

English – 12th Grade

Mr. Drake – 2007-08

Unit 1

Purpose: Creating a solid, critical base for viewing, analyzing, and ultimately understand the literature of diverse world culture— those whose mores and social conventions different greatly from our own. Can we find ways to explore our corresponding differences and commonalities?

Basic Terms

egocentric: limited in outlook or concern to one's own activities or needs; concerned with the individual rather than society

ethnocentric: characterized by or based on the attitude that one's own group is superior

ETHNOCENTRISM

What is it? Why are people ethnocentric?
What is the problem? What can we do about it?

A snowmobile race sponsored by the Inuit (Eskimo) community council in a village on the Hudson's Bay in the Canadian Arctic, Christmas 1969. Inuit friends urged me to join in a snowshoe race across the river ice, but, knowing I was inexperienced at this, I was reluctant to participate. They persisted, however, and, recognizing that they wanted me to be involved, I agreed. Of course, I was the last one to return, way behind everyone else in the race. I was very embarrassed, but to my surprise, people came up to me and congratulated me, saying, "You really tried!" A month later, when I was on a caribou hunting trip with three Inuit men in a remote area, we got trapped by a winter storm and had to go several days without food. This was when I learned that trying was much more important than winning. While the Inuit like to win, their greater value on trying has a distinct adaptive function. One way anthropologists learn about other cultures is "participant observation," being involved in their daily life, watching what they do, and doing what they do. We seek to learn the meanings and (more important) the functions of their ways. We are also involved in "cross-cultural comparison," comparing their life experiences with other groups (mostly our own). In the case of the snowshoe race, I learned about Inuit values on trying, but I also learned about American values on competition and winning.

"Ethnocentrism" is a commonly used word in circles where ethnicity, inter-ethnic relations, and similar social issues are of concern. The usual definition of the term is "thinking one's own group's ways are superior to others" or "judging other groups as inferior to one's own". "Ethnic" refers to cultural heritage, and "centrism" refers to the central starting point... so "ethnocentrism" basically refers to judging other groups from our own cultural point of view. But even this does not address the underlying issue of why people do this. Most people, thinking of the shallow definition, believe that they are not ethnocentric, but are rather "open minded" and "tolerant." However, as explained below, everyone is ethnocentric, and there is no way not to be ethnocentric... it cannot be avoided, nor can it be willed away by a positive or well-meaning attitude.

To address the deeper issues involved in ethnocentrism calls for a more explicit definition. In this sense, ethnocentrism can be defined as: making false assumptions about others' ways based on our own limited experience. The key word is assumptions, because we are not even aware that we are being ethnocentric... we don't understand that we don't understand.

One example of ethnocentrism is seen in the above comments on the Inuit snowshoe race. I assumed that I had "lost" the race, but it turns out the Inuit saw the same situation very differently than I did. Westerners have a binary conflict view of life (right or wrong, liberal versus conservative, etc.), and I had imposed my "win or lose" perspective of life on the situation. As a result, I did not understand how they experience life, that trying is a basic element of life. This did not necessarily involve thinking that my ways were superior, but rather that I assumed my experience was operational in another group's circumstances.

Another example illustrates how basic ethnocentrism is. If we go to a store and ask for a green coat and the sales clerk gives us a blue one, we would think the person was color blind at the best or stupid at the worst.

However, "colors" are not so simple. The Inuit lump shades of what Anglo-Americans call "blue" and "green" into one color category, *tungortuk*, which can only be translated as "bluegreen." Does this mean that they cannot see the difference? Just as we can distinguish between different shades (such as "sky blue" and "navy blue," and "kelly green" and "forest green"), so can the Inuit. If they want to refer to what we would call "green," they would say *tunguyortuk*, which can be translated something like "that bluegreen that looks like the color of a [conifer] tree." The point is that something so "simple" as colors has very different meanings to us and to the Inuit. How could an Inuk "feel blue"? Colors, after all, are only different wavelengths of light, and the rainbow can be divided in many different ways.

