

Cultural bias in psychological theories

Many psychological theories are hampered by cultural bias, which can ultimately negate their validity. Cultural bias can appear in two forms; ethnocentrism and eurocentrism. Ethnocentrism refers to the use of our own cultural group to make judgements about other groups. We tend to view the beliefs, customs and behaviours of our own cultural group as normal or even superior, and those of other groups as strange or deviant. Eurocentrism is a particular form of ethnocentrism whereby psychologists place an emphasis on European (or Western) ideas at the expense of those of other cultures. Western research is then applied to other cultures to create a universal view of human behaviour.

Mogaddam has suggested that 'economic' theories of relationships such as Thiabut and Kelly's social exchange theory and Walster's equity theory only apply to Western relationships and even then only to short term relationships among those with high mobility. Such theories only reflect characteristics of individualist societies whereby members are concerned with their own success (therefore their profit and loss in relationships). Conversely, collectivist societies strive towards the success of the group as a whole, thus profit and loss and equity in relationships are less important.

In social psychology many theories eg those by Walster and Thiabut and Kelly are criticized for only being relevant to individualist cultures. The US is often cited as an example of an individualist society, whilst Japan is often cited as a collectivist society.

However, it is often an untested assumption that certain cultures differ in terms of their position on the individualism-collectivism continuum.

To assess the validity of this assumption Takano and Osaka reviewed 15 studies comparing the US and Japan in terms of individualism/collectivism. Surprisingly, 14/15 studies did not support the common view. Takano and Osaka suggest that the wide acceptance of the distinction between the US and Japan is a result of the fundamental attribution error. There is a tendency to overestimate personal characteristics which leads to an underestimation of situational factors in interpreting the collectivist behaviour of the Japanese.

Another psychological theory which has come under fire for its cultural bias is Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which is seen as a universal view of human behaviour, with all people in all cultures going through the same stages in the same order. However Kohlberg's description of his stages may be ideologically balanced towards Western democratic cultures. Moral development may mean something quite different to members of different cultures who have different moral values. Thus, if we used Kohlberg's stages to compare cultures we may draw invalid conclusions.

The idea of cultural bias in Kohlberg's theory was supported by Snarey who found that the theory did not lend itself to cross cultural comparison. Whilst stages 1-4 appeared to be almost universal, stages 5-6 did not always appear in less industrialised societies. Furthermore, post conventional reasoning (Kohlberg's highest level of moral development) was entirely absent in all 8 traditional village societies studies, whereas it was present to some degree in all of the non Western urban samples. Snarey also noted that in some cultures there were moral judgements which did not fit into Kohlberg's stages, suggesting that other values and forms of moral reasoning are missing from Kohlberg's model.

It has also been suggested that neuropsychological research may be culturally biased. Although we may believe that brain structure and function are universal, our understanding of cultural differences in neuropsychology is extremely limited, and Matthews has questioned the universality of neuropsychology. He claims that we cannot rule out the possibility that different brain organisation may emerge over time owing to different ecological demands faced by different cultures.

Indeed, recent neuroscience research has supported the importance of the cultural environment in shaping the organisation of the human nervous system has been supported. In a recent review of neuropsychological studies Ardila found considerable evidence that the outcomes of neuropsychological assessment are influenced by ecological and cultural factors. The ecological demands of our daily lives appears to generate processes of adaptation at both cultural and biological levels simultaneously.