

# Conducting Research Across Cultures: Overcoming Drawbacks and Obstacles

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**ABSTRACT** This article discusses some of the methodological and practical difficulties that cross cultural researchers experience in their studies, from the issues concerning understanding and studying other people's culture and separating its influence from that of the workplace culture, to the culture-specific nature of some supposedly universal managerial concepts such as HRM (human resource management) and the choice of appropriate research tools and paradigms. Building on the author's similar commentary on the subject a few years ago, the article draws a rather optimistic picture for the future while pointing out some avoidable methodological inadequacies still observed in many published reports of international comparative studies. The article also cites examples of recent studies which have made an effort to avoid these.

**KEY WORDS** • comparative • cross cultural • culture • HRM • methodology

We are living in a complex world, where peoples and countries are more than ever interdependent. When Japan's stock market sneezes the US and Europe catch cold and the rest of the world might even develop pneumonia. Also, mass communication media and fast and far-reaching means of transport are bringing people from various parts of the world closer and closer together. The electronic revolution which started in the first half of the 20th century and got on to an incredible speed in the late 1980s and the 1990s, has contributed greatly to the shrink-

ing of our world. Other technical and scientific discoveries and innovations have also left their imprints on our lifestyles. International companies play a significant part in this complex, fast-moving and multi-faceted world. They sponsor innovations and apply scientific breakthroughs; they produce and move goods and services around the world; they transfer ways of doing things from one country to another; and they transform societies also along the way (Tayeb, 2000a).

Interest in the international aspects of management among scholars is correspond-

ingly burgeoning. Researchers from different parts of the world and different cultural backgrounds have scrutinized these aspects from various angles: economic, political, managerial, organizational, sociological, philosophical, and . . . cultural.

The culture-focused studies have in recent years increasingly concentrated on interface activities of firms such as negotiations, advertising and customer/client relationships, and internal activities such as human resource management and industrial relations. This article addresses some of the major obstacles that such studies face, and the attempts that have been made to overcome some of these. It is not intended to be prescriptive and offer solutions, but to stimulate debate and discussion on the way ahead.

The issues and problems that the present article focuses on fall within six categories: (1) dimensionalization of national culture, (2) treatment of non-cultural factors in cross cultural studies, (3) disentanglement of national culture from organizational culture, (4) parity of meaning of concepts across cultural boundaries, with special emphasis on HRM, (5) research tools, and (6) researchers' cultural bias.

## **Cultural Dimensions**

Culture, however defined (Chapman, 1992, 1997), applies of course to various levels of society: national, industry, corporation, department/function, a class of university students attending an international business course in their final year. In fact, any two or more people who engage in and sustain a relationship over a length of time would develop their own culture with its own unique recognizable features. The focus of the present article is national culture, hereafter referred to simply as culture.

Culture is a woolly concept, almost impossible to observe and 'measure' all its visible and hidden corners; like the air that we breathe, we cannot see or weigh it, we

cannot put our arms around it and feel its strength and power, but we know it is there. Many researchers, certainly those who work within a positivist paradigm, have attempted to measure it. To do that, one obvious course of action would be to break culture down into what are thought to be its components, or 'dimensions'. Within the management and organization discipline, researchers started noting culture's presence and effects as far back as the mid-1960s (Crozier, 1964; Haire et al., 1966), but we owe its 'dimensionalization', certainly in the comparative cross cultural field, to Hofstede's seminal study conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which culminated in his book *Culture's Consequences*, published in 1980. Others followed, almost all unquestioningly, replicating and using these dimensions to measure and compare various cultures, sometimes modifying or adding to them along the way.

Hofstede's original study, a by-product of two in-house attitude questionnaire surveys in subsidiaries of an American multinational company, proposed four cultural dimensions, each placed on a continuum ranging from high to low, along which nations could be also placed. Some had a smaller value of any given dimension, others a larger one. These by now well known dimensions are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism and masculinity/femininity.

Together with a colleague, Hofstede (Hofstede and Bond, 1984, 1988) identified a fifth dimension, a result of two questionnaire surveys among a sample of students from 10 and 23 countries respectively. This dimension, first termed 'Confucian dynamism' and then renamed as 'time orientation', is argued to embrace two contrasting poles and distinguish 'short-term oriented' cultures from the 'long-term oriented' ones.

Some of these five dimensions were later refined (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987, 1990) and elaborated further (Trompenaars, 1993; Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1994; Triandis, 1995).

Triandis (1990, 1995) developed a theory of individualism and collectivism that can be used both at cultural and individual or psychological levels. Fiske (1990, 1992) identified four universal patterns of social behaviour – called ‘communal sharing’, ‘equality matching’, ‘market pricing’, and ‘authority ranking’ – that can be used to explain similarities and differences in cultures. Schwartz and colleague (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987, 1990) presented a theory of universal structure of value that can be used to cluster cultures into different groups and explain their similarities and differences.

Trompenaars’ (1993) cultural model consists of seven dimensions, five of which are grouped under ‘relationships with people’, the other two are concerned with time and environment:

- relationships with people:
  - universalism versus particularism
  - individualism versus collectivism
  - neutral versus emotional
  - specific versus diffuse
  - achievement versus ascription;
- attitudes to time;
- attitudes to the environment.