There are many, many examples of such differences in meanings that make life experience so unique for all the human groups around the world. For example, English has tenses built into our verb forms, so we automatically think in terms of time (being "punctual," "time is money," "make the time," etc.). But Algonquian Indian languages do not have tenses (not that they cannot express time if they wish), but rather have "animate" and "inanimate" verb forms, so they automatically think in terms of whether things around them have a life essence or not. So when Chippewa Indians do not show up for a medical appointment, Anglo health care workers may explain this as being "present oriented," since we normally cannot think except in terms of time frames. But this is the essence of ethnocentrism, since we may be imposing a time frame where none exists.

The assumptions we make about others' experience can involve false negative judgements, reflected in the common definition of ethnocentrism. For example, Anglos may observe Cree Indians sitting around a camp not doing obvious work that is needed and see Crees as "lazy". Westerners generally value "being busy" (industriousness), and so may not appreciate the Cree capacity to relax and not be compelled to pursue some activities of a temporary nature... nor realize

how much effort is put into other activities like hunting.

Assumptions can also reflect false positive attitudes about others' ways. For example, we in urban industrial society frequently think of Cree Indians as being "free of the stresses of modern society," but this view fails to recognize that there are many stresses in their way of life, including the threat of starvation if injured while checking a trap line a hundred miles from base camp or when game cycles hit low ebbs. False positive assumptions are just as misleading as false negative assumptions.

Examples abound in our local communities, as well as around the world. When you think about your own experience with people from other ethnic groups and with attitudes expressed about relations with other countries, what examples come to your mind where you may have imposed your own views and feelings about life on their experience?

Everybody is ethnocentric, as all of us around the world assume things about other people's ways. The question is why are we ethnocentric?

The definition given above emphasizes that we make false assumptions based on our own limited experience. This is all we know... what we have already experienced is the basis for our "reality", what we expect. It is normal to assume it is the "natural" basis of reality... because our own ways work for us. Our perceptions of colors, our time frames, our values on industriousness, our social roles, our beliefs about Life and the Universe, and all our other ways help us organize life experience and provide important meanings and functions as we move through daily and life span activities. Therefore, our limited experiences we have already had are the basis for interpreting new experiences, in this case, others' behavior. Since we have not experienced everything they have experienced, how can we not be ethnocentric?

So, what is the problem with ethnocentrism?

Ethnocentrism leads to misunderstanding others. We falsely distort what is meaningful and functional to other peoples through our own tinted glasses. We see their ways in terms of our life experience, not their context. We do not understand that their ways have their own meanings and functions in life, just as our ways have for us.

At the heart of this is that we do not understand that we do not understand! So we aren't aware that we can develop more valid understandings about how they experience life.

At the best, we simply continue in our unawareness. Yet this can have consequences within our own society and in international relations. We may be well meaning in interethnic relations, for example, but can unintentionally offend others, generate ill feelings, and even set up situations that harm others. For example, it is easy not to see the life concerns of others (particularly minorities and the disadvantaged) or conversely to pity them for their inability to deal with life situations (like poverty or high crime rates). How do we feel when someone doesn't recognize our concerns, or feels sorry for us because we can't "just let go" of a stressful situation?

A lack of understanding can also inhibit constructive resolutions when we face conflicts between social groups. It is easy to assume that others "should" have certain perspectives or values. How often are we prone to address conflicts when others tell us how we should think and feel?

Ethnocentrism is also evident in international relations, creating conflicts and inhibiting resolution of conflicts. For example, how might our Western binary conflict view of life (A versus B) influence our interpretation of another group's intents when they express a different position on an issue? Is it just another "viewpoint", or is it "against" our viewpoint? If we don't "win" the conflict, will we "lose"? We may have positive intentions (from our viewpoint) in "helping" other groups deal with certain "problems," but how do they

see the problem and what kind of solution do they want? Some peoples around the world see Americans as very competitive and violent people, as evidenced by our business practices, Hollywood movies, and events like the Columbine High School massacre. How much does this describe your personal experience? How do you think this perception might influence their assumptions about our intents in relations with their societies? An ultimate case of such misunderstandings is warfare, where many people are killed, maimed for life, have their families, subsistence, health, and way of life disrupted, sometimes forever.

There are extreme forms of ethnocentrism that pose serious social problems, of course, such as racism, colonialism, and ethnic cleansing. These views are generally condemned by the world community, but we regularly see such cases in the news.

