

# The SAGE Dictionary of Quantitative Management Research

## Cross-National/Cultural Comparisons

Contributors: J.C. Usunier

Editors: Luiz Moutinho & Graeme Hutcheson

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## Cross-National/Cultural Comparisons

### Etic, Emic, Derived Emic Perspectives

A classic distinction, Emic versus Etic cross-cultural research, was first developed by Sapir (1929) and further elaborated by Pike (1966). The Emic approach holds that attitudinal or behavioural phenomena are expressed in a unique way in each culture. Taken to its extreme, this approach states that it is not possible to make comparisons. The Etic approach, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with identifying universals. The difference originates in linguistics where *phonetic* depicts universal sounds, common across languages, and *phonemic* stresses unique sound patterns in languages. In general, research approaches and instruments adapted to each national culture (the Emic approach) provide data with greater internal validity than tests applicable to several cultures (the Etic approach, or 'culture-free tests'). But it is at the expense of cross-national comparability and external validity: results are not transposable to other cultural contexts. This is why many researchers try to establish cross-national or cross-cultural equivalence in a way which is inspired by the Etic rather than the Emic perspective. Most Etic-oriented researchers look for differences in degree while Emic researchers look for differences in nature. Typical questions for Etic-oriented researchers are: Is it scalable, can the constructs be operationalized? Are the differences across countries/cultures measurable on common conceptual dimensions? Emic researchers, who emphasize the fully [p. 66 ↓] different nature of a specific concept, are also drawn implicitly to some common reference point. The literature on cross-cultural methodology suggests some form of combined Emic–Etic or derived Etic approach, which requires 'researchers to first attain emic knowledge (usually through observation and/or participation) about all the cultures under study... [Then] make cross-cultural links between the emic aspects of each culture (Schaffer and Riordan, 2003: 174).'

# Naive Ways of Making Etic Comparisons

Cross-national and cross-cultural management literature are plagued with poor findings based on the direct comparison of mean scores concerning key constructs without first assessing the equivalence of research instruments and response styles across contexts. There are many ways of achieving naive comparisons, based on implicit assumptions that need to be checked for relevance. The first issue to be addressed is the way in which culture is treated? Comparative studies often assume that countries are treated nominally as cultures and observed differences are explained on the premise that nationality can be used as a surrogate for culture. This may not be true in highly diverse countries, in terms of language, religion and ethnicity. Cross-national comparisons which provide little or no theoretical indication as to why culture causes differences should be clearly distinguished from cross-cultural designs which explicitly take culture into account at the theoretical level, both within and between the compared contexts. A second issue is whether the research instruments measure the same notions throughout contexts: Is their meaning equivalent? Is their internal validity invariant across countries/cultures? A third issue relates to data collection discrepancies across contexts which can be rival explanations to apparent differences and obscure the true interpretation of findings both in terms of similarities and differences.

## Cross-National/Cultural Equivalence

Cross-national/cultural equivalence (invariance) should be established both *ex ante* (at the stages of theorizing, research instrument and preparing data collection) and *ex post* in order to check the outcomes of *ex ante* precautions when analysing and interpreting data. This is relevant, for instance, in the case of the replication of psychometric scales used for management research in foreign contexts, both in terms of validity and reliability. Establishing **conceptual equivalence** – i.e. securing that concepts used at the theoretical level have equivalent meaning in the contexts being investigated – is a prerequisite. It is largely based on a self-critical view of a researcher's prejudices when she ethnocentrically tends to impose concepts drawn from her own culture on alien contexts.

The search for **sampling equivalence** is a second concern whereby researchers in comparative management must respond to the paradoxical injunction that they have to find comparable samples for different base populations. Because in most management research, data are based on surveys with respondents self-reporting on their attitudes and behaviours, the context of data collection and the degree of familiarity with the research instruments are likely to create significant differences in **response styles** that have to be uncovered and, if possible, corrected. When data is collected, **measurement invariance** across contexts has to be assessed before any attempt at meaningful comparison is undertaken.

J.C.Usunier

## Further Reading

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