

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will explore the following concepts that are traditionally associated with anthropology, but are also important to sociology:

1. Cultural Universals
2. Ethnocentrism
3. Cultural Relativism

1. CULTURAL UNIVERSALS

Some concepts are traditionally associated with anthropology, but are still very important in sociology.

Cultural universals are cultural patterns that are found in all human societies.

IN CONTEXT

Religion and the uncertainty of death is an example of a cultural universal. Universally, humans have striven to answer the question of what happens after they die, and they've done so in many different ways.

Think of the myriad religions that humans have, that they've developed to answer this question, to put themselves at ease about death. Even Native Americans, who had no contact with European Westerners, had their own cosmological religious systems in place when the Europeans arrived. All cultures universally strive to answer this question, but they do so in different ways.



TERM TO KNOW

Cultural Universals

Cultural patterns that are found in all human societies.

2. ETHNOCENTRISM

Closely related to cultural universals is the concept of **ethnocentrism**, which is the attitude that one's own culture is superior to others and that your values, beliefs, and behaviors are more "correct" than other cultures.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Ethnocentric types of statements might include:

- Your religion is wrong; your culture's backwards.
- You're ignorant and stupid, but we're smart, cultured and more refined.

This way of thinking, although to be avoided, has its place in the evolution of human society. It's a natural outgrowth of human social evolution, because as social animals, humans can't survive unless they're in groups. Group identification is an important part of human survival, and this 'Us vs. Them' mentality stems from the fact that humans evolve together in groups.

This doesn't excuse people from simply being ethnocentric bigots, however. It's important to temper these natural impulses, and this is done through a similar concept, cultural relativism.



TERM TO KNOW

Ethnocentrism

The attitude that our own culture is superior to others and that our values, beliefs, and behaviors are "more correct."

3. CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativism is an idea that is often paired with ethnocentrism. Cultural relativism is the view that a culture needs to be understood on its own terms, from within, and judged by its own standards, rather than by those of an outside observer.

People often engage in cultural relativism and ethnocentrism at the same time, as they're negotiating the world around them. They aren't mutually exclusive concepts, meaning you're either a culture relativist or you're an ethnocentrist--you can be both at the same time.

IN CONTEXT

Think about times that you have traveled internationally, or even traveled to another state, and engaged in another form of culture.

In Argentina, for example, it's typical for restaurants to be closed between three and five in the afternoon for 'siesta,' and dinner time is much closer to 10:00pm, or even midnight.

As an American, this may be frustrating. Your natural ethnocentric reaction might be, "This isn't right, what are these people doing? Sleeping! They're lazy." In reality, though, you need to take a step back and relativize the culture, relative to your own, and judge it by its own standards.

When you do that, you may find that the siesta actually serves an important social function. All of the Argentines tend to gather socially during this period, so it is a crucial time for maintaining and building social relationships. When you see this pattern of cultural behavior from within, judged by its own standards, it doesn't appear so backwards and out of touch.



TERM TO KNOW

Cultural Relativism

The view that a culture needs to be understood on its own terms, from within, and judged by its own standards, rather than by those of an outside observer.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about several anthropological concepts that are also important to sociology: **cultural universals, ethnocentrism and cultural relativism.**

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Cultural Relativism

The view that a culture needs to be understood on its own terms, from within, and judged by its own standards, rather than by those of an outside observer.

Cultural Universals

Cultural patterns that are found in all human societies.

Ethnocentrism

The attitude that our own culture is superior to others and that our values, beliefs, and behaviors are "more correct."