



A World View from Anthropology: Human Universals and Cultural Relativism

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In addressing the topic of “Education, World Citizenship and the North/South Divide” at the World Scout Scientific Congress, I have chosen to lay out what I believe to be the core beliefs and practices of my own academic discipline—anthropology—as they bear on these issues. As is the case with many academics, anthropologists are often most animated by our own internal dramas and debates. Nevertheless, there are aspects of anthropological theory, method and practice that may be of interest to practitioners working with world-wide youth movements like Scouting.

Anthropology in its most expansive moments takes as its canvas the human condition, irrespective of time and space. We set as our task the understanding of all human beings, in all societies and at all stages of historical and evolutionary development. On a more modest note, let us say that anthropologists attempt to address the full range of similarities and differences in human behaviour. Many anthropologists choose to stress the obvious differences between people in different societies generally drawing on the notion of cultural relativism to frame these differences. Other anthropologists concern themselves more with human universals—the psychic unity of mankind—often attributing commonalities to the shared biological nature of the human species.

In recent years, these different approaches exploded into a bitter public controversy involving two anthropologists, Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman. This controversy may be relevant in the present instance because the issue at stake was the nature of adolescence. Indeed, the debate questioned the very existence of adolescence as a universal stage of human life-cycle development. I will briefly review the Mead-Freeman controversy and, drawing on the work of several contemporary anthropologists, attempt to derive some pragmatic lessons that can usefully guide us in addressing these issues in a world that simultaneously seems more global

and more fragmented than ever.

Margaret Mead was a well-known public figure, honoured by many as the single most famous anthropologist in the United States and perhaps in the world. She assiduously cultivated this persona and was ever ready and willing to wade into public controversies to deliver her judgements and offer counsel. One might even argue that it was this very public fame that drew the attention of Derek Freeman, an Australian anthropologist - relatively unknown outside the academic world, who enjoyed a solid if unspectacular reputation within the discipline.

Interestingly, Margaret Mead was initiating her career in anthropology at roughly the same time that Sir Robert Baden-Powell was hard at work fomenting the international Movement that came to be known as Scouting. Following his initial efforts to establish the early version of Scouting in England prior to World War I, Baden-Powell was working in the post-war period to expand Scouting to other countries, while struggling with complex organizational issues within the Movement.

During this period—roughly the first quarter of the 20th century—most fledgling American anthropologists, especially those who trained under Franz Boas at Columbia University, did their fieldwork among American Indian tribes. Boas was working to establish anthropology as an academic discipline at a time when it was mostly centred in museums and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, DC. The field was mostly staffed by well-heeled amateurs and adventuresome individuals without advanced academic credentials.

Boas set out his research agenda in opposition to the dominant interpretive paradigm of the day— evolutionism.¹ This approach essentially argued that all extant cultures could be arrayed on an evolutionary scale from most primitive (savagery) through intermediate stages (barbarism) leading to the final stage (civilization) as embodied in the cultures of Europe (and by extension the U.S.). A racial hierarchy was presumed to parallel social and cultural evolution and in such indices as colour, head shape and nasal configuration could be read the technology, marriage customs, social institutions, religious beliefs and economic practices of all societies. Tribal societies were interpreted in effect as living fossils. This was often conjoined with a social-Darwinist vision of survival of the fittest that fit nicely with imperial themes.

The leading scholar of adolescence at the time, G. Stanley Hall, espoused a narrow form of evolutionist thinking, recapitulationism, in which the stages of human maturation were seen as paralleling the presumed stages of social evolution from savagery to barbarism to civilization (i.e.; ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny). As an intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood, adolescence was equated to barbarism. The task of society was to quell and tame the instincts of this intermediate stage of human development in order to produce civilized adults from barbarous adolescents.²

In part, Boas set out to place “culture” at the centre of the anthropological enterprise, replacing the emphasis on “nature,” which he argued was all too often based on erroneous racial assumptions. So it came to pass that Margaret Mead, his eager and energetic young graduate student, set out for Samoa on her first fieldwork expedition to ascertain whether in fact adolescence was an inevitable period of storm and stress (*sturm und drang*) dictated by human biological nature or an artefact of the specific civilization (culture) in which young people are socialized. In one of the most famous books ever written by an anthropologist, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, she made her case that in this relatively relaxed and care-free Pacific Island society, young girls did not exhibit the signs of stress and turmoil characteristic of their North American counterparts.

