

Relatively Speaking: Anthropology, Intercultural Communication, and the 'Prime Directive'

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Fifty two years ago this year, the U.S. television program *Star Trek* was first broadcast. This broadly optimistic vision of the future featured an ethnically diverse yet fully integrated starship crew whose only intercultural difficulties were with inhabitants of other planets, encounters guided by the ethical imperative of the Prime Directive, a strict prohibition against interfering in any way with the natural development of other societies. In its insistence on the impropriety of making ethnocentric, or rather anthrocentric judgments on, and intervening in, cultures other than one's own, no matter how benevolently intentioned, the Prime Directive was, in effect, an expression of the principle of cultural relativity that has had such an influence on the development of both modern anthropology and its academic offspring, intercultural communication.

In this paper I should like to examine the idea of cultural relativity as it has been taken in slightly different directions by anthropology and intercultural communication, and suggest how the two fields, currently estranged,¹ could and need to work together in order to create a truly emancipatory praxis for dealing with current and future cross-cultural conflicts. In a rapidly globalising world of cultural mixing, both voluntary and enforced, such problems can no longer be confined to university departments and academic conferences, and both anthropologists and intercultural communication practitioners have an obligation, I believe, as well as skills both complementary and necessary, to engage effectively in the dialogue. Although there is an understandable reluctance on the part of anthropologists, as per the Prime Directive, to intervene in cultural matters, the time for creative, considered intervention may have come. As Kuper noted, summarising Terence Turner: "The debate about culture has become political again." (Kuper, 1999, p. 228)

Cultural relativity is most closely associated with the work of Franz Boas in the early twentieth century, along with that of his principal intellectual inheritors, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Melville Herskovits, although the idea has antecedents long predating these scholars. Whatever its origins, however, there has been broad agreement since Boas that the relativist paradigm had the beneficial effect of liberating the human sciences from ethnocentric evolutionary schemes by which cultures slowly developed from savagery through barbarism to

civilisation (like ours, of course). Over the last thirty years or so, however, people everywhere have been exposed through the media or, increasingly, even in their own neighbourhoods to cultural practices perceived as offensive to many, such as female genital cutting, honour killing, mistreatment of animals, social injustice, religious fundamentalism, and terrorism. As a result, relativity has come under attack, its critics accusing its adherents of moral disengagement, apathy, and nihilism. Human rights advocates such as the bioethicist Ruth Macklin have argued persuasively for a universalist position (Macklin, 1999) and the philosopher Mary Midgley has captured the confusion and frustration of many in the title of her book: "Can't We Make Moral Judgements?" (Midgley, 1991)

There are, I think, two main problems with these criticisms, one definitional, one functional. Some years ago Clifford Geertz noted, in an essay on what he termed 'Anti Anti-Relativism': "Whatever cultural relativism may be or originally have been (and there is not one in a hundred of its critics who has got that right), it serves these days largely as a specter to scare us away from certain ways of thinking and toward others." (Geertz, 2000, p. 42) One reason why relativity seems so resistant to definition is that it comes in a wide range of guises. Understandable confusion exists regarding what distinguishes cultural relativity from its near cognates — moral, cognitive, linguistic, epistemological, ontological, aesthetic, — and all the other varieties that occupy philosophy departments. For the purposes of this short essay, therefore, I shall restrict myself to the most basic and (I hope) least controversial statement of the position, the idea that cultural beliefs and behaviours can only be evaluated relative to that culture, and that any judgment from outside the system must necessarily be ethnocentrically influenced by the cultural background of the observer. Ethnographers since Boas have therefore committed to immersing themselves in the society under study for a long period, learning the language, and participating in the cultural life of their hosts, eschewing judgment, at least temporarily, on the practices observed. Anthropologists could thus attain a deep, specific knowledge of a culture by making use of cultural relativity as a methodological attitude, a means to the end of greater understanding.

It is likely that this detailed knowledge derived from ethnographic experience is one reason why anthropologists tend to be dismissive of the pretensions to cultural understanding of intercultural communication (IC) practitioners, few of whom have had the same extensive exposure. From the anthropological perspective, IC can seem to have a superficial, generalising view of 'culture', an essentialist attitude potentially reinforcing stereotypes rather than dispelling them. A recent critic of IC claims that the use of terms such as 'uncertainty avoidance' or 'power distance' lead to "normalization, if not reification, when new practice becomes established routine, and what were once contested ideas become real things." (Holliday, 2011, p. 144) Furthermore, in my personal view, IC people have not helped matters by referring to themselves as 'interculturalists', a vague term that conveys little while simultaneously omitting the most important aspect of their work, the focus on communication. (Although the term does at least preserve the crucial *inter-* prefix, highlighting how IC specialists try to work between cultures.) For their part, of course, IC specialists may criticise anthropology for being too narrowly focused on such details as kinship systems and ritual practices, a quest for knowledge for its own sake, rather than a means to help people from different cultures communicate and understand each other better. My assumption, however, is that both anthropologists and IC practitioners are in fact invested

in the same liberal humanist project of both furthering knowledge *and* fostering understanding and communication across cultural boundaries. To this end, there is a vital need for the two disciplines to work together, and to acknowledge that each has developed a vast body of sound research and useful technique that can and should be shared and synergistically combined. At the present time, when the general public is in need of specialist guidance and the notion of cultural relativity itself is under suspicion, that collaborative project is urgently required.

