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Culture and the Home-Field Disadvantage

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Abstract

The home-field disadvantage refers to the disadvantage inherent in research that takes a particular cultural group as the starting point or standard for research, including cross-cultural research. We argue that home-field status is a serious handicap that often pushes researchers toward deficit thinking, however good the researchers' intentions may be. In this article, we aim to make this home-field bias more explicit and, in doing so, more avoidable. We discuss three often-overlooked disadvantages that result from this home-field status: the problem of marked versus unmarked culture, the problem of homogenous versus heterogeneous culture, and the problem of regression toward the mean. We also recommend four interventions researchers can apply to avoid the home-field disadvantage or, at the least, attenuate its deleterious effects.

If cultures were not ordinarily different, one from another, we would find both the concept of culture and research about it of little interest. From what people eat (e.g. Rozin, 2007) and marriage customs to sleeping arrangements (e.g. Shweder, Jensen, & Goldstein, 1995) and the relation of language to thought (Gentner and Goldin-Meadow, 2003), intriguing cultural differences are found. The past few decades of work have shown the folly of assuming that what undergraduates at major research universities do in experimental tasks is universal or even typical (e.g. Medin and Atran, 2004) and there is evidence that even basic cognitive processes may differ across cultures (Nisbett, 2003).

But it is also true that few research areas are as problematic or have such a jaundiced history as the study of culture. Cultural research has been used as the instrument of colonialism to justify subjugating people whose thought processes are "more primitive." It is easy to think of culture as something other groups have that prevents them from seeing the world objectively, like we think we do (e.g. Ross, 2004). It is easy to interpret cultural differences in terms of a deficit model, where the cultural group that differs from us is seen as having failed, where "failed" means not performing in accordance with our standard. For these reasons some have argued that the very construct of culture is so susceptible to stereotyping and essentializing other groups that it should be discarded (see Brumann et al., 1999 for a review and commentaries).

For purposes of this article we are going to assume that the most egregious and most transparent misuses of cultural research have been called out (see Cole and Scribner, 1974 for a clear analysis and examples). Our focus will instead be on the more subtle and perhaps more pernicious forms of cultural bias that grow out of what we refer to as "the home field disadvantage."

The *home-field disadvantage* refers to the disadvantage inherent in research that takes a particular cultural group—or that group’s performance—as the starting point or standard for research, including cross-cultural research. Given that psychological sciences have been dominated by research conducted in the USA, it is almost always the case that the beginning point consists of results obtained in labs at major USA research universities. It is not obvious that this is a disadvantage in itself, other than limiting the presumed generality of results. We argue that the home-field is a serious handicap that pushes us toward deficit thinking (or some euphemism for deficit), however good our intentions may be. In this paper, we aim to make this home field bias more explicit and, in doing so, more avoidable.

Paths to the Home-Field Disadvantage

It may be useful to distinguish among senses home-field status. First, researchers themselves often come from only one of the cultural groups being compared (*in-group* as home-field). Second, research *design, evaluation, and analysis* often originates (or originated) with only one cultural group, whether or not the researchers themselves are from that group (starting point as home-field). Third, historically, members of both *in-group* and *starting point* populations often occupy a position of power and authority relative to other groups being compared (*power* as home field). The fact that white American males do a great deal of the research on culture is an example of the first (in-group) and third (power) paths to home-field status. The fact that the research protocol is often originally designed, evaluated, and analyzed using primarily white, USA, university undergraduate students as participants, is an example of the second (starting point) and third paths to the home field.

All three paths to home-field status asymmetrically influence the *psychological distance* between researchers and the cultural groups being studied. Psychological distance refers to how subjectively (*psychologically*) close or distant an event or person is across a range of measures of distance, including time, space, and personal identity (Trope and Liberman, 2003). Here we are particularly concerned with the third kind of distance, specifically the degree to which *research designers* identify with *the cultural groups they are studying*. All three paths to home-field status push in the same direction such that researchers are psychologically closer to (1) their cultural *in-group*, (2) the cultural group they take as a *starting point* for research design, evaluation, and analysis, and (3) the dominant or majority culture group.

