

Against the diversity objection to group worldview description

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Abstract. The practice of attributing a worldview to a group has been objected to in the following way: it overlooks different views within the group and wrongly portrays the group as homogeneous. I defend the practice against this objection.

Keywords: worldview, group, diversity objection, homogeneous, assumptions.

A worldview consists of a set of propositions about reality, typically highly general propositions. Some articles within social and cultural anthropology aim to present the worldview of a group.¹ They aim to present propositions which members of the group are said to openly express or else silently assume (e.g. Whorf 1950; Redfield 1952; Horton 1962). An example is Robin Horton's article "The Kalibari Worldview: An Outline and Interpretation." But do anthropologists today attempt to present the worldviews of groups? When I come across articles with titles of roughly the form "The worldview of group X," they are generally from decades ago. Of course, this does not mean that the practice of group worldview description has disappeared. But this practice seems marginal today, at least within anthropology.

The marginality is because of an objection that has been made against group worldview description. Anthropologists mostly do not engage in this practice because they think it involves something false. The practice involves portraying all members of a group as committing themselves to a certain worldview, when group members typically differ in the views they hold. The practice falsely portrays a group as uniform in their views, as

¹ In this paper, we can use "group" in a very broad sense, to refer to any set of individuals.

homogeneous. In a review comparing traditional and new approaches to anthropology, Susan Wright tells us:

Anthropologists of various persuasions were also criticized for treating ‘culture’ as if it were a set of ideas and meanings which were shared by a whole population of homogeneous individuals – which was empirically not the case. (Wright 1998, 8)

I take this to be the most influential objection that has been offered against group worldview description. But should we accept this objection? Below I aim to defend the practice against it.

I shall begin by presenting a response which I think is already grasped by one anthropologist, perhaps by more (Strathern 1992, 2). The response involves accepting that the people an anthropologist studies may well differ in their views on many topics. But it asserts that this is not a problem for the group worldview describer, as long as there are common assumptions that the different views rest on. The group worldview describer can then present these assumptions and refer to them as a worldview.

To illustrate this point, consider the following disagreement. Person A thinks that the most evil Briton is Jack the Ripper. Person B thinks that the most evil Briton is Margaret Thatcher. Despite their different views, there are assumptions that both citizens make, such as that some individuals are more evil than others. We can attribute a shared worldview to a group, even when different views on a topic are expressed, if there are assumptions common to group members.² (Can we take any common assumption and say that it is part of a shared worldview or must the assumption be of a certain character to qualify? It seems to me that the advocate of the diversity objection does not want to say there is no shared worldview and

² Someone might protest that, strictly speaking, the assumptions are not features of the object of study, rather of an anthropologist’s model, because they are not observed. To make sense of a debate over the most evil Briton, say, the anthropologist develops a model in which participants share an assumption. But still something very similar to group worldview description can continue: models which attribute shared assumptions.

then make a subtle concession that there are shared assumptions of some kind, which the anthropologist can identify – the objection would greatly diminish in importance. Thus any shared assumptions are a challenge to this objection.)

I shall now consider the claim that we have empirical evidence against group worldview description, in order to make a closely related point. Difference without common ground is an extreme situation. One might wonder whether it is even possible (Davidson 1974: 19-20). So far I do not think that any anthropologist has presented evidence for such “groundless difference” when studying a group. To summarize: the practice of group worldview description is objected to as if mere evidence of different views within each group studied is enough to reveal the mistakenness of this practice, when what is needed is evidence of different views without any common assumptions; and we have yet to be provided with evidence of a group which contains such groundless difference.

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