

Cultural Bias in Psychological Research

So far, we have seen how cultural bias can occur when a construct derived from one society is used inappropriately in another (imposed etic), when one's own culture is regarded as 'normal' and all others in some way 'deviant' (ethnocentrism) and when a belief in the superiority of one's own culture leads one to denigrate or regard as irrelevant the characteristics and traditions of other cultures (racism).

Some researchers have attempted to address the problem of cultural bias by extending their work from the West into other cultures. There are two general approaches to this:

- Studying a range of different cultures to find out about the variability of human behaviour (cross-cultural psychology)
- Studying a range of different cultures to find out about the universal features of human behaviour (sometimes called trans-cultural psychology).

Either way, it is considered a good start if psychologists actually go out and study people from non-westernised cultures, rather than simply generalising from Western samples. Two possible approaches to studying members of other cultures include:

- The replicative approach – exporting your studies to other countries and carrying them out there, then comparing results with your own culture.
- The anthropological approach – going to different societies and observing and interacting with their members as they go about their daily lives, to try and get a feel for their way of doing things and understanding the world.

Both of these approaches have their strengths and weaknesses.

What you need to do...

In pairs or threes, discuss the problems that a researcher might encounter when:

- (a) Arranging to replicate the Milgram obedience experiment in Lapland
- (b) Gathering data about the lives and worldview of the Iq

And when we've discussed that...

- (c) Find out about some of the criticisms that have been made of Margaret Mead's anthropological work in places like Papua New Guinea and Samoa. To what extent do these criticisms affect the trust we can place in her work?

And here's something to think about...

When we talk about 'members of other cultures' in the way we have, are we guilty of a cultural bias ourselves?