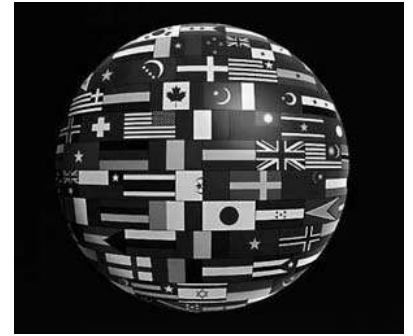


## Controversies in Psychology: Cultural Bias

(pg 160-161)

What I will need to know:

- Be able to describe the issue of cultural bias in psychology
- Evaluate the issue of cultural bias in psychology
- Be able to apply to a novel situation
- Be able to discuss:
  - Cross cultural studies
  - Difference or bias?
  - Ethnocentrism
  - Historical and social context



### Introduction

During your studies of psychology, especially in component 3, the issue of culture bias in psychology has appeared numerous times. You can use relevant content to discuss the wider issue of culture bias here, as well as content from year 12.

**What do we mean by “culture”?** *Culture can be defined as groups of people that may differ in terms of their norms, behaviours, practices, language, values, beliefs, ethnic background, language, location etc. Their life experience and behaviours may be very different to each other. It is not the same as nationality: you could live in a particular country, but belong to another culture. Culture can also be separated into **subcultures**. Subculture: ‘cultures that are within cultures’ Lots of mini/sub cultures that exist and/or may be separate from the main culture in terms of things like: age, (dis)ability, gender, class, sexual orientation, language, values, beliefs, ethnic background. England is a good example. There are many sub cultures: Afro-Caribbean’s, Polish, old people, Northerners, Posh people, Homosexuals, Jewish people, deaf people, poor people etc. The way of life of these people may be very similar to the dominant culture, or may be different.*

**What is “culture bias”?** Culture bias is the act of interpreting and judging behaviour and psychological characteristics of one culture by holding them to the standards of your own. In psychology this can take a number of different forms; either by theories developed in one culture which are then applied inappropriately to all others, or through biased research methods which only use participants which are not representative of all cultures. Psychology is often accused of being culturally biased. Much of the research carried out has been on white American or European undergraduate students, the results of which have then been applied to all people the world over. Depending upon the behaviour being investigated, this may or may not be appropriate.

*Brain storm: what issues of culture bias have we come across before in psychology? Think about the topics from C3 as well as the things you learned in Y12.*

## 1. Cross cultural Studies

**Cross cultural** psychology is a field of psychology that aims to investigate the effect of various cultural practices on human behaviour where cultures are compared and contrasted. Most cross cultural psychology has involved comparisons between different nations or countries. Cross cultural studies are often used as a way to determine whether a particular behaviour is universal (and therefore likely to be due to an innate biological cause such as genes) or whether it varies from culture to culture (and is therefore likely to be due to environmental and cultural factors).



*What studies have we come across that make comparisons between different cultures?*

### *Advantages*

- Cross cultural studies are a good way to help us understand what is innate about human behaviour. For example, much sexual behaviour is the same from culture to culture, suggesting that it is innate.
- It can also help us understand what is determined by our environment. For example, the symptoms of schizophrenia seem to be influenced by cultural expectations, with hearing voices being perceived as threatening in the West, but comforting in other parts of the world.