Trompenaars’ proposed dimensions, although they are different from those of Hofstede’s, have been argued (Gatley et al., 1996) to be conceptually related to ‘individualism’ and ‘power distance’.

In a later study (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1994) the ‘neutral versus emotional’ dimension was replaced with another one which the authors called ‘equality versus hierarchy’.

Hall’s (1977) work, although not related to any of the above studies, is another attempt to view culture in terms of continuum-based dimensions. He introduced the concept of low- and high-context cultures that he argued reflected the way in which people in any given culture communicate with one another. ‘Context’ is the information that surrounds an event. In a low-

context culture, information is explicit and vested in words of precise and unambiguous meaning; in a high-context culture information is implicit, vested in shared experience and assumptions, and conveyed through verbal and non-verbal codes.

The previously mentioned studies, especially those by Hofstede and his followers, have been both widely replicated and criticized on methodological grounds and also for various other reasons (see for instance Tayeb, 1988, 1994a, 2000c; Sondergaard, 1994; Yeh and Lawrence, 1995; Smith, 1996; Fang, 1998). The present author does not intend to either discuss or add to them here. However, the issue of ‘dimensionalization’ of national culture needs to be considered in some detail because of its extensive and uncritical use in cross cultural research.

The main advantage of breaking down culture into its constituent characteristics is that it facilitates comparisons across cultures; one looks at the same trait and observes similarities or differences among the nations under investigation or even notes its absence from some cultures altogether.

However, by putting culture into neat, sometimes unconnected, little boxes we are in danger of losing sight of the big picture. National culture cannot really be simplified and reduced to a handful of boxes into which some nations are placed and from which others are excluded. To do this will give one only a myopic and incomplete picture of a nation. Neither is it possible to attribute a certain degree of cultural characteristics to a nation and their opposites to others and then pigeon-hole them there for ever.

Take the collectivism/individualism dimension, for example. There seems to exist in each of us, not only as individuals but also as members of our respective coherent cultural grouping, a little bit of both individualism and collectivism, that may surface from time to time and in different circumstances.

The French are an individualistic nation but their emphasis on having national social

policies, be it public transport or radio and television services, or shelter for the homeless, shows their collectivism and respect for common good.

Japanese culture is perceived by many both in Japan and in the rest of the world to be characterized by, among other things, a high degree of collectivism. However, Masakazu, a Japanese sociologist and an expert in aesthetics and drama, challenges this perception. Focusing on the question of individualism in Japanese culture, as opposed to the groupism that is commonly assumed to define it, Masakazu (1994) highlights the prominent role individualistic attitudes and strong personalities have played in the formation of Japan's cultural traditions.

In the individualist United Kingdom a tragedy befalling, for example, a school in a small town brings the best of community spirit in all the citizens up and down the country. In the collectivist India, people can behave in a most individualistic, self-centred manner towards their fellow citizens, and sometimes just on the grounds of caste membership and/or the degree of poverty and wealth. You need only to take a ride on a crowded train or walk in the streets to see how harshly some of the poor and low-caste members of the society are treated by others.

True, this type of behaviour may have something to do with the size of the in-group/out-group, and the individuals or sections of society who are or are not part of one's in-group (see also Tayeb, 1995, for a comparison between three collectivist cultures regarding this point). However, whereas the in-group/out-group distinction may be used to explain the Indians' behaviour towards their out-group, it does not explain why members of various classes in class-conscious Britain do not deny care and attention to people outwith their class (in-group) if a tragedy befalls them.

It could be argued that the different ways in which people in collectivist cultures treat their in-groups and out-groups is typical of

collectivist cultures. The present author is from a collectivist culture, Iran. In her experience both as a researcher into Iranian culture and organizations (Tayeb, 1979, 2001) and as a citizen who lived and worked in that country for over 30 years, this generalization about a typical collectivist culture does not stand up to closer scrutiny in Iran.

In contrast to the in-group/out-group argument, the proposition that we have in each of us a bit of both individualism and collectivism, or the opposite ends of any cultural dimension for that matter, can better explain the seemingly contradictory behaviours within the individualist Britain and the collectivist India.

In addition, both collectivism and individualism appear to manifest their presence at different levels of society within the same culture. Scots, for example, are a very individualist nation, similar to the rest of their UK compatriots, especially the English, but when it comes to trade unionism and solidarity with fellow workers, they are far more collectivist than the English. A similar phenomenon exists in India and Iran. Whereas one might observe individualistic attitudes and behaviours among employees in relation to their workplace, in both countries at family and other in-group levels collectivism prevails (Tayeb, 1979, 1988, 2001). Interestingly, in Japan, another collectivist culture, the national level collectivism seems to have been carried over to the organizational level (Tayeb, 1995). In this connection, Kirkbride and Tang (1992) also make a distinction between Hong Kong's family-based collectivism and Japan's work-based collectivism with high levels of organizational allegiance. (See also Triandis, et al., 1988 and Triandis and Bhawuk, 1997, for further discussions on individualism and collectivism.)

