

## **Criteria for Judging the Quality of Research Design in Comparative Management : A Qualitative Perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article is aimed at throwing the light on the growing arena of comparative management. The research into this field has lots of methodological drawbacks. Because quantitative cross-national survey has long been a dominant research design in this domain, most methodologists have long addressed this problem from the quantitative standpoint. To draw more attention to qualitative methodology in comparative management, the criteria for assessing the quality of this kind of research are discussed here. To facilitate this discussion, these criteria use research terminology, namely construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability.*

In the wake of globalisation, more and more academicians have begun to compare the same administrative behaviour in different cultural settings. No matter what kind of research, the quality of research findings is the most important issue in conducting a good research. The research with high quality must produce a valid and reliable conclusion. Rigour is a set of criteria for justifying the quality and trustworthiness of research findings. In the same vein, cross-cultural research needs such rigour. Notwithstanding, the quality of cross-cultural research is hardly attainable owing to the methodological problem of comparing two or more cultural settings. Many scholars in the arena of cross-cultural or comparative management have long addressed this issue, but most of them have tended to mention this methodological deficiency from the perspective of quantitative research. Unlike in the domain of comparative sociology, very few scholars have brought up this issue from the viewpoint of qualitative research.

This paper is aimed at raising the methodological issues from the standpoint of qualitative research having long been ignored from the community of comparative management methodologists. Nonetheless, the rigour of qualitative method in comparative management is harder to achieve than that of quantitative one because of both combinatorial and holistic nature of explanation in qualitative method. Normally, random sampling, generalisability, and reliable and valid measurement are rarely applicable to qualitative studies (Ragin, 1987; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Padgett, 1998). To facilitate the readers' comprehension, the terminology pertinent to an experimental design which is also often applied to other research designs is used as an ideal type here. The four criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research into comparative management comprise construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability (Yin, 1993, 1994).

**Construct validity.** This criterion is dealing with objectivity, cross-cultural comparability and replicable confirmability in the research design. All constructs, concepts and items in conceptual framework and research instruments must explain the phenomenon under study accurately. These constructs, concepts and items must be conceptually comparable and effectively translatable. Because the research conclusion, especially from qualitative design is likely to be influenced by a researcher's subjectivity, objectivity of this design is sceptical from the positivistic perspective. Objectivity is intimately linked with replicability. Unless a case is replicable, no objectivity is attained. In reality, objectivity and replicability are not the same thing. For a good comparison, only objective and cross-culturally comparable instruments can minimise this bias and produce the valid result (Yin, 1993, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Johnson, 1996; Berg, 1998).

With regard to an emic-etic dilemma, construct validity in comparative case studies can be undermined by the four threats (Maxwell, 1996; van de Vijver & Leung, 1997; Padgett, 1998): (a) level of equivalence, (b) the researcher's subjectivity and preconceptions, (c) reactivity and (d) respondents' biases.

*a) Level of equivalence.* When pursuing comparative case studies, the inquirer must take equivalence into consideration for developing the research concept. Because all constructs, concepts and items are not universally applicable across cultures, comparative research is difficult. Identical indicators across cultures are virtually impossible, but equivalent ones are more possible. Equivalence involving different cultural groups needs to be established. Otherwise, the same phenomenon in a different culture might be misinterpreted or misunderstood. Incapable of expressing to what theoretically understood entity these indicators are supposed to be equivalent makes finding equivalent indicators for concepts meaningless. Because equivalence is the consistent relationship across cultures, its establishment is the way to minimise cross-cultural biases in the research design. The equivalence in comparative case studies comprises lexicon, contextual, conceptual and instrumental equivalence (Kohn, 1989; Nowak, 1989; Cavusgil & Das, 1997a; Neuman, 1997; van de Vijver & Leung, 1997):

*Lexicon equivalence* is the comparable translation of words, phrases and other stimuli. Correct translation into each relevant language must be ensured. At least, the meaning of languages in stimulus or instrument must be equivalent unless literally identical through the practical approximation of socio-linguistic pattern. Translation from one language to another is not easy. The context and meaning of the concept are often either distorted or lost through the translation, because the exact concept in one language may not exist in another. For example, French word 'drameur' cannot be translated into English, because a man who has been brought up in any Anglo-Saxon society has never behaved in the French way of 'drameur'. He does not have this notion in his mind. Possible peculiarities in meaning that might be misleading in a particular culture must be identified. Additionally, different socio-linguistic pattern in each language might complicate translation further. Many Asian languages have a wide range of honorific reflecting their social hierarchy. For instance, Thai has a lot of words for addressing 'I' according to the status of a speaker relative to that of his or her interlocutors. Normally, a translation must be done for each country. Thus, translation equivalence must be scrutinised whenever verbal items, instruction or other stimuli are employed cross-culturally (Adler, 1984; Oyen, 1990; Berry, Poortinga, Segall & Dasen, 1992; Brewster, Tregaskis, Hegewisch & Mayne, 1996; Johnson, 1996; Wright, 1996; Neuman, 1997).

