

# Cultural relativism article

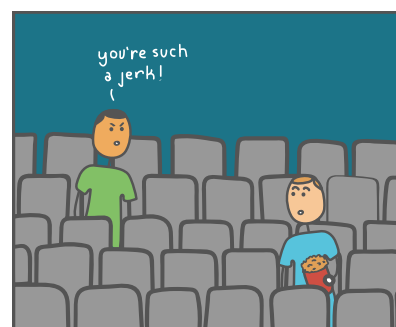
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## How is culture defined?

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

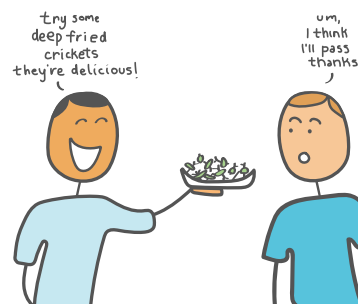
stare at others in public, or to stand very close to others in public spaces. In South Africa, if you board a nearly empty bus or enter a nearly empty movie theater, it is regarded as polite to sit next to the only person there. On the other hand, in a recent study of Greyhound bus trips in the US, a 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.



## What is cultural relativism?

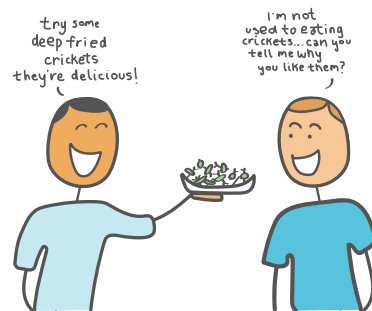
Have you ever seen or eaten food from another country, such as dried squid or fried crickets and

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.



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!



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,...?


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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.

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**Isaac Deatherage** 2 years ago



Language relativity! The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis! I am soooooo very glad to see this in the culture section. It is very true. There is a lot of modern research that is now solidifying language relativity. A more extreme example is numeracy. Tribes that only have words for "one," "two," and "more" do not see a difference between 5 or 7. As well, Eastern cultures think of time as vertical while Western cultures think of time as horizontal all because the word produces the specific thought. Even color perception is based off of language. People love to argue anytime they feel that socialization, prejudice, discrimination, relativity, and so on takes the power away from the human. They argue for universal thoughts, emotions, impulses, etc. The best answer is that primitive instincts such as emotions and evolutionary impulses all arise genetically from the one original tribe of humans so that they



could survive. However, higher order thinking is a direct result of language. That is in fact what separates us from the animals. People love to ask for citations. I'll point you to PubMed and ask you to type in language relativity and Whorfianism and see for yourself the overwhelming evidence. Sure, you can find studies indicating the opposite and copy and paste those to fulfill a self-confirming bias, but understanding how language creates our thoughts is very important in cultural relativism so that languages are appreciated for their beauty and diversity. As well, the exception does not wipe out the rule. I hope people watching the other playlists on language that argue against this will read this article and research it themselves. This heavily influenced both my undergrad research as well as my graduate thesis, and it is very interesting and vital in order to more clearly understand and appreciate others.

Rep · **1** (14 votes)  Upvote  Downvote  Flag



**David Wang** a year ago

Totally agree that languages conceptualize things differently, but the Hopi time controversy and especially the "Eskimo"/Inuit words for snow are outdated clichés about linguistic relativity that have since been proven to be inaccurate. These examples assume a strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which isn't accepted by mainstream linguistics. I also wrote about this in the "Clarifications" page, but see the Wikipedia article

which quotes from Malotki (1983) about establishing that the Hopi have future and non-future tense system ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hopi\\_time\\_controversy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hopi_time_controversy)) and this Atlantic article gives a nice explanation for why the "50+ words for snow!" is misguided (<https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/01/mini-object-lesson-no-there-are-not-a-hundred-eskimo-words-for-snow/426651/>)




Yes, there are languages whose only numerals are "one," "two," and then anything more than "two" is just considered "many." But that doesn't mean that speakers of that language do not have a concept for "three" or "four." (As an aside, my linguistics professor for my Language Universals and Typology course in undergrad did once say that numerals are one of the first words to be exchanged and incorporated into a language when there's language contact from an outside language. Struggling to find sources for that, though.)

Similarly with color terms. Some languages only have two basic color terms: "black" and "white." But, that does not mean that they only see in "black" and "white" or "warm" and "cool" colors (red & yellow vs. green & blue, respectively). Recognizing those colors as different may take slightly longer, as in the

experiment where Russian speakers who have an obligatory for light blue/dark blue were faster at distinguishing those colors than English speakers (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1876524/>), but that doesn't mean that English speakers are incapable of measuring that difference. As that article notes in its discussion, "... our results suggest that language-specific distortions in perceptual performance arise as a function of the interaction of lower-level perceptual processing and higher-level knowledge systems (e.g., language) online, in the process of arriving at perceptual decisions. The exact nature of this interaction cannot be determined from these data. It could be that information from linguistic systems directly influences the processing in primary perceptual areas through feedback connections, or it could be that a later decision mechanism combines inputs from these two processing streams."

To me, this controversy is similar to the competing theories on emotion. Is emotion partly a result of our analysis of a situation via a cognitive label like the two-factor/Schachter-Singer theory or do we feel our emotion and its corresponding physiological aspects after we appraise a situation to be one

way or the other like the Lazarus theory? As the article later notes, "The Whorfian question is often interpreted as a question of whether language affects nonlinguistic processes. Putting the question in this way presupposes that linguistic and nonlinguistic processes are highly dissociated in normal human cognition, such that many tasks are accomplished without the involvement of language. A different approach to the Whorfian question would be to ask the extent to which linguistic processes are normally involved when people engage in all kinds of seemingly nonlinguistic tasks (e.g., simple perceptual discriminations that can be accomplished in the absence of language). Our results suggest that linguistic representations normally meddle in even surprisingly simple objective perceptual decisions." There is a mixture of cognitive events happening here that can't be so easily pulled apart and said that our language determines everything. As much as I think having a strong version of linguistic relativity would be cool, we just don't live in the movie "Arrival."

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**comme** (8 votes)  Upvote  Downvote  Flag



**Heather Tanner** 9 months ago

I don't really understand the comment:  
"Through such an understanding,

polygamy makes cultural sense." Why does polygamy make sense? Why do you assume the women don't have multiple husbands to accommodate the many passing men? This sounds like a patriarchal comment and removes the power women also hold in any culture which is a common oversight in literature written primarily by men and/or largely influenced by male thought.

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**Jen** 9 months ago

Heather, this is not an oversight. Your views on polygamy make sense in the context of your society's culture, where polygamy is unacceptable. So your opinion on it is actually an example of ethnocentrism, which is covered by a big chunk of this article (the same section this example is in, actually: "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."

The aim is to "think about their customs in a way that helps us make sense of how their cultural practices fits with their overall cultural context." So when we're considering the economic sense of the culture of herders, polygamy is a cultural practice that fits within that cultural context. Hope that helps!

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**ff142** 3 years ago

"can you tell me why you like them?" sounds a little rude


Totally agree with "Why are people in bands geeks?" I really don't understand why

**Repl** • **Comm** (4 votes)  Upvote  Downvote  Flag



**fjduenas** 2 years ago

lol if its not in line with the dominant culture than its considered "strange", if someone asked "why do you like them"? in a pleasant tone vs a tone with disgust that is what should be considered. those who see it as strange want to understand, just as we all are here to try to understand things that we don't...

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**Grant Parker** 5 months ago

can you make the pictures bigger please

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**Fahim Shahriar** 2 years ago

please explain about cultural ecology

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**Lynley Evans** 3 years ago

Do you have any references to ayurvedic medicine

Repl · Comm (1 vote) Upvote Downvote Flag



**sacharshruti** 3 years ago

<http://www.progenresearchlab.com/articles/Scientific%20basis%20for%20Ayurvedic%20medicines-Book.pdf>

Comm (2 votes) Upvote Downvote Flag



**rprangen** 4 months ago

When is the time appropriate to challenge culture? Are there cultural practices that should not be considered to fall under cultural relativism? If so please give some examples. How should cultural practices be viewed when they conflict with Universal Rights or Natural Rights?

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**Jamaca Jackson** 2 years ago

What is culture region

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**Culture questions >**