



Department of Anthropology

Introduction to Social Cultural Anthropology

Anth101-010

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### ETHNOCENTRISM

If the above picture was in color, you would see a predominance of red in clothing and headdress. The picture is one of a Chinese wedding. One obvious difference is the symbolic difference in the meaning of color. The color “red” for the Chinese means good fortune, health and prosperity, as well as, happiness. On the other hand, in Western culture marriages (and usually the first marriage only), the color “white” carries symbolic value as it stands for purity, vulnerability, and youth. If someone said that red was the “wrong color” for a wedding and that white was the “proper color” for wedding garments, they would be ethnocentric

We are ethnocentric when we believe that our culture, its beliefs, practices and behaviors are “right”, and “superior” or “more advanced” than other cultures who we judge to be inferior or “primitive”. We judge other cultures and their members according to the standards of our own culture.

- Ethnocentrism leads us to make false assumptions about cultural differences. We are ethnocentric when we use our cultural norms to make generalizations about other peoples’ cultures and customs. Such generalizations—often made without a conscious awareness that we’ve used our culture as a universal yardstick—can be way off base and cause us to misjudge other peoples. Ethnocentrism also distorts communication between human beings

- Ethnocentric thinking causes us to make wrong assumptions about other people because ethnocentrism leads us to make premature judgments
- “They” may not be very good at what we are best at. By evaluating “them” by what we are best at, we miss the many other aspects of life that they often handle more competently than we do.
- Some Examples of Ethnocentric thinking: We often talk about British drivers driving on “the wrong side” of the road. Why not just say “opposite side” or even “left hand side”? We talk about written Hebrew as reading “backwards”. Why not just say “from right to left” or “in the opposite direction from English”.

Cultural Awareness is more than just realizing that another culture is different from ours. It is learning to value that other culture. So how do we get to that point?

- First by practicing cultural relativism which means that each cultural act, behavior, practice, belief, value and thinking must be understood within the whole context of that specific culture.
- Reject “Our Way is The Best Way” because here difference means deficient. The belief that our culture is superior to all other cultures is ethnocentric.
- Adopt an alternative mind set: “Wait a minute, there may be another way” Awareness of alternative ways of living creates some sensitivity to cultural lenses.
- Educate yourself; Move to the position where you understand there are reasons why people live, think, behave, and respond differently. The mind set here is one of favorable acceptance and respect for cultural differences
- End up at this place: “Multi-cultural living can enhance our lives and even be fun”. Mindset is one of appreciation for the ways we are different and the ways we are similar. It is a position of esteem for everyone involves.