Currently, probably the most frequently heard argument made by secularists against relativity is that of universal human rights, a position neatly summarised by Alison Dundes Renteln as follows: "[I]f a cultural tradition violates a human right, the tradition should not be permitted; if not allowing a cultural tradition would violate a recognized human right, the tradition should be permitted." (Renteln, 2004, p. 215) One difficulty here, of course, is the assumption that human rights are culturally neutral, a kind of *a priori* natural law rather than a contingent, possibly Eurocentric creation. And no code of human rights, even one generally agreed to, could cover every potential conflict without ambiguity. Do children have the same rights as adults, for example? If not, at what age do they attain these rights? If so, what are parents' rights? Can parents be permitted to make decisions regarding their children that involve irreparable harm (scarification, circumcision) without outside (neocolonial) intervention? ('Irreparable harm' is a phrase often heard in the relativity debate, usually without any acknowledgement that 'harm' is defined differently according to cultural context.) According to Henry Bagish, who has made a cogent case for a pragmatic, 'if . . . then' approach to such issues, cultural relativity is actually "a moral theory that gives a central place to one value: *tolerance*." (Bagish, 1981, p. 7) He recommends instead assuming a *hierarchy* of values and initiating dialogue through statements such as: 'If you value your children's lives, then vaccination is more effective than animal sacrifice.' In an inescapably multicultural world there has to be some kind of resolution between, on the one hand, the unlimited tolerance of extreme cultural relativity and, on the other, an absolutist 'one size fits all' prescriptive code of ethics with enforced compliance, even under the more benign-sounding assimilationist ('When in Rome . . .') model. Working toward such a resolution is an emancipatory project to which both anthropologists and IC practitioners can contribute.

With respect to multiculturalism, many people now seem to agree with Ruth Macklin that: "It is one thing to require that cultural, religious, and ethnic groups be treated as equals; . . . It is quite another thing to say that any cultural practice whatever of any group is to be tolerated and respected equally." (Macklin, 1999, p. 133) According to the philosopher Stephen Darwall, however, there are two kinds of respect: recognition respect, which is the basic attitude that should govern any interaction among people by virtue of their shared humanity and equal dignity; and appraisal respect, which is an evaluative reaction to something said or enacted by others, either individuals or groups. (Darwall, 2013) Using this formulation, it is therefore possible to respect the individual without necessarily condoning the behaviour, thus creating the possibility for civil dialogue, possibly using the approach suggested by Bagish, outlined above.

By using the term 'civil' in this context, I am implying more than mere politeness; civility is in fact a fundamental attribute of civil society, now global society; an obligation on its members not only to be respectful, but engaged, curious, and open to new ideas. It is in this sense that the historian Timothy Garton Ash uses the term in his recent book on free speech when he writes

of the necessity for an attitude of "robust civility" in order to cope with the pressures and challenges of cultural diversity. (Ash, 2016, p. 208) The robustness in Ash's formulation refers to the need, on both sides of an exchange, to interact with mutual respect but above all with honesty, and without a paralysing fear of giving offence. This approach is potentially extremely high-risk, of course, especially in the context of such controversial issues as those mentioned above, and Ash devotes many pages to discussions of political correctness and trigger warnings. Nevertheless, the need for, and potential benefits from such robustly civil exchanges are clear, and both anthropologists and IC specialists could have crucial roles to play in their facilitation, the former providing essential cultural information and the latter suggesting effective communication approaches. Gumperz, among others, has shown the importance of context in intercultural discourse (Gumperz, 1982), and anthropologists and IC specialists could together ensure that difficult conversations on differing cultural values could take place under optimal conditions for respectful exchange.

Throughout this paper I have stressed the need for anthropologists and intercultural communication practitioners to collaborate on procedures for intervening constructively in cross-cultural conflicts, but this would clearly need to be a multidisciplinary project, a reversal of the unfortunate academic impulse toward narrow specialisation. From its inception the IC field has drawn liberally from a wide range of sources; Edward T. Hall, himself an anthropologist, was influenced by ethology and was also deeply interested in psychology, as was Gregory Bateson, who was arguably responsible for the shift in academic speech departments to departments of communication, thereby providing the new IC discipline with a home. Cultural relativity itself obviously has philosophy credentials, but the important idea of contextual relativity comes from William Perry, an educational psychologist. (Perry, 1998) My own feeling is that the burgeoning field of neurology, another interest of Hall's, is likely to make significant contributions to both IC and anthropology over the next few years, and it is essential that both disciplines strive to be openly receptive to all new inputs.

In their explorations of 'strange new worlds' the crew of *Star Trek* were regularly in breach of the Prime Directive, seemingly unaware that their very presence in these worlds constituted an intervention. If only they had thought to include anthropologists and IC practitioners in the complement of the *Enterprise*, they could have boldly gone with a great deal more awareness. And possibly less conflict.

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Notes

- 1 Focusing particularly on the study abroad context, the divergent historical development of the two fields and the unfortunate consequences of their lack of cooperation have been eloquently described by Bruce La Brack and Laura Bathurst. (La Brack & Bathurst, 2012)