Title: Judging Non-Judgement: Assessing Anthropology Students’ Adoption of Cultural Relativism

Short Abstract: Cultural relativism is central to cultural anthropology and applicable to student’s lives outside the classroom, but adoption of this approach through introductory courses is taken-for-granted. This research assesses students’ demonstration of cultural relativism mastery by scoring their written work on a three-point rubric, questions why few progress between stages within the semester, and proposes further systematic research.

Preferred Presentation Format: I think it would be a good fit for a concurrent session, but I am flexible.

Description: Anthropology faculty generally hold the development of a critical perspective toward cultures, both one’s own and others’, as central to the work our students do in an introductory cultural anthropology course (Griffith 2014). We refer to this critical perspective as “cultural relativism,” which entails the suspension of judgment about the values, beliefs, and practices of different cultural groups in pursuit of deeper understanding. In addition to its relevance in the classroom as content important to the discipline, we view a cultural relativist orientation and the recognition of its opposite, ethnocentrism, as applicable to the rest of students’ lives, regardless of their major or career path (Burtonwood 2002).

However, students’ internalization of these foundational aspects of the anthropological approach through introductory anthropology courses is taken-for-granted, and not explicitly discussed in formal anthropological scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). This research initiates systematic study of the teaching and learning of the cultural relativist orientation within anthropology.

My presentation, based on research at a large public university’s regional campus, proposes a method of assessing and reflecting on student progress toward mastering the cultural relativist approach. Methodologically, it draws on other SoTL research across the disciplines in creating a rubric to assess students’ demonstration of key skills and content understanding. In this case, the criteria for mastery of cultural relativism include demonstrating non-judgmental, context-aware, and analytical thinking about other cultures and one’s own culture. Through qualitative content analysis, I have coded students’ written work to rate their level of mastery on a three-point scale. I have compared students’ work throughout the semester to determine their adoption of cultural relativism as an orientation toward the cultures they encounter in the course. I illustrate the three levels of mastery narratively through my teaching notes from discussion in the classroom and excerpts from student work.

Data analysis is still in progress (as of Jan. 2019) and data collection continues in the current semester (Spring 2019). However, my initial findings show that many students begin the course demonstrating a developing (2nd stage) sense of cultural relativism, but few progress into mastery (3rd stage) within the one semester course. My preliminary interpretation of these results is that many students have gained familiarity with concepts and vocabulary related to multiculturalism and tolerance before starting the
anthropology course, but fewer are reflecting the attention to context required of cultural relativism mastery, the critical distance essential to withholding judgment and challenging biases, and the empathetic imagination required to understand the cultural viewpoints of others. I will discuss assignments and lessons that led to greater mastery for some students.

I have undertaken the study with approval from my university Institutional Review Board.

Goals for the Session
My presentation will begin by describing the concept of cultural relativism and introducing relevant SoTL research in allied disciplines, along with less formal pedagogical discussions in anthropology. Within this context, the session is intended to accomplish two primary goals. First, I will report the qualitative results of the research in the first cohort of the study (the Fall 2018 semester), illustrated by examples of students’ initial and final written work. Second, I aim to lay a foundation for and provoke further discussion about effectiveness in teaching the most essential aspects of anthropological inquiry, including cultural relativism, including obstacles, best practices, and modes of assessment.

In my presentation of the results, I will discuss some of the methodological challenges of the research, including potential issues with coder reliability and the various factors that might inhibit students from honestly expressing their views on the beliefs and practices of various cultures, their own or others. I will propose possible strategies to overcome these research problems (e.g., further studies, research teams, different assignments), as well as teaching techniques that might improve mastery (e.g., greater emphasis on shocking examples of cultural difference, further illustration of the historical and cultural contingency of daily practices within the students’ cultures). I will also introduce the next steps in the current project, which include quantitative analysis of the expanded data set after the Spring 2019 semester.

