

Ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism

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, 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.
- It can, however, be an opportunity to recognize and resolve our own biases, and to learn more about potentials we all have for being human... a lifelong process of learning and growth.
- 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.

Ethnocentrism.

- 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 AngloAmericans 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.