Ethnocentrism/Xenophobia

Bennett, M. (2013). Entry in C. Cortes (Ed) *Multicultural America: A multimedia encyclopedia*. New York: Sage

The term "ethnocentrism" was coined by William Graham Sumner in reference to the view that one's own group is the center of everything, with others judged in terms of the familiar standards of that group. One manifestation of ethnocentrism is "xenophobia," or the fear of outsiders. Xenophobia may have served an evolutionary purpose in the development of homo sapiens by allowing them to automatically reject potentially competitive groups, but it is an increasingly dysfunctional response to modern mobility and multiculturality. Fear, like all emotions, arises from our perceptual experience. So to address the fear of outsiders, we need to understand how insiders and outsiders are being created and maintained by our perceptual experience of culture.

The idea of ethnocentrism has long been associated with a kind of national xenophobia, but the basic mechanism of ethnocentrism is equally applicable to understanding many troublesome aspects of domestic intergroup relations. The key to reducing xenophobia among domestic ethnic groups, including immigrant groups, is to assume 1) that all groups have a cultural dimension and 2) that relations among groups includes a kind of intercultural communication. With these assumptions, it is possible to see three major aspects of ethnocentrism that impact multicultural relations in America (and elsewhere). (See section on Intercultural Communication for a discussion of "culture" in multiculturalism.)

Ethnocentrism as Denial

The primary mechanism of ethnocentrism is perceptual. The groups in which we are socialized provide us with a set of figure/ground distinctions that give form to some phenomena and not to others. For instance, U.S. American women as a group are taught to make many more distinctions in texture and color than are U.S American men, while generally men are provided with more categories for distinguishing technical objects like automobiles and computers. (See section on Generalizations for a discussion of generalizing about a group without stereotyping members of the group.) The result of this socialization is that women tend to treat color and texture as objects of interest, while men tend to treat them as just background. Men, on the other hand, tend to treat cars or computers as important objects of interest, while women tend to see them as just the mechanisms through which transportation or information occurs.

In communication between these two groups, American women may see American men as aesthetically incompetent, while men may lament women's intransigence towards learning basic mechanical skills. However, in both cases, the issue is not really about behavior – it is about perceptual conditioning. If we have not learned to differentiate certain objects, we cannot generate categories that let us talk about or even think about those objects. The others may seem incompetent, but really they are simply oblivious.

There are at least two major implications of perceptual conditioning for multicultural group relations. One is that entire groups of people may exist and not be perceived at all by people of other groups. For instance, not so long ago in the United States, many straight people did not have a well-developed perceptual category for gay people. Consequently, straights tended not to perceive the existence of gays as a group; when asked, they greatly underestimated the size of the group, and they reacted to individual gay people who came to their attention as deviants from their own group rather

than normal people in a different group. The perceptual category for gays is now much better defined, as evidenced by the recent event of the president of Iran claiming that there were no gay people in Iran – a statement ridiculed by many of the same people who once claimed the same thing in the U.S.

African Americans and members of other minority groups have usually experienced having their existence denied, meaning that they were not noticed as objects of attention and treated only as part of the general background. Recipients of this non-attention often report that they would rather be the object of discrimination than not an object at all.

The second implication of this kind of ethnocentrism is that people may fail to attribute equal humanity to others. The reason for this is that ethnocentric people experience their own culture as much more complex than other cultures; they have well-developed perceptual categories to organize the familiar events of their own culture, while they have at best only vague notions of the perceptual categories generated by other cultures. As a consequence, these people may experience themselves and their compatriots as complex human beings while they experience others as more simple and primitive. In its relatively benign form this contrast generates the "little brown brother" syndrome, wherein dominant-culture members help others to develop the obviously superior dominant-culture perceptual categories.

The more serious implication of denying equal humanity to others is its potential to support exploitation or even extermination. If others are not as human as one's self, it is no more exploitive to enslave them than it is to harness animals. And from perceiving others as valuable animals, it is only one more step to experiencing them as disgusting rodents or insects, possibly justifying genocide or ethnic cleaning.

Ethnocentrism as Defense

As people's perceptual categories for other groups become somewhat better defined, those groups may seem to be more threatening; they seem more human, but in a simple and primitive way. Following basic psychological attribution theory, ethnocentric people attribute complex motivations to members of their own culture while attributing simple motivations to other groups. For instance, immigrant groups assumedly come to the U.S. only because "they want to take our jobs" and minority groups have children so "they can collect government welfare checks." These and the other typical negative stereotypes form the basis of a perceived attack on "our way of life." Under this threat, ethnocentric people defend their own culture by derogating others and by asserting the superiority of themselves.

The defense/derogation form of ethnocentrism is more obvious than the denial form, since it generally involves a strong polarization of "us and them" and overt expressions of disrespect for others. We are the good guys and they are the bad guys. But the boundaries of who constitutes "us" and who constitutes "them" are mutable. Against immigrants, "us" may be U.S. Americans of all majority and minority groups. But an arbitrary generational boundary may separate some of "us" who have been in the U.S. more than three or four generations from "us" who have only been in the U.S. for one or two generations. For this reason, African Americans of U.S. slave heritage may consider more recently arrived African Americans as "them," but both groups may be "us" compared to the "them" of blacks of Caribbean slave heritage. While this is an obvious cultural identity issue, it also fuels different expressions of ethnocentrism, since the culture that is experienced as central is a moving target.

