

**Title:** Danish Baby Carriage on the Curb: An Introduction to Ethnocentrism

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**Abstract:** This interactive lesson introduces students to the concepts of ethnocentrism, cultural relativity, and cultural discontinuity using the parenting of babies as a case study.

**Estimated Time:** Two 45-minute sessions or one 90-minute session

**ASA High School National Standard Competency:**

Domain 2 – Social Structure: Culture, Institutions, and Society

**Assessable Competencies:**

2.1 – Students will describe the components of culture.

2.1.1 – Nonmaterial culture, including norms and values

2.1.2 – Material culture

2.2 – Students will analyze how culture influences individuals, including themselves.

2.2.1 – Ethnocentrism

2.2.2 – Cultural relativity

**Assessments:**

1. Small group response table and annotation activity (for students to complete toward the end of the lesson's first part)
2. Large group discussion of the article's cultural explanations (for students to complete at the beginning of the lesson's second part)
3. Individual exit slip (for students to complete at the end of the lesson's second part)

**Materials Provided:**

1. Slideshow
2. Handout A: District Attorney Exercise
3. Handout B: Culture as Explanatory Exercise
4. Individual Debriefing Exercise
5. Resources about Baby Boxes and Parenting Handout

**Activity Background:**

This lesson plan was originally developed to introduce the concepts of ethnocentrism, cultural relativity, and cultural discontinuity in a high school sociology course's unit on culture.

**Class Activity Procedure:**

1. *Lecture Setup (5-10 minutes)*. Start with a brief lecture about how sociologists use culture to explain the social practices comprising everyday life. Note that sociologists understand culture as meaning. Meaning comes from social processes (e.g., socialization) and shapes social practices (e.g., child rearing), which involve material and nonmaterial objects.

Display pictures of famous people being “bad parents.” The provided slides feature some examples, including more mild instances of actress Julia Stiles (who improperly positioned her baby in a carrier, without its legs dangling out), supermodel Chrissy Teigen (who could have broken her daughter’s leg by going down the slide with her), and actor Val Kilmer (who was in arrears with child support payments). More extreme examples are pop star Britney Spears (who drove with her baby on her lap), actor Charlie Sheen (who threatened the life of his children’s mother in their kids’ presence), and film director Woody Allen (who married his 21-year-old stepdaughter).

While displaying these images, ask students to describe what they see. Inquire whether these images depict bad parents, if they know of any other examples of bad celebrity parents, how they know what constitutes a “bad parent” and/or what is “bad parenting.” The goal is to get students thinking about the existence of widely held beliefs about undesirable or unacceptable parenting.

Avoid derailing the lesson with discussion of “good parenting,” since the first part of this lesson requires students to consider whether and how to prosecute parents who transgress the dominant collective understanding of acceptable child rearing.

2. *Case Study (10 minutes)*. This lesson’s focus is what it means to provide desirable or appropriate care for an infant. More specifically, what does it mean when a parent leaves a baby in its stroller on the street curb on a cold day? Offer some guiding questions, such as: Is this an example of fit or unfit parenthood? Why? How do we know? So what? Why does it matter?

Share the case study by reading the slide, “One Time in New York City.” Continue to display this slide during the small group work.

3. *Small Group Work (10 minutes)*. Put students into small groups of 4-5. Distribute Handout A, which directs each group to act as the district attorney and decide how to move forward with the situation of the baby left in a carriage on the curb.

Explain that each small group should summarize their responses to the questions on Handout A. If students are meeting online and/or have stable access to the internet, the response table could be posted on a shareable word processing program (e.g., Google Docs). If students are meeting in-person and/or have access to a large board and writing utensils, each group can name a representative to write their response on the board. Either visualization will help facilitate one of the lesson's assessments and the large group discussion.

As small groups talk, circulate to ensure students understand the activity. Check for questions. Help focus their attention by reminding them to think from the perspective of the New York District Attorney. The instructor can also ask questions, such as: To whom are they responsible? What are the key factors that weigh their decision to charge the mother? Should the Danish mother and the American father be treated differently, given their different nationalities? How should similar offenses be adjudicated in the future?

4. *Assess Small Group Response Table & Large Group Discussion (15-20 minutes)*. After all small groups have completed the Small Group Response Table (see Handout A), read each summary aloud for the class.

