



Chapter IV

Methodological Issues in MIS Cross-Cultural Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a discussion of methodological issues that are relevant and idiosyncratic to cross-cultural research. One characteristic that typifies cross-cultural studies is their comparative nature, i.e., they involve a comparison across two separate cultures on a focal phenomenon. When differences across cultures are observed, the question arises as to whether the results are true cultural differences or merely measurement artifacts. Methodological considerations in cross-cultural research focus on ruling out alternative explanations for these differences and thus enhancing the interpretability of the results. The paper presents an overview of key methodological issues in cross-cultural research and reviews methods of preventing or detecting methodological problems.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization of business has highlighted the need to understand the management of organizations that span different nations and cultures. In these multinational and transcultural organizations, there is a growing need to utilize information technology (IT) to achieve efficiencies, coordination, and communication. However, cultural differences between countries may have an impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of IT deployment. Despite its importance, the effect of cultural factors has received limited attention from information systems (IS) researchers.

Cross-cultural information systems research, in general, remains relatively undeveloped. Although several important research endeavors have been recently published in the better IS journals, the overall number of cross-cultural articles is fairly low considering the number of practical and theoretical questions that remain unanswered. This incongruence can be partly explained by methodological and resource difficulties inherent in cross-cultural research as well as the long time horizon required to complete and conduct these types of studies.

This paper focuses on these difficulties. Methodological considerations are of the utmost importance to cross-cultural studies since valid comparisons require cross-culturally equivalent research instruments, data collection procedures, research sites, and respondents. Ensuring equivalency is an essential element of cross-cultural studies and is necessary to avoid confounds and contaminating effects of various extraneous elements.

In the next section, we provide a brief discussion of key methodological issues in cross-cultural research, presenting both threats to making valid cross-cultural comparisons as well as methods of preventing or detecting potential problems. Next, sampling considerations and guidelines for instrument wording and translation are presented. The paper concludes with a summary discussion of the issues.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Cross-cultural research has some unique methodological idiosyncrasies that are not pertinent to intracultural research. One characteristic that typifies cross-cultural studies is their comparative nature, i.e., they involve a comparison across two or more separate cultures on a focal phenomenon. Any observed differences across cultures give rise to many alternative explanations. Particularly when results are different than expected (e.g., no statistical significance, factor analysis items do not load as expected, or reliability assessment is low), researchers may question whether results are true differences due to culture or merely measurement artifacts (Mullen, 1995).

Methodological considerations in carrying out cross-cultural research attempt to rule out alternative explanations for these differences and enhance the interpretability of results (van de Vijver and Leung, 1997). Clearly, the choice and appropriateness of methodology can make a difference in any research endeavor. In cross-cultural research, however, one could go to the extreme of classifying this as one of the most critical decisions. In this section, we briefly review such cross-cultural methodological considerations. Specifically, this section will address equivalence (Hui and Triandis, 1985; Poortinga, 1989; Mullen, 1995) and bias (Poortinga and van de Vijver, 1987; van de Vijver and Leung, 1997; van de Vijver and Poortinga, 1997) as key methodological concerns inherent in cross-cultural research. Then

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