

Ethnocentrism

Closely related to the concept of cultural relativity is the concept of ethnocentrism. The word ethno comes from Greek and refers to a people, nation, or cultural grouping, while centric comes from Latin and refers, of course to the centre. The term ethnocentrism then refers to the tendency for each society to place its own culture patterns at the centre of things. Ethnocentrism is the practice of comparing other cultural practices with those of one's own and automatically finding those other cultural practices to be inferior. It is the habit of each group taking for granted the superiority of its culture. It makes our culture into a yardstick with which to measure all other cultures as good or bad, high or low, right or queer in proportion as they resemble ours.

Ethnocentrism is a universal human reaction found in all known societies, in all groups and in practically all individuals. Everyone learns ethnocentrism while growing up. The possessiveness of the small child quickly translates "into my toys are better than your toys" Parents; unless they are quite crude, outwardly discourage their children from verbalizing such beliefs. But in private, they may reassure their offspring that their possessions are indeed very nice. Much of the learning of ethnocentrism is indirect and unintended, but some of it is deliberate. History for example, is often taught to glorify the achievements of one's own nation, and religious, civic and other groups disparage their competitors openly. Among adults, ethnocentrism is simply a fact of life.

Once one becomes conscious of ethnocentrism, the temptation is strong to evaluate it in moral terms; to label it with epithets such as bigoted chauvinistic, and so on, and to imply that one who has not discovered and compensated for his or her ethnocentric biases is not worthy. This incidentally, is another form of ethnocentrism. The important point, however, is that ethnocentrism is one of the features of culture and, like the rest of culture, it needs to be evaluated in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of social order and the promotion of social change.

The functions of ethnocentrism in maintaining order are more apparent than those which promote social change. First, ethnocentrism encourages the solidarity of the group. Believing that one's own ways are the best, encourages a "we" feeling with associates and strengthens the idea that loyalty to comrades and preservation of the basis for superiority are important values. Positively, ethnocentrism promotes continuance of the status quo negatively, it discourages change.

Second, ethnocentrism hinders the understanding of the cooperation with other groups. If the ways of one's own group are best, there is little incentive to interact with inferior groups. In fact, attitudes of suspicion, disdain and hostility are likely to be engendered. Extreme ethnocentrism is likely to promote conflict, as the records of past wars, and religious and racial conflicts reveal.



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Conflict, of course often leads to social change and in that sense ethnocentrism becomes a vehicle for the promotion of social change. It does so, however, through encouragement of its peaceful evolution. There is little doubt that most social scientists are biased in favor of peaceful social change and are opposed to conflict. Consequently, they tend even if subtly, to denigrate ethnocentrism and to imply that students must rid themselves of it if they are to learn effectively. In so doing, sociologists operate implicitly from a combination of evolutionary and functionalist models. Recent years have seen this stance called into question. The revolutionary efforts of groups who see themselves as downtrodden blacks, the poor, women, and young people have included deliberate efforts to foster ethnocentrism as a means of strengthening themselves. Slogans such as "black power" conflict model of society from which they operate.