Students should then go through the digital document or to the physical board and mark up the table, noting their agreement or disagreement with the different group positions. Assign each student a symbol (e.g., \$, %, ^, !). Each group's summary position can thus be received by the entire class, and supplied feedback. Highlight majors points of consensus and contention within the class using the marked-up summary table.

Also, pose questions to generate student discussion about the patterns they see in how the groups responded to the situation. How were the parents treated? What reasons justify the groups' decisions to prosecute or not? What role did beliefs about babies being left alone in carriages as fit or unfit parenting play in their decisions?

To conclude this first part of the lesson, return to the sociological idea that normative practices are rooted in specific contexts, which vary across time and place. Tensions occur when people across contexts interact, and when people are judged based on norms they do not hold. In the lesson's second half, students will rethink this case from the Danish perspective.

–The end of first 45-minute lesson or the half-way point in a 90-minute lesson–

5. *Culture as Explanatory Individual Exercise & Large Group Discussion (10-15 minutes)*. As needed, remind students of the previous lesson segment focused on the Danish mother who left her baby in a stroller outside of a Manhattan cafe in the cold. While the previous lesson focused on interpreting the situation from an American perspective, this lesson will take on a Danish perspective. In Denmark, leaving babies in their carriages on the curb is a widely accepted practice.

Distribute Handout B. Tell students to individually read the article, published on a popular parenting blog called *Fatherly*. Direct students to highlight and number (e.g., 1, 2, etc.) the sections of the text that offer cultural explanations for leaving babies on the curb.

Facilitate a large group discussion by asking students to share one cultural explanation they identified in the *Fatherly* article. Next, get students thinking about how meaning is generated through social relationships within a shared context by asking questions like: What meaning do Danes assign to the parenting practice of leaving babies in their carriages on the curb? How does the Danish perspective differ from Americans' typical take on this practice?

What factors about Denmark might shape this widespread practice? How do Danish people perceive parents who leave their baby outside in a stroller?

Pose different scenarios to students so that they are considering lots of possibilities that highlight the need to consider wider context to begin to understand the meaning of a cultural practice from an insider's perspective. For example, what if the mom brought the baby into the smoky cafe? What if the mom never let the baby leave the house when it was cold out? How are these behaviors based on beliefs on what is good for a baby, what is bad for a baby, and what is unacceptable parenting?

Explore how insiders possess understanding of its own group's norms that outsiders may lack. What are some consequences of judging outsiders by cultural norms that they do not hold? Why do insiders tend to see their cultural practices as superior to outsiders' practices?

Be sure to explicitly discuss the role of nonmaterial objects, such as beliefs, that shape the notion of acceptable parenting. What is good for a baby? Should they be outside? Can they get cold? Can they be out in the snow?

6. *Large Group Discussion of Material Objects (10-15 minutes)*. Display images of babies in unattended strollers along the streets and in snowy yards. Slowly click through the images, giving students time to process how many babies are parked on the curb in their carriages around Denmark and other Scandinavian countries.

Play two videos. The first is a one-minute clip (In the Know 2017). Set-up the clip by saying that other groups and the societies they have formed have their own perspectives on how to care for babies in very cold climates. Note this video has instrumental background music and text that appears on the screen to provide information.

The second is around five minutes long (A Kind of Adventurous Life 2016). Preface the clip by explaining that this practice of leaving babies in their carriages on the curb in cold weather is widespread across several countries that have extremely cold winters.

Discuss the role of material objects in this cultural practice and the assumptions that groups have about material objects. Prompts could include assumptions about material objects. What do students think of when they hear “cafe” (not a smoky place if you are American, but a smoky place if you are Danish in the late 1990s), or “baby carriage”? Who would buy a polar survival snow suit for an infant? How much fresh air is ideal for a baby?

7. *Conclusion and Assessment (10-15 minutes)*. Conclude by introducing the three key concepts of this lesson, one at a time: ethnocentrism, cultural relativity, and cultural discontinuity. Ask the students to offer their guess at what each term means using the provided slides before showing them a definition.

Emphasize that culture influences individuals in terms of how they judge others and how those judgments reflect broader belief systems, as well as how they make decisions about how to navigate everyday life.

Conclude the story of the Danish baby carriage in New York City. Note how the transgression of cultural norms can lead to a range of consequences. Sometimes mild and other times more severe, violating norms has consequences that are

especially complex for people who are cultural outsiders because they are being judged by rules that do not hold.

Distribute Individual Debriefing Exercise to complete the lesson's final assessment.