With respect to another dimension, uncertainty avoidance, and drawing on Chapman and Antoniou's (1994) research, one can argue that it is too simplistic to say that

country A is lower on this dimension compared with country B. Country A may in fact be higher on uncertainty avoidance when it comes to driving habits (an uncertainty and anxiety generating activity), but lower on sexual conduct expected of the young (another activity with an uncertain outcome), in comparison with country B.

Attitude to power and authority is also highly situation based: an Indian man might feel more powerful than his wife at home, but less so at work if he happens to be the director of a firm of which she is the owner-chairman. There may in fact be a whole host of complicated reasons why some people behave in one way under one condition, and in a different way under another.

'Confucian dynamism', or 'time-orientation', also artificially divides cultures into two separate groups, by dividing specific Confucian values into a 'positive' pole on the one hand and a 'negative' pole on the other. As Fang (1998) argues, perhaps the best known symbol of east Asia is Yin Yang – the Chinese philosophical principle of dualism in the manifest world (Cooper, 1990). The Chinese believe Yin and Yang exist in everything, or everything embraces Yin and Yang. Confucian values are no exception: each Confucian value has its bright and dark side. Furthermore, these values on either pole of Hofstede's 5th dimension are essentially intertwined and do not contrast with one another (Fang, 1998).

All the above points and examples serve to remind us that national culture is a complex construct and we simplify them at our own peril. But, regrettably, many authors of cross cultural studies have a tendency to focus on a few dimensions and ignore various other aspects of culture which might have equally significant bearings on people's values, attitudes and behaviours.

The preamble to Ang and Teo's (1997) study of Singaporean managers' negotiation styles, based on certain general cultural traits identified by Usunier, is a recent case in

point. Usunier (1996) identifies time processing orientation as a key component of culture which is likely to surface and play a crucial role in international negotiations. Time processing orientation refers to the ways in which individuals make use of their time. Monochronic individuals are time oriented and thus follow expeditiously to pre-set schedules. In contrast, polychronic individuals tend not to adhere to schedules because they place more emphasis on developing relationships as opposed to committing themselves to a schedule.

Following this argument, Ang and Teo (1997) cite the Japanese as an example of people who let deadlines go and do not stick to the scheduled time in meetings. This may be so, but in some other aspects of business activities, such as their much emulated just-in-time practice, the Japanese are known for strictly observing timetables and schedules. The whole system is based on honouring finely-tuned delivery times.

Similarly, Fang (2001) argues that the Chinese reciprocate foreign negotiators' provocative and face-losing actions by harsh retaliation which could jeopardize or even cancel any future business with the same negotiators. Fang argues that this reciprocity is rooted in Chinese culture. Again, this may be so, but, as was mentioned earlier, the situation in which one finds oneself can also influence one's actions – negotiations in a friendly atmosphere with tactless but trusted foreign partners may not necessarily lead to hostile reactions even if these foreigners cause a Chinese person to lose face. See also the quote from Tsang (1998) later in the article.

Dimensionalization of culture also has another unfortunate side effect – minimalism. The authors of many published cross cultural studies do not give relevant details of the culture or cultures within which their studies are conducted, before going on to discuss their implications for their focus of investigation. Instead, they only say that the

culture(s) in question scored this and that figure on Hofstede's dimensions, considering, to paraphrase Shakespeare, the cultural aspect of their job as done. One is not asking here that we should reinvent the wheel, but surely the least that we can do is to investigate the cultural context of our study more thoroughly than this. A minimalist approach can only damage our credibility.

We really need to look at national culture in a more holistic manner, with our eyes and ears open to all possibilities – to see the whole elephant and not just a few parts of its body; we need to understand the *raison d'être* of our discipline deeper and better. Marc Maurice warned us, nearly three decades ago, against focusing on one set of factors (in his case contextual factors) at the expense of others. Criticizing the advocates of the universal model of organization, he argued that they look for similarities rather than differences in organizations operating in different countries:

Thus, when certain formal characteristics of organization structures (centralization, formalization, specialization, etc.) are related to such contextual variables as size and technology, it is important to realize that these studies are based on concepts and indicators that by nature are universal – thereby precluding any testing of the impact of national or cultural variables in which such studies express interests. (Maurice, 1976: 5–6)

Which brings the discussion to the place of non-cultural factors in cross cultural studies.

### **Non-cultural Factors across Cultures**

National culture, as the present author has argued elsewhere (Tayeb, 1988, 1995, 1998, 2000b), should not be considered as a strait-jacket. It is true that one's behaviours and actions are informed by one's values and taken for granted assumptions, but these values are not purely national culture based. One's education, age, occupation and life

experience in general exert powerful influences on one's values and taken for granted assumptions. As a result, an older person might be more tactful in encounters with others, a well-travelled person might be more tolerant of other nationalities, a senior manager might be more time conscious than a junior office clerk, a well-educated person might have a more intellectually developed mind and sharper problem-solving faculties, than their opposite numbers within the same culture.

In addition to such individual variations, there are of course regional variations within any single nation, some of which are caused by non-cultural factors. In the regions with high unemployment and economic depression local employees pose less challenge to the authority of their superiors, unions become less militant, and organizational strategic and structural changes are tolerated rather more than in the areas which enjoy economic prosperity and full employment (see Tayeb, 1994b and Beechler and Yang, 1994 for UK and US examples).