Home-field status—with its relationship to psychological distance—in turn contributes to at least three distinct (though overlapping) disadvantages. These are the more subtle dangers that we warned about. First, it affects whether a group’s cultural practices and beliefs seem normal or deficient (the problem of *marked vs. unmarked culture*). Second, it affects the degree to which cultural groups seem more uniform and easy to essentialize versus diverse and multi-faceted (the problem of *homogenous vs. heterogeneous culture*). Third, by virtue of the process by which research stimuli and methods are selected, home-field status makes it likely that cultural differences will be found that have no basis in reality. For reasons that will become clear we refer to this as the problem of *regression towards the mean*.

Marked Versus Unmarked Culture

At a typical psychology convention, if research participants are mentioned at all, the speaker most often says, ‘people’, because it is safe to assume that they are talking about undergraduate students at an American university (and most likely a student taking Introduction to Psychology), along with the additional unmentioned demographic and cultural characteristics that go along with being a student at an American university. There are many reasons that this particular cultural group is unmarked, of course, including all three paths to the home-field mentioned above. One problem with this cultural group (i.e., the standard research population) being unmarked is that its peculiarities go unnoticed. Instead, the characteristics of this group are the characteristics of “people,” implicitly taken to be representative of humankind, and providing insight into universal, culture-free human psychology. Culture is something that members of *other* populations have, the lens that shapes the way *they* see the world.

The problem of markedness may persist among cross-cultural researchers, though in less direct ways. Although we may carefully mark the demographic characteristics of our research participants, the cultural-specificity of the normally-unmarked group’s *practices and beliefs* are not so easily marked.

Consider the following example from Medin’s research with Scott Atran (Atran & Medin, in press). One of the things these investigators looked at in their cross-cultural studies concerns the so-called *diversity principle* in reasoning about categories. To see how this principle works, readers can participate in an experiment. Suppose you know that Disease A affects river birch and paper birch, and Disease B affects white pines and weeping willows. Which disease do you think is more likely to affect all trees? If you give problems like these to University of Michigan undergraduates, over 90% answer Disease B, the disease that affects white pines and weeping willows (López et al., 1997). If you ask them why, they say something like this: “Well, Disease A could be just a birch thing, and if it happens for trees that are this different—as different as white pines and weeping willows, it’s more likely to affect all trees.” This is the *diversity principle* in categorization and, at least initially, Atran and Medin thought the diversity principle might be universal. But when they tested it with Itza’ Maya agro-foresters in Guatemala they found *below* chance diversity responding (López et al., 1997).

In this case, the university-student population had been consciously marked, but their understanding of the task, which corresponded to Atran and Medin’s understanding, had not, indeed, could not have been. This dilemma comes from starting with what you know. The “natural” question for Atran & Medin to ask was, “Why do the Itza’ *fail* to show diversity?” because diversity seemed like *the* only reasonable strategy. As it happened, Atran & Medin were also simultaneously doing studies involving another population consisting of USA adults who knew a lot about trees—people such as parks workers and landscapers (Proffitt et al, 1999). Like the Itza’ they also showed below chance diversity responding. When presented with the disease scenario outlined above, thirteen out of fourteen parks workers picked Disease A—the disease that affects river birch and paper birch—as more likely to affect all trees. Their typical explanations were causal and ecological. They regularly said such things as: “Well, first of all, birches are incredibly susceptible to disease. If one of them gets it, they’ll all get it. Secondly, they’re

very widely planted as an ornamental, and they're widely dispersed naturally; so there would be plenty of opportunities for that disease to spread."

Note that had Atran and Medin begun their studies with Itza' Maya or tree experts the deficit thinking would have been reversed: "Why do college undergraduates fail to show causal and ecological inductive reasoning? Even the notion of "expert" depends on one's perspective. The tree "experts" could identify roughly 90% of the trees in the Chicago area, but where Atran and Medin work in Guatemala, nearly everyone can identify nearly all the trees. Itza' Maya would find it very strange for us to call our tree "experts" experts. Whether the landscapers and park personnel are experts, or Northwestern undergraduates have a nature-deficit disorder depends on where you start.

Homogenous Versus Heterogeneous Culture

There is extensive work in social psychology suggesting that greater psychological distance and power differentials biases people toward making dispositional rather than situational attributions (Fiske, 1993; Trope & Liberman, 2003). Gilensky et al. (2006) have experimentally manipulated power and found that a position of power is associated with a diminished capacity to take other people's perspective and comprehend how they think and feel.