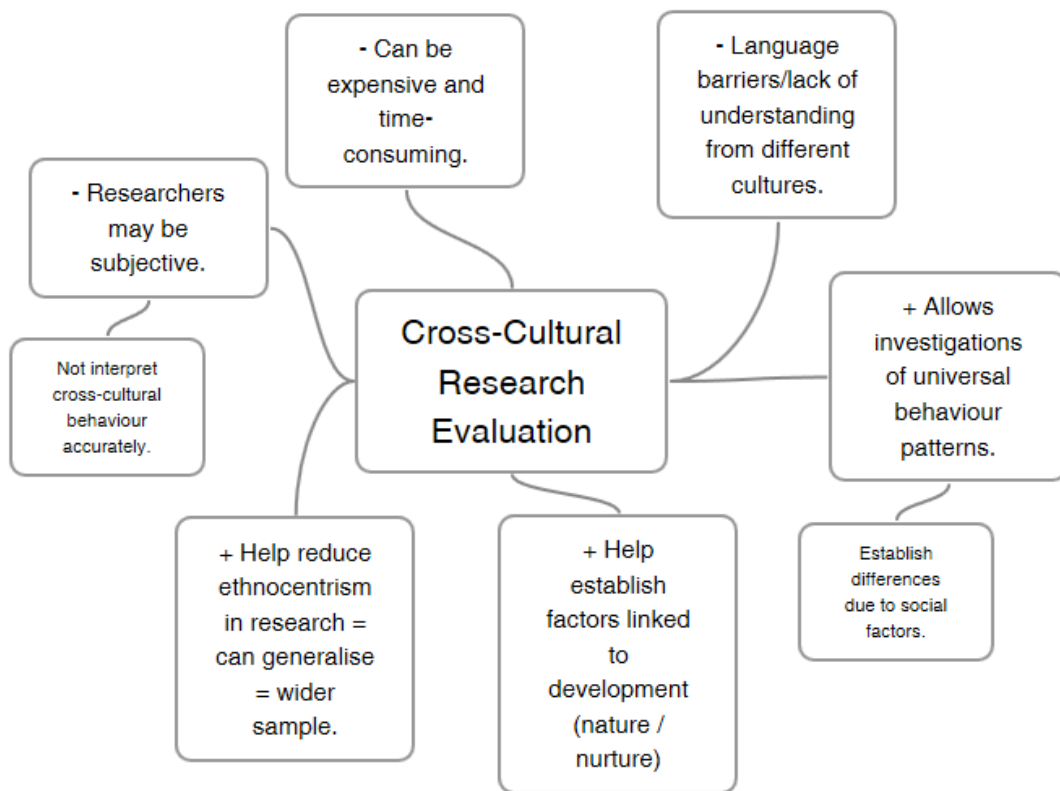
### *Disadvantages*

- When psychologists perform studies on groups from a culture that is very different from their own, they may misunderstand that culture, and interpret what they observe through the eyes of their own culture. For example, in Nigeria, a common symptom of depression is a feeling of crawling on the skin. As this is not a common symptom of depression in the West, this may be misinterpreted as a symptom of psychosis. This **observer bias** can be a big issue. Psychologists, just like everyone else are socialised within a particular culture, and will usually hold the norms of that culture. Behaviour that deviates from their norms may be misunderstood, or interpreted in a way that makes sense to them rather than as a reflection of reality.
- The tools that are used by psychologists tend to be biased towards a Western view of mental health or ability. These tools may not be appropriate for all cultures that may hold different views or who think differently. This can be of particular issue when investigating intelligence for example. If an intelligence test is developed based in Western ideas of logic or reasoning, other cultural groups who think in a different way may score lower, and the researcher may assume that group has a lower intelligence. The use of psychological tests that have been devised in one culture and then used in another is called an **imposed etic**
  - A good example of this is **Cole et al (1971)** who asked adult members of the Kpelle tribe in Africa to sort familiar objects into groups. In Western societies, people would sort the objects into categories (food, tools etc). The Kpelle tribes people sorted them into functional groups (a knife with an orange because an orange can be cut by a knife). This suggests that what is intelligent behaviour can differ from culture to culture. (when the Kpelle were shown how to sort the items in a “Western” way, they thought it was a stupid way of doing so!).



How might Kohlberg's study of moral development have an imposed etic?

- Another issue with cross cultural studies is that we are ignoring **subcultural differences**. No one sample of people is going to be representative of the whole culture. Therefore, can we really make generalisations from one culture to another based upon the differences between the two small samples of participants? **Vandello and Cohen (1999)** for example found that the individualistic culture (self-centred approach) applied to most Americans in the Mountain West and the Great Plains, whereas a more collectivist culture (group centred approach) applied in the Deep South.



Look at the cross cultural studies you identified earlier. Do any of these evaluation points apply to them?

## 2. Difference or Bias?

When studies are done cross culturally, if we find a difference between two cultures, does that mean that there is genuinely a difference, or does that difference reflect a problem with the methodology used? It is often proposed that there is a difference between cultures. **Hofstede (1984)** outlined the main differences between individualist and collectivist cultures.

- Individualist cultures - emphasise self-interest and the interest of one's immediate family, personal autonomy (independence), initiative and achievement.
- Collectivist cultures - emphasise loyalty to the group, interdependence and the belief that group decisions are more important than individual ones.



Someone's culture can have an effect on their behaviour or their thought processes. For example, attributions in collectivist cultures tend to be contextualised on the situation whereas attributions made by people in individualistic cultures tend to be more focussed on personal choice. Also, the attribution error of the self-serving bias (taking credit for success, but not blame for failure) is much stronger in individualistic cultures.

While these seem to be genuine differences (although this may be disputed- see later) what if the difference that we found is due to problems in the way in which we collect our data? For example, if the intelligence test that we use was developed in the West, other cultures may score lower (see previous page). However, this difference does not reflect a real difference between the cultures, but a bias in the way the data is collected. Other methodological issues such as the views of the researcher, or problems with translation may also bias the results.

An example: **Harris (1995)** investigated the role of love in 42 hunter-gatherer societies. There was evidence of romantic love in 26 of these societies. However, only 6 of them gave individuals complete freedom of choice of marriage partner, all of the others had some form of arranged marriage, or at least giving the parents the right of veto. This study would seem to suggest that the notion of romantic love is not a universal one.

