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Balancing Rigour and Relevance: The Case for Methodological Pragmatism in Conducting Large-Scale, Multi-country and Comparative Management Studies

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Collecting large-scale comparative management data from multiple countries poses challenges in demonstrating methodological rigour, including the need for representativeness. We examine the rigour of sample representativeness, the counterbalancing effect of sample relevance, and explore sampling options, equivalence across countries, data collection procedures and response rates. We identify the challenges posed by cross-national survey data collection, and suggest that the ideal research designs presented in much of the literature might not be practical or desirable in large-scale, multi-time-point, cross-national comparative management studies because of the need to ensure relevance across such contexts. Using the example of Cranet – a large-scale, multi-time-point, cross-national survey of human resource management – we offer suggested solutions for balancing both rigour and relevance in research of this nature.

Introduction

There is a long tradition in management research of comparing countries, with country or national context now recognized as a powerful explanatory variable in developing our understanding of complex management phenomena. The contextual heterogeneity inherent in country-level differences is increasingly viewed as a unique mechanism for theorizing and expanding the body of knowledge on management systems across territories (Cooke, Veen and Wood, 2017; Minbaeva, 2016). Increasingly, international comparative management studies have been dedicated to unearthing the explanatory power of societal context from either a cultural (e.g. López-Duarte, Vidal-Suárez and González-Díaz, 2016) or institutional (e.g. Aguilera, 2005; Batt, Holman and Holtgrewe, 2009) perspective which, in turn, serves to landscape commonalities and differences in dominant national management 'paradigms' or 'recipes' (Walker, Brewster and Wood, 2014).

Accompanying this growth in international (i.e. multi-country) comparative management research is an increasing awareness of the many conceptual, collaborative, methodological and analytical challenges that arise when simultaneously collecting comparable data across multiple countries. This additional complexity is vested largely in 'the variability across nations of various constraining factors' (Lynn, 2003, p. 323) that (rightly or wrongly) would be considered fixed in single-country studies.

Several of these challenges are evident in the shortcomings that, arguably, extant international comparative management research often includes:

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a reliance on untested secondary data that have often been collected for different purposes in different countries; underscored by a largely positivist tradition and an over-reliance on quantitative methods; a preponderance of managerial respondents with far fewer studies canvassing other stakeholders, raising the spectre of common method bias; too few longitudinal studies; a gap between academic research and what is needed or understood by management practitioners; and generally weak explanations of observed differences and similarities (Cascio, 2012; Cheng, 2007; Chidlow *et al.*, 2015; Clark, Gospel and Montgomery, 1999; Doty and Glick, 1998; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003; Romani *et al.*, 2018; Starkey and Madan, 2001; Yang, Wang and Su, 2000).

Rather than trying to solve these issues, we challenge here whether these are truly shortcomings or simply reflect the realities of conducting complex, multi-country comparative management studies. We note also that this complexity is exacerbated when researchers attempt to collect such data over multiple points in time. Consequently, large-scale, multi-time-point, multi-country studies often rely heavily on secondary data collected or compiled by bodies such as the European Union, the World Bank or the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Nevertheless, the value of conducting original international comparative management studies is clear: a comparative angle adds context, determining the extent to which the findings of mono-contextual studies are generalizable, as well as allowing a broader set of voices to be heard (Esser and Hanitzsch, 2013). Such studies, conducted over time, allow for a fuller exposition of convergence and divergence in our management models (Farndale *et al.*, 2017; Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2011; McGaughey and De Cieri, 1999). Importantly, this approach to enquiry, although often constrained by questions of feasibility, can help to address phenomena-based research questions (such as 'why do firms adopt different approaches to management across national contexts?' or 'why do approaches to management over time develop in one direction rather than another in particular countries?'). The questionable alternative is merely to focus on extending extant theory that may or may not apply in previously under-researched contexts (Cheng, 2007).

