Anthropology and Moral Relativism

Two stories:

- In 1960’s and 70’s a prominent Harvard psychologist named Jerome Bruner decided that it would be a good idea to expose young people to some of the concepts of social science, so he developed a curriculum called “Man: A Course Of Study” (MACOS). The curriculum concentrated on the Inuit. The course lasted 7 days and was designed for 9th graders. The students watched videos with no narration. One was about 25 minutes of a man waiting with a spear near a hole in the ice. He is waiting for a seal to emerge from a breathing hole. There was a great deal of excitement about this course.

  In 1970 a minister in Lake City FL, his daughter was taking the class. He looked at the curriculum and was upset by it. He had a local radio show and condemned this curriculum for promoting gun control, pornography and hippie-dippy values. The protest grew from there into a huge backlash. Congress got involved and the curriculum was suppressed.

  The reason was that some of the films showed things that people were unhappy about. For example: There was a practice that some Inuit men might share a single wife. This was mentioned in the course without condemnation for the practice. Another example: In times of famine, the old people might voluntarily get up and disappear into the night, for the sake of the group.

- 1910 the pres of Panama went to visit the Kuna in a boat. In the villages where he was welcomed, he was very upset about the way the Kuna women dressed. They pierce the noses of little girls with a piece of string. As they get older the put in bigger in bigger pieces of string until they can wear a piece of jewelry.

  There are also strings of beads wrapped around the legs in elaborate patterns and are left there permanently (they are only removed to alter or fix the pattern). This alters the muscles of the legs.

  The govt. of Panama decided it wanted to civilize the Indians. The first thing they went for outlaw was this beading practice. They claimed that they were liberating women who were deforming their flesh.

What these stories highlight is the problem of cultural relativity, but particularly the moral issues that come up

1. **The History of Studying Morality in Culture**: A challenge of difference and the challenge it offers to ethnocentrism.
   a. This attitude was challenged starting in the 16th century with the expansion of the West.
b. Spanish Catholics thought other people were irrational simply because
they weren’t Catholic.
c. There were also some counter currents
d. Most famous whistle blower: Bartolome de Las Casas
   i. A colonizer in the new world.
   ii. Guilt-stricken by the destruction of the population in the
       Caribbean, became a Dominican and huge advocate for the native
       population.
   iii. 1650 has a famous showdown with another Dominican named
        Sepulveda
   iv. Debated the humanity of the Indians
       1. Could you attack them first and missionize them later or
          were they worthy of being missionized first and attacked
          later?
       2. Not a debate in the traditional sense. Never met face to
          face. One person read manuscript for about five hours and
          then the other read a manuscript. After that a commission
          went off and made their decision about who was more
          convincing.
   v. In essence they were debating cultural and moral relativism.
e. Famous French essayist Montaigne
   i. Wrote an essay on cannibalism.
      1. For a brief while the French had a colony in Brazil, wrote
         about cannibalism seen there.
      2. Members of a group called the Tupi
      3. Said that in many ways the culture was more egalitarian an
         more harmonious that French society.
      4. Idealized this native culture.
   ii. He wasn’t saying the cannibalism was good, but was showing that
       if we judged these people by European moral standards, they in
       many ways outshone French society.
f. But this doesn’t really come to terms with the differences.
g. 19th century anthropologist were very sure of the moral inferiority of savages and barbarians
h. Then you get an article about Franz Boas.
i. Served a paradoxical role:
   1. On one hand he went out of his way to knock down all of the dogma of the 19th century evolutionary anthropologists, particularly against racist explanations. He was a moral relativist.
   2. On the other hand, he was crusading for his own moral agenda
i. It’s still a struggle today in anthropology. We promote moral relativism but also moral crusades.

2. Cannibalism
a. The problem of then and us comes to a head with things that we approve of. The biggest issue where this comes to a head is cannibalism.
b. The word cannibal comes from the French words for the Caribbean because they were thought to be cannibals.
c. The Europeans who were critical of cannibalism were also the people who had their enemies drawn and quartered, massacred whole villages, and involved in other horrible practices.
d. A few years ago and anthropologist argued that there were no cannibals left in the word, other than people who were starving.
   i. Very popular kind of denial. Not true
   ii. It was a way to weasel out of the moral relativism argument.
e. Ruth Benedict wrote a paper of moral relativism and cannibalism
   i. Pushed the point of why is cannibalism so much more morally offensive than starvation or genocide?

