

Final Paper

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### The lack of Cultural Relativism in the United States

Cultural relativism refers to not judging a culture to your own standards of what is right, wrong, strange or normal but rather trying to understand cultural practices of other groups in its own cultural context. In the United States, it is quite evident that the nation lacks a sense of cultural relativism in spite of it being so heavily diverse. Through personal cross cultural experiences as well as taking into account the history of our country, including others around the world, it is with the lack of cultural relativism that we struggle to understand each other.

Culture is defined as the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts; meaning that culture can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to each specific group. Cultural relativism is the ability to understand a culture on its own terms by not making judgments using the standards of one's own culture. The goal of this is to promote the understanding of cultural practices that are not typically part of one's own culture. For example, according to the article *Cultural Relativism* written by Dr. Caleb Rosado, he states the importance of diverging away from an ethnocentric culture and moving more towards cultural relativism. The article reads "If people are going to be successful in today's multicultural, information, world society, they will need to develop a culturally sensitive frame of reference... It is the purpose to help people move from an ethnocentric, exclusive mindset to a culturally sensitive modus operandi, by clarifying what is meant by ethnocentrism and cultural relativism,

how each operates, and what are the steps that move a person from one perspective to the other" (Rosado). Ethnocentrism is the evaluation of other cultures according to preconceptions originating in the standards and customs of one's own culture, also identified as cultural ignorance. It is because there is an excessive amount of ethnocentrism that many cultures are judged and oppressed.

Culture is essentially how one functions. It determines the way they do things, their taste in arts and outlook on their beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and values. One's culture and upbringing can affect the way they communicate, interact, and socialize with others in society. Because the concept of culture is so diverse, the social interactions between different cultures can prove to have difficulties in adjusting or accepting other people's way of life and respecting their values and taboos.

Socially interacting with someone from a different culture than you can prove to have its difficulties with the lack of cultural relativism. Many people would first try to find similarities between another's culture however when there are more differences than similarities in the uniqueness of one's culture, this could either push one further away from interacting with others who are different from them, or create a sense of open mindedness and willingness to adapt. According to the article *Understanding Social Interaction*, It states "Social structures and cultures are founded upon social interactions. By interacting with one another, people design rules, institutions and systems within which they seek to live. Symbols are used to communicate the expectations of a given society to those new to it, either children or outsiders. Through this broad schema of social development, one sees how social interaction lies at its core." to someone who has immigrated to a different country might find it a little more difficult to socially interact with another's culture as they have adapted to the ways of their own. Cultures from all around the

world communicate differently, have different attitudes towards a conflict, and make decisions differently. In the United States, when faced with conflict, it is common for people to face it head first and overcome it right then and there. However, in Montenegrin culture, it is more common to try and keep a conflict from getting out of hand and handling it in accordance with the other party involved without other people knowing.

Cultural taboos are defined as behavior or attitudes that are strictly prohibited. In cultures that are intertwined with the religion of Islam, it is taboo to date outside of your religion, eat pork, consume alcohol, and in some other cultures, date outside of your race. Not all of these taboos are prohibited in Islam such as dating outside of your race however when culture and religion become intertwined, it becomes fairly easy to use religion as an excuse to why some things may be taboo. Not being allowed to be with or date other races can be very off putting to someone whose culture is more open to the concept and embraces it fully. This can pose many difficulties for someone who is trying to understand and adapt to a new culture.

Immigrating or visiting a new country can be a shock and adjustment for some people when trying to understand the culture. In some cultures, the way in which people interact and socialize is through food. Whether that is sitting at a large dining table or sitting on the floor eating from one big plate and using your hands as opposed to silverware. Coming from one of these interactions and adjusting to another can be difficult and can even cause someone to stay away from interacting with others as part of that culture due to their suppressed ethnocentrism. For example, if one party was told to never eat using their hands as it can be seen as improper and less than, go to a traditional Indian household where they sit on the ground and eat with their hands can be very off putting for someone who lacks cultural relativism and is not used to the ways of a culture completely different from their own.

I grew up Muslim in a Montenegrin household and grew up having very different cultural values, taboos, and superstitions than a lot of my more American friends. It is very taboo to wear shoes in your home as that is supposed to be a clean space and bringing unnecessary outdoor debris into your home through your shoes is looked down upon. However, in the United States, it is very common to wear shoes in the house and some households even have shoes that are specifically worn only around the house. I grew up around many different cultures from all around the world. However, there were times that I had encountered different cultures and within my own culture where I couldn't agree or be open to their morals and values. Domestic violence, racism and mental health is never talked about in Balkan culture and a lot of Middle Eastern cultures as well. Problems in general are not openly discussed and when problems such as domestic violence arise, they're usually dismissed or played down. I know it is very common for a woman to stay in a violent marriage in fear of bringing shame upon her husband and her family in Balkan culture. The worst experience I have had with someone regarding culture was with the topic of domestic violence. I had known someone who was in a very toxic, manipulative, and physically violent marriage but she refused to leave. Even with emotional and financial support from family and friends, she chose to belittle the severity of the situation and would rather not discuss it and so she stayed. This was the first time I was shocked by a cultural experience and could not wrap my head around someone choosing to stay in that environment and subject their children to it. I had learned that all cultures are beautiful however they all have their imperfections and flaws. Because speaking on the topic of domestic violence is taboo in my culture and in many other cultures as well, the only way I found to overcome this was to speak on the topic more openly in hopes of the stigma of it bringing shame to your family if you've gone through it would eventually fade away.

