

**Discuss the sources of cultural bias in psychological theory and research,  
and how they have (or have not) been addressed.**

Cultural bias is one of many biases to be found in psychological theory and research, and is sometimes also referred to as 'Eurocentric bias'. The term describes the way in which the majority of theoretical and practical psychology has been carried out in Western cultures, and has been applied unthinkingly on a global scale. As an extension of this, the fact that many of the researchers are also heterosexual males lead to the consideration of other biases such as androcentric, and heterosexist biases in their work.

Within psychology, 'culture' has been defined as the "man-made part of the environment" (Segall *et al.*, 1990), but as individuals are affected by their culture, so they affect culture. Moghaddam *et al.* (1993) summarise this dependence: "humans have an interactive relationship with culture: we create and shape culture, and are in turn influenced by our own cultural products" which illustrates the complexity of the human element within any culture.

The differences between cultures have been identified by Triandis (1990) as "cultural syndromes" which he describes as "a pattern of values, attitudes, beliefs, norms and behaviours than can be used to contrast a group of cultures to another groups (sic) of cultures". It is the increased awareness of these 'cultural syndromes' which have lead to the observance of eurocentric bias in psychology.

There are three main ways in which cultural bias affects research, and these lead to biased theories being formed. The principal bias is the researcher's choice of experiment participants. The majority of British and American research is carried out by researchers on members of their own cultures, and the preponderance of the participants are psychology undergraduates who are likely to respond in a predictable manner meaning that the results are unrepresentative not only on a global scale, but also within their own culture. This seemingly absurd situation is brought about for two reasons, firstly there is only minimal cost to recruit participants, and secondly is indicative the researchers' lack of interest in considering cultural variations. There is also the consideration of researchers avoiding socially sensitive

studies which could lead to the violation of existing cultural values. This bias is clearly demonstrated in a study of psychology textbooks which revealed that in America, 94% of the studies referred to were American (Baron & Byrne, 1991), and in Britain, 68% of the cited studies were also American (Hewstone *et al.*, 1988).

If a Western researcher attempts to overcome this problem by using members of the alien culture as participants it leads to another source of bias. Research has to be based upon something, and as Berry (1969) indicates, it “usually involves an instrument of observational technique rooted in the researcher’s own culture”. This means that the researcher is taking an emic (a perspective from their ‘home’ culture), and using it as the basis for a comparison between the two cultures – an ‘imposed etic’. Such a flaw in the experimental design means that any results that are possible to attain will be a nonsense as they are looking at the culture from an unrealistic perspective. A study involving boys at a summer camp (an event peculiarly American) had to be abandoned in Lebanon (Diab, 1970) as the concept of the summer camp, and having to co-operate with one’s peers was incomprehensible to the eleven year old boys from the non-industrialised society. The implication of this flawed design method is that standards are set by which all other cultures are compared, regardless of the validity of the comparison. However, should such a designed study in fact *prove* American finding, or match American emic standards, it would allow the consideration of genuine universal psychological theories.

Were all these factors to be overcome, it is no guarantee that the findings will help shape new theories as the final major source of cultural bias can be seen by the way in which research and theories are broadcast to other psychologists. The main source of disseminating information is through professional journals in the written form. This enables the findings to be edited, or filtered by the dominant (publishing) culture, and as such, non-mainstream information may be excluded. This means that new textbooks can draw only on the filtered body of published knowledge, which simply serves to perpetrate the eurocentric ideals. This evidence for this can be seen in the above figures regarding the percentage of information in textbooks based on American studies. This ultimate control of the dissemination of knowledge

exemplifies the eurocentric bias in which non-Western views and opinions are either marginalised or ignored.

The extent of this problem is illustrated by Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (1994) who accuse psychology not of cultural bias, but of racism. Although there are negligible biological differences between cultures, the view persists that cultures are (very) different despite contradictory scientific evidence. To help correct this bias, cross-cultural psychology has become an important way to conduct research. Cross-cultural psychology is said to be “concerned with the systematic study of behaviour and experience as it occurs in different cultures, is influenced by culture, or results in changes in existing cultures” (Triandis, 1990), meaning that it avoids the tendency to judge everyone by the researchers’ ethnicity, and considers the subjects in their respective cultural environment.

The choice of the sample population is a concern that is readily addressed, but it leads to the problem of the imposed etic as discussed above. For Western psychologists to carry out studies on alien cultures Berry (1969) suggested the employment of a set of ‘derived etic’ generalisations. This means that the participants are observed in their natural environment, to learn about their culture specific traditions, before the studies are executed. This enables the studies to be designed from a more emic viewpoint, which would lead to a set of results that can be considered in the correct cultural context.

The way in which studies are carried out also has to be considered: as Western psychologists conceive the studies, assumptions are falsely made about the alien culture’s ability to understand and interpret the language used, and to grasp concepts necessary to the study. The different ways in which an idea, or statements may be interpreted are termed ‘equivalences’. Translation equivalence (or the language difference) is apparent where there are no words or phrases in the foreign language to express the concepts conveyed in the original language. It is possible to test the reliability of the translation by using a method called ‘back-translation’ where one person translates the original into the foreign language, and another person translates the foreign version back to the original language. By comparing the original and

resultant versions, the researcher is able to see whether it has in fact been possible to express the concepts in another language, and the success of the first translation can be gauged by the similarity between the original and resultant versions.

Conceptual equivalence, where concepts need to be grasped by another culture, is based on the assumption that while the general concept will be the same between cultures, the way in which it is conveyed or expressed will probably be different. To overcome this requires the identification of the etic aspects of the concept that the researcher is trying to use, and seeing how they relate to the emic ideas of the culture being studied. Using emic terms in the research will mean that the concepts are made relevant to the culture being studied.

Even if all these conditions are met, it has been conjectured that the development of a 'culture-fair' test is very difficult, and "will probably never be completely successful" (Segall *et al.*, 1990). This means that the interpretation of any cross-cultural study need to be conducted within the relevant cultural context, and that "the degree to which we are measuring the same thing in more than one culture, whether we are using the same or different test items must always worry us" (Segall *et al.*, 1990).

The publishing and inclusion of collected data can be improved only by journals reviewing their editorial procedures and practices, and developing formal ethical requirements. While it is a sizeable problem, people have to be aware that positive work can be carried out at a number of levels to help facilitate change, which will, in the long term, allow theories to be developed on a global scale without the biases currently associated with them.

On an individual level, a psychologist needs to be sensitive and empathise with the bias, rather than ignore it. They must therefore pay attention to the interpretation of their results, and the way in which their results are used, otherwise they could easily be guilty of eurocentrism in any resultant theories.

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While the sources of cultural bias are wide ranging and present problems to researchers, the problems are surmountable, as has been discussed, and to enable the continuing development of psychological understanding it is necessary that they be addressed. Indeed, Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (1994) argue that “we have a moral obligation to challenge cultural bias and racism, otherwise we are guilty of complicity”.

(1502 words)

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