*Contextual equivalence* is the comparable application of terms or concepts in different cultures. All terms or concepts under investigation must serve the same roles or functions cross-culturally. This type of equivalence is likely to affect qualitative interpretation. This interpretation might be subject to historical context, because each society has its own unique history. When the researcher study the phenomena in different contexts, his or her observation and conclusions may not refer to quite different things (Kohn, 1989; Yu, Keown & Jacobs, 1993; Cavusgil & Das, 1997b; Neuman, 1997).

*Conceptual equivalence* is the expression of the same concepts across cultures. How are constructs expressed in the form of behaviours or attitudes in different cultures? This is an important question because the way parents love their children may be different across culture. This condition is problematic because many concepts are culturally bound. The concept is hard to define cross-culturally. The researcher who lives within a particular culture often bases his or her concepts on his or her experience and knowledge from his or her own cultures (Nowak, 1989; Malhotra, Agrawal & Peterson, 1996; Yu et al, 1993; Neuman, 1997).

*Instrumental equivalence* is construing and measuring all the same concepts, items, response categories and stimuli across cultures. Alternatives between etic and emic instruments must be considered. It may deal with whether each the items, measures or underlying constructs can equivalently be operationalised across cultures. It constitutes calibration and scalar or metric equivalence. The empirical relationship between concepts and their indicators may be different cross-culturally, so that the pattern and the degree of empirical correspondence between the indicators used to measure cross-culturally valid concepts can be accurately established. A psychometric analysis bases comparability of data from various cultures on a presumed coherence or structure. This analysis is applicable to both the specification of meanings and the operationalisation of concepts of intra-nationally and cross-nationally tested hypotheses. This condition can be achieved by both developing the scale on the basis of equivalence in each culture, and having comparable patterns of relationship within each of them. The scale must express the scores with both the same origin and the same metric cross-culturally. This equivalence can be evaluated after finishing data analysis and interpretation. However, an excessive use of psychometric jargons can undermine meaningful comprehension and depiction of phenomena and explanatory theories (Adler, 1984; Nowak, 1989; Poortinga, 1989; Peng, Peterson & Shyi, 1991; Berry et al, 1992; Yu et al, 1993; Malhotra et al, 1996; Neuman, 1997).

b) *The researcher's subjectivity and preconceptions* are likely to determine his or her interpretation of observation. In comparative case study, this problem is exacerbated

by the researcher's culture. Because each culture has its own premises, logic, orientation towards time and fundamental values about human life, the inquirer tends to select and interpret data according to his or her cultural assumptions. It is unrealistic to presume that he or she is fully free from his or her own cultural indoctrination. Additionally, when he or she encounters unfamiliar customs and conditions, he or she may either overlook some important variables or misinterprets the event according to his or her cultural subjectivity. Usually research into a distant culture is more difficult. Limited information about culture under investigation also aggravates this problem. Becoming more multicultural is reducing ethnocentrism (Punnet, 1988; Serror, 1988; Rosenzweig, 1994; Brewster et al, 1996; Johnson, 1996; Wright, 1996; Neuman, 1997; Padgett, 1998). Moreover, if the investigator applies a conceptual framework to his or her research, he or she tends to collect and construe data according to his or her theoretical preconceptions or preconceived constructs in such a framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Maxwell, 1996; Wright, 1996; Padgett, 1998).