Can better understandings of others' life experience avoid conflicts that drain the resources and well-being of all parties, and instead promote cooperative relations between peoples to the mutual advantage of all?

So here we have a paradox: we falsely assume because we are not even aware we are assuming... and furthermore it is the normal thing to do. We cannot not be ethnocentric, and we cannot will it away or make ourselves have a completely open attitude. Is it ever possible not to be ethnocentric?

So, what can we do about ethnocentrism?

Addressing ethnocentrism is not a matter of trying not to be ethnocentric. This is an impossible task, since we will never experience every life situation of everyone around the world. We will always have our assumptions about life based on our existing limited experience. So a much more productive approach is to catch ourselves when we are being ethnocentric and to control for this bias as we seek to develop better understandings.

In science, grounded understandings are not developed from the absence of biases, but rather the recognition and control of biases. The scientific process helps us have a clearer view of what we do understand in the context of what we do not understand. Ethnocentrism is a bias that keeps us from such understandings of other people's life experience, but it is possible to recognize this bias and control for it... so that we can go on to develop more valid and balanced understandings. This calls for us to develop our learning skills, but it can be done. Many of us know people who have moved to other societies and have learned to become functional in their new social settings, evidence that it is possible to develop more grounded understandings. Anthropologists, of course, have worked on systematically developing these skills for well over a century.

The first step in developing more balanced understandings is to recognize that we do not understand, that we are falsely assuming something that is not the case and is out of context. How can we consciously become aware of something that is happening subconsciously? In this case, how can we know when we are being biased?

One of the most effective means for recognizing that ethnocentrism is inhibiting our understandings is to watch for reactions. Reactions tell us that we are assuming something and that our assumptions are not working.

We can always observe our own reactions. When we have negative reactions towards others (such as thinking "that doesn't make sense" or "that's wrong," or feeling offended or confused, etc.), these are clues that our assumptions are not working in the situation. For example, we may feel Cree Indians are "unfriendly" because they are often nonexpressive in social situations, but recognizing our reaction can provide an opportunity to better understand Cree values on self-control which can be adaptive when a small family group has to be self-sufficient in a winter camp far from others' help. Observing our positive reactions towards others (such as thinking "that's really nice" or

"that's wonderful," or feeling pleased or satisfied) can also help us to be aware that we are not understanding. For example, Anglos frequently think the Inuit are "happy" and "friendly" because they smile a lot in social situations, but recognizing this reaction can provide an opportunity to better understand Inuit social values which are adaptive where subsistence is based on cooperative hunting.

We can also observe their reactions. If we blissfully go on in our misconceptions but they don't respond the way we would, this is also an important clue that our assumptions are not working in the situation. Again, their reactions may be both positive and negative. For example, if a Cree shows gratification when we give him a gift, recognizing his reaction can provide an opportunity to better understand adaptive Cree values on economic leveling (rather than assuming that our "generosity" has been duly recognized). Also, if an Inuk responds to our inquiry about how to keep our shoulders warm while spending weeks on a mid-winter hunting trip with a surprised "You mean you want to be warm all over?", recognizing his reaction can provide an opportunity to better understand Inuit concepts of self and the environment (rather than providing us with the desired "answer" to maintaining our own concept of bodily comfort).

In general, reactions tell us first about us. Why do we think people should be "friendly"? should appreciate material goods? should feel warm all over? When we refer to others as "primitive" or "superstitious," what are we saying about our own premises that we value in life? When we idealize others as being "simple" or "not wasting anything," what are we saying about the problems we perceive in our own way of life? When others consider us as "technologically skilled" or "selfish," what does this say about us that we may never have realized? Cross-cultural encounters revealing more about our own perspectives, values, and emotional investments than about others, and so provide us unique opportunities to learn more about ourselves.

Once we realize that we are not understanding, we are now in a better

position to seek more valid and balanced understandings.

