

# Examining Cross-cultural Observations

This modelling the tools is incorporated into critical challenges at grade 10, however, it can be adapted for use at all grade levels.

## Overview

These activities help students recognize when anthropological accounts are culturally sensitive. Students are introduced to one of the anthropological accounts. Using this example, students learn about three sets of pitfalls involved in judging, interpreting and generalizing about cultures. Next, students work with a partner to examine the cross-cultural sensitivity of anthropological accounts of the cultures of New France. Their ratings and evidence are summarized in a display chart, which is evaluated by other pairs of students. Finally, students examine the cross-cultural sensitivity of a different anthropological account.

## Preplanning

Anticipate students' receptivity.

This challenge addresses three pairs of opposing concepts, each of which reveals a lack of cultural sensitivity of one form or another:

- value judgements about other cultures may be based on "cultural superiority," i.e., using our "superior" standards to judge other cultures—whatever we do is always better, or "cultural relativism"; i.e., believing that no culture's practices are better or worse than another culture's practices—whatever any culture does is acceptable
- interpretations of other cultures that may be rooted in "ethnocentrism," i.e., inappropriately applying our concepts and beliefs to explain another group's practices, or "radical uniqueness"; i.e., the impossibility of explaining another culture because no one other than those in the culture can understand anything about its practices
- generalizations about other cultures that may be rooted in "stereotypes," i.e., the oversimplification or exaggeration of the practices of a group, and "radical individualism"; i.e., the impossibility of generalizing about a culture because each person or event is so individualistic.

To meet diverse learning needs, you may want to address one, or perhaps two, of these conceptual pairings. Alternatively, rather than presenting all three pairs in one session as we have described, you may prefer to take students through the challenge using one set of concepts and later ask them to revisit the same documents a second and third time after introducing each of the other pairs of concepts. Because of the complexity of these concepts, we propose a four-step process:

1. analyze a document individually
2. analyze a document in a group
3. peer-critique other students' analyses of a document

4. analyze yet another document.

You may wish to eliminate one or more of these steps.

## Session One

Introduce the Snaidanac.

- Ask individual students to read aloud sections of an overhead transparency of **Body Rituals of the Snaidanac** (Background Information). This is a very brief Canadian adaptation of a famous 1956 article by Horace Miner (see References), where he presented an account of common American bathroom customs disguised as the rituals of a newly discovered Aboriginal group. Do not reveal to the class that this cultural group is Canadians spelled backward. Instead, indicate that this is an excerpt from an anthropological study of a previously unknown North American people. Ask the class to explain what an anthropologist does. Write the answers on the board, drawing attention to the following features:
  - the Greek root words *anthropo* and *ology* mean human study, particularly the study of human cultural practices
  - anthropologists study the culture or life ways of particular groups, usually those groups to which they do not belong
  - anthropologists try to interpret and explain other cultures.

Discuss the problem.

- Ask students to comment on what is obviously wrong with this anthropologist's explanation. In the course of the discussion, draw out that the anthropologist is on the outside of the culture: he does not see the practices from the perspectives of those who live within the culture. Or to put it another way, he does not understand what these practices mean to the people within that culture. Explain that anthropologists have a particular problem in this respect. Because they are concerned with understanding cultures other than their own, anthropologists must be especially conscious that their own belief systems do not interfere with their interpretations. They need to be sensitive to cultural differences and to suspend the tendency to judge and interpret everything through their own, narrow cultural lenses. This requires interpreting other cultures with cross-cultural sensitivity—with a sensitivity that takes anthropologists outside their own cultural frame to some extent and helps them see things from the perspective of those within the culture.

Introduce problems in judging cultures.

- Distribute a copy of **Judging Cultural Practices** (Background Information) to each student and walk students through the briefing sheet by explaining what is meant by making judgements about other cultures, including these pitfalls:
  - cultural superiority; i.e., using our "superior" standards to judge all other cultures—whatever we do is always better

- cultural relativism; i.e., believing that no culture's practices are better or worse than another culture's practices—whatever any culture does is acceptable.

Identify examples in Snaidanac account.

- Referring back to the overhead of the Snaidanac account, ask students to identify examples of these two pitfalls. On the overhead, make a note of each example next to the relevant statement. For your information, [Annotated "Snaidanac"](#) (Background Information) contains a copy of the text with our interpretations of all the pitfalls present in the account including those related to interpreting and generalizing about cultures.

Introduce cross-cultural sensitivity.

- Ask students to read the section on cross-cultural sensitivity in the briefing sheet. Point out that cultural superiority and cultural relativism are two ends of a continuum, and that cross-cultural sensitivity occupies the middle ground between these two extremes. As a form of review, write the title "Judging Cultural Practices" at the top of the board. Draw a horizontal line under the title, label the positions along the continuum and record student-generated summaries of the key ideas.

