

An Analysis on the Universalism-Relativism Debate, the Effects of Ethnocentrism, and How These Theories Dictate Human Rights Around the World

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Abstract

This paper analyzes theories correlated with Human Rights and Intercultural Communication. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) entails thirty basic human rights that are intended to be held by every living human. Universalist scholars believe that these are inalienable, regardless of certain cultural values that differ from societies around the world. Relativist scholars believe that there needs to be a respect for cultural practices, even if they are harmful to other people. A case study is performed to illustrate the positive and negatives to both theories. Ethnocentrism is then introduced, which is when people judge cultures and practices that are different than their own, and hold beliefs that their own culture is superior to others. Another case study shows how ethnocentrism can be dangerous. Finally, the dialogical approach is introduced in order to show why this is the best alternative to the Universalism vs Relativism debate, and how it can help ensure justice for cultures near and far.

Keywords: Universalism, Relativism, Dialogical Approach, Ethnocentrism

Introduction

Treat everyone as you would want to be treated. The Golden Rule has been a cornerstone in interpersonal interactions for thousands of years. It is a basic human right to be treated with dignity and respect. Therefore, how does that differ in a culture where certain people are oppressed and persecuted? There are societies around the world that engage in cultural practices that are particularly harmful to groups of people, but occur as a result of traditions passed from ancestors thousands of years ago. There are undeniable human rights given to everyone the moment they are born, but there are some cultural practices that eradicate those rights. However, from that culture's perspective they are following their own set of laws created by their ancestors. Who is "right"? Which culture is breaking the law and how do we ensure justice? These are a couple questions human rights scholars have debated for years.

There is no question there needs to be a guideline to ensure the safety of each human. Unfortunately, not everybody is able to protect themselves and fight for their rights, especially in societies that are patriarchal in nature, such as Islamic or indigenous cultures. There is a need for a culturally respectful, objective, but functional approach to protecting people against harmful traditional practices that only serve to oppress certain citizens in that society. Although there is not a quick, easy fix for combating human rights violations in different cultures, the dialogical approach is the best resolution. This essay will introduce Universal Declaration of Human Rights and why human rights are needed from a universal approach through the topic of female genital mutilation. Then, through the relativist lens an explanation for why specific cultural values and the prevalence of ethnocentrism will be provided. Finally, a case study will reveal the need for a dialogical approach.

Human Rights and the UDHR

According to the United Nations, from the moment you breathe air you are given thirty basic human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was proclaimed on December 10, 1948 when representatives from every region of the Earth met in Paris to sign it into action as the foundation for every living human's inalienable rights. Ranging from not being subject to torture of any form, to being allowed to leave any country and return to any country, to the right to a nationality and everything in between (United Nations, 1948). When diving further in to these declarations, one can only wonder how this differs from culture to culture, country to country, or religion to religion. In a world where globalization is "increasing at a surprising rate" peacefully coexisting is becoming more difficult as people and their value systems, from all over the world connect and sometimes collide (United Nation, 2017).

Thinking about the different cultures and religions around the world, where do those opinions and life decisions compare to the thirty human rights? What happens when a religious act violates a basic human right? These questions can be best answered by examining Universalism versus Relativism theories. These two theories remain optimal in forming the following analysis because the UDHR declares these rights as universal and inalienable, but relativist scholars Lenzerini and Halliday also argue that infringing on cultural practices will inevitably erase any form of culture. The potential solution does not necessarily have to result in selecting either all the rights are universal or each culture has their own set of laws that citizens abide by. Every person has a moral compass of right and wrong, but every person also has had extremely different life experiences that shaped their upbringings.

Religion, family life, and culture are just a few of the many examples of factors that can create and mold someone's own moral compass.