The first step involves an attitude: we are the learners. In this process, it is important to remember that we are the learners. We do not know, and that is why we are seeking to develop better understandings. They are the ones who do know what their life experience is like... we are asking them to help us understand better. The best method is to ask for their explanations about what they do or say. ("Can you help me understand X better") In particular, avoid posing questions that impose our own realities and bound their realities. ("Why do you use 'green'?") Also, we should give people an out, and respect their right to not share with us (just as we may not want to share things that are 'private' or 'sacred'). If we appreciate that their life experience can be as valid for them as ours is for us, acknowledge that we may be misunderstanding, and ask them to help us understand, most people are more than willing to help us understand better. (This is a lesson I learned primarily from the Inuit, and many others have contributed to it since.)

Next, we have to ask two sets of questions (first to ourselves) to provide more insights into life experience in their context:

(1) What are their meanings about the behavior and situation? (In anthropological terms, what is their emic experience?) This includes both their cognitive views and their emotional feelings. This essentially involves inquiring about their perspectives on their own life experience, including specific cognitive views about colors and the structure of the Universe, feelings about social relationships and proper behavior, and every other area of cultural life. Also, observing what they are not ready to talk about can open new insights about their introspection and sense of self or about why they consider certain rituals to be secret. We need to keep in mind that there are many meanings of any given behavior and that these are often very deep in people's subconscious and are often difficult to put into words. For instance, how would we explain to someone from another

culture what "freedom" means to Americans? Usually it is these differences in meanings that are the basis of ethnocentrism.

(2) What are the adaptive functions of the behavior and situation? (In anthropological terms, what is their etic experience?) (*etic: of, relating to, or involving analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of one who does not participate in the culture being studied.*) How does this help the group adapt to life challenges (ecologically, biologically, economically, socially, psychologically, etc.)? This is the question which is usually not asked on a common level, yet is the one that can provide the greatest insights and understandings. For example, some people may accept that a group's belief that witchcraft causes illness is meaningful to them (rather than simply writing this off as "superstitious"). But they may fail to consider that such beliefs often have important functions in these groups. For example, the character and behavior of "witches" defines norms of socially unacceptable and disruptive deviancy, and in contrast also defines "good" behavioral standards for the group. This also serves as a mechanism of social control, because people are afraid of being accused of witchcraft if they step out of accepted boundaries of behavior. If we did not ask about the functions of beliefs in witchcraft, we would never develop insights like understanding that such views can help promote constructive behavior that helps the whole group adapt. A particular meaning may have an important function in another area of life, such as a religious belief in witchcraft having an important social function. We also need to keep in mind that there are many functions of any given cultural practice, including ecological, biological, economic, social, and psychological functions that help a group adapt to life challenges. "What are the adaptive functions?" is the question that is generally not asked, but which usually leads to the greatest insights into others' cultural system.

Asking about the meanings and functions of behavior is not a matter of "insiders" or "outsiders," however. We can analyze the meanings of our own behavior, which are highly complex and normally seated deeply in

our subconscious, as with our idea of "freedom." We can also analyze the functions of our own behavior. For example, why is "freedom" such an important American value? how does it help us adapt? Sometimes outsiders can see things we don't usually see because they are contrasting our behavior with others' ways, but being an insider does not preclude members of any group from understanding their own behavior.

When we start asking about how others' ways are meaningful and functional to its participants, we come to realize that there are many valid ways in which human beings can experience life.

Perhaps no one can ever have complete understanding of another people, without fully experiencing everything they experience. However, this does not mean we cannot develop a functional understanding, to interact successfully with others. The many immigrants who have become functional members of our society demonstrate this is possible, as well as anthropologists and others who have become functional members of other groups. One goal that is achievable, however, is to make sure that what we do understand is valid and balanced in the context of recognizing what we do not understand.

How can we develop these skills? Like other life skills, practice at every opportunity helps us develop our abilities to catch ourselves being ethnocentric and asking good questions to better understand others' cultural behavior.

How does all this concern the idea of relativism, a prominent value in anthropology?

"Relativism" usually means not judging others' ways and accepting them as equal to our own. This may be a positive value in terms of interethnic relations, though it is often unrealistic since we cannot avoid ethnocentrism. We do not necessarily have to agree with others' ways, and we have the right to our own ways, since they provide

important meanings and adaptive functions for us.

