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Work in Progress:

A 5 decade Analysis of Theoretical, Conceptual, Empirical and Analytical Challenges of Empirical Cross-cultural Research
-
A Review of Reviews

Abstract

We systematically analyze 118 methodological reviews published over a period of five decades in order to identify areas of methodological progress and perennial problems within the field of cross-cultural research. We extracted information along key issues for each successive stage of the research process. The stages were classified into the following eight broad categories, each consisting of further sub-categories: paradigmatic positioning (emic vs. etic perspective), theoretical issues, conceptualization/operationalization of culture, research design, fieldwork and data collection, data preparation and analysis, and report preparation and presentation. This project is still in its initial phase and has to be read as a work in progress paper.

Keywords

Cross-Cultural Research, Methodologies, Review-of-Reviews

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the inherent complexity of the methodological challenges in cross-cultural marketing research, it is imperative for the discipline to assess the development of methodological issues and take stock of what has been accomplished periodically. For instance, Aulakh and Kotabe (1993, p. 24) argue that *"the research methodology issue is one area in need of immediate attention to make international marketing research more rigorous."* Accordingly, questions must be continuously raised about how research methods and procedures could be conducted more rigorously (Cavusgil, 1998). In essence, periodic assessments are crucial in refining, revitalizing, and even redefining cross-cultural research methodology (Jain, 2007).

A substantial number of authoritative reviews have been published across the past five decades to assess and consolidate the methodological development of cross-cultural research in the disciplines of marketing, management and organizational psychology [1](e.g., Aulakh and Kotabe, 1993; Bhagat and McQuaid, 1982; Boddewyn, 1981; Engelen and Brettel, 2011; Hult et al., 2008; Nakata and Huang, 2005; Roberts, 1970; Samiee and Jeong, 1994; Schaffer and Riordan, 2003; Schöllhammer, 1973). The focus of these assessments is directed towards studies that collected mainly quantitative data in at least two cultures in order to analyze how, when, what aspect(s) of, and why culture influences substantive phenomena. Thus, this type of research is rooted in a tradition of differential psychology, which can be characterized by the largely quantitative nature of its strategies and approaches to answering cross-cultural

research questions. However, we show in the analysis of the reviews that qualitative methods also play an important role for gaining empirical knowledge.

Yet, these highly cited reviews are subject to the following three limitations. First, existing reviews do not analyze methodological issues from a comprehensive perspective but are, instead, focused on selected procedural steps, such as the research approach (emic vs. etic perspectives), theoretical modeling, instrument development, sampling, data preparation and analysis, among others. This limits the possibility to demonstrate the interrelatedness of singular procedural steps. Second, the assessments of most published reviews are limited to short time frames (often 10 years), thus not allowing to identify any trends or changes. Third, reviewers usually restrict their assessments to specific disciplines (marketing, management or organizational psychology) and, hence, do not consider the parallel advancement and persistent problems of cross-cultural research processes as such.

Moreover, looking at the field of cross-cultural research, in general, cross-cultural research methodology is not extensively discussed and adhered to in journal publications, in comparison to the constantly increasing number of empirical studies (Levingston, 2003). Hence, Slater and Yani-de-Soriano (2010, p. 1143) lament that *"scholars and practitioners highlight the importance of understanding culture when making marketing decisions, but fail to take account of cultural differences when they design their marketing research project."*

AIM OF RESEARCH

To address the above described gap in the literature, we examine comprehensively (referring to all research steps), longitudinally (5 decades under review), and critically the key findings of existing authoritative reviews published in marketing, management, and psychological journals. In doing so, we identify and define stages of methodological advancements and identify perennially problematic areas of cross-cultural research practices. The degree to which empirical cross-cultural studies have adhered to the guidelines that have

been proposed by reviewers over the years is also assessed. Reviewers' recommendations of how to handle the inherent complexity of cross-cultural research are likewise discussed and their applicability to tackling methodological challenges is evaluated. Based on our analysis, we develop a structured framework of guidelines for conducting cross-cultural research.