Universalist Approach

Universalism and relativism are two approaches to human rights that have been debated by scholars for centuries. Oyowe and Donnelly are universalists believe that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) are undeniably given to every human at birth. By signing this document, the contributors agreed that this universal international agreement, at least in theory, that certain things simply cannot legitimately be done to human beings – regardless of the difficulties in specifying those things (Donnelly, 2013, 404). Most parents raise their child to treat others as they would like to be treated, not to steal, do not harm others. Ambiguity occurs when cultures engage in practices that outgroup members deem harmful. Universalist scholars believe that “even if something is indisputably ‘traditional’, this is hardly a sufficient reason for accepting it as desirable or ethically valid” (Halliday, 1995, p 162). Universalists aim to condemn governments and groups in power who abuse these cultural practices. Webb Keane says:

“One obvious problem is that since certain practices are contingent on particular cultures, [imposing relativistic ideologies] would counterintuitively imply that one's status as a human being is lost or diminished if one were to be removed from that cultural context” (p 5118).

Which is found to not be true because experiencing or living in a different culture does not automatically mean you should lose your basic human rights (Oyowe, 2014). Acknowledging the apparent difference in religions across the world, scholars analyzed Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Confucianism, and Islam and found all include notions of humanity, welfare, and wellbeing in each which only unifies the universalist argument more

(Lenzerini, 2014). Through finding similarities of humanity and wellbeing in differing religions, this only further promotes the idea of treating everybody with dignity is ingrained in different religions. It separates acts of indecency and religion, a mistaken correlation that is often made. Article 2 of the UDHR states that “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (UN) and is the foundation for the universalist viewpoint.

Relativist Approach

In response to the signing of this document, “many Western countries in fact rejected the legal concept of international human rights because it contradicted what many in these countries felt was a much more important principle, the sovereignty of the state” (de Varennes, 2006, p 70). Relativist opinions started to form as a result, and began to claim quite generally that the enforcement of values and the meanings of concepts are always relative to a culture (Oyowe, 2014). Also, scholars believe that moral values are inherently subjective, and fear that a universalist approach to human rights would anger cultures and in the end erase any and all cultural diversity (Lenzerini, 2016). Relativist scholars argue that “universalists do not pay adequate attention to certain cultural practices that societies still participate in” (Choudhury, 2015, p 243). Outright universalism takes away power from the state and gives the impression that societies who still engage in traditional practices are unable to govern themselves. Universalists believe the view that if it were not for the cultural baggage they have acquired, people in traditional societies would realize the benefits of universal human rights, which is inherently arrogant (Choudhury, 2015). Relativist scholars believe “to say that a cultural practice endorsed by tradition is bad is to risk erring by

imposing one's own way on others who surely have their own ideas of what is right and good (Nussbaum, 2008, p 1). Failing to trust an individual's own moral compass of right and wrong is judgmental and incredibly offensive to anyone of any culture.

When does this cross a line to arrogance to assume that everybody wants Western ideals of law? One scholar argues that this is an observation without ethical import, leaving open the judgement that one culture is better than another (Halliday, 1995). Adopting the universalism theory would establish worldwide westernized laws, even when it is inevitable that other cultures have fundamental differences in core values. While this does not seem harmful or senseless in the beginning, solely projecting a westernized judicial system on the rest of the world would be detrimental to the growth and expansion of different cultures. However, fully adopting the relativism theory for human rights risks the danger of turning a blind eye to monstrosities that are happening to people when people in positions of power use "culture" as their primary defense. The issue at hand is not a problem of culture —it's a problem of deeply rooted ideologies that enable systemic practices with no importance or valid purpose.

Case Study

Putting these two theories to test, female genital mutilation (FGM) is used as the topic for deeper analysis. Scholars' estimates indicate that FGM is a custom that originated over 2,500 years ago (Mitchum, 2013). FGM consists of all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or other non-therapeutic reasons. There are different levels of circumcision, ranging from external to internally invasive. The practice can be costly: with

many of the girls bleeding to death. Most are traumatized. The girls who survive the procedure usually suffer long term health effects during marriage and pregnancy. It is predominantly practiced for social and religious reasons. (von der Osten-Sacken & Uwer, 2007).