c) *Reactivity* is the effect of the researcher and research process on natural setting. During the data-capturing process, research procedure including the researcher's presence and research instrument often influences his or her subjects. Different cultural background between the researcher and respondents often causes culturally biased assumption when conducting a research. Owing to respondents' cultural premise, they may be unfamiliar with research process, such as instruments, characteristics of persons pursuing the research and its presentation, and the imposition of the researcher's value on them from another culture. If respondents do not understand the research process because of this unfamiliarity, they may refuse to co-operate with the researcher (Adler, 1984; Punnet, 1988; Hofstede, 1991; Nasif, Al-Daeaj, Ebrahimi & Thibodeaux, 1991; Rosenzweig, 1994; Fay, 1996; Wright, 1996; Padgett, 1998). The comparative inquirer must be cognisant of right questions to ask according to cultural difference. Moreover, different education, status or prestige between the researcher and subjects causes reactivity. If the inquirer is seen as an authority figure, subjects may try to please him or her. If he or she is seen as a lower-status figure, respondents may refuse to collaborate (Punnet, 1988; Nasif et al, 1991). Finally, because of possible historical effect, a good comparison must not have long time lag. Time elapses may affect comparability. Thus, timing is crucial to data collection variables (Ronen, 1986; Nasif et al, 1991; Yu et al, 1993).

e) *Respondent's biases* are respondents' exaggeration, lie or understatement owing to an attempt to please the researcher or defend themselves. Mostly subjects from different cultures may respond to the instrument differently according to their different conceptual frames of reference. Response equivalence can be attained by

adopting uniform data-gathering procedure across cultures, so as to minimise variance from data collection. Respondents might express the same idea in a different way when they talk in different language, so the meanings and interpretation may be contradictory (Ronen, 1986; Adler, Campbell & Laurent, 1989; Riordan & Vandenberg, 1994; Wright, 1996; Padgett, 1998).

**Internal validity** Intellectual community is socially sceptical of the sincerity of the researcher. His or her integrity is extremely important in comparative case study because a question of trust, a lack of cross check and different kinds of bias can undermine credibility of research findings. Culture is not necessarily the best explanation for different findings. An investigation into causality between independent variables and dependent variables must be able to point out that national culture mainly explain managerial behaviours. However, a research design is not totally immune to alternative explanation caused by some extraneous variables. To avoid a blunt conclusion that there is causality between culture and organisational behaviours, the inquirer must acknowledge that some other extraneous factors may cause this behaviour and he or she cannot totally exclude these factors. Because some events are not directly observable, careful inference from observation is crucial. In general, an investigation must be internally valid before it can be externally valid (Ronen, 1986; Heller, 1988; Yin, 1994; Neuman, 1997).

There are five main threats to internal validity of comparative research (Adler, 1984; Hofstede, 1984; Ronen, 1986; Ragin, 1987; Maxwell, 1996): (a) inaccuracy or incompleteness of the data, (b) incorrect level of analysis, (c) lack of knowledge of others' way of seeing things, (d) problems of contradictory findings, and (e) Galton's problem.

*a) Inaccuracy or incompleteness of data.* Sometime the captured data are inaccurate and incomplete, so that they can cause misinterpretation. Whenever the inquirer captures the data, he or she must ensure data accuracy and completeness, Data must be recorded and transcribed carefully and correctly. To ensure easy retrieval, data must be categorised and codified systematically.

*b) Incorrect level of analysis.* The data analysis can be conducted at four levels: (1) individual, (2) within-country subculture unit, (3) cross-cultural unit, and (4) pan-cultural unit. The researcher must be careful of different levels of analysis. The data from each respondent must be analysed separately in individual level. The data from different subculture group are analysed separately for within-country cultural unit analysis. The data from all respondents can be aggregated for each country on the sole basis of the positioning effect of culture that ignores the distribution of responses within a culture in the cross-cultural analysis. The data for

all respondents from all the countries can be pooled and analysed in pan cultural analysis. The incorrect level of analysis emanates from the two types of confusion: (1) ecological fallacy and (2) reverse ecological fallacy or individualistic fallacy. The former is making inferences about individuals directly from evidence collected about subcultures or cultures. For instance, albeit national culture is a collective phenomenon, it might determine a single permanent characteristic of an individual. The latter is drawing conclusions about cultures or subcultures from evidence captured about the behaviour of individuals. These two kinds of distortion make the internal validity questionable (Hofstede, 1984; Price & Mueller, 1986; Leung & Bond, 1989; Boyacigiller, Kleinberg, Philips & Sackmann, 1996; Brannen, 1996; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; Malhotra et al, 1996).