This approach is possible with the availability of a large number of critical and detailed reviews published across the last five decades. The term, "review of reviews", should not be confused with meta-analysis using statistical data to make inferences. Instead, the term was chosen to describe the aim of analyzing methodological issues peculiar to cross-cultural research. By analyzing research methodology, we refer to all procedural steps researchers (should) go through when conducting empirical cross-cultural research. These steps include, for instance, the theoretical foundation of the research project, conceptualization of culture and substantive constructs, as well as empirical (e.g. data collection) and analytical steps. Therefore, this paper focuses on the question of how reviewers describe empirical cross-cultural research in terms of research methodology, rather than analyzing research themes, substantive problems, results, and accumulated knowledge. With respect to this aim, we tend to the following questions:

1. *How do reviewers across the last five decades discuss the methodological state of the art of empirical cross-cultural research? And what assessments and what recommendations were made with regard to research process related issues?*
   - *1.1 Theoretical:*
     - *What theoretical approaches were identified (recommended) to use in empirical research in order to test orexplain cross-cultural similarities and differences?*
     - *What theoretical approaches were identified (recommended) to specify the characteristics of cross-cultural theory?*
     - *What ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the definition and conceptualization of culture were identified (recommended)?*
   - *1.2 Conceptual:*

- *What definitions or conceptualizations of culture were identified (recommended) to be incorporated into empirical research to study the impact of culture on substantive phenomena?*

1.3 Empirical:

- *What assessments (recommendations) were made with regard to the organization of cross-cultural research projects?*
- *What empirical approaches were identified (recommended) addressing emic/etic issues?*
- *What assessments (recommendations) were made regarding the use of research instruments?*
- *What approaches to selecting cultures and sampling individuals were identified (recommended)?*
- *What assessments (recommendations) were made regarding the collection of data across cultures?*

1.4 Analytical:

- *What analytical procedures were identified (recommended) to assess measurement fidelity, provide evidence for cultural effects, and generate generalizable knowledge?*

ORIGINALITY/ VALUE

In our analysis of the methodological issues existent in reviews of cross-cultural research, we identify the methodological progress and perennial problems across the field's development from early 1960 to date. Moreover, we integrate the fundamental procedural research steps reviewed by previous scholars into a structured framework. The framework highlights the interrelationship of methodological issues and provides guidelines for overcoming persistent methodological challenges. The framework is also designed to help researchers and reviewers better evaluate fundamental procedural steps in cross-cultural research endeavors. Finally, we analyze reviews from within three business-related disciplines. By examining reviews in cross-cultural marketing, management and psychology,

it is possible to evaluate the relative progress in each discipline. This approach has been selected to decrease in response to disciplinary myopia.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We systematically analyze the manifest content of authoritative reviews dealing with methodological issues over a period of five decades. This particular time frame was chosen because review publications focusing on cross-cultural research methodologies have been appearing regularly since the late 1960s (e.g. Frijda and Joahoda, 1966; Nath, 1968; Schöllhammer, 1973; Ajiferuke and Boddewyn, 1970). Moreover, this time frame is adequate to discern meaningful stages of methodological development in the field. Our analysis is organized in three steps, as shown in Figure 1 (see page 15).

−−−−−−−−Figure 1 about here −−−−−−−−

The first step was to determine the type and number of scientific outlets to be screened for review publications. Because we are interested in synthesizing the methodological development of cross-cultural research in management, marketing, and organizational psychology, we examine academic journals devoted to these disciplines. Our literature search considered only reputable scientific publication outlets in terms of their impact and immediacy. Hence, we limited our sample of journals by considering prominent ratings of marketing (e.g., Guidry et al. 2004; Moussa and Touzani; 2010), management (e.g., Johnson and Podsakoff, 1994; Tahai and Meyer, 1999), and psychological journals (e.g., Anseel, Duyck, De Baene, 2004) as well as ratings estimating the impact of journals specifically geared toward cross-cultural research (e.g., Dubois and Reeb, 2000). Furthermore, we augmented these evaluations by carrying out a citation analysis of journals with regard to the aforementioned disciplines through the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI). We further limited our selection to the top 10 journals within each of the above categories. Such a focus on journals ensures that the methodological reviews under investigation passed only the most

rigorous standards (usually double-blind peer review process by the fields' most expert scientists). These reviews inform the research community about methodological advances and any lack of rigor evident in scientific work of even the highest caliber. Thus, the frontiers of methodological developments should appear in leading scholarly periodicals. As such, our search for reviews covered the major marketing (e.g., Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Consumer Research, Marketing Science, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Business Research), management (e.g., Academy of Management Review, Academy of Management Journal, Organization Studies, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies), and applied psychology journals (e.g., Journal of Applied Psychology, Psychological Bulletin, Annual Review of Psychology, Psychological Review, American Psychologist), as well as journals specifically geared to cross-cultural issues (e.g., Journal of International Business Studies, Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Management International Review, Journal of International Marketing, Journal of International Management, International Business Review,). In addition, scholarly reviews published in well recognized and often cited handbooks on the topic were considered (e.g., Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Beyond Hofstede).

