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A CASE OF MISSING PERSONS: CULTURAL RELATIVISM IN TODAY'S WORLD



Introduction

In the nineteenth century, ethnologists quite regularly documented "exotic" customs such as human sacrifice, infanticide, and ritual suicide. In the early twentieth century, as cultural relativism emerged as a strong value in the discipline, cultural anthropologists, for the most part, avoided writing about such practices. Rather than debating the moral issues that one encounters when learning about another culture, anthropologists concentrated on topics like kinship systems, agricultural practices, leadership patterns, and myths. Today, a growing interest in defining universal human rights has ignited a lively debate within anthropology about cultural relativism.

Cultural relativism, the principle that cultural traits are best understood in the context of the cultural system of which they are a part and, therefore, not subject to external or absolute standards, became a central tenet of cultural anthropology, particularly as anthropologists sought to dispel notions of racism and ethnocentrism in the early twentieth century. Cultural relativism asks us to engage in a "suspension" of our values so that we might interpret other peoples' customs in the context of their cultures. To do otherwise -- to judge other peoples' customs from our own culture's viewpoint -- often leads to ethnocentrism, or the belief that one's own culture and its values are superior to that of others.



Many anthropologists still hold to some form of "absolute cultural relativism" by which anything that is acceptable in any one culture has to be viewed as acceptable by an outsider seeking to understand the practice. My study of contemporary patterns of female infanticide, sex-selective abortion, and general neglect and abuse of females in India has led me to a revised view that I call "critical cultural relativism."

Studies in Mortality

Population dynamics can be grouped under three major areas of study: fertility (reproduction and population growth), mortality (death), and migration (population movements). Both population anthropology and medical anthropology address these topics, but population anthropologists have paid far more attention to studying fertility and migration than to studying mortality, until recently.

Mortality is more difficult to research in a typical fieldwork period (one year) and within the traditional fieldwork setting of a village or urban neighborhood. In one year's time, several births might occur in a village of 1,000 people, and many people may migrate in and out. But only one infant death may occur, and no murders or suicides.

Death may, of course, occur randomly, with no discernible pattern associated with a particular person's death, at a particular time, or from a particular cause. Death is often the result of biological factors that impair the body's functioning, such as a malformation in an infant's heart. In short, there often are non-cultural factors determining the time and cause of death.

Culture and Mortality

In many cases, culturally-shaped patterns play a key role in putting certain people more "at risk" of dying from a particular cause, or at a particular age, than otherwise. We only have to look at statistics on mortality from car accidents in the United States, and especially from car accidents in which alcohol is involved, to see that such deaths are not evenly spread throughout the population. Culturally prescribed roles for adolescent males that involve "macho" type display behavior, excessive alcohol consumption, and otherwise dangerous lifestyle features are obviously implicated in the much higher mortality rates they experience, compared to females and older age groups.

Starting even before birth, an infant's chances of survival are influenced by culture. In societies where women are overworked and undernourished because of culturally constructed patterns of discrimination, infants are likely to be smaller and therefore less likely to survive infancy than in societies where prenatal care receives more attention.

In some societies, once a baby is born, culture plays an immediate and direct role in deciding whether or not the child will live. Abundant evidence from around the world documents the deliberate killing of offspring as almost a cultural universal. However, infanticide is usually not a frequent or widespread phenomenon within any particular society as a whole.

The mechanisms of infanticide differ, historically and cross-culturally. Infanticide refers to deliberate killings of juvenile offspring, but the word "deliberate" is not easy to define. Marvin Harris, a leading American anthropologist of the cultural materialism tradition, has contributed much to

contemporary thinking on infanticide. He distinguishes between direct and indirect infanticide.

Direct infanticide is the intentional killing of a child, by such common methods as poisoning, exposure to weather, smothering, or strangling. Indirect infanticide is more subtle and may not be exactly "deliberate." Indirect infanticide results in the death of a child through such practices as neglect in care and treatment. For example, not feeding a baby enough leads to malnutrition and lack of resistance to disease, and not taking the child to the clinic for treatment of an illness may allow the illness to progress to a terminal stage.

In different cultures, different children are at risk of infanticide. For example, it may be children born with teeth, since they are believed to be witches, or one of a set of twins since twins are widely believed to be inauspicious, or firstborn boys. Considering all the evidence we have for infanticide cross-culturally, we can say that the preponderant cases of systematic infanticide -- infanticide that is practiced by comparatively many people in the society, through history -- are systems of female infanticide.

In the United States, there are substantial numbers of infant murders and untold cases of fatal child abuse each year. But victims do not seem to be consistently more of one gender than another, as far as current statistics indicate (although cases of sexual abuse tend to involve far more cases of female children as victims).

