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Ethnocentrism

Why read this text...

Ethnocentrism is judging another culture believing that the values and standards of one's own culture are superior. It should come as no surprise that European curriculums are still largely ethnocentric, or specifically, Eurocentric. What we teach and how is never neutral and acknowledging this fact is in service of being a better teacher to all our students in this ever diverse world.

Historical Context

Ethnocentrism refers to the tendency to perceive and judge the world from the perspectives of one's own culture. In that sense it is a truism of a sorts, as all people perceive and judge the world from situated cultural perspectives embedded in particular value systems. Ethnocentrism refers to cultural biases that become institutionalized, embedded in social structure and extended beyond the bounds of the societies and cultures in which they emerged. It refers common tendencies to parade particular *worldviews* as if *universal*. Eurocentrism is for example intimately tied up with histories and processes of colonialism and imperialism, in which particular views on race, gender and social class were constructed. Quoting Battiste, Baker (2008) identifies ethnocentrism in education as a form of "cognitive imperialism" that positions Western ways of knowing, teaching and learning as superior.

Criticism of ethnocentrism in anthropology produced a methodological reliance on cultural relativity as a tool to explore and counter ethnocentric biases. This was not moral relativism, but rather an important idea that that any worldview is always at the outset partial and particular and that no one worldview can thus claim universality.

a) Discussion

The term ethnocentrism was first appropriated in anthropology by Franz Boas (1858-1942), one of the founders of American anthropology. He used it to describe the dominance and prevalence of thoughts and practices that privilege the "European" as the highest form of evolutionary development, a common view that had permeated the public space, and especially science and the academy. Boas was particularly opposed to evolutionary hierarchizing and ranking humans and cultures into racial categories, and assuming greater or lesser value according to their placement in an imagined value systems. To combat ethnocentrism, Boas enlisted cultural relativity as a methodological tool, which allowed anthropologist to investigate and understand other cultures in their own terms. This included suspending judgment until familiar with the culture at hand through committing to long-term ethnographic research (Moore, 2002, Barnard, 2011).

Discussions and productions around cultural relativity have made anthropologists acknowledge that the very concepts we use in describing and classifying the world are



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ethnocentrically biased in the sense of being situated in a particular language and cultural perspective. Since the Boas era ideas about cultural relativity have extended beyond anthropology. In other domains, relativity was not understood as a methodological and analytical tool, but rather linked to ideas of moral relativism (it's OK in that culture...) and human behaviour as culturally determined (it's their culture ...).

The renowned anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughold (2008) addressed how we might balance between unreflected both ethnocentrism and too freely extended relativism.

"Again, when I talk about accepting difference, I am not implying that we should resign ourselves to being cultural relativists who respect whatever goes on elsewhere as "just their culture." I have already discussed the dangers of "cultural" explanations; "their" cultures are just as much part of history and an interconnected world as ours are. What I am advocating is the hard work involved in recognizing and respecting differences—precisely as products of different histories, as expressions of different circumstances, and as manifestations of differently structured desires" (Abu Lughold 2008:787).

While Abu-Lughold is here addressing anthropologists, the same may apply to teachers at all levels of education, who teach across the social and cultural differences represented in a classroom.

b) Practical Example

Joanna DaCunha (2016) offers an insight into the series of workshops she conducted in US with multiracial groups of students from 13-18 years of age with the specific goal to disrupt their Eurocentric education through a social justice curriculum created to assist students of colour in developing critical consciousness and self-awareness. Using Critical Race Theory and other theoretical frameworks, they conducted a series of workshops, aimed at promoting youth self-awareness and critical consciousness through self, societal and global awareness by challenging the dominant white discourse and teaching students about their black and Latino communities by engaging with popular culture and history. Workshops included students analysing music lyrics, making poetry, learning about media representation, social movements and marginalised cultures in particular. As a result, other realities of life were addressed, which provided the young people with self-confidence and value for their own cultures.

Thinking further:

1. How do you think about the ideas of progress and growth? Are things you teach in relation to these concepts? In what ways? Can you think why would the idea of progress be ethnocentric?



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2. Do the things you teach have an author (like in literature and art?) or do you teach some things like a “universal” knowledge (like geography or math)? Can you ask yourself who do you teach and why? Is the knowledge you teach about the world universal? Why?
3. What styles of learning do you subscribe to? Do you teach all of your students the same way? Are the contents of your classes always the same or do you adapt them to your students?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Eurocentrism, Cultural relativity, Colonialism

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