In a second step, we screened all published issues of the identified outlets for methodological reviews. We conducted article title, abstract, and methodology section searches in every single issue of the above named journals. In addition, we used a snowball approach based on references in and citations of identified reviews. Reviews selected for further analysis had to review a substantial number of empirical cross-cultural articles in the field in which culture is used as an explanatory variable. Furthermore, reviews needed to discuss one or more research process related issues and possess a high scientific impact as evidenced by their citation counts in order to qualify for further analysis. This procedure yielded a sample of 118 reviews.

In a third step, the identified reviews were systematically content analyzed using a qualitative approach. To facilitate the systematic analysis procedure, the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was applied (Berg and Lune, 2012; Kuckartz, 2010). As a research technique, qualitative content analysis allows for the systematic identification of fundamental dimensions of cross-cultural research methodology. Content analysis is considered appropriate for and is often applied to assessments of the state of scholarship (e.g., Engelen and Brettel, 2011, Li and Cavusgil, 1995; Nakata and Huang, 2005). We developed the coding scheme both inductively and deductively by applying constant comparison and reflective coding procedures to reduce the risk of misrepresenting authors' ideas (Charmaz, 2014). Moreover, we used inter-judge triangulation with other experts in the field to identify common themes of assessments and recommendations pertaining to research process related issues. We independently summarized and extracted relevant information from 16 reviews. After coding every two reviews we discussed commonalities and differences. When discrepancies occurred, the raters discussed the issues to resolve them. The inter-rater reliability was with 89 percent satisfactory (Lombard, Snyder and Bracken, 2002).

Specifically, the content analysis identified methodological assessments and recommendations for each successive stage of the research process. The stages were classified into the following eight broad categories, each consisting of further sub-categories (see also Figure 1; p. 15): paradigmatic positioning (emic vs. etic perspective), theoretical issues, conceptualization/operationalization of culture, research design, fieldwork and data collection, data preparation and analysis, and report preparation and presentation.

INITIAL FINDINGS

In this section, we illustrate some initial findings from our analysis. However, due to the complexity and plurality of methodological challenges the focus is at this preliminary stage of the paper directed towards a selection of core fundamental issues. Despite noteworthy

developments during the last five decades in issues such as the translation of research instruments, the cross-cultural collaboration of research teams (e.g., Schaffer and Riordan, 2003; Sin and Cheung, 1999) and statistical data analysis and preparation (e.g., Adler, 1984; Albaum and Peterson, Engelen and Brettel, 2011; Nakata and Huang, 2005; Hult et al., 2008; 1984; Samiee and Jeong, 1994;), the majority of the analyzed reviews passed critical judgement on the methodological state-of-the-art, arguing that cross-cultural research is struggling to leave a cherished paradigm which has been described by Lowe (2002) as an "*inadequate vehicle*" for understanding culture.

For instance, reviewers repeatedly lamented the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of cross-cultural research, which have been dominated by a functionalist paradigmatic agenda that resulted in naive positivism employing ethnocentric, myopic, and inadequate methods of research and research designs (Adler, 1983; Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991; Bhagat and McQuaid, 1982, Lowe, 2002, Nakata, 2009). Moreover, many reviewers attacked the 'made in U.S.A.' stamp of cross-cultural research. This includes the use of research designs tested in the United States without considering the circumstances peculiar to other cultures (e.g. Aulakh and Kotabe, 1993; Boddewyn, 1981; Craig and Douglas, 2006, Nath, 1968; Redding, 1994, Roberts, 1970; Tsui, Nifadkar, and Ou, 2007; Slater and Yani-de-Soriano, 2010).

Another point of severe criticism focuses on the vague, inadequate, and not delineated conceptualization of culture. Often the concept of culture simply served as a synonym for nation without any further conceptual grounding. The nonexistence of a widespread agreement of an operational definition of 'cultue', let alone domain specific definitions, has been repeatedly criticized (e.g. Bhagat and McQuaid, 1982; Child, 1981; Triandis, 1990). The most widely discussed and applied definition of culture among cross-cultural researchers is Hofstede's conceptualization of 'the collective programming of the mind (1980) (e.g. Nakata and Pokay, 2004; Engelen and Brettel, 2011; Okazaki and Mueller, 2007, Taras, Rowney and

Steel, 2009; Zhang, Beatty and Walsh, 2008). Moreover Hofstede's conceptualization and operationalization of culture and other available cultural indices (e.g., House et al., 2004; Inglehart, 1997; Schwartz, 1994; Trompenaars, 1993) have been frequently used unreflectively, often utilizing these calculated country indices without collecting direct measurements of culture from the population investigated. Cross-cultural research, especially in marketing, was characterized by a lack of attention to adapting cultural constructs and/or developing domain specific conceptualization and operationalization that may be hypothetically related to the substantive phenomenon under study (e.g. van de Vijver and Leung, 1997).