A stream of literature has arisen related to addressing the challenges in international comparative management research (Harzing, Reiche and Pudelko, 2013), focused primarily on issues related to measurement and data equivalence (Riordan and Vanderberg, 1994; Tomas *et al.*, 2008), cross-cultural response bias (Harzing, 2005; Harzing *et al.*, 2009, 2012) or broader issues concerning reliability and validity (Cascio, 2012; Ryan *et al.*, 1999; Van de Vijver, Van Hemert and Poortinga, 2008). These discussions are important but, as they are well rehearsed in the extant literature, they are not our key focus here.

We argue that while rigour and generalizability in relation to measurement is of vital importance in cross-national comparative management studies, it is also important to undertake research that is both rigorous and legitimate within the local context. To achieve this, researchers need to exercise a degree of pragmatism about what will and will not work methodologically. With this in mind, we focus here on issues of sample selection and data collection in comparative multi-time point, multi-country surveys, which pose methodological and resourcing challenges for scholars wishing to landscape the contours of management systems in different countries through engaging in large-scale original empirical work.

We draw on our own experience of long-term and large-scale cross-national survey research conducted as part of our collaboration in the Cranet Network in order to highlight the dialectical tensions inherent in this type of research, and we make the case for a degree of methodological pragmatism in order to deliver appropriate data and build cumulative knowledge. Cranet is a multi-country, multi-time-point survey of human resource management (HRM) policies and practices, undertaken regularly over the past 30 years by a collaborative network of scholars from over 40 countries. We do not claim here to address all of the challenges inherent in comparative management research. Indeed, in reference to the shortcomings listed above, Cranet also relies on quantitative data and on managerial respondents. However, our experiences and observations as part of this major research endeavour have allowed us to develop an understanding of the practical requirements that lie beneath a sustainable collaboration of this nature and the trade-offs and compromises necessary at particular points in time in order to deliver strong research outcomes. Thus, while we cannot solve all the problems perceived as inherent in previous comparative studies, we can provide experience-derived insights that may

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be helpful to researchers planning to conduct cross-national studies.

We argue that, practically, the challenges inherent in research across a large number of countries in different stages of development, with different languages and different scientific traditions, and where academic research has a different meaning and value, inevitably means compromising on 'ideal' data collection standards. Reinforcing Harzing *et al.*'s (2013, p. 113) observation that 'the actual research process is quite messy in nature', McGrath's (1982, p. 69) earlier account of 'a set of dilemmas to be lived with', and Adler's (1983) conclusion that funding, methodological complexity and time represent key constraints on the execution of management research across cultures, we emphasize the importance of striking a balance between methodological rigour and the reality of collecting large-scale relevant data capable of informing the phenomenon of interest. We build also on Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman's (2013) observation of a conflict between what is theoretically desirable and what is practically possible. However, we move beyond their notion of 'opportunistic' research approaches, to argue that the ideal research designs presented in much of the literature are not only impractical, but might not actually be appropriate in large-scale, longitudinal, cross-national comparative management studies due to the need to ensure relevance across national contexts.

In what follows we organize the insights that we have accumulated from our practical experience under four headings, namely: sampling; response rates; equivalence across countries; and data collection procedures. We provide illustrative examples of how and why the choices made proved necessary for Cranet as part of an overall collaborative effort. We conclude with practice-informed reflections on the need for compromise between rigour on the one hand, and relevance and practicality on the other.

Sampling

A first issue involves probability versus non-probability sampling, with a general implication that probability sampling creates a more methodologically sound dataset due to the random selection of participants (Cascio, 2012). Probability sampling is, however, extremely difficult when undertaking multi-country comparative survey research, not so much in terms of collecting responses but in defining the relevant populations in the first instance.

By way of example, Edwards *et al.* (2007) note the difficulty of defining a population of organizations (in their case, multinational corporations – MNCs) within a country. In some countries (usually smaller countries) this can be attained more easily than in others but if, for example, we are seeking to sample small or medium-sized organizations, a lack of reliable records makes identifying the total population almost impossible. Another example of the difficulties in developing a comprehensive list of the populations of organizations in a country is provided by McDonnell *et al.* (2007), who were forced to draw on multiple data sources in order to establish the population of MNCs in Ireland. This problem is exacerbated when conducting multi-country research over multiple time periods. In many countries there is often no publicly available database of organizations that is regularly updated. Thus, for pragmatic reasons, large-scale comparative surveys usually use non-probability sampling.

