Cultural differences

Lesson 7.1.5 | A Level issues, debates and methods

Core ideas

Culture includes shared values, norms, practices, language and meanings that can shape behaviour and experience.

Cultural differences matter because a finding from one group may not generalise automatically to another group.

Researchers should avoid ethnocentrism, where one culture is treated as the normal or superior standard for judging others.

An etic approach looks for patterns that may compare across cultures, while an emic approach tries to understand behaviour within one culture's own meanings.

Methods can be culturally biased if tasks, questionnaires, translations or researcher expectations do not fit the participants' context.

Applications of psychology should be adapted carefully because interventions, workplace practices, health advice or consumer strategies may not work the same way in every culture.

Key terms

Culture: Shared values, norms, practices, language and meanings within a group.

Cultural difference: A variation in behaviour, belief or experience linked to cultural context.

Generalisability: How far findings apply beyond the original sample or setting.

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Continued

Ethnocentrism: Judging other cultures using one culture as the main standard.

Cultural bias: Distortion caused when methods or interpretations unfairly favour one culture.

Emic approach: Studying behaviour from within the meanings of one culture.

Etic approach: Comparing behaviour across cultures to look for broader patterns.

Translation validity: How well translated materials keep the same meaning across languages.

Further detail and evidence

Culture involves shared meanings, practices and norms, with substantial variation within any country. Cultural differences may concern personal space, communication, authority, health beliefs, advertising or the value of group membership. Nationality is an imperfect indicator of cultural orientation.

Cross-cultural comparison needs equivalent recruitment, tasks, language and measurement meaning. Translation/back-translation helps wording but does not guarantee conceptual equivalence. The same rating can have different reference points or social desirability pressures.

Earley illustrates the importance of individualist/collectivist orientation together with in-group membership. Del Campo reports cross-country differences in heuristic use. Neither warrants the claim that all members of one nation think or work in the same way.

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Applying the ideas

A leadership scale developed in one context may treat speaking up as effective participation, while another context expresses constructive contribution differently. Pilot locally, examine meanings and compare relevant workplace conditions before interpreting a score difference as a cultural trait.

Worked example: A questionnaire about workplace motivation is written in English, translated quickly and used with employees in three countries. Results are then compared as if the measure worked identically everywhere. What should be questioned? Translation validity should be questioned because the same words may not carry the same meaning in each language or workplace culture. The measure may also have cultural bias if examples, rating styles or ideas about motivation fit one context better than another. Before comparing scores, researchers should check whether items are understood similarly and whether local work norms affect responses.

Worked example: When a health campaign from one country is copied into another, fewer people follow the advice even though the message is scientifically accurate. How can cultural differences explain this? The advice may not match local beliefs, language, family roles, trust in health authorities or practical barriers, so the application does not transfer directly. This shows that psychological evidence can have practical value but still needs cultural adaptation. A stronger campaign would test the message with the target group and adjust examples, delivery and support to fit the local context.

Evaluation and connections

Cultural research challenges universal assumptions and improves appropriate applications. However, culture may be confounded with education, economics, workplace structure and test familiarity. Avoid ethnocentrism and within-country stereotypes. Generalise from the sampled setting with a clear account of its limits.