

## Methods and Assessment in Culture and Psychology

Significant advancements in methodologies and statistical techniques in cross-cultural psychological research abound, but general practice, education, and most researchers in psychology rarely use them. This leads to misinterpretations, misrepresentations, and prejudice. The authors expertly demonstrate the importance of methodological rigor to safeguard appropriate inferences about similarities and differences, particularly when methods have not been developed in the cultural contexts where they are used. The book features acculturation and identity, including contributions on remote acculturation, religiosity, and organizational contexts. It also covers individual differences and evaluates methodological progress in educational assessment, emotions, motivation, and personality. Methodological and psychometric perspectives on equivalence and bias, as well as measurement invariance in cross-cultural research, are a central theme. From study design to data interpretation, it is essential for psychology, and the social sciences in general, to adopt methods and assessment procedures that are more rigorous for culture-comparative studies.

**Michael Bender** is an assistant professor at Tilburg University, the Netherlands, and an honorary associate professor at Gratia Christian College, Hong Kong. He is the incoming editor of *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture (ORPC)*, the open-access journal of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology (IACCP), and a board member on the committee for Cultural Diversity in the Netherlands Institute of Psychologists (NIP). He works on acculturation, identity, memory, and motivation.

**Byron G. Adams** is an assistant professor at Tilburg University and the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands; a visiting professor at Ghent University, Belgium; and a senior research associate at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. He served on the governing council for the Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (SSEA) and the Committee for Cultural Diversity in the Netherlands Institute of Psychologists (NIP). His research focuses on identity, inclusion, and well-being across cultures and life-spans.

*Culture and Psychology*

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David Matsumoto, *San Francisco State University*

As an increasing number of social scientists come to recognize the pervasive influence of culture on individual human behaviour, it has become imperative for culture to be included as an important variable in all aspects of psychological research, theory, and practice. *Culture and Psychology* is an evolving series of works that brings the study of culture and psychology into a single, unified concept.

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Michael Bender and Byron Adams, *Methods and Assessment in Culture and Psychology*

# Methods and Assessment in Culture and Psychology

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*Edited by*

**Michael Bender**

*Tilburg University*

**Byron G. Adams**

*Tilburg University*



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This book is dedicated to Fons, and to our families,  
both academic and non-academic.

We particularly appreciate reviews and comments made on earlier versions of the book by the following colleagues:

Alejandra del Carmen Domínguez Espinosa, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico  
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Diana Hanke-Boer, University of Koblenz Landau, Germany  
Filiz Künüroğlu, Izmir Katip Çelebi University, Turkey  
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Itziar Alonso Arbiol, University of País Vasco/University of the Basque Country, Spain  
Julia Mendzheritskaya, Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany  
Nadzeya Svirydzenka, De Montfort University, United Kingdom  
Nicolas Geeraert, University of Essex, United Kingdom  
Peter Titzmann, Leibniz University Hanover, Germany  
Serkan Arikan, Bogazici University, Turkey  
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Vassilis Saroglou, Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium  
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## Contributors

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BYRON G. ADAMS, Department of Social Psychology, Tilburg University; Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, University of Amsterdam; Department of Work, Organization, and Society, Ghent University; Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, University of Johannesburg

MICHAEL BENDER, Department of Social Psychology, Tilburg University; Department of Psychology, Gratia Christian College

ISABEL BENÍTEZ, Department of Methodology of Behavioral Science, University of Granada

SEGER M. BREUGELMANS, Department of Social Psychology, Tilburg University

BARBARA M. BYRNE, School of Psychology, University of Ottawa

ATHANASIOS CHASIOTIS, Department of Developmental Psychology, Tilburg University

CHI-YUE CHIU, Faculty of Social Science, the Chinese University of Hong Kong

LINA DAOUK-ÖYRY, Suliman S. Olayan School of Business, Management, Marketing, and Entrepreneurship Track, American University of Beirut

GAIL M. FERGUSON, Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota

VELICHKO H. FETVADJIEV, Department of Social Psychology, University of Amsterdam

RONALD FISCHER, School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington and Instituto D'Or de Pesquisa e Ensino

JOHNNY R. J. FONTAINE, Department of Work, Organization, and Society, Ghent University