The discussion will be relevant especially for teachers of anthropology, but also those in allied fields, like sociology, international studies, psychology, international studies, business, and communication. In fact, much of the extant literature on teaching cultural relativism that is not in anthropology comes from these fields. Today, cross-cultural understanding and communication skills are critical for students in all fields and with all career trajectories in mind, and teachers in many disciplines attempt to expand the viewpoints of their students in ways that echo cultural relativism, even if it is called something else. This session will be especially of interest for anthropology faculty, for whom cultural relativism is a defining orientation of research and perhaps even of being, and who struggle to teach this fundamental approach to their students.

Overview of the Content
This critical perspective that we espouse in anthropology is called “cultural relativism,” which anthropologist Barbara Miller (2017: 380) defines in her popular introductory textbook as “the perspective that each culture must be understood in terms of the values and ideas of that culture and not judged by the standards of another culture.” For anthropology researchers, cultural relativism is part of our methodological approach, founded in our view of cultures as holistic and our epistemological belief that cultures are best understood in local context and with first-hand experience. For anthropology teachers, a desire to help students question their own ethnocentric biases is part of what motivates sharing this epistemology. Ethnocentrism, which we could frame as the opposite of cultural relativism, is an ideology that prompts one to judge other cultures based on the norms and values of one’s own culture rather than on the other culture’s own terms. Practically, we see ethnocentrism as an impediment to positive interaction in a multicultural society, and in terms of students’ broader
education, ethnocentrist views can prevent students from engaging with new ideas with an open mind (Brown 2008).

Yet, active research into the ways in which anthropology courses attempt to and succeed in helping students adopt a cultural relativist orientation and overcome the obstacles of ethnocentrism is largely absent from the scholarship of teaching and learning literature. For decades, we anthropologists have debated internally about the limits and advantages of “cultural relativism” from a theoretical perspective (Brown 2008, Herskovits 1958, Ulin 2007, Washburn 1987). Meanwhile, in allied fields like sociology, communications, and psychology, there are small bodies of research assessing students’ ethnocentrism and on teaching strategies to challenge ethnocentrism and cultivate cultural relativism (Aboud 1980, Cherry et al 2014, Keith 2011, Neulip and McCroskey 1997, Puffer 1994, Schmid 1995). Given that the cultural relativist orientation is so central to the discipline of anthropology and an essential objective of our courses, the dearth of systematic SoTL research on the effectiveness of anthropology courses on student adoption of cultural relativism seems a grave oversight. My presentation bridges the SoTL work in other fields and the intense theorizing and reflection anthropologists direct toward cultural relativism and proposes a new vein of teaching and learning scholarship.

The presentation is based on an ongoing investigation of how students in introductory cultural anthropology courses (ANTH- E105) on a large public university’s regional campus develop expertise in elements of critical thinking central to an anthropological perspective. The research also assesses which aspects of the course and teaching contribute to that learning process. Specifically, the study researches how and to what extent students adopt a cultural relativist approach to analysis of human behavior and critique their own ethnocentrism, through exposure to cross-cultural case studies, their own ethnographic analysis, and personal reflection. The study assesses change in the students’ level of expertise in deploying this critical perspective throughout the course based on data derived from activities that are already built into the syllabus as part of the course.

The course is a survey of basic concepts, figures, and topics within cultural anthropology, and the format is primarily lecture with active learning activities during each twice-weekly class meeting. The assessments for the course include two essay projects, one of which requires students to conduct small-scale first-person participant-observation of human activities in a cultural setting. The students also complete written reflections as part of their projects and at several other points in the course, including during the first week and the final week of classes. The consideration of their own position and perspective in relation to the course concepts and to various cultures provides fitting material to assess based on mastery of cultural relativism.

References


Presenter Information

Name: Madeline Chera

Affiliation: Department of Sociology & Anthropology

Institution: Indiana University South Bend

Position: Future Faculty Teaching Fellow [Visiting Faculty]

Cell Phone: 610-247-3409

Office Phone: 574-520-4613

Email address: mchera@iu.edu

Note on Authors:
The research for this project was undertaken with Indiana University IRB approval (Exempt Study #1806162250), for which the Primary Investigator on record is Dr. Katherine Kearns (IU Bloomington). The author of the analysis proposed for presentation is Madeline Chera, the co-PI of the study. Chera is a Ph.D. Candidate in Anthropology at IU Bloomington, in addition to her faculty position at IUSB.