One of the most recent studies which takes non-cultural as well as cultural factors into account has been conducted by Denny (1999). In a study of training and development policies of two subsidiaries of a Swedish company in France and the United Kingdom, Denny notes that these policies and their implementations were heavily influenced not only by cultural factors, but also by institutional characteristics of the host countries, especially strongly by their state of market competition. The study examines open-mindedly all the major possible factors and tries to explain both similarities and differences found between the two subsidiaries in terms of these factors – more on this study later.

The present author's (Tayeb and Thory, 2000a, b) ongoing qualitative study into the HRM policies and practices of a large sample of Scottish subsidiaries of major multi-national companies, has also been designed

specifically to explore the influences of non-cultural as well as cultural factors on HRM. Similar to Denny's research findings, market competition and other business related factors were prominent among the non-cultural factors which had a significant influence on HRM.

An obvious, reasonable question to ask with regard to this issue is: so what? We know that non-cultural factors influence organizations, but some researchers are interested in investigating only the role of cultural factors, and what is wrong with that? Nothing, except that in order to study the impact of national culture on organizations the least that one can do is to isolate it by holding constant the impact of non-cultural factors and by comparing like with like across different cultures. Many of our colleagues, unfortunately, do not do that. To know something is there, non-cultural factors in this case, is necessary but not sufficient; you have got to design it out of your investigation. In the absence of such designs in many published studies, their authors' assertions about the influence of culture are pure conjecture, and not factually-based propositions.

A second reasonable question to ask is: why, then, do some people keep making the same mistakes and conducting faulty research? Difficult to say. It could be inadequate training. But it is not possible to judge by the published material whether this in fact is the case. Judging by my own professional experience as a researcher and a teacher, both at home and abroad, there does not seem to be any shortage of good workshops and courses on research methodologies and data interpretation techniques in the seats of learning in many parts of the world.

'Publish or perish' might be an explanation for the carelessness with which some authors approach their research projects' design and execution. Universities increasingly place great emphasis on research publications as one of the main criteria for

eligibility for promotion. Governments, the present author can certainly speak for the UK academics, increasingly link state-funded universities' grants to their research output. The four-yearly Research Assessment Exercise in the UK has been devised to rank universities and their individual departments and schools according to their publication records, which in turn will determine the amount of funds allocated to them.

In circumstances such as these, it is hardly surprising that quality waits upon quantity. A decent thoroughly worked out study, especially in our multi-strand discipline involving in most cases more than one country, takes a lot of time, not to mention a lot of money and trouble. So many things can go wrong at every step of the way, from getting a visa to enter a foreign country, to securing access to companies whose managers and employees do not speak your language, to arranging for your teaching to be done by someone else while you are away, etc.

How many people are fortunate enough to be in a position to do what Hofstede did in the late 1960s and early 1970s? Even he was able to perform this feat only once! For the vast majority of people the short-term, easy-to-conduct, quick-to-see-findings-in-print study is the only reasonable option.

I once read two articles by the same authors, who for obvious reasons should remain nameless, who had asked two sets of questions in their quantitative survey questionnaire, a handful in each set. They had used the responses to each set to write each of the two articles. There was absolutely nothing in the two articles that you could possibly describe as seminal or original or a contribution to knowledge, on either methodological grounds or because of the quality of the findings. But the articles had nevertheless been published, admittedly in less than distinguished journals, and no doubt helped the authors boost their CVs and support their promotion applications.

Having said that, between the works of the Hofstede of this world and the likes of the above unnamed authors, there are a large number of good decent studies which keep our discipline going, and have helped it grow from a seedling in the 1960s to the established, respectable and mature discipline to which we are all happy to subscribe today.

## **National and Organizational Cultures**

It goes without saying that within the context of work, organizational culture and indeed professional culture (managers, shopfloor workers, accountants, etc.) are some additional influences besides the national culture of the actors involved. As the present author has discussed elsewhere (Tayeb, 2000b, c) the disentanglement of the influences of these various cultures on the behaviours and actions of members of organizations is a daunting challenge which has not yet been fully met.

Hofstede's (1980) study is a major exception because the organizational culture was to some extent held constant. The employees in the subsidiaries of the US corporation whose responses were analysed in the study all had to some extent been socialized to the company's culture: they shared the same overall company strategies, policies and mission statements, they were selected to belong to the same occupational categories, so they did very much the same kind of work, they were of the same education level and varied only marginally in age and sex composition. However, the study did not demonstrate in a concrete manner the extent to which the respondents' values and attitudes had their roots in national or organizational cultures.

In a study conducted in Holland and Denmark (Hofstede et al., 1990), Hofstede and his colleagues attempted to address the issue of organizational vs national culture more directly. They found considerable

*differences in values*, in the sense of broad, non-specific feelings, such as good and evil, between the two national cultures (comparing otherwise similar people). Among organizational cultures, the opposite was the case: they found considerable *differences in practices* for people who held about the *same values*.