3. Explaining Away the Problem
a. They are not merely cultural, but also political and social as well.
b. You get all kinds of explanations to justify it.
c. Spain passes a law called the New Law.
   i. Supposed to protect Indians from slavery.
      1. But an exemption in the law said you could enslave someone if they happened to be a cannibal.
      2. Subsequently, many people were labeled as cannibals.
d. In China a lot of justification from missionaries on the practice of foot binding.
e. In India, justification for the practice of Sati (Sutee).
   i. Sati: wives were immolated on the funeral pyres of their husbands.
f. Also a practice called thuggee.
   i. This is where the word “thug” comes from.
   ii. A sect had a requirement that to be an adult male you had to kill someone on the road.
   iii. The explanation for this was that it wasn’t true, there just happened to be many robbers on the road.
g. These were things seized on by colonizers to justify the subjugation of the people.
h. Very often these things seem to do with women and women’s bodies.
i. The Puritan settlers were appalled at how the Native Americans treated their women.
   i. The men would cut down the trees and clear the land for planning, but the women would plant the crops, tend the land and harvest all the food, while the men’s job was to hunt.
   ii. But the Puritans say the Indian men were lazy.
   iii. But they missed the point that these Indians hunted all night.
   iv. Also missed the fact their own society was very repressive of women.
j. Here are these people who repress their own women, but also use the repression as a principle justification for their critique of the “natives”.

4. Morality: Constructed and Contingent
a. People are just plain different. People not only believe things that are different from you, but also different from the very moral fiber of your being.
   i. But it’s hard to be totally ethnocentric – Imagine that if you were born in Islamabad. You would probably be Muslim, regardless of what you presently think about Islam.

b. In a way, the fact that our beliefs are so dependant upon where we were raised is very unsettling.

c. That’s why Congress was so upset about MACOS.
   i. Alternative ways of life were being presented without condemning them.

d. Anthropology also unsettles morality by sowing it as constructed and contingent
   i. It doesn’t necessarily come out of God’s head.

e. E E. Evans-Pritchard (EP)
   i. Studied the Azande in Sudan.
   ii. Studied their thinking, particularly about witchcraft
   iii. People assumed that the primitives were just backwards in their thinking.
   iv. EP assumed on the contrary that everyone had a kind of logic and reason behind it.
   v. Wrote a very influential book saying that: If you take their base assumptions to be true, everything else about their behaviors follows logically and rationally from them. While he lived with the Azande, he lives by these assumption but following their logic and rational. The whole system is coherent and systematic.

f. The implication is that everyone’s way of thinking is contingent in the same way.

g. Same thing was done for morality.

h. Rival of EP was Radcliffe-Brown
   i. Had an idea about ancestor worship
ii. Said that is goes with a very close kinship ties.

iii. Indicated that these kinds of beliefs might be an extension of social factors.

i. Fay Ginsberg wrote a book on the subject of abortion
   i. Clear differences between the women on either side of the issue
   ii. Their moral positions seemed to have as much to do with their careers, the connections to their families and the way they were brought up as much as it had to do with morality.

j. All this is unsettling because it makes morality seem flexible and mutable.

k. There are people who think one of the worst developments of the 20th century is moral relativism.

5. Dealing with the Problem
   a. One way to deal with this is to say that basic core values are the same in all cultures.
      i. But this doesn’t always work. People sometimes differ on core basic values.
      ii. For example: should there be freedom of religion? Who should be educated? Are women equal to men?

b. Another way to get around this is to say: people argue for their interests, their moral values are at base, just protecting their interests.
   i. But this is dangerous because it trivializes people’s beliefs

c. Another argument: They believe it because they were indoctrinated, brainwashed.
   i. They wouldn’t think a certain way if they knew any better. Karl Marx’s idea of “false consciousness”
   ii. Notion of hegemony, something is so pervasive and so dominant that no one thinks to question it.
   iii. Race is a classic example.

d. But it’s difficult to use these terms to talk about other people because you have to recognize that you may be operating under hegemonic principles or false consciousness as much as the people you’re studying.
i. These terms were used to explain why the oppressed lower classes didn’t rise up in revolution.

e. Implicit in this, these subjects are embedded in social and political consequences.

6. Current Debates

a. Right now Britain is debating fox hunting
   i. There are many of people on both sides of the debate.
   ii. There are class issues imbedded in this.

b. A lot of these issues deal with ethnicity and women.
   i. The most ferocious debates are about genital cutting.

c. Is there some kind of cross-cultural moral stance that will allow us to critiques these practices?

d. Often times the preservation of culture is used to argue for or against a practice.
   i. Example: Indians who started hunting whales again.
      1. Opponent said that they hadn’t hunted for centuries, so there wasn’t a tradition anymore.
      2. Said that since these people hunted in motorboats and used guns to kill the whales, the practice wasn’t traditions.
      3. They even used the fact that these people lived in mobile homes to prove that they weren’t “traditional”

e. Also, cultures are not uniform.
   i. Though we project that third world “others” are uniform in their culture

f. Example for debate: School girls wearing headscarves in France.
   i. Many people come back to the issue of choice:
      1. If the girls freely choose to wear a headscarf, then they should be allowed to.
      2. The trouble is that choice is a Western value.

g. We are also deeply rooted in raising children a certain way.
   i. Other cultures don’t give their children choice.
ii. Schools, at a certain level, don’t give our children choice. It teaches them certain values and behaviors.

iii. How you’re socialized is a big factor.

h. But anthropologists also tend to be extremely opinionated.

i. Anthropologists introduced moral relativism, but they are also very set in their beliefs.