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Methodological Problems in Cross-Cultural Research: An Updated Review

Abstract

- This paper covers the methodological problems in cross-cultural research. The issues covered include the criterion problems, methodological simplicity, sampling, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, level of analysis and generalizability.

- While providing an updated review of the literature, suggestions are made for reducing and/or overcoming these problems.

Key Words

- Cross-cultural research, Methodological probems, comparative management research.

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The purpose of this paper is to identify the methodological problems in cross-cultural research through a review of the literature in the field. The implicit suggestion is that research in the field should overcome these problems to be "good" research. Using a similar approach, journals in the field, and research and funding institutions can develop a set of criteria for use in decisions like paper acceptance, research design, and funding. The problem motivating this review is the lack of "good" theories in cross-cultural research.[1]

Comparative management research can be defined as studies comparing organizations in different cultures which are designed to identify similar and different aspects of organizations in cultures around the world.[2] The main purpose of this type of research, according to Adler, is to develop equivalent theories of social behavior within work settings in cultures around the world.[3] Another definition of international business research is the scholarly investigation of business-level activity that crosses national boundaries.[4] Roberts and Boyacigiller state that the purpose of cross-national organizational research is to understand the impact of environmental characteristics on organizations, their members, and relationships within those organizations.[5] This ultimately leads to findings of universalism and/or divergence in those relationships. Barrett and Bass indicate that the cross-cultural study of men at work deals with the question of whether what is learned or developed in one culture can be transferred with or without modification for effective use in another.[6]

Using the above definitions as a basis, we define cross-cultural research as research that has culture as its main independent or dependent variable but not as an extraneous and/or residual variable. The problem in cross-cultural organizational research is the lack of universal organizational theories. An organizational practice that is effective in one culture may or may not be effective in another. The outcome of cross-cultural research will be the identification of universalities and/or divergence in the independent-variable, dependent-variable relationships. In his review of the literature, Roberts was pessimistic about progress which was made until then in the field.[7] However, the more recent reviews like Barrett and Bass, Bhagat and McQuaid, Sekaran, Roberts and Boyacigiller, and Ronen are increasingly optimistic about the progress which has been made.[8]

Kuhn defines scientific paradigms as "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners."[9] In cross-cultural research there are no paradigms develop yet. To guide progress in this direction, Roberts and Boyacigiller propose that researchers stop doing small studies that seek answers to limited and often unimportant questions.[10] Small or big, the number of cross-cultural research being done is increasing at a slow rate. Adler states that the American economic activity has internationalized a lot faster than has the publishing of cross-cultural articles in American management journals.[11] She points out that

there are two major reasons for this: funding and methodological complexity. International and cross-cultural studies are more expensive, more difficult, and more complex than are domestic studies.

This paper addresses the methodological problems cross-cultural research needs to overcome in order to fully grow into an independent and developed field of research. Ricks conducted a survey of the fellows of the Academy of International Business for a listing of the best articles in International Business.[1,2] Most of the articles in his "Top 20" list were basically integrative and theory-building in nature. These conceptual and theory-building articles provide guidance for future empirical research utilizing more rigorous designs.

This paper uses a process approach to cover the methodological problems in cross-cultural research. It includes a discussion of the problems in each successive stage in the research process. We begin the paper by discussing the criterion problem and continue it with the discussions of methodological and theoretical simplicity; sampling and instrumentation problems; issues related to data analysis and the levels of analysis; and finally, the generalizability of the results. The problems identified in this paper are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Methodological Problems in Cross-Cultural Research

I. *Criterion Problem*
- A. Definition of culture
- B. Country as a surrogate for culture
- C. When is culture a contingency?
- D. Cultural biases of researchers
- E. Cultural biases of national theories

II. *Methodological Simplicity*
- A. Difficulties of rigorous designs
- B. Cross sectional case studies
- C. One-shot static studies
- D. Static group comparisons
- E. Functional equivalence
- F. Time problems
- G. Single-discipline studies
- H. No synergy

III. *Sampling Issues*
- A. Selection of cultures (convenience)
- B. Selection of subjects (convenience)
- C. Student samples
- D. Sample size
- E. Representativeness of the sample
- F. Matched samples
- G. Independence of samples (Galton's problem)
- H. Description of the characteristics of the samples

IV. *Instrumentation*
- A. Equivalence of language (translation)
- B. Equivalence of variables
- C. Equivalence of scaling
- D. Equivalence of experimental manipulation

V. *Data Collection*
- A. Equivalence of administration
- B. Response equivalence
- C. Timing of data collection
- D. Status and other psychological issues
- E. Cross-sectional versus longitudinal data collection