While FGM mostly practiced in Africa, it has recently gained popularity in the Middle East. It is unknown if whether or not it has always been practiced and just never reported, or if the practice itself is beginning to occur more frequently (UNICEF). In some cases, young girls are subject to this practice against their will, however, there are women who complete this practice voluntarily. Scholars began to wonder why, and they found they believe it to be an “important rite of passage” as well as at times religiously motivated (Sheldon & Wilkinson, 1998). Parents who refused to have their daughters engage in this practice run the risk of putting their daughter through years of embarrassment, humiliation, and alienation for failing to undergo such a culturally recognized tradition (Mitchum, 2013). These women truly believe that the fate of their marriages and lives depend on this practice because it is what has been ingrained in their heads and constructed as “normal” for centuries. This is the social argument as to why women voluntarily subject their daughters to FGM. There are also religiously driven motivations. Some Muslim communities also practice this tradition because of the belief that they are required to do so by their faith. However, religious scholar Brennan has confirmed that the Koran does not mention FGM at all (Brennan, 1989). This does not prevent religious leaders from asserting that it has a place in Islam (Oyowe, 2014). They have also found that the Muslim religion itself is not only highly fragmented, but is one that operates without even a purported theological and legal central authority: what we have is a range of leaders who interpret law and tradition as they see fit and which appeal to all

Muslims to follow them (Halliday, 1995, p 155). This reinforces the idea that cultural practices are being wrongfully performed because people in positions of power believe physical oppression is the ideal way to stay in control.

People who practice FGM do not fundamentally believe that it is degrading or cruel. From a social aspect, they believe it cleanses the woman and enables her to get ready for womanhood. Without one of the three different types of circumcision, women are deemed unfit to marry and start families. From a religious perspective, they are groomed to believe religious leaders in the community. If those predominantly male leaders consistently tell them that the God they worship not only approves of, but supports this practice, women do not have much of a choice in whether or not they want to participate and still remain devout worshippers.

FGM Through a Relativist Approach

From a relativist perspective, theorists would relinquish any control over other cultures and respect whatever rituals and beliefs they may have. Even though practices such as FGM, and forced early marriage or honor-based violence still occur, relativists argue that it's all a smaller piece of a puzzle, with the entire puzzle being a country, a society, a culture, or a tribe. Taking a piece of that puzzle away would ruin the entire puzzle.

To offer a different perspective on a predominantly Western cultural practice, Islam does not believe women should beautify their bodies in any way. Undergoing breast augmentation would be an insult to Allah (Islamonline.net). Women pay for breast implants that do not in any way benefit her physically, and could potentially cause health problems later in life depending on multiple different factors. This is clearly an unfair comparison, considering the medical procedures are night and day different in a multitude of ways.

However, women do undergo FGM voluntarily because they think it will project them higher in social standings, aid them in finding a husband, and to aesthetically look better- all parallels to breast augmentation that occurs around the world.

There are some obvious flaws in this approach, because it allows horrendous practices such as FGM to still occur today. Forced early marriage and honor-based violence are just two more examples of culturally based practices that are harmful and the costs far outweigh the benefits, if there are any. With no benefits to these practices, but consistently high percentages of people affected by them, one can only assume that these practices are in place to further degrade the victims.

FGM Through Universalist Approach

Looking through a universalist approach, practicing female genital mutilation clearly violates Article 5 of the UDHR, which states: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” as well as Article 30, which states: “Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein”(United Nations, 1948). The UDHR is a signed document back by the United Nations, which means that every nation has a responsibility to uphold its laws. This document is foundationally universal. The United Nations and other organizations have attempted to stop the practice, and while they have been successful in lowering the percent that it’s completed, they have not fully convinced people that it is a cruel and inhumane practice.