A related consequence of distancing may be its influence on what one takes to be the relevant unit of analysis. If out-groups are seen as homogeneous, then it will seem natural to aggregate over broader groups. Chandler & Lalonde's (1998) research looking at suicide rates among First Nations people in British Columbia provides an example of how misleading results can be if the level of aggregation is too broad. First Nations or Aboriginal peoples have the highest rate of suicide of any culturally identifiable group (Kirmayer, 1994). In British Columbia, the suicide rate among First Nations people is about three times higher than it is for other Canadians (*Figure 1*), and several times higher still for First Nations youth. Given this summary statistic, might be tempted to organize suicide-prevention programs targeting all First Nations people.

[Insert *Figure 1* here]

But Chandler & Lalonde broke down the *Figure 1* data by different bands/tribes (*Figure 2*). Some of the more than 200 bands in their study have a suicide rate literally hundreds of times higher than the national average, but 40% of the bands studied have a suicide rate of *zero*. Chandler & Lalonde then looked to see what might be correlated with these variable suicide rates. There are a number of easily imagined standard demographic factors that do *not* correlate, including whether the band members live in urban or rural settings, average income, population density, and rates of unemployment. Instead, they found that suicide rates were negatively correlated with efforts on the part of bands to restore and revive their threatened cultures. Using a series of measures which they label as markers of "cultural continuity" (including *self-government, land claims in courts, health services, and knowledge of aboriginal languages*), Chandler & Lalonde found that the suicide rate decreased dramatically as a function of how many of these factors were in place (*Figure 3*). This completely reverses the perspective on the meaning and policy implications of indigenous suicide rates.

Moving from a global First Nations perspective to an exploration of the differences that divide specific bands allowed them to identify factors associated with resilience that would have been missed—and are easy to miss—when reasoning about psychologically distant cultural groups.

[Insert *Figure 2* here]

[Insert *Figure 3* here]

Regression towards the Mean

Another home-field disadvantage in cross-cultural research comes from knowing the “sweet spots.” Suppose we begin with some psychological phenomenon that has already been established using a North American sample, or use experimental stimuli that other people have been effectively using (with that same sample), or generate experimental stimuli or methodological intuitions already well honed within our own cultural group. If we then translate and transport these stimuli and methods for a cross-cultural comparison, chances are we are likely to find that the phenomenon either is weaker or disappears. This may well happen even when researchers work to translate the materials into local languages, or, otherwise, take steps to insure that the assessment tools in use are locally meaningful and familiar. A common and tempting interpretation of this pattern of results is that we have discovered a bona fide cross-cultural difference, but such an interpretation may be problematic because of *regression towards the mean*.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand regression to the mean and its implications for cultural comparisons is with a concrete example. Suppose that we were study “sense of humor” and developed a set of jokes in North America and then (after proper translation) tested them in another culture. We could be quite sure that people in the other culture would not find them as funny as people in our home culture. But no reasonable person would want to conclude that people in the other culture had a worse sense of humor. We recognize that jokes have been *selected* for funniness and that this is determined by (variable) knowledge, values and other sorts of individual and cultural variables. But what holds for jokes also applies to any assessment tool when it is selected and developed in one culture and applied to another.

Research findings are not simply measures of psychological phenomena—they are the result of an interaction between psychological phenomena and the stimuli designed to bring them out. Through trial and error, or active intention, research stimuli are selected according to how well they fit the participant population to produce a particular effect. For example, the most widely cited example used to show framing effects in decision making—Tversky & Kahneman’s Asian disease scenario (1981)—also happens to produce larger effects than other framing scenarios having the same abstract structure (Kühberger, 1998). Looking for items that bring out some effect of interest makes perfect sense but it has inimical consequences when used asymmetrically in cross-cultural comparisons. Because the particular stimuli have been selected to bring out particular effects with a particular (though often unmarked) cultural group, *regression towards the mean* predicts movement away from this exceptional performance toward the less exceptional, even if the second cultural group would display the same psychological

phenomenon equally well (or better) using a different set of stimuli that had been tailored for success with the second population.

Of course, this does not always contribute to a perception that the second cultural group is deficient. The Asian Disease scenario, for example, is designed to demonstrate deficiencies (i.e., deviation from normative models of rationality). In such cases, regression toward the mean suggests that other cultural group will appear *less* deficient rather than more deficient. In general, the fact that research stimuli have been selected to “work” with a particular cultural group (usually American, usually university students) gives that group a privileged status that is not shared with other cultural groups, whether this privilege makes the original group look better or worse or just different.