VI. *Data Analysis*
- A. Qualitative vs. quantitative data
- B. Non-parametric vs. parametric statistics
- C. Univariate vs. multivariate analyses

VII. *Level of Analysis*

Data collection and analysis at one level, inferences at another
- A. Individual level
- B. Organizational level
- C. Societal level

The Criterion Problem

Most criticisms of cross-cultural research begin with the fact that the term culture is not adequately defined. This problem sometimes leads to researchers including, Bhagat and McQuaid, suggesting that the term culture should be eliminated.[13] Most published articles use the terms culture, country, nation, and society interchangeably. This is because, there are very few operational definitions of culture.

Frequently, research on cross-cultural issues uses the country as a surrogate variable for culture. This is due to the convenience that national borders provide in defining a unit of analysis for research. Most of these studies label themselves as cross-cultural, when in fact they are cross-national studies. These studies implicitly assume that the domestic population within those countries are culturally homogeneous. If one could operationally define culture, it will be obvious that most nations in the world are multicultural units. Research in this field should first identify whether the study is cross-cultural or cross-national. Only then can it operationally define culture as one of the main variables in the study.

The earliest article in Rick's list of the leading articles in International Business, dates back to 1959.[14] After nearly twenty-five years of research, Sekaran states that the field is still not in a position to conceptualize and assess the variable "culture".[15] Child and Kieser's article is an example of a study trying to provide a definition of culture that is independent of national boundaries.[16] The authors state that much research is needed to assess the impact of cultural factors.

Although it is difficult to operationally define culture, it is widely accepted that culture has a significant effect on organizations.[17] This raises the question of "When is culture a contingency factor?" Culture affects some aspects of human and organizational behavior but not others.[18] Culture as an independent variable may not be related to the dependent variable or the theory of interest in a study.[19] Studies should also specifically mention whether their theory is culture-free or not.[20]

Culture affects the researcher and the definition of culture is affected by the researcher. The researcher as a person, is a product of his or her own culture. On the General Hierarchy of Systems, the researcher (man) is at level 7.[21] The object of the study (human organizations and society) is at level 8, a more complex level. Since the researcher is less complex that the subject, the researcher is both affected by the system and also has difficulty in understanding what goes on at higher levels.[22] Adler says that in order to design, conduct, and interpret research from each culture's perspective and not strictly from a single culture, research teams should be multicultural.[23]

Theories used in research are also under the effects of culture. Hofstede, for example, suggest that American theories may not apply to other cultures.[24] The call for multicultural research teams, applies here too. Multicultural research teams should combine different national theories to develop theoretical frameworks for research.

In summary, the criterion problem in cross-cultural research is that there is no widespread agreement in the field on an operational definition of "culture". Hofstede's multidimensional operationalization provides the beginning of paradigm development in cross-cultural research.[25] Most books and articles in the field make a reference to his definition. As we stated earlier, culture has significant effects on both the researchers and the national theories.[26] This creates questions of external validity for any criteria used in organizational research. Adler states that the "growing internationalism demands that a narrow domestic pardigm be replaced with one that can encompass the diversity of a global perspective."[27]

Methodological Simplicity

The second major dilemma with which cross-cultural research faces is methodological simplicity. Since doing cross-cultural research is more difficult than doing purely domestic research, Sekaran suggests that "we ought to be willing to settle for less than the ideal research designs."[28] Adler further suggests "perhaps reviewers and journal editors will need to keep this fact more closely in mind when evaluating international organizational behavior studies submitted for publication."[29] We believe that cross-cultural research should try to overcome its simplicity, rather than throwing itself to the mercy of these suggestions.

There are three types of problems associated with simplicity. These are: ethnocentricity, functional equivalence, and time frame. Reviews of cross-cultural research indicate that most of the studies are cross-sectional static studies. That is, they are one-shot, after-the-fact, case studies or are static group comparisons.[30] Most of these studies are in the classification of ethnocentric research in which the studies in one culture is replicated in a second culture.[31] Adler states that the majority of ethnocentric research is American research being replicated in another country.[32] The choice of the other culture(s) is generally due to convenience. This problem will be discussed in the sampling section of this paper.

Functional equivalence is a problem generally ignored in this kind of research. Sekaran says that "valid cross-cultural behavior comparisons can be

made only when the behavior in question has developed in the different cultures in response to similar problems."[33] The definitions of concepts should have the same meaning in each culture.[34] Another problem is the "time" problem. Researchers often measure things at their convenience or when they are allow to.[35] The results of case studies often reflect the effects of the time they are done. The third problem relating to methodological simplicity is the fact that most cross-cultural research is not multidisciplinary.[36] Cross-cultural research can benefit greatly from the disciplines of sociology, psychology, political science, economics, and anthropology. Multidisciplinary approaches help develop adequate paradigms capable of explaining diversity.

