The Conflict of Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism “the position that the values and standards of cultures differ and deserve respect” (Kottak, 2009) greatly opposes the idea of ethnocentrism “the tendency to view one’s own culture as best and to judge the behavior and beliefs of culturally different people by one’s own standards” (Kottak, 2009). Although cultural relativism and ethnocentrism may be seen as distinctly opposing lenses that are used to view another culture, they are in fact quite similar in the large amount of tragic conflicts and disagreements they can cause.

I am sure we are all familiar with the reputation ethnocentrism has gained in the past several years as being an agent of conflict. For example, students in a middle school social science class are taught to examine the ways in which the nation is being ethnocentric and imposing its views on other peoples. These students are instructed to consider how wars and political disputes may be caused by a nation holding their beliefs and ways of life as superior to other nations. Clearly, exercises such as these are important and useful tools to help students and all people to understand the harm of viewing other cultures through an ethnocentric lens. However, couldn’t it be just as dangerous to view a culture through the lens of cultural relativism? Imagine a world where anything goes, everyone can do what they want, people may define their own definitions of right and wrong, and with no concerns of ever having to answer to an overarching moral code. A world in which truth and morals are simply viewed as relative to the culture would result in a world that would quickly become filled with mass chaos and with as much conflict, if not more than is caused by viewing cultures through an ethnocentric lens.

However, not all uses of a cultural relativistic lens have negative outcomes. Anthropologists have mastered the means of using what is known as a methodological relativistic lens to view other cultures as opposed to using a moralistic relativistic lens. By viewing other cultures behaviors and practices through a methodological relativistic lens anthropologists can focus on describing human
behavior and why it is functional or necessary in a particular culture. Of ten by describing why certain human behaviors may occur in a culture an anthropologist may be able to also better understand and relate on both a scientific and personal level to the practices.

Personally, as a psychology major I find myself consistently using a methodological relativistic lens to understand why individuals behave in a particular way. I think I find it quite easy in most instances to apply a culturally relativistic view to examine a culture’s behaviors and practices. I can understand why a practice has a place in that culture and how it traces back to the value system of that culture. One practice that I do struggle to understand and hold a cultural relativistic attitude toward is the practice mentioned in the reading of female genital modification. I find it difficult to fathom the real purpose this would have in the Middle Eastern and African cultures it takes place in. Although the practice does supposedly occur to deter women from committing adultery it also causes the women a great deal of pain and decreases their sexual pleasure and therefore probably the likelihood that they would want to engage in sexual interactions with their spouse. Although I try to refrain from bringing in ethnocentric viewpoints I would think that this practice would prove to be overall ineffective in achieving the goal that women be available sexually for their husband solely.

In closing, you may be wondering how it is possible that two such opposing views, ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, can cause such similar disharmony between cultures. You would think that if an ethnocentric view of another culture may result in discord than surely the opposite way of viewing cultures, through cultural relativism would surely lead to harmony. The reality in fact is that neither viewing cultures through an ethnocentric lens or a culturally relativistic lens will ever be wholly correct or free of conflict. The best way to view a culture is with both lenses in mind. Using a culturally relativistic lens to understand the methodology of perhaps why certain practices and beliefs work for a particular culture and then using your own personal morals and values to investigate how that culture fits into your personal cultural framework.
Bibliography