

## **In Search of Equivalence in Research: The Cross-Cultural Approach**

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There are three approaches in psychology, the mainstream psychology, the indigenous psychology and the cross-cultural psychology.

### **The Mainstream Psychology**

The mainstream psychology looks at behaviour that is universal e.g., studies on Piaget's cognitive theory. Examples of some studies by the author and colleagues in Malaysia in support for this approach are given below.

The study by Keats, Keats and Wan Rafaei Abdul Rahman (1977) looked at the performance by Malay and Chinese children in Piagetian tasks using two languages (Malay and English, and English and Chinese). The participants were children of 5 – 6 years old in kindergartens around Kuala Lumpur. The instruments used were the Piagetian tasks of conservation of numbers, quantity, weight and volume. The result showed that the Piagetian stages existed in Malaysia but the sequence of conservation of numbers, volume, weight and quantity was not the same as in the west.

Omar Ibrahim and Wan Rafaei Abdul Rahman (1986) studied at the concept of horizontality. The participants were 30 male and 30 female children in a primary school in Kuala Lumpur. The result showed the existence of the five categories of behaviour as obtained by Beard (1964) in England.

Studies by McClelland showed that achievement motivation played an important role in economic development. Given all the economic factors for economic growth, a society with more achievement motivated individuals are more developed than that with low achievement motivated individuals (McClelland, 1961).

Wan Rafaei Abdul Rahman's (1980) study on achievement motivation in Malaysia and the United Kingdom among school students showed McClelland's (1961) theory is applicable in Malaysia.

In that study, students from United Kingdom were shown to have higher achievement motivation than their counterparts in Malaysia. The Chinese students in Malaysia had higher achievement motivation than the Malays or Indians as hypothesised.

Wan Rafaei Abdul Rahman and Habibah Elias (1992) successfully conducted a training module on university students using McClelland's (1961) theory.

### **Indigenous Psychology**

Indigenous psychology looks at behaviour in the local context. Example of indigenous psychology in Malaysia are by Suhana Sulaiman (1981) on the characteristics of the Malays using content analysis from 'Sejarah Melayu' by Shellabear (1977) and 'Sandera' by Arenawati (1978) and Wan Rafaei Abdul Rahman (1994, 2004) analysis of Malay proverbs to look at the characteristics of the Malays and to uncover a theory of motivation.

Suhana Sulaiman (1981) content analysed 'Sejarah Melayu' and 'Sandera' to see if there was a change in the Malay characteristics from the 16<sup>th</sup> century as pictured by 'Sejarah Melayu' to post independence as pictured in 'Sandera'. The result showed that compared to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Malays, the Malays in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were more positive in their outlook towards life, more achievement motivated, have more self-confidence, more risk-taking, more future-oriented, possess more initiative and do not believe that luck determines everything.

Wan Rafaei Abdul Rahman (1994, 2004) analysed the Malay proverbs to uncover a theory of motivation before Vroom (1964) suggested his expectancy theory of motivation. The analysis showed that the Malays were aware of the theory of motivation well before Vroom discovered his model

## **Cross-cultural Psychology**

The cross-cultural psychology looks at the role of culture in behaviour. It compares behaviour across cultures.

It is important to Malaysia as:

1. Most of theories are developed in the west (e.g outside Malaysia)
2. Malaysia is a plural society. Malaysia consists of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Kadazan, Dusun, Dayak, Iban, etc.

It is also important in other developing countries as well for they too use theories developed in the West and that they are also plural societies.

## **Cross-Cultural Problems**

Frijda and Jahoda (1966) came up with four problems in cross-cultural research that must be minimised before cross-cultural studies can be conducted. The four problems are:

1. Equivalence of descriptive categories
2. Equivalence of phenomena studied
3. Equivalence of method including instruments used in the study
4. Equivalence of samples used

In terms of descriptive categories even within the Malay community the same words could have different meaning as shown in table 1.