This was clearly a welcome message in terms of Boas' drive to institutionalize anthropology in the academy based on nurture (culture) rather than nature (race). Boas was a political activist as was Mead, both of whom were responding to the rapidly changing social environment in the United States with its contemporary culture wars. The emancipation of women, the loosening of rigid religious controls, the emergence of urban culture, and progressive movements in education provided a fertile public context for the reception of Mead's first publication. Within the academy the book received less respectful attention, but it was clearly a major success in the public forum.

Boas and his students enshrined cultural relativism at the core of American anthropology. Customs and practices were to be understood in terms of the cultural context in which they operated without a priori judgements about their meaning (Ito-Adler, in *Dictionary of Anthropology* 1997:98). As part of the methodology of carrying out first hand ethnographic fieldwork, cultural relativism remains a hallmark of anthropological work in the U.S. and Boas was indefatigable in opposing any sweeping theoretical constructs such as Lewis Henry Morgan's unilineal evolutionist models. He was also anti-racist in rejecting any attempts to stigmatize other races or cultures as inferior, especially on supposed evolutionist grounds.

The meaning of a custom or practice or artefact was best explained in the context of the actual culture in which it occurred rather than by placing it in a hierarchical evolutionary sequence.

Derek Freeman's critique of Mead's work on Samoa took many forms. Basically, he argued that in her zeal to support Boas' research agenda, she misinterpreted the Samoan data to support her desire to see adolescence as culturally determined and not an inevitable stage of human development based on our species biology. He also believed he discovered that she had been hoaxed by her informants based on his own work in Samoa. His work was delivered in a very public forum and found a ready audience in many quarters among those who were hostile to the message of cultural relativism, broadly conceived.

Part of the reaction was no doubt due to the spread of cultural relativism beyond academic anthropology to become a general perspective that was more or less used to argue that anything goes. "If the bongo-bongo do it why can't we" was an argument very appealing to those attacking the status quo and anathema to those defending more conservative positions. And the topic of adolescence, especially in matters relating to sexuality, is always guaranteed to get a rise out of the defenders and attackers of the status quo. This is as true today as it was a century ago.

Since my objective is to indicate what in anthropology might prove useful in understanding youth movements, it is unnecessary to delve too deeply into the debate. One could spend a lifetime analysing the Mead-Freeman controversy—indeed doctoral dissertations could be and have been written on the topic.

University libraries are filled with treatises and articles analysing the personal calumny and rancour engendered by the attacks and counter attacks. Much of this acrimony sheds heat not light on the issues.

To the extent that meaning is the focus of research, cultural relativism is an excellent methodological tool that need not imply ethical relativism or the absence of standards to judge. No known culture has ever been relativistic in relation to its own norms and standards; but it is clearly impossible to understand other human beings (where "other" implies people with a different culture) without granting that they too might have their own particular norms and standards. Incidentally, this holds true for interpreting people's behaviour in earlier times (i.e. Baden-Powell) in our own culture who were responding to issues defined by the times (*zeitgeist*) in which they were acting. In fact, the historian's challenge is precisely to understand those times, when arriving at their interpretations without imposing anachronistic

interpretations based on present values.

In anthropological experience and practice, no “other” culture has ever been encountered that was resistant to efforts to learn their language and gain a sufficient grasp of their cultural norms and standards to understand how they define and play the game—so to speak. We can do this because we are all human beings and share a basic human nature that provides sufficient commonalities that we can get started on communicating. Understanding is not the same as approving, but it seems clear that it is a necessary first step in arriving at informed judgements.

One of the human universals is a life cycle closely tied to our species’ characteristic physiological development and its social correlates. Sexual reproduction, paternity uncertainty, sexual dimorphism, prolonged infant dependency, universal capacity for language, etc., are shared across all cultures and societies. This gives us a starting point. Returning to Mead’s perspective on Samoan adolescence, we note that she did not deny that Samoan girls are born as infants and at some point experience menarche and grow into adults capable of reproducing physically and raising a next generation of children. She did make the case that they understand this process in their own terms and—given their social arrangements—did not necessarily perceive it as unduly stressful and threatening.

Freeman, arguing that she overlooked, missed or misinterpreted the data, made the case that adolescence in Samoa was indeed stressful and that far from being a tropical paradise with uninhibited expression of sensuality (our myth), there was much evidence that the darker side of human nature was there to be seen by someone without ideological blinders—aggression, rape, violence, stigmatized forms of behaviour, etc.

He was undoubtedly correct in his dismissal of an overly romantic image of Samoa as a tropical paradise.