### **Judging Cultural Practices**

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#### **Cultural Superiority**

- Our cultural ways are superior.
- We can legitimately apply our own values whenever judging practices in another culture.

#### **Cross-cultural Sensitivity**

- Recognizes cultural differences.
- Is aware of dangers of judging a culture using values from outside a culture.
- Is careful to make judgements only when those values are fairly applied to the culture.

#### **Cultural Relativism**

- No culture's ways are better or worse than any other culture's.
- Everything is relative.
- Only those values held by the culture can be used to judge behaviour in that culture.

Explore problems in interpreting cultures.

- Follow the procedures discussed above to introduce the second set of cultural pitfalls, those related to interpreting cultures. Distribute a copy of [Interpreting Cultural Practices](#) (Background Information) to each student and explain what is meant by interpreting a culture and how that is different from making judgements about the culture. Explain also the two opposing pitfalls:
  - ethnocentrism; i.e., inappropriately applying our concepts and beliefs to explain another group's practices

- radical uniqueness; i.e., the impossibility of explaining another culture because no one other than those in the culture can understand its practices.

Return to the overhead transparency of the Snaidanac account and invite students to identify examples of the two forms of cultural pitfalls involved in interpreting another culture. On the overhead, make a note of each example next to the relevant statement. (Consult the annotated copy presented earlier for our identification of the pitfalls in interpreting another culture.)

Ask students to read the section on cross-cultural sensitivity in [\*\*Judging Cultural Practices\*\*](#) (Background Information). Point out that cross-cultural sensitivity occupies the middle ground between these two extremes. As a review, write the title "Interpreting Cultural Practices" at the top of the board. Draw a horizontal line under the title; label the positions along the continuum and record student-generated summaries of the key ideas.

### Interpreting Cultural Practices

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<b>Ethnocentrism</b>	<b>Cross-cultural Sensitivity</b>	<b>Radical Uniqueness</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our culture's concepts and beliefs provide the tools to explain practices in other cultures.</li> <li>• We can understand other cultures by interpreting their practices and beliefs through our own cultural lenses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizes cultural differences.</li> <li>• Is aware of dangers of interpreting cultures using concepts from outside a culture.</li> <li>• Is careful to interpret only to the extent that the concepts are appropriately applied to the culture.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No culture's concepts and beliefs can explain practices in other cultures.</li> <li>• Understanding of other cultures is not possible because each culture is unique.</li> </ul>

Explore problems with generalizations.

- Follow the procedure discussed above to introduce the third set of cultural pitfalls, those related to making generalizations about a culture. Distribute a copy of [\*\*Generalizing about Cultural Practices\*\*](#) (Background Information) to each student and explain the following:
  - what is meant by generalizing about a culture
  - how this is unavoidable when interpreting a culture
  - stereotyping; i.e., the oversimplification or exaggeration of the practices of a group
  - radical individualism; i.e., the impossibility of generalizing about a culture because each person or event is so individualistic.

Return to the overhead transparency of the Snaidanac account and invite students to identify examples of the two pitfalls involved in generalizing about a culture. On the overhead, make a

note of each example next to the relevant statement. (Consult the annotated copy presented earlier for our identification of the pitfalls in generalizing about a culture.)

Ask students to read the section on cross-cultural sensitivity in **Generalizing about Cultural Practices** (Background Information). Point out that cross-cultural sensitivity occupies the middle ground between these two extremes. As a review, write the title "Generalizing about Cultural Practices" at the top of the board. Draw a horizontal line under the title; label the positions along the continuum and record student-generated summaries of the key ideas.

### **Generalizing about Cultural Practices**

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<b>Stereotyping</b>	<b>Cross-cultural Sensitivity</b>	<b>Radical Individualism</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People within a culture are generally alike.</li><li>• There are universal, easily recognizable traits within a culture.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognizes cultural differences.</li><li>• Is aware of the dangers in generalizing about a culture.</li><li>• Is careful to make qualified generalizations based on adequate evidence.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Each culture is so diverse and complex that no generalizations are possible.</li><li>• All statements about a culture are limited to the individual person or event.</li></ul>

Pose the critical task.

- Explain to students that the earliest contact between Aboriginal peoples and Europeans in what is now Canada created considerable confusion among the two groups as they struggled to understand a culture different in so many ways from their own. Indicate to students that their homework assignment is to assess the cultural sensitivity of the early anthropologist's account of contact between Europeans and Aboriginal peoples in New France. Distribute copies of **Examining Judgements about Cultures**, **Examining Interpretations of Cultures** and **Examining Generalizations about Cultures**. Place a copy of **Examining Judgements about Cultures** on the overhead to illustrate the nature of the rating scales that appear on all three charts. Explain that, initially, students are to work at home to complete the following critical task:

Rate the cultural sensitivity of selected anthropological observations  
about 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century societies in New France.

