



14 Best Examples Of Ethnocentrism (For Students)

By Chris Drew (PhD) / January 20, 2023

ETHNOCENTRISM

Ethnocentrism is the belief that your culture is natural and correct while other people’s cultures are incorrect, unnatural, or inferior.

EXPLANATION

Ethnocentric people think the ways they do things is the way things should be done, and every other culture’s way of doing things is unsavory or undesirable.

Ethnocentrism can be a contributing factor to prejudice, racism, and xenophobia. In all these instances, you’re considering yourself and your culture to be the best compared to all others.

EXAMPLES

- 1 Judging other countries’ diets
- 2 Expecting others to speak English
- 3 Thinking you don’t have an accent
- 4 Judging cultural dress
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Ethnocentrism is the belief that your culture is natural and correct while other people’s cultures are incorrect, unnatural, or inferior.

Here’s a scholarly definition from Sumner, the person who coined the term:

“...the view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it” (Sumner, 1906)

A person who is ethnocentric will shun and look down upon other cultures and the ways they do things (also known as [‘cultural bias’](#)). They will have a narrow-minded outlook that fails to see things from other people’s perspectives (often manifesting itself as [cultural blindness](#)). They may also ascribe to the concept of [cultural universalism](#).



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Examples Of Ethnocentrism

1. Judging Other Countries' Diets

An example of ethnocentrism is when you judge other countries for the way they eat, but don't have a moral reason for this.

For example, many Americans might think Peruvians eating Guinea Pig to be disgusting. But, a Peruvian might ask: how is eating Guinea Pig different to eating chicken? For traditional Peruvian cultures, Guinea Pigs are animals to be eaten!

Similarly, an American might turn up their nose at the French eating snails. Given that snails are not smart animals (certainly not as smart as pigs!), the idea that we would judge or shun their consumption of these animals may just be a knee jerk reaction and not based in logic.

2. Expecting Others To Speak English

Many of us arrogantly believe that everyone should speak English to us, no matter where we are in the world.

When traveling the world, many of us English-speakers live with the expectation that others will speak English to us. We have this luxury because English is currently the world's dominant language – especially in business interactions.

This can lead to ethnocentrism when we roll our eyes at people who aren't bilingual, even when we're in their own country!

This is a common criticism that Quebecois Canadians have of English-speaking Canadians. They will travel to Quebec and expect Quebecers to speak English to them, even though their local language is French.

It's a good reminder to us that we should humbly ask people if they speak English, and if they don't, we can't be upset. We wouldn't want to think that English is the *natural and normative* language and all other people should learn it!

3. Chopsticks Vs Western Cutlery



This is one of the most common examples of ethnocentrism that I start out with in my seminars on ethnocentrism.

Likely, many westerners would consider chopsticks to be a strange tool for eating. They appear clumsy and unnecessarily difficult to manage.

But many Asian cultures where chopsticks are the norm may have opposite views. They may laugh at the clumsiness of foreigners when they use chopsticks. They might consider us to be uncultured for having to use forks.

Of course, not everyone thinks this way. But some of us do, showing how we think *our way of doing things* is the right and *natural* approach, and other people's approaches are – naturally – inferior.

4. An Idiot Abroad

I will often show my students clips from *An Idiot Abroad* because it's so full of examples of ethnocentrism!

Below is a great clip of Karl eating some Egyptian delicacies. His commentary about the strangeness of it all shows his sense that his English diet (of Pasta, chicken and potatoes) is *normal* and the Egyptian diet is just strange.

Often when I show these clips to my students, their instant reactions are disgust at the parts of the animal that people in other parts of the world eat.

But as the Egyptian man in this clip says, it's natural to them. They consider eating as much of the animal as possible to be the right thing to do, and anything else to be *wasteful*! In this example, everyone is thinking from the norms of their own society, showing how we all tend to approach situations with a degree of ethnocentrism.

An Idiot Abroad: Egypt - Egyptian Cuisine



5. My Big Fat Greek Wedding

***My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is a fun case study in ethnocentrism that you could use in classrooms.**

The film shows a Greek family living in the United States who are very proud of their Greek heritage. When the daughter decides to marry a non-Greek man, the family finds it very hard to accept.