Both Mead and Freeman saw the situation as interactive—owing to both nature and nurture—but clearly had different research agendas, political stances, and career objectives. The controversy is interesting in historical terms, but in my opinion holds little of further value for us in terms of discerning what we might need to know about adolescence as a life stage in cross-cultural terms in order to get on with understanding what insights anthropology has to offer the world Scouting Movement.

One of the central questions is to understand variation across cultures and within cultures. Perhaps a more useful critique of Mead’s approach is derived from Anthony F.C. Wallace’s analysis of anthropological attempts to relate culture patterns to individual psychological orientations. One of the central tenets of the cultural approach is that culture transcends individual participation, yet is embodied in the particular set of individuals sharing it. A Scout Troop can persist as a social entity as older boys leave and younger ones enter, as leaders depart and are replaced in their social roles by successors—indeed, this is characteristic of any age-based organization. To remain viable through time, the values, attitudes and range of acceptable behaviour must be reproduced through recruitment, socialization, and enculturation—or maybe not as the culture of the groups changes over time.

Wallace argued that there are two dominant approaches to resolving this dilemma, which he termed the “replication of uniformity” approach and the “organization of diversity” approach. He pointed out that many anthropologists in the field of culture and personality studies (Mead being a prominent example) favoured the first approach. An ideal adult personality type is set forth and every effort is made to bend the young “twigs” so that the adult “trees” turn out to be true to type. In this approach, the main problem is deviancy—the individuals who cannot or will not conform to the ideal. As an aside, Mead—ever the nonconformist—obviously felt that by studying the range of actual variation across cultures she would be able to argue the contingent nature of norms and standards in her own culture thus preparing the

way to make progressive changes to lessen the burden felt by “deviants” from the existing standards, especially with regard to gender roles.

A correlate of this approach was the belief that in so-called simpler societies of the type favoured by anthropologists for their field work, the range of individual variation would be smaller and thus more amenable to study than in complex industrial societies. Wallace himself took psychological testing materials to the field, including Rorschach tests, and convincingly demonstrated that in fact there was no single modal (most common) personality type among the members of the Indian tribe he studied as measured by psychological instruments. This led him to argue that in fact the relation between individual personalities and cultural patterns could best be understood as a problem of the “organization of diversity.” Diversity among individuals was irreducible and endemic, so successful (i.e. viable) cultures would have to be able to organize this diversity into workable institutional arrangements. People needed to have the mutual capacity to make reasonably accurate predictions about their fellows’ behaviour which did not necessarily depend on shared values, motivations, etc. In fact, Wallace went further and argued that most institutions depended on a non-sharing of values, knowledge and goals in order to function adequately.

So what does this say about successful organizing within the Scouting Movement? At a first approximation, Scouting holds to a “replication of uniformity” model. The Movement identifies ideal values, forms of behaviour, shared symbols and ritual experiences that provide commonalities across time and space. This might be dubbed the catholic moment in that the shared elements are universal aspects of the experience and those who are unwilling or unable to accept and attempt to emulate them are outside the Movement.

Clearly, in the early history of Scouting, there were protestant schisms as alternate movements hived off and competed in the organizational space or sought alternate environments to develop their own visions.

There was also a relatively successful attempt to incorporate divergent pre-existing organizations under the umbrella of the one true Scouting Movement identified with the founder, Sir Robert Baden-Powell.

But, Scouting as a growing Movement faced the dilemma of growth versus purity so to speak. The more rigidly defined the prescriptive standards, the less attractive it would be, but the more loosely defined, the less coherent and faithful to the original model. As Scouting spread to other countries, the decentralized nature of the international Movement would enable local practitioners to make such adjustments as necessary to successfully recruit new members and establish new units. It would be interesting to study just how this process worked and in anthropology there is a growing field of study that follows the fortunes of successful enterprises that expand on a global (transnational) basis and the accommodations they make to local sensibilities and sensitivities. This raises the inevitable question of just how much can an organizational model change and still be said to be faithful to the original?

One thing is clear—the outward behaviour can be identical in form, but the meaning of the activity to local participants may be quite different from that attributed to it by participants in the home setting. One example might suffice. Scouting in the United States might be a means for suburban youth to participate in the world of nature and to develop archaic even rustic skills; in short, provide a respite from the perceived debilitating effects of modern urban civilization, especially among the suburban middle classes. It may well be that in a less developed third world country, Scouting might be perceived as an exported product of a more developed society. Importing it would enable them to participate in a modernizing institution, provide access to shared experience with those in the first world. This may be mere speculation and in fact Scouting may be only of interest to youth in cognate settings (urban, well-off, etc.) in countries that are trying to emerge from the dominance of traditional

tribal or rural cultural settings.

