

# Universalism

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In a universalist perspective, psychologists regard psychological constructs as having relevance both within and across cultures. However, although the fundamental nature of a construct may be the same universally, its outward manifestation may differ as a function of cultural factors. Culture, therefore, is an important element in understanding thought and behavior because culture determines the behaviors that reflect the underlying construct. Two alternative perspectives are *relativism*, which posits that any given construct is particular to a single culture, and *absolutism*, which asserts that culture is irrelevant to understanding psychological constructs because they do not differ across cultures (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002).

There can be some confusion between absolutism and universalism because both perspectives acknowledge the reality and validity of a construct across groups. The difference between the two is that according to universalism, in order to understand people, one must take culture into account. In contrast, according to absolutism, culture is not a meaningful factor when one tries to understand behavior because absolutists regard constructs as invariant across cultures.

Another difference between universalism and absolutism is that universalism recognizes the importance of making measurements that are meaningful within a cultural context, whereas absolutism ignores the role of culture in measurement. Thus, psychologists subscribing to a universalist framework will accept comparisons across cultures as long as measurements of targeted constructs take into account cultural variability.

In cases where two cultures accept the same construction of a concept, absolutists would accept as valid, any comparisons across

the cultures as long as the concept shows *construct validity* and the method of measurement is appropriate for each culture. Within this framework, psychologists can make meaningful comparative statements across cultures, although such comparisons may not be possible for some constructs.

Van de Vijver and Poortinga (1982) have conceptualized four levels regarding the universality of constructs. 1) Conceptual universals include meaningfully related constructs at an abstract level. Concepts such as intelligence fall into this category. Although the universality is seen by many to exist (i.e., all people in each culture show relative levels of intelligence), no useful measurement is associated with the concept at this level of abstraction, and the concept has no explanatory value; 2) Functionally equivalent (weak) universals include constructs that one can measure with validity in different cultures, although the methods or scales of measurement differ across cultures; 3) Metrically equivalent (strong) universals include constructs that are measured using a validated metric such that quantitative differences within a culture are meaningful, but comparisons of differences in scores across cultures are not; 4) Scalar equivalent (strict) universals include constructs that are measured on the same scale and show the same distribution across cultures. Few constructs have been empirically validated at this level, although some reaction time measurements show this level of universality.

Thus, universalists agree that it is possible to measure some constructs with validity and to make meaningful comparisons across cultures. But empirical validation of those measurements is necessary because targeted constructs are not necessarily on the same scale across cultures. An important implication of this framework is that comparisons across cultures should be non-evaluative; that is, differences are simply differences and do

not reflect evaluation of better or worse. The evaluative approach would reflect the initial research across cultures that relied on assessing behavior from the context of the then-dominant Western approach to science (Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998).

Most psychologists agree that behaviors arise from biological and sociocultural factors. Thus, the extreme positions of relativists and absolutists may be difficult to support without qualification, and most psychologists fall somewhere between the extremes (Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998).

**SEE ALSO:** Absolutism; Construct Equivalence; Relativism; Values (Shalom H. Schwartz)

## References

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