The assessment of interests has served as the cornerstone for the field of vocational psychology, especially in the United States, for the better part of a century. Interests have served as crucial information in helping individuals learn about themselves, the world of work, and making occupational and educational decisions. At least with respect to the United States, the assessment of interests has been very well done and rivals assessment in most any area of psychology (Fouad, 1999). Given this, it is not uncommon for these interest instruments to be used in other cultures. While such applications can be cost effective, such applications can also be invalid (e.g., see chapter 26). Care must be taken to thoroughly evaluate any application. In this chapter the focus will be on interest assessment in cross cultural contexts by reviewing the issues involved in cross cultural assessment generally and then apply this to interest assessment specifically. In the framework of this contribution the terms cross-cultural and international are used interchangeably but it is recognised that cultures can often be more specific than nationalities. Examples are the separate ethnic cultures found within the United States. So the discussion is not limited, nor should it be, by examining only national differences and similarities.

Assessment in a Cross-Cultural Context

The problems involved in applying models and measures created in one culture to a different culture have received ever increasing attention in the literature (e.g., Ben-Porath, 1990; Berry, 1989; Buss & Royce, 1975; Irvine & Carroll, 1985; Prediger, 1994). The issues involved in cross-cultural measurement are many and they continue to make application difficult. This chapter will focus predominately on the issue of cultural equivalence, as it is easily misunderstood.

A common approach to cross cultural assessment is where a measure is developed in one culture, then translated into the language of a second and administered in that second culture. The scores of the sample in the second culture are compared to
those obtained in the first culture and conclusions drawn about similarities and differences made (e.g., interest scores in the arts are higher in the second culture). However unless the measures are equivalently representing the same underlying construct, then such comparisons yield inaccurate conclusions. Artistic interests in one culture may not at all look like or be similar to those in another and thus comparison of scores is invalid. Another common application is that a measure is translated and used in a second culture to investigate the relation of the construct with some other construct (e.g., is there a relation of artistic interests and occupational choice?). In this case, both the measure itself (artistic interest) and the behaviour it is intended to predict may be very differently manifest in the second culture. Again any conclusions made may be invalid given any of these possible and unexamined measure differences.

A central component in any cross-cultural assessment is thus construct equivalence (Hambleton, 2005; Harkness, 1998). Can it be claimed that the construct is equivalently represented across different cultures? This is a central and often overlooked aspect. It is very common for measures developed and based in one culture to be administered in another culture with the implicit assumption that this administration is equally valid. In many cases, this involves translating one instrument into another language. Even with very careful attention to issues of translation, there is no assurance that the same construct is being equivalently represented. Indeed, this is true even in contexts where there is no language change but that there is a different culture (e.g., different ethnic groups in the U.S.A.). Without explicit examination of construct equivalence, it is likely that inappropriate measures may be applied that would yield misleading results. Construct equivalence, however, is never something that is demonstrated; rather it is something that is approximated with continued work. Providing support for the construct validity of any measure involves providing a case for the theoretical basis of a scale using the nomological net (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955), wherein certain theoretically defined relations (both convergent and divergent) are supported. This is not an easily accomplished process when viewed in one culture but it becomes more complex when cross-cultural examination is involved.

The determination of construct equivalence involves a dynamic tension between etic and emic issues, where etic refers to aspects that apply across cultures (more universalisms) and emic refers to aspects that are specific to individual cultures (Berry, 1979). Etic examinations involve examination of the generalisability of a measure in other cultures involving questions of both intra-measure relations (e.g., Does the measure have similar structural relations in other cultural contexts?) and extra-measure relations (e.g., Does the measure have relations to other measures of similar magnitude?). Construct equivalence can be evaluated to the extent that both the intra and extra measure examinations provide similar answers across cultures. Duarte and Rossier (see Chapter 24) do an excellent job of delineating some of the issues relevant to assessment of intra measure equivalence. However, failure to find similar patterns in measures across cultures does not necessarily indicate that the construct is not appropriate in cross-cultural contexts. Lack of a measure’s construct equivalence could be indicative of either an inappropriate construct or an