An Overview of the Challenges faced during Cross-Cultural Research

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Abstract

Cultural diversity in cross-cultural research is something which academic researchers need to recognise. This paper is an overview of the challenges faced during a cross-cultural research project in UK and in India. It identifies challenges which academic researchers can face in relation to data collection, cultural obligation and peer pressure, ethical considerations and awareness, the experiences working with a cross-cultural team and issues faced at personal level. This paper recommends ways for how such challenges could be addressed without compromising on the quality of the research. Personal experiences along with a review of literature in intercultural psychology suggest that an understanding of cultural norms, approaches and behaviours along with flexible and adaptable methodological and high ethical awareness are vital. Translation, instrumentation and data collection, cultural obligation and peer pressure are some of the crucial factors discussed.

Keywords

Culture, Individualist, Collectivist, Individualism, Collectivism.

Culture defines to a large extent who we are, how we perceive our environment around us and how we behave (Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). Understanding behaviours requires an understanding of cultural specific norms, values and behaviours. While Western cultures (typically labelled Individualist) are considered more independent, self-focussed and autonomous, Eastern cultures (typically labelled Collectivist) are considered more interdependent, group orientated and focussed on maintaining harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis et al. 1988). As researchers in social sciences and related disciplines, it is important that consideration of such cultural differences are acknowledged when formulating and implementing research strategies and interpreting findings. With increased globalisation, the need for cross-cultural research is on the rise which raises the question of one's understanding of cultural variability and differences while conducting cross-cultural research.

This paper is an overview of the challenges encountered during a cross-cultural research study conducted in a city in the UK (Western culture) and in one of the largest cities in India (Eastern culture). The UK as an individualist country and India as a collectivist country are clearly separated on the dimension of individualism and collectivism (see Hall's, 1976) and Hofstede's (1980) Dimensions of Cultural Variability for Selected Countries). One of the main aims of the project was to understand how culture influences our attitudes and the decisions we make in specific situations, and the study was embedded in a larger research plan. An attempt was made in this paper to encompass some of the major challenges experienced during the conduct of the study in both countries. The main challenges experienced were in the areas of translation, instrumentation and data collection, cultural obligation, peer pressure, ethical consideration and awareness of the ethical requirements.

Challenges

Survey design

The study was in the form of a survey adapted from previous studies into culture-specific attitudes and behaviours in different social situations (Gardner et al.1999; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). The scales used in the survey were validated scales, however they had been developed keeping in mind Western populations who score higher on levels of individualism, unlike Eastern populations who score higher on

levels of collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and had been mostly used on Western samples. Therefore, it was important that item equivalence was maintained in both cultures in order to identify any "true" cultural differences. Such equivalence in instrument design can only be achieved when researchers are mindful of the various idioms, phrases and grammatical details to be found in a particular location and, more generally, how respondents make inferences in different cultures (Sekaran, 1983). For example, "Feeling guilty for my brother's/sister's failure" was one of the items in the survey. Such feelings might be "strongly relevant" to respondents in Collectivists countries, where members believe in being part of their social structure, and as such, they might hold themselves responsible for not being able to guide or support their brother/sister, which could have prevented their failure. However, such feelings might be less agreeable in Individualist countries, where members believe in being responsible for their own actions and behaviours. The inferences we make are highly influenced by our cultural background, which influences how we think, perceive and react to situations around us (Cunningham et al.1995; Dake, 1991; Kühnen & Oyserman, 2002; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). While acknowledging cultural influences on participant responses, a culturally fit instrument and an understanding of cultural demands can help interpret results correctly.

Translation

Cultural variability limits the development of a single instrument which can be consistently used in all cultures (Sechrest et al. 1972; Sekaran, 1983). Administering a culturally viable research instrument can only be achieved when it is used in the participant's native language. This means that a translation of the research instrument needs to ensure the identification of such cultural variance adequately. It is important to note that concentrating too much on maintaining methodological equivalence can lead to researchers overlooking other, important individual cultural differences. However, maintaining such equivalence helps to minimise variance in a data set more generally and is desirable (Sekaran, 1983).