Sekaran's tolerance for methodological simplicity and her optimism for the future of cross-cultural research reflects the hope that eventually all these "little" studies will build upon each other to create synergy.[37] Roberts and Boyacigiller support Sekaran by suggesting that cross-cultural studies build upon one another so that a world view of organizations emerges.[38] They say that, by definition, cross-cultural research seeks a world view. Methodological simplicity in cross-cultural research, however, is slowly being overcome by the recent rigorous research methods and interdisciplinary approaches used in the field.[39]

Sampling Issues

Sampling issues reflect a critical problem in cross-cultural research. The problems regarding sampling consist of the number of cultures included in the study, the selection of cultures and the subjects of the study, the representativeness of the samples, and the independence of the cultures in the study.

Generally, the number of cultures included in cross-cultural research is low. Many times it is only two. 54 percent of the 57 studies reviewed by Nath were two country studies.[40] Adler labels these as ethnocentric studies in which a research in one culture is replicated in another culture. She suggests that studies involving few cultures be viewed primarily as pilot studies.[41] Sekaran strongly argues that these small studies are needed. If possible the "number of cultures selected should be large enough to randomize variance on non-matched variables and eliminate rival hypotheses."[42]

In cross-cultural research, the selection of cultures and the subjects of research is generally based on opportunistic availability.[43] Foreign students at American universities are used as subjects, or data is collected during a sabbatical leave in another country. The selection of cultures and subjects should be based on the theoretical dimensions of a study and not merely on convenience.[44]

Another problem with sampling in cross-cultural research is the representativeness of the sample. Often it is unclear which subjects represent a nation's (culture's) central tendencies. Foreign students at American universities repre-

sent only a cross-section, usually the elite, of their own societies. Sekaran suggests that researchers use matched samples to overcome this problem.[45]

A further problem with sampling is that the matched samples may not be independent. This is referred to as the Galton's problem.[46] It happens because different cultures adopt similar practices because of cultural diffusion. Adler states that the independence of samples in management research may not be feasible due to the interrelatedness of the business worldwide, and sometimes the independence of the samples may not be desirable for the same reasons.[47]

The problems in sampling include the number and selection of cultures and subjects, and their representativeness and independence. These may be very difficult to overcome in cross-cultural research. When random sampling is not possible, the best researchers can do is to describe their samples in detail including all of their characteristics which could potentially influence the results or their interpretation.[48]

Instrumentation

Equivalence of the instruments used in different cultures is another concern of cross-cultural research.[49] Translation causes many problems. Hofstede states that language is not a neutral vehicle and that our thinking is affected by the categories and words available in our language.[50] In cross-cultural research equivalence of meaning rather than direct translation, is most important. Back-translation by experts will increase this kind of equivalence.[51] In back-translation, the translated instrument is translated back to the original language to see if it matches the original instrument.

There are three other issues regarding the equivalence of instruments. One is the equivalence of variables. This deals with whether test items are measuring the same variables.[52] The second issue is the equivalence of scaling. A five point scale, for example, may not produce the same measurement effect in different cultures. Equivalent scales should be developed individually in each culture. The third issue is the equivalence of experimental manipulation. The experimental manipulation (stimulus) may interact with cultural variables. This confounds the interpretation of results.[53]

The instrumentation problems in cross-cultural research are equivalence problems. Other than the equivalence of language, the variables (items) included and their scales, and the experimental manipulation should also be equivalent, not identical.

Data Collection

In data collection, the research setting, instructions, and timing should be equivalent, not identical. Adler states that the goal in cross-cultural research is equivalence, not standardization in each culture.[54] The approach to research may be identical but how it is carried out may not be. Making the setting, instructions, and timing equivalent, provides equivalence of administration.

Another issue in data collection is response equivalence. The research should be designed and administered in such a way that the subjects' responses to the experimental stimuli are equivalent. This is possible when the researcher achieves equivalence in: (a) the subject's familiarity with the test, (b) levels of anxiety and other psychological reactions (c) the experimenter effect, (d) the demand characteristics, (e) characteristics of the person conducting the research, and (f) the characteristics of the presentations.[55] Basically, response equivalence can be achieved by adopting uniform data collection procedures in different cultures.