**Possible Next Steps:**

Teach students about baby boxes and parenting (see Resources about Baby Boxes and Parenting). Discuss the different ways “the state” can shape parenthood and childhood, as well as what resources are distributed to families, and/or how stigma around poverty varies across race and gender.

Teach students about celebrities. Discuss the role of fame and celebrity in American culture, as well as how status and reputation are created through social processes.

**Supplemental Resources for Students:**

\*Resources about Baby Boxes and Parenting Handout

Clawson, Dan and Gerstel, Naomi. 2002. “Caring for Our Young: Child Care in Europe and the United States.” *Contexts* 1(4):28-35.

Edin, Kathryn. 2018. “One Misfortune Away.” Vimeo video. Retrieved July 19, 2022 (<https://vimeopro.com/asasoc/insights/video/267480294>).

Frederick, Angela. 2014. “Mothering While Disabled.” *Contexts* 13(4):30-35.

Randles, Jennifer. 2017. “The Diaper Dilemma.” *Contexts* 16(4):66-68.

Sternheimer, Karen. 2008. “HOLYWOOD Doesn’t Threaten Family Values. *Contexts* 7(4):44-48.

Sternheimer, Karen. 2011. “Enduring Dilemmas of Female Celebrity.” *Contexts* 10(3):44-49.

**Supplemental Resources for Teachers:**

\*Resources about Baby Boxes and Parenting Handout

Garcia, Angela Cora. 2014. “The ‘Outsider/Insider’ Assignment: A Pedagogical

Innovation for Teaching Cross-Cultural Understanding." *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 26(3):454-462.

Gusfield, Joseph R. "Culture." *Contexts* 5(1):43-44.

Fine, Gary Alan. 2008. "Reputation." *Contexts* 7(3):78-79.

Levy, Diane E. 1992. "Teaching Family Ritual: Sunday, Sausage, and Solidarity." *Teaching Sociology* 20(4):311-313.

McCabe, Janice. 2019. "The Corner, the Canopy, and the Iconic Ghetto." *Contexts* 18(1):10-11.

Miller, Elizabeth. 2014. "Learning to Interpret Cultural Meaning through an Etic Description of a Familiar Culture." *Teaching Sociology* 42(4):298-302.

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

Schopmeyer, Kim D. and Bradley J. Fisher. 1993. "Insiders and Outsiders: Exploring Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativity in Sociology Courses." *Teaching Sociology* 21(2):148-153.

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A Kind of Adventurous Life. 2016. "Some Facts about Babies in Finland." YouTube video. Retrieved July 10, 2022 (<https://youtu.be/OdjLubdvCps>).

Dufour, Jeff. 2020. "Why Danish Parents Leave Their Kids on the Curb at Stores and Restaurants." *Fatherly*, August 3. Retrieved July 10, 2022 (<https://www.fatherly.com/love-money/why-danish-parents-leave-their-children-outside-in-strollers>).

Harden, Blaine. 1997. "A Baby Alone Lands Parents in N.Y. Jail." *The Washington Post*, May 14. Retrieved July 10, 2022 ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/05/14/a-baby-alone-lands-parents-in-ny-jail/5ba88b9b-a323-4b09-b4e7-dc4e9a780ffd/?utm\\_term=.d0728ebc6d3a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/05/14/a-baby-alone-lands-parents-in-ny-jail/5ba88b9b-a323-4b09-b4e7-dc4e9a780ffd/?utm_term=.d0728ebc6d3a)).

In the Know. 2017. "Why Newborn Babies in Sweden Sleep Outside in the Cold." YouTube video. Retrieved July 10, 2022 ([https://youtu.be/I\\_4kyrFGH9Q](https://youtu.be/I_4kyrFGH9Q)).

Kallick Dyssegaard, Elisabeth. 1997. "The Danes Call It Fresh Air." *New York Times*,

May 17. Retrieved July 10, 2022

(<https://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/17/opinion/the-danes-call-it-fresh-air.html>).

Reuters. 1997. "Charges Against Danish Mother Dropped in N.Y." *L.A. Times Archives*,

May 17. Retrieved July 10, 2022 ([http://articles.latimes.com/1997-05-](http://articles.latimes.com/1997-05-17/news/mn-59633_1_criminal-charges)

[17/news/mn-59633\\_1\\_criminal-charges](http://articles.latimes.com/1997-05-17/news/mn-59633_1_criminal-charges)).