This particular study was in the format of a survey and very much text-based. The immediate question was that of translation. One of the primary goals of translation is to obtain an instrument that could be used consistently between cultures, i.e., with same literal and cultural meaning (Brislin, 1970; McGorry, 2000). It was not only

important to get at the correct "linguistic" translation, but it was also important to achieve an equivalence in cultural meaning, thereby giving the researcher confidence that any intercultural differences in the findings are not due to translation error. There are different ways of conducting a translation in a systematic way, e.g., the one-way translation, which is without any back translation in the original language, and translation by committee, which involves two or more individuals who are familiar with both languages and who help in translating the instrument from the original version. The researcher then uses the independent translators to arrive at a consensus or recruits an additional independent party to choose the version that fits best with the original version. Decentring is a method that involves re-designing survey instruments to fit in with the target culture and involves constant revision of the original survey instrument. This method can also alter the items and survey length (McGorry, 2000). Using bilinguals, who can read and write fluently in both languages, is crucial during a translation process (Marin & Marin, 1991). However, cultural phraseology should also be considered, where regional or class differences matter. So, it is first important to decide which groups of culturally different people are under investigation.

Being able to develop a culturally and literally viable instrument was crucial for the research design and for maintaining validity and reliability of the data. There were two independent groups of translators, who were fluent in reading and writing in both English and Bengali (the native language most relevant among individuals living in the Indian city). Each group consisted of three members who were recruited in order to conduct the back translation process adequately (see Figure 1). This was in line with standard recommendations (Marin & Marin, 1991) and was also cost effective and quick, unlike, for example, the decentring process of translation (McGorry, 2000) which would require a significant and time consuming departure from the original version of the survey instrument. It was also different from the translation by a committee method, where the three members in each group translated the survey items after a group discussion and not as independent translators.

The translation method selected for this particular study had the advantage of quickly removing any discrepancies in the translated version as survey items were translated after coming to a group consensus. Although it is recommended that applications of several translation processes could help to achieve a more accurate and culturally fit instrument (McGorry, 2000), such a procedure is not always possible for researchers

due to restrictions in funding and time constraints. Below is the step by step guide of the back translation process used.

Back Translation Procedure for research instrument in India

1)   A focus group of three Bengali translators were selected who had studied and lived in the Indian city. They could read, write and speak fluently in Bengali and in English.

2)   The focus group was asked to read through the questionnaire which was in the original English version and then after discussion with each other came up with a Bengali version of each item on the survey.

3)   Another focus group of three Bengali translators were selected for the back translation procedure. They could also read, write and speak fluently in Bengali and English.

4)   The second focus group was asked to read every item in the Bengali questionnaire and come up with an English version of each item on the questionnaire. This was also achieved with discussion between the three members in the focus group.

5)   The original English version of the questionnaire was then compared with the second English version of the questionnaire by all parties including the researcher. Although both the original English version and the second English version of the questionnaire were not exactly the same, the core meaning of each survey item was found to be well preserved. Hence there were no further changes made to the translated version of the questionnaire for the study. On completion of the translation process the survey were administered to participants in India.

