

Article

Received: 28-01-2019; Accepted: 18-02-2019; Published: 28-02-2019

Ethnocentrism and Bias Incidents: Is there a Common Thread?

Rifka Pratama^a

*English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University,
Semarang 50275, Indonesia*

pratamarifka@live.undip.ac.id

Abstract

This paper discusses the concepts of culture, ethnocentrism, and bias incidents targeting minority groups, in this case Muslims, in the US. The discussion about the concepts of culture is needed to give a comprehensive understanding of culture and other related topics. In other words, it helps to understand the basis of ethnocentrism. Furthermore, it elaborates both the concept of ethnocentrism and bias incidents that occur in America to find whether there is a common thread between the understanding and the phenomena. The study found that ethnocentrism could be the cause of bias incidents targeting minority groups in America. The data is obtained by using the library research method.

Keywords:Culture;Ethnocentrism; Bias Incidents; America.

1. Introduction

Known as a populous country with a multicultural, multiethnic, and multi-religious society the United States often faces social disharmony especially with regard to bias incidents and hate crimes targeting minorities. Some will presumably see these two as ideological problems. It may be associated with American history in positioning the minority groups. This includes the African-American, the Asian-American, the Arab-American, the Jewish, and, as discussed in this paper, the Muslim groups' experiences in the so-called multicultural country. And of course it is still related to racial and ethnic identity. Not to mention are those related to ideologies, sexual orientations, and social identities.

America has been facing the threat of social disharmony. A current study, cited from *the Guardian*, for example, found that in 2017 hate crimes in the United States increased by 17% by placing anti-Semitism as the main issue. There were approximately 7,200 hate crimes during this period. In this case, most hate crimes are based on racial bias, religious bias, and sexual orientation. More specifically, the 23% of hate crimes is based on religious identity bias^[1]. Further, based on the data released by FBI, there were 938 anti-Jewish incidents and 273 anti-Muslim incidents out of a total of 1,564 religious-motivated hate crimes throughout 2017. Meanwhile, anti-racial and ethnic sentiments ranked top with 4,131 with African American groups as the top targets. In addition, a sexual orientation hate crime numbered 1,130^[2].

Intellectuals and academics with their respective disciplines have a diagnosis of disharmony that occurs. The discussion about bias incidents and hate crimes within the limits of cause, effect, and resolution, however, is often inseparable from sociological and cultural disciplines. Sociology as an approach, in this case, will help to portray the situation of the conflicting community. While culture is somewhat an understanding of the sources of prejudice and discrimination. Both are needed to get a comprehensive description of the events that occurred.

In the matter of solutions of what happened now in the US, legal and political approaches are not enough. The discussion about mutual understanding needs to be taken seriously. Thus ethnocentrism is one of the subject matters in relation to the understanding. Furthermore, even though the definition is mutually different, ethnocentrism and prejudice, which is also a cultural subject, have a common thread. Some studies have shown that the basis of bias incidents, hate crimes, and things alike is a misunderstanding of culture, race and other ethnicities which is usually caused by prejudice. In this case, ethnocentrism may be one of the roots. In more straightforward language, some people are too fanatic about their culture so they fail to tolerate other communities.

2. Methods

The data are taken by applying library research. Sources of knowledge regarding social disharmony, hate crime, prejudice, discrimination, and ethnocentrism are obtained from relevant writings and other written sources. Both are printed and electronic. The data include theories, events, and statistics. The data are sorted and chosen. This process involves a socio-cultural approach. The writer, thus, can narrow down and choose the subjects relevant to the title and purpose of the study.

