

Dasen P R. Cross-cultural Piagetian research: a summary. *J. Cross-Cult. Psychol.* 3:23-39, 1972. [Australian National University, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia]

This summary of cross-cultural studies based on Piaget's theory concludes that the qualitative aspects of the theory (the stages and individual reactions to the tasks) are verified in most cases, but that the rate of operational development is affected by cultural factors, sometimes to the extent that the concrete operational stage is not reached by large proportions of non-Western samples. [The SSC[®] and the SC[®] indicate that this paper has been cited in more than 115 publications, making it the most-cited paper published in this journal.]

How Ethnocentric Is Developmental Psychology?

Pierre Ft. Dasen
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences
de l'Éducation
University of Geneva
1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland

Studying psychology in Geneva, in the 1960s, necessarily meant studying "genetic epistemology" with the master himself. When I went to Australia in 1967, to study cognitive development in aboriginal children, I was convinced that J. Piaget's theory had to be universal. The first person to shake my belief was a fellow student, who had just come back from the highlands of Papua, New Guinea, reporting that she had tried out some of Piaget's "conservation" tasks and that the children there, and even adults, did not all display concrete operational reasoning. She thought this was quite normal, since the babies were carried around in string-bags that expand as the babies grow: How could they possibly develop concepts of invariance under these conditions? I was shocked by such a preposterous statement. How could any human being live without this "basis of ail rational thought"?

Of course I still believe that the string-bag explanation was way out, but some exaggeration is sometimes needed to shake our basic ethnocentrism! When Piaget¹ wrote his initial statement on the importance of cross-cultural research, only two cross-cultural studies based

on his theory were available; by the time I wrote the literature review for my thesis (the paper under discussion), four years later, there were more than 30. The main thrust of my own PhD research was in fact visual perception, and I saw the Piagetian tasks only as a sideline—before Jumping onto the bandwagon myself. My PhD supervisor, G.N. Seagram, and I had launched a newsletter called *Inventory of Cross-Cultural Piagetian Research*, which provided a lot of information on ongoing projects and later led to a whole volume on the topic.²

This initial literature review remained the only one available for several years, which is certainly why it was cited so often. In my eyes, this success is rather unfortunate, because it was a very preliminary summary. While it provided some useful distinctions (qualitative vs. quantitative aspects of the theory, global stages, substages of particular tasks, horizontal decalages) that helped to clear up some confusion, the review concentrated on descriptive studies; in fact, the editors of the journal had asked me to shorten the manuscript, trimming off most of the quasi-experimental research. Subsequent research (for example, the link with eco-cultural demands,³ or the distinction between performance and competence), including my own, soon added other important dimensions that went largely unnoticed because the 1972 review was used as the standard reference. The 1972 review takes the results at face value, "leaving the methodological problems aside," and presents cultural differences as if they were always at the competence level. Thus, the paper was often, and rightly, criticized, and sometimes chastised for its rampant ethnocentrism.

A lot of ground in the direction of cultural "decentration" has been covered in the meantime, as can be seen in more recent reviews.^{4,6} Research now pays more attention to "everyday cognition," with a more "emic" approach. And the Piagetian school has been replaced by the so-called "neo-Piagetians," although cross-cultural studies in this new trend are still few and far between.⁷

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3. ----- . Concrete operational development in three cultures. *J. Cross-Cult. Psychol.* 6:156-72, 1975. (Cited 30 times.)
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Received September 2, 1993