Figure 1. An Illustration of the Back Translation Process followed in India
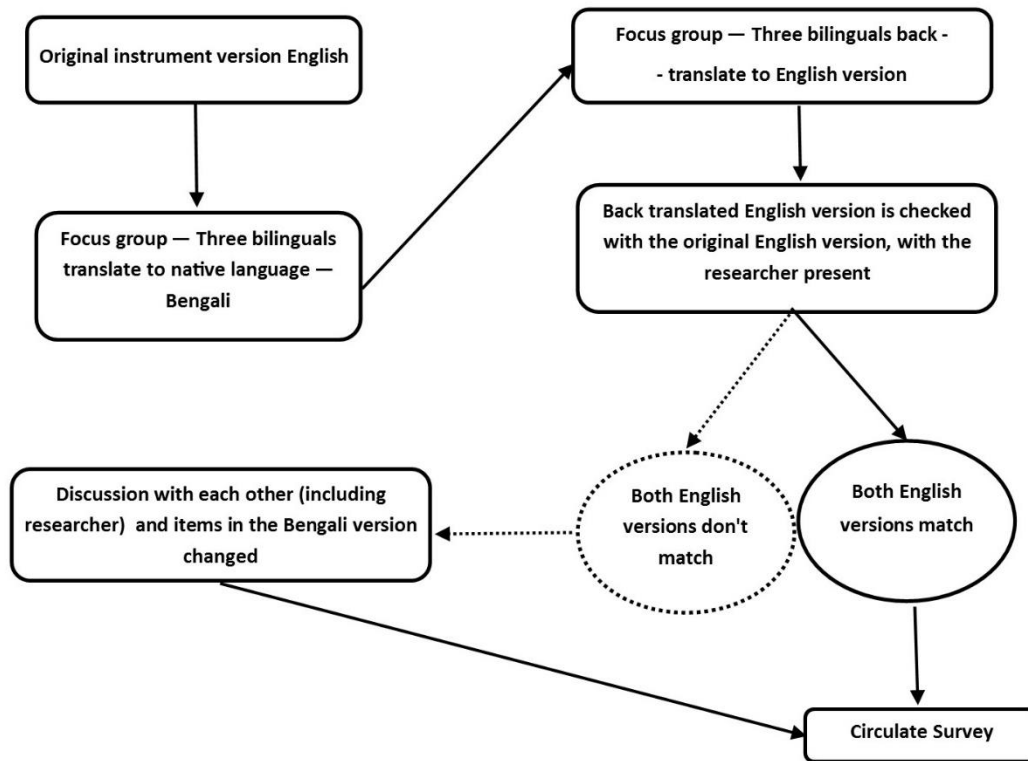
Data collection

The level of familiarity with the general research process and participation in research studies among the Indian sample was certainly a concern as not all universities in India indulge in similar research activities. This called for developing creative ways to administer the surveys in both cultures so that all participants could fully understand the participation process and their rights. All the respondents were from Higher Education institutions and had good levels of English both written and verbal, but it was difficult to find out what their actual level of understanding was as they had not themselves been involved in similar research projects previously. Additionally, it was difficult to have a one-to-one chat with the student participants due to time constraints. It was observed that in spite of their familiarity with English language, they still had difficulty in following the overall study participation process. This could be due to their lack of familiarity with the research process and the ethical demands or due to other aspects of the survey design. This further highlights the importance of culturally fit

instruments to help attain valid participant responses. Here, this issue was resolved as the researcher was present in person along with one of the bilingual translators to assist participants while taking the survey. However, in other cases such as online surveys, participants' understanding of the survey questions might be restricted and participants might end up responding incorrectly to the questions, when they fail to understand task requirements, further highlighting the importance of clear and appropriate instructions. Unintended responses will certainly have an adverse impact on the research outcome and may produce an intercultural effect when actually there is none. The global demand and use of the internet has made researchers change and adapt to newer ways of conducting their research and in particular for cross-cultural research online methods are attractive (Kraut et al. 2004) as they save time and are also cost effective. However, the absence of personal cues and support might also have a negative impact on the quality of the data collected.

Conducting cross-cultural research also requires planning ahead. While particular dates and times might be useful and convenient for the researcher in one country, it might not be the same in another country. The data collection process in the UK was conducted without any hindrances, whereas a different picture emerged in India as national holidays were suddenly called for by the government due to local elections, which also resulted in social unrest in some parts of the country. This had an adverse effect on the sample size as it resulted in a reduced number of student attendance. Therefore, it is suggested that although planning ahead is always useful, researchers should always plan for sudden changes during cross-cultural research as it is not always possible to predict cultural or political changes in other countries. Planning ahead can include aspects like allocating additional meeting times, checking university opening and closing times, and also identifying the most promising time for data collection.

Informal meetings with Indian students after their participation in the survey suggested that although they were anxious about the social situation in the city, they felt that as students, they were obligated to participate in the survey as it has been requested by their lecturers. Such loyalty and compromising behaviours are a part of collectivist cultures (Heine & Dehman, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and it is argued that such obedience of instructions by their lecturers, helped students to display their loyalty towards their lecturers and their institutions, thereby helping them

to self-enhance (Gaertner et al. 2008). On the contrary, such behaviour also raises ethical implications which will be discussed in the later sections.

