

# CULTURAL RELATIVIST VIEW ON HUMAN RIGHTS

## INTRODUCTION

Universalism is a doctrine that applies to all persons and/or all things for all times and in all situations. On the other hand, relativism arise within the context of a society's peculiarities. Cultural relativism emphasizes the demonstrations of sympathy for societies as characterized as oppressed, different, or marginal, as explained by anthropologist Ruth Benedict. Glazer (1994) emphasizes that cultural relativism posits that all cultures are of equal value and need to be studied from a neutral point of view. Contrary to universalism, Walzer (1999) notes that relativism is not universal and not valid outside of accepted norms. By this he means that there are instances when, in a cultural relativism, the principles of human rights clash with the traditions of a community.

## HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Seeking human rights is a noble intention. However, there are situations wherein the observance of respect for human rights contradicts the existing traditions in a community. Some human rights principles are not in consonance with some traditions that have been in existence in the community for a long time. And it is important for these traditions of a community to be respected. Therefore, despite the noble intentions for the observance of human rights, if those human rights are outside the accepted norms, they cannot be insisted upon. The intentions and acts of seeking human rights should not clash with the existing traditions in a community. Justice requires adhering to the established traditions and norms of a culture. Violation of these has corresponding repercussions.

Through the years, cultural relativism was criticised because some believed that it was being used to mask the effect of Western colonialism and imperialism. In some instances, Western colonialism and imperialism were promoted under the guise of cultural relativism. According to Stanley Diamond, popular culture co-opted anthropology in a way that voided the principle of any critical function. It is Stocking (1982) who mentioned that cultural relativism had buttressed the attacked against racism that justifies the backward techno-economic status of previously colonized people.

The complex climate of change, diversity as a result of globalization, as well as acute vulnerability raises new challenges for cultural relativism. Modern day cultural relativism has to cope with the fast climate of change. With the offshoot of globalization, diversity affected the way cultural relativism evolved through the recent years. These changes made the society vulnerable, thus affecting current days' cultural relativism. In cultural relativism, there is a need to respect culture while upholding professional ethics.

Individuals often find the topic of human rights as a point of no dispute. Most people automatically assume that a certain set of rules must govern us all. However, the concept of universally-recognized human rights is a tricky one and has been proven over time to be weak and untenable. This uncertainty has then given rise to the debate between universality and cultural relativity.

According to the cultural relativist view, universal human rights are pointless (Ayton-Shenker, 1995). In a document written for the United Nations, Ayton-Shenker (1995) says that cultural relativists further maintain that the concept of cultural relativism states that "each culture is a unique specimen of the historically formed collective personality of a people" (Ahmed, 2007). As such, the perceptions that are prevalent among a specific cultural group regarding rights and responsibilities are also culturally specific.

Bell, et. al. (2000) focused on the debate between universality and cultural relativity in the Asian context. They found that cultural relativism is often viewed as "Asian values" because the governments in certain Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia have espoused the relativist viewpoint as a way of settling up criticism (Bell, et. al., 2000). The editors state that the value system of Asians (e.g. family over self, peace over conflict) put Asian cultures in discord with the Western notions of human rights.

## CONCLUSION

Cultural relativism rebuffs the idea of contemporary human rights having a universal quality. The point is that to declare a universal foundation for a set of rights, norms, and ethics that has roots in a specific culture (i.e. the West) is a paradox. Cultural relativists assert that the idea of universal human rights is not historical since current notions of human rights such as free speech have historical and cultural origins in the West. Supporters of cultural relativism also maintain that the effort to promote universal human rights is practically the same as cultural imperialism.

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