



We Form Ingroups & Reference Groups

Even before we develop an ethnic identity, we identify with one or more ingroups. Part of the process of developing an ethnic identity is forming ingroups. What we're familiar with tends to become a value. The familiar provides the indispensable basis of our existence. As early as age five, children develop a fierce sense of loyalty to their ingroup. Members of an ingroup all use the term we with the same essential significance. Ingroup memberships are not set in concrete. At times people have reason to claim one category of membership, and at other times a different or slightly larger category, depending on their need to look good or be accepted.

No doubt, you've noticed that certain people in your ingroup squabble among themselves all the time. But if one of them is attacked by someone from outside the group, the former squabblers may join together in defending against or attacking the outgroup enemy. Likewise, two groups that formerly fought each other may join

together to fight a third group, a common enemy. In this way members may modify their ingroups to fit their needs. When those needs call for hostile action, the purpose of the newly formed ingroup may be action against a hated outgroup.

The term *ingroup* indicates the sheer fact that you're a member of a group, while the term *reference group* indicates whether you cherish that membership or whether you seek to relate yourself with another group. The terms help us to identify two levels of belongingness. A reference group may be either

- an ingroup that you're happy you belong to, or
- another group that you'd like to belong to.

Some people are always comparing themselves with groups that, for them, are not ingroups. Some minority persons tend to mold their attitudes around those of the dominant majority, which for them may be a reference group. The dominant majority exerts a strong pull on minorities, often forcing them to conform to majority attitudes. This conformity, however, rarely goes so far as a minority rejecting her or his own ingroup. It does explain, however, why women and minorities sometimes echo the opinions of Euro-American men even when such opinions are against the best interests of women and minorities.

Ingroup memberships are vitally important to individual survival. Through memberships we form a web of habits. When we meet outsiders who follow different customs, we tend to unconsciously say, "They break my habits." Habit-breaking is unpleasant because we tend to prefer the familiar. Most of us feel a bit on guard when other people seem to threaten or even question our habits. Attitudes partial to the ingroup, or to the reference group, do not necessarily require that attitudes toward other groups be antagonistic—even though hostility often helps to intensify the ingroup cohesion. Narrow circles can, without conflict, be supplemented by larger circles of loyalty. Allport (1954) noted that this happy condition is not often achieved, but it remains from the psychological viewpoint a hopeful possibility.

We Become Ethnocentric

Ethnocentrism can lead to prejudice, but does not always do so. While prejudice assumes different groups are inferior, ethnocentrism assumes your own group is superior. It's a part of developing an ethnic identity. While ethnocentric attitudes are widespread in human society and seem to reflect a universal tendency, studies indicate that Euro-American managers are more ethnocentric than their counterparts in Britain, Australia, and mainland Europe (Ijzendoorn 1980).

***Ethnocentrism is the belief that your ethnic group
is superior to all others.***

Ethnocentrism is a form of ingroup/outgroup bias. Two related factors stand out:

- Such bias can be based on nearly any group identity, such as blue eyes or brown eyes, and does not necessarily imply a long history of prejudice.
- It's a milder form of ingroup favoritism than the more extreme forms of hostile bigotry that are usually associated with prejudice and discrimination.

In her landmark experiment with school children, Jane Elliott (1985) was able to create the main dimensions of ethnocentric behavior in a matter of hours on the basis of a group separation that was essentially arbitrary—whether a child had blue eyes or brown eyes.

Research provides evidence that dominant group members tend to believe that when outgroup people succeed, it's because they got help or got lucky, but when

ingroup members succeed, it's because they deserved it, earned it, and had the right traits and skills. In other words, Euro-American males tend to think that when their own succeed in the workplace, it's because of internal traits, but when others succeed, it's because of external circumstances.

Ethnocentrism in the workplace has made it difficult for people other than Euro-American males to make it to the top. For example, several studies indicate that the major barrier is the tendency for Euro-American males at the top to be more comfortable with their own kind (Morrison 1987, Carr-Ruffino 1991). Ethnocentrism is a human tendency that offers several benefits. If you decide to stick with your ingroup:

- You can better predict and understand others' behavior, because they're like you.
- It's easier to figure out why others in the group do what they do.
- It's easier to establish rapport and build a relationship.
- You're more likely to help others, because people are more likely to help others like themselves than to help "strangers."

People who are high in authoritarian and rigid personality traits and low in moral development tend to be more ethnocentric. They tend to be less tolerant toward, and hold less favorable attitudes toward, members of outgroups, especially minority group members (Ijzendoorn 1989, Brewer 1979, Clark 1975, Greenhaus 1991).

People who are more open and flexible enjoy a different set of advantages. When you're comfortable and open to interacting with people from outgroups:

- You get to expand your experience and knowledge of other people and cultures.
- You make your work more interesting, exciting, and intriguing.
- You increase your ability to relate to many types of people.
- You boost your social and leadership skills.
- You become more cosmopolitan.