

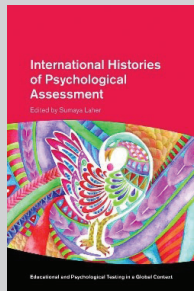
Situating international histories of psychological assessment in a changed scientific landscape



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Situating international histories of psychological assessment in a changed scientific landscape

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Introduction

One can imagine that asking a multitude of authors to provide an overview of psychological assessment in their countries is a daunting task, but Laher (2022) managed the process excellently by including section editors and providing contributing authors with a clear structure, or discussion template, that allowed authors to organise content comparably. Writing histories is fraught with difficulties, but the authors of this collection of international histories of assessment did an excellent job.

The structure of the book

The work is introduced by Laher and section editors in Chapter 1, giving a short introduction to the brief given to authors and introducing the reader to the global terrain of assessment. The sections include Africa, Arab Levant, Europe, Asia, Oceania and the Americas. Although comprehensive, some areas are not covered, such as East Africa, but as the field grows and access to psychology increases, future editions of this work will hopefully be expanded.

The chapters utilised the discussion template to reflect a brief overview of the country under discussion and phases in the assessment development, such as pre-history, the 19th century and the development during the 20th century. Prominent tests used in a particular country were discussed, as well as limitations and future directions. Not many chapters addressed the latter, but as Laher (2022) pointed out in Chapter 19, most concluded that assessment and test development need to progress much more, gain more ground, focus on indigenous test development and allow psychology to flourish as a science and practice. Of course, it depends on which part of the world was discussed. As expected, the West or North America and Western Europe dominate the test development scene in terms of progress with creating, adapting and analysing tests as well as providing guidelines for test construction, adaptation and application. The editor tempered the importance of these localities by placing the chapter on North America (and Canada; Chapter 18) last in chapters related to history discussion – a nice symbolic touch to emphasise the ‘other’ international voices in assessment.

The International Test Commission (ITC), which supported this publication, plays a pervasive role in providing training, guidance and standards along with the European Federation of Psychologists’ Associations (EFPA) and others. The progress or lack thereof in various Latin American, African and Asian countries can be associated with institutionalised support on the local governmental or international association level. Assessment and test development go hand in hand with accepting psychology as an academic discipline and practice in countries. In some instances, psychology and assessment are supported by local governments, even with the establishment of local psychological regulative bodies. It is also apparent that some countries struggle with establishing these bodies, so psychology and assessment suffer greatly (Chapter 4). Of course, some governments view the psychological project as colonial and mainly a Westernised endeavour, making it taking root so much more difficult (see Zambia as an example in Chapters 1 and 3).

A lesson to be learned from global history is that some form of regulation of psychological practice is required if a country would like psychology to thrive. It need not be based on a Westernised model. Still, the sole reason is to do justice to communities at the receiving end: they deserve high-quality and standardised assessment and therapeutic interventions. A form of regulation does ensure training and assessment standards but should be in a form suited locally. From the

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different narratives, it seems as if progress in assessment is also associated with how well psychology becomes institutionalised as an academic discipline along with the goal of training psychologists. Iran is one example (Chapter 11), and Brazil (Chapter 16) is another.

Worldwide assessment and test development trends show that Western countries found their feet many years ago and took the lead with standards and guidelines (Chapters 7, 9). In contrast, other countries went through initial development phases, promising progress and then sudden interruption and decline (Chapter 16). Even in these countries, like Chile (Chapter 16) and South Africa (Chapter 2), assessment and test development need to be re-invigorated, marketed and supported. Political factors greatly impacted the growth and decline of psychology and assessment (Chapters 11 and 13). The communist regime's dismantling of psychology in Eastern-European countries is an example (Chapter 10). Other countries struggle with the exigencies of having psychology as a subject in their education and training institutions. Some countries only recently managed to formalise psychology, training and associated regulative bodies, such as Malaysia and Peru (Chapters 14 and 16), while others were growing strongly since the 2000s, such as Brazil, with the support of the ITC (Chapter 16).

Writing history

The introductory Chapter 1 sets the tone for contributors by providing some guidance about writing the assessment history. At first glance, the guidelines harbour an epistemological tension against the background of the *old* and *new*-style of history writing in psychology (Lovett, 2006). The *old* refers to a manner of presenting the history of psychology, of which Boring (1950) is a prime example. The *new* justifies its approach by contrasting it with particular features of the old. The characteristics of old history writing as contrasted with the new are (Lovett, 2006): (1) providing grand histories of prominent men in psychology as opposed to a focus on the historical context or *Zeitgeist* (Watrin, 2017), (2) focusing on development within psychological science (internalist) without considering the socio-political and historical context influence on the development of psychology (externalist), (3) writing about past events that have relevance for the present. Thus, what and how to report depend on present concerns (presentism) as opposed to interpreting events through the eyes of the past (historicism), (4) current knowledge of psychologists is viewed as progressive when compared to the past; we know more than those in the past (Whigg history) as opposed to an anti-progressionist view of development and progress in psychology, (5) old histories apparently rely on secondary sources rather than first-hand accounts which is the preference of the new histories and finally, (6) old histories were largely written by psychologists with no formal training in historiography, while trained historians are responsible for the new history.