Giving Up the Home Field Disadvantage

Is there a cure for the home field disadvantage? No but we will propose four vaccines. The first is to simply try to remain aware of the three disadvantages discussed above. Actively mark the unmarked cultural group. This does not simply mean identifying the demographics of the populations and acknowledging that findings may not generalize to other groups; it also means recognizing that seeing outside our own culture-specific perspective is a considerable and ongoing challenge. Work to see cultural groups as diverse and heterogeneous rather than as homogenous. Recognize that research findings will tend to represent a relationship between a particular cultural group and the research design, and that, therefore, when these same designs are applied to a different population, some kind of flattening of performance (regression toward the mean) can be expected.

Second, try to be as diverse and collaborative as possible in designing and carrying out research. This includes members of the research populations being studied. The Canadian Institute for Health Research has an outstanding set of guidelines along these lines for research involving aboriginal peoples that might serve as a model for such an approach (Canadian Institute for Health Research, 2007).

A third approach, which is particularly challenging, is to do one’s best to study the phenomenon of interest on the terms of the culture, or cultures, being studied. For example if one were studying cultural differences in emotions, it would be a mistake to start with English emotion terms and try to identify their counterparts in another culture since this presumes part of what one wishes to study (Boster, 2005). In other words, there is much to be gained by changing the starting point of investigation and the home-field disadvantages that come with it.

Our last piece of advice, which goes against our training as psychologists, is to substitute perspective taking for trying to be “objective.” The idea of trying to be objective may be like trying to draw a map without a point of view. The solution we propose to the impossibility of not taking any perspective at all, on the one hand, and the pitfalls of taking a particular perspective, on the other, is to do one’s best to take multiple perspectives. This entails not just taking the first two pieces of advice above, but also actively seeking to use multiple methods comprised of a variety of research stimuli with a variety of cultural groups and collaborators. It also requires the humble recognition that whatever pains we might take to lose the home-field disadvantage, it may be that the best

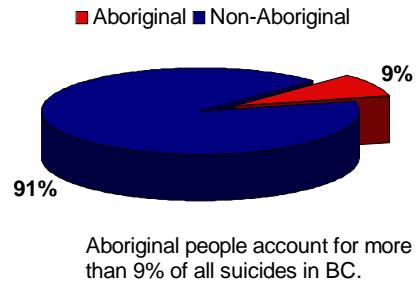
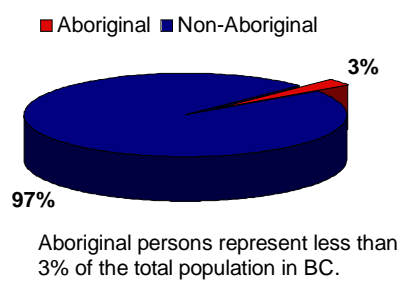
we can hope to achieve is a partial rendition of the phenomena we are seeking to understand.

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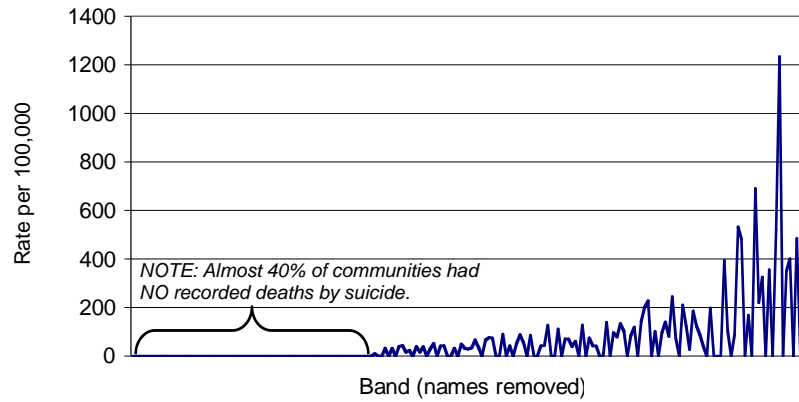
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British Columbia (BC) Statistics



BC Youth Suicide Rate by Band (1987-2000)



BC Youth Suicide Rate by Number of Factors Present in Community