3. Discussion

3.1. *Understanding the Concepts of Culture*

Experts have been long trying to define what culture is. It also seems to be difficult to be able to find the equivalents or maybe a concise definition of what culture is. To begin with, it can be started from Tischler's definition. He said that culture is "all that human beings do, to use, to produce, to know, and to believe as they grow to maturity and live out their lives in the social groups to which they belong"^[3]. Then, it is Clifford Geertz, who stated that culture is "a system of inherited conceptions of expressions in forms of means which communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life"^[4]. And what is not less well-known is Edward Tylor. According to his definition, culture is "a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [a human] as a member of society"^[5]. Some of the cited experts' definitions do not seem to simplify what culture is. All of them include various aspects in defining the so-called culture. The definitions of culture are provided in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of what is referred to as culture in the matter of ethnocentrism. And of course it is to argue strongly that culture is not another name for art, traditional clothing, and language, as what some think. Therefore, culture, as understood from the existing definitions, covers not only aspects but also actions.

Since culture is not merely about such aspects as language, art, political systems, organizations, etc., but also the functions and the processes, it can be understood that culture is dynamic and thus it can develop. Some maybe do not take this into account. Further, based on what Geertz stated, that culture is used by humans to develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life, then there must be a clue that culture can change and develop. It is important to present this understanding first before discussing ethnocentrism. As ethnocentrism itself develops from the understanding that culture is a very sacred and static thing, so that to some extent this can lead to cultural superiority.

3.2. *Culture and Ethnocentrism*

It is probably uneasy to describe how culture and ethnocentrism are interrelated. Especially if the ethnocentric attitudes themselves arise in the midst of misunderstanding of what culture is. For the sake of simplicity, it can begin by defining the term. First, ethnocentrism is a tendency towards excessive preference for one's own group and thus overrides the other groups^[4]. In other words, it can be said that an ethnocentric individual is one who rigidly adheres to their culture by rejecting other groups with different cultures. Also, this terminology has more or less the same idea as some socio-

cultural terminologies including stereotyping, mirroring, prejudice, discrimination, xenophobia, racism, scapegoat theory, and enemy images^[6]. All these terms, including ethnocentrism, make culture an object and an individual as the subjects. In this case, it more or less can be described that culture is actually a thing created by society.

Let us be back to question what cultural relations and ethnocentrism are. Tischler, in his book *Introduction to Sociology*, states in a simple explanation, "people often make judgments about other cultures according to the customs and values of their own, a practice of sociologists call ethnocentrism"^[3]. There are several key ideas on the previous explanation namely judgment, culture, customs, and values. Referring to what Tischler has just stated before, if ethnocentrism is an understanding and an attitude then culture is what is addressed. Individuals use their culture to respond to people with different cultures. In this case, it tends to be unfavorable or even detrimental attitudes. In accordance with this, it can be predicted that two responses to ethnocentrism will emerge over it. The first is to accept without conflicting. The second is to confront. In many cases, ethnocentric attitudes do not only lead to verbal conflict. It, in the worst case, could lead to sectarian conflicts.

It has been previously known that ethnocentric individuals target those who have different cultures. The next question is what elements of culture are being talked here? Referring to the concepts of culture proposed by Tischler he classifies culture into two forms. The first is material culture and the second is immaterial culture. Material culture is related to material and physical matters. As he stated, "it consists of human technology — all the things human beings make and use, from small, handheld tools to skyscrapers"^[3]. While non-material culture is related to knowledge, beliefs, values and rules. How does each relate? In a simple depiction, every society with a different culture is unique in how they build houses, dress, and cook food. All of them are supported by knowledge, values, even beliefs that are very diverse.

3.3. *Bias Incidents in the US*

Data shows some increases of hate crimes and bias incidents targeting American Muslims. Data obtained from CAIR (The Council on American-Islamic Relations), for example, showed an incremental bias of 83% and a hate crime of 21% in the second quarter of 2018 in America^[7]. Referring to CAIR's definitions, bias incidents here are cases where there is an identifiable element of discrimination. While hate crimes are criminal offenses against persons or property, or incidents that can be charged as such under relevant state or federal statute. CAIR added that incidents involving government agencies, including the FBI and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, also increased by 60 percent in that period. Yet, in some places in America such as New Jersey there has been a decrease in the number of incident biases during this period^[8].

