

the presumed age and cultural attribution of individual remains are correct. Of course, all of these concerns have serious budgetary considerations.

While NAGPRA has produced conflicts, it has also both vastly increased the tempo of work on skeletal collections and provided an avenue for new cooperation between Native Americans and researchers. Many of the collections now analyzed would not have been examined if not for NAGPRA. Native claims will, in some instances, necessitate additional research on poorly documented groups. Indeed, anthropological or archaeological research may be critical to assessing the association and ownership of cultural materials and human remains. On the other hand, anthropologists are given the opportunity to share their discoveries with those populations for whom the knowledge is most relevant.

## Applied Anthropology and Human Rights

**18.4** Discuss how applied anthropologists are engaged in human rights research.

### Cultural Relativism and Human Rights

A recent development that has had wide-ranging consequences for applied anthropology and ethnographic research involves the ways in which anthropologists assess and respond to the values and norms of other societies. Recall our discussion of *cultural relativism*, the method used by anthropologists to understand another society through their own cultural values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors. In order to understand an indigenous culture, the anthropologist must strive to temporarily suspend judgment of that culture's practices (Maybury-Lewis 2002). Anthropologists refer to this as *methodological relativism* (Brown 2008). While difficult, this procedure does help the anthropologist gain insights into that culture. However, some critics have charged that anthropologists (and other people) who adopt this position cannot (or will not) make value judgments concerning the values, norms, and practices of any society. If this is the case, then how can anthropologists encourage any conception of human rights that would be valid for all of humanity? Must anthropologists accept such practices as infanticide, caste and class inequalities, slavery, torture, and female subordination out of fear of forcing their own values on other people?

**Relativism Reconsidered** These criticisms have led some anthropologists to reevaluate the basic assumptions regarding cultural relativism. In his 1983 book *Culture and Morality: The Relativity of Values in Anthropology*, Elvin

Hatch recounted the historical acceptance of the cultural relativist view. As we saw in Chapter 13, this was the approach of Franz Boas, who challenged the unilinear-evolutionary models of nineteenth-century anthropologists like E. B. Tylor, with their underlying assumptions of Western cultural superiority. Boas's approach, with its emphasis on tolerance and equality, appealed to many liberal-minded Western scholars. For example, the earlier nineteenth-century ethnocentric and racist assumptions held within anthropology were used at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis to display other peoples as barbaric, uncivilized, and savage people to the "civilized" citizens who viewed them. These "pygmies" from Central Africa were given machetes to show how they "beheaded" one another in their local regions, and the Igorot tribal people of the Philippines were given a dog to cook and eat daily in front of the "civilized" citizens of the United States in order to portray them as inferior races and cultures (Breitbart 1997). Such displays of these peoples during that period both distorted their cultural practices and allowed *anthropologists* of the time to treat them in an inhumane and unethical manner; they also resulted in harmful practices toward these native peoples in different regions. Thus, the criticisms of these racist and ethnocentric views and the endorsement of cultural relativism were important human rights innovations by twentieth-century anthropologists. In addition, many Westerners were stunned by the horrific events of World War I and the devastation and massive casualties for people within Western societies that were supposedly morally and culturally superior to other, non-Western societies. Cultural relativism appealed to many people in the West as a corrective to the earlier racist and ethnocentric views (Hatch 1983; Brown 2008).

**Ethical Relativism** However, belief in cultural relativism led to the acceptance by some early-twentieth-century



1904 World's Fair in St. Louis showing "pygmies" beholding one another. This was never an aspect of "pygmy" culture.

anthropologists of moral or ethical relativism, the notion that we cannot impose the values or morality of one society on other societies. Ethical relativists argued that because anthropologists had not discovered any universal moral values, each society's values were valid with respect to that society's circumstances and conditions. No society could claim any superior position over another regarding ethics and morality.

As many philosophers and anthropologists have noted, the argument of ethical relativism is a circular one that itself assumes a particular moral position. It is, in fact, a moral theory that encourages people to be tolerant toward all cultural values, norms, and practices. Hatch notes that in the history of anthropology many who accepted the premises of ethical relativism could not maintain these assumptions in light of their data. Ethical relativists would have to tolerate practices such as homicide, child abuse, human sacrifice, torture, warfare, racial discrimination, and even genocide! In fact, even anthropologists who held the ethical relativist position in the early period of the twentieth century condemned many cultural practices. For example, Ruth Benedict condemned the practice of the Plains Indians to cut off the nose of an adulterous wife. Boas himself condemned racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of bigotry. Thus, these anthropologists did not consistently adhere to the ethical relativist paradigm.

