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Is the “Best Country” the Only One that Matters?

Land of the free. Home of the brave. The best country in the world. The many names given to the United States of America indicate that the typical American considers their country to be the most powerful, the freest, and, overall, just plain better than all the rest. While the line between pride and nationalism is a thin, dangerous one, it is commonly thought that pride in one's country is an admirable trait. It can be, as long as it includes a healthy criticism of America's laws and policies when needed, as well as a respect for the progress and cooperation of the other countries in the world. Unfortunately, American pride is often centered around superiority and ethnocentrism, an unhealthy way to assess other countries and cultures based on what Americans consider to be normal. The American tradition of ethnocentric thinking hinders international cooperation and understanding, creating stereotypes and misconceptions that harm any and all foreign peoples.

In American media, other cultures are often defined only by their perceived differences to American culture rather than by their unique qualities, making it difficult for Americans to recognize similarities in foreigners. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie came to the United States from Nigeria to attend university. Her roommate, having only been shown the stark differences between her home and Africa, immediately expected someone with whom she could never relate to, instead finding a girl who spoke her same language and listened to her same music (Adichie). With such an emphasis on differences, people are trained to look for those

instead of searching for similarities. If only Adichie's roommate had instead been informed of the diversity in African culture, she would have had an immediate understanding of Adichie, who would have had a much smoother transition into this foreign country. If America prides itself on being a place where people can be safe and achieve their dreams, Americans should be creating a welcoming, safe environment for every immigrant into the country, instead of exuding rejection and hurling insults. While, as in the case of Adichie, the misconceptions created by American misunderstanding were not necessarily harmful for her, a foreigner, they can easily make outsiders feel ostracized and misunderstood, in return creating negative stereotypes of America as well. This vicious circle caused by inaccurate cultural expectations inhibits cooperation between countries and creates an air of uneasiness for all world travelers.

Especially when outside of the sphere of western Europe, the United States looks down on other countries that have substantially contrasting views to their own. Because America considers its own values as standard, immigrants and refugees from foreign countries in need, such as Syria, are rejected based on this fear of the unknown. This is when the seemingly harmless ethnocentric views held by Americans hurt, or even cost the lives of, foreigners. One man, Brandon Stanton, aims to counteract Syrian misconceptions through a project called Humans of New York: Refugee Stories. By photographing and detailing refugees' emotions and losses throughout their harrowing journeys, he succeeds in demonstrating the similarities among all human beings, and, through these stories, cannot help but to evoke empathy and compassion for people previously misunderstood or even feared. The refugee crisis is one of the most glaring examples of the damaging American opinion that the "best country in the world" only needs to protect its own, and that no other lives are worth as much as an American's. This thought process, coupled with fear based on ignorance, discourages aid to scared foreign families, based

on the underlying concern that they are simply too different. If only all Americans read Stanton's stories, perhaps the United States would begin working toward global cooperation by participating in the international effort to help those who need it, no matter where they were born.

If Americans only saw their "normal" culture from a different perspective, they would finally observe the ridiculousness of ethnocentrism and the division it creates between peoples. This is precisely what Horace Miner accomplished in his essay, "Body Ritual among the Nacirema". In this work, Miner sheds a light on how ethnocentrism warps a culture into something strange and uncivilized, rather than something relatable. By presenting American culture as having "such unusual aspects that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go," Miner begins the essay with an image of a barbaric, bizarre group of people who obviously have nothing in common with today's proud American (1). He continues by detailing usual American morning routines in a way that resembles the magical rituals of a tribal group devoid of modern technology (2-5). By displaying American life in this way, it becomes clear that any culture can become something completely incomprehensible depending on how it is skewed. How we see the world and each other, if not based on direct experience, is all based on who relays the information. It is easy to see how quickly stereotypes can be formed after reading the essay, because suddenly every person in the group Miner depicted is the same. He doesn't note the variation between individuals or try to make them relatable to the reader, but instead succeeds in making Americans unappealing and delusional. The realization after analyzing this essay may force Americans to reconsider their superiority complex surrounding foreign countries, and to stop interpreting different as something that should be avoided instead of embraced.

Many Americans are working to help their fellow citizens wake up from the media-induced delusions most have. Advocates like Brandon Stanton and Horace Miner, or immigrants like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, need only to raise awareness of the disillusion Americans have regarding the world around them. It may take global tragedies, such as the Rwandan Genocide, or the more recent Syrian Civil War, to evoke compassion and a call to action in some Americans, but to others the same events may just serve to affirm their unfounded beliefs. A very common perspective in America often goes unnoticed, although being one of the most dangerous motives to reject other cultures. It is the idea that no foreign life is worth saving if it may risk just one American life. If it goes unanalyzed, it seems almost logical: of course one should protect his own nation at any cost. However, looking closer at the concept reveals that an American life is evaluated as being worth more than hundreds, even thousands, of any other lives. If one thinks of these lives in terms of people, regardless of nationality, it seems clear that saving many lives is well worth the possibility of risking one. This was exemplified in the United States' role in the Rwandan genocide of the 1990s. While having the power to stop the war early, they decided it was too risky for Americans to get involved, leaving hundreds of thousands more people to needlessly die (Rusesabagina and Zoellner). In summary, the misconceptions that arise from American ethnocentrism, a view that essentially judges other countries for not being American enough, can range from hurtful to deadly. If it's hurtful, it causes the rest of the world to look down on the United States as a country that rejects outsiders, disregarding the fact that it used to proudly be called a "melting pot" of cultures. It could also be deadly, either as a driving force of hate crimes, or as a refusal to acknowledge pain in the world because it doesn't directly affect natural-born American citizens. If America doesn't realize its ethnocentrism and start to respect diversity throughout the globe, it will eventually become isolated from the rest of the world.

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