*c) Lack of knowledge of others' way of seeing things.* People from different culture may see things in a different way from each other because they do not share the same conceptual frame of reference. A research into another culture is often difficult. It is hard for the researcher to understand the native's viewpoint unless he or she understands the local context. The same social phenomenon can have different meaning in different culture. For instance, Tayeb (1994) illustrated that close attention to time keeping might be construed in one culture as authoritarian leadership and in another as indication of strong commitment to the goals of the work group. These different interpretations reflect different intention and perception according to different cultural logic. If cultural background between the researcher and respondents is very different, this discrepancy may not be meaningfully interpretable. If the data are not construed carefully, a number of alternative explanations may arise. Profound comprehension of others' mentality and social context is critical for understanding the social phenomena, manipulating respondents through a meaningful instrument and interpreting the data in an appropriate way (Ronen, 1986; Adler et al, 1989; Riordan & Vandenberg, 1994; Brannen, 1996).

*d) Problems of contradictory findings.* Contradictory findings often emanate from errors of explanation owing to errors of both causal inference and universality assumptions. The organisational causality is both multiple and combinatorial, so that its assessment is difficult. As an ideal type, an experiment is inapplicable to the analysis of causal complexity (Ronen, 1986; Ragin, 1987; Cavusgil & Das, 1997a).

Superficial cultural similarities may mask profound differences owing to different historical context. Several combinations of cultural condition may produce the same changes or emergent events or characteristics in a different way. If national culture is interactively influencing cultural causality, this interaction may modify any

impact of culture on cultural causality. It may catalyse a conditional relationship, a multiplicative factor for intensifying this causality. It may change the direction or shape of the causality. Both multiple combinatorial complexity and interaction often cause contradictory findings. The researcher should delve into cases with good knowledge of those cases (Ragin, 1987; Kohn, 1987; Nowak, 1989).

These contradictions may stem from difference in language pattern. Discrepancy may be derived from inconsistent finding. Because any factor capable of restricting the generalisability of the findings must be clearly identified, two distinctions in cross-cultural comparison must be made: (1) the distinction between cross-culturally identical and non-identical domains, and (2) the distinction between close and open systems in generalisation. Irrationality, evasiveness, or acquiescence can cause contradictions even within an identical domain. Before accepting contradictory findings, the level of inference must be scrutinised. Because the contradictions or alternative explanations must not be resolved by chance or happenstance, the inquirer must not let preconception deny contradiction (Ronen, 1986; Kohn, 1989; Vaughan, 1992; Cavusgil & Das, 1997a).

*e) Galton's problem* is the main threat to internal validity in comparative research, especially when culture is taken into account for causing something. The matched sample or cases may not be independent because different cultures can adopt similar practices from cultural diffusion. This problem causes spurious relationship. It can be minimised by studying geographically dispersed culture, because probability of spreading over great distances is less than between neighbours. However, globalisation makes it more difficult for each culture to be immune to cultural diffusion, because cultures seldom have fixed border (Scheuck, 1990; Ember & Otterbein, 1991; Nasif et al, 1991; Peng et al, 1991, Malhotra et al, 1996; Neuman, 1997).

**External validity** A problem of external validity is that results from the study are generalisable to the population or culture as a whole. A degree to which the findings can be generalised is very crucial for theory building. The more the generalisable research, the more the valid theory. The transferability between findings can ensure generalisability, and in turn the theory.

There are three main threats to external validity of comparative management: (a) case selection, (b) methodological simplicity and (c) limited generalisability.

a) Case selection is important for the comparative case study. The alternative between representative and matched cases, and whether or not the cultures included in the case are independent must be chosen. Selection issues comprise the embodiment of various culture into the study, the choice of case in the study, the representativeness



of the cases, and the independence of both culture in the study (Nasif et al, 1991; Berry et al, 1992).

In previous comparative research, the selection of cultures is often based on convenience, not on the theoretical dimensions of such research. The representativeness of the cases was often unclear. This selection should be more stringent in a comparative case study than in a case study in one country. Because randomisation hardly verify differences between culture, matching cases on the basis of theoretical strictures is more plausible and better enhances generalisability. The criterion to enumerate cases should be equivalence, not sameness. However, matching on one variable may lead to mismatching on other variables. Some items are cross-culturally comparable; others are not. This criterion sometimes is uncontrollable (Heller, 1988; Wright, Lane & Beamish, 1988; Nasif et al, 1991; Berry et al, 1992; Tayeb, 1994; Johnson, 1996; Cavusgil & Das, 1997b).

Differences within country among subculture groups are important threats to external validity. To rule out this variation and to assure all equivalence across all cultures, cases and respondents in comparative research must represent culture's central tendencies in all countries (Nasif et al, 1991; Berry et al, 1992; Tayeb, 1994; Johnson, 1996; Cavusgil & Das, 1997b).