Mental health is another topic that is taboo to speak on in a lot of cultures. According to the article *Perception and coping with stigma of mental illness: Arab families' perspectives*, it states “Arab families perceived the experience of caring for a family member with a mental illness with fear, loss, embarrassment, and disgrace of family reputations. Further, secrecy, isolation, despair, and helplessness were reported the most among different family groups in Jordan and Morocco.” Those struggling with mental health refuse to seek help in fear of bringing shame and embarrassment upon their families. If more Arab families had let go of the negative stigma behind mental illness, it would be a lot easier to help those who are desperately in need of guidance and professional help. The article *Hidden Afflictions: Mental Illness in the Middle East* states “Depression and anxiety disorders are by far the most common mental illnesses in the Middle East. A 2002 study conducted at primary care centers in Saudi Arabia suggested that up to 20 percent of Saudis are depressed.” The Middle East is struggling with a mental health crisis but it is because of the culture that many refuse to seek help.

Each culture is unique and beautiful in their own way. Culture determines the way a person lives their everyday life and interacting with someone who grew up completely different from you, can be quite a shock. Some are more open to adapting and embracing other cultures while others steer clear from them and tend to surround themselves with people who share the same culture and experiences. It is believed that culture is the cultivation of the soul and mind; giving one their distinctive identity and authentic expression and with that, it is through the interaction of different cultures that we see the greatness or obscurity in individuals.

Although every culture has its own distinct uniqueness, due to the lack of cultural relativism in the United States and a surplus of ethnocentrism, it has become extremely difficult to accept each other due to the deeply rooted racism that the country was founded upon. Using

the perspective of cultural relativism leads to the view that no one culture is superior to another culture when compared to systems of morality, law and politics. Because of the open mindedness of cultural relativism, there is no absolute standard of good or evil, therefore every decision and judgment of what is right and wrong is individually decided in each society and culture meaning that any opinion on ethics is subject to the perspective of each person within their particular culture.

The United States has been facing a long term issue and battle in regards to racism. The more recent social issues include the Black Lives Matter movement vs. the All Lives Matter movement. It is believed that the reason the United States is so deeply rooted to race begins from when the country was initially founded. The article *Protests in the US: How Deep-Rooted is the Racism?* states “This has to do with the historical formation of a country that was constructed on the basis of the genocide of the Native American groups by European conquerors and, subsequently, the trafficking of slaves imported from Africa. The memory of these ethnic and cultural oppositions during the founding period has become consolidated at all levels of the North American social system, in institutions and in daily life.” The United States was founded upon an unwritten law of superiority against anyone who wasn’t a white European man. It initially began with the genocide of the Native Americans in 1758 where land was forcefully claimed by white men to prove that they belonged to be there. After the country was founded in 1776, the slave trade began in the United States shortly after where minorities would be enslaved, mistreated, and dehumanized for hundreds of years to come. It is with generational ethnocentrism that although the United states has created some progress, in comparison to other countries, they have moved exponentially slowly.

On May 25th, 2020, a black man named George Floyd was arrested and wrongfully murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin by the use of excessive force. Police brutality and racial profiling against the black and hispanic community is anything but new in the United States. After Floyd's death, the country and world began to protest against police brutality under the movement Black Lives Matter. This led to the prosecution of the police officer Derek Chauvin to be charged with. According to the article written by the New York Times *How George Floyd was Killed in Police Custody*, it reads "The day after Mr. Floyd's death, the Police Department fired all four of the officers involved in the episode. On May 29, the Hennepin County attorney, Mike Freeman, announced third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter charges against Derek Chauvin... On June 3, Hennepin County prosecutors added a more serious second-degree murder charge against Mr. Chauvin and also charged each of the three other former officers with aiding and abetting second-degree murder." Between May 29th, and June 5th, the country was protesting and rioting to seek justice for Floyd and every other person who has been wrongfully treated by our justice system. Very rarely does the police get prosecuted and found guilty of a crime committed against a minority. Although Chauvin was found guilty and charged, Breonna Taylor, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice and many many more victims whose families still have yet to get justice. The United States justice system is incredibly biased and superiorizes white people and those in the military and police force. It is because of the systemic generational ethnocentrism that there has been a lack of change to our justice system.