## List of Contributors

xiii

- CAGLA GIRAY, Research-to-Policy Collaboration, Pennsylvania State University
- DERYA GÜNGÖR, Center for Social and Cultural Psychology, KU Leuven
- JIA HE, Department of Methodology and Statistics, Tilburg University, and German Institute for International Educational Research
- CARIN HILL, Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, University of Johannesburg
- Jan Hofer, Developmental Psychology, Trier University
- LEON T. B. JACKSON, Research Unit for People, Policy and Performance, Potchefstroom Campus, North-West University
- YOSHIHISA KASHIMA, Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences, University of Melbourne
- DAVID MATSUMOTO, San Francisco State University
- DEON MEIRING, Department of Human Resource Management, University of Pretoria
- J. ALEWYN NEL, University of Pretoria
- PETER NOACK, Department of Psychology, University of Jena
- KAREN PHALET, Center for Social and Cultural Psychology, KU Leuven
- YPE H. POORTINGA, Tilburg University
- DAVID L. SAM, Department of Psychosocial Science and Department of Global Public Health and Primary Care, University of Bergen
- MAJA KATHARINA SCHACHNER, Educational Psychology – Culture and Socialisation, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg
- MIRIAM SCHWARZENTHAL, Department of Inclusive Education University of Potsdam and College for Interdisciplinary Educational Research
- YUANYUAN SHI, Fudan University
- PETER B. SMITH, School of Psychology, University of Sussex
- COLLEEN WARD, School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington
- KUTLAY YAGMUR, Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University
- PIA ZEINOUN, Department of Psychology, American University of Beirut

## Foreword

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In this book, the editors and authors have set out to examine the intersection between context, psychology, and assessment. It is centered on the contributions to cross-cultural assessment and other areas of cross-cultural psychology by Fons van de Vijver. During the preparation, Fons passed away unexpectedly. Hence the book stands as a tribute to his work.

This is an exciting text for anyone interested in behavior differences and invariance between human groups and in the validity of cross-cultural research findings. The context dependency of human behavior is the basis for the continuously expanding body of research on psychological differences between groups defined in terms of regions, nations, minority status, sojourning, or, in short, “culture.” An inherent difficulty in such research is that the target behaviors in a study are influenced by not only context but also the methods and instruments used for assessment. Any kind of psychological data, collected beyond a narrowly defined homogeneous population, is subject to *cultural bias*; such data are *incomparable* or *nonequivalent*. Ignoring bias can lead to serious misrepresentation. A painful reminder from the history of psychology comes in the form of the racist views reflected in the derogation of the cognitive capacities of “nonwhite” people during much of the twentieth century based on scores on intelligence batteries. In principle, the cross-cultural comparison of scores via other kinds of instruments, such as scales for personality, values, or emotions, and experiments is equally subject to erroneous interpretation. Far too often, this basic issue in cross-cultural research continues to be ignored or is dealt with only superficially. The chapters in this book amply illustrate what measures can be taken to improve the validity of cross-cultural data in various areas of psychological research and, in the final section, address theoretical implications and remaining challenges.

The current state of affairs in cross-cultural assessment significantly derives from the fact that psychological assessment instruments traditionally were developed within the context of a specific (usually Western)

population defined by a common language, nationality, customs, and history. By the 1960s, most psychologists began to realize that scores on a psychometric test or scale should not be interpreted at face value when obtained in a population other than the one for which the instrument had been developed. This was captured in the notion that a test cannot be “culture-free” or “culture-fair.” In the then-emerging field of cross-cultural psychology, *all* researchers (I mean this literally) endorsed the principle of “incomparability” or “nonequivalence” of test scores. At the same time, this imposed a serious question: How can valid cross-cultural comparisons be realized? In various schools of cultural and cross-cultural psychology, this question has been addressed in three distinct ways: avoiding, ignoring, or addressing the issue.

First, there were scholars who rejected all direct comparisons of data obtained with tests and scales, arguing that human behavior and psychological functioning are essentially context-bound. This led to the development of various schools of indigenous psychology, sociocultural psychology, and early cultural psychology, all of which shunned the idea of using common instruments in cross-cultural research. In these traditions, the researcher provides an interpretation of whatever data have been collected and thus serves as a (subjective) standard for interpretation. Needless to say, many researchers have serious reservations about such subjectivity in research.

