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Cross-national research and international business: An interdisciplinary path

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ABSTRACT

Comparative cross-national research is among the oldest approaches of scientific inquiry in the social sciences. We investigate the foundations of published works in cross-national research (CNR) in international business (IB), sociology, and psychology with an eye on leveraging their rich traditions for future IB research. Our approach aims to contribute and address repeated calls for taking an interdisciplinary approach in IB. We examined published CNR in 106 scholarly journals and identified 817 articles with 51,738 citations in IB, 477 works with 30,017 citations in sociology, and 835 articles with 54,519 citations in psychology. We use metric multidimensional scaling to examine the co-citation data for each field and identify knowledge and approaches commonplace in sociology and psychology to propose future research paths in IB. In particular multilevel analysis, which is scarcely used in IB, offers the potential of unfolding new dimensions within the field. Based on the emergent results from our MDS solutions, we recommend multiple future paths for CNR, particularly with respect to IB relationships, market entry, and related domains.

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1. Introduction

As international business (IB) activities, functions, decisions, and strategies transcend national boundaries, the comparative cross-national research approach has gained popularity and is commonplace within the field.¹ Inasmuch as the comparative research approach has been acknowledged as instrumental and the core of the scientific method (Campbell & Stanley 1963), its popularity in IB and other social science disciplines is to be expected. Comparative research permits researchers to transition from parochial and ethnocentric studies to more comparative, geocentric, and synergistic types of research approaches (cf. Adler, 1983). Comparisons make it possible to observe or infer

differences, similarities, co-variation, and causality, and it is within the context of such utilities that the comparative method acquired its cross-cultural overtones (Berry, 1980). Given its central role and importance to advancing IB as a discipline, the comparative approach should be afforded regular examination with the goal of advancing theory and methodology, and provide new avenues for research.

Although its use in IB research is now routine, the comparative method is largely rooted in other branches of social science, notably knowledge spaces created in sociology and psychology. Cross-national research (CNR)² in sociology, for example, became increasingly routine following World War II (Elder, 1976), but its

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¹ A rudimentary Google Scholar search, for example, lists over 12,000 cross-national publications; a more focused EBSCO search for cross-national or cross-cultural terms in the title reveals over 2700 business publications since 1940.

² We use the term "cross-national research" generically to denote international-oriented comparative studies, that is, works that involve more than one country or culture. Operationally, we use a broad set of terms in this research which is discussed in the method section. We acknowledge that studies testing a given theory, model, or scale in a second country or setting are also comparative by extension (cf. Craig & Douglas, 2011); however, our focus is only on those studies that explicitly involve comparative cross-national methodology considerations at inception.

critical importance was voiced much earlier by Durkheim (1938 [1895]). Thus, CNR within the field of IB initially benefitted from prior advances in the comparative research of other branches of social science. By virtue of leveraging existing methods and knowledge from other fields and being comparative, CNR in IB is interdisciplinary at its core. The interdisciplinarity of IB as a field of inquiry has long been stressed and encouraged by scholars (e.g., Buckley & Chapman, 1996; Cheng, Birkinshaw, Lessard, & Thomas, 2014; Cheng, Henisz, Roth, & Swaminathan, 2009; Dunning, 1989; Shenkar, 2004; Wright & Ricks, 1994). Dunning (1989) asserted the critical importance of an interdisciplinary approach to studying IB. Over a decade later, Dunning (2002) further notes the interdisciplinary nature of the field by “. . . the distinctive feature of IB as an area of study [that] rests precisely on an appreciation of how different cultures, political systems, and exchange rate policies affect our understanding of the cross border decision making of firms and the environment in which they operate” (p. 825).

Irrespective of its interdisciplinary roots, CNR in IB has been functioning relatively independent of non-business domains of comparative research. In fact, published CNR works have evolved into significant bodies of knowledge. Still, even though there is an acknowledgement in IB's CNR of the need for more interdisciplinary research, very few studies venture out to other disciplines beyond the broader areas of business. By looking to other disciplines' CNR, specific research evaluations and expansions can be made with regard to their relevance to IB's CNR. This study affords us the opportunity to leverage important cross-national advances of other disciplines to motivate future research within IB. By analyzing the CNR of disciplines outside of – yet similar to – IB, a more complete understanding of how to advance CNR in IB can result.