Rural India: A Case Study

Information about son preference and daughter neglect in rural India (80 percent of India's population lives in rural areas) provides solid

clues to the problem of why and how so many girls die. However, there is still much that is not known, and cultural anthropology can play an important role in generating further knowledge that might be useful to health planners. In addition, there are people in India who do not support the discrimination against females, who are working to encourage new social policies to promote equality between the sexes in Indian society today.

We know that the most extreme and widespread scarcity of girls is seen in the northwestern region of India. This pattern is similar to the distribution of direct infanticide as revealed through a study of reports from the 1800s. For more contemporary periods, census data collected by the government of India every ten years, throughout the nation, allow us to calculate "sex ratios" (that is, the number of boys per girls, so that "perfect" balance -- although this rarely occurs -- would be 100 boys for every 100 girls).

Biologists have shown that in humans, the sex ratio at conception is 120:100, with more boys than girls. Despite the fact that female embryos have a higher mortality rate than males within the first two weeks of conception, the mortality rate of males is greater than that of females at every age thereafter. By birth, the sex ratio has fallen to about 106:100 in most documented populations, and throughout the life span, the ratio continues to fall. The result is that there are more males than females in the younger generations, but increasingly more females than males in the older population.

Research on juvenile sex ratios (for under ten-year-olds) in India shows that in some areas of the northwestern plains, ratios exist of 115-120 boys for every 100 girls. This means that one of every five or six girls dies an excess

death compared to boys.

Daughters and Dowries

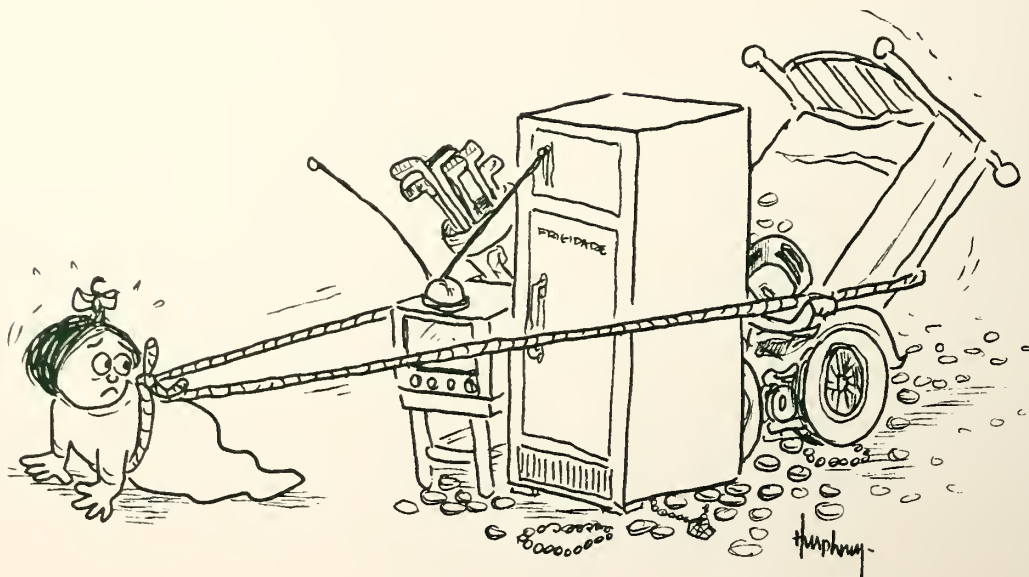
One might guess that the poverty of India drives people to kill female infants or to let them die through neglect. But in India, the scarcity of daughters has consistently been greatest among the "propertied" class -- farmers who own their land, as compared to landless agricultural wage-workers -- and upper caste groups in the north. This social pattern causes perplexity among many people in the United States, since most Euro-Americans have a "rationality" model of "child investment," a model which sees poverty, not wealth, as a force driving people to do difficult and unpleasant things to other people.

Why, then, does female infanticide and neglect make sense from the perspective of the propertied class? North Indian propertied-class cultural rules of marriage, in conjunction with the limitations for women's wage earning in this class, make daughters a very costly burden to raise. It is essential that a girl be

married, since spinsterhood is a great stigma for her and her family, and she must be married to a boy of a somewhat higher socioeconomic status, requiring a very expensive dowry. North Indian-style dowry includes goods such as furniture (refrigerator, bed, motorcycle, watch, clothing, jewelry) and, increasingly, large sums of cash. The better the dowry, the "better" the groom's family will be. If a family seeks to marry off a daughter well, the expenses will put them in debt for many years. That burden is even greater if there is more than one daughter to be married.