Throughout the film, the family believes that – because their culture is *best* – their children should attend Greek schools, learn Greek language, and study Greek history. And of course, they also want their children to marry within the Greek community.

The film is a great example of a migrant family who not only wants to retain their cultural heritage but looks upon the [dominant culture](#) with suspicion, distaste, and even sometimes scorn.

Here, they cross over from being proud of their heritage to being biased and condescending of other people's heritage.



6. Thinking You Don't Have An Accent (And Everyone Else Does!)

When you grow up only hearing one accent, it starts to feel like that 'accent' is *normal* and not an accent at all.

You often only hear accents if they're different from your own. That's when your brain tells you that something sounds funny.

This will often lead people to believe that *they don't have an accent*. In fact, I remember when I did my semester abroad when I was younger that we used to talk about it all the time. People would say "your accent is so funny!" and I would say "no, your accent is funny!"

This is a great example of ethnocentrism. Myself *and* the people I was talking to saw accents from their own perspective. We all thought our accent was *normal* and other people's was *funny*.

Of course, this is a natural thought (it's our brain noticing the difference sounds funny to us). This ethnocentrism can be fun, and only really has a negative effect when you start discriminating against people based on their accent.

7. Judging Women's Cultural Outfits

Women's outfits differ significantly across cultures and societies. And while many of us might say "It's a woman's right to decide what she wears and we should respect her no matter what", different cultures have various views on this!

Plenty of Europeans might feel like it's very normal for women to wear bikinis at the beach. But head to more conservative nations and women might always cover their shoulders or hair.



In this example, again, both cultures may use an ethnocentric lens to look at the other culture. One culture says “that’s oppression of women!” while the other says “that outfit is immodest!”

Sometimes, we need to accept other people’s cultures with an open mind and try to see where they’re coming from.

8. Colonial Imperialism

Throughout the era of European imperialism and colonization, there was a widespread belief that Indigenous populations were inferior or even unintelligent.

They looked at different types of land use (such as with nomadic cultures) and governments (such as tribal rather than parliamentary systems) as rationales for these beliefs.

This gave Europeans cover so they could invade the lands of Aboriginal populations. In fact, in Australia, the British declared Australia *terra nullius*, or a ‘land belonging to no one’, which they believed gave them the right to colonize.

After the lands were invaded, local cultures were oppressed and people were told that they must live, dress, eat, and act like Westerners.

9. Delegitimizing Others’ Religious Celebrations

Ethnocentrism is also often directed at other cultures’ religious beliefs.

For example, [in 2014](#), China attempted to crack down on the celebration of Ramadan in the Muslim region of Xinjiang.

This is an example of the dominant culture believing a minority culture’s beliefs and practices are a threat or inferior within the space of the nation. The minority culture is *othered* so the majority culture can maintain and promote their own practices and traditions as the *natural* or *normative* traditions within the nation-state.



This is an example of ethnocentrism being put into policy in order to protect one ethnic identity and suppress another.

10. Australia's Stolen Generations

In most of the 20th Century (Between 1905 and 1970), Aboriginal Australian children were frequently taken from their families and placed under the care of Anglo-Australians in a systematic effort to suppress Aboriginal cultures, with the belief that the dominant Anglo-Australian culture was superior.

Children of mixed race (derogatively labeled half-castes) were particularly targeted with the fear that these children would grow to straddle both cultures and normalize Indigenous cultural traditions among white Australians.

According to [Dr. Cecil Cook](#), the Northern Territory Chief Protector of Aborigines, there was urgency to ensure mixed race children reject Aboriginal cultures:

“Everything necessary [must be done] to convert the half-caste into a white citizen”.

11. Canada's Residential Schools

In a similar approach to Australia, colonial Canada established residential boarding schools where first nations children would be forcibly taken in order to snuff out Indigenous cultures within Canada.

Residential schools were set up in 1828, and while most were closed in the 1960s, the last one closed in 1997.

The stated goal was to assimilate the first nations children into white Canadian culture. This would be achieved by removing children from their parents. As John A McDonald, Canada's first prime minister, [stated](#):

“Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence.”