However, this study did not quite succeed in separating the influences of organizational culture from that of national culture on employees' work-related values and attitudes. As the authors themselves point out,

All in all, having gone out to study organizational value differences and having done this in two countries for reasons of convenience, we seem to have mainly caught national value differences. (Hofstede et al., 1990: 300).

## **Concepts and their Meanings: Researching HRM across Cultures**

In an earlier article (Tayeb, 1994a), the present author discussed, among other things, the difficulty in achieving a parity of meaning of concepts such as culture and its components when conducting research across two or more countries.

The problem of achieving parity of meaning of concepts and constructs in most cases goes beyond language barriers and mis-translation. Some concepts are more or less universal, some are generated and organically developed in a particular culture and bear the hallmark of that culture to such an extent as to make it incomprehensible to outsiders. Some can be imported but made workable only after conscious or unconscious modifications and adaptations. Some do not even exist in certain cultures and therefore cannot be compared across cultures.

Human resource management (HRM) is a relatively new addition to our catalogue of concepts and constructs. A discussion of HRM within the context of cross cultural research is particularly necessary because of the popularity and overwhelming use of the

term in academic discourse and within the professional circles. We need to examine HRM's credentials as a universal construct.

HRM has been defined in many ways and various models have been developed and discussed to tease out its specific character (see for example Legge, 1995 for a thorough review and analysis of the literature). HRM is clearly rooted in its ancestor, personnel management, with a strategic slant (Legge, 1989; Poole, 1990; Storey, 1992; Schuler et al., 1993). So in fact one still deals with issues such as selection, recruitment, training, remuneration, and the like, the preserve of personnel management. But all these issues are considered with regard to the overall strategies of the firm and the ways in which HRM can contribute to those strategies.

HRM has been viewed from two different perspectives (Legge, 1995): hard and soft (Storey, 1987; Hendry and Pettigrew, 1990). According to the hard model, reflecting utilitarian instrumentalism, HRM is used to drive the strategic objectives of the firm (Fomburn et al., 1984) and the 'human resource', the object of formal manpower planning, is a resource, like other factors of production, and an expense of doing business, rather than the only resource capable of turning inanimate factors of production into wealth (Tyson and Fell, 1986).

The soft model, developmental humanism view of HRM, while still emphasizing the importance of integrating human resource policies with business objectives, sees this as involving treating employees as valued assets, a source of competitive advantage through their commitment, adaptability and high quality (Storey, 1987; Vaughan, 1994). According to this view, employees are proactive inputs in production processes and are capable of development, worthy of trust and collaboration, to be achieved through participation and informed choice. The stress is therefore on generating commitment via communication, motivation and leadership. If employees' commitment yields better eco-

nomics performance, it is also sought as a route to greater human development (Beer and Spector, 1985; Walton, 1985; Storey, 1987).

The definition and major models of HRM, as outlined earlier, have certain underlying assumptions which are by their nature highly culture specific. HRM is essentially an American invention, bearing the hallmarks of that country's managerial priorities; it is a product of a professional and scholarly culture rooted in its originators' own wider societal culture, which is not universally valued or appreciated as relevant (Tayeb, 2000b). Having been transferred across the 'pond' and beyond, HRM has not quite taken root in Europe (Clark and Pugh, 2000), let alone in countries further afield, especially the developing nations with widely diverse political, social and business priorities and preferences.

Clark and Pugh (2000), building on the vast literature on the implications of national culture for management techniques and models, conducted a 'polycentric' study into the conceptions of HRM in a sample of European countries, namely Germany, the UK, Denmark, Spain, France, Sweden and the Netherlands.

The authors found that the concept of HRM has not been accepted or established as an academic discipline evenly among the sampled nations. For instance, there has been little discussion of HRM in Spain, due to a period of shake-out of labour, with rising redundancies and unemployment, which the country has been undergoing for some time until recently. This has meant that appreciation of the competitive value of human resources, which is at the basis of HRM, has not been much in evidence. The authors further argue that Sweden's strong collectivist culture counters the development of a more individualistic orientation to employment relationships, and the Dutch 'feminine' culture encourages the antipathy of Dutch employees to 'hard' HRM. Similarly, the

institutional factors in Germany of the strong role of the unions and the formal consultative structures between employers and employees attenuate the rise of the managerial prerogative. In France the power of the *patronat* hinders decentralization.

In an ongoing study of HRM in a sample of international joint ventures in Iran Namazie (2000) has found that Iran's perception and role of HRM is very different from that seen in developed countries. Whereas, as was previously discussed, western and many other developed countries view HRM as a strategic function, seeking to achieve competitive advantage by making full use of human resources (Storey, 1995; Lu and Bjorkman, 1998), in Iran the role of HRM is more basic and has been dependent on internal and external politics. The redundancy of female staff in top managerial and industrial sectors following the Islamic revolution and the recruitment of large numbers of war veterans following the Iran–Iraq eight-year war are telling examples here. As Tayeb (2001) points out, HRM in this country is really the 'old' personnel management with a heavy local colour, especially in recruitment and training areas.

Even in the United Kingdom, a country second only to the US in its enthusiasm to embrace HRM, and where the present author has conducted a number of empirical studies, many companies have simply renamed their personnel department the HR department, not because the function has any strategic role (Legge, 1989, 1995; Poole, 1990; Storey, 1992; Schuler et al., 1993) but because the title is considered to be 'cool'.