Therefore, having a limited number of daughters is a poverty *avoidance* strategy for those who are *not* poor. The problem with having more than one daughter is not that the family cannot afford to feed them as children, but that they cannot afford to get them married properly later on.

Consider in the North Indian propertied group context the difference between having sons versus daughters. If you have a son, you can expect that he will "bring in" with his bride a



substantial sum of money and goods, because in this kinship system, daughters "marry out" of their natal family (exogamy) and take up residence in their husband's natal home or village.

As dowry is evolving in India in the 1990s, more and more of its contents goes to the groom's family rather than to the newly-married couple. If a family has several sons, it is likely to be in very good financial shape. Incoming dowry through one's sons' marriages can be used, in turn, to pay for the dowry of one's own daughter(s). Given this system, a parent wants to have more sons than daughters.

Among the poor, although dowry has become more common since the 1970s, daughters were traditionally married with no dowry, or even with the transfer of bridewealth or brideprice. Bridewealth is usually a cash amount of a fixed rate which is transferred from the family of a groom to the father of the bride. Compared to dowry, brideprice is a much smaller amount, and a prospective groom can work to earn it himself rather than being totally dependent on his family to provide it. Imagine, in this system, if you were the parent of several daughters; the prospect of receiving bridewealth would make a big difference in your attitude about having daughters.

Impact of Modernization

Modernization theorists claim that with increasing urbanization, industrialization, and education, discrimination against girls and women declines. But over the past several decades, the scarcity of girls in India has been spreading, both regionally and socially. Comparison of unbalanced juvenile sex ratios from the decade 1961-1971 revealed that a substantially greater number of districts had "suspiciously high" sex ratios in 1971 than in

1961: from one fourth of all India's districts up to one-third. Geographically, the problem is spreading outward from the northwestern core area into all directions.

Another major change since the 1980s is the increasing use of medical technology to learn the sex of a fetus and to seek an abortion in the case of a female fetus. This technology is now widely available in India, even though its use for sex-selection purposes was recently banned by the national government. Statistics from a large study of births in northwestern India reveal that people are aborting female fetuses in large numbers. Sex ratios at birth are reaching 115-120 boys per 100 girls, similar to what was previously the result of indirect infanticide in the same area. (Compare the expected "normal" ratio of about 106 boys to 100 girls.)

Recent evidence of direct female infanticide has also emerged in several rural areas of the state of Tamil Nadu in far southern India. It is not currently known whether this is a new practice or whether it has been going on for a long time and simply unnoticed by researchers and health care workers. The state government of Tamil Nadu, which is relatively progressive concerning women's issues, has taken several steps to help stop this practice, including setting up "drop boxes" for unwanted female babies who can then be adopted, and offering to pay marriage costs for daughters once they are grown.

The Anthropologist and Social Policy

Should anthropologists who study groups made vulnerable by societally defined conditions of inequality become involved in policy and action that alleviates such inequalities? Emphasis on key areas of research can add much to our understanding of how and why people are systematically

disadvantaged by their culture and anthropologists can suggest ways to improve their situation.

According to absolute cultural relativism, anything that goes on in any culture is "just fine" because, it is said, no one has the right to judge the rightness or wrongness of any behavior or belief, and such judgment would be ethnocentric. According to this view, anthropologists should maintain their objectivity and remain uninvolved in policy or social action.

Consider where this position leads by looking at one of the horrors of the twentieth century: the Holocaust during World War II. Millions of Jews and other minorities in much of Eastern and Western Europe were killed as part of the German Aryan supremacy campaign. The absolute cultural relativist position would hold that the Holocaust was undertaken according to the values of the culture in which it occurred, so who are we to say anything about it?

Can anyone feel truly comfortable with such a position? We have to ask, "Whose culture supported the values that killed millions of people on the grounds of racial purity?" It was not the culture of the Jews and the Gypsies. It was the culture of Aryan supremacists, who were a subgroup primarily of Germans. We have a much more culturally complex picture than a simple absolute cultural relativist statement can take into account. There was not "one" culture and its values involved. Rather, we see an example of cultural imperialism at work, whereby one culture claims supremacy over minority cultures and proceeds to exterminate the latter in the interests of the former. We can perceive oppressors and victims.

Critical Cultural Relativism

An alternative conceptual option is what I term *critical cultural relativism*. This perspective is situated within the general framework of cultural relativism, whereby we try to view all cultures empathically from the inside. But it is more specific. It prompts us to understand the plural interests within any society (whether it is between Nazis and Jews, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, men and women, the able and the less able) and to understand the power relationships between these interest groups. We must critique the behavior of these groups from the standpoint of some set of more or less generally agreed upon human rights.

