

Thoughts on Ethnocentrism versus Cultural relativism

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Abstract

It is not just the evaluation of other cultures according to preconceptions originating in the standards and customs of one's own culture but also defines one's mental construct formed by the environment, which is reflected by the culture that one is living in. When colonial administrators, missionaries, and travellers were visiting the non-western world, they encountered the local communities and tried writing about "other cultures" because they were attracted by the cultural differences which were witnessing. These differences were understood in terms of a sense of inferiority and all their writings reflect their cultural hegemony. They tried to establish cultural superiority by adopting several intellectual strategies to study these communities. For instance, a study of youth dormitories brought out the presence of pre-marital sex and sexual laxity, which in turn brought out the loose sexual idea as opposed to the Christian idea of monogamy.

Introduction

Ethnocentrism is generally thought to involve substantial cognitive ability in individuals (Sumner 1906; Simmel 1955; LeVine and Campbell 1972; Hewstone et al. 2002) and to be based on complex social and cultural inputs. While such factors certainly play a role in much ethnocentric behaviour, extensive empirical evidence from psychology suggests the prevalence of a strong individual predisposition toward bias in favour of in-groups, which can be observed even when cognition is minimal and social input very abstract. Laboratory results, for example, suggest that behaviours of in-group favouritism can be easily triggered by even the most trivial and arbitrary group definitions (Tajfel 1970; Tajfel et al. 1971). Behaviours favouring in-groups are also found to be widespread even when they are individually costly and even in the absence of opportunities for reciprocity or direct self-interested gain (Ferguson and Kelley 1964; Kramer and Brewer 1984; Brewer and Kramer 1986). Studies in cognitive psychology find that categorization and discrimination based on group boundaries are often rapid and even preconscious (Dovidio and Gaertner 1993; Lamont and Molnar 2002).

The results show in in-group favouritism can be an undemanding yet powerful mechanism for supporting high levels of individually costly cooperation with only minimal cognitive requirements and in the absence of other, more complex mechanisms. This finding helps to explain how the observed predisposition toward in-group favouritism might have evolved and why such a predisposition might be easily triggered in situations where other social mechanisms for cooperation (institutions, reciprocity, etc.) are absent. Such a mechanism may have been derived from kin recognition systems or may have arisen separately. The model presented here does not study the process by which specific traits become salient in defining group distinctions, although the emergence of a predisposition to favour in-groups helps to explain why manipulating such differences is often a powerful political strategy (as demonstrated in the early 1990s by Slobodan Milosevic c/f Hammond and Axelrod, 2006). We assume here that distinctions between groups are based on a single abstract trait, with only four available types. Future work might consider the fact that group distinctions are socially constructed. Indeed, broadening the boundaries of what is perceived as the in-group represents one important policy approach to reducing ethnocentric behaviours. Our results also suggest several other policy implications worth further study. We have demonstrated that ethnocentrism can be an effective mechanism for supporting cooperation in the absence of such conditions as continuing interactions, well-developed institutions, and strong social norms. These conditions do often exist in society and may help to lower reliance on in-group favouritism to generate cooperation. Similarly, we show that the ability to discriminate based on group membership is especially helpful to cooperation in our model in more austere environments (e.g., when the individual cost of cooperation is high). Reducing the costs of cooperation (or increasing its benefits) might therefore reduce the value-added of discriminatory behaviours. Finally, our model speaks to Putnam's (2000) concepts of "bonding" and "bridging" capital, by demonstrating how easily ethnocentrism creates "bonding" social capital within groups. Efforts to reduce discrimination might focus on how to create opportunities for creating "bridging" social capital between groups as well.

The projected studies like the Nasal index correlated with social status by H Risley (1851-1911) -People of India, a complete study of all Indian population. One component of the study revolved around the nasal index and social state. The study argues that high-caste people have sharp noses i.e., Leptorrhine (Risley, 1915). This is rooted in a strong ethnocentric bias, because, it had the underlying assumption that tall, fair, and pointed (sharp) nose people are racially superior. Therefore, this study is a case of

“racial othering” regarding the Caucasian race as superior. Thus, this discussion is an attempt to understand the evolution of ethnocentrism, its patterns, and ways to come out of its mould.

Culture in Transition

During the twentieth century, the term ethnocentrism has widely been used in the common English language from its original usage in social science theory. In present usage, it means the belief that one's culture is superior to others. As LeVine (2015) referred to, the use of a frame of reference derived from one's own culture to judge the attributes of another culture, often in disparaging terms. The term was invented by the sociologist Sumner WG in 1906 and conceptualized as a means of promoting solidarity within. He claimed ethnocentrism in this sociological as well as cultural sense to be a universal tendency of intergroup relations among humans ('ingroups' and antagonism toward 'outgroups'). Forty years later, Sumner's theory came under criticism from scholars, who argued that individuals often belong to multiple groups and often admire outgroups. Anthropologists described parts of the world in which ethnic identities and thus alliances and antagonisms were unstable historically. As Sumner's sociological formulation and claims of universality lost credibility, the value of the ethnocentrism concept as a descriptor of recurrent attitudes gave it a permanent home in the English language.

Ethnocentrism is an important concept in the study of intergroup relations. William Graham Sumner introduced it, and he advanced the central theorem concerning the concept. In its simplest terms, he held that ethnocentrism—defined broadly as an extreme attachment to the ingroup—led to outgroup hate. Moreover, he believed that this link was universal, with ingroup attachment and out group hate being simply two sides of the same coin.