Further criticism concerns the lack of theoretical integration of cultural and substantive mechanisms into the research design. Most criticism was directed towards studies simply comparing subject responses to standardized instruments without defining culture and its hypothetical effect on the investigated substantive phenomenon (e.g. Aulakh and Kotabe, 1993; Roberts and Boyacigiller, 1984; Roberts, 1970; Nakata and Hunag, 2005; Nakata and Pokay, 2004). The weakness in these rather 'atheoretical' studies lies in that differences, if empirically obtained, are never explained in adequate theoretical terms (Barrett and Bass (1976).

Additionally, cross-cultural studies were repeatedly criticized on several empirical issues, such as non-equivalence in sampling (e.g., Aulkah and Kotabe, 1993; Sin, Cheung, and Lee, 1999) and over-reliance on surveys as means of data collection (e.g., Roberts, 1970; Albaum and Peterson, 1984; Sin et al., 1999; Tsui et al., 2007). Likewise problems in establishing construct equivalence prior to data collection (e.g. Bui, Chernatony, and Martinez, 2012; Cavusgil, Deligonul and Yaprak, 2005; Hult et al., 2008) and testing equivalence issues after data collection (e.g., van de Vijver and Leung, 2000; Tsui et al., 2007; He et al. 2008) have been repeatedly criticized during the field's coming of age. Sin et al. (1999) and van de Vijver and Leung (1997) argued that the persistent failure to address

these issues adequately has led to confusing alternative explanations that have limited the validity of cross-cultural research studies.

CONCLUSION

This cursory review of the field indicates that cross-cultural research has remained, even after 60 years of development, an extremely “slippery” task. Our study aims to outline methodological advances and perennial problems of cross-cultural research in a systematic manner. The relative progress of cross-cultural research in marketing, management and psychology is also explored. Hence, this study offers a comprehensive stock-taking of the methodological issues researchers in these three disciplines have faced, and continue to be confronted with, while conducting cross-cultural research. In the analysis, we also review the coping mechanisms that are recommended by reviewers to enhance methodological rigor. Based on the resulting inventory of methodological challenges and coping mechanisms, we attempt to develop a structured framework that allows researchers and practitioners to assess and enhance the quality of cross-cultural work.

RESEARCH LIMITATION/ IMPLICATIONS

There are several limitations of our project that could, however, provide a stimulus for future reviews on cross-cultural research methodology. First, the reviews included in our study based their assessments on empirical articles as they appeared in various journals. As such, reviewers may not have considered that editors and reviewers often seek and receive classification and additional data that may not be included in the final article. For instance, procedures for establishing instrument equivalence a priori may due to space limitations not be reported in the actual journal publication. Second, although the inclusion of the scientific outlets screened for review publications was informed by journal ratings, a predominance of U.S. and European Journals may unintentionally reflect an ethnocentric bias or preference for

certain types of methodologies and approaches. Third, the results of our analysis can be criticized on the grounds of subjectivity in the data analysis. The information in the reviews was examined, filtered, evaluated and correlated through our own understanding (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This limitation is addressed by describing both the data collection and analysis in detail and using inter-judge triangulation. Fourth, the findings could be accompanied with additional assessment and current thought derived directly from cross-cultural scholars. As such, the Delphi method (e.g., Griffith, Cavusgil, and Xu, 2008) could be applied. Fifth, due to the fact that our study aims to assess cross-cultural research from an academic perspective, it would be interesting to evaluate it according to its relevance to and impact on cross-cultural operating managers who are responsible for international and global marketing or management tasks. Finally, the intention of this paper is to provide a roadmap for researchers as well as practitioners in dealing with methodological challenges when conducting cross-cultural research. However, this roadmap is not intended as a normative compendium of criteria for cross-cultural research, but rather a stimulus for discussion. It is hoped that more holistic efforts will be made to increase methodological progress along all research stages. As such our study may be a useful starting point for more rigorous cross-cultural research projects.

