idea is that judgements are based on experience, which is interpreted by each individual in terms of his or her own enculturation: an individual’s beliefs, activities and other cultural elements make sense in terms of his or her own culture and can be judged only through their relevance to a given cultural context (Herskovitz, 1973). Social and economic impacts of tourism in Pacific Islands, for example, cannot be judged automatically to be positive (or negative) without a sensitive analysis of the host culture and how the impacts are perceived and evaluated by the hosts.

Cruise tourism to relatively isolated island cultures and the behaviour of visiting Western tourists are often based on conflicting perceptions of a host culture if local people, their habits and value systems are evaluated solely from a Eurocentric perspective and portrayed as primitive, uncivilized, exotic and often erotic sights that Western tourists are expecting to see (Douglas, 1996), based on their own cultural judgements, beliefs and knowledge. The conflicting misperceptions are widely circulated in tourism advertising, travel books and general media, which make them difficult to change and correct. In addition, cruise tourism to Pacific Islands, for example, has a long tradition of representing Indigenous people based on Western imagination.

Cultural relativism has its origins in a response to evolutionary anthropology, the comparative method in anthropology and Western ethnocentrism that dominated the late 19th- and the early 20th-century studies on cultures and ways of human life. The normative assumptions of the evolutionists were challenged by Franz Boas (1858–1942) and his students, such as Ruth Benedict, Melville Herskovitz, Alfred Kroeber and Margaret Mead, who maintained that there are no superior cultures or lower cultures – all cultures are equal. Boas’ criticism was directed especially against the emphasis on biology and race as opposed to culture in evolutionary anthropology. He thought that cultural relativism would help researchers to understand the environmental factors that shape a culture, to analyse the social and psychological elements that frame it and to explain the histories of place-specific traditions and customs.

Methodologically, cultural relativism has served as a social scientific tool designed to