The reason for focusing on new history would be to avoid the supposed bias inherent in old history writing. Thus, amateur

historians tend to one-sidedly promote a great person's or grand narrative's influence on psychology, and perpetuating these beliefs for 'facts' relevant to the present by relying on narrowly focused internal history. The proponents of the new history justify it as *critical* because it aims to unmask perpetuated biases and beliefs when telling the story of psychology and, in this case, assessment (Teo, 2005; Watrin, 2017). Thus, supporting the critical intent of the new history but avoiding a dogmatic use of the dichotomies, one would do well, as Watrin (2017) urges, to view the writing of the history of psychology as a mix of approaches. Accordingly, Laher et al. (2022) aptly require:

[A]uthors ... to situate the chapters somewhere between narrative and historiography. Hence the chapters assume a more critical stance in reporting the history of psychological assessment that recognises that history is never fact and always represents the subjective position of the author. (p. 2)

They utilise both an internalist and externalist perspective, accommodating both the present and the historical, and secondary and first-hand sources when required. Authors provided 'facts' of assessment in their countries and also employed their knowledge of psychology and the assessment enterprise. These accounts did not glorify the achievements of the past but acknowledged the modern roots of Anglo-European developments in assessment; authors also, where applicable, pointed out the indigenous roots of assessment even if they hark back hundreds of years. The story of assessment is not one of linear and cumulative progress. To provide ethical and non-discriminatory psychological service to countries and their people, psychologists need to consider the historical story of assessment: where did we do injustice, against whom did we discriminate and in what manner; how did we employ assessment and psychological science to commit epistemological violence (Teo, 2008, 2010)?

The contributors' view of history (writing) recreates the epistemological tension on another level as well, because the topic of the work is assessment, an activity and project primarily located within the quantitative domain of psychological practice. If it remains in the metatheoretical domain of modernist science with close alliances to natural science, positivism and associated epistemologies, then its ability to be critical, as its history stance would like to be, can be stymied. This issue is addressed next.

Psychology as science

Laher (2022, p. 359) in Chapter 19, claims that most of those working with assessment and assessment development are guided by '... by a particular way of understanding science as espoused by the scientists working within modernist assumptions of what science should be'. That the modernist assumptions of what science should be are still widely accepted is probably true. Authors mostly wrote carefully about these assumptions. Laher (2022, p. 359) rightly credits cross-cultural psychology for its critical take on classical assumptions, the resulting sensitivity was displayed in abundance in most chapters. Most called for the translation of

tests, the adaptation of tests, development of indigenous tests and realised that emic-developed assessments were preferable to mere translation and adaptation. However, as Teo (2005, pp. 161–162) remarks, the critical propensity of cross-cultural psychology is not as incisive as that of postcolonial critique: the former remains squarely within Western (and thus modernist) assumptions and methodologies and might fail in dissolving the epistemological tension referred to above.

Although the metatheoretical considerations of natural science moved beyond positivism, naïve realism and empiricism a long time ago, the image of science psychologists are stuck in can rightfully be labelled as modernist. We have to thank our empirical social science and psychology methodology textbooks for this. The modernist view of science is informed mainly by what Michell (2003) calls the quantitative imperative, namely, the view that measurement is a necessary characteristic of science. For various reasons, psychology invested in this modernist view of science, which applies primarily to some natural science disciplines (Michell, 2000, 2008). The modernist view of science became so entrenched in our approach to methodology that it is not even questioned in psychometrics.

If we accept the socio-historical nature of our psychological constructs, the demands of various postmodern and postcolonial positions make sense. With varying degrees, these positions provide a necessary voice to those treated unjustly, marginalised and misappropriated (Teo, 2005). In Chapter 9, Laher (2022) reiterated that the origin of psychometrics as we know it lay with Galton; further development of assessment and tests are a Westernised project which delivered processes and products that justified the judgement of inferiority of certain races and cultures. Laher's (2022, p. 360) warning has postcolonial overtones: '... assessment is not, as with all fields of knowledge, exempt from agendas linked to power', where in this instance, power refers to economic exploitation: the proliferation of Western assessments is profitable. Thus, it is easy to see how not attending to emic epistemologies and methodologies is possible. But, Laher (2022, pp. 361–362) calls for a combination of emic and etic approaches and correctly points out that it is an error to think that Eurocentric constructs have universal applicability just as it is an error to think that the emically developed tests, methods and constructs have only local validity.

The same applies to methodology, methods and our concept of science. Emic and etic perspectives can enrich and even change these. For the moment though, we can address our *modernist* assumptions about what science is. A critical realist

view of science allows us to maintain a position between constructionism and realism by distinguishing between an intransitive and transitive domain (Bhaskar, 1975/2008). The latter comprises our constructions, so to speak, about the real. The former acknowledges a mind-independent reality. Science is the process of examining, confronting and questioning reality whilst forming explanatory theories about how things work, and we know that our theories, facts and knowledge may be false or shown to be empty constructions. On some levels, we can and do measure phenomena. The fortunate advantage of critical realism is its methodological pluralism implying that the nature of the thing under investigation determines the applicability of the method (Danermark et al., 2019). The epistemological relativism, realism and critical orientation of critical realism provide a proper postmodern metatheoretical framework that can address our postcolonial concerns and global assessment aspirations (Tinsley, 2022).

This illuminating collection of chapters intentionally steps into a new scientific landscape no longer modernist. It has to negotiate between the old and new and land in a metatheoretical space where epistemological tensions are superseded.

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