Experiences Conducting Cross-Cultural Research

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ABSTRACT

When conducting cross-cultural investigations, it is incumbent upon the information systems researcher to be prepared to reflect upon the differences between the frameworks of the researcher and the research participants. Three cross-cultural projects are discussed in this article. The first project, investigating systems analysts, employs the Repertory Grid from Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955, 1963). The second and third projects both employ Narrative Inquiry (Bruner, 1990). The second project investigates the use of information systems by small business and relies upon multiple regional researchers. The third project, which is currently ongoing, investigates the emerging role of chief information officers and is a single researcher venture. These projects have contributed to the information systems field of study and are presented here to provide researchers with ideas for further qualitative cross-cultural investigations.

Keywords: cross-cultural; Group Theory; narrative inquiry; Personal Construct Theory; qualitative; Repertory Grids

INTRODUCTION

Many businesses have established global operations. Large corporations may build processing operations close to natural resources or markets. Some large corporations may rely on access to skilled personnel to help make location decisions. This is shown by the creation of many versions of Silicon Valley around the globe. Also, it is now relatively easy for small businesses to establish a global presence. The development of a Web site allows small businesses to present their products and services to a global market. Thus, anyone anywhere (given Internet access) may avail themselves of the offerings of either small or large businesses. This internationalization of business leads to research that includes a cultural perspective. The investigation of international operations entails a scope beyond one specific country and includes individuals from different countries. Thus, the adopted research methods must address the inherent diversity or similarity of cultures.

It has been suggested some time ago (Klein & Lyytinen, 1985) that information
systems researchers should adopt approaches to their investigations that will advance the discipline. Further, Galliers and Land (1987) have suggested that information systems research “methods must take account of the nature of the subject and the complexity of the real world” (p. 901). Galliers (1992) supported this comment, proposing that the adopted research method reflect the research objectives. Hirschheim (1992) expanded upon this idea, suggesting that information systems fundamentally are social systems. An approach to conducting investigations with objectives of taking account of the complexities of the real world of social systems may be found in qualitative research.

Now there is a growing community of information systems researchers employing a qualitative perspective to their investigations (Benbasat & Zmud, 1999; Trauth, 2001). Recently, Gallupe and Tan (1999) have challenged information systems researchers to use alternative qualitative approaches, such as ethnography, interpretive epistemology, and grounded theory. They suggest that these approaches are especially appropriate for international information systems researchers, who will inevitably become involved in cross-cultural research.

This article presents a perspective on conducting cross-cultural research. The next section discusses the consideration of taking a qualitative approach to cross-cultural research. Then, some examples of this type of research are presented. A discussion of implications follows. Conclusions finally are drawn regarding the use of qualitative methods when conducting cross-cultural research.

**APPLYING QUALITATIVE APPROACHES TO CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH**

Qualitative researchers work very closely with research participants. The researchers spend a lot of time in the field attempting to document research participant’s interpretations of personally experienced events. It is incumbent upon the researcher to approach these investigations with an open mind. It is also very important that the researcher be prepared to reflect upon the differences between the frameworks of the researcher and the research participants. This is true especially when the research project is international and research participants from different cultures are involved. The research approach must allow the research participants to provide their own interpretations. The approach must facilitate grounding the data within the personal experiences and the culture of the research participants. Subsequent data analysis also should be based upon the elicited comments of the research participants.

Issues relating to diversity and similarity should be addressed when conducting cross-cultural research. One issue relates to the individual development of constructs upon which the research will be carried out. That is, when conducting cross-cultural research, it is important to identify if the research method takes an emic or an etic approach. These concepts originated within linguistic research (Pike, 1954; Berry, 1990; Headland, Pike & Harris, 1990). Essentially, an emic approach is based upon constructs developed in one culture. Conversely, an etic approach is based upon universal constructs developed by comparing data from many cultures. A complicating factor is the introduction of a
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