

## INTERNATIONALIZATION IN PSYCHOLOGY: A PROCESS, NOT AN OUTCOME

LA INTERNACIONALIZACIÓN EN PSICOLOGÍA: UN PROCESO, NO UN  
RESULTADO

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**Abstract:** Today there is broad discussion of internationalization across institutions, organizations and disciplines. However, there has been little agreement on the scope, definition, or anticipated effects of internationalization. The purpose of this presentation is to open discussion on the meaning, measurement and importance of internationalization in psychology today.

### WHAT IS INTERNATIONALIZATION?

Internationalization has different meanings for organizations (where it generally includes exchange, collaboration, and relations across borders), for disciplines (where it generally refers to a search for common constructs, methods or standards), or for products (where it commonly means preparing a product so it can be easily adapted for use in multiple locations).

Within psychology, internationalization has been taken to mean each of these things (cf. Arfken, 2012). At the organizational level, internationalization has been fostered almost as long as psychology has been a formal discipline, beginning with the first international Congress in 1889 in Paris. Throughout the 20th Century the number of international gatherings has grown steadily so that now there are well over 100 international and regional conferences in psychology each year (data gathered from [www.psychologyresources.org](http://www.psychologyresources.org)). This kind of networking is one of the goals of many psychology organizations. In addition to exchange and networking, internationalization also is reflected in increased representation, including in collaborations, or in service on boards and committees of international organizations in psychology, science, or application.

At the disciplinary level, internationalization in psychology refers to harmonization or consensus on defining standards, methods and processes.

This might include consensus on the definition of psychology, on the competencies that underlie psychological practice, or agreement on quality assurance standards or ethical principles. Internationalization also frequently addresses the substance of psychology, addressing similarities and differences in psychological processes across borders and cultures.

It should be noted that internationalization does not mean the same thing to all groups of psychologists. For some, it means bringing in content, data, people or theories from the rest of the world. For example, when people talk about internationalizing the curriculum or the psychology literature in the United States, they generally mean adding information on psychology in other countries, or increasing access to the literature from non-English, non-US or European scholars.

In contrast, for others, internationalization means reaching out to represent one's own work in a more international forum. This might include attending international conferences, publishing in international journals, usually in English, sending students or faculty abroad, fostering international collaborations, or representing one's country or perspective in international bodies.

In part, there are historical reasons for this difference in connotation. At least since the 1950's, the international psychology literature and world of psychology textbooks have been dominated by contributions from the US (and more recently the

US and Europe and English speaking countries) complemented by parallel literatures at the country level in local languages. As psychology has developed around the world into a robust discipline, the search for a more global, inclusive perspective means expanding the range of what is considered “mainstream,” promoting the visibility of approaches outside the U.S. and Europe, and developing explicitly local or indigenous psychologies (Kim & Park, 2007).

### WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF INTERNATIONALIZATION?

In the end analysis, the goals of internationalization are to understand the broad scope of behavior around the world, across variations in geography, culture, language and history (cf. de Vijver, 2013). Taking an international perspective allows us to ask deeper questions about what is universal in behavior and what is local, and how to tell the two apart.

These goals have become more visible as psychology has grown around the world, and as increasing numbers of psychologists have come to articulate how “mainstream” models, data and theories based on a small and narrow band of the worlds’ populations, may not be good models for behavior universally (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010). These goals have become more visible for a variety of reasons. First, the demographics of psychology have changed. The rate of growth in psychology over the last several decades has been faster outside of the traditional centers of mainstream psychology in North America and Europe. Thirty years ago there were more psychologists in the United States than in any other geographical region. Today, there are more psychologists in Latin America or in Europe than in the U.S., and the growth rate continues to increase in these regions as well as Africa and Asia. In addition, whereas advanced training in psychology often required studies in the U.S. or Europe, today there are more local, national opportunities for high quality advanced training, and countries traditionally outside the mainstream – universities in Latin America, in Asia, and in Africa, now have extensive educational, research and application opportunities.