Research in the social sciences, however, fails to confirm Sumner's hypothesis. Both at the individual and societal levels of analysis, tests of the hypothesis demonstrate repeatedly that ethnocentrism and outgroup hatred are separable phenomena. Ethnocentrism develops first and has different correlates than outgroup hatred. To be sure, the two phenomena are closely related under certain conditions. External warfare and other forms of threat such as extreme famine typically enhance in-group unity. The lack of contact between the groups also can connect the two phenomena. Similarly, those with authoritarian personalities are more likely to combine in-group favouritism with out-group rejection. But Sumner's assumption that the two processes are invariably and universally correlated is not correct.

The breadth of the general concepts involved in the Sumerian hypothesis invites a wide range of indicators for both ingroup and outgroup reactions. The present review suggests the use of multiple indicators for each of the key parts of the Sumerian hypothesis. For direct indicators of ethnocentrism itself, numerous measures exist at both the individual and societal levels of analysis.

Understanding on Views

Yet philosophers who reject ethnocentrism, relativism, and isolationism must still confront the persistence of ethical diversity and disagreement and the challenges they pose, especially in the culturally complex societies found in large, modern nation-states. An increasingly influential response, associated with some forms of ethical pluralism, is the doctrine of multi-culturalism, which recommends that we act and judge on the presumption that the ethical beliefs and practices of every way of life are in principle valuable and worthy of respect. But compelling philosophical discussions of multiculturalism have construed this presumption as, at best, a 'starting hypothesis,' maintaining that a final verdict on the worth of any practice must always await the results of respectful, but sustained, critical reflection (Taylor, 2013). In response, some philosophers have urged the adoption of critical multiculturalism (as a form of objectivist ethical pluralism) which leaves open the possibility that reflection on almost any practice might generate rationally compelling grounds on which to reject the practice as ethically indefensible (Moody-Adams, 1994). The question of how to put this critical multiculturalism into practice—how to articulate and apply plausible principles for tolerating some stances, rejecting others, and intervening in practices deemed intolerable—will be a central topic of debate in the normative ethical and political philosophy of the twenty-first century.

The ethnocentrism mentioned above is *etic*. It is accentuated by two other phenomena, which are also probable *etic*s: (i) we have a tendency toward naive realism which limits our capacity to appreciate the extent to which our construals are subjective (Robinson et.al, 1995); and (ii) we tend toward false consensus, which is to think that other humans agree with our positions more than is true, and disagree with our position less than is true (Kruger and Clement, 1994).

Perception on Ethnocentrism

In short, we tend to think that the way we see the world is both valid and universal. Our culture provides the “lenses” for seeing the world in a particular way and that way of seeing is so obvious that it is not questioned. Consider this example, in Orissa, India, most of the population believes that widows must not eat chicken (Shweder, et.al, 1990). When asked if this behaviour should be universal, they said: “Of course. It is a great sin for widows to eat chicken.” When told that Americans do not believe this, they look down upon Americans and explain this “moral deficiency” by noting that America is a young country that has not yet reached the level of moral maturity found in India. Now, consider what happens when Illinois participants are asked whether widows must not eat chicken. They say that this belief is silly. When asked if this rule should be universal, they object vehemently. When told that people in Orissa, India, strongly believe that widows must not eat chicken, they look down upon these Indians, and point out that they are not sufficiently developed to have “correct views.”

Do you see ethnocentrism in both perspectives? The Indian view stems from the basic assumption that people are interdependent. Married individuals are supposed to be linked to each other forever. For a widow to eat chicken is a sin because they believe that eating chicken makes one sexually aroused, and such arousal will result in the widow having sexual relations with someone, thus breaking the eternal bond with her husband. Note that cultures often have sets of beliefs that are supportive of each other.

Now consider the American view. The basic assumption is consistent with American individualism (Triandis, 1995) which assumes that people are autonomous entities. Widows can do their own thing. If Indians have an idea that is different from the American idea, it is because they are not sufficiently developed! Thus, both cultures conclude that their views are superior, and the views of the other culture are inferior. Ethnocentrism leads to prejudice and attempts to impose the subjective culture of one's own culture on other cultural groups. This is not the place to debate the merits of individualism and collectivism. Hofstede (1980) linked these concepts with many ecological variables. Triandis (1995) has suggested that individualism is associated with high levels of achievement, creativity, self-actualization, and democracy, but also with high levels of crime, divorce, and child abuse. Collectivism is associated with high levels of social support, cooperation, interpersonal sensitivity, and pleasantness in social relationships, but also with extreme conformity, low creativity, and ethnic cleansing. In short, both cultural patterns have both positive and negative elements, and it is natural for most people from all types of cultures to prefer their cultures. As scientists, we can examine the links between ecology, culture, and social pathology, but preferences for social pathology are matters of taste, not scientific judgment.

Conclusion

This was the time when Anthropology was gaining its ground and in 1890, an American Anthropologist, Franz Boas put forward his argument that Anthropology is suffering from an ethnocentric bias of the colonizers and therefore, contemporary should come out of its mould and undertake the study of particular culture without any value judgment. All cultures have their own reasons and unreason, logic, and superstitions and therefore, Anthropologists should not pass any cultural judgment. On the contrary, every culture should be studied all by itself without any reference to other cultures. This approach instilled Cultural Dignity. According to Franz Boas, Cultural Relativism is the first step to minimize prejudices and biases, in turn, exercising scientific temperament in the studies. If Anthropology has to be meaningful science, it must come out from the mould of ethnocentrism.

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