The real issue of relativism, I believe, is at what point is one group justified in intervening in the behavior of another group? There are areas where most people around the world believe there is little justification, such as how an ethnic group defines a desirable marriage partner. There are also areas where most people believe there is great justification, as with genocide and atrocities that violate international principles of human rights. Also, there are areas where most people readily accept aid to meet catastrophic circumstances, like relief supplies for earthquake victims.

There is a wide gray area in between where different opinions abound, such as "free trade" which fosters both investment opportunities and child labor. Who is right in these circumstances? There are few absolute answers, but there are some guiding principles included in the international Declaration of Human Rights which can be applied in evaluating what to do. What are the community positions about the situation? Most groups have norms that are both meaningful and functional. If they promote well-being within and across groups, then we have to ask what right we have to intervene. If situations arise that jeopardize the adaptive balance within and across groups, there may be some room for addressing the situation, as long as it includes all the groups concerned and it is made clear whose well-being is being served on the part of all parties involved. As indicated, the world community has reached an international consensus about human rights and about world functioning and balances.

We need to be careful, however, in how to be involved. There are many examples of people using stated values to justify their own vested interests, as with efforts to "civilize" or "develop" other countries, which has promoted access to raw materials and new markets for their own industries. There are also many examples of people being sincerely well-meaning towards others (in terms of their own values) with dire unforeseen consequences, such as introducing medical technologies which undermine local social

structures and cohesiveness. Whose interests are being served the most? What is the overall impact on the group's adaptation?

Before we act, we need to evaluate several issues:

What is our basis for becoming involved? What are our cultural views involved? our values? our vested interests? Even where "justice," "health," "standards of living," and other views are shared by others, they exist in different contexts of cultural meanings and functions. We are still acting from our values, and do we have the right to decide they are valid for them? Why do we want to "help"? We can be more effective in determining mutual solutions if we can control for our own life views, and recognize what we want to get out of the results.

What are their meanings and functions regarding the situation? What do they want? What are the likely outcomes for them? What do they get out of the results? Where we have more valid understandings, we have a more sound basis for identifying the common overlap areas where effective agreements and solutions can be reached.

Self-determination is one of the most effective means of social change for all parties concerned. Who is in the best position for understanding what is best for them? We all make mistakes, but they are our mistakes and we have the opportunity to develop from them. If we decide for others, then they will never have the opportunity to test their own initiative in doing what is best for themselves, to develop their own judgments, to learn from their own mistakes. Also, it is when people are denied the legitimacy of their own life goals that they may turn to radical means outside accepted practice like terrorism. I believe our most effective role is to support them in achieving their own goals where these overlap ours.

In the long run, hasty "solutions" that impose one side's views about the situation rarely work. How many times have we enthusiastically acted with high hopes, only to realize later that there were unforeseen and unwanted consequences that we ourselves may have generated? The most effective resolutions are those that negotiate the

common areas which allow each party validation of their own ways, where the solution is desired by each party, and, of course, where each party is really able to make a contribution.

Interethnic encounters, then, can be an opportunity.

One of Anthropology's greatest contributions is this concept of ethnocentrism and how to recognize and control for it so we can go on to develop more valid and balanced understandings of other cultural ways and of ourselves.

A standard scientific principle is that diversity is adaptive. The more different resources a group has, the more potentials it has for adapting to life challenges. We have come to realize this in ecodiversity, but perhaps we still have to realize this in terms of ethnic diversity. The more different ways of experiencing life available to a society, the more resources it has for meeting adaptive challenges. One of the United States' greatest strengths is its ethnic diversity. We have available within our society adaptive resources from peoples all over the world, available to contribute to our continued adaptation.

When we encounter people from other ethnic backgrounds, we have an opportunity to learn new ways of seeing and experiencing life which we never knew existed. In a larger framework, we can learn the tremendous potentials humans have for being human. These potentials also exist for us, possibilities that we never knew we could be, such as looking at life in a complementary perspective instead of as an inherent conflict; and, on the negative side, possibilities that we want to be sure that we not foster, such as the brutality exhibited by average young American men as they massacred Vietnamese civilians at Mi Lai. We can also better understand ourselves, by contrasting our own ways with other life experiences and asking about our own meanings and functions.

When we go beyond ethnocentrism, there are whole new areas of understanding the

possibilities in how all humans can experience
life.

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