**Table 1. Word & Meaning**

<b>Word and standard meaning</b>	<b>Other meaning</b>
Kawan (friend)	Isteri / suami (Spouse, Negeri Sembilan)
Mengaji (Study the Quran)	Belajar, (learning, Kelantan)

Saing (compete)	Kawan, (friend, Kelantan)
Sebat (hit)	Makan (eat, Pahang)
Segan (shy)	Malas (lazy, Kedah)
Selalu (frequent)	Sekarang (now, Kelantan)

Other examples of the first problem of equivalence of descriptive categories are 'going to pub/ church' and 'dating'. Going to pub is not a normal activity in the village in Malaysia for instance. Going to the coffee shop can be considered equivalent, as the coffee shop is the place where the Malays especially go to relax after work.

Going to church in questionnaires developed in the west implies a measure of religiosity. In the Muslim community, religiosity cannot be measured by asking if the person goes to the mosque regularly. The Muslims can pray at home five times a day.

Dating is an activity that is not indigenous in Malaysia. In fact it cannot be translated into the Malay language, there is no equivalent word.

An example of the second problem is the phenomenon studied such as preparing for the life skill. In most developing country schooling is regarded as preparing for life skill. But this not true in primitive societies where learning to hunt and gather food is what they do to prepare for life.

Equivalence of method suggests that what is being used in the method is appropriate for both cultures. In the use of questionnaires, for instance, the translation must be effective. 'Pub' cannot be used in studies involving rural Malaysia; the more appropriate translation is the 'coffee shop'. Another example is the 'Lie Scale' in Eysenck Personality Questionnaire. The test was developed so that those respondents scoring more than 5 on the scale are regarded as having 'lied' and so they are excluded from the study. But most Asians and West Asians score about 12 – 13 on Lie scale. If we use the guidelines from the test manual all the respondents have to be excluded. A more reasonable solution is to consider the lie scale as another personality characteristic, conformity, for the Asians as has been suggested (Wan Rafaei Abdul Rahman, 1994).

Equivalence of samples entail the matching of the respondents from the cultures to be studied in terms of gender, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, education, etc. This is to ensure the difference in the results cannot be attributed to factors other than the factor under study or the preferred hypothesis.

There are seven cross-cultural problems according to Brislin, Lonner and Thorndike (1973); they are:

1. Meaning of research
2. Choosing the appropriate topic
3. Discovering the problems specific to a given investigation
4. Effect of the researchers and curiosity by participants
5. Rival hypothesis
6. Choice of participants
7. Problem of emic-etic

Brislin, et. al (1973) insisted that in order to obtain equivalence in the comparison between the two cultures, the two cultures must understand what research means. The topic chosen must also be appropriate for the cultures studied. It is more preferable to have specific topics rather than general topics. It would help the investigators if they discover problems specific to the investigation to facilitate their research. For instance, it is more appropriate to ask the class teacher to help in the administration of the questionnaire if the participants are school children as the teacher has the authority to make the school children answer the questionnaires. The researchers must also be vary of the curiosity of the participants and not tell them what is wanted from them.

One very important factor proposed by Brislin et. al (1973) is rival hypothesis. A rival hypothesis is another explanation to the obtained data besides the preferred hypothesis. According to Campbell (Brislin et. al, 1973) rival hypothesis can occur if the researchers do not match the two cultures on as many variables such as socioeconomic status, test experience, maturity in doing test, experimental mortality, interaction of participants and instruments used, etc. If these factors are not matched, the obtained results could

be due to any one of the variables rather than the preferred hypothesis.

The participants must be chosen according to the sampling requirements. Emic – etic distinction must be understood in order equivalence can be obtained.

In a cross-cultural research it is important to reach the equivalence as discussed by Frijda and Jahoda (1966) and Brislin et al (1973)

### **Conclusion**

To undertake a cross-cultural research it is suggested that the researchers use:

1. Two instruments to measure the same concepts
2. “Good” sampling with as many similar characteristics for the different groups
3. Appropriate translation method

The above three steps and the suggestions by Brislin et al. (1973) could make the cross-cultural research more appropriate.

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