Perhaps the most important changes have been in the discourse within psychology itself. There is recognition that our psychology “facts” which, as Jeffrey Arnett (Arnett, 2008) reminded us in 2008, are based on data from only 5% of the

world’s populations, may not be universally true. This has provoked renewed attention to issues of generalizability and universality of our data and models. The findings from cross-cultural psychology over the last 30 years (Berry et al, 2002; Triandis, 1994) have done much to promote this conversation. Cross-cultural research addresses how behavior varies across and is influenced by culture. This work has suggested in many areas of psychology that well-known constructs or “laws” of behavior are not universally observed (e.g., Nisbett et al, 2001). Put another way, this work shows that culture exerts powerful effects not only on the norms and mores of societies, but on such basic psychological constructs as temperament, personality, identity, memory, perception, and pathology.

### WHY IS INTERNATIONALIZATION IMPORTANT?

Internationalization is important for a number of reasons. In addition to strengthening psychological knowledge (as noted above), internationalization is important to develop a broader database of behavior (e.g. to collect data from a broader swath of the worlds’ populations). This breadth is important because our societies are changing in their demographics – and we need to understand variability and diversity more deeply. A psychology that is more inclusive is one that has the potential to be more generalizable. As de Vijver noted, “We need to move beyond the current state in which many psychological constructs are either taken to be completely invariant across cultures or are considered culture-specific and incomparable across cultures.” (2013, page 762). As we become increasingly aware that many of the core constructs and processes in psychology -- identity, self, personality, developmental tasks, causal attributions and explanations, just to name a few, are not invariant – but we have little data on the scope, degree, or impact of variations across culture, nationality, language, geography, social milieu. Becoming a truly international discipline will help us ask and address these issues.

Internationalization is also important for strengthening psychology’s voice in addressing global challenges in health, well-being, development, and the role of human choice, decision making and behavior. Psychology in almost every country shares the same issues in being heard in addressing societal issues through policy or program development and implementation. Learning across

borders how different programs and organizations have approached similar challenges may increase our toolbox for effective science to application. An internationalized psychology will also provide a stronger sustained engagement with global and regional organizations addressing health (WHO) and development (UN).

### HOW TO WE FOSTER INTERNATIONALIZATION?

We need to scale up current efforts to promote exchange and collaboration. As a discipline, we need to encourage our institutions, departments and colleagues to value international work, and to provide resources to allow it to flourish.

As a discipline we also need to address how to engage internationally with an international attitude – how to share data and ideas across language and space, and how to account for strong resource differences across countries. One way is to begin to address some of the barriers to international collaboration – barriers in language, power and access.

Language is a complex issue. For most, English has become the common language of the scientific discourse. But adopting this as the norm raises a challenge for psychology. Much of our cultural frameworks are carried in language (cf. Christopher et al, 2014), and translating these frameworks may not preserve important nuances for understanding behavior. In addition, quite pragmatically, discourse is impeded if it needs to occur in a second or third language rather than in one's more proficient language. Some may disagree with me but I do not think the solution is for us all to learn English. Rather we might work to develop mechanisms so we can interact across languages, of developing ways to make literature in different languages more accessible, encouraging dialogues across languages, and getting more comfortable interacting outside out language comfort zones (Draguns, 2001). We also need to address power and access differences – whether due to economic circumstances, political context or social history and context, psychology communities vary in resources and access to resources. Addressing these differences means a commitment to capacity building in those areas of the world where psychology is less developed, and to thinking about how to keep standards

high but achievable. It also means developing an attitude of learning partnerships that help us to maintain collaborations that cut across resource differences.

Let me end with a caution —internationalization in psychology is not globalization —we are not looking to become all the same, or to assume there are universal explanations for psychological phenomena or universal interventions —there are many examples to caution us away from these goals (cf. Marsella, 2007; Stevens & Wedding, 2007). Rather, the goal is to continue to balance international and local perspectives, and to develop strategies for promoting information exchange, access, and collaboration across all regions in the world. Ironically, for psychology, internationalization may mean recognizing and tolerating a variety of systems and explanations, rather than agreeing on a homogenous science or practice. It is up to us to form the collaborations, ask the questions and explore how learning across borders can impact the content, scope, and quality of our science, and the strength of our explanations and applications.

Although this statement was written close to 90 years ago, it is relevant today—

It is a truism that science knows nothing of national boundaries, and that the commonwealth of mind draws all... into its domain, so that in the pursuit of truth all may join in friendly rivalry. But it is equally true that physical remoteness, or cultural insulation, as well as the barriers of alien tongues, still serve to keep... [us]... from the fullest and most sympathetic understanding of one another's thought.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (James R. Angell [1930], Opening address to the 9th International Congress of Psychology, 1929)

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