

Notes to Cross-Cultural Research on Careers – Methodology and Fundamental Challenges

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Abstract:

Cross-cultural research on careers brings multiple methodological, cultural and ethical challenges. This paper presents specific fundamental methodological challenges of a cross-cultural research on careers planned to be conducted in 30 or more countries. Nowadays, these challenges are more significant considering economic recession in the world. The paper describes methodological and decisional processes including decisions on sampling, questionnaire creation and simplification, data collection and analysis, comparability, language and translation challenges. This paper provides review of the literature and suggestions for minimizing and / or overcoming these problems.

Keywords: career, cross-cultural research, methodology, economic recession.

1 Introduction

Cross-cultural research has become increasingly important in this modern world where companies are becoming more international, and business as well as information move freely across borders. With rapid modernization in all areas, more and more shared global culture, and with social and demographic values being shifted, the importance of managing the career effectively is crucial. Career stability is jeopardized more with these changing conditions as well as economic recession in the world. [4]

Performing qualitative, or any, cross-cultural research is interesting and very exciting, but it is related to many ethical, cultural, and methodological challenges. This paper will present specific fundamental methodological challenges of a cross-cultural research on careers planned to be conducted in 30 or more countries the author of this paper is participating in as well. It will also encourage readers to start thinking about methodological issues as well as ways for minimizing these challenges in performing cross-cultural research.

2 Consortium for the Cross-Cultural Study of Contemporary Careers (5C Group)

Long-term international research collaboration initiated in 2004 to define and measure differences in individual, social and structural influences on definitions of career success adaptation to emerging economic conditions in terms of career management. [1]

The consortium was set up due to the fact that there is very few studies on comparing careers in different countries. So the aim of the consortium is to systematically look at perceptions of career success and transition around the world. [3]

Qualitative data from 11 countries gathered to date. Countries: Austria, China, Costa Rica, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Serbia, South Africa, Spain, United States. This has been a qualitative research, which studied three groups of occupations – those being nurses, blue collar workers and managers – and then two different age groups – people that have just started their careers and people who have nearly finished their careers. The research focused on some questions around their careers to date; how they conceptualize careers success. The main goal was to build a picture of how this differs across countries and age groups.

The 5C Group is now entering the “second phase” - a survey phase where the research will look at over 30 countries and the main goal will be to create a picture of career success, the outcomes associated with career success, the inputs to career success and present commonalities and the differences. The research should provide better insights into global trends, regional trends, local trends, which directly or indirectly affect not only human resource management but also national and international, multinational corporations and expatriation and thus global careers. [3]

The survey phase represents many methodological challenges to 5C Group as it prepares for its second phase of its cross-cultural research. This preparation stage is fully used to define the potential challenges, also based on the first phase experience and to find the tools to eliminate these challenges. This paper will focus on the two main challenges the consortium works on now: Sampling and Instrumentation.

3 Sampling Challenges

Roberts (1997) stressed that one of the most common and visible problems in cross-cultural research is sampling. Sampling issues include many aspects but the number and selection of cultures and subjects would be the crucial ones together with the representativeness of samples. [7]

The sampling challenges related to the cross-cultural research discussed in this paper will include, but will not be limited to, cross-cultural aspects, accessibility of selected groups, comparability, relation to the research questions or setting the right values.

To eliminate these challenges and to make the sampling as relevant and effective as possible, the group has decided to focus and evaluate the following sampling considerations- understanding occupation, access and difficulty of coming out, similarity/differences of job/level/industry as to where can national differences be found. Other considerations will be an education level in job, different levels (entry-management) in some industries, and level of occupational culture in comparison with country culture.

The 5C Group had identified, after a long discussion around which samples would be interesting for the study, a list of possible groups/occupations. These were:

- Knowledge workers: engineers, IT workers, academics, scientists, creatives, teachers, professional services
- Manual/blue collar workers: retail, factory workers, hairdressers, taxi drivers
- Other: business people, nurses, police, random sample

Initially this list was narrowed down to two groups: 1) knowledge workers to contain engineers (possibly including IT) and professional services and 2) manual workers to include retail and hospitality. However, after discussion it was decided to focus on only one group for phase one of the survey. This will be knowledge workers – defined as those individuals with either engineering or business/management degrees. This way many of the sampling considerations can be eliminated in this cross-cultural study although many still have to be evaluated. [3]

Many of these considerations are cultural considerations and cultural challenges in cross-cultural research. For example, gaining access to research participants can be very difficult in and the same is applicable in cross-cultural research. [4] Quite often this can be problematic due to the culture and cultural differences involvement. Thus it is very beneficial to have connections within the community of potential research participants.

4 Instrumentation

The process of instrumentation involves the use of culturally equivalent variables, factors and translations into a second language. “The problem of equivalent variables arises when variables designed in, by, and for one culture are applied to a second culture without modifications.” [6] They can have a very different, even opposite, meaning and can be meaningless or even offensive to the participants from the other culture. One suggestion would be that these variables would first be developed in as universal terms as possible. Then it would be important to accommodate these variables to a certain culture. The most commonly used techniques include factor analyses and unstructured interviews on each culture. [2]

Heavy burden is put on the translation process to ensure equivalence in meaning. The main factors that need to be carefully considered are the use of vocabulary, idioms, grammar and syntax. [6]. The most important task of cross-cultural researchers in translating variables and factors into another language will be to gain common meaning. To ensure conformity, many researchers recommended back-translation to the original language after its direct translation to the second language is completed.

5C Group has been in the back-translating process and has experienced troubles with the fact that some words in the English language have no translation in other languages. Since the 5C Group survey phase of the research is going to be conducted in 30 more countries, the group has to work with about 15 languages. thus translation problems are not easily solved. One suggestion is for those researchers familiar and involved with the research in each language region to translate and back-translate the material several times till the equivalency in meaning is reached.

5 Conclusion

Cross-cultural research has become increasingly important in this modern world where companies are becoming more international, and business as well as information move freely across borders. Career stability is jeopardized more with these changing conditions as well as economic recession in the world and thus effective career management is crucial in all parts of the world. This paper introduced the 5C Group - Consortium for the Cross-Cultural Study of Contemporary Careers which has done cross-cultural research on career success and transitions

perceptions in multiple countries and is preparing for the survey phase of the research in 30 some countries.

Performing qualitative, or any, cross-cultural research is interesting and very exciting, but it is related to many ethical, cultural, and methodological challenges. This paper presented specific fundamental methodological challenges of a cross-cultural research on careers planned to be contacted in 30 or more countries. Sampling and instrumentation were chosen as the examples of these fundamental methodological challenges in this cross-cultural research. This paper also suggested to readers some ways for minimizing these challenges in performing cross-cultural research.

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