

1B

Four levels of ethnocentrism in psychology

Cross-cultural study of differences may easily lead to these being viewed as deficiencies; the differential evaluation of groups (as in “us better/them worse”) is known as ethnocentrism. The term was coined by Sumner (1906), who noted that there exists a strong tendency to use one’s own group’s standards as *the* standards when viewing other groups, to place one’s group at the top of a hierarchy and to rank all others as lower. This tendency is likely to be a universal feature of cultural group relations (LeVine and Campbell, 1972; Brewer and Yuki, 2007). However, it need not be (and we argue, should not be) a feature of cross-cultural psychology. In its stead, a value-neutral position has been advocated for anthropology (Herskovits, 1948) and for psychology by many researchers who consider that we too must avoid absolute judgments that are rooted in our own culture. Essentially, this position assumes no evaluative stance with respect to differences; each varying phenomenon is viewed in its own context, and described and interpreted relative to the cultural or ecological situation in which it occurs. An obvious example from the domain of social behavior is that of greeting procedures; in many western cultures a firm handshake and direct eye contact are considered appropriate, while in other parts of the world a bow, without eye contact, is proper. It is difficult to avoid imposing one’s own cultural norms (feeling that looking down is inappropriate), or attributions about the other person (as shy or lacking in manners), even when one has had frequent contact with other cultures. However, it is necessary to avoid these value judgments in cross-cultural psychology.

The danger of incorrect interpretation of behavior begins with the answers of respondents to questions in interviews and items in psychometric tests and questionnaires. In the second half of Chapter 1 and in Chapter 12 we shall discuss the notions of cultural bias and inequivalence that are about identifying and dealing with such issues. Apart from leading to incorrect interpretations of responses on specific items, effects of ethnocentrism can enter into cross-cultural research at three more levels, which correspond to distinctions made in the main text.

The second level is the introduction of culture-specific meaning with methods that were originally designed in one particular culture. If there is one message that emerges from knowledge accumulated so far, it is that one should never assume blindly that a task in a psychological instrument will have the same meaning cross-culturally (Van de Vijver and Leung, 1997).

The third level at which ethnocentrism is likely to affect cross-cultural research is in the formulation of theories. Our notions and ideas about behavior are embedded in our own culture. Consequently, even theory-driven research is likely to be affected by cultural biases. In fact, instruments tend to be focussed on western concepts rather than on concepts formulated in other cultural contexts. For example, in South Africa there appears to be no scale for *Ubuntu* (Zulu) or *Obotho* (Xhosa) – a concept emphasizing community orientation (see Chapter 5 on *Ubuntu* in Africa), although it is a much discussed concept among psychologists in that country. Another area where ethnocentrism is obvious is the expression and diagnosis of psychopathologies (Chapter 17).

Probably the most important effect of ethnocentrism lies in a fourth level, namely the choice of research topics. As we indicate in the subsection on indigenous psychology in Chapter 1, psychologists from majority world countries have frequently lamented the lack of societal relevance cross-cultural research has for their societies. There is another side to this complaint, namely that a hasty application of presumed scientific knowledge from the West also can lead to serious errors (D. Sinha, 1997).

Cross-cultural psychology attempts to reduce the ethnocentrism of psychology: by recognizing the limitations of our current knowledge and by seeking to extend our data and theory through the inclusion of other cultures we can reduce the culture-bound nature of the discipline. The pursuit of this goal of reducing ethnocentrism exposes us to the risk of even more ethnocentrism since it involves collecting and interpreting data from other cultures. As a general rule, one finds that the greater the cultural or behavioral difference, the greater is the potential for negative evaluations of the difference. In a thorough analysis of the discipline of history, Preiswerk and Perrot (1978) have shown the dangers that social scientists face when looking at their own past in relation to that of others: who can resist the temptation to accept, even in subtle ways, their own superiority? However, resist we must, and an explicit recognition of the potential for ethnocentrism is a first step toward its control.

Avoiding ethnocentrism does not mean that one has to accept all cultural customs as morally respectable. Arguing against mutilation through circumcision of girls in some groups, against the poisoning of young minds through violent and sexually explicit TV shows, or against abortion need not reflect an ethnocentric position. It does so if the customs objected to are taken as characteristic of (i.e., as “typical” of) the population that practices these or if the criticism serves as a basis for negative stereotyping and prejudice.

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