



Conscious of the Other

Anthropology is a reflexive social science which strives to understand what it means to be human. Anthropologist Franz Boas developed a field of cultural anthropology at Columbia University and in focussing on the concept of culture, avoided using the concept of race, which was influenced at the time by the study of eugenics and racial theory which may have justified western colonialism but from which the diabolic results were obvious in the ideologies of Nazi Germany.

It was Boas's student Ruth Benedict who championed cultural relativism. At the heart of cultural relativism is that other people's truths are to be found within their own world views and cultural classifications. However there is another aspect to cultural relativism and that is the question of tolerance. We are often challenged by cultural relativism when we come across a situation in another culture that makes us feel uncomfortable about what we are experiencing in that culture. For example, as a New Zealander, I come from a country where smacking children is illegal. A number of times, I witnessed a mother in an Australian supermarket smacking her young child, causing it to cry, I always found this culturally disturbing.

Sometimes the other is culturally imagined. Palestinian born anthropologist Edward Said (1935-2003) wrote about Orientalism – the creation in the European imagination of a romantic middle-eastern culture which actually did not exist. It was an imagined culture. From a different perspective, Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1949-2012) notes that in creating the other, we write our own history and in the process facts and the truth disappear. Trouillot argues that the west could not conceive that slaves were capable of successfully bringing about a revolution and establishing a stable, long term form of government. Thus the event of the successful Haitian revolution 1791-1804 was silenced in western history. When we look at our own nation's history, Trouillot's comment that any historical narrative is a bundle of silences is unfortunately true.

In creating "the other" we do two things. Firstly, we define ourselves by identifying what we are not. Thus we are not Muslim or Indian or we do not do it in "that way". Secondly, in the process of defining the other we depersonalise the other and start to see a labelled group. For example, a news item: two Australian tourists were killed in a terrorist attack; the "other" 122 Pakistani become a statistic and the individual people invisible. This process of defining the other is at the heart of ethnocentrism. It is so easy to start acting out our ethnocentrism in the form of racism.

There is another form of "othering" worth reflecting on. In much of life, we freely use categories such as the poor, the asylum seeker, the wealthy. The danger is that in applying the other, we are reducing real people to a typological category and in fact assisting in dehumanizing them as people. We need to watch that we are not reinforcing stereotypical biases, which in term help us to define our own identity by saying, this is what we are not.

- Paul Robertson

Youth Custody Index 2015

This month St Thomas of Canterbury College launched the second annual findings of their annual index into youth in custody in New Zealand. The research was prepared by a group of students and continued the work for the 2014 Youth Custody Index.

Youth Custody Index Leader Charlie Devine said that the purpose is to inform public debate. "We do not offer solutions to the issues raised or seek to apportion blame, we seek to be the voice for our brother and sisters who are locked up".

This year new streams of information were added that examined the training, skills, staff turnover and incidents of those who look after youth in Care and Protection and Youth Custody Facilities. The index also looked at the experience of female youth in custody, especially what barriers and opportunities exist.

[Read the full Youth Custody Report 2015 here](#)



The 2015 Index was launched by New Zealand's Principal Youth Court Judge, Andrew Beecroft, pictured with Parliamentary Ombudsman – Professor Ron Paterson. They are pictured here with the Edmund Rice Youth Custody Index Group 2015

**“Treat people as if they were what they ought to be
and you will help them become what they are capable
of becoming”**

- Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe