

THE EMANCIPATED MIND:

OVERCOMING SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT



USING CRITICAL THINKING
TO GET BEYOND GROUPTHINK

LINDA ELDER

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LINDA ELDER

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PREFACE

This guide is concerned with the influences groups have on individual human thought and some of the problems that result from those influences. It is also concerned with some of the many dysfunctional ways in which groups operate, as well as a number of the root causes of this behavior. In short, it is about the problem of sociocentric thought. Much has been written about sociocentricity (often under the label “ethnocentricity”); countless studies have been conducted in an attempt to understand it. However, to my knowledge, no adequate theory has been developed that effectively makes sense of why and how sociocentricity occurs in human cultures. No integrated theory has been articulated that gets at its most basic causes. For instance, little has been written about the relationship between egocentric and sociocentric thought, though a strong connection exists between these two phenomena. Both are native to human thought.

Sociocentrism, in brief, refers to the tendencies of human groups to privilege their own group, to impose sanctions on those within the group who refuse to uncritically accept the mainstream view, to unquestioningly submit to those in power within the group, and to validate the beliefs of the group. Throughout this guide, I will elaborate on this initial definition and offer examples of sociocentricity from many domains in human life.

Sociocentrism is a powerful force in every culture in the world. It is exemplified in widespread group selfishness, conformity, and myopia. It threatens the well-being of humans and other species as never before. The capacity of groups to cause great suffering, not only to huge numbers of people but also to other sentient creatures, is unprecedented. And the magnitude of destruction to the planet at the hands of human groups in the last 150 years has been exponentially greater than anything seen in the history of *Homo sapiens*.

Pressing and complex problems deriving from sociocentric thought now abound in every important domain of life. Our only hope for dealing with these problems lies in our thinking. There is no other way. Yet we as humans give very little attention to the thinking that leads to most of the problems we experience. Until we do, we won’t be able to emancipate our thinking from the shackles of social ideologies, rules, conventions, mores, taboos, groupthink, prejudices, biases, vested interests, selfishness, arrogance, closed mindedness, and hypocrisy. Until we do, there is little hope that we will stop all the nonsense that leads to so much sorrow and destruction.

The root causes of problems in human thought can be organized into two sets of cognitive tendencies, both of which are natural and “comfortable” to the human

mind: 1) egocentrism, or narrowminded, selfish thought, and 2) sociocentrism, or narrow-minded “groupish” thought. Both are briefly dealt with in this guide. The primary focus is on sociocentrism, because group selfishness, or groupishness, has historically caused far greater destruction than individual selfishness. But these two phenomena are best understood in relationship to each another.

Finally, let us not forget the human potential for rational thought and reasonability. A major premise in this guide is that we are capable of gaining significant command of our egocentric and sociocentric tendencies if: 1) we understand them deeply, and 2) we actively work to diminish the power they have in our lives.

In brief, each of us is a mixture of reasonability, selfishness, and groupishness. We routinely engage in all three ways of thinking. The hope for our survival and the well-being of the planet lies in cultivating our rational capacities and diminishing the power of our egocentric and sociocentric tendencies.

One of the main goals of this guide is to show that we need to embrace new and expansive ways of thinking. We need to ask new questions, pursue new purposes, create new ideas. We need to begin with new assumptions and to look at things from new perspectives. And we need all of these new ways of thinking to be based in critical thought—not egocentric or sociocentric thought.

For instance, when we grasp the intimate connection between thinking and behavior, we understand that our actions are caused by our thinking. When we understand the role that thinking plays in our lives, we begin to take command of the thinking that is controlling us. We can change the thinking that causes us to behave in irrational ways. We can replace unreasonable, illogical, self-centered, or group-centered thought with reasonable, logical, ethical thought.

In short, we need to work toward the cultivation of critical societies, societies in which fairminded, critical thought is the rule rather than the exception. We need to create cultures in which people routinely enter into and empathize with alternative viewpoints. We need cultures in which people regularly look for and correct mistakes in their thinking, in which people expect the same high standards of themselves that they expect of others.

This book seeks to begin a dialogue on these and related issues. Again, it focuses fundamentally on the problem of sociocentric thought as a barrier to the cultivation of critical societies. It links sociocentric thought to native egocentric tendencies. Finally, it attempts to illuminate the possibility of critical societies—societies in which critical discussions of important issues are routine and pervasive, societies in which the typical human mind is developed and cultivated from birth and throughout life.

I want to point out, before launching forward into the dialogue about sociocentric thought that this book is largely conceptual rather than empirical in nature. I have tried to use intuitive examples to support a given conceptual point, but this is not a guide to experimental studies on humans as social animals. Many

wonderful studies have been conducted that illuminate our understanding of human thought and behavior. Some of these studies have been referenced in this book. But this work is primarily theoretical, rather than empirical, and therefore may not be what some readers are either accustomed to or are seeking. When you come across a theoretical point that seems counterintuitive, it might help to come up with your own examples that would either support it or negate it, as you decide whether to accept or reject the idea (itself an exercise in critical thinking). In many cases, I have offered “Test the Idea” activities to help you do this.

Where I do focus on empirical studies, some will wish I had used more current studies. Where I quote from important thinkers from the past, some will wish I had quoted from important thinkers of today. I have tried to keep this book brief while supporting the conceptual points implicit in a substantive conception of sociocentric thought. These points could certainly be further developed with additional examples. Many of the conceptual points might perhaps have been supported by better examples. But at some point, an author must bring a written piece to its close. It is up to you to judge for yourself whether the theory I have developed and the assertions I have made can adequately be supported with real-life examples (especially if my examples don't seem intuitive to you).

Moreover, a number of my examples may be considered controversial. This is implicit in the content I am dealing with, since examples meant to illuminate sociocentric thought will focus on the received views of society (either past or present). If you have accepted uncritically a cultural practice, and someone is critical of that practice, your natural tendency will be to negate or be offended by it. This is true for us all as humans, because we are largely sociocentric; it is natural for us to accept group ideas without questioning them or examining them. In other words, ironically, our very sociocentrism will get in the way of our learning what it is and how it influences our thoughts and actions. Hence the need for this book and an open mind to read it.

I have at all times tried to stick with what I consider to be paradigm cases and examples. But I realize what may be paradigmatic in my view may well be perceived as controversial by others. Again, when you find yourself disagreeing with an example I have used, it might be best to focus primarily on the conceptual point and think of your own examples to support it rather than throwing out the theory itself. Of course, you may find the theory to be unsound, and when this happens you will need, as an autonomous thinker, to reject that theory.

In all of my writings, I begin with the assumption that the world is in desperate need of a better way of living that can only be possible through better ways of thinking. Sociocentric thought along with egocentric thought, in my view, together represent the most powerful twin barrier to the development of thought and the cultivation of critical societies. We can't get command of these forces in the mind unless and until we understand them and are actively working against them. It is in this light that I hope this book will be understood and received.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish first to thank Richard Paul for his continued support of my development as a student of critical thinking and for the living example he offers as thinker *par excellence*. I cannot name another theoretician who has so attempted to live the principles he espouses as Richard has done throughout his life.

I wish also to acknowledge the excellent feedback on this book given to me by my colleagues Gerald Nosich, Enoch Hale, and Rush Cosgrove, all fellows of the Foundation for Critical Thinking. This work has been significantly improved as a result of their comments and suggestions. To all three, I express my appreciation for giving their time to this project.

Finally it is important for me to acknowledge the parts of this book that have been co-written by me and Richard Paul—especially much of the section on ethics, which is found in our *Thinker's Guide to Ethical Reasoning*.

Notwithstanding these acknowledgements, I lay claim to any theoretical mistakes and all the controversial examples. I have been justly warned by my colleagues and have not always taken their good advice.

THE PROBLEM OF SOCIOCENTRISM

INTRODUCTION

Conventional people are roused to fury by departures from convention, largely because they regard such departures as a criticism of themselves. ... Where the environment is stupid or prejudiced or cruel, it is a sign of merit to be out of harmony with it. ... Galileo and Kepler had “dangerous thoughts” ... and so have the most intelligent men of our day.

—Bertrand Russell, 1930

Humans are social animals. We must interact with others to survive as beings in the world. But we aren't just social animals; we are social animals who form complex belief systems. These belief systems often reflect a variety of forms of intellectual blindness as well as intellectual insights. We develop worldviews that are a mixture of self-serving, group-serving, and rational thought. Our social groups not only provide us with ways and means of surviving; they also impose on us a relatively narrow way of looking at the world.

We are all born *centered in ourselves*. We feel directly and unavoidably our own pain and frustration, our own joy and pleasure. Thus, we largely see the world from a narrow, self-serving perspective. But we are also members of groups. And these groups have a powerful influence on our thoughts and actions.

Our native narrowness of perspective, focused on our own needs and wants, merges with our group views as we are increasingly socialized and conditioned, over time, to see the world, not only from our own perspective but from the perspective of our groups: family, gender, peers, colleagues, ethnic group, nationality, religion, profession, and so forth. Thus, we come to see the world as Japanese, American, Turkish, Korean, or Chinese persons. We see it as Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus. We see it as teachers, entrepreneurs, lawyers, doctors, judges, prosecutors, police officers, and so on.

Sociocentric thought is the native human tendency to see the world from narrow and biased group-centered perspectives, to operate within the world through subjective and partial group beliefs, group influences, group rules, group interests. It is connected with the human need for validation—the innate need to be accepted and esteemed by others.

This mentality can be seen in a powerful social force pervasive in many developed countries today: nationalism—or, in other words, “our country is the best”: “We have the best government, legal system, schools, cars, and cities. We are

the most sophisticated and charming, talented and inventive. To demonstrate our superiority, we need to have the best weapons, be the first to go to the moon, have the most sophisticated satellite systems, telescopes, and rockets. You are either for us or against us. You are either on our side or on the side of our enemies.”

The idea of sociocentric thinking is not new. Under one label or another, many books have been written on the subject. It has been the focus of important sociological studies. In 1906, the preeminent sociologist William Graham Sumner (1906; 1940) introduced the concept of ethnocentrism, which he used synonymously with what we term sociocentrism:

Ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view of thinking in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it. ... Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exacts its own divines, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn (p. 13).

Sociocentrism,¹ as a mode of thinking, contrasts with that of the emancipated human mind (the mind that thinks beyond narrow group interests to the rights and needs of all humans, as well as other species). The first is intellectually dysfunctional but common; the second is a high and challenging ideal, largely unrealized in human groups. The first entails unjustified prejudices, and delusions in favor of group interests and desires; the second requires open-mindedness, intellectual autonomy, and intellectual empathy. The first comes naturally to the mind; the second must be cultivated.

Starting at a very young age humans begin fitting themselves into groups, from no choice of their own but out of instinct and primarily in order to survive. Young children lack the skills to critique the beliefs thrust upon them by these various groups—to determine group practices that make sense to accept, to identify those that need modification, and to abandon those that should be rejected. Thus, from a very young age, humans for the most part uncritically accept the beliefs of family, school, religion, peers—indeed any group in which they become members. Then they spend their lives largely defending and building on views they have uncritically accepted as children. As we age, we don't *naturally* become less sociocentric, just perhaps more sophisticated in our sociocentrism.

¹ The term “ethnocentricity” is often used synonymously with “sociocentricity.” The relationship between these two concepts is discussed later in this guide.



Test the Idea

Think of one group you were thrust into as a child that influenced your thinking. Complete these statements:

1. I would describe this group in the following ways . . .
2. The beliefs I probably uncritically accepted from this group are . . .
3. The problems I see with these beliefs are . . .
4. It makes sense to replace these beliefs with the following beliefs . . .

Of course, many of the beliefs given to us through group membership make perfect sense to accept; many of them help us survive. But more of them are based in dangerous ideologies. The point is that we don't inherently distinguish the one from the other.



Test the Idea

Distinguish between the reasonable and unreasonable ideas within one group you belong to. Complete these statements:

1. Some beliefs in this group that seem to make perfect sense, objectively speaking, are . . .
2. Some beliefs that probably need to be reworked are . . . These beliefs cause problems in the following ways . . .

Jean Piaget, a preeminent twentieth-century developmental psychologist and philosopher, conducted numerous studies to deeply understand the minds of children. In so doing, he uncovered sociocentricity as a common phenomenon in children. For instance, he documented the fact that even young children routinely display the belief that their group is the best. Consider this passage from Piaget's study for UNESCO (Campbell, 1976), which is a dialogue between an interviewer and three children regarding the causes of war and which illuminates the problem of nationalism (prominent form of sociocentric thought):

Michael M. (9 years, 6 months old): Have you heard of such people as foreigners? *Yes, the French, the Americans, the Russians, the English...* Quite right. Are there differences between all these people? *Oh, yes, they don't speak the same language. And what else? I don't know. What do you think of the French, for instance? The French are very serious, they don't worry about anything, an' it's dirty there. And what do you think of the Russians? They're bad, they're always wanting to make war. And what's your opinion of the English? I don't know... they're nice...* Now look, how did you come to know all you've told me? *I don't know... I've heard it... that's what people say.*

Maurice D. (8 years, 3 months old): If you didn't have any nationality and you were given a free choice of nationality, which would you choose? *Swiss nationality.* Why? *Because I was born in Switzerland.* Now look, do you think the French and Swiss are equally nice, or the one nicer or less nice than the other? *The Swiss are nicer.* Why? *The French are always nasty.* Who is more intelligent, the Swiss or the French, or do you think they're just the same? *The Swiss are more intelligent.* Why? *Because they learn French quickly.* If I asked a French boy to choose any nationality he liked, what country do you think he'd choose? *He'd choose France.* Why? *Because he was born in France.* And what would he say about who's the nicer? Would he think the Swiss and French equally nice, or one better than the other? *He'd say the French are nicer.* Why? *Because he was born in France.* And who would he think more intelligent? *The French.* Why? *He'd say the French want to learn quicker than the Swiss.* Now you and the French boy don't really give the same answer. Who do you think answered best? *I did.* Why? *Because Switzerland is always better.*

Marina T. (7 years, 9 months old): If you were born without any nationality and you were given a free choice, what nationality would you choose? *Italian.* Why? *Because it's my country. I like it better than Argentina where my father works, because Argentina isn't my country.* Are Italians just the same, or more, or less intelligent than the Argentines? What do you think? *The Italians are more intelligent.* Why? *I can see people I live with, they're Italians.* If I were to give a child from Argentina a free choice of nationality, what do you think he would choose? *He'd want to stay an Argentinean.* Why? *Because that's his country.* And if I were to ask him who is more intelligent, the Argentines or the Italians, what do you think he would answer? *He'd say Argentineans.* Why? *Because there wasn't any war.* Now who was really right in the choice he made and what he said, the Argentinean child, you, or both? *I was right.* Why? *Because I chose Italy.*

One can infer that the children in these interviews have been indoctrinated into the beliefs, with accompanying ideologies, of their nation and culture. These children cannot articulate why they think their country is better than others, but they have no doubt that it is. Seeing one's group as superior to other groups is both natural to the human mind and encouraged by the cultures in which we live.

Sociocentricity operates at the unconscious level of thought; it is not explicitly recognized by the mind, yet it guides much human behavior.² Only to the extent that each of us takes command of this hidden part of our nature, can we begin to extricate ourselves from dogmatic and dangerous group ideologies, from group rules, taboos and conventions arbitrarily formed and strictly imposed, from group righteousness that leads to untold pain and suffering, from group agendas and actions that undermine the cultivation of critical societies.

² What I mean here is that humans do not inherently recognize sociocentricity in their own thought. It should be pointed out, however, that people often do notice it in others.



Test the Idea

Think of some ways in which children in our culture are indoctrinated into group ideologies. Complete these statements:

1. From a very young age, children in our country are indoctrinated into the following beliefs. . .
2. In schools, children are indoctrinated in the following ways. . .
3. These types of beliefs are a problem because. . .

SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT SHOULD BE DISTINGUISHED FROM SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT

There are many situations in which people need to work together as a cohesive unit. For this to happen, some level of agreement is necessary. But how this is done, and for what purpose, will bear upon its level of reasonability. *That* people function in groups is not the problem; this is only natural. *How* they function in groups—whether and to what extent blind obedience is required or expected, whether and to what extent reasoned dissent is allowed and encouraged—determines the extent to which any group can be said to be reasonable or rational.

Thus, it is important to distinguish *dysfunctional* group-centered thought and behavior from that which is either productive and useful or neutral. Just because people function in groups doesn't mean they do so in a way that is harmful or destructive. Healthy groups can and do exist (though every group can potentially fall prey to groupthink, prejudice, bias, distortion and so on). Many advocacy groups have well-reasoned goals and processes for reaching those goals. Many families function as rational entities, concerned not only with the well-being of its members but with the well-being of those outside the family as well. In short, many groups function so as to nurture group members while also being concerned with the rights and needs of those outside the group.



Test the Idea

Think of some group in which people work together toward positive change or the cultivation of fairminded, critical societies. Complete these statements:

1. I would describe this group as follows. . .
2. The good that this group is working to bring about can be described as follows. . .
3. If people took this group's ideas seriously and acted on them, things could improve in the following ways. . .

In sum, though humans are naturally *social*, and though they will always to some extent be *sociocentric*, they need not be primarily so. Social behavior is a problem only when it is dysfunctional. Because groups tend to assume their own thought and behavior to be rational, they often have difficulty recognizing their own irrational perspectives, viewpoints, inferences, and conceptions.



Test the Idea

Think of some behavior that a group you belong to sees as reasonable but which you think is dysfunctional. Complete these statements:

1. I would describe this group in the following ways . . .
2. The beliefs this group perceives as reasonable but which I see as unreasonable are . . .
3. I think these beliefs are unreasonable because . . .
4. If I were to mention my views to the group, I think its members would think and behave in the following ways . . .

The extent to which any particular group is sociocentric is a matter of degree. Just as people are a mixture of the rational and the irrational, so are groups. Group members may, for instance, function reasonably well as a group, with each member taking into account the concerns of all other group members, while at the same time ruthlessly pursuing vested interests which harm those outside the group. Many businesses are good examples of this. Take, for instance, the marketing department of a successful tobacco company. The marketing “team” may work effectively together, showing concern and empathy for one another’s viewpoints. They may spend time together on weekends enjoying one another’s company and that of their families. They make exchange gifts at Christmas and sympathize with one another through personal tragedies. They may, in short, function reasonably and empathically within the group in terms of interpersonal relationships while at the same time creating marketing strategies that are deadly and will play a key role in the deaths of millions of gullible people who become addicted to cigarettes (not to mention the millions of people who don’t necessarily die from smoking cigarettes but suffer other negative effects associated with the consumption of tobacco products).



Test the Idea

Think of a group you belong to or have belonged to in which some of its views were quite reasonable while others were unreasonable. Make a list of the unreasonable beliefs and then the reasonable ones, followed by some important implications of each.

HUMANS ARE INFLUENCED BY GROUPS WITHIN GROUPS

Because humans are intrinsically social creatures, we form groups for almost every imaginable purpose. Any given person will belong to numerous groups in a lifetime. These groups will each have their own set of social rules, expectations, and taboos. Many groups will overlap with others; some will operate more independently. Some people will be more autonomous, allying themselves with fewer groups. But all of us, whether we like it or not, belong to a broader culture or society that imposes its rules on us.

Thus, everyone is part of a number of groups, each of which has its own influence and many of which influence one another. Any given individual is usually influenced first by the family, each member of which has in turn been influenced by the groups in which he or she has been a member. Then, as we go through life, the groups we become members of (either voluntarily or involuntarily), with their various ideologies and belief systems, influence our thought and actions.

A typical pattern of group influence begins with family, wherein the views of the family are thrust upon the child—views on “the family,” on marital relations, sibling relations, intimacy, parenting, sexuality, health and well-being, and so forth. If the family is religious, the child is likely expected to uncritically accept the religious beliefs of the family. When the child goes to school, the views of teachers are inculcated into the mind of the child. At the same time, peers can have significant influence on the child’s developing mind. As the child goes through school, there are many influencing parties—teachers and peers, neighbors and clergy, and still the parents and siblings—each having different influences at different ages. Religion, sports, TV and other media, extracurricular activities, and other influences contend for the child’s attention. The young adult may attend college and be influenced in many new directions, then move into the world of work and professions with their varied influences. Add to all of these the many cultural influences trickling down through each group and manifest in media sources like TV, newspapers, radio, the internet. Given these many group influences, from birth and throughout life, one can hardly imagine what one’s life or views would be, or would have been, without them. Most important, these influences cause us to form ideas and assumptions almost before we have the benefit of conscious reasoning, certainly before we have developed critical capacities for discerning what to accept and what to reject.

When significant contradictions arise between and among groups to which we belong, we often compartmentalize, rather than resolve the contradictions. Take, for example, the wealthy college student whose parents have taught him not to socialize with people of lower economic status. Let’s imagine that this student has uncritically accepted the view of his parents—that people of a lower economic class are “beneath” him. Then while attending college, he is thrown into a social group comprised of people from differing economic levels and befriends someone less wealthy than his family. In so doing he has two choices: he either rejects his

parent's views as narrow and dogmatic, or he simply makes an exception in this particular case. Very likely he will do the latter, having been indoctrinated into his parents' views before he could reasonably critique their validity. In short, a common way of dealing with this sort of issue is to maintain the original beliefs while making an exception.



Test the Idea

Make a list of the groups you believe have had the strongest impact on your thinking. Complete these statements for each group:

1. This group has influenced my thinking in the following ways. . .
2. I would now question the following beliefs I "received" from this group. . .

After answering these questions for each group, write out whether and to what extent the beliefs of each group are "compatible" with one another and which beliefs conflict between and among these groups.

FOUR PRIMARY FORMS OF SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT

Four distinct forms of sociocentric thinking often form complex relationships with one another. All are destructive.³ They can be summarized as follows:⁴

1. *Groupishness*⁵ (or *group selfishness*)—the tendency on the part of groups to seek the most for the group without regard to the rights and needs of others, to advance the group's biased interests, to forward its partial agendas. Groupishness is almost certainly the primary tendency in sociocentric thinking, the foundational driving force behind it. It informs the point of view from which everyone outside the group is seen and understood and by which everything that happens outside the group is judged. It leads to the problem of *in-group* thinking and behavior—everyone outside the group being judged according to the standards of the group; everyone in the group being privileged; everyone outside the group being denied group privileges and/or seen as a potential threat.

³ Remember that the term sociocentric thought is being reserved for those group beliefs that cause harm or are likely to cause harm. Group thought that is reasonable, useful, or helpful would not fall into this category. It is important to see sociocentric thought as destructive because the mind will find a variety of ways to rationalize it. By recognizing it as irrational, we are better able to identify it in our thinking and take command of it.

⁴ Also see Appendix B for "the logic of" each form.

⁵ By groupishness I mean group selfishness. This term refers to group pursuit of its interests without regard to those outside the group; its counterpart is selfishness, which refers to individual pursuit of one's interests without regard to others. We can use the term "group selfishness" for our intended meaning here; but it seems rather to be an oxymoron. How can a group be selfish, given the root word "self," which refers to the individual? The term "groupish" seems a better fit for the purpose. Note that this use of the term "groupish" differs from the way in which evolutionary biologists use the term. Their use generally refers to the fact that members of a group are aware of their group membership and are aware that there are others (like them) in the group.

2. **Group validation**—the tendency on the part of groups to believe their way to be the right way and their views to be the correct views; the tendency to reinforce one another in these beliefs; the inclination to validate the group's beliefs, however dysfunctional or illogical. These may be long-held or newly established beliefs, but in either case, they are perceived by the group to be true and in many cases to advance its interests.
3. **Group control**—the tendency on the part of groups to ensure that everyone in the group behaves in accordance with group expectations. This logic guides the intricate inner workings of the group, largely through enforcement, ostracism, and punishment in connection with group customs, conventions, rules, taboos, mores, and laws.
4. **Group conformity**—a byproduct of the fact that to survive, people must figure out how to fit themselves into the groups they are thrust into or voluntarily choose to join. They must conform to the rules and laws set down by those in control. Dissenters are punished in numerous ways. Group control and group conformity are two sides of the same coin—each presupposes the other.

It is essential to recognize that these pathological forms of thought largely lie at the unconscious level. It isn't that people are aware of these tendencies and consciously choose to ignore them. Rather, these dispositions are, at least to some extent, hidden by self-deception, rationalization, and other native mechanisms of the mind that keep us from seeing and facing the truth. The mind tells itself one thing on the surface (e.g., we are being fair to all involved) when in fact it is acting upon a different thought entirely (e.g., we are only concerned with our own interests). In most instances, the mind can find ways to justify itself—even when engaging in atrocious acts.⁶



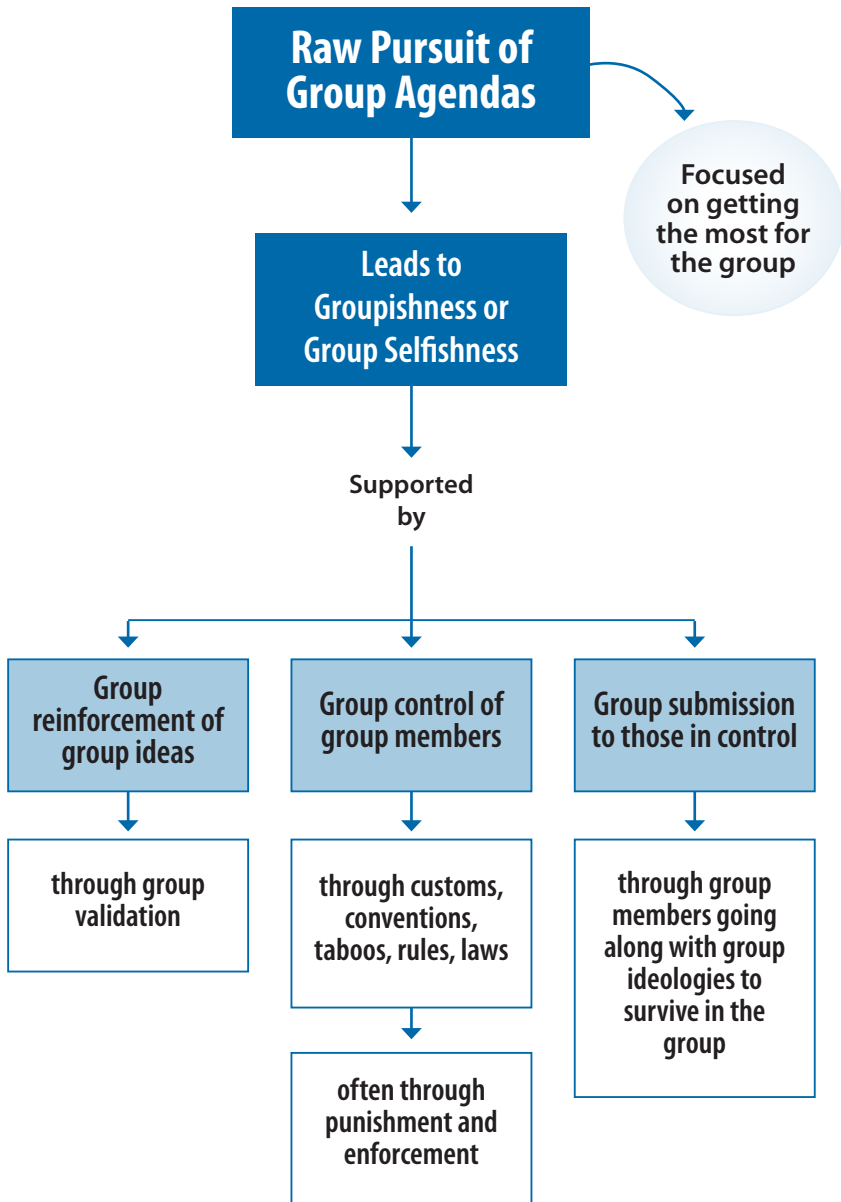
Test the Idea

Before reading further, write down each of these main forms of sociocentric thought (groupishness, group validation, group control and group conformity), and then:

1. Articulate the meaning of each one in your own words.
2. Come up with one or two examples of each from your own experience.

Now let us look more closely at these four sociological dispositions and consider some cases that exemplify them.

⁶ See the section on egocentrism for further discussion on this topic.



THE LOGIC OF GROUPISHNESS

Groupishness is the native human tendency to pursue group agendas without concern for the rights and needs of those outside the group. It is, if you will, group selfishness.

Groupishness leads group members to see “outsiders” as either falling in with their interests or working against those interests. The group functions as a cohesive unit against conflicting agendas found in other groups and individuals.

In speaking of the relationship between vested interests and group thought, Sumner (1906; 1940) says:

People in mass have never made or kept up a custom in order to hurt their own interest. They have made innumerable errors as to what their interests were and how to satisfy them, but they have always aimed to serve their interests as well as they could (p. 58).

The essence of groupishness is this—that which is perceived to be in the interest of one’s group is considered good; that which goes against the perceived interests of one’s group is to be avoided, denounced, attacked, and so on. Take for instance the problem of industrial pollution. For as long as industrial giants have existed, many have failed to take responsibility for the pollution they generate. They have been unwilling to purchase and install devices which would reduce this pollution (often citing expense). At the same time, many of these companies enjoy magnificent profits. Is the problem that they don’t realize they are causing pollution? Or is it that they deceive themselves into thinking they shouldn’t be held responsible for doing anything about it? Perhaps they tell themselves that the pollution they cause isn’t nearly as bad as the pollution caused by some other companies, or it doesn’t really lead to serious health or environmental problems, or they can’t afford to make the changes being asked of them. All these are reasons used to justify this type of unethical behavior. But the real reason is greed—as much as possible for “our group,” whatever the cost to others. The reasons given are masks behind which these companies hide, rationalizations that enable them to avoid facing the truth.

The pursuit of vested interest is common in the corporate world; but it is also common in the professions. Consider the following example of a potential conflict of interest seen in child psychiatry with important implications for the increasing number of children being diagnosed with “bipolar disorder.” The phenomenon



exemplified here is that of researchers being paid by medical companies that develop products to “solve” the problems researchers “uncover.” It is unfortunately part of the much larger issue of vested interest potentially influencing medical decision making (thereby causing errors in human judgment):

A world-renowned Harvard child psychologist whose work has helped fuel an explosion in the use of powerful antipsychotic medicines in children earned at least \$1.6 million in consulting fees from drug makers from 2000-2007 but for years did not report much of this income to university officials, according to information given to Congressional investigators. ... Dr. Biederman is one of the most influential researchers in child psychiatry. ... Although many of his studies are small and often financed by drug makers, his work helped to fuel a controversial 40-fold increase from 1994 to 2003 in the diagnosis of pediatric bipolar disorder, which [has led to] a rapid rise in the use of antipsychotic medicines in children ... it is far from clear that the medications improve children’s lives, experts say. ... In the last 25 years, drug and device makers have displaced the federal government as the primary sources of research financing, and industry support is vital to many university research programs. But as corporate research executives recruit the brightest scientists, their brethren in marketing departments have discovered that some of these same scientists can be terrific pitchmen. ... Many researchers strongly disagree over what bipolar looks like in youngsters, and some now fear the definition has been expanded unnecessarily, due in part to the Harvard group. ... Dr. E. Fuller Torrey, executive director of the Stanley Medical Research Institute, which finances psychiatric studies, [contends]: “In the area of child psychiatry in particular, we know much less than we should, and we desperately need research that is not influenced by industry money” (New York Times, June 8, 2008).

If it is in researchers’ financial interests to conduct studies focused on whether a behavioral problem exists for which medicine can be prescribed, a medicine developed by the company funding the research, it is only reasonable to question whether and to what extent such studies can be said to be unbiased. Note that though selfish interest is at play in examples such as these, for individual researchers the bigger problem is that many researchers *collectively* validate these practices.



Consider an example in the field of agriculture. For decades, the primary form of vegetable farming has been large crop farming with mass use of chemical pesticides. In the meantime, scientists have become increasingly aware of the myriad problems caused by overuse of pesticides. Two of the most significant of these problems include ecological destruction and human disease escalation (caused by pesticide exposure through ingestion and inhalation). For many years, eminent scientists worldwide have spoken out against these destructive practices. And yet the problem largely

remains. By ignoring relevant and significant information, by failing to think through logical implications, by covering up or ignoring important evidence, agriculturalists violate some of the very ideals they purport to advance. It seems reasonable to link this failure to the problem of vested interest—the simple fact that farming with pesticides is cheaper than farming without them. The bottom line is more money for farmers with little or no regard for the health and well-being of those affected by the pesticides.⁷



Examples of the pursuit of group vested interest and its consequences can be found in every part of human life—in business and personal life, in professional disciplines and organizations, in religious programs, in schools, indeed everywhere humans gather together in groups. Group vested interest validates irrational group-serving views. It leads to a vast array of problems, including social stratification, poverty, hunger, group bullying, terrorism, genocide, torture, and any number of unethical actions on the part of groups against other people or groups.⁸

By implication, groupishness often *damages people outside the privileged group* while protecting and privileging people within the group. Those inside the group win; those outside the group lose.⁹



Test the Idea

Now that you have a basic idea of groupishness, articulate three or four examples of your own which illuminate this problem. Then find examples of groupishness in the newspaper or in another news source or book.

THE LOGIC OF GROUP VALIDATION

Groups tend to see their way as the right way and their views as the correct views, even when they haven't thought seriously about their perspectives and views. Group members implicitly tend to validate one another's views, reinforcing group beliefs deeply held and/or beliefs perceived to be in the group's interests. Thus

- 7 One might argue that not using pesticides drives up the price of food and therefore has negative implications for the poor and disadvantaged. Though this may be true, governments, if willing, can find ways to deal with this problem. Instead, governmental leaders are often connected with big business in ways that do not serve the public interest.
- 8 Again, it is important to understand that whether and to what extent a group is engaging in groupishness must be determined case by case, using unbiased reasoning and evidence.
- 9 Of course, the extent to which someone is "inside of" or "outside of" a group may be a matter of degree. For instance, because of stratification that exists within groups, every larger group has potentially a number of smaller groups within it. Some of those smaller groups will get more of the "goodies" within the group than others. Thus the larger group might pursue the goals of the entire group while at the same time privileging certain smaller groups of people within the larger group. This phenomenon is seen quite plainly within countries that seek to get resources for the larger population in the country ("more for our country"), but which dole out those resources lopsidedly, giving more to the ruling class or wealthy than to the people at large.

group validation may be connected with groupishness but is often connected simply with maintaining group beliefs.

We commonly see this form of thinking in sports—our team is the most victorious, our athletes are the biggest and most talented, our cheerleaders are the sexiest, our pitchers are the best, our quarterback is the greatest, our uniforms are the most colorful, our team has the nicest facilities, the biggest stadiums, and so on. We line up behind our team, and we cheer and root for our team. We can't stand the other team. We always want the other team to lose; we always need to win. When we win, we played the best; when they win, the referees were unfair to us. The very way in which we refer to the team we support as “us” and “we” is amusing. “We” missed the field goal. The referees gave “us” a bum deal.¹⁰

This may seem like a trivial example, but it helps us understand the phenomenon of group validation in a behavior that many of us engage in regularly. Of course, this form of sociocentric thought isn't confined to the trivial—which is why it is problematic, as we shall see presently.



Theoreticians have conceptualized the problem of group validation in different but often overlapping ways. In his article (Oct. 2008) on “mob mentality,” Laurence Gonzales targets a term psychologists call “groupness ... the tendency of various animals, including humans, to form in-groups. When the in-group encounters individuals from outside the group, the default response is hostile. People protect their group from outsiders and from outside influences. ... If a group invests a lot of effort in a goal and succeeds, its boundaries become stronger,

¹⁰ If you tend to believe that this way of thinking makes perfect sense, you might ask yourself whether you would feel the same way about “your team” if you backed a different team, say in a different city or at a different college or university. If so, doesn't this demonstrate that you would support any team you identified with? Wouldn't you be caught up in the “our group is the best” mentality, no matter what group you supported? Consider a study focused on perception, in which two psychologists showed football game films to students at Dartmouth and Princeton. Students were instructed to be “completely objective” and note each infraction of the rules and which team was responsible. Princeton students saw *twice* as many infractions by Dartmouth as Dartmouth students saw (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954).

and it tends to become even more hostile to outside influences. This may not be overt hostility. It may simply be a subtle and unconscious tendency to reject anything from another group” (p. 28).

Sumner (1906; 1940) describes folkways as the socially perceived “right” ways to satisfy all interests according to group norms and traditions. He says that in every society:

There is a right way to catch game, to win a wife, to make one’s self appear ... to treat comrades or strangers, to behave when a child is born. ... The “right” way is the way which ancestors used and which has been handed down. The tradition is its own warrant. It is not held subject to verification by experience. ... In the folkways, whatever is, is right (p. 28).

John Stuart Mill (1859; 1997), in *On Liberty*, points out that all countries, throughout history, have tended to hold their views uncritically, perceiving such views to be prima facie correct. He says that, when deciding on rules and laws to be followed,

No two ages and scarcely any two countries, have decided it alike; and the decision of one age or country is a wonder to another. Yet the people of any given age and country no more suspect any difficulty in it, than if it were a subject on which mankind had always been agreed. The rules which obtain among themselves appear to them self-evident and self-justifying. This all but universal illusion is one of the examples of the magical influence of custom ... (p. 45).

In human societies children are systematically indoctrinated into the beliefs of their culture and expected to *accept those beliefs without question*, to take them on blind faith. Children are taught to see the customs and taboos of the society as the *right way to live*, rather than some ways to live among many possibilities.

People don’t usually know why they believe what they do. They haven’t objectively examined their thoughts. They haven’t considered other ways of looking at the beliefs they have been expected to accept uncritically. They have no sense of how their views are enmeshed in cultural beliefs passed down through generations over time. They cannot see that these views are largely arbitrary, based more in “the way we have always done things,” than in well-reasoned perspectives. Trapped in narrow present-day views, people often lack the knowledge that can be gained through a broader historical perspective. They don’t see that there is frequently a more reasonable way of looking at issues, ideas, and situations than that which their culture expects or requires. At the same time they often fiercely defend their beliefs (i.e., the beliefs of the group).

In studying how children understand and relate to rules, Piaget (1962) uncovered the roots of this problem. He noted that children pass through the following three stages of development:

Stage one—the child, being fundamentally egocentric, does not see rules as obligatory, and basically does what feels good. Rules, when followed, are unconsciously received (ages 0–2).

Stage two—rules are considered sacred and untouchable, emanating from adults and lasting forever (ages 3–10).

Stage three—rules are considered the result of mutual consent. The child believes that to be loyal one must “respect” the laws. Laws can be altered if you can enlist general opinion on your side (ages 9–12) (p. 28).

Piaget considers the “collective rule,” the belief that everyone must follow the rules, to be initially external to the child. But over time the child begins to see the rules as freely chosen, a product of mutual consent and an “autonomous conscience.” In other words, the child uncritically accepts the rules and laws of society, and yet sees them as independently chosen. This phenomenon is evident in adult thinking as well. Many rules of society are accepted without question, blindly; yet people believe they have come to their beliefs through their own good reasoning. Though they uncritically adhere to societal customs and taboos, still they see themselves as autonomous thinkers.



Test the Idea

Now that you have a basic idea of groupishness, articulate three or four examples of your own which illuminate this problem. Then find examples of groupishness in the newspaper or in another news source or book.



MANY GROUP-VALIDATED BELIEFS ARE DANGEROUS

Those who hold creationist views exemplify the problem of group validation. Devout creationists are Christian fundamentalists who take the Bible literally, beginning with the six days of creation referred to in Genesis. Incredibly, many of them believe the earth was made in six 24-hour days and a supernatural being created people during those six days. Creationists argue that their view of the earth should be taught alongside, or instead of, evolution, which they reject as an explanation of the diversity and complexity of life on Earth. To create the appearance of legitimacy, creationists have developed the concept of “creation science,” a term which implies that their theory is scientific in nature, when in fact it is clearly theological. Mainstream scientists naturally reject this theory. Since the 1920s, creationists have fought against the teaching of evolution in public education (Shermer 1997).

It should be noted that there are both critical and uncritical ways to hold religious beliefs. Those who hold their religious views critically are open to alternative ways of looking at religion and are comfortable with metaphor; those who hold their religious views uncritically are locked into literal ways of looking at religion and continually seek to validate their group’s religious views. Too often, religious beliefs are held in the same uncritical way that creationists explain how the earth, and life on Earth, began.

Similar to the claims of creationists, the claims of astrologers are validated within certain groups of people but rejected by the scientific community. Though most adults have taken many science classes in school, many do not know how to assess the claims of astrologers scientifically. In fact, many students, and even teachers, believe that astrology provides accurate personality descriptions and valuable advice. Noted astrologers earn sizeable incomes as consultants. To many, the personality descriptions based on horoscopes seem to fit. As people read the descriptions of personality traits attributed to those born under their “sun sign,” they examine themselves and find they have many of the traits depicted. But they don’t look to see if descriptions associated with other signs of the Zodiac might fit them equally well.

Scientists agree that the positions of the sun, moon, and possibly even some nearby planets affect living organisms—but not in the ways claimed by astrologers. Carefully controlled studies of predictions based on astrological theories have always yielded negative results. Yet people continue to validate one another in these beliefs that “feel right” to the group, though they are in essence nonsense.

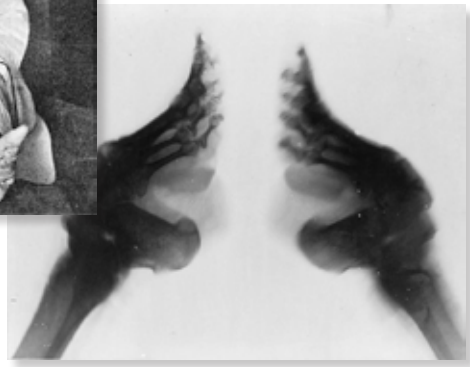


Many harmful folkways have existed throughout human history and can only occur through the mechanism of group validation. For instance, foot binding was a custom practiced in China on young girls and women for a thousand years, beginning in the tenth century and ending in the first half of twentieth century. This practice, extremely painful in itself, rendered women unable to walk, except very slowly. It led to the appearance of smaller feet; and it caused women to sway when they walked, which was considered by some to be erotic. It was a sign of wealth and privilege when families could afford to bind their girls' feet—publicly displaying that they need not ever work. That a culture of millions of people could have supported this painful tradition shows the power of groupthink.



Left: high caste Chinese woman with bound feet circa 1900

Below: x-ray of bound feet



Given the history of (and absurdity) of human beliefs, it is clear that there is hardly a belief that groups wouldn't, under certain conditions, validate. The relatively new term "porn addict," as understood by the Westside Family Church in Lenexa, Kansas, exemplifies this point (*New York Times*, May 3, 2010). The church's leader, Crystal Renaud, offers a group for women who see themselves as addicted to pornography. Her view is shared by the XXX Church, which can be found on the internet and offers speakers for anti-pornography events. The views of Renaud and the XXX Church diverge "from secular sexual theory by treating masturbation and arousal as sins rather than elements of healthy sexuality. Emphasis is on recovering "sexual purity," in which thoughts of sex outside marriage are illicit." The XXX Church offers a test online so that anyone interested can learn whether they are addicted; the church's 30-day online workshop "sells 100 copies a month, at \$99 each," according to its youth pastor. Such views are

apparently lucrative, but they are steeped in Puritanical ideologies, not substantiated by reasoned thought. And however large or small the number of people who adhere to these beliefs might be, group members nevertheless collectively validate absurd group beliefs.

Witch-hunts represent a pathological mode of in-group thought which resulted in tens of thousands of tortures and executions during the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries and which is still found in some countries today. Legal codes of punishment for sorcery and witchcraft can be found in the earliest extant legal precepts of Egypt and Babylonia.



A form of witch-hunt prevalent in the United States after the second World War was that of McCarthyism, in which thousands of Americans were accused of being communists or of sympathizing with communists. Though McCarthy led the charge in these investigations, he was supported by a vast number of leaders in Washington, D.C., as well as much of the American public. Those hunted by the McCarthy machine became the subject of pernicious government investigations based on flimsy or nonexistent evidence; they were interrogated before government and private-industry panels, agencies and committees under the direction of then Senator Joseph McCarthy. Those who participated in the McCarthy “anti-communist” investigations systematically ignored evidence and refused to examine the very assumptions at the foundations of their thinking—for instance, that if people read a books written by Karl Marx, or if they believe that college faculty should be allowed to give their personal views in class, they are on the side of communism and are hence a threat to the U.S. government.

Government employees, educators, union activists, and people in the entertainment industry were primary targets. Many of



A propaganda comic book published in 1947 by the Catechetical Guild Educational Society warning of the dangers of a Communist takeover.

those questioned were imprisoned and/or suffered the loss of their careers. Consequently, and perhaps ironically, McCarthyism is a term now used to describe the making of accusations of disloyalty, subversion, or treason without proper regard for evidence.

And even though Americans generally feel they learned their lessons from the McCarthy era, it seems we move from one form of “witch hunt” to another. Consider the “birther movement,” which insists that President Obama was not born in America, despite the fact that the state of Hawaii has produced his birth certificate.



In her book *Message From an Unknown Chinese Mother, Stories of Loss and Love* (2011), writer and broadcaster Xinran focuses on the deplorable fact that in China, baby girls are often killed at birth, due to the government’s one-child ruling (which began in 1979). Families engage in this practice because of the traditional Chinese belief that boys are superior to girls. Families that don’t kill their daughters might raise them to a certain age and then abandon them.

This case further illuminates the problem of group validation and some of its important implications.

These few examples represent an unlimited number of examples we could draw from throughout history—of groups protecting and validating beliefs not based in sound reasoning, of groups holding to beliefs handed down through group folkways, of groups unwilling to be moved by evidence and logic.¹¹

PEOPLE SEEK VALIDATION IN A MULTIPLICITY OF SUBTLE WAYS

It is apparent that people seek validation in groups. What is less obvious are the many subtle ways in which this is done. Take, for example, some insights gleaned from the work of Erving Goffman. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) reports on a now classic study he conducted in which he finds that, in social groups, people create façades and masks in order to define situations in particular ways, according to their purposes and to be validated or accepted by others. The phenomenon he observes in his study can be generalized to many group contexts. Goffman asserts that when people enter groups:

¹¹ This phenomenon is supported by empirical evidence. For instance, one important study by Lord, Ross & Lepper (1979) found that people tend to look at evidence that supports their view far more favorably than evidence that goes against their view. In this study, subjects who supported or opposed capital punishment were exposed to two purported studies, one seemingly confirming and the other seemingly disconfirming their existing beliefs about whether the death penalty has a deterring effect. As might be expected, both groups rated as more convincing the results of studies that confirmed their own views.

Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interest to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan. Thus, when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey (pp. 3–4).

To illuminate this point, Goffman cites a fictional episode in which “Preedy,” an Englishman, appears for the first time on a beach while vacationing in Spain:

...in any case he took care to avoid catching anyone’s eye. First of all, he had to make it clear to those potential companions of his holiday that they were of no concern to him whatsoever. He stared through them, round them, over them—eyes lost in space. The beach might have been empty. If by chance a ball was thrown his way, he looked surprised; then let a smile of amusement lighten his face (Kindly Preedy), looked round dazed to see that there were people on the beach, tossed it back with a smile to himself and not a smile at the people, and then resumed carelessly his nonchalant survey of space.

But it was time to institute a little parade, the parade of the Ideal Preedy. By devious handlings he gave any who wanted to look a chance to see the title of his book—a Spanish translation of Homer, classic thus, but not too daring, cosmopolitan too—and then gathered together his beach-wrap and bag into a neat sand-resistant pile (Methodical and Sensible Preedy), rose slowly to stretch at ease his huge frame (Big-Cat Preedy), and tossed aside his sandals (Carefree Preedy after all) [Sansom, 1956, pp. 230–232]).

This passage illuminates the types of superficial behavior humans routinely engage in to control the way others see them and to be accepted in groups. The character Preedy wants to be seen as kind, and so he helps out a stranger when a ball is tossed his way. He wants to be seen as intelligent, but not nerdy, so he subtly totes a book he thinks will elicit such a perception. He wants to be seen as methodical and sensible, so he makes a show of folding and placing his things in a pile in a particular way. Goffman summarizes his point as follows:

I have said that when an individual appears before others his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they come to have. Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain. Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case. Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status require this kind of expression and

not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression. Sometimes the traditions of an individual's role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind and yet he may be neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression. ... In any case ... [we may say] that the individual had "effectively" projected a given definition of the situation and "effectively" fostered the understanding that a given state of affairs obtains (p. 6).

In short, Goffman assumes that when people appear before others in any context, within any group (of two or more people), they will attempt to control others' impressions of them, as well as the situation. Whether or to what extent this is literally true in every group encounter or experience, the essence of Goffman's argument can be useful for understanding our own behavior and the behavior of others within social groups. It can help us identify when we are seeking to influence others' perceptions of us and why. It can help us come to terms with how often we are playing a role in order to be in control of or validated by the people who surround us.

THE LOGIC OF GROUP CONTROL AND THE LOGIC OF CONFORMITY

Now let us consider two additional predominant tendencies of sociocentric thought that have been only implicitly covered thus far: 1) group control of its members, and 2) people conforming or submitting to the controlling forces within the group. These two phenomena are best understood in relationship with one another.

The phenomenon of group conformity entails successfully fitting into the groups to which one belongs—one's family, clubs, peer groups, school, university, religion, country, and so forth. It largely means learning the rules, taboos, customs, laws and regulations of the group and molding oneself so as to survive within it, to be accepted and retained as a group member.

Of course, it only stands to reason that there should and must be social expectations within every group. As social animals, people have to get along, to coexist. But the extent to which one is accepted in human societies is often determined by whether, and to what extent, one goes along with what are often arbitrary group ideologies, not reasonable group ideas.

Social rules should lead to the advancement of critical societies. They should be guided by ethics, rather than unjustifiable social conventions and practices. However, because even otherwise insightful people frequently confuse social rules with ethics, ethical principles are often violated in today's societies. Thus group expectations often seem reasonable, when in fact they violate people's rights. (See the section on ethics for examples).

GROUPS IMPOSE IDEOLOGIES ON GROUP MEMBERS

John Stuart Mill (1859; 1997) wrote extensively about the problem of group imposition on the individual. In his writings he also aptly noted that, though most every country in every historical period has created its own social rules and customs, each country sees these rules and customs as perfectly correct, as self-evidently good. In his words:

The effect of custom, in preventing any misgiving respecting the rules of conduct which mankind impose on one another, is all the more complete because the subject is one on which it is not generally considered necessary that reasons should be given, either by one person to others or each to himself. ... The practical principle which guides [people] to their opinions on the regulation of human conduct, is the feeling in each person's mind that everybody should be required to act as he, and those with whom he sympathizes, would like them to act. No one, indeed, acknowledges to himself that his standard of judgment is his own liking; but an opinion on a point of conduct, not supported by reasons, can only count as one person's preference; and if the reasons, when given, are a mere appeal to a similar preference felt by other people, it is still only many people's liking instead of one. To an ordinary man, however, his own preference, thus supported, is not only a perfectly satisfactory reason, but the only one he generally has for any of his notions of morality ... (p. 45).

As Mill points out, people impose rules on others without seeing themselves as obligated to even give reasons for the rules. Mill sees the prevailing principle for human conduct in modern societies as something like this: *Everyone should be required to act as I and other people who agree with me would have them act.* Naturally, people are not consciously aware that they use this principle in judging the actions of others. They wouldn't admit that they do, even to themselves. In short, people tend to assume norms to be inherently ethical and they expect everyone to behave in accordance with these norms. But Mill argues, rightly, against this view.

The imposition of group ideologies on group members is antithetical to critical thinking and *intrinsically damaging to people inside the group*. Because human cultures do not actively work against sociocentric group control and instead tend to encourage it, children are injured by society from the very beginning of their lives. For the most part, children are not encouraged to develop their minds, to understand their minds, to understand the problematics in native human thought, to see through capriciously imposed group control. There is, then, a sense in which *society is abusive to the developing child*. The child needs and wants to grow and develop intellectually, but societies typically won't allow this, or allow it only to a limited degree. Societies instead impose subjective, often unethical, rules and customs on the mind of the growing child.¹² From almost the beginning of

¹² There is a caveat to this in that although sociocentric societies damage the mind of the child, people in such societies "grow up" to damage others through influence, indoctrination, and domination. In other words, the intellectually damaged child eventually becomes the adult who is likely to impose unreasonable ideologies on his or her own children as well as others in the culture.

life, the child is continually molded into prefabricated shapes designed by society, through the following types of messages:

You can wear these types of clothing but not these other types. You cannot remove your clothes in public (unless you are a man and then you cannot remove your pants). You must sit in your seat in class. You must stay in a line when walking down the hallway at school. You must stand for the pledge of allegiance. You must not burp at the table. You can take these “medications,” but not these “drugs.” You must go to church on Sunday morning and Sunday evening. You cannot be in the park after 10 p.m. You must make enough money to function in a complex economic system. But if you cannot make enough money to support yourself, you cannot live on the streets.



In mainstream western cultures the man can go shirtless while the woman has to wear a top.



In other cultures, women can be seen topless in public.

People at Nambassa Festival in 1978. At various times in history nudity may be allowed, while at other times, made illegal. Nambassa was a series of festivals held between 1976 and 1981 on large farms in New Zealand. They were music, arts, and alternatives festivals that focused on love, peace, and respect for the earth’s resources. Nudity was commonplace at these gatherings, as it was in the U.S. counterculture of the 1970s.





Test the Idea

Think of some examples of beliefs, coming from group ideologies, that have been imposed on you. These are beliefs your culture or group expects you to accept unquestioningly. What are some implications of people uncritically accepting these beliefs?

PEOPLE TEND TO BLINDLY CONFORM TO GROUP RULES AND GROUPTHINK

As we have said, living a human life entails membership in a variety of human groups. This typically includes groups such as nation, culture, profession, religion, family, and peer group. We find ourselves participating in groups even before we are aware of ourselves as living beings. We find ourselves as part of one or more groups in virtually every setting. What is more, every group to which we belong has some social definition of itself and some usually unspoken “rules” that guide the behavior of all members. Each group to which we belong imposes some level of conformity on us as a condition of acceptance. This includes a set of beliefs, behaviors, and taboos.

All of us, to varying degrees, uncritically accept as right and correct whatever ways of acting and believing are fostered in the social groups to which we belong. This becomes clear to us if we reflect on what happens when, say, adolescents join an urban street gang. When they do so, they identify themselves with:

- a name that defines who and what they are,
- a way of talking,
- a set of friends and enemies,
- gang rituals in which they must participate,
- expected behaviors involving fellow gang members,
- expected behaviors when around the enemies of the gang,
- a hierarchy of power within the gang,
- a way of dressing,
- social requirements to which every gang member must conform,
- a set of taboos—forbidden acts that every gang member must studiously avoid under threat of punishment.

What we tend not to see is that these same principles, or slightly revised versions of them, are implicit in most group behavior and aren’t confined to gang membership. For instance, consider college faculty as a group. They have names or labels, such as “professor,” “assistant professor,” “instructor,” and so on, each of which designates rank. When referring to ideas within their disciplines, they often speak with one another using specialized language that only they understand (they also often write books for one another using this same type of specialized language). They invite one another to special parties and dinner engagements, and they exclude people not in their special “club.” They might invite a select group

of graduate-level students or students considered “gifted” or in some other way considered “special” and therefore deserving of their attention. There is usually a hierarchy that everyone in the group recognizes and “respects,” often having to do with “rank” or seniority. Those with more prestige (for instance those who are highly published) might be viewed as deserving of special attention, or they might be frowned upon as having too much status or “celebrity” outside the group (due to professional jealousy). They have a code of dress, often entailing a casual but “professional” look. Any number of taboos might be implicit in the group code, such as having too many publications, or too few publications, or publications of the wrong sort; fraternizing too much with students; or not being open enough to students (being considered “cold”); or teaching in any number of ways considered unorthodox within the group.



Test the Idea

Think of some group you belong to or have belonged to in the past. See if you can articulate the following for this group:

1. the name that defines who and what they are,
2. a way of talking,
3. a set of friends and “enemies”—or “out-group,”
4. rituals in which group members must participate,
5. expected behavior involving fellow members,
6. expected behavior when around the “enemies” of the group (or the “out-group”),
7. the hierarchy of power within the group,
8. the approved way of dressing,
9. social requirements to which every member must conform,
10. the group’s taboos—forbidden acts that every member must studiously avoid under threat of punishment.

For most people, blind conformity to group restrictions is automatic and unreflective. Most people effortlessly conform without recognizing their conformity. They internalize group norms and beliefs, take on the group identity, and act as they are expected to act—without the least sense that what they are doing might reasonably be questioned. Most people function in social groups as unreflective participants in a range of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors analogous, in the structures to which they conform, to those of urban street gangs. Sumner (1906; 1940) articulates the point well:

Whether the masses will think certain things wrong, cruel, base, unjust, and disgusting; whether they will regard certain projects as sensible, ridiculous, or fantastic, and will give attention to certain topics, depends on the convictions and feelings which at the time are dominant in the mores (p. 114).

Historian Howard Zinn (2003) exemplifies the problem of sociocentric thought through nationalism, which is a manifestation of groupthink. This particular example illuminates how people collectively beat the drums to war, lining up behind those in power:

As always, in a situation of war or near-war, the air becomes filled with patriotic cries for unity against the enemy. What is supposed to be an opposition party declares its loyalty to the president. The major voices in the media, supposed to be independent of government, join the fray. Immediately after President Bush declared “war on terrorism” and told Congress, “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists,” television anchorman Dan Rather ... spoke. He said, “George Bush is the president. He makes the decisions, and, you know, as just one American, if he wants me to line up, just tell me where.” Speaking again to a national television audience, Rather said about Bush: “He is our commander in chief. He’s the man now. And we need unity. We need steadiness.”



Test the Idea

To what extent do you see nationalism as a problem in human societies today? Give examples that illuminate this problem. Look in the newspaper for examples.

Conformity of thought, emotion, and action is not restricted to the masses or the lowly or the poor. It is characteristic of people in general, independent of their role in society, independent of status and prestige, independent of years of schooling. It is in all likelihood as true of college professors and their presidents as it is of students and custodians, as true of senators and chief executives as it is of construction and assembly-line workers. Conformity of thought and behavior is the rule for humans, independence the exception.

In his classic text *The Power Elite*, C. Wright Mills (1956) examines the thinking and behavior of the powerful in America. In speaking of chief executives, he says:

When it is asked of the top corporate men: “But didn’t they have to have something to get up there?” The answer is, “Yes, they did.” By definition, they had “what it takes.” The real question accordingly is: the sound judgment, as gauged by the men of sound judgment who select them. The fit survive, and fitness means, not formal competence—there probably is no such thing for top executive positions—but conformity with the criteria of those who have already succeeded. To be compatible with the top men is to act like them, to look like them, to think like them: to be of and for them—or at least to display oneself to them in such a way as to create that impression.

In this example we see conformity as a primary criterion for success at the executive levels of management, coupled with validation of the group’s beliefs

and standards, however arbitrary, superficial, or absurd these standards might be. These standards are validated within the group and thus determine the extent to which a given person will survive in the power structure and at what level.

In his autobiography *The Summing Up*, Somerset Maugham (1938) reveals how he came to see the sociocentric (uncritical) manner in which most people hold their religious beliefs, and how he consequently came to reject his own. He came to see that people conform to the beliefs of their country or their religion without any sense that they are doing so. He says:

... when I went to Germany I discovered that the Germans were just as proud of being German as I was proud of being English. I heard them say that the English did not understand music and that Shakespeare was only appreciated in Germany. They spoke of the English as a nation of shopkeepers and had no doubt in their minds that as artists, men of science and philosophers they were greatly superior. It shook me. And now at High Mass in Heidelberg I could not but notice that the students, who filled the church to its doors, seemed very devout. They had, indeed, all the appearance of believing in their religion as sincerely as I believed in mine. It was queer that they could, for of course I knew that theirs was false and mine was true. ... It struck me that I might very well have been born in South Germany, and then I should naturally have been brought up as a Catholic. I found it very hard that thus through no fault of my own I should have been condemned to everlasting torment. My ingenious nature revolted at the injustice. The next step was easy: I came to the conclusion that it could not matter a row of pins what one believed; God could not condemn people just because they were Spaniards or Hottentots. ... The whole horrible structure ... tumbled down like a house of cards (pp. 248–249).



Test the Idea

Articulate Somerset Maugham's point in your own words and think through some important implications of it. In other words, give it meaning and then ask, "if people took this line of reasoning seriously, how would they act differently?"

Because people tend to hold fast to deeply held beliefs, especially those instilled through powerful group influences, this example illuminates an ability quite rare—to reject such beliefs unreservedly.

In sum, group conformity in human life, the counterpart to group control, is so common as to be nearly undetectable by the individual. People tend to automatically accept and follow the mainstream view. This phenomenon is connected with the largely unconscious need to feel accepted, to be validated, within the group. Very few people are autonomous thinkers, since true independence of thought is so little valued in human cultures. Conversely, conformity can be seen in almost every part of human life, from the way we wear our hair to the way we dress, from the food we eat to the cars we drive, from the

technological gadgets we purchase to the music we listen to. When, for instance, any new cell phone or music device is released onto the market, large numbers of people flock to the store to get it before their friends have a chance to. People will often stand in line for hours to purchase some new technological plaything in case the store should run out before they get theirs. All of this is conformity to (might we say dysfunctional) group values. The sheer amount of frivolous toys produced and sold in “developed” societies creates enormous strain on the earth’s resources. People are so busy conforming to group codes and conventions, while at the same time having no real sense that they are doing so, that the negative implications of group influence go largely unnoticed. In other words, people do not see themselves as conformists even while in the very act of conforming. They buy new technological gadgets because everyone else is buying them, not because they need them. They spend \$50 on a haircut because their friends pay the same, not because the cut is any better than the one they could get for \$20. They wear clothing that fits the styles popular among their peers and in their culture.

insert picture of people standing in line—need litebox link for image



Cultural practices that seem unique are often found in various forms in different cultures and historical periods, as these pictures reveal.

Hundreds of thousands of rules and laws are thrust upon us when we enter life as humans, most of which are created by humans functioning within the twin logics of group control and group conformity.



Test the Idea

Now that you have a basic idea of group control and group conformity, articulate three or four examples of each, which illuminate these problems. Then find examples of both in the newspaper or in another news source or book.

GROUP CONFORMITY IS OFTEN DANGEROUS

Group conformity is a problem due to its magnitude and the fact that it is so little noticed in today's societies. Because people don't see themselves conforming when they are in fact highly submissive to group beliefs, those who hold persuasive and literal power in the group can easily move the majority of people to do what is in fact against their interests or the interests of other sentient creatures.

Take human sacrifice. For thousands of years, various human cultures have engaged in this horrific practice, primarily for religious purposes. Most people have gone along with this custom, believing it to be required or desired by their gods. Slaves were often chosen by the ruling group to be sacrificed. As long as people in these groups submitted to the dominating ideology, as handed down by the ruling class, the practice continued.

Female genital cutting, or female genital mutilation, is a similarly ghastly practice; it deprives girls and women of the right to determine for themselves how their bodies are to be treated.¹³ It denies them the right to enjoy healthy sexuality through the full retention of their sexual organs.¹⁴ This tradition, practiced mainly in Northern Africa and the Middle East, has been handed down through generations and continues primarily due to social pressure. The 2010 *Population Reference Bureau* reports that:

... an estimated 100 million to 140 million girls and women worldwide have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), and more than 3 million girls are at risk for cutting each year on the African continent alone. FGM/C is generally performed on girls between ages 4 and 12, although it is practiced in some cultures as early as a few days after birth or as late as just prior to marriage.

This folkway is considered essential to the proper raising of a girl and preparatory to adulthood and marriage. Female genital cutting is connected with what is considered appropriate sexual behavior, namely maintaining virginity before marriage and fidelity during marriage. It is associated with the notion of female cleanliness and beauty—after the removal of body parts considered “male” or “unclean.” The World Health Organization, the United Nations, and Amnesty International are strongly opposed to this barbaric practice. This custom would most likely cease if all the women in the practicing countries simply refused to engage in it or subject their daughters to it.

¹³ It should be noted that many women and girls who undergo this procedure will fiercely defend their right to do this, just as many Chinese women were horrified when no longer required to bind their feet, and indeed people may defend any common practice they have participated in but which is revealed as irrational or unreasonable. This fact exemplifies how deeply people can and are indoctrinated into belief systems that are harmful or which deprive them of some basic right. The fact that these people would defend irrational practices (in the name of doing what seems right to them, or behaving in accord with their beliefs) does not in any way make them intellectually autonomous thinkers or reasonable persons.

¹⁴ Female genital cutting (FGC), also known as female genital mutilation (FGM), female circumcision, or female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), is any procedure involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs. The term is almost exclusively used to describe traditional or religious procedures on a minor, which requires the parents' consent because of the age of the girl.

The American war in Vietnam provides a stunning case of dangerous conformity. For more than a decade, the American people supported a war that was opposed by many important thinkers across the world. Swept up in the zeal to stop “communism,” at the behest of our leaders the vast majority of Americans failed to question the roots of the war, the reasons for the war, the implications of the war. Their view was mostly this—what our government tells us to believe, we believe; if we are asked to support war, there must be good reasons to support it. Submitting to those in positions of power, assuming the U.S. government to be inherently right as our “leader,” uncritically accepting the propaganda fed to the American people through the media—all exemplify sociocentric thought. In his book *War Crimes in Vietnam*, Bertrand Russell (1967) gives these estimates regarding the results of the war:

... 160,000 dead by mid 1963; 700,000 tortured and maimed; 400,000 imprisoned; 31,000 raped; 3,000 disembowel with livers cut out while alive; 4,000 burned alive; 1,000 temples destroyed; 46 villages attacked with poisonous chemicals; 16,000 [concentration] camps existing or under construction (p. 59).

Remembering that the war was to continue until 1975, the numbers reflecting tortures, murders, and false imprisonment grew well beyond these already staggering figures.

Dominating groups often create special rules for themselves. On February 23, 2006, the *New York Times* highlighted a report by Human Rights First in which it stated that the longest sentence for any member of the American military linked to a torture-related death of a detainee in Iraq or Afghanistan had been five months. “In only 12 of 34 cases has anyone been punished for the confirmed or suspected killings, said the group. ... Beyond those cases, in almost half of 98 known detainee deaths since 2002, the cause was never announced or was reported as undetermined.” The report also documented the fact that “In dozens of cases ... grossly inadequate reporting, investigation and follow-through have left no one at all responsible for homicides and other unexplained deaths. In Baghdad, a victim’s son said, “Justice wasn’t done in our father’s case by the U.S. forces, because if he was a criminal, they should have interrogated him fairly and not tortured him barbarically and then killed him.” His father, who was suspected of “supporting the anti-American insurgency, died in 2003 when an Army interrogator covered him in a sleeping bag, sat on his chest and put his hand over his mouth.” He had been detained when he appeared at an American base to seek the release of his four sons. His interrogator, originally charged with murder, was convicted of negligent homicide in a military trial and was reprimanded, without jail time. If the average person in the United States committed murder in these same ways (outside the special rules of war), he would be convicted of murder under U.S. law and would most likely serve life in prison or receive the death penalty. But the military has special rules for its members, as is seen in this and many other similar cases.

Group control and group conformity are implicit in *social stratification*. According to Plotnicov and Tuden (1970), since virtually all modern societies today are complex, characteristics of stratification presumably can be found in every such society. Each entails social groups that:

1. are ranked hierarchically;
2. maintain relatively permanent positions in the hierarchy;
3. have differential control of the sources of power, primarily economic and political;
4. are separated by cultural and invidious distinctions that also serve to maintain the social distances between the groups; and
5. are articulated by an overarching ideology which provides a rationale for the established hierarchical arrangements (pp. 4–5).

Given this phenomenon, we should be able to identify, for any group in our society, where approximately it stands in the hierarchy of power, how the sources of power and control are determined and arranged, how the distinctions that indicate status are formulated, how social distances are maintained between the groups, and what the overarching ideology is that provides the rationale for the way things are perceived within the group.



Test the Idea

Consider the ways in which cultures are stratified, given Plotnicov and Tuden's articulation. Complete these statements:

1. I see the hierarchical ranks in my country as follows. . .
2. I think these ranks are (or are not) relatively permanent because. . .
3. The groups I think have the most power in my country are. . . I think this because. . . These groups are (or are not) mainly economic or political (explain).
4. Those in the higher ranks separate themselves from those in the lower ranks in the following ways. . .
5. The ideologies used to maintain these hierarchical arrangements are as follows. . .

DISSENTERS IN TODAY'S SOCIETIES ARE OFTEN PUNISHED

Because people are expected to go along with mainstream views, dissenters, or those who simply do not live in accordance with conventional traditions, are often treated harshly in today's societies. A *New York Times* article (August 13, 2010) highlights a case in Iran in which Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani was sentenced to death in Iran by stoning on adultery charges. Among other things, the article mentions the fact that one of her attorneys, Mohammad Mostafaei, was summoned by authorities to appear for interrogation. Another of her lawyers "fled

Iran ... after his office was ransacked and members of his family were arrested, and he is now seeking asylum in Norway. Mr. Mostafaei has taken on dozens of controversial cases, and has urged Iran's judiciary to ban stoning, juvenile executions and the imprisonment of political dissidents." In this case, the woman charged with adultery violated the sacred norms of society, not any objective standard of ethics. Her attorneys were willing to risk perhaps even their lives to work toward a more fair society. The Iranian government has made it clear that they will punish such dissention.

One of the most well-known dissenters in history is Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), who was put to death by the state for "corrupting" the young by teaching them to think critically about traditions and customs, and for presumably not believing in the gods sanctioned by the "city." Galileo advanced the notion, put forth by Copernicus, that the sun (rather than the earth) was the center of the universe, which got him in trouble during the Roman Inquisition (1615). He was warned to abandon his view, which he did in order to save his skin. Later he defended his views (1632) in his most famous work, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. Consequently, he was tried by the Inquisition, found suspect of heresy, forced to recant, and spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

Emotionally charged issues often lead people to stereotype dissenters, however sound their reasoning or justifiable their actions. The reader may recall the case of Dr. Jack Kevorkian, dubbed "Dr. Death" by the media, who fought for the rights of the suffering to end their own lives in dignity. He argued that medical doctors have an ethical responsibility to assist terminally ill patients in ending their lives, should these patients choose to do so; and he argued that euthanasia is a basic human right. Jack Lessenberry, a prominent Michigan journalist for the Detroit Metro Times, wrote, "Jack Kevorkian...was a major force for good in this society. He forced us to pay attention to one of the biggest elephants in the room: the fact that today vast numbers of people are alive who would rather be dead, who have lives not worth living (*New York Times*, June 4, 2011)." Though the debate continues as to whether euthanasia should be legalized, Kevorkian's advocacy for the right of people to end their lives impacted how people think of euthanasia. Further, according to the *New York Times* (June 4, 2011), Kevorkian's actions "helped spur the growth of hospice care in the US and made physicians more sympathetic to those in severe pain and more willing to prescribe medication to relieve it." Still, Kevorkian spent eight years in prison for assisting one patient in ending her life. His views didn't fit mainstream views so he had to be punished.

Dissenters can be found (and punished) in any potentially any area of human life. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tony Kushner was briefly kept from receiving an honorary degree from the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York because of his views on Israel. Kushner has criticized Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza. According to the *Press Democrat* (June 4, 2011), one trustee of the board, Jeffrey Wiesenfeld, denounced Kushner's views, branding him "a Jewish anti-Semite" and a 'kapo,' a term for Jews who worked for the Nazis

in concentration camps.” In a speech to graduates of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Kishner said “they, too, must engage with society’s thorniest issues and urged them to ‘find the human in yourself by finding the citizen in yourself, the activist, the hero in yourself.’”

Implications of the increasingly harsh sex laws in the United States illuminate how people who violate sexual customs are treated in the society. In Petaluma, California (*Press Democrat*, October 21, 2010), a businessman who was formerly a high-school coach was charged with annoying and molesting a team member while serving as coach. Chief Deputy District Attorney Tashawn Sanders said the man’s conduct “was motivated ‘by unnatural or abnormal sexual interest in a person under 18 years old.’” This statement seems to imply a definitive cutoff point at which being sexually interested in someone under that specific age should be considered perverted or disgusting. The problem is that such a cutoff point, wherever it is, must be completely arbitrary. There is no holy book of ages at which people should be allowed to engage in sexual relations, though societies act as if such a book exists. The history of sexuality shows that all ages of people have engaged in all manner of sexual behavior with one another through the course of human history. A little over 50 years ago, for instance, it was common for girls at the age of 12 to be married to men much older than themselves (in the United States). I don’t mean to argue for marriage at age 12 but only to show how norms change, and when they do, how attitudes of people change accordingly. Sexual norms considered acceptable by one group at one point in time may well be considered perverted and pathological in another. Even in the United States the age of consent varies from 16 to 18. In many other countries the age of consent is much lower. For instance, in Italy, Hungary, Peru, and Puerto Rico the age of consent is 14. In Spain and South Korea the age is 13. In some countries the age of consent is even lower.¹⁵ Sexual behavior considered criminal in one country might be considered a healthy norm in other countries. What is often missed is whether and to what extent actual harm is done during the sexual experiences.

In 2004, Jonathan Johnson was convicted of engaging in unlawful sex with several teen-age girls when he was between 18 and 20 years of age. A jury convicted Johnson of 41 felonies involving sexual contact with girls between the ages of 13 and 16. Regardless of the girls’ consent, state law prohibits adults from having sex with minors. Johnson was sentenced to almost 200 years in prison (*Press Democrat*, July 14, 2008). According to the *Press Democrat* (February 6, 2004), “During the trial and again in court Friday, his attorney said the sentence was an unfair punishment for a young man who acted wrongly but not violently in pursuing sexual acts with partners who were willing, if unsophisticated, teenage girls. Chris Andrian said Johnson ‘was simply engaging in sexual behavior that is common, if inappropriate, among teens.’ Andrian argued vehemently against the sentence, saying, ‘These are the same sentences that people get if they cut off your head with a machete, or if they lie in wait and kill your children.’ The mother of one of the teens who had sex with Johnson said, before the sentence

¹⁵ This information was taken from www.ageofconsent.com and www.ageofconsent.us

was pronounced, “You took my daughter, who was a virgin and innocent, and you violated her.” During his six-week trial, prosecutors characterized Johnson as a sexual predator and said he used his position as wrestling coach to prey on girls who looked up to him. Assuming that all the sexual encounters between Johnson and these girls was consensual (and remember that he was not convicted of force in any of the cases), both the conviction and sentencing show a barbaric “justice” system entrenched in Puritanical¹⁶ ideology. The idea that teen girls are either not sexual, that they shouldn’t be sexual, or that they should not be allowed to decide the conditions under which they should have sex is based simply in social ideology, not objective truth.

A special issue of *The Economist* (August 8–14) highlights what it terms “America’s unjust sex laws.” A number of examples are offered of the ways in which people have suffered because “America has pioneered the harsh punishment of sex offenders.” In one example, a 17-year-old girl was asked to perform oral sex on a male student in class who was just shy of his 16th birthday. The girl was arrested. She was told by her public defender to plead guilty. Unaware of the implications of doing so, she complied. She was sentenced to five years on probation. “Not being the most organized of people, she failed to meet all the conditions, such as checking in regularly with her probation officer. For a series of technical violations, she was incarcerated for more than a year.” Now her personal information is on a public sex registry in Georgia, a website that “describes itself as a list of people who have ‘been convicted of a criminal offence against a victim who is a minor or any dangerous sexual offence.’ As a result of what can appropriately be compared with the experiences of the girl in *The Scarlet Letter*, “she sees people whispering, and parents pulling their children indoors when she walks by” (p. 21).

All three of these examples on sexuality highlight not only the problem of unnecessarily harsh laws but also the fact that many people in Puritanical cultures dissent from mainstream view on sexuality; however they tend to do so privately, rather than publicly. They hold beliefs about sexuality that would and do get them into trouble with the law. Though they may not publicly dissent, their behavior *implies* dissenting beliefs. They refuse to conform to group beliefs, and that refusal results in (often harsh) punishment. They probably rarely discuss their views on sexuality since talking about different ways of viewing sexuality can get one into trouble, even in many democratic countries.

In sum, the truly autonomous thinker is rare, and penalties for independent thinking can be stiff. Because people are taught to uncritically conform to group ideologies as children, the habit of acquiescing is ingrained in us by the time we reach adulthood. The idea of going against the rules is thus considered unpatriotic,

¹⁶ In a number of places in this book, I use the term Puritanical in reference to sexual mores, customs, or taboos. By Puritanical I mean viewing sexuality in excessively rigid and narrow terms, taking the strictly biblical view of sexuality as designed for procreation, as inherently “dirty” when engaged in for reasons of pleasure or outside of marriage. Traditional Puritanical beliefs entailed viewing sexual behavior such as masturbation, homosexuality, anal sex, and oral sex as perverted and prurient. Today, Puritanism in reference to sexuality may entail these traditional views as well as other sexual taboos prevalent in a given culture. The term “Puritanism” has more than one use. It is this use to which I refer in this book.

anarchic, and irresponsible. Those who do are branded rebellious, undemocratic, dangerous, or heretical.¹⁷



Test the Idea

Think of your own examples of dissenters or those who go against mainstream views. What are some important consequences of their actions? See if you can find examples in the newspaper or another news source or book.

GROUPISHNESS, GROUP VALIDATION, GROUP CONTROL, AND GROUP CONFORMITY INTERCONNECT AND INTERACT

Though *groupishness*, *group validation*, *group control*, and *group conformity* each has a unique logic, they often interact in complex ways. From a sociocentric perspective, for the group to successfully achieve its goals and agendas, the group must be cohesive. Group members must continually reinforce among themselves a shared set of beliefs. The majority of people in the group must submit to the collective will of the group. When too much dissent is allowed within the group—when differing subgroups hold conflicting philosophies and perspectives—the larger group cannot pursue its objectives as effectively. Thus the group, concerned fundamentally with achieving what it perceives to be in its vested interests, requires conformity from its group members and affirmation of group ideologies. Militant groups, which exact blind allegiance and obedience from its members, offer a paradigm case of this point.

More than a hundred years ago, Sumner (1906; 1940) extensively documented the complex relationships between and among group-vested interest and validation, group control and conformity. He perceived that patriotic bias results from these relationships, something education should guard against:

Every group of any kind whatsoever demands that each of its members shall help defend group interests. The group force is also employed to enforce the obligations of devotion to group interests. It follows that judgments are precluded and criticism silenced. ... The patriotic bias is a recognized perversion of thought and judgment against which our education should guard us (p. 15).

In understanding the relationship between groupishness, group validation, group control, and group conformity there are countless examples we might draw upon. For one such example, consider how the “Tea Party” groups work with the oil industry to advance the notion that global warming either doesn’t exist or is not caused by human actions. This idea conveniently fits the vested interests of the oil industry, which has financially backed “Tea Party” candidates for

¹⁷ Some people see themselves as rebellious when doing such things as smoking cigarettes or tattooing or piercing their body parts. But these acts are often sociocentric in nature; people do these things to “be like” other rebellious people or to be validated by them.

congressional races. According to the *New York Times* (Oct. 21, 2010), the views of Tea Party candidates “align with those of the fossil fuel industries, which have for decades waged a concerted campaign to raise doubts about the science of global warming and to undermine policies to address them. . . . The oil, coal and utility industries have collectively spent \$500 million just since the beginning of 2009 to lobby against legislation to address climate change and to defeat candidates . . . that support it.”

Groupishness and group validation are easily seen in this example. But what about group control and submission? The fossil-fuel industries supporting Tea Party candidates, according to the *New York Times* article, “have created and lavishly financed institutes to produce anti-global warming studies, paid for rallies and Web sites to question the science, and generated scores of economic analysis that purport to show that policies to reduce emissions of climate-altering gases will have a devastating effect on jobs and the overall economy.”

All this propaganda is aimed at controlling the way people think about global warming, leading them to believe that humans aren’t responsible for it (and therefore don’t need to do anything about it). Those seeking office under the Tea Party flag are interested in power and control. The fossil-fuel industry is interested in money, more money, power, and control. Working together through disseminating incorrect or distorted information, they manipulate and control the way people think about global warming. If they are effective, people submit to this manipulation and control: they reject the idea of global warming and they support the candidates who are manipulating them.

The view that global warming is not a growing problem is coupled with the religious notion that the earth and its resources were designed by God to be enjoyed by his people and exploited for their own ends. This idea is used by Tea Party candidates as part of their manipulative propaganda; and apparently it works. In response to the issue of global warming, Norman Dennison (*New York Times*, Oct. 22, 2010), founder of the Corydon Tea Party, said, “It’s a flat-out lie. . . . I read the Bible. . . . He made this earth for us to utilize.” Lisa Deaton, a small-business owner who started We the People Indiana, a Tea Party affiliate, said, “They’re trying to use global warming against the people. . . . It takes away our liberty. . . . Being a strong Christian I cannot help but believe the Lord placed a lot of minerals in our country and it’s not there to destroy us.”

We see in this example 1) groupishness—unbridled pursuit of vested interests, 2) group validation—group members validating the primary views of the group, 3) group control through manipulation and distortion of the truth, and 4) group conformity to those in power.

For another example, consider the treatment of women in Afghanistan. According to the *New York Times* (September 21, 2010), “in a land [Afghanistan] where sons are more highly valued, since in the tribal culture usually only they can inherit the father’s wealth and pass down a name, families without boys are the objects of pity and contempt. Even a made up son increases the family’s

standing.” Such made-up sons are actually young girls who dress as boys; they are called “bacha posh” in Dari, which literally means “dressed up as a boy.” Couple this with the way in which women are often treated in Afghan culture—given in childhood by their families, abused by their husbands and their husbands’ families, unable to go out in public without being accompanied by a male family member—and you find a paradigm example of group-vested interest, group validation, group domination, and group submission working together and feeding into one another.

According to a *New York Times* article (November 8, 2010), “The choices for Afghan women are extraordinarily restricted: Their family is their fate. There is little chance for education, little choice about whom a woman marries, no choice at all about her role in her own house. Her primary job is to serve her husband’s family. Outside that world, she is an outcast. ‘If you run away from home, you may be raped or put in jail and then sent home and then what will happen to you?’ asked Rachel Reid, a researcher for Human Rights Watch. . . . Returned runaways are often shot or stabbed in honor killings because families fear they have spent time unchaperoned with a man. Women and girls are still stoned to death.”

In Afghan culture, men are the dominating group, but women also play a role in domination when they abuse their daughters-in-law or sisters-in-law, or condone their husbands or sons in doing so. The victims, often young married women, must submit to the domination or suffer the consequences, which can mean being murdered by their own families. The dominating group has a vested interest in treating women in this way: they get to maintain control and power over the women, and they have all the power in the culture where the women have none.¹⁸ Women who abuse other women were likely abused themselves. Collectively, the dominating group validates these unethical, pernicious ways of thinking and behaving. The victims have little choice but to submit or kill themselves. This tradition is carried on, generation after generation, through group validation.

¹⁸ Note that though the men have most of the control in such a culture as this, they too have been indoctrinated into the ideologies of the culture. And though they enjoy far greater benefits in the culture than do the women, they also miss out on many essential dimensions of a healthy intimate marital relationship. For instance, in such a culture, men would likely seldom confide in their wives, would never be able to exhibit even mild forms of affection publicly, would rarely discuss how to raise their children, and would have impoverished sexual relationships. It is the culture at large that carries on the dysfunctional traditions, both men and women buying into it, with only a few dissenters who become marginalized and who are punished accordingly.



These photos come from a video film that was captured by RAWA on August 26, 2001, in Kabul using a hidden camera. It shows two Taliban religious police from the department of Amro bil mahroof (promotion of virtue and prevention of vice) beating a woman because she has dared to remove her burqa in public.



Test the Idea

Think of your own example that illuminates the four forms of sociocentric thought—groupishness, group validation, group control and group conformity. As you look for examples, note that where you find one, you will often find one or more of the others.

MANIFESTATIONS OF SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT IN HUMAN SOCIETIES

THE MASS MEDIA SHAPES AND IS SHAPED BY SOCIOCENTRIC THINKING

One of the most influential forms of sociocentric thought is found in media bias and propaganda. The mass media and press in any given country tend to present world events in descriptive terms that presuppose the correctness of the ideology dominant in that country. For instance, language is often used ideologically by the press. In so doing, the media violate the basic meanings of the terms themselves.

Those in the media often forward a sociocentric agenda because they are naturally a part of the culture within which they function and have, like most other people, been indoctrinated into the mainstream views of the culture. In other words, because much of the thinking within any given culture is sociocentric in nature.

For example, the mass media routinely validate the view that one's own country is "right" or ethical in its dealings in the world. This cultivates one-sided nationalistic thinking. The basic idea is that as largely sociocentric thinkers, all of us tend to think of our nation and the groups to which we belong in mostly favorable terms. It follows, therefore, that the media will present in mostly unfavorable terms those nations and groups that significantly oppose "us."

When we look critically at the mainstream mass media of a given country, it is easy to document how it presents important world events in biased ways. For instance, the mainstream news media are biased toward their country's political "allies" and prejudiced against its "enemies." The media therefore present events that regard the countries of allies in as favorable a light as possible, highlighting positive events while downplaying negative ones. As for its enemies, the opposite treatment can be expected. Thus, positive events in the countries of one's enemies are either ignored or given little attention, while negative events are highlighted or distorted. The ability of a person to identify this bias in action and mentally rewrite the article or representation more objectively is an important critical-thinking ability.

For example, because Israel has historically been an ally of the United States, the U.S. media has tended to ignore or give minor attention to mistreatment of the Palestinians by the Israelis. On the other hand, because Fidel Castro of Cuba is an "enemy" of the United States, mainstream news writers take advantage of every opportunity to present Castro and Cuba in a negative light, ignoring

most achievements of the Cuban government and its people (e.g., in the area of universal education, 100 percent literacy rates, and medical care).¹⁹



Test the Idea

Look for examples of media bias in the news that come from sociocentric thought on the part of the reporter or news agency.

UNBRIDLED GLOBAL CAPITALISM IS A POWERFUL SOCIOCENTRIC FORCE IN HUMAN LIFE

Capitalism²⁰ is the predominant economic force on the planet. Almost all humans and other sentient creatures now experience implications of capitalism. Even countries with socialist governments are interconnected with capitalism, so closely linked are human societies today. In his book *A Theory of Global Capitalism*, William Robinson (2004) argues that we are now living in a new economic system of global capitalism, the theory of which he details:

Globalization is the underlying structural dynamic that drives social, political, economic, and cultural-ideological processes around the world in the twenty-first century. ... Global capitalism has generated new social dependencies around the world. Billions of people who may have been at the margins of the system or entirely outside of it have now been brought squarely within its confines. The maintenance of the system is very much a life-and-death matter for millions, indeed billions, of people who, willingly or otherwise, have developed a stake in it (p. xv).

Though capitalism has its strengths, the many negative implications that have resulted from *unrestrained* capitalism are largely passed over or played down in today's mainstream western cultures and beyond. In developed countries, people tend to view capitalism as the best economic system; those who argue for public ownership and cooperative management of the means of production through "socialist" programs are often marginalized, stereotyped, and sometimes even demonized. People in capitalist countries generally fail to see capitalism as one choice among several viable economic systems. Born into capitalistic societies, they tend to uncritically accept capitalistic ideology. Capitalism represents a tremendously powerful sociocentric force in human life today.

One problem with capitalism, according to Robinson, is that it naturally expands. "In order to survive, capitalism requires constant access to new sources of cheap labor, land, raw materials ... and markets" (p. 3). In his concluding

¹⁹ For further discussion of the problem of media bias as a sociocentric force, see *The Thinker's Guide to Media Bias and Propaganda* by Richard Paul and Linda Elder, 2006, Dillon Beach: Foundation for Critical Thinking Press.

²⁰ It might be useful to point out that the term "capitalism" has largely been replaced by the term "free-market economy." However since a truly free market doesn't exist, this latter term is largely a politically generated euphemism for capitalism.

chapter on the contradictions of capitalism, Robinson points to some of its far-reaching problems:

“... as capitalism produces vast amounts of wealth, it also generates ... social polarization and crisis ... workers produce more goods and services than they are actually able to purchase with their wages ... at some point capitalists as a group ... are left with more goods and services produced by their workers than they are able to market. ... This is the point at which economic recession typically sets in. ... The polarization of world income, downward mobility, and declining purchasing power among broad swaths of humanity make it impossible for the world’s majority to consume all the goods being churned out by the global economy ... two processes germane to capitalist development have intensified through globalization. One is the secular process by which the spread of capitalism uproots precapitalist classes such as peasantries and converts them into members of the working class. The accelerated incursion of capitalist production into the countryside around the world in the second half of the twentieth century uprooted hundreds of millions of peasants and threw them into the capitalist labor market, often as unemployed or underemployed workers” (pp. 147–149).

One implication of unbridled capitalism is the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, not only in the United States, but across the world. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (June 25, 2010) reports: “The gaps in after-tax income between the richest 1 percent of Americans and the middle and poorest fifths of the country more than tripled between 1979 and 2007. ... [T]he new data suggest greater income concentration at the top of the income scale than at any time since 1928.” The United Nations reports that “around the world more than 2.5 billion men, women and children live in grinding poverty on less than \$2 a day. Such extreme poverty results in chronic hunger and malnutrition, preventable diseases such as malaria, measles and tuberculosis, environmental degradation, low literacy rates and countless other social, public health, economic and political problems.”²¹ According to the United Nations Development Report (1999), “Global inequalities in income and living standards have reached grotesque proportions.”²² The report goes on to say:

The richest countries, such as the United States, have 20 percent of the world’s people but 86 percent of its income ... 82 percent of its exports and 74 percent of its telephone lines. The 20 percent living in the poorest countries, such as Ethiopia and Laos, have about 1 percent of each. The three richest officers of Microsoft—Bill Gates, Paul Allen and Steve Ballmer—have more assets, nearly \$140 billion, than the combined gross national product of the 43 least-developed countries and their 600 million people.

When the market goes too far in dominating social and political outcomes, the opportunities and rewards of globalization spread unequally and inequitably—

21 Taken from the website of the United Nations, <http://www.un.org/works/sub2.asp?lang=en&s=17> December 19, 2010.

22 The United Nation Human Development Report, found at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr1999/>

concentrating power and wealth in a select group of people, nations and corporations, marginalizing the others.

The challenge is ... to provide enough space for human, community and environmental resources to ensure that globalization works for people, not just for profits.

One result of globalization is that the road to wealth—the control of production, patents and technology—is increasingly dominated by a few countries and companies ... this monopoly of power is cutting poorer nations off from a share of the economic pie and, often, from decent health care and education.

In 1864, in a private letter, President Abraham Lincoln said:

I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country ... corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands. ... I feel at this moment more anxiety for the safety of my country than ever before, even in the midst of war.

Given the increasing gap between the rich and poor and the consequent inordinate power now in the hands of the wealthy, Lincoln's fears have been realized. In his book *Free Lunch: How the Wealthiest Americans Enrich Themselves at Government Expense* (and Stick You With the Bill), David Cay Johnston (2007) writes:

In the past quarter century or so our government has enacted new rules that have created not only free markets, but rigged ones. These rules have weakened and even destroyed consumer protections while increasing the power of the already powerful. ... The rich and their lobbyists have taken firm control of the levers of power in Washington and the state capitals while remaking the rules in their own interests ... For more than a quarter century now our government has been adopting rules that tilt the playing field in favor of the rich, the powerful, and the politically connected. ... We sing the praises of investors who owe their wealth not to creating businesses, but to buying companies in deals that require destroying lives and careers, just so that they could squeeze out more money for themselves ... (p. 12-15).

In the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, we see evidence of all four forms of sociocentric thought—groupishness, in which the wealthy largely pursue more and more money without regard to the rights and needs of those who are poor; group validation, in which the wealthy collectively validate or justify their selfish behaviors; group domination, in which the rich are able to wield power over the poor (for instance, by having more political power); and group submission, in which the poor have no choice but to go along with those in power. Of course, there are many intricacies entailed in this process, and it may be possible for people to be wealthy without also being sociocentric in these

ways. Every case must be individually examined to determine the extent to which sociocentric forces are at play.

Not only do the wealthiest Americans have inordinate power over the federal government, there is a growing pernicious relationship between the media, big business and military interests. This relationship has given rise to what David McGowan (2000) refers to as the “military-industrial-media complex.” In his book *Derailing Democracy*, McGowan details how the military has become increasingly powerful through its associations with capitalists agendas; McGowan also details how the media have come under the power of fewer and fewer corporations—themselves with a capitalist agenda. He notes, for example:

The number-one purveyor of broadcast news in this country—NBC, with both MSNBC and CNBC under its wing as well as NBC news and a variety of “news magazines”—is now owned and controlled by General Electric, one of the nation’s largest defense contractors. Is it not significant that as GE’s various media subsidiaries predictably lined up to cheerlead the use of U.S. military force in Kosovo, it was at the same time posting substantial profits from the sale of high tech tools of modern warfare it so shamelessly glorifies. ... Following the same course that virtually every other major industry has in the last two decades, a relentless series of mergers and corporate takeovers has consolidated control of the media into the hands of corporate behemoths. The result has been that an increasingly authoritarian agenda has been sold to the American people by a massive, multi-tentacled media machine that has become, for all intents and purposes, a propaganda organ of the state (pp. 1-2).

This shows how media and military agendas are now dangerously combined through capitalistic forces, enabling the super wealthy to essentially control how people think. Dysfunctional relationships such as these illuminate the sociocentric forms of *groupishness* (conglomerates accumulating more and more money), *group control* (these conglomerates controlling the messages people receive, which serve the vested interests of these companies), and *group conformity* (people naively accepting the views disseminated by biased media outlets controlled by these behemoths).

In addition to the obvious problems caused by unrestrained capitalism are some important, more hidden problems. In their book *The Winner-Take-All Society*, Robert Frank and Philip Cook (1995) focus on the fact that the American capitalist system encourages economic waste, income inequality, and an impoverished culture. They say:

Winner-take-all markets have increased the disparity between the rich and poor. They have lured some of our most talented citizens into socially unproductive, sometimes destructive tasks. In an economy that already invests too little for the future, they have fostered wasteful patterns of investment and consumption. They have led indirectly to greater concentration of our most talented college students in a small set of elite institutions. They have made it more difficult for “late bloomers”

to find a productive niche in life. And winner-take-all markets have molded our culture and discourse in ways many of us find deeply troubling (pp. 4–5).

In exemplifying ways in which American capitalism affects our culture, Frank and Cook (1995) point to such things as how the book and movie industries tend to foster, in essence, sociocentric thought. They note that publishers tend to publish books by previously successful authors, however ill-written these books might be. They note that books tend to stay on the market to the extent that they are widely read in the culture. The same is true of movies: popular movies are those that stay in the movie theaters longer so more people can see them. These realities are disturbing because, as Frank and Cook stress, "... beginning in infancy and continuing throughout life, the things we see and read profoundly alter the kinds of people we become" (p. 19). One important implication of common practice in the book and movie industries is that books and movies that offer dissenting views don't tend to survive or are never given fair attention.

Notice how reasonable it seems to make movies and publish books based on what was previously financially successful. If a genre is successful at the box office—violent movies, for example, or romance novels—it seems reasonable to make more movies in that genre. But the only reason it seems so reasonable (and natural) is that we've internalized the sociocentrism of a capitalist economy. By choosing to produce items on the basis of their profitability, we are choosing to put aside the many more important values we could be emphasizing, such as fostering fairness, empathy, and concern for the environment, values such as improving the quality of life for humans and other species and striving to create more fairminded critical societies. The depth of the sociocentrism is apparent by observing that publishing-for-profit often seems non-ideological compared to publishing-to further-a-cause. It seems *almost neutral* compared with other values such as protecting versus exploiting the environment or exploring the idea that health-care should or should not be free to all. But of course it's not value-neutral at all. It is a key part of the ideology of capitalism.

This is just one of the many subtle examples of the ill effects of capitalism as we now experience it.

Perhaps the most serious problem connected with capitalism is that of vested interest—groups exploiting other groups (or individuals) while pursuing their own interests. Remember that this is one of the primary forms of sociocentric thought. It is documented every day in every major newspaper in the world. And more than 200 years ago, during the very early stages of capitalism, it was a primary concern of Adam Smith (1776), considered the father of modern economics. In his book *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith stressed the importance of checks and appropriate controls in capitalist economies. He said, for instance:

People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices. It is impossible indeed to prevent such meetings, by any law which

either could be executed, or would be consistent with liberty or justice. But though the law cannot hinder people of the same trade from sometimes assembling together, it ought to do nothing to facilitate such assemblies; much less to render them necessary (p. 152).

Civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all (p. 775).

Our merchants and master-manufacturers complain much of the bad effects of high wages in raising the price, and thereby lessening the sale of their goods both at home and abroad. They say nothing concerning the bad effects of high profits. They are silent with regard to the pernicious effects of their own gains. They complain only of those of other people (p. 117).

Capitalism is a complex economic system that has developed over the past two centuries or so. It is essential to recognize that it is one economic system among a number of possibilities that has been created by human thought and executed by human agents. Unfortunately, as Max Weber said in 1905, uncontrolled capitalism has largely entrapped us in what he called an *iron cage*, replete with its pernicious bureaucratic systems. This *iron cage*—from which, as Weber sees it, no escape seems possible—is a direct consequence of sociocentric human thought. But it is important to realize that capitalism is, in the first instance, a human idea; and as with all human ideas, it can be changed. It can be improved. It can be displaced. Insofar as it serves the people and minimizes suffering, it should be applauded. But insofar as it causes suffering and injustice, it should be altered or, yes, even abandoned.



Test the Idea

To what extent do you see capitalism, or “free-market economy,” as causing problems in human societies? What can be done about these problems?

SCHOOLING IS A PREVAILING SOCIOCENTRIC AGENT

In every country in the world students are indoctrinated into the ideologies of their culture through schooling. Accordingly, the schooling is an agent of the state, of the status quo, of the mainstream view. Fostering independence of thought in schooling is rare. Teachers who attempt it are often marginalized, removed from the classroom, or otherwise penalized. To exemplify this point, consider the *Scopes Monkey Trial* of 1925, a legal case in which John Scopes, a high-school teacher in Tennessee, was indicted and convicted for teaching evolution (in violation of the Butler Act, which made it unlawful to teach evolution). Though the verdict was overturned on a technicality, the

trial illuminates the difficulties teachers often face in swimming against the mainstream of the culture, even when the mainstream view is absurd.

For further examples, we can go back at least 2,000 years. For instance, in Athens (399 BCE), Socrates was accused, indicted, and ultimately put to death for two reasons:

1. Introducing and believing in gods other than those sanctioned by the state. (Although some accused Socrates of atheism, all evidence points in the opposite direction, evidenced, in part, by the fact that Socrates believed in life after death.)
2. Corrupting the young (by fostering their intellectual development and encouraging them to question the status quo).

To understand Socrates' views in connection with education and the problem of sociocentric thought, consider the following passage from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1972):

There was reason for fearing Socrates as a social force. Where arête [excellence, in terms of how to make the best of oneself and live a rational life], education, and state were fused in one image, an educator critical of received assumptions was a revolutionary. Socrates not only publicly raised such fundamental questions as "What is arête?" and "Who are its teachers?" but also by discrediting through their own representatives the accepted educational channels and by creating a climate of questioning and doubt, he was suspected by conservative minds of the dangerous game of discomfiting all authority before a circle of impressionable youths and subtracting from the state the stability of tradition. It was also apparent that the values by which Socrates lived, his indifference to material wealth and prosperity, and his freedom from desire and ambition were themselves a living criticism of all institutions and of politicians who did not seem to know what they were doing or who were compromising their principles (p. 482).

Socrates was perhaps the most original, influential, and controversial figure in the history of Greek thought. ... [H]e was obviously at home in the best society, but he had no respect for social status. ... Tradition holds that by refusing to compromise his principles, he deliberately antagonized the court which was trying him for impiety and forced an avoidable death penalty (p. 480).

In the early twentieth century, Sumner (1906; 1940) focused on the notion that schools were well on their way to becoming mere extensions of the society—replete with its prejudices and biases. Consider his developed view and ask yourself whether his fears have been realized in schooling today:

The boards of trustees are almost always made up of "practical men," and if their faiths, ideas and prejudices are to make the norm of education, the schools will turn out boys and girls compressed into that pattern. ... We seem likely to have orthodox history (especially of our own country), political science, political economy, and sociology before too long. It will be defined by school boards who are party

politicians. As fast as physics, chemistry, geology, biology, bookkeeping, and the rest come into conflict with interests, and put forth results which have a pecuniary effect ... then the popular orthodoxy will extend to them, and it will be enforced as "democratic." ... The reason is because there will be a desire that children shall be taught just that one thing which is "right" in the view and interest of those in control, and nothing else. ... In fact, this is the reason why the orthodox answers of the school boards and trustees are mischievous. They teach that there are absolute and universal facts of knowledge, whereas we ought to teach that all our knowledge is subject to unlimited verification and revision (p. 632).

In his book *Teachers as Intellectuals*, Henry Giroux (1988) focuses on some of the root problems in schooling that result from, and lead to, sociocentric thought:

The rationality that dominates traditional views of schooling and curriculum is rooted in the narrow concerns for effectiveness, behavioral objectives, and principles of learning that treat knowledge as something to be consumed and schools as merely instructional sites designed to pass onto students a "common" culture and set of skills that will enable them to operate effectively in the wider society. Steeped in the logic of technical rationality, the problematic of traditional curriculum theory and schooling centers on questions about the most thorough or most efficient ways to learn specific kinds of knowledge, to create moral consensus, and to provide modes of schooling that reproduce the existing society. For instance, traditional educators may ask how the school should seek to attain a certain predefined goal, but they rarely ask why such a goal might be beneficial to some socioeconomic groups and not to others, or why schools, as they are presently organized, tend to block the possibility that specific classes will attain a measure of economic and political autonomy (p. 6).

Because teachers themselves are heavily indoctrinated into the ideologies of the culture, resulting from the many sociocentric forces that have influenced them, they tend to unwittingly pass along their narrow, parochial views to their students. But when genuine education is fostered, schools emancipate rather than indoctrinate the mind. Schools should be alive with questions, both on the part of teachers and students. Teachers should encourage students to wonder aloud about truth and meaning. Discussions about controversial issues should be openly encouraged. *No issues should be taboo from discussion in schools.* But where can we find classrooms today where such open dialogue is possible, much less encouraged? What would parents do if students were encouraged to discuss issues considered taboo in the culture? What would happen to teachers if they led such discussions? What would happen to administrators if they encouraged teachers and students to question the status quo, the mainstream views of society? What would happen to teachers and administrators if they encouraged reasoned dissent among students? But perhaps more important, what would happen in the minds of students if they learned the power and skill entailed in reasoned dissent? And how would the world be different if they did?

In the following passages, Bertrand Russell (1957) emphasizes the importance of open and free inquiry. He stresses the critical need to create education systems that foster fairminded pursuit of knowledge and warns of the dangers inherent in dogmatic ideologies.

The conviction that it is important to believe this or that, even if a free inquiry would not support the belief, is one which is common to almost all religions and which inspires all systems of state education. ... A habit of basing convictions upon evidence, and of giving to them only that degree of certainty which the evidence warrants, would, if it became general, cure most of the ills from which the world is suffering. But at present, in most countries, education aims at preventing the growth of such a habit, and men who refuse to profess belief in some system of unfounded dogmas are not considered suitable as teachers of the young. ...

The world that I should wish to see would be one freed from the virulence of group hostilities and capable of realizing that happiness for all is to be derived rather from cooperation than from strife. I should wish to see a world in which education aimed at mental freedom rather than at imprisoning the minds of the young in a rigid armor of dogma calculated to protect them through life against the shafts of impartial evidence. The world needs open hearts and open minds, and it is not through rigid systems, whether old or new, that these can be derived (pp. vi-vii).

Sumner (1906; 1940) implicitly distinguishes between education, which entails developed criticality of mind, and schooling, which is merely what happens in school, whether reasonable or unreasonable, whether it cultivates the mind or warps it, whether it leads to emancipation or uncritical acceptance of received views. On the relationship between education and developing critical thought, Sumner says:

The critical faculty is a product of education and training. ... It is a prime condition of human welfare that men and women should be trained in it. It is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition, and misapprehension of ourselves and our earthly circumstances. ... Education teaches us to act by judgment. Our education is good just so far as it produces well-developed critical faculty. ... A teacher of any subject who insists on accuracy and a rational control of all processes and methods, and who holds everything open to unlimited verification and revision is cultivating that method as a habit in the pupils. ... When the schools are not too rigidly stereotyped they become seats of new thought, of criticism of what is traditional, and of new ideas which remold the mores (pp. 632–634).

When operating as a sociocentric force, schooling is not educational. As John Henry Newman said more than 150 years ago, education is a high word; don't say education when you mean something else.

When we can critique the many ways in which schooling is guided by and leads to dysfunctional group thought and action, we begin to forge a new path, one that systematically cultivates the educated mind.



Test the Idea

Take the four main quotes in this section (from Russell, Sumner, and Giroux). Articulate your understanding of them in your own words. Then interrelate the main ideas of each. If people took these ideas seriously, how might schooling change as a social force?

SPECIES-CENTRISM IS A FORM OF SOCIOCENTRISM

Sociocentrism is based on the notion that human groups intrinsically see themselves as privileged over other groups. Accordingly, humans naturally see their species (“their group”) as privileged over other species (“another group”). Species-centrism has been exemplified throughout human history and has caused an untold amount of unnecessary suffering to creatures outside the human “in-group.”

Consider, for instance, the use of primates in research. There is growing concern among reasonable people about whether, and to what extent, primate research is ethically justifiable, given the suffering that is almost always (if not always) connected with it. Primate research has historically been conducted for, and “justified by,” its potential human benefit. It is based on the (usually unstated) assumption that because human needs and desires take precedence over those of other species, humans are “entitled” to treat other species as they wish, with little or no regard for their thoughts or feelings. In his book, *Next of Kin: My Conversations with Chimpanzees*, Roger Fouts (1997) argues, on ethical grounds, against the use of primates for any research purposes. He points out that the chimpanzee (our closest ancestor along with the bonobo) has for hundreds of years been viewed as a model research subject because, though virtually “human” genetically chimps are said to lack human emotions:

In 1699, England’s best-known anatomist, Edward Tyson, performed the first dissection of a chimpanzee and revealed an anatomy that resembled “Man in many of its Parts, more than any of the Ape-kind, or any other Animal in the World.” Tyson was especially troubled by the creature’s brain and laryngeal region. They looked almost human, indicating that this animal might be capable of thought and speech. But Tyson was a good Cartesian and he assumed that a thinking, talking animal was simply not possible. So he decided that though this ape-man had all the machinery for thought and speech, it did not have the God-given ability to use them. It was Tyson who invented the paradigm of the mindless ape: the chimpanzee with a human brain but no single thought in it, the chimpanzee with a nervous system

but not the slightest emotion, the chimpanzee with the apparatus for language but not a thing to communicate. Tyson dreamed up the view of the chimpanzee that biomedical researchers still cling to today: a beast with the physiology of a human but the psychology of a lifeless machine—a hairy test tube created for the sake of human exploitation (p. 50).

But Fouts' own research, along with that of many ethologists, has shown what is in fact obvious to any unbiased observer: that chimpanzees (and indeed all apes) experience feelings just as humans do.

Fouts (1997) documents a number of egregious acts perpetrated on chimpanzees for research purposes. For instance, he reveals how the Air Force “recruited” infant chimpanzees from Africa in the 1950s and 1960s for its space program:

The military procured the chimps from African hunters who stalked mother chimpanzees carrying a baby. Usually the mother was shot out of her hiding place high up in a tree. If she fell on her stomach, then her infant, clinging to her chest, would die along with her. But many mother chimpanzees shielded their infants by falling on their backs. The screaming infant would then be bound hand and foot to a carrying pole and transported to the coast, a harrowing journey usually lasting several days. If the infants survived this second ordeal, and many did not, then they were sold for four or five dollars to a European animal dealer who kept them in a small box for days until the American buyer arrived—in this case the Air Force. Those still alive when the buyer came were crated up and sent to the United States, a journey that mirrored the slave trade of earlier centuries. Very few babies emerged from the crates. It is estimated that ten chimpanzees died for every one that made it to this country (pp. 42–43).

A tremendous number of research studies conducted each year on innocent creatures center on topics of little practical use or which merely serve human greed and vanity. In his book *Minding Animals*, Marc Bekoff (2002) offers the following descriptions of two such research projects. The first focuses on learned helplessness, the other on the effects of radiation. Note the conclusions that researchers come to in each case:

When a normal, naïve dog receives escape/avoidance training in a shuttlebox, the following behavior typically occurs: At the onset of electric shock the dog runs frantically about, defecating, urinating, and howling until it scrambles over the barrier and so escapes from the shock. ... However, in dramatic contrast ... a dog who had received inescapable shock while strapped in a Pavlovian harness soon stops running and remains silent until shock terminates. ... It seems to “give up” and passively “accept the shock.”

In one set of tests, [monkeys] had been subjected to lethal doses of radiation and then forced by electric shock to run on a treadmill until they collapsed. Before dying, the unanaesthetized monkeys suffered the predictable effects of excessive radiation, including vomiting and diarrhea. After acknowledging all this a DNA [Defense

Nuclear Agency] spokesman commented: “To the best of our knowledge, the animals experience no pain” (p. 140).

Jane Goodall, famous for her research on chimpanzees in the wild and for her advocacy of animal rights, illuminates some of the many ways in which humans use animals in research, often causing suffering that, if it were done to humans, would be called torture. In her book *Reason for Hope* (2000), Goodall says:

In the name of science and with the various goals of improving human health, keeping dying people alive, ensuring human safety, testing researchers’ hypotheses, and teaching students, animals are subjected to countless invasive, frightening, and sometimes very painful procedures. To test product safety and efficacy, animals such as rats and mice, guinea pigs, cats, dogs, and monkeys are injected with or forced to swallow, or have dripped into their eyes, a whole variety of substances. Surgical techniques are practiced by medical students on animals, and new surgical procedures are tested on animals. To try out experimental techniques for treating burns, vast areas of animals’ bodies are subjected to first degree burns. To discover more about the effect of smoking, taking drugs, eating too much fat, and so forth on human animals, other kinds of animals are forced to inhale huge quantities of smoke, take drugs, and overeat. To learn about biological systems, scientists stick electrodes into animals’ brains, deafen, kill and dissect them. To learn about mental functions, researchers subject animals to a vast array of tests; mistakes are punished with electric shocks, food and water deprivation and other cruelties. In short, what is done to animals in the name of science is often, from the animals’ point of view, pure torture—and would be regarded as such if perpetrated by anyone who was not a scientist (pp. 218–219).

Bekoff focuses on a number of systematic ways in which humans violate the rights of animals.²³ These violations are easily “justified” in the minds of human perpetrators when such perpetrators begin with the assumption that animals feel no pain. Bekoff details, for instance, the fact that wearing animals as clothing is still a common practice and that there are no laws in the United States that regulate fur farms or the ways in which trapped animals can or cannot be killed. He says:

Wild fur-bearing animals, over 40 million individuals per year, are cruelly captured, injured, and killed for profit. Many are trapped using contraptions that cause psychological and physical suffering. These devices include leg hold traps, wire snares that encircle an animal and pull tight as the animal struggles, and conibears that grip the entire body and break the neck or back. Beavers are often trapped in water and drown after struggling for some time. ... Animals are also raised on farms only to be slaughtered for clothing. Recently dogs and cats (bred specifically for use as clothing, or strays) have been used to make fur products. These individuals typically are kept in deplorable conditions before being beaten, hanged,

²³ The sociocentric thought on the part of researchers that we see throughout this section on the treatment of non-human research subjects should be apparent when we consider that such treatment often straightforwardly violates our own laws about the prevention of cruelty to animals.

suffocated, or bled to death. ... Animals such as mink are killed by neck-snapping. They show great distress when removed from their cages to be killed—screeching, urinating, defecating, fighting for their lives (p. 156).

In addition to the many mainstream beliefs that lead to animal suffering, there are many weird beliefs that also cause untold suffering for innocent creatures. In a *National Geographic* article (January 2010), Bryan Christy writes an exposé on the world's most notorious wildlife dealer. In this article, he focuses on Asia's wildlife trade and insatiable demand for traditional medicines, exotic pets and culinary delicacies. In cataloging these practices he says:

Tigers are all but extinct in the wild. ... There's a valuable black market for tigers. Tibetans wear tiger-skin robes; wealthy collectors display their heads; exotic restaurants sell their meat; their penis is said to be an aphrodisiac; and Chinese covet their bones for health cures, including tiger-bone wine, the "chicken soup" of Chinese medicine. ... In some Asian countries, tourist attractions called tiger parks secretly operate as front operations for tiger farming—slaughtering captive tigers for their parts and offering a potential market for wild-tiger poachers too (p. 98).

The sad fact is that the exploitation of animals throughout human history has been well-documented—from the killing of whales for their blubber to the killing of elephants for their trunks, from the use of wild animals in circuses and animal "parks" to the breeding of animals for display in zoos, from bullfighting in Spain to wild animal "sporting" in all parts of the world, from mass-consumer farming to the use of animals in research. Virtually every animal that *can* be exploited for human use *has* been exploited for human use.

Peter Singer (2000), a preeminent philosopher who specializes in practical ethics, has had perhaps more influence than any other writer in advancing the rights of animals. In much of his work, he reveals the unnecessary suffering many animals face at the hands of humans. He says:

... [W]e have no right to discount the interests of nonhuman animals simply because, for example, we like the taste of their flesh. Modern industrialized agriculture treats animals as if they were things, putting them indoors and confining them whenever it turns out to be cheaper to do so, with no regard at all paid to their suffering or distress, as long as it does not mean that they cease to be productive. But we cannot ethically disregard the interests of other beings merely because they are not members of our species. Note that this argument says nothing at all about whether it is wrong to kill nonhuman animals for food. It is based entirely on the suffering that we inflict on farm animals when we raise them by the methods that are standard today (p. xvi).

Singer illuminates the powerful role that vested interest plays in people's inability to empathize with animals. He says:

More significantly still for the prospects of the animal liberation movement is the fact that almost all of the oppressing group are directly involved in and see themselves benefitting from, the oppression. There are few humans indeed who can view the oppression of animals with the detachment possessed, say, by northern whites debating the institution of slavery in the southern states of the Union. People who eat pieces of slaughtered nonhumans every day find it hard to believe that they are doing wrong; and they also find it hard to imagine what else they could eat. On this issue, anyone who eats meat is an interested party. Meat eaters benefit—or at least they think they benefit—from the present disregard of the interests of nonhuman animals. This makes persuasion more difficult. How many southern slaveholders were persuaded by the arguments used by the northern abolitionists and accepted by nearly all of us today? Some, but not many (p. 25).

Add to the many egregious acts humans inflict upon animals the fact that the sheer number of humans (yes, the human population explosion) has caused increasing encroachments on the natural habitats of other animals, causing their numbers to dwindle, in many cases to the point of extinction. In fact, many scientists believe we are now living in what they term “the sixth great extinction,” and that this sad phenomenon is human caused.

As long as humans see themselves as superior to other species (as a natural part of our sociocentric nature), these problems will continue to plague the unfortunate creatures with whom we share the precious, but dwindling, resources on our planet.



Test the Idea

To what extent do you see species-centrism as a problem in human societies today? Locate additional examples that support the fact that this is a problem. What can be done to combat it?

MANY STUDIES ILLUMINATE SOCIOCENTRIC THINKING

Sociocentric thinking has been revealed in a multitude of studies focused on understanding human nature. One of the most famous was conducted by Phillip Zimbardo at Stanford University in 1971 in which students were randomly assigned to play the role of either guard or prisoner in a two-week prison simulation on the Stanford campus. The study was funded by the U.S. Navy to study human reactions in situations where considerable differences exist in terms of authority and power. In this study, to make the situation seem realistic, “guards” were given wooden batons and wore khaki military-style uniforms and mirrored sunglasses that minimized eye contact. The “prisoners” were not allowed to wear underwear and were made to wear loose fitting smocks and rubber flip-flops on their feet. Each “prisoner” was called by his designated number,

rather than by name. The “guards” were not given formal instructions but were simply told it was their responsibility to run the prison. From the beginning of the experiment, the “guards” misused their power over the “prisoners,” who were increasingly subjected to abusive and humiliating treatment—both physical and emotional. “Prisoners” were forced to clean toilets with their bare hands, to sleep on concrete floors, and to endure solitary confinement and hunger. They were subjected to forced nudity and sexual abuse. Because of potential emotional damage to the “prisoners,” researchers terminated the Stanford prison experiment after only six days.

This study illuminates how easily people, when placed in positions of high authority and power, will use their power in irrational ways. Further, and what concerns us most here, is how people in such positions will tend to collaborate with one another against the interests of those within their reach of power. In this experiment, both overt and tacit agreement among the “guards” led them to egregiously unethical acts, which seemed to them perfectly justified. They collectively rationalized their behavior toward the “prisoners.” This would not have been possible if most, or even many, of the “guards” had objected. In the event, each of the “guards” gained power through the agreement and corroboration of the others. In his book, *The Lucifer Effect*, Philip Zimbardo (2007), head researcher in the Zimbardo experiment, says of the “guards”:

Some of our volunteers who were randomly assigned to be guards soon came to abuse their newfound power by behaving sadistically—demeaning, degrading, and hurting the “prisoners” day in and night out ... none of [the guards] ever intervened to prevent the “bad guards” from abusing the prisoners; none complained to the staff, left their shift early or came to work late, or refused to work overtime in emergencies. Moreover, none of them even demanded overtime pay for doing tasks they may have found distasteful. They were part of the “Evil of Inaction Syndrome...” (pp. 207–208).

Another well-known experiment that illuminates the phenomenon and pervasiveness of sociocentric thinking was originally conducted in 1968 and has been described in some detail in the book *A Class Divided: Then and Now*, William Peters (1987). This experiment was not a research study in the traditional sense of the term but was in fact an experiential learning activity that yielded interesting results from a research perspective. It was conducted in a third-grade classroom by teacher Jane Elliott for the purpose of helping “Caucasian” students comprehend the problem of racial prejudice. It was devised on the heels of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. to help students empathize with the feelings of blacks, who at that time were systematically discriminated against because of their skin color. The experiment was conducted over a two-day period, and students were grouped according to eye color. One group consisted of the blue- and green-eyed students; the other of brown-eyed students. After a brief discussion about the problem of racial discrimination, in which Elliott asked her

students whether they wanted to truly understand how it feels to be discriminated against, she told them they would get a taste of it through a class activity she had designed. An excerpt from the book describes what happened when the children were placed in the “blue-eyed” or “brown-eyed” groups:

“Today,” [Elliott] told the class, “the blue-eyed people will be on the bottom, and the brown-eyed people will be on the top.” At their puzzled looks, she went on. “What I mean is that the brown-eyed people are better than blue-eyed people. They are cleaner than blue-eyed people. They are more civilized than blue-eyed people. And they are smarter than blue-eyed people” (p. 21).

What Elliott found was that in a matter of minutes after this introduction, the brown-eyed children were openly discriminating against and gloating over their blue-eyed classmates:

One blue-eyed boy slumped way down in his chair. “What color are your eyes?” Jane asked him. “Blue,” the boy said, straightening up. “Is that the way we’ve been taught to sit in class?” “No,” the boy said. “Do blue-eyed people remember what they’ve been taught?” Jane asked the class. There was a chorus of “No’s” from the brown-eyed children as they began to see how it would work. The blue-eyed boy now sat bolt upright, his hands folded neatly in the exact center of his desk. A brown-eyed boy near him, one of his close friends in the room, gave him a withering, disdainful look. It all began that quickly” (p. 22).

Throughout the day, the brown-eyed children had all the advantages. They were treated as smarter, cleaner, more responsible, and so on. The next school day, the tables were turned. The brown-eyed people were no longer privileged. They were dirtier, less intelligent, more slovenly; they were therefore denied the privileges granted their blue-eyed counterparts. Now the blue-eyed children turned on the brown-eyed classmates. They perceived themselves as better, more deserving, brighter than the brown-eyed children.

Naturally the ethical nature of this experiment has been questioned, but the results are conclusive: when people, in this case children, see themselves as superior to others, even without objective data supporting their view, they tend to act as if they were in fact superior. When groups of people see themselves as superior to other groups, and when that superiority is validated by those in power, they tend to treat people external to the group as inferior and thus less deserving. In Jane Elliott’s words:

... even more frightening was the way the brown-eyed children turned on their friends of the day before, the way they accepted almost immediately as true what had originally been described as an exercise. For there was no question, after an hour or so, that they actually believed they were superior. The fact that we were going to change roles on Monday was forgotten. Everything was forgotten in the fact of the undeniable proof that the blue-eyed children were inferior to them. It was

as though someone had pointed out to them something they simply hadn't noticed before. Weren't the blue-eyed children making more mistakes than they were? Of course. Wasn't the teacher finding fault almost exclusively with the blue-eyed children? Of course. Wasn't it clear that she liked the brown-eyed children better? Of course. What better proof did you need? (p. 25)

In addition to what has already been said, we can see from these passages and the experiment more generally, evidence of at least three important pathological phenomena coming together: 1) that people often hold their views in accordance with what they want to believe rather than what seems to make the most objective sense (“It’s true because I, or we, want to believe it”), 2) people tend to go along with the views of authority figures, and 3) people feed on one another’s pathological views within groups (especially views that are self-aggrandizing and self-validating). What this study shows is that wanting to believe in one’s own superiority, being validated by “authority” in this belief, and being confirmed in this belief by one’s peers can easily lead to a sense of arrogance and self-righteousness toward those in the out-group. In particular circumstances these combined variables can lead to abuses of the highest magnitude. This has been evidenced in many real-life situations, such as those that led to the Abu Ghraib prison tortures and humiliations in Iraq at the hands of the U.S. military.

Though the military has maintained that the tortures that occurred in Abu Ghraib resulted from a few bad apples, Zimbardo (2007), among many others, has revealed that the U.S. military was systematically responsible for creating the social conditions that led to the egregious actions perpetrated by the military in 2003. He quotes from a number of military reports that illuminate the sociocentric nature of the Abu Ghraib events:

General Taguba concludes that these MPs were set up to engage in some of these abuses by higher-ups. He states that “Military Intelligence (MI) interrogators and other U.S. Government agency’s interrogators actively requested that MP guards set physical and mental conditions for favorable interrogation of witnesses.” ... Major General George Fay’s investigative report goes even further ... “Military intelligence personnel allegedly requested, encouraged, condoned or solicited Military Police personnel ... to abuse detainees, and/or participated in detainee abuse, and/or violated established interrogation procedures and applicable law” (p. 158).

According to Zimbardo (2007, p. 357), the long list of abuses at Abu Ghraib included:

1. Breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees;
2. Threatening detainees with a pistol;
3. Pouring cold water on detainees;
4. Beating detainees with a broom and handle;

5. Threatening male detainees with rape;
6. Sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light;
7. Using military dogs to frighten and intimidate detainees with threats of attack;
8. Punching, slapping and kicking detainees; jumping on their naked feet;
9. Forcibly arranging detainees in various sexually explicit positions for photographing;
10. Forcing male detainees to wear women's underwear;
11. Forcing groups of male detainees to masturbate themselves while being photographed and videotaped.

In his book *The Lucifer Effect*, Zimbardo has drawn a number of links between the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Abu Ghraib prison tortures. He comments on the shock he experienced when he learned of the Abu Ghraib abuses and almost immediately connected them to the behavior of the “normal” students who were randomly assigned as “guards” in his study almost 30 years earlier. Both the experiment and the Abu Ghraib tortures powerfully exemplify the evil that can be, and is, perpetrated on innocent people when group validation, arrogance, and sense of righteousness are at play. These situations also point to the problem of dehumanization, which occurs when people conceptualize others as subhuman (savage, dirty, barbaric, and so on). This perception “justifies” all manner of physical and emotional abuses, including humiliation, torture and murder. People are far less likely to perpetrate evil actions on others if they have to face the truth in what they are doing. To avoid the truth, they create false beliefs through which they can deal with the situation on their own (dysfunctional) terms.²⁴

Another famous study, which focuses on the extent to which people will comply with those in positions of authority is relevant to our discussion here. In this study, Stanley Milgram (1974) demonstrated that the average person will obey those in positions of authority, even if it means causing severe harm to an innocent person. While Milgram's primary study focused on one authority figure and one “subject,” what is less well known is that Milgram also examined the degree to which group influence might affect subject responses to authority figures. In this study two confederates of the experimenter posed as teachers (teachers 1 and 2), one confederate posed as “learner,” and there was one actual experimental subject—a teacher (teacher 3). Milgram describes the study as follows:

Teacher 1 is told to read the list of word pairs, teacher 2 tells the subject [learner] whether his answer is correct or incorrect, and teacher 3 (the naïve subject) administers punishment. As in the basic experiment, the subjects are instructed to raise the shock level one step each time the learner makes an error. ... The confederates comply with the experimenter's orders through the 150-volt shock, which provokes the victim's first vehement protest. At this point teacher 1 informs

24 See the section on egocentricity and self-deception for a better understanding of this phenomenon.

the experimenter that he does not wish to participate further, because of the learner's complaints. The experimenter insists that teacher 1 continue. However, teacher 1 is not swayed by the experimenter's commands, gets up from his chair in front of the shock generator, and takes a seat in another part of the room ... the experimenter instructs the remaining two subjects to continue with the experiment. ... After shock level 14 (210) volts is administered, teacher 2, expressing concern for the learner, refuses to participate further. ... [he says] "I'm willing to answer any of your questions, but I'm not willing to shock that man against his will. I'll have no part of it." ... At this point the naïve subject is seated alone in front of the shock generator. He has witnessed the defiant actions of two peers. The experimenter orders him to continue, stating that it is essential that the experiment be completed (pp. 116–118).

Unlike the initial Milgram experiment in which the vast majority of subjects went along with the experimenter to the point of believing themselves to be causing severe pain to the learner, “in this group setting, 36 of the 40 subjects defy the experimenter” (p. 118). The question, for our purposes here, is why? Milgram answers for us. “The effects of peer rebellion are very impressive in undercutting the experimenter’s authority.” Consider some of the reasons subjects gave for refusing to proceed with the experiment:

[One] subject [said], “Well, I was already thinking about quitting when the guy broke off.” Most defiant subjects praised the confederates with such statements as, “I thought they were men of good character, yes I do. When the victim said ‘stop,’ they stopped ... I think they were very sympathetic people.” ... A subject who defied the experimenter at level 21 qualified his approval: “Well, I think they should continue a little further, but I don’t blame them for backing out when they did.” ... Four defiant subjects definitely acknowledged the importance of the confederates’ actions to their own defiance: “The thought of stopping didn’t enter my mind until it was put there by the other two.” ... The reason I quit was that I did not wish to seem callous and cruel in the eyes of the other two men who had already refused to go on with the experiment.” ... A majority of defiant subjects, however, denied that the confederates’ action was the critical factor in their own defiance (p. 118–120).

Milgram’s studies, taken together, clearly demonstrate the power of peer influence. Yet in this study, most subjects denied the role of this influence in their decision to stop punishing the “learner.” This disconnect between what is actually happening (subjects are being influenced by the group) and what the subjects think is happening (they are acting in accordance with an autonomous decision) illuminates one of the primary pathological forces in the mind—that people often see themselves as independent thinkers while in fact they are heavily influenced by the actions of others.²⁵ In analyzing the results of the experiment, Milgram offers these helpful suggestions:

²⁵ This paradox is well documented in the studies conducted with children by Jean Piaget and has been explained in the section titled *The Logic of Group Validation* on p. _____.

The peers instill in the subject the idea of defying the experimenter. It may not have occurred to some subjects as a possibility...The reactions of the defiant confederates define the act of shocking the victim as improper. They provide the social confirmation for the subject's suspicion that it is wrong to punish a man against his will...The defiant confederates remain in the laboratory even after withdrawing from the experiment. ... Each additional shock administered by the naïve subject then carries with it a measure of social disapproval from the two confederates (p. 120).

The fact that groups so effectively undermine the experimenter's power reminds us that individuals act as they do for the principal reasons: they carry certain internalized standards of behavior; they are acutely responsive to the sanctions that may be applied to them by authority; and finally, they are responsive to the sanctions potentially applicable to them by the group (p. 120).

Milgram's summing up captures at least three forces that compete for power in the human mind when faced with ethical dilemmas—one's own sense of what is right, what authority figures expect from us, and what the group expects of us.

What we see in this experiment, among other things, is that, when under social pressure to do so, people might well behave in ways that are ethical but—and here is the material point—they will often do this *not because it is the right thing to do but because they want to be perceived as "good" persons by their peers*. In other words, they get something for behaving ethically, namely validation and acceptance. But as our other studies show, people also tend to behave unethically for the same reasons.

We have dealt with a few powerful studies that have implications for our understanding of sociocentric thought. There are countless others. Taken together, these studies illuminate the problems of group control, influence, vested interest, validation, and conformity—all of which lie at the heart of sociocentrism.



Test the Idea

Investigate social studies that illuminate the problem of sociocentric thought. Also beware of studies that purport to show problems in human thought but which in fact illuminate sociocentric bias on the part of the experimenter.

SOCIOCENTRIC USES OF LANGUAGE

Sociocentric thinking is fostered by the way groups use language. Groups rationalize unjust acts and ways of thinking through their use of concepts or ideas and the way they use ideas in language. For example, as Sumner (1906; 1940) points out, sociocentrism can be exemplified by the very names groups choose for themselves and the way they differentiate themselves from groups they consider inferior:


When Caribs were asked whence they came, they answered, "We alone are people." The meaning of the name Kiowa is "real or principal people." The Lapps call themselves "men." Or "human beings." The Greenland Eskimo think that Europeans have been sent to Greenland to learn virtue and good manners from the Greenlanders. ... The Seri of Lower California ... observe an attitude of suspicion and hostility to all outsiders, and strictly forbid marriage with outsiders (p. 14).

In the everyday life of human thought (and thus sociocentric thought), we can find many group-serving uses of language that obscure unethical behavior. When Europeans first inhabited the Americas, they forced native peoples into slavery, tortured and murdered them, all in the name of "progress and civilization." By thinking of natives as "savages," they could readily justify the inhumane treatment of these people. At the same time, by thinking of themselves as "civilized," they could see themselves as bringing something valuable to the "savages," namely "civilization." In short, the terms "progress," "savagery," "civilization," and "the true religion" were used as vehicles to gain material wealth and property through the exploitation of native people.

Sumner notes that the language used by social groups is often constructed to ensure that they maintain a special, superior place:

The Jews divided all mankind into themselves and the Gentiles. They were "chosen people." The Greeks called outsiders "barbarians." ... The Arabs regarded themselves as the noblest nation and all others as more or less barbarous. ... In 1896, the Chinese minister of education and his counselors edited a manual in which this statement occurs: "How grand and glorious is the Empire of China, the middle Kingdom! ... The grandest men in the world have come from the middle empire." ... In all the literature of all the states equivalent statements occur. ... In Russian books and newspapers the civilizing mission of Russia is talked about, just as, in the books and journals of France, Germany, and the United States, the civilizing mission of those countries is assumed and referred to as well understood. Each state now regards itself as the leader of civilization, the best, the freest and the wisest, and all others as their inferior (p. 14).

In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) reinforces this view:

Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself. If three travelers chance to occupy the same compartment, that is enough to make vaguely hostile “others” out of all the rest of the passengers on the train. In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are “strangers” and suspect; to the native of a country all who inhabit other countries are “foreigners”; Jews are “different” for the anti-Semite, Negroes are “inferior” for American racists, aborigines are “natives” for colonists, proletarians are the “lower class” for the privileged (pp. xix-.

In the United States, the typical use of expressions such as “advancing the cause of freedom,” “spreading democracy across the world,” “standing up for the American flag” and “bringing civilization to developing countries” all exemplify the manipulative use of language to serve the interests of the country when they are intended (as is often the case) to mask what is really happening—taking over another country, seizing precious resources to serve our interests, supporting oppressive secret military forces, sending in the CIA to foil free elections or declaring war on innocent peoples.

To exemplify this point, consider the Vietnam War. Prior to the war, the U.S. government supported the occupation of Vietnam by the French and in fact was financing 80 percent of the French war effort. To the public (Zinn, 1980; 2006), U.S. officials said we were helping stop the spread of communism in Asia. A secret memo of the National Security Council of June 1952 shows that the main concern of U.S. officials was advancing the financial interests of the United States in Asia (specifically so we could get our hands on petroleum, rubber, tin and other commodities.) According to Zinn, in 1963, President Kennedy’s undersecretary of State, in speaking before the Economic Club of Detroit, said:

What is the attraction that Southeast Asia has exerted for centuries on the great powers flanking it on all sides? Why is it desirable, and why is it important? First, it provides a lush climate, fertile soil, rich natural resources ... The countries of Southeast Asia produce rich exportable surpluses such as rice, rubber, teak, corn, tin, spices, oil, and many others (p. 475).

But President Kennedy used very different language in explaining to the American people why we needed war in Vietnam. Zinn says, “He talked of Communism and freedom. In a news conference February 14, 1962, he said ‘... the U.S. for more than a decade has been assisting the government, the people of Vietnam, to maintain their independence’” (p. 475).

According to Zinn, in 1964, President Johnson:

... used a murky set of events in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of North Vietnam, to launch a full-scale war on Vietnam. Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara told the American public there was an attack by North Vietnamese

torpedo boats on American destroyers. “While on routine patrol in international waters,” McNamara said, “the U.S. destroyer Maddox underwent an unprovoked attack.” It later turned out that the Gulf of Tonkin episode was a fake, that the highest American officials had lied to the public—just as they had in the invasion of Cuba under Kennedy (pp. 475–476).

A little more than 58,000 U.S. soldiers died in the Vietnam War. No one knows how many Vietnamese died, but estimates are as high as 3 million or more, most of them civilians. According to Bertrand Russell in *War Crimes in Vietnam*, (1967, p. 50), in November 23, 1962, the *New York Herald Tribune* stated:

The United States is deeply involved in the biggest secret war in its history. Never have so many U.S. military men been involved in a combat area without any formal program to inform the public about what is happening. It is a war fought without official public reports or with reports on the number of troops involved or the amount of money and equipment poured in.

For further support of the fact that the U.S. government has throughout its history often manipulated the American people through misuse of language, consider the U.S. support of the brutal Pinochet administration in Chile, the United States supported overthrow of the government in Nicaragua in 1979 (facilitated by the CIA), and the U.S. war in Iraq, among many other examples.²⁶



Test the Idea

Go to a large online bookstore and see if you can find books that identify ways in which your government has manipulated citizens through misuse of language. Read a few of these books and find examples in them that illuminate this problem.

Also look in the news on a daily basis for examples of people using language to manipulate people.

THE MIND NATURALLY GENERATES CONCEPTS AND PERSPECTIVES THAT SERVE ITS INTERESTS

To understand the mind (and thus to be able to intervene in it) is to understand the most fundamental ways in which it works. One of these ways is that humans fundamentally live in their ideas, in their conceptualizations of things. We naturally place things in categories to understand them. We categorize the material things we use or need to refer to on a daily basis—things like chairs and tables and ink pens and windows. This ability to classify things in our world is essential to our

²⁶ To learn more about the secret work of the U.S. government, see the following books by Phillip Agee: *Inside the Company: CIA Diary*; *Dirty Work: The CIA in Western Europe*; *Dirty Work 2: The CIA in Africa*; and *On the Run*. Also see the political writings of Noam Chomsky and back copies of *Covert Action Quarterly* (if you can find them). And see: “allegations of state terrorism” in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegations_of_state_terrorism_committed_by_the_United_States.

ability to communicate with one another. Because we can do this, for example, we can read and understand words and what they are referring to. We can give and receive directions, we can order food at a restaurant, and so on.

But things become more complex when we conceptualize immaterial objects or abstract realities. To discuss the concept of a chair, for instance, is very different from discussing the concept of democracy, love, freedom, or justice.

Further, humans often *create* ideas to fit their agendas. We often distort ideas in accordance with what serves our interests, what gets us what we want, what keeps us from having to change, what leads to getting more for ourselves or the groups with which we identify. In short, we often conceptualize things to advance our egocentric or sociocentric interests.

In fact, this distorted way of conceptualizing reality seems the natural state of the human mind. The way we define love, for example, is often egocentric in orientation. It is focused on what we will get from other persons who “love” us, on whether and to what extent they will make us feel good, do things for us, give us things, stroke our ego. In short, we generally think more about *what others will do for us* in a “loving” relationship than what we can or will do for them. This concept of love, of course, is largely unconscious in the mind. We would never state these truths to others, nor even to ourselves. Nevertheless our behavior often implies it. This way of thinking about love *keeps us trapped in a definition of love* that we replay whenever things are not working in our relationship. It defines how we interpret our partner’s behavior with respect to us. For example, when this is the way we think of love, when this is our *concept* of love, then whenever our partner doesn’t agree with us, we decide the relationship isn’t working. When our partner doesn’t make us feel good or give us what we want, the relationship seems to be failing. These are natural implications of our distorted or false conception of “love.” And this conception of love is largely shared in many human societies.

This is only one example of the thousands of concepts—and, accordingly, the multitude of belief systems—the human mind creates that cause problems for us and for others.



Test the Idea

Think of a concept you use in your thinking to get something you want for yourself. Use my example of “love” as a model for your thinking. Look for an idea that you distort in order to get something you couldn’t justify in your own mind unless you distorted it. Another example might be “reasonable use of power.” If you think of this as justifying asking people to do things (or making them do things) that are contrary to their interest, this would not be a “reasonable use of power.” This form of rationalization is commonly seen in cultures where some people have inordinate power over others and, when group sanctioned, exemplifies sociocentric control.

Because we are born with powerful egocentric and sociocentric predispositions, the ideas, concepts and theories generated by the mind are largely driven by these innate tendencies. For example, to a large extent, humans gravitate toward that which is easy and undemanding and to avoid that which is difficult and demanding. We want life to be easy and free from complications and complexities. This is how we tend to *conceptualize* life. Consequently we seek that which is effortless and pain free. We avoid that which is demanding or trying to the mind. Likewise, as has already been dealt with in some detail, we have the instinctual “need” to be validated by others. Without this validation, we tend to believe that something is inherently wrong with us. Our self-esteem suffers. Concepts such as these, and many others, created by our minds, keep us trapped in dysfunctional ways of thinking.

SOCIOCENTRIC LENSES DISTORT THE WAY WE SEE THINGS

Most of the important concepts people use in their thinking have been heavily influenced by both the groups they have been thrust into and those they have chosen to join.



Test the Idea

Make a list of concepts you use every day in your thinking—concepts such as parenting, marriage, work, nutrition, health, love, democracy, justice, freedom, sexuality, or any important idea you use. Then briefly write out your understanding of that concept. In doing so, see if you can identify how your culture (or any group within the culture) has influenced the way you define the idea. For example, how do you define parenting? What has influenced the way you see parenting? What might be questionable about your concept of parenting? What part of your concept of parenting have you actively chosen? What part have you uncritically accepted?

To understand how concepts are used and created in human thought, think of the mind as creating lenses through which we see the world. These lenses develop over a lifetime in each of us. They are, in essence, all the ideas we have created in our minds throughout our lives. If we could examine these lenses, we would find in them a mixture of sound and unsound ideas, logical and illogical, just and unjust. *But all appear to the mind as perfectly reasonable.* It is through these lenses that we give meaning to our world, that we define things, that we determine whether to accept or reject ideas, practices, values, viewpoints, and so on. The way one sees parenting might result from a combination of the way one’s parents parented, the way one’s spouse parents, the way some particular “authorities” on parenting suggest that one should parent, the ways most encouraged in the

culture, and so forth. Each of these represents a set of “lenses” through which we see parenting. None of them ensures, in and of themselves, high-quality parenting.

Many, if not most, of these lenses come from the groups in which we have been and are members. A large number of these lenses are *sociocentric* in orientation. They are unconscious internalizations of false beliefs and values resulting from group membership that unconsciously prejudice how we think. There may be layer upon layer of social ideologies in any given human mind that affect one’s perspectives, layers upon layers of lenses through which one looks at the world. Many of these layers have been handed down through human societies for hundreds of years or more. Until we make them explicit in the mind, we can’t examine them. We can’t see them as they are. Instead we see everything through them.

In *Critical Reasoning and History* (1992), Richard Talaska illuminates this problem. He says:

The foundational values of a culture or society are not determined by reasoning but are merely handed down from some time in the distant past and assumed to be the correct ones. The origins of such values, and the values themselves, remain unquestioned. The nomoi (Greek term for cultural norms) operate at the most basic, nonreflective, emotional level...[They] are not themselves scrutinized for their validity but all else is scrutinized through them. So basic are the nomoi that it is rare, even in a society of many highly educated individuals, for such opinions to be questioned. ... Such ruling opinions ... are so basic that they are, as it were, no longer seen themselves, but that through which everything else is seen (pp. 251–252).

Consider for example mainstream views on sexuality in many cultures today. Such views tend to be highly Puritanical. By Puritanical, I mean that people tend to apply any number of arbitrary rules to sexuality, rules originally connected with religious beliefs but which have become part of mainstream culture. For instance, girls who like to have sex with different men are often referred to as “whores” in a Puritanical society; people who like to be nude outdoors are considered perverted, likely, for instance to cause sexual arousal in those who see them nude (which is, by implication, considered “bad”); certain sexual acts are considered nasty and dirty, acts such as anal sex; certain sexual orientations are considered dysfunctional, such as homosexuality, and so on.

Puritanical roots are so deeply embedded in cultural rules and taboos that even the most liberally minded, the most highly educated people, the most otherwise insightful people, often tacitly base many of their sexual views on Puritanism (though they themselves have no idea this is the case). Accordingly they are not sexually free persons. Rather they are born into cultures that impose these parochial ideologies on them.

If people want to think critically about sexuality, they must first strip away their old ideas on sexuality and begin again, with bedrock. This is very difficult, if not impossible, to do; people don’t easily give up ingrained beliefs and take on new

ones. Instead they have to actively and deliberately discard old ideas, a process to which the mind is intrinsically averse. We would “rather” see new ideas through the lenses of our already “established” ideas.

Thus, if I have been raised within a Puritanical culture and want to think openmindedly about sexuality, it may be very difficult for me to do so, since the Puritanical lenses may always be there to some degree, deeply rooted in my thinking. The way many people in American culture view open marriage, for instance, is through a Puritanical lens. People are often appalled at the very idea of it, not because there is anything inherently unethical about it (because there isn’t), but merely because they have been raised in a culture that defines marriage in terms of monogamy. Thus, these people have uncritically accepted a narrow definition of marriage. As far as they are concerned it simply isn’t something you question.²⁷ If pressed, most people would have to admit they have never thought deeply about it. They just “know” it is wrong. If called upon to fairmindedly consider the pros and cons of open marriage, they would likely be unable to look at it through anything but a distorted lens, through received conventions—not openmindedly but through preconceived notions. Accordingly, in terms of this issue at least, they are not free-thinking persons. Instead they are trapped in sexual rules, conventions, and taboos.



Test the Idea

To what extent is your view of sexuality taken from the groups you have been a member of? List all the groups that you realize have influenced your view of sexuality. How has your view been shaped by these different groups? If a parent heavily influenced your view of sexuality, what groups might have influenced her or him? How do you think of marriage in terms of sexuality? How might a healthy open marriage work, or could it work? To what extent has your culture’s view of sexuality changed over time? Is it more healthy than it was 100 years ago, less healthy, or a mix? How are you defining “healthy sexuality,” and where are you getting your conception of it?

To get beyond Puritanical views of sexuality, we can’t necessarily trust our culture for guidance, for it may well assume Puritanical beliefs to be correct and good. We can’t trust our friends for guidance, as they have likely been indoctrinated into the same belief system. We can’t trust the professions (like social work, psychology, psychiatry, medicine, and the like) for guidance; they are likely to be as entrenched in tacit social ideologies as those outside the professions. Instead, we must take a historical view of sexuality. We should look at it in the broadest possible light. We should see it as a healthy part of our biological makeup. We should be open to healthy sexual possibilities.

²⁷ Though a large percentage of people engage in sex outside of marriage, they tend to do so surreptitiously. This isn’t compatible with the concept of open marriage in which the parties agree to explore, in agreed-upon terms, sexual relations that go beyond marital sex.

In sum, we tend to see things through our society's implicit, unconscious, given view, which is quite often warped. (The fact that people have difficulty seeing this, and exemplifying it themselves, rather supports the point.) We naturally see our group's views as the "correct" ones, though we haven't examined them. And these views function as distorting lenses through which everything is interpreted and understood.

PEOPLE OFTEN HAVE TROUBLE SEEING THROUGH IDEOLOGICAL USES OF WORDS

Since people are usually unaware of the fact that their concepts guide their interpretations of reality, they do not have command of the words they use, nor are they aware of how these words influence their thinking. Consequently they often have trouble differentiating between ideological and nonideological uses of words. Thus they are unable to use words like these in a nonloaded way: capitalism, socialism, communism, democracy, oligarchy, plutocracy, patriotism, freedom, liberty, terrorism, nationalism. When these words are used ideologically, their root meanings are often lost or distorted. The words are used to put a positive or negative gloss on events, obscuring what is really going on. Hence, in countries where the reigning ideology extols capitalism, diverging political systems like socialism and communism are demonized; democracy is equated with capitalism, and plutocratic realities are ignored. In countries where the reigning ideology is communism, the ideology of capitalism is demonized. Democracy is equated with capitalism, and oligarchic realities are ignored. The groups called "terrorist" or insurgent by the one are called patriots and freedom-fighters by the other.

If we examine the core meanings of these words and use them in keeping with the core meanings they have in the English language, we may more easily recognize contradictions and inconsistencies in their common use. We may more easily notice when any group misuses them to advance its agenda. Let us review the core meanings of these terms as defined by *Webster's New World Dictionary*:

- **capitalism**: an economic system in which all or most of the means of production and distribution, such as land, factories, railroads, etc., are privately owned and operated for profit, originally under fully competitive conditions; it has generally been characterized by a tendency toward concentration of wealth.
- **socialism**: any of the various theories or systems of the ownership and operation of the means of production and distribution by society or the community rather than by private individuals, with all members of society or the community sharing in the work and the products.
- **communism**: any economic theory or system based on the ownership of all property by the community as a whole.
- **democracy**: government in which the people hold the ruling power, either directly or through elected representatives; rule by the ruled.

- **oligarchy:** a form of government in which the ruling power belongs to a few persons.
- **plutocracy:** (1) government by the wealthy, (2) a group of wealthy people who control or influence a government.
- **patriotism:** love and loyal or zealous support of one's own country.
- **terrorism:** use of force or threats to demoralize, intimidate, and subjugate—especially such use as a political weapon or policy.

To this day, countries in which the reigning ideology is capitalism tend to use the words *socialism* and *communism* as if they meant “a system that discourages individual incentive and denies freedom to the majority of people.” Countries in which the reigning ideology is socialism or communism, in their turn, tend to use the word *capitalism* to imply the exploitation of the majority by the wealthy few. Both see the use of force of the other as *aggressive* in intent. Both tend to ignore their own inconsistencies and hypocrisy. Neither see the sociocentric, “our group is better than your group,” belief structure guiding their distortions of these terms.

We begin to gain command of our minds when we begin to see our egocentric and sociocentric tendencies at work in the creation of our concepts, when we begin to see these forces guiding the way we see things and the way we behave in everyday life situations.



Test the Idea

Be on the lookout for groups using words in ways that serve their interests, but which violate or negate educated uses of those words. A good place to look is in news articles. Identify the words being used and the reasons such words are used. What might the group gain through this use of language? What do their words really mean (as compared with what they want the reader to think they mean)?

SOCIOCENTRIC COUNTERFEITS OF ETHICAL REASONING²⁸

We have touched on ethics in numerous places thus far. But let us now deal with it more directly. The proper role of ethical reasoning is to highlight acts of two kinds: those that enhance the well-being of others—acts that warrant our praise—and those that harm or diminish the well-being of others—and thus warrant our criticism. The ultimate basis for ethics is clear: Human behavior has consequences for the welfare of others. We are capable of acting toward others in such a way as to increase or decrease the quality of their lives. We are capable of helping or harming. What is more, we are theoretically capable of recognizing when we are doing one or the other. This is so because we have the capacity to put ourselves imaginatively in the place of others and recognize how we would be affected if someone were to act toward us as we are acting toward others.

It is essential to understand the importance of ethical reasoning in human life and the importance of ethics in countering the problem of sociocentric thought. Fairminded thinkers routinely distinguish ethics from other domains of thinking with which it is often confused, domains such as social conventions, religion, theology, politics, and the law. It is not uncommon, for example, for variant and conflicting social values and taboos to be treated as if they were universal ethical principles.

Thus, religious ideologies, social “rules,” and laws, which are often sociocentric in nature, are frequently mistakenly taken to be ethical in nature. If we accepted this amalgamation of domains, by implication every practice within any religious system, every social rule, and every law would be ethically justified.

If religion were to define ethics, we could not then judge any religious practices (e.g., torturing unbelievers or burning them alive) to be unethical. In the same way, if ethical and conventional thinking were one and the same, every social practice within any culture would necessarily be ethically obligatory—including social conventions in Nazi Germany. We could not, then, condemn any social traditions, norms, and taboos from an ethical standpoint—however ethically bankrupt they were. What’s more, if the law were to define ethics, then by implication politicians and lawyers would be experts in ethics and every law they finagled to get on the books would take on the status of an ethical truth.

We must remain free to critique commonly accepted social conventions, religious practices, political ideas, and laws (using ethical concepts not defined by

²⁸ For a deeper understanding of ethics, see Paul, R., and Elder L. (2006). *Understanding the Foundations of Ethical Reasoning*. Dillon Beach: Foundation for Critical Thinking Press.

them). No one lacking this ability can become proficient in ethical reasoning. Let us consider each of these domains from this perspective.

ETHICS SHOULD BE DISTINGUISHED FROM RELIGION

Religious variability derives from the fact that theological beliefs are intrinsically subject to debate. There are an unlimited number of alternative ways for people to conceive and account for the nature of the “spiritual.” The *Encyclopedia Americana*, for example, lists more than 300 different religious belief systems. These traditional ways of believing that are adopted by social groups or cultures typically take on the force of habit and custom. They are then handed down from one generation to another. To the individuals in any given group, their particular beliefs seem to them to be the only way, or the only reasonable way, to conceive of the “divine.” They cannot see that their religious beliefs are just one set among many tendentious religious belief systems.

Theological reasoning answers metaphysical questions such as:

- What is the origin of all things?
- Is there a God?
- Is there more than one God?
- If there is a God, what is his/her nature?
- Are there ordained divine laws expressed by God to guide our life and behavior?
- If so, what are these laws?
- How are they communicated to us?
- What must we do to live in keeping with the will of the divine?

Following are some examples of how religious beliefs become confused with ethical principles:

- Members of majority religious groups often enforce their beliefs on minorities.
- Members of religious groups often act as if their theological views are self-evidently true, scorning those who hold other views.
- Members of religious groups often fail to recognize that “sin” is a theological concept, not an ethical one. (“Sin” is theologically defined.)
- Divergent religions define sin in different ways (but often expect their views to be enforced on all others as if a matter of universal ethics).

Religious beliefs, when dominant in a human group, tend to shape many, if not all, aspects of a person’s life—with rules, requirements, taboos, and rituals. Most of these regulations are neither right nor wrong, ethically speaking, but simply represent social preferences and culturally subjective choices.

It is every person’s human right to choose his or her own religious orientation, including that of agnosticism or atheism. That is why there is a provision in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights concerning the right to change one’s religious beliefs:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief...” (Article 18).

Beliefs about divinity and spirituality are notoriously divergent and should therefore be noncompulsory. There is no definitive way to prove any one set of religious beliefs to the exclusion of all others. For that reason, religious freedom is a human right. One can objectively prove that murder and assault are harmful to persons, but not that nonbelief in God is.

That ethical judgment must trump religious belief is shown by the undeniable fact that many persons have been tortured and/or murdered by people motivated by religious zeal or conviction. Indeed religious persecution is commonplace in human history. Humans need recourse to ethics in defending themselves against religious intolerance and persecution.

Consider this example: If a religious group were to believe that the firstborn male of every family must be sacrificed, every person in that group would think themselves ethically obligated to kill their firstborn male. Their religious beliefs would lead them to unethical behavior and lessen their capacity to understand the cruel nature of their acts.

Or consider this: according to the *Press Democrat* (April 20, 2011), “a senior Iranian cleric says women who wear immodest clothing and behave promiscuously are to blame for earthquakes.” Hojatoleslam Kazem Sedighi, Tehran’s acting Friday prayer leader, said “Many women who do not dress modestly...lead young men astray, corrupt their chastity and spread adultery in society, which (consequently) increases earthquakes.” Those who accepted this view as based in ethics would require women to dress in accordance with a particular religious code and would blame women who refused to dress in this way, as this cleric has done, for causing earthquakes. Hmmm.

Furthermore, a society must be deemed unethical if it accepts among its religious practices any form of slavery, torture, sexism, racism, persecution, murder, assault, fraud, deceit, or intimidation. Remember, atrocities have often been committed in the name of God. Even to this day, religious persecution and religiously motivated atrocities are commonplace. *No religious belief as such can justify overriding basic human rights.*

In short, theological beliefs cannot override ethical principles. We must turn to ethical principles to protect ourselves from intolerant and oppressive religious practices.



Test the Idea

Look at the list of examples of religious beliefs being confused with ethical principles in the section above. See if you can add to this list with your own examples.

ETHICS SHOULD BE DISTINGUISHED FROM POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

A political ideology provides an analysis of the present distribution of wealth and power and devises strategies in keeping with that analysis. It provides either a “justification” of the present structure of power or a “critique.” It seeks either to protect and maintain the way things are or to change them. It seeks to change things in small ways or in big ways. It compares the present to the past and both to a future it projects.

Conservative ideologies, at least in many twenty-first-century societies, “justify” the status quo or seek a return to a previous “ideal” time. Liberal ideologies critique the status quo and seek to justify “new” forms of political arrangements designed to rectify present problems. Reactionary ideologies plead for a “radical” return to the past; revolutionary ideologies plead for a “radical” overturning of the fundamental (“corrupt”) structures. Conservative ideologies tend to consider the highest values to be private property, family, God, country and responsibility for self. Liberal ideologies consider the highest values to be liberty, equality, social justice, and responsibility for the disadvantaged. Of course, conservative and liberal ideologies occur on a continuum and thus we often see a blending of these viewpoints for those who lean towards the middle of the continuum.

Ideological analyses have highly significant ethical implications. Put into action they often have profound effects on the well being of people. What is more, the ideologies officially espoused by politicians are often widely different from the personal ends they pursue. Virtually all political ideologies speak in the name of the “people.” Yet most politicians are committed to powerful vested interest groups who fund their election campaigns. The same people often end up ruling, independent of the “official” ideology. Thus, in the post-Soviet power structure, many of those who were formerly powerful in the communist party are now among the most prominent and acquisitive neo-capitalists.

In short it appears that politicians rarely act for ethical reasons. Struggling against each other for power and control, political movements and interests often sacrifice ethical ideals for practical advantage. They often rationalize unethical acts as unavoidable necessities (“forced on them” by their opponents). And they frequently use propaganda to further vested interest agendas.



Test the Idea

Identify examples of politicians speaking and acting as if they are concerned with the welfare of the people when in fact there is strong evidence to suggest that they are instead primarily concerned with advancing the agendas of special interest groups with which they are connected.

ETHICS SHOULD BE DISTINGUISHED FROM THE LAW

Anyone interested in developing their ethical reasoning abilities should be able to differentiate ethics and the law. What is illegal may or may not be a matter of ethics. What is ethically obligatory may be illegal. What is unethical may be legal. There is no essential connection between ethics and the law.

Laws often emerge out of social conventions and taboos. And, because we cannot assume that social conventions are ethical, we cannot assume that human laws are ethical. What is more, most laws are ultimately made by politicians, who routinely confuse social values with ethical principles. Again, their primary motivation is (except in special cases) power, vested interest or expediency. For example, from 1900 through 1930, American politicians, in response to an electorate dominated by fundamentalist religious believers, passed laws which made it illegal for anyone, including doctors, to disseminate any information about birth control. The consequence was predictable: hundreds of thousands of poor and working class women suffered severe injuries or death from the effects of illegal drugs and unsanitary abortions. To “criminalize” violations of social conventions is one of the time-honored ways for politicians to get re-elected.

Examples of Laws Being Confused with Ethics:

- Many sexual practices (such as homosexuality) have been unjustly punished with life imprisonment or death (under the laws of one society or another).
- Many societies have enforced unjust laws based on racist views.
- Many societies have enforced laws that discriminated against women.
- Many societies have enforced laws that discriminated against children.
- Many societies have made torture and/or slavery legal.
- Many societies have enforced laws that arbitrarily punish people for using some drugs but not others.



Test the Idea

Look at the list (above) of examples of laws being confused with ethics. See if you can add to this list with your own examples.

OVERTURNING UNETHICAL LAWS CAN TAKE DECADES OR LONGER

In considering the ethical or unethical nature of laws, let’s look at the issue of child pornography. For many people, this is a very threatening issue. These people experience a strong gut-reaction to viewing child pornography, seeing it as a horrific crime, one that should be severely punished.

And yet, ethically considered, there is nothing that makes it wrong in itself, certainly nothing that makes it worthy of serving time in prison. Jack Weinstein, a federal judge who has come “to be identified by his efforts to combat what he calls ‘the unnecessary cruelty of the law’ (*New York Times*, May 22, 2010),” has gone to extraordinary lengths to challenge the strict punishments connected with the possession of child pornography. The *New York Times* article states, “Last week, the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit vacated a 20-year child pornography sentence by ruling that the sentencing guidelines for such cases, ‘unless applied with great care, can lead to unreasonable sentences.’” The decision noted that the recommended sentences for looking at pictures of children being sexually abused sometimes eclipse those for actually abusing a child.” Judge Weinstein was quoted as saying he does not believe that those who view the images of children, as opposed to those who produce or sell them, present a threat to children. “We’re destroying lives unnecessarily,” he said. Douglas Berman, a professor at Moritz College of Law, Ohio State University, who studies sentencing issues, agrees. He says, “What has caused concern in courts across the nation is that we have a lot of relatively law-abiding individuals sitting in the basement downloading the wrong kind of dirty pictures facing not just prison sentences but incredibly long prison sentences.” According to the *Times* article, supporters of Judge Weinstein, who is 88 years old and has served on the federal bench for 43 years, “praise his taking unusual actions in pursuit of his notions of justice, like for a time refusing to handle drug cases out of opposition to mandatory minimums.”

An interesting summary of a report in *Time* magazine (December 13, 2010) suggests that “making pornography more accessible could lead to a drop in child sex abuse.” The report from the Czech Republic points out that “rates of abuse in that country declined after a ban on sexually explicit material was lifted.” This included child pornography.

Because many people assume that viewing photos of nude children and taking illegal drugs lead to criminal behavior (or are criminal in themselves), legalizing behaviors such as these is an uphill battle. Thus to stand against the majority on these issues takes a degree of intellectual courage and autonomy rarely found among leaders in today’s societies.



Test the Idea

Make a list of the laws in your country that you believe are unethical, or for which you think the prison sentences are too harsh. Take a look at this and related books: *Ain’t Nobody’s Business If You Do: The Absurdity of Consensual Crimes in Our Free Country* by Peter McWilliams. See if it adds to your understanding of this problem.

ETHICS SHOULD BE DISTINGUISHED FROM SOCIAL CONVENTIONS

It should be clear by now that humans are, in the first instance, socially conditioned. Consequently, we do not begin with the ability to critique social norms and taboos. Unless we learn to critique the social mores and taboos imposed upon us from birth, we will most likely accept those traditions as “right.”

Consider the history of the United States. For more than a hundred years most Americans considered slavery to be justified and desirable. It was part of this country’s social custom. Moreover, throughout history, many groups of people, including people of various nationalities and skin colors, as well as females, children, and individuals with disabilities, have been victims of discrimination as the result of social convention treated as ethical obligation. Yet all social practices that violate human rights should be rejected—and have been rejected by ethically sensitive, reasonable persons, no matter what social conventions support those practices.

Socially or Culturally Variant Practices

Cultural diversity derives from the fact that there are an unlimited number of alternative ways for social groups to satisfy their needs and fulfill their desires. Those traditional ways of living within a social group or culture take on the force of habit and custom. They are handed down from one generation to another. To the individuals in a given group they seem to be the *only* way, or the *only reasonable* way, to do things. These social customs sometimes have ethical implications. Social habits and customs answer questions such as:

- How should marriage take place? Who should be allowed to marry, under what conditions, and with what ritual or ceremony? Once married what role should the male play? What role should the female play? Are multiple marriage partners possible? Is divorce permissible? Under what conditions?
- Who should care for the children? What should they teach the children as to proper and improper ways to act? When children do not act as they are expected to act, how should they be treated?
- When should children be accepted as adults? When should they be considered old enough to be married? Whom should they be allowed to marry?
- When children develop sensual and sexual desires, how should they be allowed to act? With whom, if anyone, should they be allowed to engage in sexual exploration and discovery? What sexual acts are considered acceptable and wholesome? What sexual acts are considered perverted or sinful?
- How should men and women dress? To what degree should their body be exposed in public? How is nudity treated? How are those who violate these codes treated?

- How should food be obtained and how should it be prepared? Who is responsible for obtaining food? Who for preparing it? How should it be served? How eaten?
- What individuals or groups will hold power in the society? What belief system is used to justify the distribution of goods and services and the way rituals and practices are carried out?
- If the society develops enemies or is threatened from without, how will it deal with those threats? How will it defend itself? How does the society engage in war, or does it?
- What sorts of games, sports, or amusements will be practiced in the society? Who is allowed to engage in them?
- What religions are taught or allowable within the society? Who is allowed to participate in the religious rituals or to interpret divine or spiritual teachings to the group?
- How are grievances settled in the society? Who decides who is right and who is wrong? How are violators treated?

Schools traditionally function as apologists for conventional thought; those who teach often inadvertently foster confusion between convention and ethical principle because they themselves have internalized the conventions of society. Education, properly so called, should foster the intellectual skills that enable students to distinguish between cultural mores and ethical precepts, between social commandments and ethical truths. In each case, when social beliefs and taboos conflict with ethical principles, ethical principles should prevail.

Examples of Social Conventions Being Confused With Ethics:

- Many societies have created taboos against showing various parts of the body and have severely punished those who violated such taboos.
- Many societies have created taboos against giving women the same rights as men.
- Many societies have socially legitimized religious persecution.
- Many societies have socially stigmatized interracial marriages.

These practices seem (wrongly) to be ethically obligatory to those indoctrinated into accepting them.



Test the Idea

Look at the above list of examples of social conventions that are confused with ethics. Add to this list your own examples. See how specific you can be.

TABOOS ARE PREVALENT IN HUMAN SOCIETIES

The term “taboo” is now widely used throughout human cultures to mean that which is prohibited in accordance with social customs. Taboos may or may not be connected with ethics, though the term is more often used in reference to behaviors forbidden by arbitrary social rules.

Social taboos are often connected with strong emotions. People are often disgusted when others violate a taboo. Their disgust signals to them that the behavior is unethical. They forget that what is socially repugnant to us may not violate any ethical principle but, instead, may merely reflect deep indoctrination into arbitrary social ideologies. Social doctrines regarding human sexuality are often classic examples of conventions expressed as if they were ethical truths. Social groups often establish strong sanctions for unconventional behavior involving the human body. Some social groups inflict unjust punishments on women who do no more than appear in public without being completely veiled, an act considered in some cultures to be indecent and sexually provocative. Sexual behaviors should be considered unethical only when they result in unequivocal harm or damage (or when they are intended to cause harm).

Taboos are so much a part of human societies, so entrenched in our worldviews as humans, so deeply embedded in our collective psyches that most people have no notion of how pervasively these taboos affect human thought and action. Humans are so accustomed to uncritically adhering to prescribed rules and admonishments, from such a young age, that they fail to notice even the most significant, the most absurd, the most dangerous taboos.

Because people take them for granted, taboos tend to operate at the unconscious level. The majority of people assume them to be reasonable; thus, rarely are they questioned. Certainly, when brought to their attention, people tend to recognize and even find amusing some of the more trivial taboo violations—like facing away from the door in the elevator when everyone else is facing forward, or skipping rather than walking in the office. But when confronted with more substantial taboos, people tend to become uncomfortable, threatened, even hostile. This is of course natural, given the many ways in which societies indoctrinate people into an uncritical acceptance of taboos.

All reasonable persons would agree that unethical behaviors should be avoided in human societies. But as has been mentioned, when people routinely confuse ethics with social rules and conventions, many behaviors will seem unethical that are in fact merely socially unacceptable. When people uncritically accept the norms, traditions, and taboos of the culture, when they are taught that to question social rules is disloyal and unpatriotic, they have difficulty distinguishing between practices that should be avoided (because they actually violate the rights of others) and practices that should be allowed and even encouraged (because they

don't violate anyone's rights and may even help someone). To identify taboos in a culture, one might ask:

What are some behaviors, forbidden in this culture, that do not in and of themselves cause harm? In other words, what are some behaviors people are not allowed to engage in, but which do not actually cause harm to someone else?

Due to the prohibited nature of taboos, to even speak of or write about the most significant ones might get one into trouble, even in many so-called democracies that tout the importance of freedom of speech. It should be noted that even in universities, open discussion of taboos is often taboo. In an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (December 11, 2009), Donald Livingston, a political philosopher at Emory University, is quoted as saying, "The university should be the place where the unthinkable can be thought and the unspeakable said as long as it is backed by civil conduct and argument. It is not that today."

If we go back in time, we can identify taboos less likely to "offend" than current day taboos *if* they are no longer taboos or are less powerful as taboos in the culture. Consider the following taboo having to do with the roots of virginity (Sumner, 1906; 1940):

In the development of the father family, fathers restricted daughters in order to make them more valuable as wives. Here comes in the notion of virginity and pre-nuptial chastity. This is really a negative and exclusive notion. It is an appeal to masculine vanity, and is a singular extension of the monopoly principle. His wife is to be his from the cradle, when he did not know her. Here, then, is a new basis for the sex honor of women and the jealousy of men. Chastity for the unmarried meant—no one; for the married—none but the husband. The mores extended to take in this doctrine, and it has passed into the heart of mores of all civilized peoples, to whom it seems axiomatic or "natural" (p. 359).

In illustrating the arbitrary nature of dress and customs in human societies, and taboos that become connected with them, Sumner gives these examples, among hundreds of others:

The dresses of Moslem women, nuns, and Quaker women were invented in order to get rid of any possible question of decency. The attempt fails entirely. A Moslem woman with her veil, a Spanish woman with her mantilla or fan, a Quakeress with her neckerchief, can be as indecent as a barbarian woman with her petticoat of dried grass.

It would be difficult to mention anything in Oriental mores which we regard with such horror as Orientals' feel for low-necked dresses ... Orientals use dress to conceal the contour of the form. The waist of a woman is made to disappear by a girdle. To an Oriental a corset, which increases the waist line and the plasticity of the figure, is the extreme of indecency—far worse than nudity.

Perhaps the most instructive case of all is that of the Tuareg men, who keep the mouth always covered. The cloth has a utilitarian purpose—to prevent thirst. ... A Tuareg would think that he committed an impropriety if he should remove his veil, unless it was in extreme intimacy or for a medical investigation. ... Evidently we have here a case of an ancient fact that men are never seen with the mouth uncovered, which has produced a feeling that a man ought never to be seen with it uncovered.

Ethnographical studies have established the fact that things were first hung on the body as amulets or trophies, that is, for superstition or vanity, and that the body was painted or tattooed for superstition or in play. The notion of ornament followed. ... When all wore things attached to the body a man or woman did not look dressed, or “right,” without such attachments. He or she looked bare or naked. They were ashamed. This is the shame of nakedness.

In some places the Yakuts attach great importance to the rule that young wives should not let their husband’s male relatives see their hair or their feet. In mediaeval Germany a respectable woman thought it a great disgrace if a man saw her naked feet.

The back and navel are sometimes under a special taboo of concealment, especially the navel, which is sacred ... in connection with birth. Peschel quotes private information that a woman in the Philippine Islands put a shirt on a boy in order to cover the navel and nothing more. In her view nothing more needed to be covered. Many peoples regard the navel as of erotic interest.

It is very improper for a Chinese woman who has compressed feet to show them.

An Arab woman, in Egypt, cares more to cover her face than any other part of her body, and she is more careful to cover the top or back of her head than her face (pp. 426–434).

In many places throughout his catalogue of customs, mores, taboos, and traditions, Sumner discusses how taboos can emerge from virtually any custom or practice and proceed in virtually any direction. In focusing on concealment and “decency” taboos, he says, “It appears that if any part of the body is put under a concealment taboo for any reason whatever, a consequence is that the opinion grows up that it ought never to be exposed. Then interest may attach to it more than to exposed parts, and erotic suggestion may be connected with it ... the whole notion of decency is held within boundaries of habit” (p. 435).

Sumner also illuminates behaviors that are considered taboo in many parts of the world today, but which in times past were often norms:

Every well-to-do man of the Bassari, in Togo, has three wives, because children are suckled for three years. This follows from the fact that “in primitive society women are laborers and the industrial system is often such that there is an economic advantage in having a number of women to one man.” In such societies, “women welcome more wives to help do the work and do not quarrel” ... a Spartan who

had a land allotment was forced to marry. His younger brothers lived with him and sometimes were also husbands to his wife. Wives were also lent out of friendship or in order to get vigorous offspring (p. 351).

Many of the examples of taboos uncovered by Sumner more than a century ago seem to us today to border on the bizarre. But we need not look far to find similar examples in current customs and practices. Consider, for example, childhood sexuality. It is well understood among scholars of sexuality that humans are naturally sexual at all ages and that it is not only normal but healthy for children to have sexual thoughts and engage in sexual behavior. Yet, in the United States and in many other countries today, sexual exploration among children is often considered perverted and even dangerous. Children at younger and younger ages are being watched by criminal systems as potential “sexual predators.” Increasing numbers of states include consensual childhood sexuality in their battery of sex “offenses.” These laws emerge out of the fact that sexual activity between and among children and youths is at present taboo in our culture. The harm that follows from this taboo, the punishment and shame attending it, can only be imagined.

Other inhibiting cultural taboos now prevalent (and safe to mention) include public nudity, nude bathing among adults and children, nudity in the home with children present, the use of illegal drugs for recreational purposes, interracial marriage, and marriage between people of widely differing ages.



Test the Idea

If you haven't already answered this question, answer it now: What are some behaviors, forbidden in your culture, which do not in and of themselves cause harm? In other words, what are some behaviors people are not allowed to engage in (taboos), but which do not actually cause harm to someone else?

Be on the lookout for examples in the news.

Thus though conventional “wisdom” sometimes seems to imply that humans are progressing with time, that we are “naturally” becoming more rational, a full view of the evidence doesn't support this notion. Indeed close examination of cultural taboos illuminates the fact that in many ways humans have regressed, not progressed, as thinkers. Some of our sex laws, for instance, are increasingly draconian.

In 1948 the book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, written by Alfred Kinsey and his research colleagues, detailed a magnificent scientific study on sexuality. At the time, this book was more widely known to the public than any other book in the twentieth century (Jones, 1997). It represented a culmination of years of research in which Kinsey set out to understand human sexuality in as

many of its modes and manifestations as possible. For nearly two decades, he and his colleagues interviewed more than 18,000 people to understand the human sexual experience. An entomologist by training, Kinsey was more interested in and impressed by the differences that exist between and among humans (just as he had been when studying other animals) than by their similarities. He hypothesized that normal human sexual activity was widely divergent, a view his study corroborated. In his view, Puritanical ideologies caused untold suffering as a result of crude sexual laws and taboos. He thought that if the public could see that human sexual experience is widely diverse they would become less judgmental about sexuality, more sexually free, and therefore more healthy. He dedicated most of his professional life to understanding sexuality from an unbiased empirical viewpoint and reporting on what he found. In 1953, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* was published, a sequel to the male volume. One of his biographers (Jones, 1997)²⁹ notes:

From the outset of his research, Kinsey correctly divined that Americans were awash in secrets. His research was designed to uncover what people actually thought and did in their private lives. Kinsey was supremely confident that he could shatter the conspiracy of silence that kept intimate matters enshrouded in taboo, and until the last few years of his life he remained optimistic that his discoveries would spell the end of what one reformer called “hush and pretend” (p. xi).

More than a half century after his two studies were published, some taboo sexual behaviors that Kinsey’s studies debunked as actually quite common (such as homosexuality and premarital sex) are no longer considered taboo; other sexual practices are still considered taboo.



Test the Idea

What are some sexual behaviors, forbidden in your culture, which do not in and of themselves cause harm?

Look for examples in news stories.

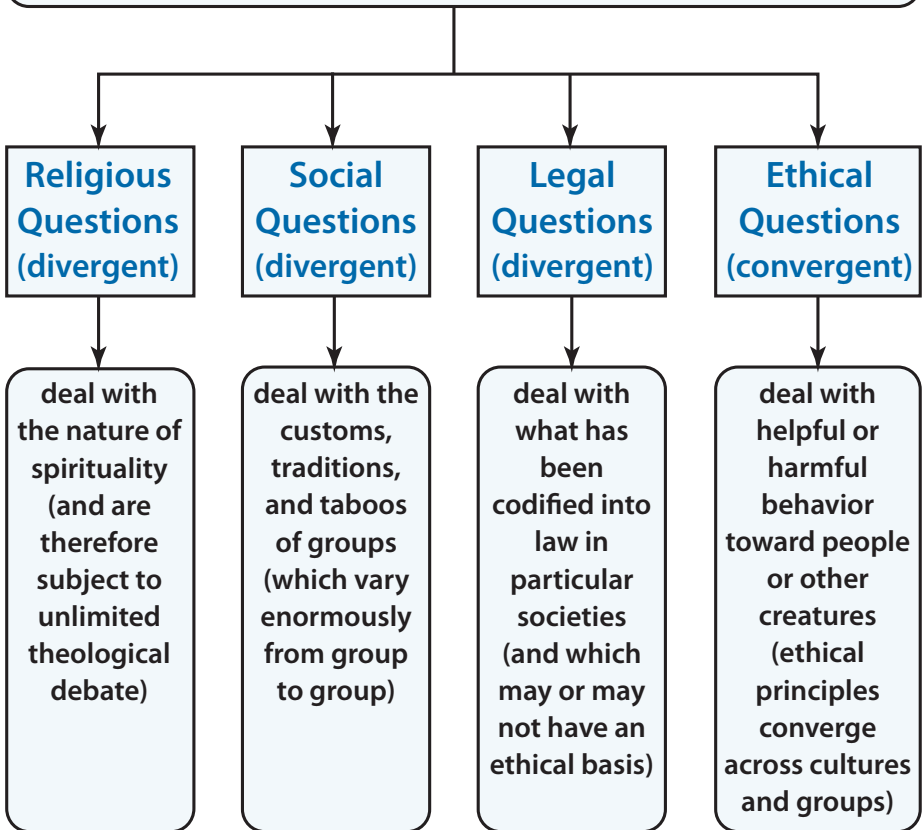
In sum, rules, conventions, and taboos of any particular time period and within any particular culture are just as likely to be arbitrary as not. Because people are indoctrinated into the ideologies of the culture before they have much, if any, developed capacity for critical thought, they naturally take these beliefs to be “correct.”

²⁹ The Jones biography of Kinsey, though replete with interesting details of Kinsey’s life, should be read with caution as it reveals a number of prejudices about sexuality on the part of the biographer. Moreover, the biographer often perceives as “facts” what are merely his inferences.

We Must Learn to Distinguish Among Questions of Ethics, Social Conventions, Religion, and the Law

If we are ever to reach a point in human development where skilled ethical reasoning is the norm, each of us must cultivate in ourselves the ability to determine whether any belief system, practice, rule, or law is ethical. To be skilled in ethical reasoning means to develop a conscience not subservient to fluctuating social conventions, theological systems, or unethical laws. Consistently sound reasoning in any domain of thought presupposes practice in reasoning through cases and issues in that domain. As we face problems in our lives, we must distinguish the ethical from the non-ethical and the pseudo-ethical, and apply ethical principles to those problems that are genuinely ethical in nature.

The more often we do so, the better we become at ethical reasoning.



ACTS THAT ARE UNETHICAL IN AND OF THEMSELVES

For any action to be unethical, it must deny another person or creature some inalienable right. The following classes of acts are unethical in-and-of themselves. Any person or group that violates them is properly criticized from an ethical standpoint:

Slavery: Owning people, whether individually or in groups.

Genocide: Deliberately and systematically killing with the attempt to eliminate a whole nation or an ethnic, political, or cultural group.

Torture: Inflicting severe pain to force information, get revenge or serve some other irrational end.

Sexism: Treating people unequally (and harmfully) in virtue of their gender.

Racism: Treating people unequally (and harmfully) in virtue of their race or ethnicity.

Murder: The pre-meditated killing of people for revenge, pleasure, or to gain advantage for oneself.

Assault: Attacking an innocent person with intent to cause grievous bodily harm.

Rape: Forcing an unwilling person to engage in sexual acts.

Fraud: Intentional deception that causes someone to give up property or some right.

Deceit: Representing something as true one knows to be false in order to gain a selfish end harmful to another.

Intimidation: Forcing a person to act against his or her interest or deter from acting in his or her interest by threats or violence.

Wrongful imprisonment: Putting persons in jail without telling them the charges against them or providing them with a reasonable opportunity to defend themselves; putting persons in jail, or otherwise punishing them, solely for their political or religious views.

SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT IN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

Sociocentric tendencies, surprisingly, are often found in academic professions. It is thus common to find any and all of the problems implicit in sociocentric thought within the professions and within academic departments, subjects, and disciplines. Where people think *collectively*, we are likely to find people vying for power positions, using power over others in unethical ways, pursuing vested interests without regard to the right of others, behaving in subservient ways to those in positions of power, and so on.

The implications of sociocentric thought in the professions can be far reaching and highly significant. Consider the case of Barry Marshall, an Australian doctor who in 1981 traced both ulcers and stomach cancer to a gut infection. This suggested that both might be treatable by antibiotics. For many years, mainstream gastroenterologists dismissed his theory, holding fast to the established view that ulcers were caused by stress. Marshall, who presented his views to the annual meeting of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, said, “To gastroenterologists, the concept of a germ causing ulcers was like saying that the Earth is flat.”³⁰ Marshall tried to get funding for his work from pharmaceutical companies, all of which initially refused him. This is not surprising when these companies were making billions of dollars a year selling Zantac and Tagamet to treat ulcers as consequences of stress. Though the view that ulcers are caused by a bacterial infection is now widely accepted, it took a decade for this view to take root, and then only after Marshall, in desperation, resorted to the surreal to prove his theory. He infected himself with the ulcer-causing bacteria he obtained from one of his patients (to prove the cause of ulcers) and then treated himself with antibiotics (to prove the cure). This example highlights the fact that even highly skilled professionals can fall prey to the phenomenon of groupthink.

To what extent is freedom of speech valued in the professional disciplines? Will professionals stand up for it, or cave in to pressure from vested interest groups? Richard Bove, a bank analyst who writes reports about the banking industry, predicts potential problems given banking practices and ranks banking companies from the riskiest to the least risky. Though he is among the best-known analysts on Wall Street, most of his colleagues deserted him after Bank Atlantic filed a law suit against him for his writings. The *New York Times* (September 12, 2010) reported that “None of the professional associations that represent analysts or the securities industry rallied to his side, and his employer ultimately abandoned him. ... As it turns out ... Mr. Bove’s rankings have proved to be

30 See Interview with Barry Marshall, *Discover Magazine*. March 2010, pp. 66-74.

largely correct.” John C. Coffee Jr., a law professor at Columbia University, “likens Mr. Bove to a news reporter who is sued over an article.” But, he says, the press typically rallies around reporters whose First Amendment rights are challenged, while securities analysts are a much less cohesive group.” He says the stakes are high in a case like this “because a negative outcome could ‘chill free and robust debate. Anyone who is forced to settle in a case like that increases the chances that a combative CEO will sue the next analyst who challenges him.”



Test the Idea

Come up with examples from your own profession or discipline that illuminate the problem of sociocentric thought within it. If you can't think of any, think again.

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY EXEMPLIFY SUBJECTS THAT FOSTER SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT

The social disciplines, such as social work, psychology, and psychiatry, often directly foster sociocentric thought. Consider, for example, the history of psychology in relation to social convention and ideology. For many years the dominant social belief about homosexuality was that it was morally perverted, mentally pathological, and, to most, disgusting. Psychologists and psychiatrists often reinforced this conception. They classified homosexuality as a mental illness and treated it as such. They cooperated in its criminalization. This was true despite historical evidence indicating that many societies have considered homosexuality to be normal and healthy. Much of the misunderstanding of homosexuality resulted from mental health professionals mislabeling it as a mental disease in the nineteenth century. Only after social attitudes toward homosexuality began to be liberalized did psychologists and psychiatrists reconsider their “professional” views.

The manner in which this reconsideration took place is instructive. In 1974 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders. This reclassification came about as a result of a poll taken of the association's general membership. The views of each association member were given equal weight even though most members had done no research on the subject. Imagine a science that determines what is true and what is false by taking polls of its members! This vote was taken some 17 years after a 1957 landmark study was conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles, which concluded that no pathological differences exist between homosexuals and heterosexuals. Despite evidence that homosexuality was not pathological, many psychiatrists still opposed removing it from the official list of mental disorders.

Psychiatrist Lee Coleman (1984) describes the manner in which the official list changed:

What particularly struck many observers was the obviously political rather than scientific basis for the change. Under growing pressure from the homosexual community, the trustees of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) declared, by a majority vote in December 1973, homosexuality to be no longer a mental disorder. So much controversy resulted from this [that] a referendum was called to enable the entire APA membership to vote. Of the total votes cast, 5,854 called for elimination, 3,810 for retention, and 367 abstained (p. 18).

Classification of a sexual practice as pathological is much more than a mere academic distinction. It has far-reaching implications for the well being of millions of people. For example, as late as the 1940s homosexual acts were classified as felonies in all the states, with punishment of up to life in prison. Homosexuals were fired, persecuted, scorned, and physically attacked (and in some cases, killed).

Historically speaking, mental health professionals have frequently supported the criminalization of social behavior merely because it was considered abnormal in a given society. They have more often reflected public opinion than led it.

Awareness of questionable practices in the mental health professions should make us cautious in accepting without question the present dominant views in the field. We should understand that the views of mental health professionals are transitory and will change as political and social attitudes change. Until mental health professionals are taught to see through the social ideologies that influence their practice, they will continue to make decisions based on pseudoscientific conformity.



Test the Idea

See if you can think of additional examples within the social disciplines (psychology, sociology, social work, psychiatry, counseling, and so on) that illuminate how these disciplines sometimes encourage or exhibit sociocentric thought. What are some important implications of these “professional’s” sociocentric beliefs?

PSYCHOLOGY’S DEFINITION OF NORMAL FOSTERS SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT

Social ideology is often confused with objective fact. It is reflected in the failure of the mental health field to ensure that its fundamental evaluative concepts (such as “healthy” and “pathological”) are established by truly independent research and not from the influence of social beliefs. For example, behavior falling outside

the “normal distribution” is often viewed by the mental health professions as “pathological.”

Consider the very definition of “abnormal” as defined by J. P. Chaplin in the *Dictionary of Psychology* (1985). Note that this definition is debatable among clinical practitioners:

... diverging widely from the normal; descriptive of what is considered normative, healthy or psychological from an adjustmental point of view. ... Some authorities have suggested that abnormality be defined in statistical terms—that individuals who fall outside certain limits along the normal probability curve be considered abnormal. ... Others have suggested that normalcy and abnormalcy be defined in terms of cultural standards, thus allowing considerable latitude for cultural relativity. ... In applying such a definition, considerable latitude must be allowed for clinical judgment (pp. 3–4).

Clearly, defining healthy behavior in terms of how most people behave is problematic. Such a position would make mental health vary, not only from culture to culture but from social group to social group as well. It would treat racist and chauvinistic practices as healthy wherever they were socially dominant. There appears to be no good reason to think either that all “normal” behavior is “healthy” or that all “abnormal” behavior is “unhealthy.”

Some critical questions that can help you determine the extent to which sociocentric thought is actively fostered or discouraged within a discipline or profession:

- To what extent is sociocentric thought implicit in this subject or tradition? What concrete examples illuminate sociocentric thinking within the field?
- To what extent are professionals within this field sensitive to social ideologies and the role they may play within the field?
- To what extent does this discipline foster the critique of cultural norms in culture and society?
- How does the field treat critics of social norms?
- How tolerant is the profession of socially diverse, but not ethically harmful, practices?
- What degree of freedom of speech or belief is tolerated in the field?

Concepts Which Imply Sociocentric Thinking or Its Opposite

There are many concepts in ordinary languages that do or may imply sociocentric thinking or its opposite.

A few are highlighted here:

<p>Words that imply acting in accordance with the prevailing standards, attitudes, practices, etc., of a society or a group</p>	<p>Words that imply habitual activity or behavior transmitted from one generation to another</p>
<p>Conformity Subordination Compliance Acquiescence Submission Obedience</p>	<p>Customs Folkways Traditions Etiquette Mores Conventions</p>
<p>Words that imply that certain behaviors are not allowed in a culture or group</p>	<p>Words that imply that certain behaviors are expected in a culture or group</p>
<p>Taboos Ban Prohibit Unauthorized Illicit Illegitimate Forbid</p>	<p>Authorize Authority Allow Disobedient Sanction Society Permit Socialize</p>
<p>Terms that illuminate the <i>problem</i> of groups expecting their members to uncritically accept their views</p>	<p>Phrases that illuminate or characterize the <i>opposite</i> of sociocentric thought</p>
<p>Indoctrinate Brainwash Inculcate Proselytize Instill</p>	<p>Fairminded Critical Societies Rational Societies Reasoned Dissent Dialogical Reasoning Dialectical Reasoning Strong Sense Critical Thinking</p>
<p>Phrases that <i>imply</i> that some groups see themselves as “better” than others</p>	<p>Words or phrases that illuminate the problem of sociocentric thought</p>
<p>Group Conceit Group Self-Glorification Group Favoritism Undue Group Esteem</p>	<p>Chauvinism Ethnocentricity Group Bigotry Group Fanatical Selfishness Patriotism Vested Interest Group Partiality Group Group Allegiance Intolerance Groupthink Groupishness In-group Deception</p>



Test the Idea

Using a good thesaurus, see if you can add words to the categories in the table above.

SOCIOCENTRIC THINKING IS LINKED WITH EGOCENTRIC THINKING

Thus far our focus has been on the problem of sociocentricity as a barrier to the development of human societies. Some significant manifestations of sociocentric thinking have been exemplified. But to understand how sociocentricity works, it is important to understand its connection with egocentricity. Let us then discuss some important links between egocentricity³¹ and sociocentricity.

It is helpful to begin with this understanding—that humans largely see the world from two overlapping and interactive sets of tendencies:

1. Our native *egocentrism*: “to view everything in the world in relationship to **oneself**, to be self-centered” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*); to view the world in self-validating, selfish terms;
2. Our native *sociocentrism*: to view everything within the world in relationship to **one’s group**, to be group-centered; to attach ourselves to others and together create beliefs, rules, taboos to which those in the group must adhere and against which the behavior of those outside the group are judged; to view the world in group-validating, groupish terms.

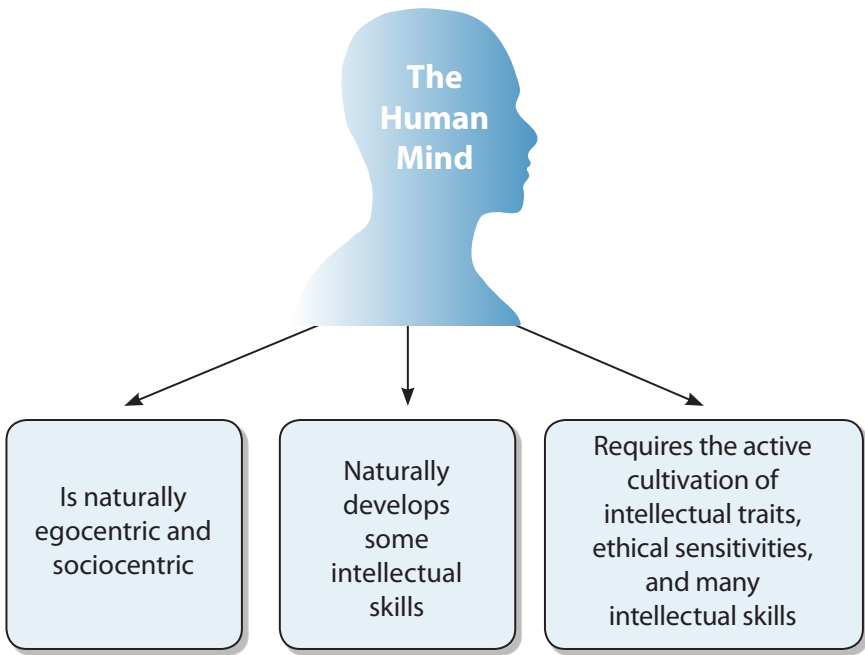
It is also important to understand that, though humans are naturally egocentric and sociocentric, they have the capacity to develop into reasonable, ethical persons. Put another way, while egocentric and sociocentric thought are intrinsic (perhaps they should be considered “first order” orientations of the mind), humans can and do develop their rational capacities to greater or lesser degrees. Selfishness and its equivalent in group thought seem to come more naturally to the mind, while reasonability, ethical sensitivities, and disciplined thought require cultivation.³²

Indeed to diminish the power of selfishness, groupishness, self-deception, and the like requires that we actively cultivate our raw intellectual and ethical capacities, that we cultivate intellectual habits or traits of mind. In other words,

31 For a deeper understanding of egocentric thought, see *The Thinker’s Guide to Taking Charge of the Human Mind* by Linda Elder and Richard Paul, 2007, Dillon Beach: Foundation for Critical Thinking Press, www.criticalthinking.org. See also: *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Professional and Personal Life* by Richard Paul and Linda Elder, 2002. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Financial Times Prentice Hall, chapter 10.

32 To understand the raw intellectual capacities of the human mind, it is useful to consider the tendencies of young children to be very curious about their world and how it works, to ask questions about the nature of things, and so on. In fairminded critical societies, these healthy tendencies would be encouraged, but in today’s societies and schools, intellectual development is largely discouraged. This raw capacity of the human mind to develop intellectually is never fully cultivated, since the mind can continue to develop throughout a lifetime. But in most people this capacity is cultivated only to a small degree—largely because of the power of egocentricity and sociocentricity in the human mind and the precedence it tends to take in human cultures.

as people become more rational and reasonable, they become less egocentric and sociocentric.



Essential Idea: Humans are, by their very nature, both egocentric and sociocentric. Humans also intrinsically develop intellectual skills to some extent, especially where the development of such skills serves their selfish or group interests. But to develop as rational, reasonable, ethical persons, humans must cultivate intellectual traits of mind – traits such as intellectual integrity, intellectual humility, intellectual empathy and fairmindedness. Whereas egocentric and sociocentric thinking occur naturally, rational reasonable thought must be actively nurtured.

HUMANS ARE LARGELY EGOCENTRIC

Egocentric thought is the native propensity to see things from one's own narrow, self-serving, self-validating perspective. It leads people to uncritically accept that which makes them feel good and that which serves their selfish desires. To understand egocentric thinking is to begin with the assumption that the human mind is naturally trapped in pathological ways of looking at the world. Instead of being open-minded, we (naturally) tend to be narrow-minded. Instead of seeing situations fairmindedly, we (naturally) tend to see them from our own

selfish perspective. Instead of recognizing that complex issues require complex reasoning, we (naturally) oversimplify them.

Though egocentric tendencies may be encouraged or discouraged in human societies, they seem to be *implicit* in the mind at birth. As children, we naturally see ourselves as the center of the universe. Everything revolves around “me.” This tendency manifests itself in both simple and complex ways.

THERE ARE TWO PRIMARY TENDENCIES OF EGOCENTRIC THOUGHT

Human egocentricity, although complex, can be organized in terms of two primary tendencies. One is to see the world in *self-serving* terms, to constantly seek that which makes one feel good—that which one selfishly wants—at the expense of the rights and needs of others. The second primary tendency of egocentricity is the desire to maintain its beliefs. It entails *rigidity of thought*. It rationalizes its irrational beliefs and sees them as obviously reasonable.

SOCIOCENTRICITY IS AN EXTENSION OF EGOCENTRIC THOUGHT

Sociocentric thinking may be conceptualized as an extension of egocentric thinking. This is evidenced in the fact that sociocentric thought operates from at least two primary tendencies of egocentric thought:

1. Seeking to get what it (or its group) wants without regard to the rights and needs of others; and
2. Maintaining a rigid belief system that serves the group’s interests.



Test the Idea

Complete the following statements:

1. The following examples illuminate the problem of egocentric selfishness. . .
2. The following examples illuminate the problem of sociocentric groupishness. . .
3. The following examples illuminate the problem of egocentric validation. . .
4. The following examples illuminate the problem of sociocentric validation. . .

The egocentric, selfish mind finds its natural home in the sociocentric group, because all four forms of sociocentric thought—groupishness, group validation, group control, and group conformity are intimately connected with egocentric thought. Individuals are often selfish as a result of their egocentricity; groups are often groupish as a result of their sociocentricity. Individuals often (egocentrically) validate their narrow or self-serving views; groups often (sociocentrically) validate

their group-serving views. Individuals often (egocentrically) dominate others; groups often (sociocentrically) dominate other groups or certain members of its own group. Individuals often (egocentrically) submit to others who dominate them; groups often (sociocentrically) submit (or conform) to the views of the group.

Egocentrism intrinsically leads to bias, prejudice, self-glorification, distortion, rigidity, intolerance, intellectual arrogance, hypocrisy, and so on. These and related dysfunctional tendencies of the mind are seen in sociocentric thought as well.

PEOPLE OFTEN USE EGOCENTRIC STANDARDS FOR DETERMINING WHAT TO BELIEVE

Because people are largely egocentric, they often use egocentric standards to determine what to accept and what to reject. At the same time, they are unrealistically confident that they have fundamentally figured out *the way things actually are*, and that they have done so objectively. They naturally *believe* in their *intuitive perceptions*—however inaccurate. Here are the most commonly used egocentric standards in human thinking:

“IT’S TRUE BECAUSE **I BELIEVE IT**.” *Innate intellectual arrogance*: I assume that what I believe is true even though I have never questioned the basis for many of my beliefs or carefully examined my beliefs.

“IT’S TRUE BECAUSE I **WANT TO BELIEVE IT**.” *Innate wish fulfillment*: I believe what “feels good,” what supports my other beliefs, what does not require me to change my thinking in any significant way, what does not require me to admit that I have been wrong. I believe in accounts of behavior that put me in a positive rather than a negative light, even though I have not seriously considered the evidence for the more negative account.

“IT’S TRUE BECAUSE I **HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED IT**.” *Innate self-validation*: I have a strong desire to maintain beliefs I have long held, even though I have not seriously considered the extent to which those beliefs are justified, given the evidence.

“IT’S TRUE BECAUSE IT IS **IN MY SELFISH INTEREST** TO BELIEVE IT.” *Innate selfishness*: I hold fast to beliefs that justify my getting more power, money, or personal advantage, even though these beliefs are not grounded in sound reasoning or evidence.



Test the Idea

Come up with examples for each of the categories above. Complete these statements, focusing on problems in your own thinking as much as possible:

1. The following examples illustrate the problem of innate intellectual arrogance. . .
2. The following examples illustrate the problem of innate wish fulfillment. . .
3. The following examples illustrate the problem of innate self-validation. . .
4. The following examples illustrate the problem of innate selfishness. . .

SOCIOCENTRIC STANDARDS FOR DETERMINING WHAT TO BELIEVE ARE LINKED WITH EGOCENTRIC STANDARDS

Just as humans use egocentric standards to determine what to believe, they use sociocentric standards as well. Note the following parallels for egocentric and sociocentric “standards” of thought; these are pathological standards routinely used in human life:

Egocentric standard: “It’s true because I believe it.”

Related sociocentric standard: “It’s true because we believe it.” *Innate group intellectual arrogance:* We assume our group beliefs to be true, even though we have never questioned the basis for many of our beliefs.

Egocentric standard: “It’s true because I want to believe it.”

Related sociocentric standard: “It’s true because we want to believe it.” *Innate group wish fulfillment:* We believe what “feels good” to our group, what supports our other beliefs, what does not require us to change our thinking in any significant way, what does not require us to admit we have been wrong. We believe in, for example, accounts of behavior that put us in a positive rather than a negative light, even though we have not seriously considered the evidence for the more negative account.

Egocentric standard: “It’s true because I have always believed it.”

Related sociocentric standard: “It’s true because we have always believed it.” *Innate group-validation:* We have a strong desire to maintain beliefs we have long held, even though we have not seriously considered the extent to which those beliefs are justified, given the evidence.

Egocentric standard: “It’s true because it’s in my selfish interest to believe it.”

Related sociocentric standard: “It’s true because it’s in our vested interest to believe it.” *Innate groupishness:* We hold fast to beliefs that justify our group getting more power, money, or personal advantage even though these beliefs are not grounded in sound reasoning or evidence.

The pathological standards above lie at the unconscious level of human thought. They illuminate the parallels that usually exist between egocentric and sociocentric thought. Just as individuals deceive themselves through egocentric thinking, groups deceive themselves through sociocentric thinking. Just as egocentric thinking functions to serve one’s selfish interest, sociocentric thinking functions to serve groupish interests. In the same way egocentric thinking operates to validate the uncritical thinking of the individual, sociocentric thinking operates to validate the uncritical thinking of the group.

PIAGET'S INSIGHTS ON EGOCENTRICITY CAN BE LINKED TO SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT

Jean Piaget identified specific patterns of egocentricity in the thought and action of children. It has been pointed out that these same tendencies are found in adult thought. Moreover, Piaget's characterizations of egocentric tendencies have significant application, with appropriate translation, to sociocentric thinking. Consider Piaget's 1976 characterizations of the egocentric thinker and then apply it to my formulation of the sociocentric parallel of each phenomenon:

Egocentrism of thought necessarily entails a certain degree of unconsciousness, with the egocentric thinker "in a perpetual state of belief..."

Sociocentrism of thought necessarily entails a certain degree of unconsciousness, with the sociocentric thinker in a perpetual state of belief (i.e., a perpetual state of uncritical acceptance of one's own beliefs).

The egocentric thinker is confident in his own ideas...

The sociocentric thinker is confident in the ideas of his group.

The egocentric thinker is naturally ... [untroubled] about the reasons and motives which have guided his reasoning process...

The sociocentric thinker is naturally untroubled about the reasons and motives that guide the reasoning of his social group.

The egocentric thinker [seeks] to justify himself in the eyes of others ... only under the pressure of argument and opposition ...

The sociocentric thinker seeks to justify his group in the eyes of other groups, or people external to the group only under the pressure of argument and opposition.

The egocentric thinker is incapable either by introspection or retrospection of capturing the successive steps ... [his] mind has taken ...

The sociocentric thinker is incapable, either by introspection or retrospection, of capturing the successive steps his group has taken in formulating their beliefs.

The egocentric thinker suffers from illusions of perspective ...

The sociocentric thinker suffers from illusions of group perspective.

The egocentric thinker is ignorant of his own ego, takes his own point of view to be absolute, and fails to establish ... that reciprocity which alone would ensure objectivity ...

The sociocentric thinker is ignorant of his group's sociocentric nature, takes his group's point of view to be absolute, and fails to establish that reciprocity among and between perspectives that alone would ensure objectivity.

The egocentric thinker [uses] thought ... at the service of personal desire ...

The sociocentric thinker uses thought at the service of group desire.

The egocentric thinker simply believes ... without trying to find the truth ...

The sociocentric thinker simply believes group-fostered ideologies without trying to find the truth.

The egocentric thinker assimilates everything he hears to his own point of view ...

The sociocentric thinker assimilates everything he hears to his group's point of view.

The egocentric thinker does not try to prove whether such and such of his idea does or does not correspond to reality. When the question is put to him, he evades it. It does not interest him, and it is even alien to his whole mental attitude ...

The sociocentric thinker does not try to prove whether such and such of his group's ideas does or does not correspond to reality. When the question is put to him, he evades it. It does not interest him, and it is even alien to his whole mental attitude.

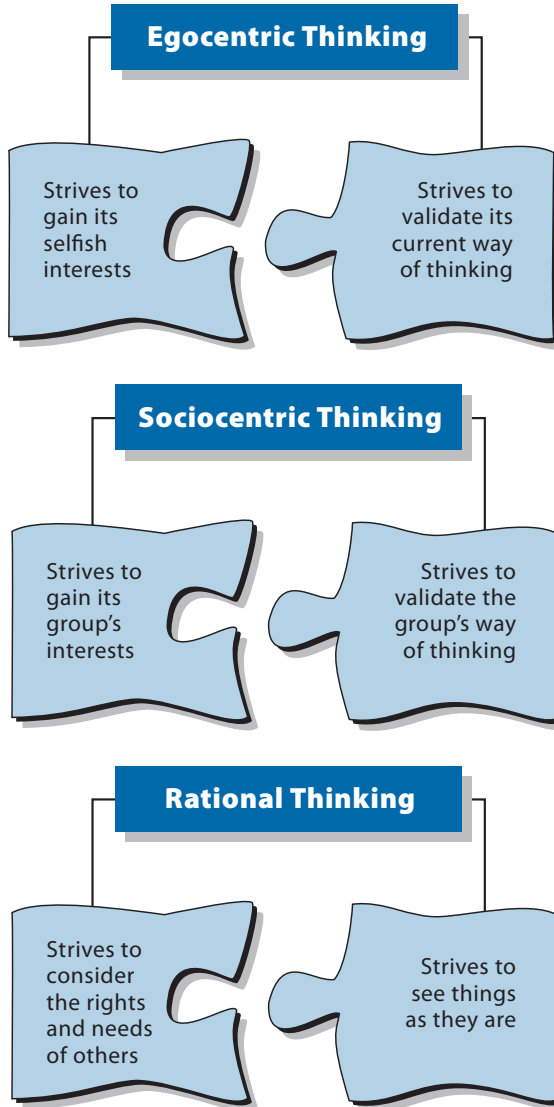
In sum, for each characterization of egocentric thought identified by Piaget, one can find a ready parallel in sociocentric thought. It seems that these parallels can easily be exemplified in potentially every human social group.



Test the Idea

See how many examples you can come up with for each of these patterns in thinking—either the egocentric or sociocentric versions. Try to target your own thinking with examples from your life.

Distinguishing Rational from Egocentric and Sociocentric Motives



Essential Idea: It is important to distinguish egocentric and sociocentric motives from rational motives.

SELF-DECEPTION PLAYS A PRIMARY ROLE IN SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT

A primary driving force for sociocentric thought is self-deception that derives ultimately from egocentric thought. Humans are nothing if not self-deceived. Indeed humans might best be described as *the self-deceived and self-deceiving animal*. The natural inclination toward self-deception, intrinsic to the human mind, is found in phenomena such as rationalization, stereotyping, distortion, egocentric memory, intellectual arrogance, hypocrisy, closed mindedness, and partiality. Methods of self-deception, evident even in young children, become more sophisticated as we grow and age.³³

Humans can deceive themselves into believing virtually anything—that beating someone is good for them, that torture is justifiable, that locking people up in prisons for minor infractions for long periods of time is reasonable, that slavery is acceptable, that stealing land from native persons is justifiable, that the planet is indestructible. There seem to be almost no limit to the human capacity for maintaining beliefs contradictory to readily available evidence.

In his book *How We Know What Isn't So*, Thomas Gilovich (1991) focuses on, among other things, “the tendency for people to believe, within limits, what they want to believe” (p. 76). He says:

One of the most documented findings in psychology is that the average person purports to believe extremely flattering things about him or herself—beliefs that do not stand up to objective analysis. We tend to believe that we possess a host of socially desirable characteristics, and that we are free of most of those that are socially undesirable. For example, a large majority of the general public thinks that they are more intelligent, more fairminded, less prejudiced, and more skilled behind the wheel of an automobile than the average person. This phenomenon is so reliable and ubiquitous that it has come to be known as the “Lake Wobegon effect,” after Garrison Keillor’s fictional community where “the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average” (p. 77).

What this reveals, among other things, is that people are adept at telling themselves things that simply aren't true in order to see themselves in a certain light. This intrinsic phenomenon naturally extends to groups and manifests in any number of ways.

Laurence Gonzales (Oct. 2008), in focusing on the problem of groupthink and self-deception, targets the loss of two space shuttles by NASA, which cost the lives of 14 crew members:

NASA defined itself as technically excellent—“the perfect place,” as one researcher called it. They put a man on the moon, and it was hard to argue with success. The insidious message was: We know what we’re doing. The corollary to that is: You

³³ See the work of Piaget for detailed analyses of the child's native egocentricity, which is often manifested in self-deception. Also see the work of Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud on self-deception and the defense mechanisms—for example, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and *Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*.

can't tell me anything I don't already know. ... The official report on the crash of Columbia said, "External criticism and doubt ... reinforced the will to "impose the party line vision ... not to reconsider it ..." This in turn led to "flawed decision making, self deception, introversion and diminished curiosity about the world outside the perfect place" (p. 28).

Through complex ideologies, groups routinely deceive themselves into believing they are taking the moral high ground when in fact they are caught up in narrow, parochial views. Consider the case of Bertrand Russell, a preeminent philosopher, who, in 1941, was prevented from teaching at the College of the City of New York because of his writings on marriage and the family. In these writings he took the view that homosexuality is neither immoral nor unhealthy, that childhood masturbation is natural and thus shouldn't be discouraged, that sex outside of marriage should be considered a private matter, and that married couples should decide for themselves whether they want to engage in sexuality with people other than their marriage partners.

After it became known publicly that Russell had been invited to teach at the college, (specifically to teach courses in logic, mathematics and the relations of pure and applied sciences to philosophy) a number of groups known for their interest in education protested the appointment, including "the Sons of Xavier, the New York Branch of the Catholic Central Verein of America, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Knights of Columbus, the Guild of Catholic Lawyers, the St. Joan of Arc Holy Name Society, the Metropolitan Baptist Ministers' Conference, the Midwest Conference of the Society of New England Women, and the Empire State Sons of the American Revolution" (Edwards 1957, p. 211).

Bishop Manning of the protestant Episcopal Church wrote a letter to all New York newspapers in which he said, "What is to be said of colleges and universities which hold up before our youth as a responsible teacher of philosophy ... a man who is a recognized propagandist against both religion and morality, and who specifically defends adultery?" (p. 210). Further quoting from Edwards, "The Bishop's letter was the signal for a campaign of vilification and intimidation unequalled in American history since the days of Jefferson and Thomas Paine. The ecclesiastical journals, the Hearst press, and just about every Democratic politician joined the chorus of defamation. Russell's appointment, said *The Tablet*, came as a 'brutal, insulting shock to old New Yorkers and all real Americans'" (p. 210).

All these groups, propped up by narrow religious and Puritanical belief systems and their accompanying sense of righteousness, systemically deceived themselves into believing they had to protect students from the harmful views of Russell, when in fact 1) none of Russell's views on marriage and the family were relevant to the specific courses he was slated to teach at the college; 2) even if they had been, the views espoused by Russell were far more enlightened than both the views of his detractors and the mainstream views at the time; and 3) it was the views not of Russell but of the religious zealots who attacked him that were in fact harmful

to students and the general public. These religious groups perceived themselves to be champions of ethics when in fact they were calling for and exemplifying its opposite. Group self-deception, aided by group validation, made this possible. We might label this phenomenon “in-group deception.”³⁴

Whenever people behave unethically, they do so for one of two reasons: 1) they are sincerely attempting to do the right thing but don’t know what the right thing is (thus are making a mistake in thinking), or 2) they are deceiving themselves into thinking they are doing the right thing when they aren’t. In the second case, self-deception enables people to avoid seeing what they are actually thinking and doing when they are behaving unethically.³⁵

One human motive is to behave ethically; a conflicting and often more powerful tendency (operating at the unconscious level) is to gratify personal desires and/or maintain existing beliefs (without regard to the rights and needs of relevant others). Unwilling to deal directly and rationally with this conflict, while at the same time disdaining incompatible thoughts, the mind often attempts to make them *appear* compatible. In other words, the mind tells itself that what is unethical is actually ethical. This is done through self-deception, which enables people to maintain selfish or narrow viewpoints with little or no discomfort. It enables the mind to justify (in bad faith) what cannot (in good faith) be justified. Through self-deception, people can sleep soundly at night even when committing the most atrocious of acts.

When groups deceive themselves into believing that some unethical act is reasonable, there are no limits to the pain and suffering they might cause. During the Inquisitions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Christians of different stripes (and nonbelievers as well) were beheaded, burned at the stake, boiled alive in tar—all in the name of God. Catholic leaders in Rome, under the direction of the Pope, collectively deceived themselves into believing that the only way to save the souls of the Protestants or “dissenters,” and keep others from rejecting the Catholic Church, was to imprison or execute them. Protestant leaders followed suit. Through elaborately developed religious ideologies, each convinced themselves they were carrying out the will of God.

Through self-deception, human groups are responsible for the needless pain and suffering each year of millions of animals labeled “livestock.” Most of these animals are denied the most fundamental of rights. They are deprived of the basic necessities and living conditions for a reasonable quality of life. Many are locked away their entire lives in cages that prohibit movement, waiting and suffering until they are deemed ready to be killed for human consumption.

34 As with the term selfishness, the term self-deception, when focused on group thought, seems inadequate. “In-group deception” might be a better term for capturing the problem of groups deceiving themselves into believing that what is false is true.

35 Depending on how one conceptualizes the mind, there might be other reasons why people behave unethically. There may be people, for instance, who just don’t care whether they do the right thing. Or we might say that sociopaths are simply incapable of knowing what the right thing is. In either case, however, one might argue that these people still think they are doing the right thing and are self-deceived. In other words, they believe their actions to be justified in the context.

In sum, throughout history and to the present day, sociocentric thinking, largely enabled by self-deception, has led directly to the pain and suffering of millions of innocent persons and creatures. This has been possible because human groups, unaware of or unconcerned with the problem of sociocentric thought, use power in largely unethical ways. Once they internalize a group-serving ideology, they can then act in ways that flagrantly contradict their announced morality while conveniently turning their backs on their own contradictions or inconsistencies.

Self-deception is so powerful a force in the mind of humans, so naturally a part of our makeup, so essential to the dysfunctional group beliefs that guide and control much of our behavior, that unless we train our minds to notice this propensity and actively correct for it, we have very little chance of improving our thinking, living an ethical life, or creating a more ethical world.



Test the Idea

Look for examples of self-deception in your life. Look for it in the thinking of others. Look for it in articles and books you read.

A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP OFTEN EXISTS BETWEEN EGOCENTRIC AND SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT

A natural marriage exists between egocentric and sociocentric thought; both are rooted in:

1. the inherent tendency to seek what one wants—either working alone or in groups;
2. the inherent tendency to hold onto and validate one's beliefs—either individually or in groups.

As I understand it, sociocentric thought is more than merely egocentric thinking applied to and utilized within groups. The relationship between the two phenomena can be complex.

At birth, we seek what we want without any sense that we are doing so. We want food, so we cry for food. We want to be held, so we cry to be held. We are sleepy and tired, so we go to sleep (or cry because we are too tired to go to sleep). We are completely centered in ourselves, consummately egocentric. We are automatically wired into our own needs and desires, *but without any sense that others are not wired into them as well*. At the base of thinking is the unconscious infantile belief that the world is here to serve “me.” This seems to be the most basic root of egocentric thought.

But at some point we realize 1) that there are others in the world besides us, and 2) those others will not necessarily always give us what we want. To get what

we want, we sometimes have to do what others want us to do which often means heeding *group expectations*. This can be seen in early relationships between children and parents. The logic of this early phenomenon of getting along in the world might be analyzed as follows:

1. The child intrinsically pursues her perceived needs and desires.
2. Among these is the need to be accepted by others (the group).
3. The group (the family) systematically rewards and punishes.
4. The child seeks ways and means of satisfying her needs and desires in socially acceptable ways.
5. Thus the child must forge a balance between pursuing her needs and desires and shaping her behavior to survive in the group.

This explains why, from a very young age, children become habituated to a large number of expectations, rules and taboos.³⁶ Then, as children move beyond the family into schools, peer groups, specialized groups (such as clubs, organizations, sports, etc.), and the broader culture, they take on the views of those groups as well, largely without questioning them. Where conflict exists between or among the beliefs of these groups, some compartmentalization is employed to hide the contradictions. And still, at times, people pursue their own individual agenda, which may be either egocentric or rational.

Mutually validating relationships can be found between egocentric and sociocentric thought in many parts of human life. We see it exemplified when group beliefs and customs validate individual self-serving desires, and when individual egocentric beliefs align neatly with group goals and purposes. In a culture, for example, where greed is fostered, individuals will be able to pursue their own greedy desires relatively untrammelled, and will be validated by the group for doing so. In a culture where group dogmatism is the norm, individual dogmatism will be expected and tacitly encouraged (as long as individual beliefs don't undermine group beliefs).

More often than not, people come to uncritically hold the dominant beliefs of society, and then fiercely protect and defend those beliefs. Their egocentric tendency to protect and validate their beliefs is funneled into protecting and validating group beliefs. At the same time, they see themselves as openminded. They think they have good reason to hold these beliefs. They see no problems in their thinking or the thinking of the groups to which they belong.

Though egocentric and sociocentric thought are mutually reinforcing, they may nevertheless go in different directions in any given situation and thus vie for power in the mind. We naturally want to do that which is in our selfish interest. But we also naturally want to fit into the groups with which we identify

³⁶ A big part of the reason groups can so easily influence the mind of a child is because a child has little or no developed critical capacities. Children take on group ideologies because they can't see through them—and because they have a vested interest in accepting them (i.e., survival within the group).

and into which we have been thrust. We want to pursue what feels good to us as individuals, but we also want to be accepted and validated by the groups that are important to us. We want to have our individual beliefs validated, but we want our group beliefs validated too. Accordingly, at times what we (as individuals) want will not coincide with what “the group” expects of us. And then finally, at times, we are more or less rational, reasonable, empathic creatures.³⁷

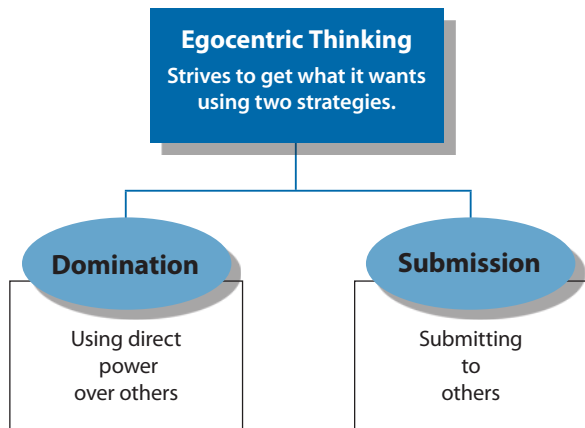


Test the Idea

Come up with examples from your own life in which there is, or has been, conflict between your egocentricity, your sociocentricity and your rational self.

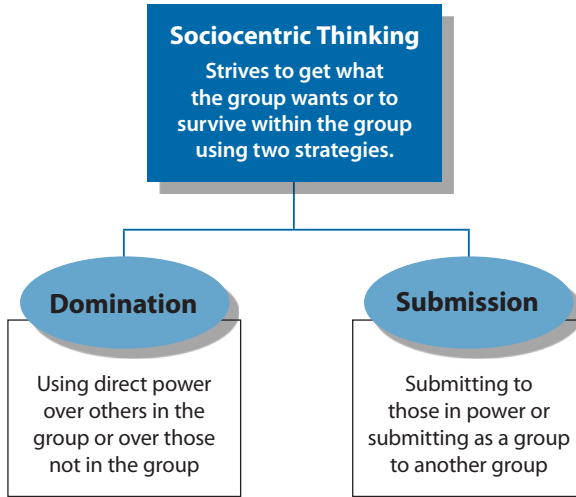
EGOCENTRIC DOMINATING AND SUBMISSIVE TENDENCIES ARE OFTEN TRANSFORMED INTO SOCIOCENTRIC DOMINATION AND SUBMISSION

Two unreasonable ways to gain and use power are given in these distinct forms of egocentric strategy: 1) The art of dominating others (a direct means to getting what one wants), and 2) The art of submitting to others (an indirect means to getting what one wants). In other words, insofar as we are thinking egocentrically, we seek to satisfy our egocentric desires either directly or indirectly, by exercising power and control over others or by submitting to those who can act to serve our interests. To put it crudely, egocentric behavior often either bullies or grovels. Either it threatens those weaker or it subordinates itself to those more powerful, or it oscillates between the two in subtle maneuvers and schemes.



³⁷ At any given moment, we might be egocentric, sociocentric, or rational—or engaging in some combination of these three modes of thought. We often move back and forth between the three in any given circumstance—for instance, first by being egocentric, then sociocentric, with rational thoughts attempting to influence our actions, only to be pushed out by sociocentric and/or egocentric forces. For instance, imagine the business manager who, during a meeting, introduces a new idea to his colleagues for their consideration, an idea that has negative implications he can't see. His colleagues point out problems with the idea. The manager, egocentrically stuck in a rigid orientation to the idea, merely wants his views to be accepted and becomes very pushy with his colleagues. A few days after the meeting, he notices that he is getting the cold shoulder from them, so he adjusts his behavior to fit into the group, not wanting to be ostracized by them. He may even recognize that he behaved irrationally during the meeting and that he needs to think more about how he relates to his ideas. So at first, he is egocentric (in presenting and pressing his ideas), then sociocentric (in needing validation from the group), then finally rational (in recognizing problems in his behavior).

These same tendencies are prevalent in sociocentric thought, and can be visualized as follows:



These sociocentric tendencies help explain the logic of group control and conformity discussed previously. In most groups, there are people who dominate and people who submit to those in power. Bureaucrats tend to dominate those they are intended to serve. Teachers often dominate students. Police officers frequently bully citizens. Governments tend to tyrannize the people they have been entrusted to protect and support. Religious groups often covertly control their members. As is apparent in these examples, domination can take many forms, from the overt (coercing, bullying, intimidating) to the covert (manipulating, inculcating, indoctrinating, brainwashing). Domination, in the sense used here—either by groups or individuals—refers to the use of power to control others against the interests of those others.

Of course, domination doesn't work if there are none willing to submit. The natural and necessary counterpart to the dominator is the submitter. The two fit together but don't complement one another in the high sense of the word, as both sets of tendencies are dysfunctional. Where the control is complete, for instance where people have been successfully brainwashed, they may be wholly compliant and "feel" relatively satisfied. Those who exhibit blind patriotism or blind faith in religion exemplify this phenomenon.

Egocentric and sociocentric domination are found in a multitude of forms through countless examples in human life. People may be dominators in one context while being submitters in another. For instance, a man may dominate his wife while submitting to his supervisor at work. A woman may submit to her husband and dominate her children. A mother may dominate her son until he is of a certain age at which time he may become her dominator.

The dangers inherent in egocentric and sociocentric domination and submission seem apparent. For instance, millions of soldiers throughout history have been willing to sacrifice their lives in wars being fought for which they are in complete ignorance. Countless people have supported such wars through blind allegiance to their country. The dangers of these dysfunctional modes of thought can also be found in conformity to laws that are unethical and unjust.

When submitters go along with dominators, they may appear to be living together peacefully. But in addition to the dangers implicit in blind loyalty, submitters are frequently resentful of their “controllers.” They may seem content in their subservient role while privately fuming. When the fuming erupts, the formerly “passive” behavior becomes “aggressive”—hence the phrase “passive-aggressive behavior.”

In sum, irrational domination and submission are intrinsic human tendencies; they manifest themselves in human life in a multitude of forms—both egocentric and sociocentric.



Test the Idea

Come up with examples from your own life in which egocentric or sociocentric domination or submission have been a problem. Complete these statements:

1. I tend to be egocentrically dominating in the following types of situations. . .
2. I tend to be egocentrically submissive in the following types of situations. . .
3. These dysfunctional tendencies have caused problems for me in the following ways. . .
4. I can see sociocentric domination as a problem in one group in which I am a member in the following ways. . .
5. I can see sociocentric submission as a problem in this group in the following ways. . .

SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT CAN BE MORE DANGEROUS THAN EGOCENTRIC THOUGHT

Though the patterns of dysfunctional thinking are similar for egocentric and sociocentric thinking, there is at least one important distinction between the two—groups have more power. Certainly, egocentric thinking is potentially dangerous. Through self-deception, individuals can justify the most egregious of actions; but individuals operating alone are usually more limited in the amount of harm they can do. Conversely, groups engaging in sociocentric thinking can typically do greater harm to greater numbers of people. During the Spanish Inquisition, the state, controlled by the Catholic church, executed thousands of reputed heretics. Under Hitler’s leadership, the Germans tortured and murdered millions of Jews, as well as other ethnic groups. Under U.S. leadership, the Vietnam war led to horrific suffering. Under the direction of Israel (supported by

the U.S. government), misery to masses of Palestinians has continued for more than 50 years.

We can look more closely at any such example, of which there are an unlimited number. For instance, consider the fact that the “founders” of the Americas, presumably guided by the hand of God, enslaved, murdered, or tortured millions of Native Americans and Africans. The heinous crimes committed by Columbus and his lot are now well documented. In his book *A People’s History of the United States* (2003), Howard Zinn chronicles the sad fate of native peoples in the Americas in the seventeenth century. Here is a brief excerpt that gives us a sense of the enormity of the atrocities committed by Columbus and his men:

The Indians, Columbus reported, “are so naïve and so free with their possessions that no one who has not witnessed them would believe it. When you ask for something they have, they never say no. To the contrary, they offer to share with anyone. ...” He concluded his report by asking for a little help from their Majesties, and in return he would bring them from his next voyage “as much gold as they need ... and as many slaves as they ask.” He was full of religious talk: “Thus the eternal God, our Lord, gives victory to those who follow His way over apparent impossibilities.” ... Because of Columbus’s exaggerated report and promises, his second expedition was given seventeen ships and more than twelve hundred men. The aim was clear: slaves and gold. They went from island to island in the Caribbean, taking Indians as captives ... In the province of Cicao on Haiti, where he and his men imagined huge gold fields to exist, they ordered all persons fourteen years or older to collect a certain quantity of gold every three months. When they brought it, they were given copper tokens to hang around their necks. Indians found without a copper token had their hands cut off and bled to death ... Trying to put together an army of resistance, the Arawaks faced Spaniards who had armor, muskets, swords, horses. When the Spaniards took prisoners they hanged them or burned them to death ... Among the Arawaks, mass suicides began ... Infants were killed to save them from the Spaniards. In two years, through murder, mutilation, or suicide, half of the 250,000 Indians on Haiti were dead (pp. 3–5).

In sum groups often work together in any number of unethical ways, validating thinking which is faulty, yet which appears perfectly reasonable merely because it is endorsed by the group.



Test the Idea

Think of an example of sociocentric thought that you consider to be dangerous.
Complete these statements:

1. The example is as follows. . .
2. This thinking and behavior is a problem because. . .

SOCIOCENTRIC PATHOLOGICAL TENDENCIES CAN BE IDENTIFIED

There is an array of interrelated sociocentric dispositions that emerge out of egocentric tendencies. To significantly develop our thinking, we must overtly identify these dispositions as they operate in our lives and correct them through critical thinking. As you read the dispositions below, ask yourself whether you recognize them as processes that take place regularly in your own mind (if you conclude “not me!”—think again):

- *sociocentric memory*: the natural tendency to “forget” evidence and information that do not support the thinking of the group and to “remember” evidence and information that do.
- *sociocentric myopia*: the natural tendency to think in an absolutist way within an overly narrow group viewpoint.
- *sociocentric righteousness*: the natural tendency to feel that our group is superior in light of our confidence that our group inherently possesses the Truth.
- *sociocentric hypocrisy*: the natural tendency to ignore flagrant inconsistencies—for example, between what our group professes to believe and the actual beliefs our collective behavior implies, or between the standards to which we hold our group and those to which we expect other groups to adhere.
- *sociocentric oversimplification*: the natural tendency to ignore real and important complexities in the world in favor of simplistic group-interested notions when consideration of those complexities would require us to modify the beliefs or values of the group.
- *sociocentric blindness*: the natural tendency not to notice facts and evidence that contradict our group’s favored beliefs or values.
- *sociocentric immediacy*: the natural tendency to over generalize immediate group feelings and experiences so that when one significant event, or a few such events, is experienced by the group as highly favorable or unfavorable, this feeling is generalized beyond the experience to the group’s outlook on the world (or view of other groups).
- *sociocentric absurdity*: the natural tendency to fail to notice group thinking that has “absurd” consequences or implications.



Test the Idea

See how many of these sociocentric pathologies you can “prove” with examples from life—either from your own life or from news articles, books, people you know, etc.

SOCIOCENTRIC PATHOLOGICAL TENDENCIES CAN BE CHALLENGED

It is not enough to recognize abstractly that the human mind has predictable sociocentric pathologies. We must take concrete steps to correct them. Routinely identifying these tendencies in action needs to become habitual in our thought. This is a long-term process that is never complete. To some extent, it is analogous to stripping off onion skins. After we remove one layer, we find another beneath it. Each of the following admonitions, therefore, should not be taken as simple suggestions that any group could immediately, and effectively, put into action, but rather as strategic formulations of long-range goals. Every group can perform these corrections, but only over time and only with considerable practice.

Correcting sociocentric memory. We can take steps to correct our natural tendency to “forget” evidence that does not support our group’s thinking and to “remember” evidence that does, by overtly seeking evidence and information that does not support the thinking of the group and directing explicit attention to that information. We should especially seek information and evidence that does not place our group in a positive light—information the group would rather forget or not be faced with. (If you “try” but cannot find such evidence, you should probably assume that your sociocentric tendencies are standing in the way of finding the evidence.)

Correcting sociocentric myopia. We can take steps to correct our natural tendency to think in an absolutistic way within an overly narrow group point of view by routinely thinking within points of view that conflict with our group’s viewpoint. For example, if we are “liberals” we can take the time to read books by insightful conservatives. If we are “conservatives,” we can take the time to read books by insightful liberals. If we are North Americans, we can study a contrasting South American point of view or a European, Far-Eastern, Middle-Eastern, or African point of view. (If you don’t discover significant group prejudices through this process, you should question whether you are acting in good faith in trying to identify your group’s prejudices.)

Correcting sociocentric righteousness. We can take steps to correct our natural sociocentric tendency to feel superior in light of our confidence that our group possesses the *truth* by regularly reminding ourselves of how little our group actually knows. To do this, we can explicitly state the unanswered questions that our group has never explicitly reasoned through, though our group behavior would imply that we have *the truth* in answer to those questions. (If, in this process, you don’t discover that there is much more that your group does not know than it does know, you should question the manner in which you pursued the questions your group has never before explicitly reasoned through.)

Correcting sociocentric hypocrisy. We can take steps to correct our natural tendency to ignore flagrant inconsistencies between what our group professes to believe and the actual beliefs our group behavior implies, as well as inconsistencies between the standards to which we hold our group and those to which we expect other groups to adhere. We can do this by regularly comparing the criteria and standards by which we judge others with those by which we judge our own group. (If you don't find many flagrant inconsistencies in your group's thinking and behavior, you should doubt whether you have dug deeply enough.)

Correcting sociocentric oversimplification. We can take steps to correct our group's natural tendency to ignore real and important complexities in the world by regularly focusing on those complexities, formulating them explicitly in words, and targeting them. We can look for instances when it is in our group's interest to simplify the complex in order to maintain a particular view or pursue some particular group interest. (If you don't discover over time that your group has oversimplified many important issues, you should question whether you have really confronted the complexities inherent in the issues.)

Correcting sociocentric blindness. We can take steps to correct our natural tendency to ignore facts or evidence that contradicts our group's favored beliefs or values by explicitly seeking out those facts and that evidence. We can look for situations when it is in our group's interest to ignore information the group would rather not see or have to deal with. (If you don't find yourself experiencing significant discomfort as you pursue these facts, you should question whether you are taking this process seriously. If you discover that your group's traditional beliefs were all correct from the beginning, you probably moved to a new and more sophisticated level of self-deception.)

Correcting sociocentric immediacy. We can take steps to correct our natural tendency to overgeneralize our group's immediate feelings and experiences by getting into the habit of putting positive and negative events experienced by the group into a larger perspective. We can look for examples of times in the past when our group has overgeneralized some event or set of events, then examine the consequences of our group having done so. We can consider the implications of our doing so should we face similar events in the future. We can strive to avoid group distortions of any kind. (If, in seeking examples of group or sociocentric immediacy, you come up short, you need to look more closely at your group's history.)

Correcting sociocentric absurdity. We can take steps to correct our natural tendency to ignore group thinking that has absurd implications by making the implications of our group's thinking explicit and assessing them for their desirability and realism. This requires that we frequently trace the implications of our group beliefs and the consequences of our group's behavior. For example, we should frequently ask ourselves: "If we really believed this, how would we act? Do we really act that way? Do we want to act this way? Is it ethical for us to act in this way?" By the way, ethics is a fruitful area for disclosing sociocentric absurdity. We frequently act in ways that are "absurd"—given the beliefs we profess to hold. (If, after what you consider to be a serious search, you find no sociocentric absurdity in the thinking of your groups, think again. You are probably just developing your ability to deceive yourself.)

GROUPS ROUTINELY USE SOCIOCENTRIC DEFENSE MECHANISMS

Sociocentric thought is connected to a number of well-established defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms tend to be understood in terms of individual thought—the individual person as in denial; the individual as engaging in identification, projection, repression, and so on. But defense mechanisms that apply to individual thought are commonly used in pathological group thought. All are connected with "in-group deception," and they interact with the sociocentric pathological tendencies described in the last section.

Consider the following *sociocentric defense mechanisms*:

sociocentric denial: when a group refuses to believe indisputable evidence or facts in order to maintain a favorable group image or favored set of group beliefs. Members of a basketball team, for example, may deny that there are any real flaws in their game in order to maintain an image of themselves as highly skilled basketball players. "Patriots" may deny—in the face of clear-cut evidence—that they (as a country) ever violate human rights or act unjustly.

sociocentric identification: when people within a group accept as their own the values and ideals of the group. Through connection with the group, its members elevate their sense of worth. For instance, football fans often experience an inner sense of triumph when their team wins; parents often experience a sense of triumph when their children succeed, citizens often feel elevated by the triumph of their nation's armed forces.

sociocentric projection: when, to avoid unacceptable thoughts and feelings, a group attributes to another group what they themselves are doing; by avoiding these thoughts and feelings they can successfully avoid facing their own actions and changing them. For instance, “country A” may accuse “country B” of terrorism, when “country B” is merely defending itself against “country A.” In this case, it is really “country A” that is terrorizing “country B.” “Country A” avoids having to face responsibility for its actions by falsely accusing “country B” of what it (country A) is in fact doing.

sociocentric repression: when thoughts, feelings or memories unacceptable to the group are prevented from reaching consciousness. This often occurs when groups do not want to face something disagreeable in their past. For hundreds of years in the United States, for instance, people repressed the notion that Christopher Columbus engaged in egregious acts against native peoples during the “discovery” of the Americas (and was therefore not the hero he is often portrayed to be). In the United States today, the often horrific treatment of native peoples during colonialism is still to a large extent repressed.

sociocentric rationalization: when members of a group give reasons (sometimes good reasons) for their behavior—but not the true reasons, because their actions result from unconscious motives they cannot consciously accept. Farmers who are unconcerned with the effects of dangerous pesticide use on animals and people rationalize their behavior by saying they have no reasonable alternatives to the use of pesticides when in fact they often do.

sociocentric stereotyping: when a group lumps together people exterior to the group based on some perceived common (usually negative) characteristics. The in-group forms a rigid, biased perception of the out-group. One form of stereotyping comes from cultural bias, wherein people assume the practices and beliefs in their culture to be superior to those in other cultures simply by virtue of being part of their culture. They take their group to be the measure of all groups and people. For instance, a group that argued for the right of people to go nude in public would be sociocentrically stereotyped by many western cultures as perverted and unethical, whereas in other cultures it would seem only natural.

sociocentric scapegoating: when groups attempt to avoid criticism of their practices by blaming persons outside their group, or blaming the circumstance, etc., for their own mistakes or faults. A group of teachers criticized for failing to foster critical thinking in the classroom may well stereotype those who criticize them thus by blaming the school system, the parents, or the curriculum—when in fact they are failing to take responsibility for their share in the process of fostering critical thinking.

sociocentric sublimation: when groups divert instinctive, primitive or socially unacceptable desires into socially acceptable activities. Sexually unfulfilled prison guards frequently sublimate their sexual energy through aggressive and dominating behavior toward prisoners.

sociocentric wishful thinking: when those within a group unconsciously misinterpret facts in order to maintain a belief. Wishful thinking leads to false expectations and usually involves seeing things more positively than is reasonable in the situation. Military leaders who ignore relevant data that would imply little chance of success in a military battle, and who send their troops to fight anyway (while merely hoping for the best), are engaging in sociocentric wishful thinking.



Test the Idea

See how many of these sociocentric defense mechanisms you can “prove” with examples from life—either from your own life or from news articles, books, people you know, etc.

INTRINSIC COGNITIVE PROCESSES CAN SERVE RATIONAL, EGOCENTRIC, OR SOCIOCENTRIC AGENDAS

We can better understand egocentric and sociocentric thinking when we understand that many naturally occurring cognitive processes can, on the one hand, enable us to do many things with our minds and, on the other hand, often work against us. For instance, humans have a remarkable capacity for figuring things out and working through highly complex issues. To do this, the mind naturally formulates assumptions upon which we can build our thinking; in other words, we take our beliefs for granted in figuring things out. When a builder is hired to build a house and receives blueprints from the architect or engineer, he takes a number of things for granted—that the owners have approved the house as designed, that the blueprints have been prepared using proper methods of design and calculation, that the slope of the land upon which the house will be erected has been taken into account, and so on.

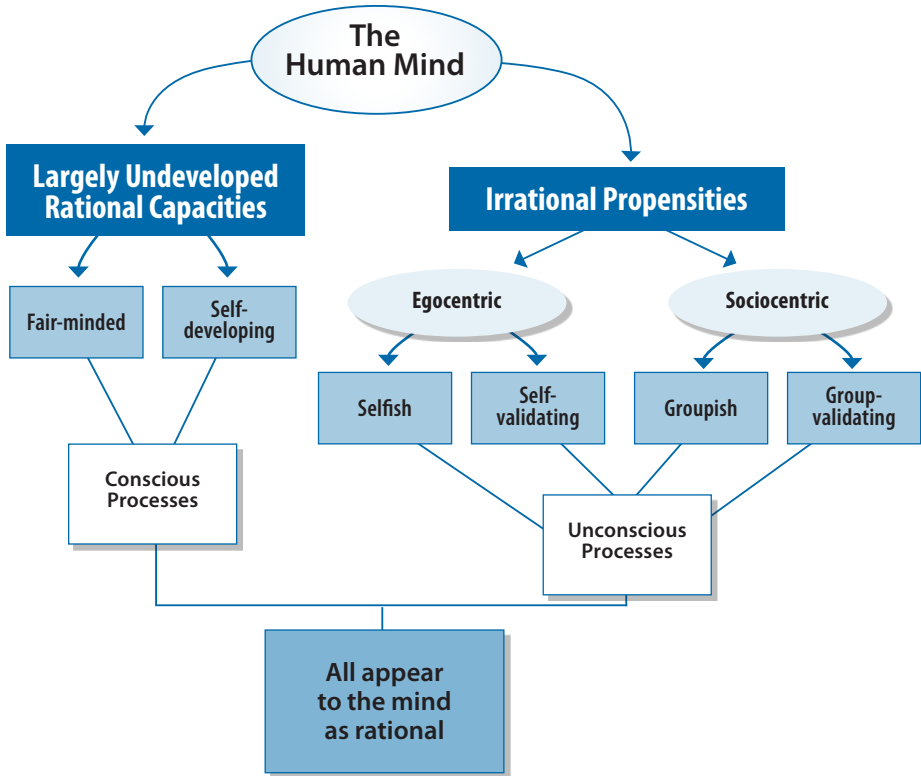
But our natural raw capacity for generating assumptions doesn’t ensure any particular quality. In other words, just because we naturally generate assumptions doesn’t mean we naturally generate *reasonable* or *justifiable* assumptions. We frequently generate assumptions that are faulty or biased. Building a space shuttle requires hundreds, if not thousands, of assumptions—about how the technology works that will be used in the shuttle, about the humans who will be operating it, about natural forces that may affect it, and so on. When a shuttle explodes without intention, some assumptions upon which decisions were made in designing and/

or deploying it will have been faulty. Something will have been taken for granted that should have been questioned.

We often generate assumptions that are egocentric in orientation, assumptions that enable us to hold onto a viewpoint that feels comfortable (assumptions such as: *It's true because I believe it. It's true because I want to believe it.*) This natural egocentric tendency to generate assumptions that shield us from seeing unpleasant realities is an inherent part of sociocentric thinking as well. As groups, we often generate assumptions that are unreasonable or unjustifiable given the context. We validate one another in holding to these assumptions and the viewpoints they engender. Many of these assumptions have been the focus of this guide. Here are some of these assumptions, as well as some new ones:

- It's true because we want to believe it.
- It's true because it makes our group look good.
- It's true because it leads to our group getting what we want.
- It's true because everyone in my group believes it.
- If I go along with those in power, I will be taken care of.
- If I dissent from the group, I will be ostracized, which I can't tolerate.
- If we want to be in control, we must keep the people ignorant.
- My only value comes in being validated by others.

In addition to the mind naturally generating assumptions, it engages in many other cognitive processes. At any given moment, any of these processes can be under the “direction” of egocentric, sociocentric, or rational thought. These processes include: making inferences and coming to conclusions, gathering information, formulating purposes and questions, thinking through implications, formulating concepts and theories, interpreting ideas, synthesizing ideas, contrasting and comparing ideas, and so on.



Essential Idea: All humans are innately egocentric and naturally sociocentric. Humans also have (largely undeveloped) rational capacities. Humans begin life as primarily egocentric creatures. Over time, infantile egocentric self-centered thinking merges with sociocentric group-centered thinking. All humans regularly engage in both forms of irrational thought. The extent to which any of us is egocentric or sociocentric is a matter of degree and can change significantly in various situations or contexts. While egocentric and sociocentric propensities are naturally occurring phenomena, rational capacities must be largely developed. It is through the cultivation of rational capacities that we combat irrational tendencies.

CULTIVATING CRITICAL SOCIETIES

Though human thought naturally tends toward egocentricity or sociocentricity, it is possible to cultivate rational, reasonable thought. It is possible to create fairminded critical societies. A fairminded critical society is a community of people who live in harmony through mutual respect and concern for the welfare of all its members. Those living in such societies seek not only the good for its own members but that of the broader civilization, other species, and the earth. They recognize critical thinking as necessary to the creation and maintenance of critical societies. Critical societies are cultures that continually develop and improve, because people within these societies routinely question practices and customs in seeking ever more rational and reasonable ways of living. The most distinguishing characteristic of critical societies is the recognition that *thinking—clear, accurate, fairminded thinking*—is the key to the emancipation of the mind, to the advancement of just practices, and to the preservation and development of life on Earth.

To achieve critical societies, it is important to consider a host of interrelated realities that must be fostered and maintained. In this section, we detail these realities and in so doing lay out our conception of a critical society. Of course, this conception needs to be developed, and will be developed, should such societies actually emerge over time. In any case, we should not expect them to emerge in the next century to any significant degree, given the natural tendencies of the human mind and the current state of human affairs.

CULTIVATING CRITICAL THINKING IS THE KEY TO CRITICAL SOCIETIES

To envision a critical society, imagine a world in which problems are routinely solved through reasoning based on openmindedness and mutual respect, rather than vested interest and power. Imagine a world that protects maximum freedoms and liberties, a world free from hunger and homelessness, a world in which people work to understand the viewpoints of others, especially those with whom they disagree. Imagine a world in which people are encouraged to think for themselves, rather than mindlessly conform.

To comprehend these possibilities, we must also be able to imagine a world in which, from the beginning of life, people are intensely and routinely focused on understanding the problems in thinking that cause most of the problems we face—in our relationships, in our work, in every part of our lives. We must begin to take thinking seriously, each of us, as a routine matter of fact. When we do so,

we can begin to systematically foster critical societies. We can begin to emancipate the mind.

To fix the problems looming before us, there is one thing we must get command of—our thinking. Everything we do is determined, usually to a large extent, by our thinking. When we divert waterways for irrigation, we do so because we *think* the positive implications of doing so outweigh its negative implications. When we dump pollutants into the oceans, we do so because we *think* the oceans can absorb the waste. When we create unjust laws, we do so because we think that being tough on crime significantly deters crime. When we send our children to schools that fail to teach them basic intellectual skills, we do so because we *think* that teachers know best. When we send our parents and grandparents to end their lives in nursing homes, we do so because we *think* there are no other feasible options. When we torture for state purposes (or for “security,” “liberty,” or any other manufactured reason), we do so because we *think* the agenda of the state precedes the ethical rights of those being tortured (and because we *think* it will produce reliable information).

Critical societies can and will emerge only to the extent that human thinking becomes of primary interest to people living in societies, only to the extent that thinking comes to be understood as a complex phenomenon routinely highlighted and discussed and critiqued in every relationship, in every family, in every business, in every organization, in every field and discipline, in every part of the culture.

In short, because the human mind is naturally riddled with problems, the creation of critical societies depends on people within societies taking thinking seriously, studying its problems, its tricks and stratagems, its weaknesses and strengths, its native tendencies, its rational capacities.

If we are ever to create critical societies, then, thinking and the problematics of thinking must become a routine object of our thought.

CRITICAL THINKING IS LARGELY IGNORED IN TODAY'S SOCIETIES

Since thinking is at the heart of every human action, because everything we do is determined fundamentally by our thinking, there is no more important set of skills, abilities, and dispositions to develop than those of the critical mind. To create critical societies, then, we must begin—as a species, across countries, religions, genders, and races—to take thinking seriously. We must begin to treat it as we do any other area of human life entailing a complex set of skills requiring disciplined, routine, committed, skilled practice. We must treat thinking, for example, the way we treat sports, music, and art—areas of human life in which we assume that development will occur only incrementally, throughout many years, and will depend upon active commitment and daily practice.

At present, little attention is given to the *thinking* that underlies our decisions, actions, emotions, and desires. Though every field and subject of study presupposes skilled and disciplined thought, few people within any field at present *think about the thinking* at the heart of their disciplines. Few explicitly concern themselves with the thinking that determines the questions they ask and the assumptions at the root of their thinking; few are aware of the concepts that determine the information they consider and the conclusions they draw.

20 Barriers to Critical Societies

To illustrate the fact that we as humans fail to take thinking seriously in today's societies, consider the following 20 barriers to critical societies. Most people:

1. are only superficially aware of critical thinking.
2. cannot articulate the ideal of critical thinking clearly, know of it only as a positive buzz word, and, in any case, violate its standards habitually and in multiple ways. Most humans, in other words, have not aspired to the ideal of critical thought, and most who have done so (having only an implicit idea of it) have succeeded only modestly.
3. uncritically accept the received views and beliefs of their culture.
4. are "culture bound" (bound by social conventions).
5. uncritically accept traditional authorities.
6. are not aware of, and do not attempt to use, intellectual standards in their thinking.
7. do not understand human thinking or the impediments to its soundness, both internal and external.
8. believe much that is arbitrary or irrational.
9. uncritically accept bureaucratic rule, procedures, and formulas.
10. accept a variety of forms of authoritarianism.
11. are uncreative and unoriginal.
12. are trapped in their social class.
13. never come to think well within any subject and have no sense of what it is to think beyond subject-matter compartments.
14. do not believe in freedom of thought and speech, or in a wide range of other inalienable freedoms.
15. are gender, culture, species, and/or politically biased.
16. blindly follow a religious ideology.
17. use their intellects only superficially.
18. have little command over their primitive emotions and desires; rather, they are at the mercy of their own impulses and passions.
19. do not value true spontaneity, naturalness, or artlessness.
20. are unable and/or unwilling to think within the viewpoints of others who hold a different worldview.



Test the Idea

See if you can add to my list of barriers to critical societies.

In 1936, A. E. Mander, in a book titled *Clearer Thinking*, stressed the importance of conceptualizing the development of thinking as requiring training and discipline, as entailing skills that must be practiced over time. He says:

Thinking is skilled work. It is not true that we are naturally endowed with the ability to think clearly and logically—without learning how, or without practicing. *It is ridiculous to suppose that any less skill is required for thinking than for carpentering, or for playing tennis, golf, or bridge, or for playing some musical instrument. People with untrained minds should no more expect to think clearly and logically than those people who have never learnt and never practiced can expect to find themselves good carpenters, golfers, bridge-players, or pianists. Yet our world is full of people who apparently do suppose that thinking is entirely unskilled work; that thinking clearly and accurately is so easy and so “natural” that “anybody can think”; and that any person’s thinking is quite as reliable as any other person’s. This accounts for the fact that, as a people, we are so much less efficient in this respect than we are in our sports. For nobody assumes that any game is so easy that we are all first-class players “naturally,” without having to learn how to play or without practice (p. vii).*

Thus the first and most important characteristic of a critical society is that thinking is taken seriously and studied carefully. Consistently high-quality reasoning is understood to entail a set of skills, abilities, and traits that must be developed over time through committed practice.

CRITICAL SOCIETIES SUPPORT MAXIMUM FREEDOMS

Critical societies take seriously the importance of human freedoms. Such societies simultaneously cultivate and systematically reward many forms of freedoms, including freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of movement, political freedom, economic freedom, intellectual freedom, freedom to learn, freedom to dissent, academic freedom, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, freedom to participate in government, sexual freedom, freedom from inhumane treatment, and the freedom to maintain one’s own privacy. Each of these freedoms supports one another. And most are presupposed in the others. Their coexistence becomes a powerful underlying dynamic for transforming the narrow provincialism now prevalent in human societies to cosmopolitan internationalism, from the vulgar dogmatic worldviews now pervasive to cultivated ethical worldviews now so rare.

One of the most valued characteristics of critical societies is freedom of thought. Freedom of thought presupposes freedom of speech. If we cannot freely and openly discuss ideas of every kind—ideas that may even undermine the status quo, that critique the way things are in the society, that call into question mainstream views—it cannot be said that we live in a free society. If we cannot dissent without being stereotyped, typecast, pigeon-holed, marginalized—if we cannot openly disagree with, oppose, contest, and resist irrational and unfair laws and rules—we are not a free society.

In the early nineteenth century, H. L. Menken (1923), arguably the most distinguished journalist in U.S. history, illuminated the importance of allowing maximum individual freedoms. He said:

I believe in liberty. And when I say liberty, I mean the thing in its widest imaginable sense—liberty up to the extreme limits of the feasible and tolerable. I am against forbidding anybody to do anything, or say anything, or think anything so long as it is at all possible to imagine a habitable world in which he would be free to do, say, and think it. The burden of proof, as I see it, is always upon the policeman, which is to say, upon the lawmaker, the theologian, the right-thinker. He must prove his case doubly, triply, quadruply, and then he must start all over and prove it again. The eye through which I view him is watery and jaundiced. I do not pretend to be “just” to him—any more than a Christian pretends to be just to the devil. He is the enemy of everything I admire and respect in this world—of everything that makes it various and amusing and charming. He impedes every honest search for the truth. He stands against every sort of good-will and common decency. His ideal is that of an animal trainer, an archbishop, a major general in the army. I am against him until the last galoot’s ashore.

John Stuart Mill, a prominent nineteenth-century philosopher, feared conformism among the majority of people, what he saw as sheeplike uniformity that imposed narrow parochial views and arbitrary rules on those more enlightened. On Mill’s view, a critical society would entail freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and the protection of other fundamental human rights. In speaking of human freedom, in his classic essay *On Liberty*, Mill (1859; 1997) writes:

It comprises, first, the inward domain of consciousness; demanding liberty of conscience in the most comprehensive sense; liberty of thought and feeling; absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical or speculative, scientific, moral, or theological. The liberty of expressing and publishing opinions ... is practically inseparable from it. Second, the principle requires liberty of tastes and pursuits; of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character; of doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow; without impediment from our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong ... No society in which these liberties are not, on the whole respected, is free, whatever may be its form of government; and

none is completely free in which they do not exist absolute and unqualified. The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.

If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind ... the peculiar

Intellectual freedom, the freedom to think for oneself, to determine what to believe and what to reject on one's own, using disciplined thought—all are hallmarks of the critical society.

evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

We can never be sure that the opinion we are endeavoring to stifle is a false opinion; and if we were sure, stifling it would be an evil still. First: the opinion which it is attempted to suppress by authority may possibly be true. Those who desire to suppress it, of course, deny its truth; but they are not infallible. They

have no authority to decide the question for all mankind, and exclude every other person from the means of judging. To refuse a hearing to an opinion, because they are sure it is false, is assuming that their certainty is the same thing as absolute certainty. All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility ... on any matter not self-evident, there are ninety-nine persons incapable of judging of it for one who is capable; and the capacity of the hundredth person is only comparative; for the majority of the eminent men of every past generation held many opinions now known to be erroneous, and did or approved numerous things which no one will now justify (p. 50–56).

Bertrand Russell (1957) emphasized the importance of open and free inquiry to rational societies. He stressed the need to create education systems that foster the fairminded pursuit of knowledge and warned of the dangers implicit in dogmatic ideologies:

The conviction that it is important to believe this or that, even if a free inquiry would not support the belief, is one which is common to almost all religions and which inspires all systems of state education. ... A habit of basing convictions upon evidence, and of giving to them only that degree of certainty which the evidence warrants, would, if it became general, cure most of the ills from which the world is suffering. But at present, in most countries, education aims at preventing the growth of such a habit, and men who refuse to profess belief in some system of unfounded dogmas are not considered suitable as teachers of the young. ... The world that I

should wish to see would be one freed from the virulence of group hostilities and capable of realizing that happiness for all is to be derived rather from cooperation than from strife. I should wish to see a world in which education aimed at mental freedom rather than at imprisoning the minds of the young in a rigid armor of dogma calculated to protect them through life against the shafts of impartial evidence. The world needs open hearts and open minds, and it is not through rigid systems, whether old or new, that these can be derived.

The conception of Sin which is bound up with Christian ethics is one that does an extraordinary amount of harm, since it affords people an outlet for their sadism which they believe to be legitimate, and even noble. It is not only in regard to sexual behavior but also in regard to knowledge on sex subjects that the attitude of Christians is dangerous to human welfare. Every person who has taken the trouble to study the question in an unbiased spirit knows that the artificial ignorance on sex subjects which orthodox Christians attempt to enforce upon the young is extremely dangerous to mental and physical health, and causes in those who pick up their knowledge by the way of "improper" talk, as most children do, an attitude that sex is in itself indecent and ridiculous. I do not think there can be any defense for the view that knowledge is ever undesirable. I should not put barriers in the way of the acquisition of knowledge by anybody at any age. A person is much less likely to act wisely when he is ignorant than when he is instructed, and it is ridiculous to give young people a sense of sin because they have a natural curiosity about an important matter... There is no rational ground of any sort or kind for keeping a child ignorant of anything that he may wish to know, whether on sex or any other matter. And we shall never get a sane population until this fact is recognized in early education ... (pp. vi-vii, 27-29).

CRITICAL SOCIETIES ENCOURAGE INTELLECTUAL AUTONOMY AND RESPONSIBILITY

The creation of critical societies presupposes not only maximum freedoms but an explicit and pervasive emphasis on disciplining the mind, including fostering individual responsibility and intellectual autonomy.

In the following passage, Albert Einstein discusses the importance of intellectual autonomy to the creation of critical societies, and the problem of mindless conformity to group influences:

Only the individual can think, and thereby create new values for society, nay, even set up new moral standards to which the life of the community conforms. Without creative personalities able to think and judge independently, the upward development of society is as unthinkable as the development of the community. ... In politics not only are leaders lacking, but the independence of spirit and the sense of justice of the citizen have to a great

Critical societies protect maximum freedoms, while fostering the development of autonomous intellectual skills and abilities.

extent declined. ... In two weeks the sheeplike masses of any country can be worked up by the newspapers into such a state of excited fury that men are prepared to put on uniforms and kill and be killed ... the present manifestations of decadence are explained by the fact that economic and technologic developments have highly intensified the struggle for existence, greatly to the detriment of the free development of the individual ... there is such a thing as a spirit of the times, an attitude of mind characteristic of a particular generation, which is passed on from individual to individual and gives its distinctive mark to a society. Each of us has to do his little bit toward transforming this spirit of the times. ... Let every man judge by himself, by what he has himself read, not by what others tell him (pp. 15, 29–30).

In an open letter to the *Society for Social Responsibility in Science*, Einstein emphasizes the importance of independence of mind to living an ethical life and creating a civilized world, even when this means defying the laws or expectations of society:

The problem of how man should act if his government prescribes actions or society expects an attitude which his own conscience considers wrong is indeed an old one. It is easy to say that the individual cannot be held responsible for acts carried out under irresistible compulsion, because the individual is fully dependent upon the society in which he is living and therefore must accept its rules. But the very formulation of this idea makes it obvious to what extent such a concept contradicts our sense of justice. External compulsion can, to a certain extent, reduce but never cancel the responsibility of the individual. In the Nuremberg trials this idea was considered to be self-evident. Whatever is morally important in our institutions, laws, and mores, can be traced back to interpretation of the sense of justice of countless individuals. Institutions are in a moral sense impotent unless they are supported by the sense of responsibility of living individuals. An effort to arouse and strengthen this sense of responsibility of the individual is an important service to mankind (p. 27).

The first and most important characteristic of a critical society is that thinking is taken seriously and studied carefully.

Intellectual freedom, the freedom to think for oneself, to determine what to believe and what to reject on one's own using disciplined thought, is a hallmark of the critical society. It requires open access to, and free exchange of, information. It enables us to see through indoctrination and propaganda. It requires a host of interrelated freedoms that much be protected.

CRITICAL SOCIETIES ENTAIL THE FOLLOWING SIX HALLMARKS

We can now summarize six hallmarks of a critical society. Critical societies will develop only to the extent that these dimensions are present. Each overlaps with and illuminates all the others.

1. Critical thinking is highly valued when...

People in the culture:

- see critical thinking as essential to living reasonably, rationally, and fruitfully.
- come to understand, from an early age, that the development of their thinking takes precedence over their development in every other skill area, because the quality of every part of their life, and their ability to live peacefully with other people, depends on the quality of their thinking.
- continue to develop the skills, abilities, and traits of the disciplined mind throughout life.
- understand that the development of critical thinking occurs in stages and in accordance with the level of commitment and the willingness to practice.
- are committed to becoming increasingly more skilled at fairminded critical thinking over time.
- recognize the importance of all people in societies learning to think critically; and work together to help one another develop intellectually.

2. The problematics of thinking are an abiding concern when...

People in the culture:

- recognize that everyone falls prey to mistakes in thinking and therefore are constantly on the lookout for problems in their own thinking and in the thinking of others.
- systemically discourage closed mindedness and systematically encourage openmindedness.
- recognize egocentric and sociocentric thinking as significant barriers to critical thought.
- routinely study and diminish irrational thought.
- avoid manipulating, controlling or using others to serve their selfish interests; avoid being manipulated, controlled, or used by others.
- recognize and guard against the natural tendencies of the human mind toward self-deception, rationalization, hypocrisy, conformism, intellectual arrogance, and other related pathologies.

3. Intellectual virtues are consistently fostered when...

People in the culture:

- think for themselves and avoid uncritically accepting the thinking or behavior of others.

- regularly and routinely enter the viewpoints of those with whom they disagree in order to understand those viewpoints and to acknowledge any merit that might be found in them.
- encourage and foster multicultural worldviews; consider themselves citizens of the world, just as concerned with the well-being of all people on the planet as they are with the well-being of their own families, neighbors, societies, and countries.
- routinely and willingly engage in open and free discussion in reasoning through issues and problems.
- do not fear new ideas and ways of looking at things. Rather, they regularly think within ideas that may at first seem “strange” or “dangerous” in order to understand them.
- are not trapped in ideological systems.
- systematically apply the same standards to themselves as they do to others, expecting as much, or more, from themselves than they do from others.
- regularly seek and willingly admit to problems in their reasoning.
- regularly distinguish between what they know and don’t know.
- believe deeply in the idea that their interests, and those of society, are best served by giving the freest play to reason.
- regularly examine their beliefs and are willing to publicly disagree with others on issues they have deeply thought through.
- persevere through the difficulties in issues and problems, using their best reasoning abilities; do not give up when faced with complexities in thought.
- communicate and relate with others through civility and mutual respect.

4. Ethical reasoning is systematically fostered when...

People in the culture:

- treat the rights and needs of others as equal to their own.
- do not use other people to serve their selfish interests.
- are routinely encouraged and expected to question the rules, mores, requirements, and taboos of the culture.
- are taught the important distinctions between ethics, social rules, legal requirements, and religious belief systems.
- do not confuse theological beliefs and social rules with ethics.
- do not see their groups as superior to other groups in terms of fundamental human rights.
- do not perceive the rights of humans as superior to the rights of other sentient creatures.
- use intellectual skills and abilities for the betterment of people and sentient creatures across the world and not to serve power and vested interests.
- recognize the intimate connection between how we live today, the health of the planet, and the well-being of future generations.

5. The analysis and assessment of reasoning are routinely used as primary tools for determining what to believe when...

People in the culture:

- recognize the predominant role of reasoning in human thought, the fact that the main activity of the human mind is reasoning.
- recognize that all reasoning contains eight elements: it targets *purposes*, formulates *questions*, pursues *information*, makes *inferences*, begins with *assumptions*, is shaped by *concepts*, is guided by a *point of view*, and leads to *implications*.
- are skilled at analyzing thinking; routinely analyze their own and others' thinking in order to assess its quality.
- continually improve their ability to take thinking apart in order to better understand it and find potential flaws in it.
- routinely assess reasoning using universal intellectual standards such as *clarity*, *accuracy*, *relevance*, *breadth*, *depth*, *logic*, *precision*, and *fairness*.
- are keenly aware of the relationship between uses of language and the mind's conceptualizations, and routinely study connections between the two.
- do not use language to manipulate other people; do not allow other people to manipulate them through their use of language.
- recognize the important role of questions in living a rational life; recognize that thinking is driven by questions, that significant questions lead to significant understandings, that superficial questions lead to superficial understandings.
- recognize that their point of view, assumptions, and conceptualizations guide the way they interpret information and the conclusions they come to.

6. Freedom of thought and action are protected when...

People in the culture:

- work together to protect the maximum freedoms for all people.
- work together to minimize the number of laws in the society.
- do not allow irrational power—through systems of justice, the police, or government—to undermine human freedoms.

Hopefully it is apparent that the characteristics laid down in this section are merely a beginning place. When deeply understood, they serve as organizers for a much broader and more detailed conceptualization of a critical society, which has yet to be developed. These understandings provide the scaffolding for what we take to be a reasonable conception of critical societies. Perhaps as significantly, they illuminate the distance between current thinking (and practices) and those that would exist in critical societies.

CONCLUSION

Because humans will always, to a very large extent, be social creatures, what we need is what might be termed a *socio-egalitarian* orientation, a worldview that values and affirms equal rights for all, a perspective that does not favor one's own group over others, a view that consistently and actively pursues fair treatment of any and all creatures. We might juxtapose the term sociocentric with *criticocentric*, the latter referring to groups that value a critical-thinking perspective.

We are a very long distance from the realization of critical societies. Rampant egocentric and sociocentric thought are two of the primary barriers to such societies. For the most part, any one of us has only limited influence. We cannot, as it were, change the world. But we can change ourselves, and we can positively influence others through measured, reasonable, rational thought. When the majority of us are doing this, critical societies will emerge. Unfortunately, the problems being created by sociocentric and egocentric thought have such far-reaching and significant consequences and are pressing down upon us to such a degree that we can only hope critical societies will emerge before we, as it were, self-destruct.

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APPENDIX A

SOME BASIC DEFINITIONS

cognitive processes: generally understood as operations of the intellect that are innate or naturally occurring in the human mind.

It is important to understand cognitive processes in human thought – processes such as classifying, inferring, assuming, planning, analyzing, comparing, contrasting, synthesizing. However, we should not assume that engaging in these processes automatically ensures skilled and disciplined reasoning. For example, whenever we plan, we do not necessarily plan well. Sometimes we plan poorly. The mere fact of planning does not automatically carry with it high quality cognition. To ensure excellent thought, we need to consistently meet intellectual standards when engaging in (natural) cognitive processes.

See *intellectual standards*.

critical society: a society which systematically cultivates critical thinking and hence systematically rewards reflective questioning, intellectual independence, and reasoned dissent.

To begin to conceptualize a critical society, one must imagine a society in which independent critical thought is embodied in the concrete day-to-day lives of individuals. William Graham Sumner, a distinguished anthropologist, explicitly formulated the ideal:

The critical habit of thought, if usual in a society, will pervade all its mores, because it is a way of taking up the problems of life. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded by stump orators

and are never deceived by dithyrambic oratory. They are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence, uninfluenced by the emphasis or confidence with which assertions are made on one side or the other. They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices and all kinds of cajolery. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens. (Folkways, 1906)

Until critical habits of thought pervade our society (which will likely be decades, if not longer, into the future), there will be a tendency for schools as social institutions to transmit the prevailing world view more or less uncritically, to transmit it as reality, not as a picture of reality. Education for critical thinking, requires that schools and classrooms become microcosms of a critical society. There are at present no existing critical societies on a broad scale. Critical societies will develop only to the extent that:

- critical thinking is viewed as essential to living a reasonable and fairminded life.
- critical thinking is routinely taught; consistently fostered.
- the problematics of thinking are an abiding concern.
- closed-mindedness is systemically discouraged; open-mindedness systematically encouraged.

- intellectual integrity, intellectual humility, intellectual empathy, confidence in reason, and intellectual courage are everyday social values.
- egocentric and sociocentric thinking are recognized as a bane in social life.
- children are routinely taught that the rights and needs of others are equal to their own.
- a multi-cultural world view is fostered.
- people are encouraged to think for themselves and discouraged from uncritically accepting the thinking or behavior of others.
- people routinely study and diminish irrational thought.
- people internalize universal intellectual standards.

See *dialogical instruction, intellectual virtues, knowledge*.

critical thinking: the most fundamental concept of critical thinking is simple and intuitive. All humans think. It is our nature to do so. But much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed, or down-right prejudiced. Unfortunately shoddy thinking is costly, both in money and in quality of life. Critical thinking begins, then, when we start thinking about our thinking with a view to improving it.

Beyond this basic conceptualization, there are many ways to begin to explain critical thinking. Here are some:

- The art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it.
- Disciplined, self-directed thinking which meets appropriate intellectual standards within a particular mode or domain of thinking.
- Thinking that commonly displays intellectual skills, abilities and traits.
- Thinking about your thinking while you are thinking in order to make your thinking better: more clear, more accurate, more reasonable, and so forth.

- Self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fairminded way.

In understanding critical thinking, it is useful to recognize that it exists in many forms and manifestations. For example, much critical thinking is one-dimensional; some is global. Much critical thinking is sophistic; some is Socratic. Some is implicit; some is explicit. And finally, some is systematic and integrated, some episodic or atomistic.

See *critical person, critical thinker, critical society, strong-sense critical thinking, weak-sense critical thinking, critical thinking forms, intellectual standards, elements of reasoning, intellectual virtues*.

cultural assumption: unassessed (often implicit) belief adopted by virtue of upbringing in a society and taken for granted.

Raised in a culture, we unconsciously adopt its point of view, values, beliefs, and practices. At the root of each of these are many assumptions. Not knowing that we perceive, conceive, think, and experience within assumptions we have formulated uncritically, we take ourselves to be perceiving “things as they are,” not “things as they appear from a cultural perspective.” Becoming aware of our cultural assumptions so that we might critically examine them is a crucial dimension of critical thinking. It is, however, a dimension largely missing from the educational process. Indeed, schools, and even colleges and universities, often implicitly and unknowingly foster blind acceptance to group ideologies.

See *sociocentricity, ethnocentricity, prejudice, social contradiction*.

defense mechanisms: a self-deceptive process used by the human mind to avoid dealing with socially unacceptable or painful ideas, beliefs or situations.

The human mind routinely engages in unconscious processes that are egocentrically motivated, and that strongly influence our behavior. When functioning egocentrically, we seek to get what we want. We see the world from a narrow self-serving perspective. Yet, we also see ourselves as driven by purely rational motives. We therefore disguise our egocentric motives. This disguise necessitates self-deception. Self-deception is achieved by means of defense mechanisms. Through the use of defense mechanisms the mind can avoid conscious recognition of negative feelings such as guilt, pain, anxiety, etc. The term ‘defense mechanisms’ is used in Freudian psychoanalytic theory generally to mean psychological strategies used by the unconscious mind to cope with reality and to maintain a positive self-image. The theory of defense mechanisms is complex, with some theoreticians suggesting that defense mechanisms may at times be healthy (particularly in childhood). However, when these mechanisms operate in the mind of the normal adult, they pose significant barriers to rationality and the creation of critical societies. All humans engage in self-deception; however, critical thinkers consistently strive to act in good faith, to minimize their self-deceptive tendencies, to understand these tendencies and work toward diminishing their frequency and power.

Some of the most common defense mechanisms (and those included in this glossary) are: denial, identification, projection, repression, rationalization, stereotyping, scapegoating, sublimation and wishful thinking. See also *egocentricity*.

denial: when a person refuses to believe indisputable evidence or facts in order to maintain a favorable self-image or favored set of beliefs.

Denial is one of the most commonly used defense mechanisms. All humans sometimes deny what they cannot face, for example, some unpleasant truth about themselves or others. A basketball player, for example, may deny that there are any real flaws in his game in order to maintain an image of himself as highly skilled at basketball. A “patriot” may deny—in the face of clear-cut evidence—that his country ever violates human rights or acts unjustly.

See *defense mechanisms*.

egocentricity: a tendency to view everything in relationship to oneself, to confuse immediate perception (how things seem) with reality, to be self-centered, or to consider only oneself and one’s own interests; selfishness; to distort “reality” in order to maintain a particular viewpoint or perception.

One’s desires, values, and beliefs (seeming to be self-evidently correct or superior to those of others) are often uncritically used as the unconscious norm for much judgment and “experience.” Egocentricity is one of the fundamental impediments to critical thinking. As one learns to think critically in a strong sense, one learns to become more rational, and less egocentric.

See *egocentric domination, egocentric immediacy, egocentric submission, defense mechanisms, human nature, sociocentrism, personal contradiction, unconscious thought, strong sense critical thinker*.

egocentric domination: the egocentric tendency to seek what one wants through the unreasonable use of direct power over, or intimidation of, people (or other sentient creatures).

Egocentric domination of others may be overt or covert. On the one hand, dominating egocentrism can involve harsh, dictatorial, tyrannical, or bullying behavior (e.g., a physically abusive spouse). On the other hand, it might involve subtle messages and behavior that imply the use of control or force if “necessary” (e.g., a supervisor reminding a subordinate, by quiet innuendo, that his or her employment is contingent upon unquestioning obedience). Human irrational behavior is often some combination of dominating and submissive acts. In the “ideal” Fascist society, for example, everyone (except the dictator) is submissive to everyone above him and dominating to everyone below him.

See *egocentric submission, egocentricity*.

egocentric submission: the irrational tendency to psychologically join and serve “powerful” people to get what one wants.

Humans are naturally concerned with their interests and motivated to satisfy their desires. In a world of psychological power and influence, people generally learn to “succeed” in two ways: to psychologically conquer or intimidate (subtly or openly) those who stand in their way (through egocentric domination), or, alternatively, to psychologically join and serve more powerful others, who then: (1) give them a sense of personal importance, (2) protect them, and (3) share with them some of the benefits of their success. Irrational people use both techniques, though not to the same extent.

When people submit to more powerful others, they are engaging in what can be termed ‘egocentric submission.’ Those who use overt force and control

are engaging in what can be termed ‘egocentric domination.’ Both of these forms of behavior can be seen publicly, for example, in the relationship of rock stars or sport stars to their admiring followers. Most social groups have an internal “pecking order,” with some playing the role of leader and most playing the role of follower. A fairminded rational person seeks neither to dominate nor to blindly serve someone else who dominates.

Opposite is *egocentric domination*. See also *egocentricity*.

ethnocentricity: a tendency to view one’s own race or culture as superior to all others, and therefore judging other cultures according to one’s own cultural standards.

Ethnocentrism can be understood as a form of egocentrism extended from self to one’s group. Much uncritical or selfish critical thinking is either egocentric or ethnocentric in nature. (Ethnocentrism and sociocentrism are often used synonymously, though sociocentricity is broader, relating to any group, including, for example, sociocentric identification with one’s profession.) The “cure” for ethnocentrism or sociocentrism is routine empathic thought within the perspective of opposing groups and cultures. Such empathic thought is rarely cultivated in the societies and schools of today. Instead, many people develop an empty rhetoric of tolerance without seriously considering the value in the beliefs and practices of other groups, the meaning of these beliefs to those others, and their reasons for maintaining them.

See *sociocentricity*.

fairmindedness: a cultivated disposition of mind that enables the thinker to treat all perspectives relevant to an issue in an objective manner, without privileging one’s own views, or the views of one’s group.

Fairmindedness implies being conscious of the need to treat all relevant viewpoints alike without reference to one's own feelings or selfish interests, or the feelings or selfish interests of one's friends, community, nation, or species. It implies adherence to intellectual standards without reference to one's own advantage or the advantage of one's group.

There are three primary reasons why people lack this disposition: 1) native egocentric thought, 2) native sociocentric thought, 3) lack of intellectual skills necessary for reasoning through complex ethical issues.

See intellectual traits, intellectual standards, ethical reasoning, egocentricity, sociocentricity.

human mind: that which thinks, perceives, feels, wills; the seat of conscious as well as unconscious thought.

The mind is an organized set of capacities by which sentient creatures think, feel and want. These capacities continually interact. Thus, the human mind entails a cognitive dimension (that of thought), as well as an affective dimension (that of feelings and desires).

In recent years, many studies have been conducted to understand the relationships between the cognitive and affective dimensions of the human mind. Yet much is known about the human mind that cannot yet be connected to precise neurological processes in the brain. For example, one natural mechanism of the human mind is its tendencies toward selfishness. This fact can be documented in hundreds of thousands of ways through simple observation. In short, we know much about the mind and comparatively little about the brain.

See emotions, desires, think.

human nature: the common qualities, instincts, inherent tendencies, and capacities of human beings.

People have both a primary and secondary nature. Our primary nature is spontaneous, egocentric, and subject to irrational belief formation. It is the basis for our instinctual thought. People need no training to believe what they want to believe: what serves their immediate interests, what preserves their sense of personal comfort and righteousness, what minimizes their sense of inconsistency, and what presupposes their own correctness. People need no special training to believe what those around them believe: what their parents and friends believe, what is taught to them by religious and school authorities, what is repeated often by the media, and what is commonly believed in their nation and culture. People need no training to think that those who disagree with them are wrong and probably prejudiced. People need no training to assume that their own most fundamental beliefs are self-evidently true or easily justified by evidence. People naturally and spontaneously identify with their own beliefs. They often experience disagreement as personal attack. The resulting defensiveness interferes with their capacity to empathize with, or enter into, other points of view.

On the other hand, people need extensive and systematic practice to develop their secondary nature, their implicit capacity to function as rational persons. They need extensive and systematic practice to recognize the tendencies they have to form irrational beliefs. They need extensive practice to develop a dislike of inconsistencies in their thought, a love of clarity, a passion to seek reasons and evidence and to be fair to points of view other than their own. People need extensive practice to recognize that they live inferentially, that they do not have a direct pipeline to reality, and that it is perfectly

possible to have an overwhelming inner sense of the correctness of one's views and still be wrong.

See *egocentricity, sociocentricity, rational, rational self, intellectual virtues.*

indoctrination: instilling within one a (usually) partisan or sectarian opinion, point of view, or principle. The term 'partisan' entails exhibiting blind, prejudiced and unreasoned allegiance. The term sectarian entails (1) adhering to particular religious faith or limited in character or scope; or (2) a narrow or bigoted person; brainwashing.

Indoctrination is a perennial problem in schooling, since students are typically taught to accept ideas without thinking them through and critically analyzing them. For most children, this begins early in life. In elementary school in the U.S., for example, students are often expected to sing the "National Anthem," a song they are rarely, if ever, encouraged to examine in terms of its implications. Similarly, media bias leads to indoctrination when people are given one side of a story as if it were "the whole," when they are given the side of a story that makes the culture look good, or the part that feeds established social and political biases and prejudices. Indoctrination is a form of propaganda antithetical to critical thinking and an impediment to the development of critical societies.

See *socialization, training, education, critical societies.*

irrational/irrationality: lacking the power to reason; contrary to reason or logic; senseless, unreasonable, absurd.

Humans are both rational and irrational. We have innate egocentric and sociocentric tendencies that often lead us to do things that are illogical (though they seem to us at the time to be perfectly logical). We don't automatically sense what is reasonable in any given situation.

Rather, the extent to which we think and act rationally depends upon how well our rational capacities have been developed. It depends upon the extent to which he have learned to go beyond our natural prejudices and biases, beyond our narrow, self-serving viewpoint, to see what makes most sense to do and believe in a given situation. Critical thinkers are alert to their irrational tendencies. They strive to become rational, fairminded persons.

See *egocentricity, sociocentricity, reason, rationality, logic.*

rational/rationality: being guided by the intellect (rather than emotions), or having to do with reason; being consistent with or based on logic; that which conforms to principles of good reasoning, is sensible, shows good judgment, is consistent, logical, relevant and sound.

In everyday discourse, there are at least three different common uses of the term 'rational' or 'rationality.' One refers to a person's general ability to think well. A second refers to a person's ability to use his intellect to achieve his purposes (irrespective of whether or not these purposes are ethically justified). A third refers to one's commitment to think and act only in ways that are intellectually and ethically justified. Behind these three uses lie these distinctions: skilled thinker, sophistic thinker, Socratic thinker. In the first use, we mark the skills only of the thinker. In the second we mark the skills used "selfishly" (as the Sophists of old). In the third we mark the skills used fairmindedly (as Socrates did).

Critical thinkers, in the strong sense, are concerned with developing their capacities to reason with skill while also respecting the rights and needs of others. They are fairminded in the use of their intellectual skills.

See *reason, logic, intellectual virtues, strong-sense critical thinkers, weak-sense critical thinkers, irrational.*

social contradiction: an inconsistency between what a society “preaches,” or professes to believe, and what it practices.

Every society has some degree of inconsistency between its image of itself and its actual character. When a group, for example, professes to be spreading peace throughout the world, while at the same time systematically engaging in unjust wars, it is demonstrating a social contradiction. Social contradiction is typically connected with sociocentric thought and correlated with human self-deception on the part of the group.

See *sociocentricity, national bias*.

socialization: a continuing process of learning to conform to the values, norms, traditions, manners, customs, taboos, and ideologies of one’s society; assuming social skills appropriate to one’s “social position.”

For the most part, humans live together in groups. Accordingly, they must learn to live together reasonably in those groups, to get along, to respect the rights and needs of others with whom they interrelate and interact. But the process of socialization often goes beyond a defensible conception of living together reasonably. It often leads to oppression and the violation of individual rights. Because humans create complex ideas and ideologies through which they see the world, these ideas are a necessary part of the “socialization process.” At a very young age children within every culture begin to think within these ideas, seeing them, not as one possible way to think, but as the right way to think (e.g. no elbows on the table, napkin in your lap, no nudity allowed).

Part of the ideology of any culture, then, is the laying down of rules, the creation of customs, the forbidding of certain behaviors. Accordingly, people living within every culture are expected to uncritically accept the largely arbitrary

rules, customs, and taboos of their culture. Every day, very young children in the U.S., for example, are expected to stand up and “pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.” In doing so, they have no real sense of what they are pledging, of what it would mean to take their pledge seriously, of what it would mean to critically analyze it, of how to skillfully argue for and/or against it. This is just one example of many forms of indoctrination that often come hand in hand with socialization.

One important part of the socialization process has to do with social stratification. People in modern societies are layered according to a political/economic “pecking order,” to put it somewhat crudely. Those at the top have most of the power and advantages. Those in the middle have a low to modest amount of power, and significant advantages. Those at the bottom have very few advantages and very little power. Part of the socialization process of every culture is to pass on the “correct behavior” for one’s “social status,” according to the system of social stratification within the culture.

It is essential to critically analyze the social rules, customs, taboos, and power structure of one’s culture so as not to be intellectually imprisoned by them.

See *sociocentrism, indoctrination*.

sociocentricity: the belief in the inherent superiority of one’s own group or culture; a tendency to judge alien people, groups or cultures from the perspective of one’s own group.

As social animals, humans cluster together. Indeed, the very survival of the human species depends upon a lengthy rearing process so that all humans survive, in the first instance, because they are cared for within a group. Accordingly, children learn from an early age to think within the logic of the group.

This is required for their “acceptance” in the group. As part of this socialization process, they (largely uncritically) absorb group ideologies.

Sociocentricity is based on the assumption that one’s own social group is inherently and self-evidently superior to all others. When a group or society sees itself as superior, and so considers its views as correct or as the only reasonable or justifiable views and when a group perceives all of its actions as justified, it has a tendency to think closed-mindedly. Dissent and doubt are considered disloyal and are rejected. Few people recognize the sociocentric nature of much of their thought.

Sociocentric thought is connected with the term ‘ethnocentricity,’ though ethnocentricity is often used more narrowly to refer to sociocentric thought within an ethnic group.

See *socialization, egocentricity, national bias, cultural association.*

strong-sense critical thinkers: fairminded critical thinkers; skilled thinkers characterized predominantly by the following traits: (1) the ability and tendency to question deeply one’s own views; (2) the ability and tendency to reconstruct sympathetically and imaginatively the strongest versions of viewpoints and perspectives opposed to one’s own; and (3) the ability and tendency to reason dialectically (multilogically) in such a way as to determine when one’s own point of view is at its weakest and when an opposing point of view is at its strongest; (4) the ability and propensity to change one’s thinking when the evidence would require it, without regard to one’s own selfish or vested interests.

Strong-sense critical thinkers are fundamentally concerned with reasoning at the highest level of skill, considering all the important available evidence, and

respecting all relevant viewpoints. Their thought and behavior is characterized primarily by intellectual virtues or habits of mind. They avoid being blinded by their own viewpoints. They recognize the framework of assumptions and ideas upon which their own viewpoints are based. They realize the necessity of putting their assumptions and ideas to the test of the strongest objections that can be leveled against them. Most importantly, they can be moved by reason; in other words, they are willing to abandon their own ideas when other ideas prove more reasonable or valid.

Teaching for strong sense critical thinking entails routinely encouraging students to explicate, understand, and critique their deepest prejudices, biases, and misconceptions, thereby discovering and contesting their egocentric and sociocentric tendencies (for only when we do so can we hope to develop as fairminded persons).

Regularly thinking dialogically about important and personal issues is necessary for developing strong-sense critical thinking. If critical thinking is taught simply as atomic skills separate from the empathic practice of entering into points of view that students are fearful of or hostile toward, they will simply find additional means of rationalizing prejudices and preconceptions, or convincing people that their point of view is the correct one. They will be transformed from vulgar or naïve thinkers to sophisticated (but not strong-sense) critical thinkers.

See *fairmindedness, intellectual virtues, weak-sense critical thinkers.*

vested interest: promoting personal advantage, usually at the expense of others; group pursuit of collective goals, exerting influence that enables the group to profit, often at the expense of others.

One natural implication of sociocentric thought is the problem of group vested interest. Every group potentially falls prey to this native human tendency—to seek more for its own group at the expense of others. For example, many groups that lobby Congress do so to gain money, power, and advantage for themselves by provisions in law that specially favor their group. The term vested interest classically contrasts with the term public interest. A group that lobbies Congress in the public interest is not seeking to gain special advantage for a comparative few but, rather, protection for the majority. Preserving the quality of the air is a public interest. Building cheaper cars by using second rate material is a vested interest (it makes more money for car manufacturers).

The term ‘vested interest’ has been largely replaced with the term ‘special interest’ by those seeking vested interests, for they do not want their real agenda to come to light. By advancing the notion that all groups are simply seeking to protect and expand their “special interest,” these groups hope to place their selfish agenda on the same footing with agendas in the public interest.

See *selfish interest, sociocentric thought*.

weak-sense critical thinkers: those who use the skills, abilities, and to some extent, the traits of critical thinking to serve their selfish interests; unfair or unethical critical thinkers.

Weak sense, or unethical critical thinkers, have the following pronounced tendencies:

- (1) They do not hold themselves or those with whom they ego-identify to the same intellectual standards to which they hold opponents.
- (2) They do not reason empathically within points of view or frames of reference with which they disagree;
- (3) They tend to think monologically (within one narrow perspective).
- (4) They do not genuinely accept, though they may verbally espouse, the values of fairminded critical thinking.
- (5) They use intellectual skills selectively and self-deceptively to foster and serve their selfish interests at the expense of truth.
- (6) They use critical thinking skills to identify flaws in the reasoning of others and sophisticated arguments to refute others’ arguments before giving those arguments due consideration.
- (7) They routinely justify their irrational thinking through highly sophisticated rationalizations.
- (8) They are highly skilled at manipulation.

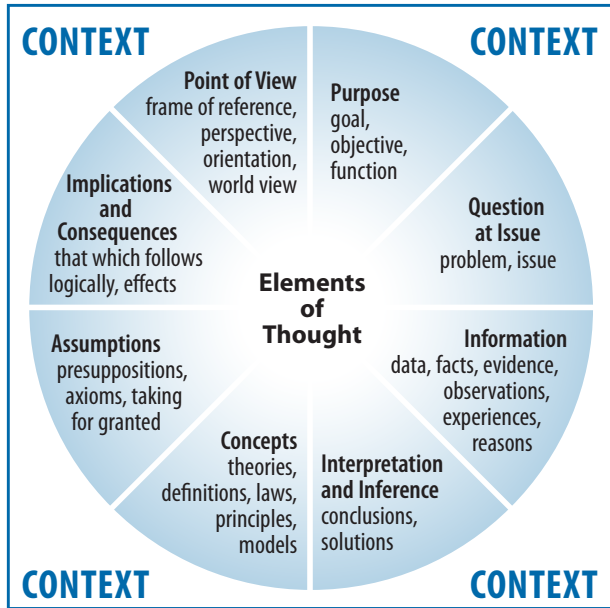
Opposite is *strong-sense critical thinkers*. See also *egocentricity, irrational, rationalization, sophistic critical thinking, strong-sense critical thinkers*.

APPENDIX B

The four primary forms of sociocentric thought (groupishness, can be understood in terms of their most basic logic seen on the following two pages. Note that the circle diagram relates to the elements of thought implicit in all human reasoning. These elements can be briefly explained as follows:³⁸

Thinking then:

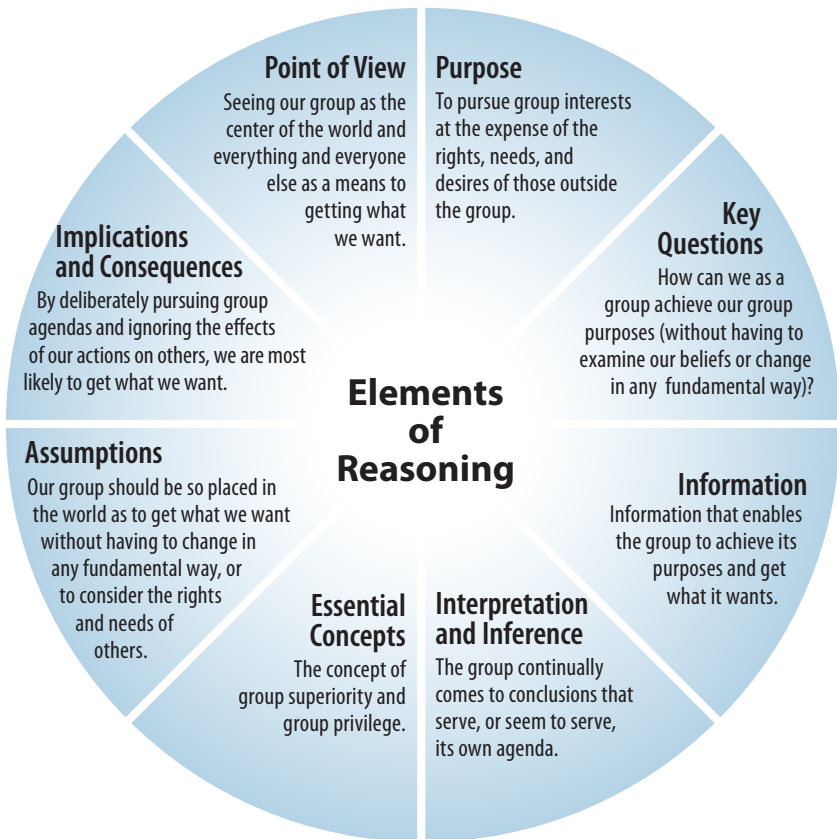
- generates purposes
- raises questions
- uses information
- utilizes concepts
- makes inferences
- makes assumptions
- generates implications
- embodies a point of view



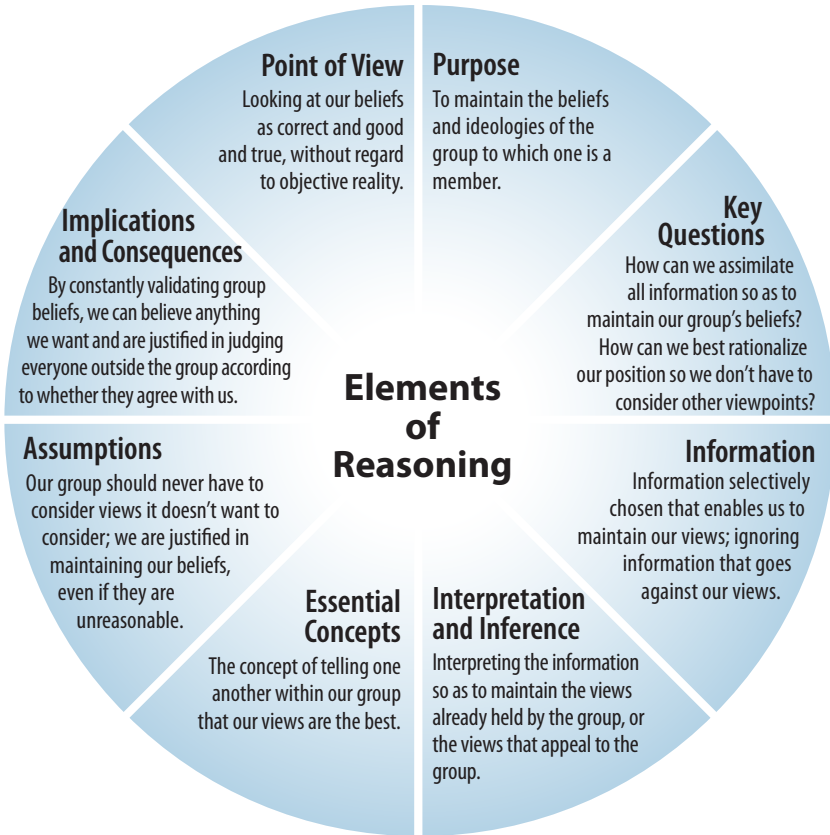
As you read through the following four “logics,” note their implicit (rather than explicit) nature. Groups naturally would never admit that these ideas were guiding their thinking and behavior. In fact, because these thoughts function at the unconscious level, most people are unaware of their influence.

³⁸ For a deeper understanding of the elements of reasoning, see *The Thinker’s Guide to Analytic Thinking* by Linda Elder and Richard Paul, 2010, Dillon Beach: Foundation for Critical Thinking Press.

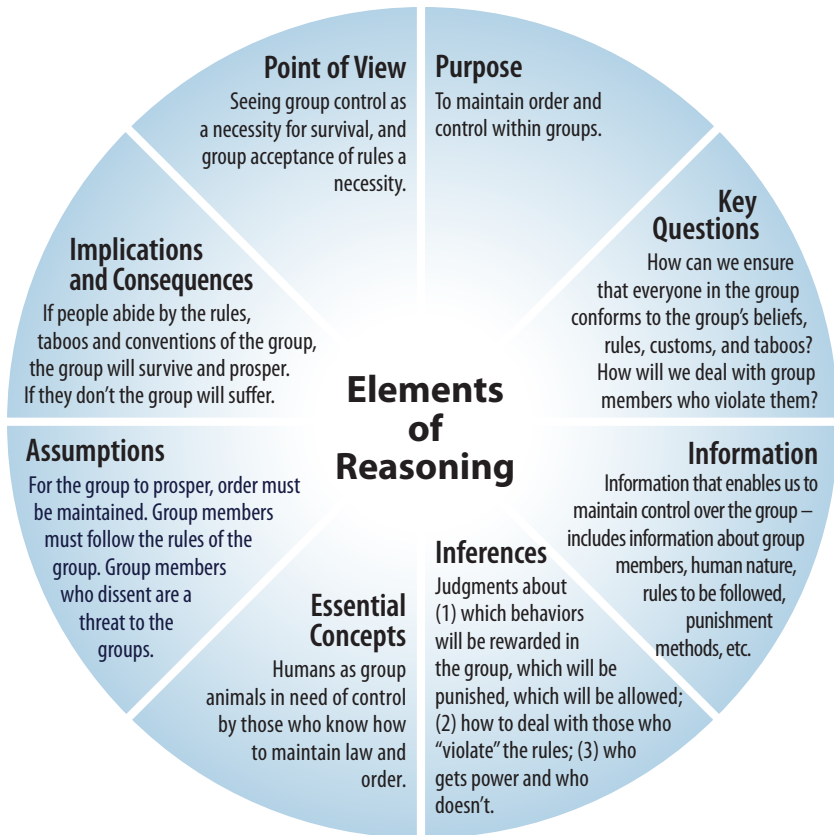
Sociocentricity: the Logic of Group Vested Interest



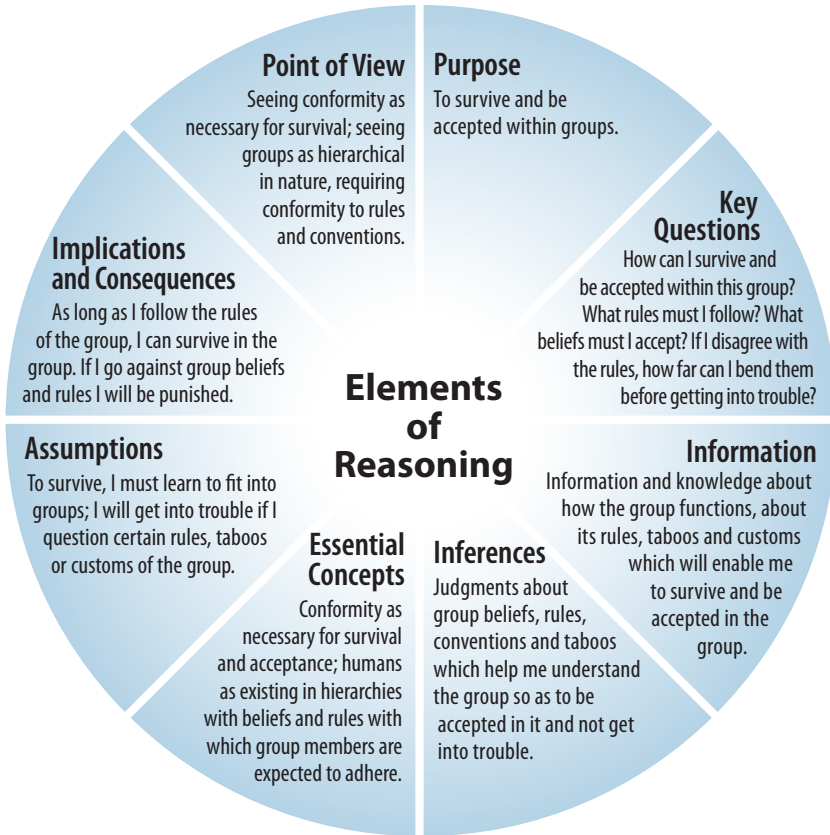
Sociocentricity: The Logic of Group Validation



Sociocentricity: The Logic of Group Control



Sociocentricity: The Logic of Conformity



INDEX

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THE EMANCIPATED MIND: OVERCOMING SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT

USING CRITICAL THINKING
TO GET BEYOND GROUPTHINK

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