To attain external validity, the degree to which cases are diverse or similar must be taken into account. The extent of diversity and similarity among cases affect the comparison. When conducting most similar design, the inquirer must be aware of illusory difference - features that are apparently different, but causally equivalent at a more abstract level. When pursuing most diverse design, the inquirer must acknowledge illusory commonality -features, which are apparently similar, but causally different. Both illusory difference and commonality interfere with the specification of underlying similarities and differences. Because the researcher must focus on how condition combine in different settings to cause the same or different result, the causes of similar result in different contexts is justified for investigation. Rhetorically, the variety ameliorates theoretical validation (Ragin, 1987; Cavusgil & Das, 1997b).

*b) Methodological simplicity.* Because conducting cross-cultural research is more difficult and complex than pursuing purely domestic research, many researchers are tempted to simplify their research design by carrying out mainly cross-sectional studies. These one-shot, after-the-fact, case studies or static group comparisons are mostly pursued because of ethnocentricity, functional equivalence and time frame (Ronen, 1986; Nasif et al, 1991).

Ethnocentric research is carried out by replicating a study from one culture in a second culture owing to its convenience and simplicity. Functional equivalence is often neglected, because it is difficult to develop the behaviour in question in the different cultures in response to similar problems. Time constraint often makes researchers conduct their studies at their convenience. These three problems impede the development of comparative management research. Only multidisciplinary research design from the disciplines of sociology, psychology, political science, economics, and anthropology facilitates the evolution of paradigm that can depict diversity (Nasif et al, 1991). Intra-country comparison groups should be established, before inter-country effect in interpretation (Cavusgil & Das, 1997a).

*c) Limited generalisability.* Most comparative case studies are both causally analytic and historically interpretative, but their generalisability is limited. Case study implies particularity. Few cases cannot enhance the possibility of identifying types of a phenomenon as a way of circumventing the absence of underlying commonality. Unless case study is aimed at building a theory, it must both test the limit of generalisability and contradict generalisation. Causal generalisation is more important than historical interpretation if the inquirer wants to develop a theory (Ragin, 1987; Walton, 1992; Stake, 1998).

According to Stake (1998), disseminating research findings from case studies is very difficult because transferring knowledge from the researcher to readers is not conceptually easy. A new case without commonality is incomprehensible. So the case researcher has to provide grounds for validating both observation and generalisation.

Because attempted replication might produce discrepancies as curious inconsistency, a failed replication in the same culture leads to the question of reliability, validity and comparability of the research process according to artefacts and a longitudinal design (Kohn, 1989).

**Reliability** This criterion is the ability to repeat the initial study by employing the same research instrument. The same research procedure and instruments must produce the same findings. As a prerequisite for a rigorous research, the purpose of reliability is to minimise the errors and subjectivity in the study. However, reliability is hardly attainable in comparative case study. To ensure reliability in comparative management research, all kinds of equivalence must be established. All instruments must achieve comparability across cultures. Because comparative case study is conducted under the influence of the investigator's idiosyncratic biases, the issues of reliability related to the data-capturing process are suspected.

All the research procedures must be recorded in a written form, so that other inquirers can examine and repeat that study in the future. A failed replication in a different culture often misleads to cultural differences and their subsequent interpretation. The reiterated study must be carried out in the same set of culture before any extension to other culture that has never been explored. Otherwise, the reliability of such a replication is questionable. If these procedures are well articulated, the successful replication of the research is possible (Wright et al, 1988; Kohn, 1989; Orum, Feagin & Sjoberg, 1991; Yin, 1994).

## Conclusion

To assure the quality of research findings in comparative management, all criteria, namely construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability must be attained. If the research results has a high quality, its design must at least achieve a high degree of trustworthiness. Construct validity assures cross-cultural objectivity and comparability. Internal validity ensures the credibility of research findings that there is no rival explanation. External validity asserts generalisation to the whole population for theory-building. Reliability affirms the verification of the findings in the future. If cross-cultural research attains these four criteria at the acceptable level, it is likely to be trustworthy. This paper is hoped to shed some light on the way to enhance the quality of research into comparative management from the perspective of qualitative methodology. Because quantitative method, such as cross-national survey cannot depict some phenomena, qualitative method is more appropriate and helpful. Cross-cultural survey has long dominated this field, so that the methodological deficiency in comparative management has long been addressed from the standpoint of quantitative methodology. Thus, the sound research design needed to be developed for the future qualitative research into comparative management.

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