Cultural obligation & Peer pressure

Having analysed the data and looked at the statistical results, further questions had to be addressed. While the survey results followed the expected trend in the UK population, results obtained from the Indian sample had some out of norm results, and were not in line with what would be expected in that cultural context. This discrepancy could be a product of globalisation which has resulted in changes in attitudes and behaviours of Indian respondents since studies first introduced the distinction between individualism and collectivism. On the other hand, it could also be assumed that the scales used in the survey, which as mentioned earlier had been originally developed on the basis of Western attitudes and behaviours (Singelis, 1994; Trafimow et al. 1991), were not really applicable to a Collectivist cultural context like India. Therefore, such issues should be taken into future considerations, while conducting a cross-cultural research. It is also important to address that participants (all students at Higher Education institutions) in India showed an obligatory role towards their seniors, such as their lecturers and deans in the institution, which could also be one of the contributing factors to the results obtained. Participants may have simply responded without actually fully comprehending the meaning of the questions.

Deans and lecturers hold high positions in the social hierarchical system in India, where teaching roles carry particular authority. Maintaining harmony and loyalty towards others, especially individuals who hold higher social positions, is regarded as an obligatory factor in a collectivist culture (Basabe & Ros, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). While such collectivist behaviour may have helped participants to self-enhance, and to improve their self-esteem and subjective well-being (Kurman, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003), it can also be argued that because of such social pressure, some of the Indian participants might have taken part in the survey against their wishes. This can have adverse ramification for the survey results as participants might not have given their truthful responses. Additionally, this also fails to maintain ethical standards relating to informed consent and participants' rights to withdraw from a study and to withdraw data after participation.

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Participants in the Indian institutions were also under constant peer pressure. Informal discussions after the survey indicated that some of the participants took part in the survey to maintain group harmony as it contributed to collective action whether they liked it or not. They believed in following the actions of their group members as they felt obligated to be loyal to their in-group. Furthermore, trying to understand participant behaviour in a group context, e.g., in a class room, in combination with peer pressure can also make participants more biased in their responses as they might respond in accordance with group norms and not their individual opinion. While the participants in the UK were direct and independent in their participation, Indian participants were more indirect in their approach. For example, Indian participants raised questions only when approached by the researcher unlike UK participants who asked questions whenever they wanted to clarify anything during the study. While such differences in behaviour are simply a reflection of cultural backgrounds (Triandis, 1989), they do highlight the importance of the presence of personal cues during data collection. In order to deal with this issue, it was made sure that participants were given full information (in English and in their native language) about participant rights. Furthermore, participant understanding was checked by asking them questions and further explanation was given, whenever identified that further explanation was required. This made sure that participants took part in the study voluntarily and with full information about the study and about their rights, and their participation was not due to any social obligation.

Ethical consideration and awareness

All research involving human participation calls for maintaining ethical standards and following ethical guidelines. This is even more important in cross-cultural research as identifying and understanding the cultural specific variance in a sample is of utmost importance to address research confounds. Issues like anonymity, participant information and informed consent, information about the data collection process and information of ownership of the data are some of the points that should always be considered. These points also provide a professional context in which participants give information to researchers. Ethical codes and practices we follow do not always address all ethical issues that we might encounter. However, by being aware of the values, norms, perception and behaviours in the target culture such issues can be addressed (Ponterotto & Casas, 1993). It is also important to understand that ethical

codes and practices that were developed with Western countries in mind cannot fully be followed when conducting research in Eastern countries (Pedersen, 1991). This follows from some fundamental and well-documented differences in cultural norms, values, and behavioural patterns (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 1997). Therefore, having an understanding of how ethical procedures may be received in the cultures under investigation is vital in administering the study and also in the rightful interpretation of the data.