In addition, in small owner-managed firms, which characterize the industrial scene in large sections of the Chinese-speaking economies, and indeed many developing ones as well, it is hard to imagine a formal concept such as HRM, more suitable for large elaborate organizations, taking root. Marlow and Patten's (1993) study, conducted in a sample of small enterprises in a western

nation, found no indication that strategic employee management was being employed with the intent of gaining competitive advantage. They found few owners indulged in forward planning in terms of employment. The researchers' tentative conclusion was that although there is some evidence that HRM strategies and techniques are accessible to small firms and some elements are being incorporated into the management of the employment relationship, it is doubtful if this is HRM or a new variant of informal unskilled management.

Given these arguments, cross cultural researchers may not be able to understand employee management in different cultures if they restrict themselves to studying HRM as is currently being discussed in many western publications and practised in some western companies.

The HRM case puts in sharp focus the problem of trying to find explanations for certain work-related attitudes and behaviours of a nation(s) by using a concept, a measurable study object, which is alien to that nation(s). In other words, it is like trying to find out the rules of a particular game across cultures when the existence of the game itself in some of those cultures is in doubt. To assume universality for the phenomena that are not universal undermines the soundness of the research methodology of one's study and renders its findings unreliable.

Ideally, relevant issues in each case, from the object of study to cultural and institutional factors which influence its character, should be identified in location and measured/studied using locally meaningful and understood tools. Admittedly, such a course of action, apart from the huge amount of time, manpower and money involved, has the potential for diminishing, on the face of it at least, the comparability of findings across cultures. But this is a challenge which we have to face and meet some day.

## Research Tools to Capture Similarities and Differences across Cultures

The debate surrounding the best paradigm and method to use to collect data cross culturally is as old as the life of cross cultural investigation itself. As a newish strand in a relatively young discipline of management and organization studies, which borrowed many of its concepts and tools from its older social sciences cousins, cross cultural research has not yet been able to develop a research tool which can capture, unambiguously and uncontroversially, the essence of what it is intended to study. Anthropologists and their social anthropologist colleagues would perhaps advocate going and living in a community in order to understand its hidden as well as visible cultural features. Our psychologist and social psychologist relatives would recommend using controlled small group experiments with ‘subjects’. Our statistics-loving friends dismiss as irrelevant anything which is not quantified into numbers that are factor analysed, correlated with one another and put into well organized tables. Our qualitative-minded colleagues argue that culture and culture-related issues can only be captured through interview-based investigations; you really need to hear your respondents talk, watch their body language, probe them over and over again until you get to the bottom of the thing. Better still, shadow them in their daily rounds of meetings and shopfloor visits, ask them to keep a diary for you, observe how they shout at their subordinates and how these fight back or burst into tears.

Chris Brewster (1999) analyses and evaluates two major paradigms in the study of HRM – universalist and contextualist – which divide intellectually the Europeans and their American cousins, already divided from one another geographically and culturally. While there is no point in repeating here what he says, it is worth echoing his conclu-

sion as a pointer to the way ahead for cross cultural studies:

Our challenge is to understand and draw the best from both paradigms: to be more ambitious in our inter-organisational, cross-sectional and cross-national research – and more careful about our findings and our analysis. (p. 232)

Denny’s (1999) research has just done that. He uses a multi-paradigm method in what he calls ‘combined positivism’ to collect and interpret qualitative data within the socio-economic context of the focal organizations. Having noted the limitations of reliance on any one paradigm, the author recognizes the benefits of drawing from the ideas of both positivism and interpretivism. What makes this study particularly refreshing is its rigour, attention to detail, multi-strand theoretical background, development of the thesis and hypotheses based on an extensive study of the contexts of the organizations investigated prior to data collection, systematic collection and interpretation of data, its open-minded approach and search for both similarities and differences, and its attempt to offer explanations for these in both cultural and non-cultural factors which characterize the home (Sweden) and host countries (France and Britain) involved.

In parallel with experimentation with multi-paradigm research designs, some researchers have been quite adventurous and introduced new research designs in their work. Budhwar’s (2000) study of the cognition of personnel specialists from a matched sample of Indian and British manufacturing firms is a good example here. The author has employed a variety of research tools, including the innovative device of visual card sorting (VCS), applied previously to a very limited extent in management research.

A VCS is an interview-based technique, which is consonant with the psychology of categorization and is found to be appropriate to show how individuals categorize concepts within a particular knowledge domain

(Canter et al., 1985; Gammack, 1987; Daniels et al., 1994, 1995). Individuals assign items to categories on the basis of their experience and particular context (Tajfel, 1981). The main task of the researcher adopting this technique is to identify the interviewees' salient categories and the pattern of assignments used to relate categories of elements. The elements, generated by the interviewer or interviewee, may be labels, concepts, objects, pictures, etc., depending on the nature of the research. The interviewees are asked to sort these elements, provided on cards, into groups on the basis of commonality of elements within particular groups. Thus a number of groups are produced with different elements assigned to them (based on the sorting criterion given by the researcher, such as causal relations or cohesiveness of concepts). The interviewee is then asked why she or he has placed the cards in such a manner.

