

30-Minute Activity

Examine how and why humans tend to describe those who differ from us as “less than.”

1. Read the passage below that explains how and why early 20th-century anthropologists described the Neanderthals as primitive and only indirectly related to human beings.
2. Discuss these main points described in the passage you just read:
 - The outlook of 19th- and 20th-century scientific communities on prehistoric humans
 - How inherent bias has clouded the understanding of Western culture on the Neanderthal
 - Reasons why the scientific study in the late 19th and early 20th centuries held that previous cultures lacked sophistication.
3. Then discuss the following questions:
 - Do you feel modern-day cultures hold inherent biases against other modern-day cultures? If so, provide examples. If not, explain why not?
 - What impact do inherent biases have on our understanding of other cultures and peoples? Is this level of understanding a positive or negative? Explain how?
 - What can people do today to go beyond their inherent biases to better understand cultures different from theirs?
4. Write a paragraph or two expressing your thoughts on the subject.

The European and American scientific communities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries held a very low opinion of early humanoids including the Neanderthals. Scientific accounts in the early 20th century described ancient man like the Neanderthal as savage, less intelligent and less equipped to inherit the earth. They pointed to their examinations of prehistoric specimens and to the fact that most of these societies became extinct. Scholars believed

that cavemen societies wandered aimlessly across Europe hunting and gathering food, while modern man invented agriculture, established cities and trade routes and built sophisticated societies. Compared to humans, Neanderthals were more savage and tended to use brute force rather than reason to solve problems and meet challenges. These descriptions of the Neanderthal's existence led scientists to conclude Neanderthals had a primitive culture. But recent discoveries like the Shanidar Neanderthal have caused anthropologists to believe the Neanderthal was more advanced and possibly more like modern man.

Why did so many earlier anthropologists have such a low opinion of Neanderthals? Social scientists today believe that some scientific study in the late 19th and early 20th centuries held preconceived notions based on inherent biases that reflected those of society, European dominance and a belief that previous civilizations and cultures were inferior to Western society. Many at the time believed that modern man would survive evolution because of humanity's uniqueness. We possess a high degree of ingenuity, as demonstrated by our tools and our culture, that defines us as uniquely human. To think that the Neanderthal was more like modern humans threatens the uniqueness and presumed superiority we give ourselves.

Common Core Standard(s) met:

CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCRA.R.2 Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CCRA.R.8 Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.