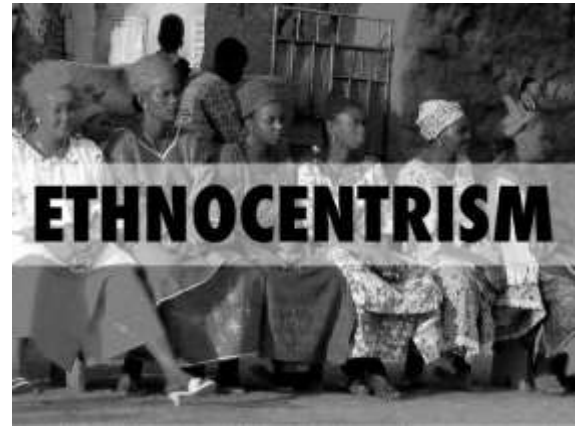


*How might the results of the study above be explained through research bias rather than expressing a genuine difference?*

*What cross cultural studies have you learned about where differences were found? Could these differences be due to bias in the research?*

### 3. Ethnocentrism

**Ethnocentrism** is the view that our own culture should be the basis for judgements of other groups. The views, beliefs and cultures of our own group are “normal” or superior, and those of other group are “strange”. A common type of ethnocentrism found in psychology is **Eurocentrism**, a form of ethnocentrism where the emphasis is on Western (European or American) values. This is hardly surprising; the vast majority of research in psychology comes from Europe and the USA. Therefore, in psychological literature, there is an overwhelming bias towards theories of human behaviour that reflect the social norms of the West.



The opposite of ethnocentrism is **cultural relativism**. This regards all cultures are equally worthy of respect, and the role of psychology is to understand how other cultures view the world.

Both ethnocentrism and cultural relativism can result in bias. **Hare-Mustin and Maracek (1988)** proposed that bias can exist in two forms.

- **Alpha bias** is the assumption that there are actual differences between cultural groups. This causes a problem because if we assume that there are large differences between cultures, we may miss universals of human behaviour. For example, while some of the symptoms of schizophrenia may vary between cultures, there are some universals (hearing voices, delusions etc.). If we were to take an alpha biased stance, we would miss these universals, and possibly the underlying biological cause of the illness.
- **Beta bias** is the assumption that all people are the same. This is the opposite of alpha bias, as differences between groups are ignored. For example, in the study by **Harris** on the previous page, the differences in the definition of romantic love may have been ignored by the researcher, and an assumption made that the Western view of romantic love was universal, leading to the results he found.

Beta bias can also arise when studies conducted on Western samples produce theories that are then universally applied to all people, ignoring any cultural differences. This may not always be appropriate. For example, **Amir and Sharon (1987)** attempted to repeat the findings of six American studies on an Israeli population similar to that used in the American studies. There were 64 significant findings in the American studies, only 24 of which were repeated amongst the Israeli participants. The other 40 findings were not replicated. In addition, there were six new findings in the Israeli sample that had not been obtained in the American samples. This suggests that findings from studies conducted in the West may not be generalisable to all cultures, and differences between cultures are being ignored (beta bias).

Alpha bias could be argued to occur when the differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures are exaggerated. It has been argued that while the collectivist/individualistic distinction is important, not everyone in a particular culture will hold the views of the majority i.e. a person in an individualistic culture may not necessarily be individualistic themselves. **Trandis et al (2001)** estimated that only about 60% of people conform to the dominant culture. Therefore, perhaps there are more similarities than differences between cultures, and the collectivist/individualistic divide is rather artificial.

*Could any of the studies or theories that you have looked at have an alpha or beta bias?*

#### 4. Historical and Social Context

Traditionally, psychology has until quite recently been almost exclusively a Western subject. While more non-western nations start to conduct their own psychological research, the overwhelming history of psychology has been white, middle class and Western. **Rosenzweig (1992)** found that 64% of the world's 56,000 researchers in psychology are American. However, while this finding itself is likely to be out of date, it is probable that the USA still has more psychologists than any other nation. Similarly, **Haggbloom et al (2002)** used various kinds of evidence to identify the greatest psychologists of the twentieth century. Less than 20% of them (including, Freud, Piaget, Pavlov and Vygotsky) were non-American. Historically, psychology has not only been a Western concept, but a uniquely American one.



Historically, European and American studies have had a favourable publication bias. **Smith and Bond (1998)** found that 66% of all the studies in a sample of psychology textbooks came from America, 32% from Europe, and 2% from the rest of the world. Non-western views of human behaviour have, until very recently been invisible.