Despite periodic review articles (e.g., Nasif, Al-Daeaj, Ebrahimi, & Thibodeaux, 1991; Samiee & Athanasiou, 1998; Zhang, Beatty, & Walsh, 2008), the lacuna regarding the intellectual influences within CNR using a bibliometric approach persists. CNR research as well as the broader IB field stand to benefit from an interdisciplinary approach by leveraging and merging advances in the methodology and theory of other fields. A more inclusive and integrated examination of the comparative body of knowledge will thus be illuminating in terms of both extant methodologies as well as conceptual domains from which IB thought might be furthered. To this end, the goal of this research is to focus on the intellectual underpinnings of the CNR literature via bibliometrics by using an interdisciplinary approach.

1.1. Disciplines of relevance in cnr

A distinction between disciplines of relevance to IB and CNR is essential at the outset. Although numerous IB scholars have asserted the interdisciplinarity of IB and echoed the importance of leveraging, for example, history, criminology, psychology, social psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, law, and geography in enriching IB research (e.g., Cheng et al., 2014; Dunning, 1989; Green & White, 1976; Sekaran, 1983), our goal is to focus on comparative CNR in IB as well as other fields of prime relevance with rich CNR traditions from which IB may benefit in methods and substance. Thus, the initial step in our pursuit of an interdisciplinary approach began with the identification of the boundaries of CNR within IB. Once this was established, a critical objective was to identify other fields in which relevant cross-national studies would be found applicable to IB as a field. After taking an interdisciplinary approach in our evaluation of fields beyond IB in specific and business in general, we determined – given the similarity of cultural values topics with IB – the fields of sociology and psychology had specific pertinence to IB. In our selection process, we make a distinction between international,

national, and subnational research in business vis-à-vis sociology, psychology, and other fields.³ Both disciplines are relevant and have long histories of CNR, notably in psychology where both the methodology and concepts have largely evolved (Gallagher & Savage, 2013). These disciplines are also shared across IB works that highlight such an approach, particularly the *JIBS* Special Issue on interdisciplinary research (Cheng et al., 2014) which almost exclusively leverages these fields. This selection process allowed us to determine which fields may provide the best opportunities to contribute to the continued development of IB.

1.2. Cross-national research

CNR seeks to compare a given phenomenon in two or more countries, societies, or cultures with the ultimate goal of legitimizing its universality (Hantrais & Mangen, 1996). The notion of comparison is central to CNR as the systematic validation of concepts and measures in vastly different environments is required. The approach was originally developed as a means of accounting for differences in cultures which can be responsible for observed differences where none may actually exist (Kagitcibasi & Poortinga, 2000). In psychology the intent has been the development of a deeper understanding of human behavior (Manaster & Havighurst, 1972), which parallels its use in IB, for example, with topics such as managerial decision-making approaches and consumer ethnocentrism.

In addition to playing influential roles in the development of psychology and sociology, CNR has become an important dimension of the IB literature and research. Increasingly, convenient, instant, and low-cost communications based on a range of platforms have essentially eliminated some key barriers to CNR and the field is experiencing rapid growth. However, despite the ease of communications across national boundaries, CNR remains a complex and daunting scholarly undertaking. Aspects of CNR are periodically reviewed or attempts are made to address issues pertaining to CNR, which are helpful in highlighting important dimensions that demand closer attention by researchers (e.g., Engelen & Brettel, 2011; Luo, Van Hoek, & Roos, 2001; Merz, He, & Alden, 2008; Samiee & Athanasiou, 1998; Singh, 1995; Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998; Watkins, 2010).

Furthermore, the move toward globalization, as evidenced by significant reductions in trade and investment barriers (e.g., the creation of the World Trade Organization and the expansion of the European Union) and increased IB initiatives in the private sectors (e.g., international outsourcing) have intensified the importance of CNR. Internationally-oriented research projects, in contrast to domestically-oriented research, generally involve aspects of CNR considerations. The nuances of CNR methods, for example, are complex and offer considerable challenges to researchers (see, for example, Davis, Douglas, & Silk, 1981; Green & White, 1976; Sekaran, 1983; Triandis & Berry, 1980; Walters & Samiee, 2003). Even routine considerations in a domestic project must be scientifically rationalized in CNR. As an example, constructs routinely used in domestic research, need to be cross-nationally validated for relevance. In fact, even the selection of countries (or cultures) targeted for investigation needs to be justified on theoretical grounds and methodological considerations (e.g., Adler,

³ Although international and national research have definitive boundaries concerning their application, subnational research may take different forms. Subnational topics pertain to themes not found at the national or individual level in this study. For instance, as a critical unit of analysis in the business, management, and economics literatures, the firm (or, enterprise) in this sense is considered an important topic at the subnational level based on the inherent heterogeneity of companies in a country. Other subnational topics may include sub-cultures, geographic areas, or political boundaries within a nation.

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