In Budhwar's study six key themes were investigated in the interviews. These were the nature of the personnel function, integration of HRM into the corporate strategy, devolution of HRM to line managers, the influence of national culture, the influence of different national institutions, and the influence of the dynamic business environment on national HRM policies and practices. For the card sorting sessions during the interviews, elements were utilized representing different institutions and different aspects of the dynamic business environments. Eight separate cards were also formed consisting of the basic HRM functions. Card sorting responses were tape recorded and noted on paper and then content analysed.

This meticulously conducted design was matched by an equally meticulous selection of the interviewees based on a number of contingent variables, in turn from a closely matched sample of manufacturing firms in the two countries (see Budhwar, 2000 for details).

The above examples show that at long

last we are witnessing a shift away from using the same old faulty tools and approaches, towards employing innovative designs that might one day offer better solutions to our methodological problems. For far too long some people have taken what one might call 'the lazy way out', from a minimalist approach to defining the parameters of the study to an undue reliance on old studies for characterization of a particular nation's culture – instead of actually studying it afresh to capture its dynamism and vitality – to using tools which are inherently incapable of capturing culture and its influence (or lack of it) on the phenomena under investigation. The tide might be turning at last.

### **Cross Cultural Researchers and their Bias**

The researchers' own cultural values and attitudes could get in the way of understanding their subjects of study. How do you detach yourself from your cultural background and iron out the filter through which everything reaches you from the outside world and is sent out to it? Impossible. The best that one can do is to acknowledge one's cultural bias, which can never be entirely eliminated. To my knowledge Geert Hofstede is the only cross cultural researcher who gives people a certain amount of information about his background (see the relevant notes in the first edition of his *Culture's Consequences*) so that people get an idea as to where he comes from and through what filter he sees the world.

Then there is the question of language, which is a major issue especially when conducting interview-based research in a country other than your own. Although it is not always necessary to know the interviewees' mother tongue – they might speak your language or, if you can afford it, you can hire an interpreter to accompany you – it will of course be an advantage and can create a friendly atmosphere.

However, the knowledge of interviewees' language or the use of an interpreter is not enough to create shared understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds. Language represents and expresses the culture, the value systems behind it. Not knowing this underlying culture can cause problems. As Jankowicz (1994) points out, some people tend to underestimate the difficulties involved in the creation of shared understanding and scarcely recognize the issue of cultural differences. Jankowicz makes a further pertinent point, in the context of the problems involved in teaching western management theories and practices to Polish managers. Using terminology taken from French literary criticism he makes a distinction between *langue* (language as translated) and *parole* (language as experienced in a given culture).

Such a distinction is exemplified in what a British member of parliament with left-leaning political views has recently said: 'when I hear the words "cool Britannia" I think of old-age pensioners who suffer from hypothermia'. If this kind of distinction is not recognized by researchers involved in cross cultural projects, misunderstanding is bound to happen.

But even belonging to a broad cultural grouping and speaking the language of the country under investigation may not necessarily mean mutual understanding and rapport between the researcher and the researched. Eric Tsang's (1998) account of his doctoral research conducted in China is a good case in point. Tsang is a Hong Kong Chinese, has received westernized education, and speaks Cantonese, Mandarin and English. Here he describes his 'blunder' regarding the issue of 'face' in a lunch meeting:

As a Hong Kong Chinese, I am less sensitive to the face game than my mainland counterparts. During the lunch, I asked the party secretary about the objectives of forming the joint venture. He replied that one of the main objectives

was to improve production technology. As such, the venture imported new machines. Inadvertently, he also mentioned that the new machines did not fit in well with existing ones and at the end, they had to sell the machines to other factories. As a follow-up question, I asked something about the decision-making process with respect to purchasing the machines. I realized my blunder immediately after I had finished asking the question. As the most senior person representing the Chinese partner, the party secretary was, to a great extent, responsible for the mistake of not checking the compatibility of the new machines before making the purchase. My question would make him confess in front of his subordinates, and thus would hurt his face. I should have asked such a question in private only. The party secretary remained silent for a short while. To save his boss's face, the quick-witted general manager replied that the previous general manager had made the purchase decision and that was one of the reasons why his predecessor had been fired. (pp. 514-15)

The researcher's cultural bias and language-related problems could of course be minimized when a multicultural team conducts a multicultural project. But such investigations are very expensive and difficult to organize, feasible only for a select and fortunate few.

## Concluding Remarks

This article has raised a few major issues related to cross cultural research and discussed some of the problems that are encountered by researchers whose studies straddle national and cultural boundaries. The subjects of the study, the concepts, the means to collect the required data and the researchers themselves are all heavily influenced by cultural and other subjective factors, making it difficult if not impossible to form an accurate and objective judgement about the characteristics and state of the object of research.

The article focused specifically on six issues of concern: dimensionalization of national culture, treatment of non-cultural

factors in cross cultural studies, disentanglement of national culture from organizational culture, parity of meaning of concepts across cultural boundaries with special emphasis on HRM, research tools, and researchers' cultural bias.