For the present study, ethics and cultural differences had to be considered from early on in the research process. The UK sample included students at UK institutions, who had full access to the internet at all times and were fully aware of issues surrounding data collection and ethical standards. The survey was therefore circulated both online and in paper format to maximize the number of participants. The online survey had additional merits for this research as it helped to reach out to a wider population unlike the paper format (Kraut et al. 2004). The online survey was distributed through the institution's research participation site which also made it convenient for both the participants and the researcher. However, not all students at the Indian institutions would have access to the internet and have a thorough understanding of the ethical guidelines for research. Hence, the survey in India was conducted in paper format in both English and Bengali. Full participant information was provided, including information of their tasks and their rights as participants. It was important to bear in mind that differences in research practices exited in both countries. Therefore, before the conduct of the research a meeting with the ethical board at the various institutions were made in India and the research procedure and requirement was discussed, to make sure it study could be successfully conducted. Therefore, during the conduct of any cross-cultural research awareness of cultural history, values and traditions are essential which needs to be incorporated in the ethical guidelines for the researchers.

Experience of working as a cross-cultural team

While conducting a cross-cultural study with a cross-cultural team, it is very helpful to collaborate with people who are supportive, understanding and flexible in their approach. This was really important for this particular study as they were guiding source under doubtful situations, which can have unexpected delays to the research timescale. Having the benefit of having a supportive and flexible research team,

helped in the conduct of this particular research in both countries, with their advice and guidance. While the UK team was focussed in getting the data collection completed on time, the Indian team of helpers, however, left the impression of a more laid back approach. This could have been due to actual cultural differences, or it could have been due to a lack of personal interest given that research outcomes were directly relevant to researchers in the UK, not India.

There was a clearly discernible lack of knowledge of research ethics among Indian students. For example, it was seen that the participants in Kolkata were not too concerned about disclosing their personal information. Furthermore, informal discussion with them disclosed that they were not fully aware of their rights to withdraw. While the lecturers did possess knowledge about ethical practices that they were required to follow, such information was clearly not passed on to their students. While there was a consensus in both the teams (UK and India) on data protection, there was certainly a difference in their approach to this issue. For example, while anonymization of data and safe storage were a given in the UK, the team in India did not seem to be overly concerned about data handling or storage. What was clear from the Indian approach was a need to help and support me in my data collection. These are certainly collectivist behaviours considering that maintaining a harmonious relationship is one of the primary goals of the members of collectivist cultures, even if it means sacrificing personal interests (Triandis, 1989). As I was referred by a personal contact to the Indian team, who was one of the long serving lecturer at the university, it was quite likely that helping me to complete my data collection meant fulfilling a favour and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the lecturer too.

Issues faced as a researcher at a personal level

The initial stage of this research faced substantial delays due to failure of response from established contacts in India. Although confirmation of their interest and help with data collection in from various Indian institutions was obtained prior to the visit, through emails and telephone conversations, this was not quite maintained when present in India. These sudden and unexpected delays had a demotivating psychological impact. Fortunately, having the advantage of having family roots in India, additional contacts, who were lecturers and deans in other universities were established through personal contacts. Further meetings with deans and lecturers at other institutions were

organised again. It is, therefore, advisable that while conducting cross-cultural research, it is important to engage in ongoing communication, with not just one, but several contacts so that the researcher is not dependent on anyone in particular as there is no guarantee that a particular social contact will work. It is also advisable to have enough time at hand to adapt to unexpected changes in the research plan as otherwise any adverse impact on the overall research cannot be cushioned.

One of the ways to help adapt to changes is to have a positive attitude. Having a positive attitude, during the research process in India helped to face the challenges with confidence. The social support received from family, friends and team of researchers in the UK helped to maintain focus and motivation throughout. While it is not always possible to have the privilege of family and friends around you, it is always helpful to get to know and establish sound relationships with locals in the area as they can be helpful during any unexpected circumstances.

Keeping a reflexive diary of daily activities during the research would also help to formulate plans in advance should you need to. The maintenance of daily reflexive notes had helped to keep track of the progress, meet deadlines and also prepare and plan daily strategies in advance. For example, on more than one occasion some of the universities failed to get access to research participants, which resulted in establishing new contacts in other universities. The reflexive notes that were maintained were beneficial under such circumstances as it helped to decide whether it was worth waiting for a particular university or whether reach out to other potential universities who could provide support in the data collection process. Making use of new opportunities, from planning new strategies to establishing new contacts, that come up can always be a good idea as it reduces the risk of being dependent on just one contact.

