1.2: Holism in Anthropology

Holism is the perspective on the human condition that assumes that mind, body, individuals, society, and the environment interpenetrate, and even define one another. In anthropology holism tries to integrate all that is known about human beings and their activities. From a holistic perspective, attempts to divide reality into mind and matter isolate and pin down certain aspects of a process that, by very nature, resists isolation and dissection. Holism holds great appeal for those who seek a theory of human nature that is rich enough to do justice to its complex subject matter.

An easier understanding of holism is to say that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Individual human organisms are not just x percent genes and y percent culture added together. Rather, human beings are what they are because of mutual shaping of genes and culture and experiences living in the world produces something new, something that cannot be reduced to the materials used to construct it. It is important to note that humans who grow and live together are inevitably shaped by shared cultural experiences and develop into a much different person than they would have if developing in isolation.

Sally Engle Merry, an anthropologist, got a call from a radio show asking her to talk about a recent incident that happened in Pakistan that resulted in a gang rape of a young woman authorized by a local tribal council. She explained to them that it was an inexcusable act and that the rape was probably connected to local political struggles and class differences. This relates to holism because the gang rape was authorized by higher authorities because it is a cultural norm for socially higher class men to feel more empowered over women. This emphasizes the connection between human actions and their environment and society.

References

1. “African People & Culture – Ashanti”.
2. “Japanese Hip Hop and the Globalization of Popular Culture” Ian Condry


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External Links

- What is Anthropology? – Information from the American Anthropological Association
- SLA– Society for Linguistic Anthropology