

Introduction: Bias research

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Bias Research: Introduction

Cross-cultural research is thriving. During the last decade, there has been an annual increase in the number of publications dealing with cross-cultural differences (Van de Vijver & Lonner, 1995). The increase was observed both for the absolute number of cross-cultural studies and the relative number of contributions (i.e., the relative proportion of psychological publications dealing with cross-cultural differences). The heightened interest may be engendered by various global changes over the last decades. For example, the political map of Europe has changed considerably. Previously sealed national borders can now be easily crossed. At a more global level, millions of people have moved during the last decades. While many of them attempted to start a new life in an economically more prosperous environment, the larger part were refugees fleeing from famine, physical threat or prosecution because of political or religious convictions. Countries that were essentially monocultural have become multicultural. The interest in cross-cultural research is also inspired by the globalization of the economic market. The European Union is a good example. Much effort has gone into the development of an exchange system of goods and services in which the barriers between the member states were minimized as much as possible. All these developments have given rise to a tremendous increase in the number and impact of cross-cultural encounters. These developments took place rapidly and the consequences can be seen at various places in society. Many societies attempt to come to grips with these developments. Thus, the multicultural nature of present day societies is high on the political agenda in many countries. The interest in cross-cultural research in psychology and sociology is one of the consequences of dealing with the pressing needs of practitioners in counseling, education, and vocational guidance to adjust their services when they have to cater to a multicultural

public (e.g., APA Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs, 1993; Hinkle, 1994; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 1995; Prediger, 1994).

In this special issue of the European Review of Applied Psychology, you will find contributions that focus on bias and assessment. The choice, application, and interpretation of assessment devices in cross-cultural research is often more complex in cross-cultural research than in monocultural research. In the latter type of studies, participants can often be taken to have a relatively homogenous standing on a variety of relevant background characteristics such as knowledge of the language used in the instrument, and familiarity with the materials presented in measuring devices. In cross-cultural research, this assumption can become tenuous. For example, when we are interested in the assessment of learning potential of a group of pupils entering primary school, the linguistic and cultural background of the pupils should be taken into account. Contacts at school may be the first exposure to the language and culture of the teachers. Tacit assumptions upon which frequently employed psychological tests and questionnaires are based may no longer hold in a multicultural setting. Instruments that have good psychometric properties in monocultural applications may well show a limited suitability to carry out cross-cultural comparisons. Assessment in cross-cultural research has to deal with at least three questions:

- (1) What kind of problems can, in general, be expected when measurement instruments are applied to individuals from various cultural populations?
- (2) Suppose that an instrument has been used in a culturally heterogeneous group. Is it possible then to examine which of these problems have played a role?
- (3) Which remedies can be envisaged to reduce or even eliminate these problems?

These questions run like a thread through all contributions. The introductory article by Van de Vijver and Tanzer discusses each of the questions and provides the theoretical background of the other contributions. The concepts of bias and equivalence are taken as a starting point to delineate the characteristic features of cross-cultural assessment. Based on a taxonomy of these concepts, the article discusses common problems and remedies. Benson and Hutchinson present a brief history and discuss recent developments in bias research in the United States. Claassen discusses developments in bias research in South Africa against a background of large political changes. Sophisticated bias research is described that has been previously reported in not always easily accessible sources. Misra, Sahoo, and Puhan discuss bias from an Indian perspective. A brief history of bias research, the cultural context of bias research in India and recent attempts in the direction of developing culturally appropriate tests are discussed. Van Leest discusses bias research in the Netherlands; the main study discussed here is a recently completed examination of differential item functioning of personality measures used in personnel selection of civil servants.

Hopefully, the current issue of the European Review of Applied Psychology will help to disseminate the knowledge and experience of the last decades of bias research.

Fons van de Vijver

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