Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

How is Culture Defined?

What if someone told you their culture was the internet? Would that make sense to you? Culture is the beliefs, behaviors, objects, and other characteristics shared by groups of people. Given this, someone could very well say that they are influenced by internet culture, rather than an ethnicity or a society! Culture could be based on shared ethnicity, gender, customs, values, or even objects. Can you think of any cultural objects? Some cultures place significant value in things such as ceremonial artifacts, jewelry, or even clothing. For example, Christmas trees can be considered ceremonial or cultural objects. They are representative in both Western religious and commercial holiday culture.

In addition, culture can also demonstrate the way a group thinks, their practices, or behavioral patterns, or their views of the world. For example, in some countries like China, it is acceptable to stare at others in public, or to stand very close to others in public spaces. In South Africa, if you board a nearly empty bus or enter a nearly empty movie theater, it is regarded as polite to sit next to the only person there. On the other hand, in a recent study of Greyhound bus trips in the US, a researcher found that the greatest unspoken rule of bus-taking is that if other seats are available, one should never sit next to another person. Numerous passengers expressed that “it makes you look weird”. These are all examples of cultural norms that people in one society may be used to. Norms that you are used to are neither right nor wrong, just different. Picture walking into a nearly empty movie theater when visiting another country, and not sitting next to the only person in the theater. Another person walks up and tells you off for being rude. You, not used to these norms, feel confused, and anxious. This disorientation you feel is an example of culture shock.

Cartoon showing two people in an empty movie theater. One person is saying 'you're a jerk' to the person who sat far away from him.

What is Cultural Relativism?

Have you ever seen or eaten food from another country, such as dried squid or fried crickets and think of it as weird and gross? This is an example of ethnocentrism! That means you use your own culture as the center and evaluate other cultures based on it. You are judging, or making assumptions about the food of other countries based on your own norms, values, or beliefs. Thinking “dried squid is smelly” or “people shouldn’t eat insects” are examples of ethnocentrism in societies where people may not eat dried squid or insects.

Cartoon showing a person offering another man some deep fried crickets. The man who is being offered the crickets says 'um, I think I'll pass.'

Is ethnocentrism bad or good? On the one hand, ethnocentrism can lead to negative judgments of the behaviors of groups or societies. It can also lead to discrimination against people who are different. For example, in many countries, religious minorities (religions that are not the dominant religion) often face discrimination. But on the other hand, ethnocentrism can create

loyalty among the same social group or people in the same society. For example, during the World Cup or Olympics, you may tend to root for your own country and believe that the players or teams representing your country are much better. National pride is also part of ethnocentrism.

To avoid judging the cultural practices of groups that are different to yours, we can use the cultural relativism approach. Cultural relativism refers to not judging a culture to our own standards of what is right or wrong, strange or normal. Instead, we should try to understand cultural practices of other groups in its own cultural context. For example, instead of thinking, “Fried crickets are disgusting! ” one should instead ask, “Why do some cultures eat fried insects?”. You may learn that fried crickets or grasshoppers are full of protein and in Mexico, it is famous Oaxaca regional cuisine and have been eaten for thousands of years as a healthy food source!

Cartoon showing a person offering another man some deep fried crickets. The man who is being offered the crickets asks to know more about them.

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Some people worry that the concept of culture can also be abused and misinterpreted. If one culture behaves one way, does that mean all cultures can behave that way as well? For example, many countries and international organizations oppose the act of whaling (the fishing of whales) for environmental reasons. These environmental organizations say that there are not many whales left and such fishing practices should be stopped. However, other countries argue that whaling is a cultural practice that has been around for thousands of years. Because it may be part of a country’s oceanic culture, this country may say that such a cultural practice should not be opposed based on cultural differences, say, by an inland country that does not understand. Who gets to define what a moral cultural behavior is? Is whaling immoral? Two different cultures may have very different answers, as we saw in the above example. Another more extreme instance would be female genital cutting in some parts of the world. Locally, it is argued that the practice has cultural roots, but such a practice has raised concerns among many international human rights organizations.

Anthropologists say that when we think about different cultures and societies, we should think about their customs in a way that helps us make sense of how their cultural practices fits with their overall cultural context. For example, having several wives perhaps makes economic sense among herders who move around frequently. Through such an understanding, polygamy makes cultural sense.

What is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic Relativism) and How does It Impact Us?

In the 1930s, two anthropologists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, noticed that the Hopi Indians in the United States had no words to differentiate between the past, present, and future. This was a surprising discovery. In English, we can easily think of tense and know what time frame someone is referring to. The two scholars found that the way language is used affected the way we think about and perceive the world. In other words, worldviews and cultural

influences are largely embedded within the language we use, even if we are saying things like coffee. When we talk about coffee in the US, we would think of a large mug, and the coffee would come from a pot of coffee. When Europeans talk about coffee, they are most likely thinking about little espresso cups filled with strong coffee.

How a language affects the way we think about the world is called linguistic relativism or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Linguistic relativism means that there are certain thoughts we have in one language (e.g. English) that cannot be understood by those who exist in another language context (e.g. Spanish). The way we think is also strongly affected by our native languages. For example, the Inuits (northern aboriginals) have dozens of ways to convey the word snow. In English, how many ways can you think of to express snow? Maybe four or five ways? Snow, flurry, sleet,...?

Let’s think about another everyday example. Imagine that we are watching an American teen movie on TV. The main character walks into the high school cafeteria, and sees the students sitting in a particular arrangement: the jocks, the mean girls, the nerds, the band geeks, the stoners, the goths. If you went to an American high school, you may immediately understand what the groupings mean. However, even among those of you that did go to an American high school, the definition of mean girls may be completely different. Now think, on the other side of the world, a high school student watching this movie in China would be very confused. If you try to explain these groupings to someone outside the linguistic cultural context, it becomes very difficult. Why are people in bands geeks? What is a stoner, can someone be both a nerd and a stoner at the same time?

So, learning a language does not mean only learning words. It also means that we need to learn the cultural contexts that are embedded in the language itself. Languages reflect our cultural experiences. For example, if you hear someone say that ginger is warm food, and melons are chilly food, in English, it may make little sense. However, for those who are well-versed in Chinese or Ayurvedic medicine will likely understand that warm foods would be good for the sniffles or even rheumatoid arthritis, while chilly foods would be good for constipation or mouth ulcers. Sometimes doctors in a US hospital are confused when Chinese language speakers express pain symptoms in English as hot and cold. These are all examples of cultural and linguistic differences and the importance of understanding language and culture.