The horrors associated with World War II eventually led most scholars to reject ethical relativism. The argument that Nazi Germany could not be condemned because of its unique moral and ethical standards appeared ludicrous to most people. In the 1950s, some anthropologists such as Robert Redfield suggested that general standards of judgment could be applied to most societies. However, these anthropologists were reluctant to impose Western standards on pre-state indigenous societies. In essence, they suggested a *double standard* in which they could criticize large-scale, industrial state societies but not pre-state indigenous societies.

This double standard of morality poses problems, however. Can anthropologists make value judgments about homicide, child abuse, warfare, torture, rape, and other acts of violence in a small-scale society? Why should they adopt different standards in evaluating such behaviors in pre-state indigenous societies as compared with industrial state societies? In both types of societies, human beings are harmed. Do not all humans in all societies have equal value?

**A Resolution to the Problem of Relativism** Is there a resolution to these philosophical and moral dilemmas? First, we need to distinguish between *cultural relativism* (or *methodological relativism*) and *ethical relativism*. In other words, to understand the values, the reasoning and logic, and the worldviews of another people does not mean

to accept all of their practices and standards (Salmon 1997).

Second, we need to realize that the culture of a society is not completely homogeneous or unified. In Chapter 3, we noted how culture was distributed differentially within any society. All people do not share the same culture within any society. For example, men and women do not share exactly the same "culture" in a society. Ethnographic experience tells anthropologists that there are always people who may not agree with the content of the moral and ethical values of a society. Treating cultures as "uniform united wholes" is a conceptual mistake. For one thing, it ignores the *power relationships* within a society. Elites within a society can maintain cultural hegemony or dominance and can use harmful practices against their own members to produce conformity. In some cases, governments use the concept of relativism to justify their repressive policies and deflect criticism of these practices by the international community. In Asia, many political leaders argue that their specific culture does not have the same notion of human rights that is accepted in Western society. Therefore, in China or Singapore, human rights may be restricted by political rulers who draw on their cultural tradition to maintain repressive and totalitarian political policies (Ong 2006; Brown 2008). Those who impose these harmful practices upon others may be the beneficiaries of those practices.

To get beyond the problem of ethical relativism, we ought to adopt a humanitarian standard that would be recognized by all people throughout the world. This standard would not be derived from any particular cultural values—such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence—but rather would involve the basic principle that every individual is entitled to a certain standard of "well-being." No individual ought to be subjected to bodily harm through violence or starvation.

Of course, we recognize certain problems with this solution. Perhaps, the key problem is that people in many societies accept—or at least appear to accept—behaviors that Westerners would condemn as inhumane. For example, what about the Aztec practice of human sacrifice? The Aztecs firmly believed that they would be destroyed if they did not sacrifice victims to the Sun deity. Would an outside group have been justified in condemning and abolishing this practice? A more recent case involves the West Irian tribe known as the Dani, who engaged in constant warfare with neighboring tribes. They believed that through revenge they had to placate the ghosts of their kin who had been killed in warfare because unavenged ghosts bring sickness and disaster to the tribe. Another way of placating the ghosts was to bring two or three young girls related to the deceased victim to the funeral site and chop two fingers off their hands. Until recently, all Dani women lost from two to six fingers in this way (Heider 1979; Bagish 1981). Apparently, these practices were accepted by many Dani males and females.

In some Islamic countries, women have been accused of sexual misconduct and then executed by male members in what are called "honor killings." The practice of honor killings, which victimizes women, has been defended in some of these groups as a means to restore harmony to the society. The males argue that the shedding of blood washes away the shame of sexual dishonor. There have been a number of "honor killings" among immigrant Middle Eastern families within the United States. In both Africa and the Middle East, young girls are subjected to female circumcision, a polite term for the removal of the clitoris and other areas of the vagina. These practices, referred to by most human rights advocates as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM or FGC), range from the cutting out of the clitoris to a more severe practice known as pharaonic infibulation, which involves stitching the cut labia to cover the vagina of the woman. One of the purposes of these procedures is to reduce the pleasure related to sexual intercourse and thereby induce more fidelity from women in marriage. Chronic infections are a common result of this practice. Sexual intercourse is painful, and childbirth is much more difficult for many of these women. However, the cultural ideology may maintain that an uncircumcised woman is not respectable, and few families want to risk their daughter's chances of marriage by not having her circumcised (Fluehr-Lobban 2003, 2013).

The right of males to discipline, hit, or beat their wives is often maintained in a male-dominated culture (Tapper and Tapper 1992–1993). Other examples of these types of practices, such as head-hunting, slavery, female subordination, torture, and unnecessarily dangerous child labor, also fall into this category. According to a universal humanitarian standard suggested here, all of these practices could be condemned as harmful