Wider effects of cross-cultural research

This particular study included an actual experiment. The survey came in two different versions with the aim of making participants switch between cultural identities. This switch was expected to last at least for the time it took participants to respond to the remainder of the survey. As such, some manipulation of participants was taking place. The survey was considered safe to be used in both cultures as it did not aim to reverse participant behaviour but to highlight different aspects of their existing self-concept to

them. No adverse psychological impact on the participants could be expected from the survey. But on a more general level this begs the question whether all research methods are equally appropriate for use in different cultures.

The selection of method in cross-cultural research is very crucial as implications of incorrect methodological procedures can sometimes lead to adverse psychological and social issues for the participants in certain countries, if the method followed does not fit in with the social and cultural norms and values of the countries. While one method of study might be easy to use and implement in one country, it might not be the same in another country. For example, while a survey response of participants on views on adult images in newspapers might be easy to accept in an Individualist country, such topics might not be easily accepted in Collectivist countries. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to anticipate the culture-specific impact of the method itself. One solution could be the consultation of country-specific ethical boards before data collection. However, the availability of such board members is also crucial. A researcher firmly embedded in one particular culture may not always be able to assess the psychological impact of a piece of research on participants in another culture. As researchers, one can only be cautious and take measures to eliminate any possibilities of adverse psychological impact on our participants and minimising said impacts on participants should be of paramount importance.

Future implications and recommendations

Recognition and adaptability to different cultural norms, values and behaviours is called for at numerous points in the research process. A well planned research strategy and flexible methodological approach should be incorporated in any cross-cultural research. Research instruments require to be appropriately back translated in the native language in order to be viable both culturally and literally. This will not only help the participants to be able to comprehend the meaning of the items but will also enable them to respond truthfully and correctly. However, challenges during cross-cultural translation should also be addressed if researchers want to attain consistency. Failing to get the meaning of the items correct will have an adverse impact on the data collected and as such researchers should be cautious when interpreting such data.

Cultural understanding and familiarity with cultural specific norms and behaviours would help researchers develop contacts more easily and conduct studies in a time-

efficient manner. It is also recommended that ethical guidelines should be seen from a cross-cultural perspective and should take into consideration cultural differences while formulating or implementing ethical guidelines and practices. For example, while participant consent might be acceptable directly from the participants in Western countries, consent from additional university authorities and family members might be required in Eastern countries. Some ethical guidelines and practices, which have been developed for research in Western countries may be difficult to incorporate and implement in Eastern countries. This calls for developing culturally appropriate guidelines and practices. It is recommended that researchers conduct a pilot study prior to any main study to test their research strategy and their instruments. It is also recommended that participant feedback is collected after the study. This can be a part of the study at the end or researchers can also have informal discussions with the participants in person which will help to identify areas of improvement or amendment.

Conclusions

This paper was an attempt to give an overview of some of the challenges faced while conducting cross-cultural research in the UK and in India and to provide recommendations on how such challenges could be handled. One issue to emerge from this particular context were the differences in approaching research ethics, and having a more flexible ethical approach, which encompasses a flexible methodological approach, is therefore called for. This certainly requires the identification and appreciation of cultural value, norms and behaviours. Participant feedback is a crucial element of the research design as it will help in identifying areas of improvements in the study. For the present study, feedback was collected from participants in both cultures with the aim of identifying as many issues as possible and to resolve them. For example, at some point, the overall survey design was re-worked to make it more participant friendly. The overall layout of the survey including font size was changed. Care was taken to include more detailed instructions with examples relevant in both cultures to help participants follow the instructions correctly. Future research should focus on highlighting more cross-cultural challenges, from more research settings, that researchers could encounter and recommend ways to overcome them. It is important to highlight that having a cross-cultural background, and/or culture-specific sources of support, had noticeable benefits for conducting the research and opened up doors to new opportunities in often unexpected ways. It is for this reason that researchers

always need to be psychologically prepared for unforeseen challenges during cross-cultural research.

Notes

While a team of authors has contributed to this work, the first-person voice of the lead researcher was used as the most appropriate narrative in some sections.

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