The largest drawback with the universalist approach is that these practices occur in extremely rural places. The procedures are done in shacks with zero medical equipment, just

a blade and a table. With that being said, when one of the human rights is violated, the Human Rights Council is in charge of pursuing justice. It is unrealistic to believe that the Human Rights Council is going to summon a woman from rural Sudan or Somalia to stand in front of the council to undergo a trial. To completely impose these articles from the UDHR and expect these tribes to throw out centuries of culture is arrogant. We cannot expect cultures to completely erase what their elders and religious leaders have always told them to do, because they see no benefit. Little girls are raised to understand and believe that this is the best for them, because their mothers told them and their mothers told them, and so on. People who participate in FGM think of it as a practice that guarantees a successful future. Forcing these cultures to abide by the UDHR with zero regard in to their historical beliefs is not going to successfully stop the practice of female genital mutilation.

Ethnocentrism

An additional problem with the universalist approach is its inherent ethnocentrist foundation. According to scholars Neuliep and McCroskey (1997), ethnocentrism causes “individuals see their cultural group as being the best one and reject other cultures as being inferior because of perceived differences or a disagreement between cultural ideologies” (Khan & Brusckke, 2016, p 12). Other scholars believe ethnocentrism is natural and can potentially be a good thing, with Van den Berghe (1995) arguing that “ethnocentrism represents an extension of the basic mechanisms underlying kin-group selection to ethnic groups” (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2012, p 888). A less extreme version of ethnocentrism is patriotism, which is a healthy, appropriate emotion to feel towards one’s country. There is a difference between the two; patriotism has a positive connotation and is associated with camaraderie and loyalty.

Where ethnocentricity crosses a line is when it becomes judgmental and arrogant. Being ethnocentric automatically creates an ingroup-outgroup binary with prejudice towards the outgroup. Studies have found that “ethnocentrism, with its focus on ingroup superiority and importance of ingroup interests over those of the outgroup, could easily predispose people to become negative to outgroups” (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2012, p 891). Levels of ethnocentrism lead to lower levels of intercultural communication. Some scholars believe it is very important to have a higher amount of friends that are culturally different than you which will eventually lead to reduced effects of perceived threat of ethnocentrism (Khan & Bruschke, 2016, p 27). Another study found that “intercultural interactions with high friendship potential allow participants to develop a greater intellectual and relational capacity because of their meaningful, reciprocal exchange” (Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003). Developing higher levels of diversity within a culture has been proven by these studies to be beneficial to people because it brings more perspectives to light.

It is important to note that ethnocentrism is taught, it is not a natural-born ideology. Nobody is born believing that their society or culture is superior to others. This recurring principle correlates with the religious and political leaders in Africa and the Middle East upholding the tradition that female genital mutilation is necessary and ethical. The preservation of practices like FGM and ideologies like ethnocentrism will only further perpetuate intercultural conflict and continue to engrain negative behaviors that are passed down from generation to generation.

Ethnocentrism Case Study

Now that it has been established that ethnocentrism limits diversity which then leads to a more stagnant culture, the following paragraphs will provide an example of

ethnocentrism and how it can have negative implications. For our case study, we are going to use the recently passed Alabama Human Life Protection Act, signed in to action by Governor Kay Ivey (Governor.Alabama.gov). In short, it makes abortion illegal even though it contradicts the historically prevalent *Roe v Wade* Supreme Court case from 1973.

The United States has historically been built on Christian beliefs and values. The founding fathers were religious and wrote the Constitution with this foundation in mind. Freedom of religion is one of those inalienable rights people receive when they become a U.S. citizen, which is one of the reasons America is a great country (my own ethnocentric opinion). However, the United States has a law that allows people to believe or follow any religion, or none at all, and laws are passed with a religious agenda behind it, it cancels out the inalienable right to freedom of religion.