Slightly more subtle expressions of defense are statements of the superiority of one's own culture. Rather than derogating others, ethnocentrism may be expressed by affirming the standards of one's group as central to quality and civilized action. Thus, community development efforts, like colonialism, may be enactments of an experience of cultural superiority, and schools may insist, in the name of preserving educational quality, on helping students match the cultural standards of one ethnic group. People who promulgate such efforts often do so with good (albeit ethnocentric) intentions, and they may be surprised or even angered if prospective recipients reject the offered assistance. On an interpersonal level, similar ethnocentric assumptions may underlie some coaching or mentoring efforts

in organizations. When an ethnocentric member of the dominant group (in the U.S., usually an older white male) is given the task of mentoring a younger person, a woman, or a person of color, he may take it as a directive to help his charge get over his or her troublesome cultural predilections and to adopt the clearly successful cultural standards of European Americans.

Sometimes ethnocentrism is expressed in a reversed polarization of "us" and "them." This may occur when a member of a dominant group takes on the cause of an oppressed group in a way that romanticizes the adopted group while derogating the dominant culture. Romanticizing, or exotifying a group involves experiencing the group's culture in terms of positive stereotypes, such as "all Asians are smart," or "Latino people have a deep love of life." The simplistic (but positive) experience allowed by these stereotypes is juxtaposed to the more complex experience of the shortcomings of one's own culture. In other words, "them" become the good guys and "us" become the bad guys. This is still ethnocentric defense, but with the poles reversed.

Ethnocentrism as Minimization

The subtlest form of ethnocentrism is when cultural difference is minimized in favor of stressing human similarity and common experience. On the surface, such minimization appears to be the solution to ethnocentrism, since it reduces many of the expressions of the denial and defense. However, minimization actually reinforces the basic mechanism of ethnocentrism – the experience of one's own culture as central to reality. Rather than rejecting or derogating other groups, one's own culture is taken as being central to the experience of all human beings, whatever cultural group they belong to.

In the minimization form of ethnocentrism, attention is directed to the fact that human beings of all groups are genetically quite similar, and that they all face the challenge of satisfying needs for safety, security, socialization, and spirituality. Further, certain "universal values" are assumed to underlie our various cultural experiences, making particular cultures like transforms of a universal cultural grammar shared by all human beings. Variations in group experience therefore become relatively trivial compared to our immersion in the basic experience of being human. Here, ethnocentrism is expressed as a kind of worldview projection. For instance, ethnocentric Christians tend to believe that deep down, whether they know it or not, everyone is a child of God. But ethnocentric Hindus tend to think that everyone has dharma and karma. Ethnocentric Marxists believed that everyone given a chance would revolt against class-based economic control, but ethnocentric capitalists think that everyone given a chance would try to become an individual entrepreneur in a market-driven society.

In domestic relations among groups in a multicultural society, minimization becomes a pressure towards assimilation. In the United States, ethnocentric members of the dominant ethnic group of European Americans tend to define aspects of their culture – e.g. individualism, personal responsibility, and communicative directness – as central to all human experience. Further, they may see the U.S. as "exceptional" in its adherence to these assumedly basic human qualities. Consequently, in this view, to be an American is to share these cultural qualities – not because European Americans have the power in many cases to enforce these qualities through education and selection, but because they are the universal human qualities that America has the responsibility for upholding. And to note that alternative cultural qualities co-exist within the American national culture is not taken as an accurate description of multiculturalism, but as a betrayal of the sacred covenant upon which the country was founded.

Minimization also masks cultural privilege. European Americans tend to believe that all people have an equal opportunity for success in the U.S. unless they are victims of active prejudicial discrimination. When it is noted that the higher ranks of nearly all organizations are populated by a predominance of European American males, including in organizations with strict anti-discrimination policies and procedures, ethnocentric members of that group may claim that other people certainly had the chance, but they just didn't want to work as hard. This expression of minimization ignores the privilege enjoyed by dominant culture members, which is to define the path to success in their own cultural terms.

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See also in this volume: Acculturation/Assimilation; Constructivism; Genocide; Identity Development (ethnic and racial); Intercultural Communication; Stereotypes/Generalizations, Racism.

Further Reading:

Bennett, Milton. "Becoming interculturally competent" in Wurzel, J. (Ed.) *Toward multiculturalism: A reader in multicultural education*. Newton, MA: Intercultural Resource Corporation, 2004

McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege and Male Privilege" in Andersen, M. L. & P. H. Collins, eds. *Race, Class & Gender: An Anthology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988. 73-75.

Sumner, William Graham. *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Customs, Manners, Mores, and Morals. Boston: Athenaeum Press, 1906.*