ENDNOTES

[1] Since cultural and substantive variables considered in cross-cultural marketing research are similar to those employed in cross-cultural management and organizational psychological research (Green and White, 1976, p. 86) this paper will be concerned mainly with the methodological challenges of cross-cultural research in those disciplines. The interrelatedness of those disciplines is further demonstrated by a high number of cross-references both in empirical articles and in articles assessing the methodological state-of-the-art.

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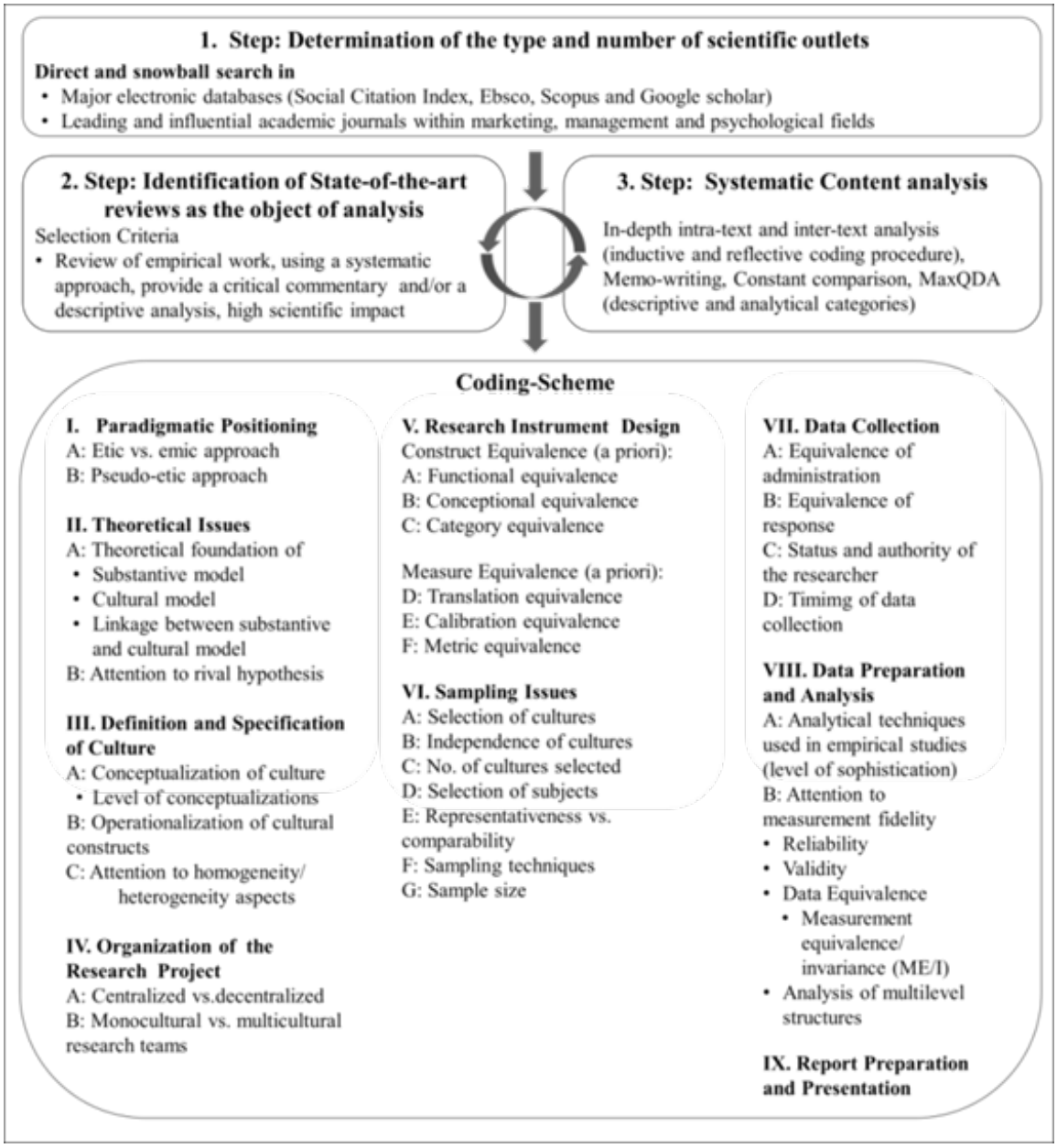
FIGURE 1: RESEARCH DESIGN