The article outlined the major dimensions proposed in previous seminal studies, which have been helpful in sharpening our focus and building up a critical body of arguments and principles. But we need to move on. Dimensionalization of culture, it was argued, while facilitating comparisons across boundaries, simplifies a complex and dynamic construct and diminishes the accuracy and therefore reliability of research findings along the way. In addition, breaking down culture to a handful of bi-polar dimensions ignores the fact that the two opposing poles of each of these dimensions may exist in the same culture. The co-existence of these poles has been of course recognized by some researchers. However, this recognition has not been translated into appropriate research designs in practice in a vast majority of reported studies.

Non-cultural factors, it was pointed out, are not still taken as seriously in many cross cultural studies as they should be. We can either study these alongside the cultural factors in order to arrive at a fuller picture of what actually influences workplace values and actions; or, alternatively, design them out of the equation by comparing like with like – through matching samples in different cultures on non-cultural factors, for example. Nothing new or revolutionary in this approach, but very few studies have adopted it.

The issue of separation of organizational culture from the national culture has always been a problem. One can, to some extent, hold organizational culture constant by studying a single multinational company across a number of nations, but this does not disentangle the two cultures completely or satisfactorily. This is a challenge we have yet

to meet, but in the meantime we can at least issue a word of caution to the readers of our articles.

Parity of meaning across cultures is another problem that the article focused on, with special emphasis on HRM. While popularizing and extending the range of use of such terms and concepts facilitate understanding and communication among people from different cultural backgrounds, they do not necessarily help achieve the objectives of serious cross cultural research. On the surface, almost any manager you talk with these days in an international conference or at a research interview session, seems to be familiar with the term HRM. But when you actually engage in deeper level conversation and pose probing questions you realize the widely differing meanings people assign to HRM, depending where they come from.

There is also the 'jumping on the bandwagon' phenomenon, which complicates matters further. It is suggested that cross cultural researchers need to identify locally significant issues and study them using locally relevant and comprehensible tools and measurements. There is, for instance, no point in conducting part of a comparative research into women managers' motivation and job satisfaction in countries such as Saudi Arabia, where women are not even allowed to drive let alone hold senior managerial positions. Women managers as a subject of study does not exist in that country. This may sound banal, but it is not, if only because of the number of studies where authors claim to have investigated HRM (or other similar non-universal subjects) in certain countries where the concept does not exist beyond its fashionable use in casual conversations.

The 'researcher effect' is a well-recognized problem in all branches of social sciences, but especially so in cross cultural research. The article discussed this issue with respect to language and the cultural heritage behind it. In addition, there is what one

might call the 'subject of the study effect' – try being a woman researcher in a country where people do not think very much of a woman as a professional. Your respondents' view of you as a woman can significantly influence the quality of the information you can get from them, if you are allowed to conduct the study, that is. Indeed, the different cultural backgrounds of both the researcher and the researched create an environment ripe for misunderstanding, frustration, prejudice, and even hurt.

Some of the obstacles and concerns discussed and raised in the article are difficult to eliminate either partially or completely. However, there are some which can be overcome with a more careful and better thought out research design. Examples were given of recent studies in which multi-paradigm designs and innovative data collection tools have been employed.

Our discipline, although it is a young one, is well past its adolescence. We have learned quite a lot since the 1960s but there is still a lot more to learn. We need to experiment more and to try out new ways of doing things. Judging by some of the promising studies carried out in recent years we might be well on our way to achieving maturation as some other branches of natural and social sciences seem to have done.

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## Résumé

### **Mener une recherche interculturelle: éviter les obstacles, résoudre les défis (Monir Tayeb)**

L'auteur analyse les difficultés méthodologiques et pratiques auxquelles sont confrontés les chercheurs en management interculturel. Elle s'intéresse en particulier aux questions liées à la compréhension et à l'étude d'une culture étrangère, aux problèmes posés par l'isolation de l'influence de la culture par rapport à celle de la culture de travail, à la nature culturellement spécifique de certains concepts de management supposés universels comme la GRH, et au choix des paradigmes et outils de recherche les plus appropriés. Partant d'une analyse du sujet par les auteurs il y a quelques années, l'auteur donne une vision plutôt positive du chemin parcouru et des perspectives à venir. Elle insiste aussi sur la possibilité d'éviter les insuffisances méthodologiques que l'on observe encore dans de nombreuses études comparatives internationales publiées. Plusieurs études récentes sont ainsi présentées qui traduisent un tel effort méthodologique.

## 摘要

跨文化管理研究：关于如何克服研究中所遇问题的探讨

Monir Tayeb

本文对在跨文化管理研究中，学者们在研究方法理论及实践中所遇到的问题进行了讨论。文章作者同时也对在了解不同文化及如何区分传统文化和企业文化的研究中存在的问题作了系统的分析。对那些广泛应用的管理理念(如人力资源管理)，研究方法选择及范例等在本文中进行了探讨和比较。结合几年前对相关问题的研究，本文作者对今后跨文化管理理论的发展感到乐观。同时，作者也指出，在当前国际比较理论研究方面，还有许多不严密之处。本文作者就此进一步例举了近年来发表的一些关于如何完善比较理论的研究。