Most Christians fundamentally believe abortions equate to murder and should be illegal. People who consider themselves strictly pro-life believe that under no circumstances should a mother get an abortion. Pro-choice people believe that mothers should have a choice in whether or not they want to abort, and sometimes might not even personally believe in abortion but accept the notion that others might have to accept that reality. There is a very clear ingroup-outgroup binary at play, the ingroup being pro-life advocates. This leaves the pro-choice advocates to occupy the outgroup. The immediate message received by society is this law was passed with the pro-life ideology being dominant over pro-choice, perpetuating the deeply rooted Christian beliefs that stand as a foundation for the rest of the U.S. citizens to follow, even if some do not consider themselves religious or follow a contrasting religion. Pro-life advocates are by definition ethnocentric, and the Human Life Protection Act forces all Alabama citizens to conform to the dominant ethnocentric ideology.

Dialogical Approach

With the examples of universalism and relativism in regards to FGM, the case study of the new abortion law, and ethnocentrism, there are positives and negatives to each. It shows us just how difficult getting justice for human rights violations is. The extreme polarization of these theories does not make enforcing basic human rights in cultures who have fundamentally opposing beliefs easy. One scholar believes “The answer to the universalism–relativism debate lies not in the law itself, but in how one approaches the law” (Lenzerini, 2016). With a more dialogical approach to the UDHR, human rights allotted to every citizen of Earth is more applicable.

The dialogical approach looks to advance the global implementation of human rights law in a manner compatible with the preservation of culture-specific differences (Healy, 2006). It aims to enforce universal laws that every human deserves to have, but is respectful to the practices that do not cause any kind of harm to individuals. Other scholars believe “Dialogic attitudes are held to best nurture and actualize each individual's capacities and potentials... and those using this approach attempt to generate an atmosphere characterized by authenticity, inclusion, confirmation, presentness, a spirit of mutual equality, and a supportive climate” (Johannesen, 1996, p 66). A dialogical approach does not take away the need for a universal set of laws that protect against human rights abuses, but allows for the UDHR to be more applicable to the differing cultures around the world. It allows for universal enforcement of these laws, but in a way that is still respectful of intracultural practices.

In the UDHR, Article 23 deals with “components such as the right to join trade unions”, and Article 24 that “allows periodic holidays and leisure time and is often seen to hold bias towards the industrialized capitalist world, and to be much less relevant to

indigenous societies” (Bell, 2018, p 12). These are two examples of human rights that are of no importance to some cultures, but completely relevant to others not in the majority. We can not expect minority cultures to completely abide by laws that do not necessarily apply to them, and then reprimand them when they engage in intracultural practices. It is inherently ethnocentric and will not be successful.

The dialogical approach at its core is a compromise between the universalist and relativist approaches. When applied to a cultural practice such as FGM, the approach only works if everyone is completely committed to negotiation. The cultures that still practice FGM have to be able to accept some responsibility on their side and understand that it is a useless and extremely harmful tradition. The universalists who believe that the leaders who partake in this practice are evil misogynists need to understand that FGM is a tradition, as offensive to Western beliefs as it is, that has been a core part of their culture and how they have come to comprehend a women’s sexual maturation.

It is difficult to rationalize why even women would voluntarily subject themselves to such a practice, but the dialogical approach “calls for the adoption of an open-minded, questioning attitude in our interaction with other cultural traditions so as to facilitate the possibility of learning from difference in a sense that goes beyond mere tolerance” (Healy, 2006, p 524). There’s no sense of ethnocentrism present, because this approach eliminates prejudice that is present in the universalist approach. The dialogical approach still protects against human rights violations, but from a perspective of mutual learning. There is still a duty to protect humans against hate and violence, but there is a way to do it respectfully while at the same time learning from the different cultures around the world.

Conclusion

Ensuring justice for human rights violations while at the same time respecting intracultural practices is difficult. The dialogical approach is the only way to explain why an old tradition is harmful and useless to an entire society that believes it is imperative to becoming a female adult, while not imposing westernized ideals of law. This approach helps us accept potential cultural differences while still protecting people against human rights violations. It's important to remember that people have had vastly different life experiences which led them to where they are. Imposing personal beliefs on others who don't hold the same beliefs is not ethical, regardless of whether you are an adolescent female in rural Africa or unexpectedly pregnant in Alabama.

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