There are, of course, some reasons for those incidents. Among the most likely causes are misinformation and stereotypes. This is in line with some definitions of bias incidents. To get a complete understanding, some definitions of incident bias will be presented. First, bias incidents is interpreted as any act that is targeted by person (s) to be motivated by hostility toward one or more of their identities (ie, race, religion, nationality, sex, disability, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, etc.)^[9]. Second, bias incidents are conduct, speech or expression motivated, in whole or in part, by bias or prejudice^[10]. Thirdly, bias incidents include conduct or behavior (verbal, nonverbal, or written) that is threatening, harassing, intimidating, discriminatory, or the identity of the person or group affiliation, including (but not limited to) such things as race, age, disability status, gender, gender identity / expression, national origin, sexual orientation, or religion^[11]. To highlight, the bias incidents unfavorable attitudes, it can be both verbal and non- verbal, which targets individuals carried out on the basis of negative prejudice towards identity, affiliation, gender, country of origin, sexual orientation, or religion.

Based on the existing definitions of bias incidents and again by remembering the definitions of culture ethnocentrism is very likely to occur in the midst of the bias of incidents targeting the minority groups. At first, it is understood earlier that America is a large country with diverse backgrounds. Within such situations the threat of social disharmony in the form of hate crimes and bias incidents is likely to happen. The data has proven this. Furthermore, since culture is something that can strongly conformed by individuals and communities, in the sense that it is difficult to lose in the daily practices of individuals and groups, then culture can possibly intersects with another culture. Thus, friction is a possibility as well. In practice, there are both material and non-material cultures brought by Muslims which are seen in appropriate and even considered strange by some. This can lead to prejudice.

4. Conclusions

Understanding the concepts of culture, ethnocentrism, bias incidents and the cases, it can be concluded that all of them are interrelated. In this case, culture plays a very strong in everyday life and it could be a cult which will eventually negate other different cultures. If it is aggravated by stereotypes, it can be a far more serious threat to social harmony. In addition, Muslims, like other minorities in America, still experience quite high bias incidents.

References

- [1] "FBI data shows sharp rise in US hate crimes". The Guardian. Accessed January 28, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/13/fbi-data-hate-crimes-rise-us-report>
- [2] "2017 Hate Crimes Statistics". Criminal Justice Information Services Division FBI. Accessed January 26, 2019. <<https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2017/tables/table-1.xls>>
- [3] Tischler, Henry L. 2011. *Introduction to Sociology*: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- [4] "American Anthropologist". Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed January 26, 2019.<<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Clifford-Geertz>>.
- [5] "What is Culture?". Palomar Edu. Accessed January 27, 2019. <https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/culture_1.htm>
- [6] Öğretir, Özçelik. "The Study of Ethnocentrism, Stereotype and Prejudice: Psycho-Analytical and Psycho-Dynamic Theories". *Journal Ofqafqaz University*. 24 Fall 2008, ss. 236-244. *Literature Online*. Web September 2008
- [7] "CAIR Report: Anti-Muslim Bias Incidents, Hate Crimes Spike in Second Quarter of 2018". Council on American-Islamic Relations: CAIR. Accessed January 25, 2019. <https://www.cair.com/cair_report_anti_muslim_bias_incidents_hate_crimes_spike_in_second_quarter_of_2018>
- [8] "Anti-Muslim bias cases are on the rise, except in New Jersey". Northjersey. Accessed January 26, 2019. <<https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/nation/2018/04/23/donald-trump-travel-ban-spike-bias-incidents-muslims/542799002/>>
- [9] "Report a Bias Incident". Valparaiso University. Accessed January 28, 2019. <<https://www.valpo.edu/bias/31-2/about/>>
- [10] "Identifying and Responding to Bias Incidents". Teaching Tolerance. Accessed January 26, 2019. <<https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/identifying-and-responding-to-bias-incidents>>
- [11] "How Much Discrimination Do Muslims Face in America?". Emma Green, The Atlantic. Accessed January 27, 2019. <<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/american-muslims-trump/534879/>>