cult are perfectly acceptable; e.g., killing of millions of Jews is “right” for them. Cultural relativism believes in the unquestioned acceptance of all cultural practices because there are no legitimate grounds for someone outside a culture to assess the wisdom or merits of that culture’s practices.

Cross-cultural Sensitivity when Judging Cultures

Cultural superiority and cultural relativism are two poles on a continuum, and cross-cultural sensitivity is the middle ground between these two extremes. Cross-cultural sensitivity is defined by the following characteristics:

- Recognizes differences: Anthropologists expect to find differences between cultures and presume that these differences are likely to have some merit.
- Is aware of dangers: Anthropologists are cautious when using values from outside a culture to make judgements about the culture.
- Is careful when reaching conclusions: Anthropologists make judgements (negative or positive) only when these kinds of assessments are based on values that are fairly applied to the culture.

In their attempts to interpret cultures, anthropologists will ensure that any judgements that are made are based on values that are cross-cultural—that is, apply across many cultures and are basic to being human. Cross-cultural values may be found in formal declarations of basic human rights or international environmental standards that have been accepted by many countries representing a wide spectrum of religious and cultural backgrounds. Notice the United Nations document is referred to as a universal bill of rights to indicate that it should apply to all human beings.

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