Students should evaluate their anthropologist's cross-cultural sensitivity in judging, interpreting and generalizing about cultural practices. Each sheet contains an introductory set of remarks and then the actual anthropologist's account. Students should focus their analysis solely on the primary source. Since anthropologists are rarely totally on one side or the other, their insensitivity may appear in extreme or modest forms. In the boxes below the headings, students should record statements from the anthropologist's account that reflect each concept. Warn

students that this task is a challenging one and ask them to do their best at distinguishing between the terms and identifying examples. Explain that during the next class students will work in groups to compare their findings.

Distribute anthropological accounts.

- Eight different anthropological accounts are included as background information. We propose that seven accounts be used at this point and that the eighth be reserved for a final assessment. Each student is expected to assess only one of the seven following accounts. Provide three to five copies of each account so that every student has a copy of one of them:

[Health](#)  
[Epidemics](#)  
[State of Nature](#)  
[Feelings](#)  
[Lifestyle](#)  
[Dreams](#)  
[Origins.](#)

## **Session Two**

Share findings within groups.

- After all students have completed an initial assessment on all three scales, direct them to meet with the other students who completed the same account. Members of each group should share their ratings and evidence in an effort to reach consensus about the extent of the anthropologist's cross-cultural sensitivity on each of the three scales. Each group is to assemble its findings on a sheet of chart paper that will include the following information:
  - topic of the account
  - name of the anthropologist and date this writing was published
  - copy of the anthropological account that has been annotated (using different-coloured pens) with all the examples of sensitivities and pitfalls noted by the group (similar to the annotated Snaidanac account)
  - the consensus rating for each scale.

Critique the evaluations.

- After groups have completed and posted their summary charts around the room, ask students to pair off again, working with the same partner or a different one. Each new pair is to evaluate a different anthropologist's account (approximately two sets of partners will evaluate each summary chart). Distribute a copy of [Assessing the Examination](#) to each pair. Direct them to study the chart and evaluate the group's assessment of the anthropologist's account using the rubric as a guide. Each pair must reach consensus on the rubric ratings and provide a justification under the Comments section of the activity

sheet. As each pair finishes its assessment, encourage students to examine other summary charts.

Debrief the evaluations.

- Invite each pair to summarize the anthropologist's account and share its evaluations of the summary chart. Encourage all groups in their efforts, reminding them of the complexity of the task. As students share their assessments, you may want to confirm connections or correct misunderstandings. Collect the completed rubrics. If you trust the ratings, you may wish to include an average of each pair's score in determining a mark for the assignment.

Repeat the critical task.

- If desired, assign for homework an individual assessment of the last of the anthropological accounts. Distribute to each student a copy of [Beauty of Form and Temperament](#) (Background Information) and copies of the three evaluation charts. Direct students to complete the critical task one final time by recording their ratings and supporting evidence on the charts.

## ***Assessment***

Assess the evaluation.

- Assess students' evaluation of the cross-cultural sensitivity of the anthropological accounts recorded on the three evaluation charts using the rubric [Assessing the Examination](#). According to this rubric, each evaluation is assessed on two criteria:
  - identification and labelling of cultural sensitivities and pitfalls
  - plausible ratings.

## ***Extension***

Rewrite anthropologists' reports.

- Invite students to rewrite one of the eight anthropologists' reports so it is more culturally sensitive. If you choose to do so, you will need to provide background information or appropriate resources so students may accurately reflect the situation in a culturally sensitive way.

Work with other sources.

- In other inquiries, use the concepts and the accompanying data charts on cultural sensitivities when judging, interpreting and generalizing to analyze passages in the textbook or in other sources.

## **References**

Miner, H. "Body Ritual among the Nacirema." *American Anthropologist*, 58:3 (1956), pp. 503–507.

## **Credits**

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

## **Documents**

### Documents Summary

The following documents are referenced in the above modelling the tools. They can be adapted for your needs and re-saved.

### Graphic Organizers

- [Examining Judgements about Cultures](#) 
- [Examining Interpretations of Cultures](#) 
- [Examining Generalizations about Cultures](#) 

### Assessment

- [Assessing the Examination](#) 

### Background Information

- [Body Rituals of the Snaidanac](#) 
- [Annotated "Snaidanac"](#) 
- [Judging Cultural Practices](#) 
- [Interpreting Cultural Practices](#) 
- [Generalizing about Cultural Practices](#) 
- [Health](#) 
- [State of Nature](#) 
- [Epidemics](#) 
- [Feelings](#) 
- [Lifestyle](#) 
- [Dreams](#) 
- [Origins](#) 
- [Beauty of Form and Temperament](#) 