French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss commented that "No society is perfect," even when considered from what that society claims as moral values. He pinpoints the difficult position of the anthropologist who looks from one culture to another. The predicament is how to maintain what could be called scientific objectivity. Lévi-Strauss claims that the task of the anthropologist is to study "the other" without passing judgment. Other anthropologists claim, to the contrary, that since one cannot ever achieve true objectivity, the best we can do is examine and expose our own biases, and then try to treat all cultures equally, to look equally critically at all cultures -- one's own and "others." Critical cultural relativism tries to do this in terms of a set of universal human rights.

Cultural anthropologists following a path of critical cultural relativism face the challenge of what might be considered universal human rights; that is, rights that should be guaranteed to all people everywhere regardless of their culture. Defining human rights in a cross-cultural perspective may seem like an easy task. For example, we might argue that the

right to food and health care should be universal. But the case of India's missing millions of girls illustrates just how difficult this might be.

Extreme cultural relativists argue that a balanced sex ratio, or even gender equality in health and welfare, is ethnocentric, and since they do not seem to apply to India, then they are not appropriately applied there. In such a view, an unbalanced sex ratio -- achieved through female infanticide and neglect and sex-selective abortion -- is culturally appropriate and acceptable.

Indian Activists

One can argue to the contrary, though, because many people in India are "egalitarianists" and do not support the inequality that does exist. As the following story, told to me by a long-time medical doctor serving in the rural areas of northern India, indicates, little girls who are discriminated against are also able to express their unhappiness with the situation, at least through their tears:

In one village, I went into a house to examine a young girl, and I found that she had an advanced case of tuberculosis. I asked the mother why she hadn't done something sooner about the girl's condition because now, at this stage, the treatment would be very expensive. The mother replied, "then let her die, I have another daughter." At the time, the two daughters sat nearby listening, one with tears streaming down her face.

In India, activists are working on many fronts to try to equalize life chances for males and females, from political lobbying against sex-selective abortion to grassroots work with parents, teaching them the value of daughters.

Cultural anthropologists can contribute to a more precise understanding of just where, and in which groups, little girls are at most risk of dying so that appropriate action might be taken to remedy the situation. And they can help with better understanding of how and why this happens, so that policies might go to the root of the problem and not just the surface. Cultural anthropologists could carry on research in the following arenas, showing:

1. How schooling affects attitudes toward sons and daughters and other matters such as dowry marriage and women's work. While many scholars insist that "education is the key," ironically the data for India show that, in northern India, the poorest and least educated people are less discriminatory toward daughters than many more well-off and educated people. In India, being educated goes with middle and upper class lifestyles, and such are not necessarily egalitarianist; indeed, they may be extremely conservative when it comes to women's rights.

2. How more and better health care provisions might affect female child health and survival. Some scholars argue that if more clinics were available, then parents would care for children of both genders more equally. Currently, however, studies show that parents in the northern part of the country are using better health care facilities for their sons, not their infant daughters, even when the distance to the clinic is not great.

3. How women's work affects gender patterns of child survival. Development studies demonstrate that, worldwide, children's welfare responds more positively to an increase in maternal earning power compared to an increase in paternal earning power, because mothers more than fathers use their income for household welfare expenditures. In northern India, where strong negative

sanctions exist about women's work for rural middle and upper-class families, it is difficult to know how women's earnings could be enhanced and if women would have the intrahousehold power to allocate earnings toward equal treatment of children.

4. How mothers deal psychologically with the loss of children. Is maternal grief a Western luxury that rural Indian mothers are socialized against? How do parents and other household members speak about the deaths of children, wanted or unwanted? And how is this changing, given the now widespread availability of television with its international messages about behavior, emotion, and discourse?

Although more is known now than fifty years ago about the cultural dynamics of India's missing females, the entire story is only slowly and unevenly unfolding. Much more needs to be known. In the United States, in addition, we must face the fact that increasing numbers of parents are seeking sex-selective abortion. The problem of gender-specific reproductive wishes is not just "over there," but increasingly in our own culture. Critical cultural relativism helps us to better understand cultural practices and actions desirable to take, given certain norms of universal moral behavior and universal human rights.

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About Barbara Miller

Barbara Miller first became interested in India in elementary school and as a senior in high school took a course in cultural anthropology at a local college. While an undergraduate at Syracuse, she participated in a year-long study program in Banaras, India. She received her PhD, with distinction, from Syracuse University in 1978. She plans to return to India for extended research in the future.

Barbara's research interests include child survival, women's health status, the cultural construction of morbidity and mortality, migration and mental health, intrahousehold dynamics, public policy regarding the household, and rural development in relation to population dynamics. She has done field research in India, Bangladesh, and Jamaica, and has coauthored a book on Sri Lanka.

For Further Reading

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