The second way of dealing with the issue was to renounce the use of instruments that had a bad reputation (notably tests of intelligence) but continue with score comparisons in other fields, such as social psychology (e.g., values scales, acculturation scales) and personality research (e.g., trait questionnaires and inventories, clinical scales, quasi-experiments). In this tradition, much attention is paid to precise translation of verbal items, but with a tendency to accept linguistic equivalence as evidence of psychometric equivalence. For example, the equivalence of values scales even today often is taken for granted, and score differences continue to be interpreted at face value. Consequently, the size of distortions due to bias and the possible implications remain largely unknown.

In the third tradition, which is the focus of the present volume, translation accuracy is seen as a necessary but insufficient condition for valid comparisons. Research in this tradition is characterized by explicit attention for psychometric analysis of bias and equivalence in cross-cultural data sets. Initially, statistical tests of bias were simplistic; for example, if correlations between variables had the same sign in the groups to be compared, this was advocated as a sufficient condition for meaningful comparison. Also, there was a sharp dichotomy, with scores being seen as either fully comparable or incomparable. Over time, methods of analysis

have become more sophisticated and differentiated. Now there are distinctions between levels of equivalence (structure, metric, and full-score equivalence). Moreover, the requirement of perfect equivalence is being seen as unrealistic, and recently this has led to the formulation of somewhat more relaxed criteria. After half a century, the analysis of bias and equivalence continues to form a central feature of cross-cultural assessment, and this theme is reflected throughout the book.

In the introductory chapter, the editors of this book describe how this third tradition was pursued by Fons van de Vijver; of his voluminous publication record, the methodology and conceptualization of cross-cultural assessment formed the core. Extending over almost four decades, his work followed developments and often showed the direction to go. His orientation was pragmatic; he accepted that data sets are less than perfect, but they should be analyzed with the best possible methods to which they lend themselves.

There is more to assessment than psychometrics and methodology. Cross-cultural assessment covers a range of substantive topics and traditions, organized by the editors in three sections. The first section has chapters on acculturation and identity. Acculturation, in the sense of migrants and sojourners adapting to living in their new society, is a field where psychological research has contributed important conceptual distinctions and extensive empirical data. Historical developments have been from simple assimilationist models assuming uniformity of change in migrant populations to more complex models that distinguish various domains of behavior (e.g., public versus private), various trajectories of change, and various opportunities for change in a receiving society. Above all, it is increasingly recognized that individual variations in these parameters make implicit assumptions about the homogeneity of populations unrealistic, shifting acculturation research to more fragmented groups and an individual-level orientation. This is reflected in the title of this section, linking acculturation (predominantly a population-level concept) to identity (predominantly an individual level concept).

The second section consists of chapters dealing with the core question of how individual psychological traits interact with context. In each of the three fields addressed – personality, motivation, and emotion – the balance between group specificity of behavior and universality has been a major theme of research and controversy. This dichotomy has never been truly resolved, but together the six chapters show how the impact of the contrast can be reduced: by starting with local (indigenous) data, paying attention to design, and including a sufficiently dense representation of elements from the target domain of interest in the measures. The

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relevance of careful and creative approaches to assessment is evident throughout.

The third section of the volume stands somewhat apart, as the focus is more on conceptual issues. There is an in-depth discussion on the history of statistical procedures in the analysis of equivalence of cross-cultural data and the reach of such procedures. There is an exposé on theoretical aspects of measurement, with a focus on functional equivalence. The final chapter discusses the need for diachronic analysis and comparison of behavior across time, raising the question of cross-temporal meaning equivalence. Together the chapters in this section cover many facets, which is not surprising when considering the kaleidoscopic and often fuzzy meaning of the concept of “culture.” We have a fair idea of how far we can jump psychometrically; we know how to describe core issues of assessment, and by and large, we know how to address them. This section makes clear that in the fascinating study of how to conceptualize and analyze cross-cultural differences, there is still much to gain. The numerous professionals and researchers who deal with data from different populations owe the editors for moving cross-cultural assessment forward by bringing together this range of authors and perspectives.

*Ype H. Poortinga*  
*April 2020*