Also, cultures change over time. Particularly in our modern, interconnected world, cross cultural research may go out of date quickly. As the internet causes the world to get smaller, and Western views become more universal, any study that finds differences between cultures may only be taking a snapshot of a particular moment in time that may not be relevant in ten years' time. An example of this is **Westen (1996)** who quoted the work done by an American doctor, **Celia Mosher** who asked her middle class female patients about their sex lives at the end of the 19th century. Those who had been born in the middle of that century saw sex as vital for reproduction, but not very pleasurable, whereas those born near the end of the century described sex in more positive terms, and saw it as closely linked to passionate love. We could argue therefore that different time periods are essentially different cultures; "The past is a foreign country". These studies could be argued to lack **temporal** or **historical validity**.

*How might Bowlby's study of the 44 Thieves demonstrate this point?*

#### What can we do to improve?

In the exam, you will not specifically be asked about how to reduce cultural bias in psychology. However, it would be good to include a brief discussion of improvements to add depth and range in your answer. These points could also make up part of a conclusion.

*If you were in charge of all psychology, what would you do to improve it, and make it less culturally biased?*

While cultural bias was and still remains an issue in psychology, modern psychologists are much more aware of these issues and try to implement strategies to reduce them, and make psychology less culturally biased. One way to do this is to encourage **indigenous psychologies**. This is where psychology is carried out by the members of a particular culture themselves, rather than Western psychologists. By cultures investigating themselves, rather than being investigated by outsiders who may not grasp the nuances of their culture, researcher bias should be reduced.

One such indigenous psychology is **Afrocentrism**. **Nobles (1976)** argued that the Eurocentric psychology has presented a view of humankind that is based on one particular type of culture and is not representative of all people. The European worldview is orientated along the principles of “survival of the fittest” and “control over nature”. These two principles therefore affect European values and customs with an emphasis on competition, individual rights, independence and uniqueness. The African worldview however differs. The emphasis is on “survival of the tribe” and “oneness with nature” leading to the values of co-operation, interdependence and collective responsibility. Therefore, Afrocentrism focuses on these uniquely African values, rather than forcing European values onto a culture that they are not compatible with.



### **Conclusion**

*Having examined the evidence and arguments, what conclusions can you come to? Is culture bias a big issue? Why? What are the main causes of culture bias? What problems might it cause? What can be done?*

**Exam Practice**

1. "Is the biggest issue that affects psychology cultural bias?" Using your knowledge of psychology, justify your answer [25]
  - *This question is testing your AO2 application skills [10]. You can gain AO2 marks from providing evidence and examples to support the points you make, providing good arguments, and using correct terminology.*
  - *It is also testing your AO3 evaluation skills [15]. You can gain AO3 marks by interpreting the evidence, discussing the arguments and evaluating them, and coming to a conclusion.*
  - *This question is a broad discussion question. You can include in your answer any of the arguments or evidence we have looked at in class.*
  - *You need to come to a conclusion. This means that at the end you need to have provided an answer to the quote given. You may agree, disagree or be sitting on the fence. However, your conclusion should follow logically on from the arguments and evidence you have presented.*
  
2. "Psychology has been accused of being highly ethnocentric. Explain why this is an issue." Using your knowledge of psychology, discuss issues of cultural bias in psychology, including a discussion of ethnocentrism. [25]
  - *This question is testing your AO2 application skills [10]. You can gain AO2 marks from providing evidence and examples to support the points you make, providing good arguments, and using correct terminology.*
  - *It is also testing your AO3 evaluation skills [15]. You can gain AO3 marks by interpreting the evidence, discussing the arguments and evaluating them, and coming to a conclusion.*
  - *Unlike the question above, this one makes specific reference to the issue of ethnocentrism. This means that you have to include a discussion of ethnocentrism in your answer. However, the whole essay does not need to be about ethnocentrism. You should include other arguments as well.*
  - *You need to come to a conclusion. This means that at the end you need to have provided an answer to the quote given. You may agree, disagree or be sitting on the fence. However, your conclusion should follow logically on from the arguments and evidence you have presented.*
  
3. Discuss issues of cultural bias in psychology, including a discussion of the issues raised by the use of cross cultural studies. [25]
  - *This question is testing your AO2 application skills [10]. You can gain AO2 marks from providing evidence and examples to support the points you make, providing good arguments, and using correct terminology.*
  - *It is also testing your AO3 evaluation skills [15]. You can gain AO3 marks by interpreting the evidence, discussing the arguments and evaluating them, and coming to a conclusion.*
  - *Unlike the question 1 above, this makes specific reference to the issues raised by the use of cross cultural research. This means that you have to include a discussion of these studies in your answer. However, the whole essay does not need to be about cross cultural studies. You should include other arguments as well.*
  - *You need to come to a conclusion. Unlike the other two essays, there is no quote to address. However you still need to come to a conclusion. Perhaps talk about how much psychology is biased, and what can be done to prevent it.*