The timing of data collection is also very important. Too much time should not elapse between the times when data are collected from different countries.[56] This enhances the comparability of the data collected. Roberts and Boyacigiller emphasize the importance of time in cross-cultural research, because different cultures use and view time differently.[57]

The status and authority of the researcher relative to the subjects may affect data collection in cross-cultural research. Different cultures have different understandings of power and authority.[58] The equalitarian-oriented interviewing techniques of the western researcher may affect the responses of eastern subjects who are not comfortable with that style. A foreigner collecting data may also affect the responses. Sekaran suggests using trained local researchers, or agents, to overcome this problem.[59]

Cross-sectional data gives an understanding of an organization only at a point in time. Organizations are not static. However, as discussed in an earlier section, most cross-cultural studies are methodologically simple and are cross-sectional static studies. Longitudinal data collection procedures should be used to get a more dynamic and valid picture of the organization. A good example of this kind of a study is the Hofstede study.[60] This was a five-year, forty-nation study, conducted twice (1968 and 1972), and included 116,000 respondents from a large multinational company.

The above problems in data collection; namely, the equivalence of administration, response, timing, status of researcher, and the problem of cross-sectional data can be overcome. Sekaran suggests that the solution is collaboration of researchers from different countries. Use of local researchers, she says, will minimize the response biases.[61]

Data Analysis

Problems in data analysis for cross-cultural studies include use of qualitative vs. quantitative data, non-parametric vs. parametric statistics, and univariate vs. multivariate analysis. Methodological difficulties of doing empirical cross-cultural research resulted in a proliferation of qualitative articles on cross-cultural issues. Most of the "best" articles in International Business listed by Ricks are integrative, conceptual, and theory-building articles.[62] Consequently many of the cross-cultural studies are not empirical. Basically, they are opinion-research and lack any data analysis as a basis for their discussions.

The second problem in this area is that many of the cross-cultural studies are based on surveys of subjective opinions. The data from these studies do not lend themselves to higher-level, more powerful statistical analyses. If researchers can collect more objective data, then the use of parametric statistics in cross-cultural research will increase.

A third problem in data analysis in cross-cultural research is that most studies end up being investigations of bivariate correlations. Adler states that comparative research studies investigate a very complex issue. This makes the univariate statistical techniques inappropriate.[63] Sekaran is optimistic about recent developments in the field and gives examples of multivariate techniques used such as multiple regressions, cluster analyses, factor analyses, component analyses, and multidimensional scaling in cross-cultural research.[64]

Data is hard to get in cross-cultural research. A recent increase in the number of empirical studies in cross-cultural research lead to optimism about the future of the field.[65] Since cross-cultural research investigates a complex phenomenon (the effects of culture) there is a need for appropriate types of data to be collected and appropriate methods to be used in analyses. Operational definitions of concepts, quantification and collection of more objective data will eventually lead to the use of multivariante and other more powerful statistical analyses.

Level of Analysis

Hofstede labels the level of analysis problem in cross-cultural research as "ecological fallacy". The problem is, confusing the country level correlations (ecological) with the individual level correlations. This happens when countries are treated as individuals. Using data at the society level, inferences are made to the individual level. "Reverse ecological fallacy" is confusing individual correlations with ecological correlations. Here, there is a making of ecological (society level) inferences from individual level data.[66]

Roberts, Hulin, and Rousseau identify the same problem as the "aggregation problem" in organizational sciences. They define it as the "use of some combination of responses or unit characteristics to reflect something about the immediately more macro unit of analysis." They also define "disaggregation" as the "separation of the component particles within an aggregated mass or structure."[67] Both are frequent problems in cross-cultural research.

The society and the individual are two different entities with different characteristics. The terms used for describing an individual cannot accurately describe a society. When researcher collects data at one level and makes inferences for another from that data (ecological fallacy), the inferences and the descriptions will not be correct. Since cross-cultural research inevitably deals with a societal level variable (culture), this problem occurs frequently. Recently, Mossholder, Bedeian, and Rousseau provided guidelines for multi-level and cross-level research. They suggest that this type of research may provide a more comprehensive and integrative perspective of organizational phenomena.[68]

Conclusion

This paper provides a review of the literature on methodological problems in cross-cultural research. The problems identified are listed in Table 1. These problems are: criterion, methodological and theoretical simplicity, sampling and instrumentation, issues related to data analysis and levels of analysis, and generalizability of the results. We further provided suggestions for reducing the extent of these problems or overcoming them altogether. Regardless of the fact that the field faces many methodological problems, we agree with many reviewers who are pleased with its recent progress and are optimistic about its future.

Footnotes

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