As open and diverse the United States is made out to be, there is a lot of change that needs to occur in order to move towards a more cultural relative state. Although police brutality and racial profiling is a main issue in the United States, there are several other countries who



lack cultural relativism as well. As easy as it is to point your finger at the US right now and list all of their generational ethnocentrism, other countries such as Austria has also had a history of police brutality and racial profiling. According to the article *Austria: Incidents of Police Brutality* it states “The Austrian authorities continue to ignore serious incidents of police brutality and have failed to end the ill-treatment of detainees, Amnesty International said in a report launched in Vienna today. Supported by eyewitness reports and medical evidence, detainees have reported being repeatedly kicked, punched, kneed, beaten with truncheons and sprayed with pepper after restraint. The victims are mostly non-white foreign or Austrian nationals and in many cases police are alleged to have used racist language.” Austria too has a history of generational ethnocentrism a lot like the United States and it is not uncommon for Austrian black mothers and fathers to worry about their children, and talk to them about how they should behave in public and how they should react if they're stopped by the police.

With many ethnocentrism issues in the the United States and world wide, there are some solutions as to what may help the US move a little closer to achieving cultural relativism. The United States has come a long way in terms of advancing socially. The institutionalised segregation of the Jim Crow south is now seen as a shameful part of the country's past. In 1968, just 54 percent of black Americans graduated from high school whereas in comparison to now, more than 90 percent of black Americans graduate high school today . The poverty rate for African-Americans, which stood at almost 35 percent in 1968 dropped to 22 percent in 2016. Since then, the number has fallen further although the coronavirus recession may reverse some of those gains. In 2016 after former president Donald Trump had won the election, ethnocentrism in the United States was incredibly high. The article *Ethnocentrism in the US* states “Muslim women having their hijabs ripped off, black families waking up to hate speech spray-painted on

their houses, men and women of Middle-eastern descent immediately pegged terrorists and being called that in public. Countless videos have popped up with his supporters spewing hate rhetoric in the name of Trump... The idea behind ethnocentrism is that people who are not part of our group are perceived as being all the same because they aren't one of us, so we treat them differently. That is exactly what some of Mr. Trump's supporters are doing to other citizens of our nation just because they look different or practice another religion." This specific kind of hate carried on during all four years of Trump's presidency. It wasn't until after he was removed from office that his influence began to subside and we as a country began to move in a brighter direction.

White privilege are inherent advantages possessed by a white person on the basis of their race in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice caused by ethnocentrism. White privilege is very real and exists. Of course white people struggle and are faced with hardships but they do not struggle because of the color of their skin. The article *What is White Privilege?* Talks about the true meaning behind the privileges of being white in the United States and how the implicit biases are ignored. The article reads "The truth is that growing up as a white person means never having to consider race for the majority of one's life. It's not something white people notice, because the world is set up for their convenience. They have the power of being "normal," or in the default state. When white people say they are 'color blind' or don't notice differences in skin tone it actually minimizes BIPOC experiences and ignores implicit biases." That power of being and feeling "normal" is something that everyone should be entitled when going about their everyday lives. In order to move towards creating a country with a cultural relativism type of mindset, those who possess this privilege need to use it. It was never enough to not be racist. Those who are deemed superior in the system due to the colour of their skin must

be anti racist. Using their voices in a country where many aren't heard are ways to break the generational and systemic oppression imposed on black people and other minority groups.

Reforming the justice system and those who serve it is another greater solution to breaking down ethnocentrism in the United States. *A Failing Criminal Justice System*, an article published by the NewYorkTimes states "The criminal justice system in America was created to keep communities safe, to respect and restore victims, and to return offenders who leave prison to be self-sufficient and law-abiding. What the system has become is a monumental failure that our states and nation can no longer afford... The fact that minorities are unfairly targeted goes beyond decriminalizing marijuana or a handful of petty crimes. Prosecutors and police budgets are rewarded for convictions, and they are not held to account for their contribution to spending in prisons or for increases in welfare and Medicaid dependence. Our minority population is a reliably easier target for getting the numbers by which society measures law enforcement today." The justice system is what mainly targets minorities and is filled with the least amount of cultural relativism and cultural respect and is where the most reformation needs to take place in order to become a country whose unbiased and open minded towards other peoples cultures.

The United States lacks cultural relativism while ethnocentrism is deeply embedded into its history. Breaking that generational systemic cycle has proven to be more difficult and discouraging than what was once believed however it is with the newer generations that we hope will make the difference to one day live in a world where the term "white privilege" is no longer around and different cultures and values are respected and acknowledged.

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