The North-South Divide is a short-hand way to invoke the division between wealthier countries (the North) and poorer countries (the South). The wealthier countries are the developed countries and the poorer countries are variously described as the least developed, developing or underdeveloped countries. This distinction maps somewhat haphazardly on notions of the First, Second, Third and sometimes Fourth Worlds, with the First World and parts of the Second World included in the North and the Third and Fourth Worlds in the South. The distinction originally tagged with the geographical markers (North and South, as opposed to the East and West of Baden-Powell's era) has become more tied to comparative wealth and degree of development per se than actual latitude.

It is also clear that the terminology refers to "countries" or nation-states as the unit of analysis.

Interestingly, within countries (say the United Kingdom in the northern hemisphere or Brazil in the southern hemisphere) when the North-South Divide is invoked, the connotations are reversed and, in both, the South is the wealthier, more developed region and the North is the poorer, less developed region. For our purposes then, we need to be aware not just of international contexts, but intra-national ones as well.

This has led to an interesting situation in the countries where Scouting was born and nurtured. Scouting has evolved from being presented as a gateway to participation in the modern world for poor disadvantaged youth, to being a means of avoiding or counteracting the pernicious effects of contemporary youth culture for relatively advantaged youth.

Scouting has its own dynamic of centralization/decentralization based on its nested hierarchical organization. In one of the best anthropological studies of Scouting, entitled *On My Honor*³, Jay Mechling combines an intensive study of the summer camp run by a U.S. Scout Troop in California, with his analysis of cultural and social aspects of the universal problem of constructing male gender identities during adolescence. He points out those individual boys are organized into patrols that are organized into Troops that are loosely grouped in regional councils that are overseen by National Scouting Organizations that are in a federated world organization of Scouting. He makes a strong argument that in terms of impact on their lives the most important level is the Troop as represented by the Scoutmaster and mediated through the senior/junior levels and the patrol organization. He discusses at length the national level where the battles over different family models, political ideologies, the "culture wars" are fought.

In turn, the various "winners" at the national level in terms of defining the cultural models for Scouting in their own societies meet at the transnational level to discuss and debate these same issues. To sit next to a Finnish Scout leader one moment and then a Scout leader from Saudi Arabia, during the World Scout Movement's 2007 Conference in Geneva, is to become acutely conscious of the range of cultural responses to dealing with the issue of adolescent sexual maturation, norms of adult gender roles, religious beliefs (or the lack thereof). As Mechling puts it, the problems of dealing with "gays and girls" in organizations that began as strongly committed to addressing crises of masculinity in their own society are paramount. I believe that recognition of the inevitable human universal and culturally particular elements in these debates will provide a more sophisticated if less polemically satisfying approach to dealing with the issues.

This must be joined with an appreciation of the organizational problems of nested hierarchy with varying degrees of top down (central/peripheral) control and grass roots, bottom up autonomy in defining and dealing with the problems. Education for world citizenship will come with recognition of both our similarities and differences across these horizontal and vertical social boundaries that define the human species, the social structures we live in and

the cultures we live by.

The form of education that Scouting has pioneered is best understood as complementary to the two major forms of education recognized on a world-wide basis. Scouting is extra-familial and non-formal where formal is defined as school system sanctioned by the state. Baden-Powell created a brilliant pedagogical system based on his amalgamation of the British public (private elite) model and the British army model. It relied on a senior-junior mechanism among the ranks, eschewing classroom models. It was activity/adventure based (which worked especially well for boys), and was (following Seton) standard-based rather than fostering unwelcome forms of internal competition.

As Scouting spread to societies beyond the Anglo-American world, it fitted into the complementary space between family and school (and sometimes alongside church) that varies across societies. Drawing on informal forms of cultural transmission that exist in every society, Scouting was able to mediate the gulf between children's worlds and adult worlds that exist in every social setting. Mechling, a folklore-oriented anthropologist, is especially good on the rituals and social learning that boys learn from older boys, pass on to younger boys and then forget in a form of generational amnesia as adults. This escapes—fortunately—the attention of the adults who believe they are running the Scouting show at a national level and offers adolescents an invaluable learning environment at the local level.

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1 It is interesting to note that Baden-Powells father, the Reverend Baden Powell, was deeply involved in the mid-19th century debates on evolution. His basically was a voice favouring evolution from within the church; a stance which caused him no end of trouble.

2 It is also of interest that Boas first academic job was at Clark University in Worcester, MA where he had been hired in an entry-level position as docent of anthropology by none other than G. Stanley Hall, president of the university.

3 Jay Mechling, *On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2001).