

Interpreting Cultural Practices

Pitfalls in Interpreting Cultures

Can we ever understand another culture—that is, can a person who is outside a culture interpret or explain what is going on within another culture? This is different from judging a practice as positive or negative. Interpreting does not involve assessing the merits of the custom; it simply tries to make sense of it. The challenge of interpreting cultural practices is the defining preoccupation of anthropology: to try to explain the meaning that cultural practices in another group have for members of that group. Even though the practices do not directly operate in our culture as they do in the other culture, anthropologists believe that we can often come to some understanding of these other ways of doing things. While this seems possible, there are two pitfalls associated with interpreting the practices of other cultural groups. We will refer to these as ethnocentrism and radical uniqueness.

- Ethnocentrism is the tendency to interpret other cultures in terms of our own cultural practices. Ethnocentricity comes from two words—*ethno* from the Greek word meaning *nation* and the Latin word *centralis* meaning *centre*. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to place one's own culture and beliefs at the centre of the world and explain everything in terms of these ideas. The problem is that we may inappropriately apply our constructs to another group's practices. For example, when interpreting Aboriginal political structures, some early anthropologists thought that Aboriginal chiefs were exactly like kings. These anthropologists inappropriately applied concepts from their culture to explain the political structures of Aboriginal groups without appreciating that the structures differed. Ethnocentricity arises because we tend to make sense of what we see by using concepts that are familiar to us.
- Radical uniqueness believes that each culture is very different and that there are no parallels among peoples' experiences—no one from one cultural group can ever explain another culture because we cannot know anything outside of our own group. In order to avoid ethnocentrism, those who believe in radical uniqueness insist that people should only interpret their own culture and not presume to

make sense of other cultures. The problem is that radical uniqueness denies any possibility of knowledge by one culture about another culture. This is unreasonable because there seem to be obvious parallels among different cultures; e.g., needing food to eat, forming personal relationships, celebrating important events through rituals.

Cross-cultural Sensitivity when Interpreting Cultural Practices

When anthropologists interpret cultural practices they try to avoid the extremes of ethnocentrism and radical uniqueness. Cross-cultural sensitivity is the middle ground between these two poles. Cross-cultural sensitivity in interpreting cultural practices is defined by the following characteristics:

- Recognizes differences: Anthropologists expect to find differences within and between cultures, and they presume that these practices make good sense to the people who engage in them.
- Is aware of dangers: Anthropologists are cautious when using concepts from outside a culture to interpret the culture.
- Is careful when reaching conclusions: Anthropologists interpret other cultures only to the extent that the parallels between the cultures are appropriate.

In their attempts to interpret cultures in a cross-culturally sensitive manner, anthropologists typically spend considerable time with the culture carefully observing and engaging in the practices they are trying to interpret, and often seek confirmation from members of the culture that the interpretations are true to the culture.

Adapted from Ruth Sandwell et al. *Early Contact and Settlement in New France* (Vancouver, BC: The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2002), pp. 33–60. Permission granted by The Critical Thinking Consortium for use by Alberta teachers.