As part of this effort, the Canadian government placed residential schools as far from the Indian Reserves as possible. Parents would still come to the schools and camp out the front to be closer to their children, leading to a visitation pass system designed to further separate parents from their children.

12. American Exceptionalism



American exceptionalism – often characterized by the oft-repeated saying that “America is the best country in the world” – was coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831.

This is a topic that verges on ethnocentrism but does not *always* reach that level.

The idea behind American exceptionalism is that America’s founding (based on its constitution, and the fact the nation was founded as a free and anti-elite republic) gave America a special place in the world. This often translates to American foreign policy where the nation sees themselves as the ‘world police’ whose role is to promote freedom around the world.

Here, you can see that America sees themselves as the idealized norm against which other nations should be judged (and always found wanting!).

The concept of American exceptionalism also leads to a concept known as nationalistic Americentrism, a smug and egotistical belief that the United States is morally superior and its culture more important than those of other nations.

As former President Obama [argued](#), American exceptionalism can also lead to failure to see the good in (and learn from) other nations. It may lead us to be reluctant to collaborate with or care for other nations’ cultures and lead migrants to feel like they should assimilate.

Here, you can see, there’s a fine line between love for your culture and nation, and irrational belief in your own country’s superiority.

13. The Spanish Inquisition

The Spanish Inquisition is one of the most extreme examples of religious ethnocentrism that has occurred in human history.

Between 1478 and 1834, the Catholic Spanish rulers decided that Catholicism should be the ascendant religion within Spain. Muslims and Jews within Spain were forced to convert or be killed.

The Inquisition has many of the hallmarks of ethnocentrism. There was a belief that Catholicism was the *best* religion and that all other religions were intolerable. Catholicism was the *naturalized* religion in society and *all others were judged by Catholic doctrine* to be heretics.

14. Assimilationism

[Assimilation policies](#) state that immigrants to a country should leave their old culture behind and embrace their host country’s culture.

This is a mindset that is driven by fear that your culture will be diluted by migrants. Some could argue that it is ethnocentric because it reveals a preference for your culture to remain the dominant norm and remain the



standard within your country.

But, other people might argue that the willingness to protect your own culture is not ethnocentrism because it's not saying other cultures are *less valuable* but rather that yours needs protection. Here, it all depends on perspective – and even, perhaps, judgement about whether a culture is genuinely under threat of dying out.

Other immigration approaches include Integration, where different cultures all live together in a patchwork throughout a city, and [Self-Determination](#), where everyone can choose which culture they want to follow.

Is Everyone Ethnocentric?

Ethnocentrism is a *bias* or even a *knee-jerk reaction* where you are illogically inclined to believe that your way of doing things is best. [Everyone has this anchoring bias](#) deep down inside them, so the trick is to identify it and try to avoid it.

Of course, you can use logic, research, and reasoning to decide that the way your culture does things appear to be the best approach for you. That wouldn't be ethnocentric because it would be based on thoughtfulness and balance. But, be sure to stay open-minded and avoid making unfair judgements of others.

As we've seen, such uninformed judgements have had terrible consequences around the world.

The opposite of this is xenocentrism, where you believe another culture is better than your own. For example, some people who move to the United States might have dreamed of fleeing their homeland to the USA since childhood because they've loved the concept of freedom, small government, and capitalism.

Conclusion

Taking a look at ethnocentrism helps us to identify our own biases and blind spots. And usually, people who study ethnocentrism come to conclusions that highlight the importance of [cultural pluralism](#) (that is, cultures living together and respecting one another) and compassion.

While we might not want to change our culture and traditions, we could use the theory of ethnocentrism to get to know other people's cultures better. However, if we get too far the other way, we end up being [cultural relativists](#) – with no moral framework guiding us at all. If we understand other people's perspectives, we can live more harmoniously together, and remain open-minded to learning from each other.

[Related: 6 Types of Cultural Diffusion](#)

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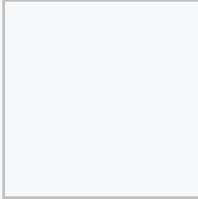


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