**Ethnocentrism and Conflict:**

Differences in values and beliefs and the evaluations of characteristics possessed by a person or group often are the basis of conflicts. People tend to think their way of life and their characteristics are good and indeed better than those held by other people. This widespread phenomenon among different peoples is recognized in the term **‘ethnocentrism,’** the tendency for people to regard themselves as the standard by which others should be evaluated.

In defining themselves, groups also define others; and in defining their opponents, they also define themselves. Each self-conscious collectivity defines non-members; indeed, identity is in good measure established in contrast to others. We know who we are by emphasizing how we are not like others; thus, many former colonial peoples, such as Arabs, Africans, and Asians define themselves by affirming their separation from Western ideals and values. During the Cold War many people in the United States partly defined themselves as being American by being anticommunist.

People are generally inclined to evaluate their own group as superior to others. This universal tendency toward ethnocentrism contributes to the sense of each group to view relations with others as one of “us” against “them.” But it is important to note that this is not true all the time. Often, members of one people find members of another interestingly different and enjoy their music or food or other traditional products. Social psychological research indicates that positive attachment to one’s country—patriotism—is separate from feelings of national superiority—nationalism. (after, Louis Kriesberg, CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICTS, Rowman and Littlefield, 2007)

With this insight into the origins and meaning of ethnocentrism, consider this discussion of becoming “civilized” by psychologist Charles Osgood. He calls it “The Neanderthal Mentality”

“‘Man is the measure of all things.’ Surely this must be a Neanderthal epigram. The whole history of the development of human science traces a progressive freeing of his measurements from the arbitrary platform of his own senses and opinions. Copernicus removed our planet from the center of the universe; Darwin removed our species from the center of God’s creative intentions; Freud removed our reason from the center of control over our behavior. But who is going to remove man’s ethnocentrism from control over his social judgments of what is good and bad?

What a person thinks is ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ usually depends upon his own range of experience. What is ‘big’ for the child may be ‘little’ for the adult; what is obviously ‘risqué’ to a New England grandmother is obviously ‘stylish’ to her teen-age granddaughter. For my teen-age son to wear his trousers barely above the buttocks is obviously sloppy; and for Khrushchev to pound his desk at the United Nations with his fists (and worse, with his shoes) is obviously ‘boorish.’ Why do these social judgments seem so obvious? Because we are seldom aware of our own norms; they are projected outward as the natural design of the universe………..
To appreciate fully the arbitrariness of our own norms it is necessary to get outside the framework provided by our own society, away from the pervasive cultural stimuli provided by our own mass media. Foreign travel is an excellent way to accomplish this, if you can bread out of the ‘American bubble’ that most of us carry around the world with us. During the past few years I have traveled in many countries in connection with cross-cultural research. I read the foreign press, to as great an extent as my linguistic talents would allow, and I found it full of refreshing heresy.

What does ‘being civilized’ mean? It means more than having protected oneself from the vagaries of the environment with thermostats, refrigerators, and bathtubs. It means more than having a deep tradition in philosophy and religion. It means more than having harnessed electricity, magnetism, gravity, and the atom. It also means understanding the workings of one’s own mind, so that its irrational tendencies can be recognized and controlled.

Think of it this way: we can describe at least three stages in the process of becoming civilized inside. At the most primitive stage, we unconsciously project our own norms onto others. Since we naively assume that everyone shares our norms, it must follow that if someone else sees as straight what to him is obviously crooked, calls tasty what to him is obviously distasteful, then this other person must be lying, evil, or at least abnormal in some way.

The second stage in becoming civilized is where we recognize the relativity of the other fellow’s norms, but not our own. This is the ‘forgive them for they know not what they do’ kind of attitude. At least, it produces a more humane approach to social problems and differences. They see things wrongly……..they behave badly……..because they have grown up without as much education and culture as we have had. This is the stage of the ‘White Man’s burden.’

The third stage in becoming civilized is arrived at with difficulty and maintained with even greater difficulty. It is where we recognize the relativity of our own norms as well as their norms. This is the parent who can see that his idea of how his teenager should dress is really arbitrary. This is the sensitive—not ‘ugly’—American who realizes that his own norms for what is clean, tasty, and even moral are not necessarily any more natural or obvious than those of the Hindu or African.

Accepting the idea of relativity in human social judgments is not the same as claiming there are no rights or wrongs, no goods or evils. In fact, it is just because human judgment is so liable to bias that we need to look for objective external criteria. The physical, biological, behavioral, and social sciences gradually provide such criteria—-for physical and mental health, for population control, for growing better crops, or even for building better bridges.”