This is the case with Cranet, where complete databases of organizations and their HRM contacts are not available in all the countries included in the research. Where such a database is available, for example in Croatia, a census or probability sample is used. Other countries draw on multiple databases. McDonnell *et al.* (2007) demonstrate how it is possible to construct a reasonably reliable population of organizations using multiple databases, however this is easier in smaller countries such as Ireland. In larger countries such as the UK, USA or China, where no complete list of relevant organizations within the country is available, non-probability sampling is the norm.

While we acknowledge the limitations of non-probability sampling, there are steps that can, nevertheless, be taken to minimize the bias in this approach (Cascio, 2012), ensuring we remain true to the relevance of the research. These include demonstrating sample representativeness according to already known characteristics of the population for each country, such as organization size or sector (see e.g. Farndale *et al.*, 2017). In Cranet, each partner is asked to align their sample of organizations in proportion to size, sector and industry in their country, in so far as that can be established. Aligning the sample to approximate proportions of organizations with certain

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characteristics in a population allows the researcher to ensure approximate representativeness against key population characteristics and thus minimize bias (Patten, 2001).

Sampling issues extend beyond selecting organizations within countries to be sampled, to decisions on who are the appropriate respondents within each organization. Generally, the literature expounds multi-source data as necessary to avoid issues of common method bias in research studies (Cascio, 2012). We suggest however that, for certain purposes, single respondents can be acceptable. The important issue here is who has the accurate (valid) data needed: the individuals identified need to be the most knowledgeable about the issue under investigation (Huselid and Becker, 2000). In the Cranet research, we take a key informant approach, whereby the respondent to our questions about HRM policies is the highest-ranking HRM professional in the organization or their representative (Arthur and Boyles, 2007; Kumar, Stern and Anderson, 1993). Of course, it is impossible to be completely confident about who actually answers the questionnaire, but by providing guidance that the survey should be steered towards those individuals who have the most knowledge of the phenomenon of interest (in this case HRM policies and practices), and by asking only factual questions of these individuals, we argue that researchers can collect reliable data without increasing the required resources or damaging response rates.

Response rates

Increasing survey fatigue, especially in developed economies, has served to heighten the debate on response rates and their consequences (Baruch and Holtom, 2008). There is little doubt that a low response rate can undermine the perceived credibility of the data gathered (Luong and Rogelberg, 1998). Nevertheless, despite a substantial literature on the subject, 'there are no fixed rules or "formulae" to determine the acceptability' (Mellahi and Harris, 2016, p. 426) of the response rates achieved in business and management research. Of particular relevance is the observation that while higher response rates reduce the risk of non-response bias, they 'do not necessarily lead to a more balanced response' (Schouten, Cobben and Bethlehem, 2009, p. 112).

Response rates and sampling procedures are inexorably linked. As noted, given the difficulty of defining a population of organizations across a range of countries, how might we then know what an appropriate response rate per country should be? Small response rates in large countries yield the large numbers of respondents generally considered sufficient to explore a management research phenomenon. Small response rates in small countries yield small numbers of respondents, so having a similar response rate in the two countries could be counterproductive. Of course, a small response rate in a large country might not be sufficient to represent that country if the sample is biased, for example, towards a particular geographical location or industry sector. Thus, a 10% response rate in China with all of the respondents from service sector organizations in Beijing is not valid in relation to representing the entire Chinese population. Thus, obtaining a sample that is representative in relation to location and other sample characteristics, as suggested above, is also necessary (Patten, 2001).

Interventions to improve response rates have been widely discussed and are the subject of a number of significant reviews (see e.g. Singer and Ye, 2013). Suggestions have included pre-notifying participants, publicising the survey and establishing its importance, designing it carefully and managing its length, along with providing feedback to respondents (Baruch and Holtom, 2008). Cranet uses all of these approaches. While the research question defines the range of organizations and countries to involve in the study, it is necessary to demonstrate that if conclusions are being drawn for example at country level, then sufficient data from that country has been collected.

In Cranet, we focus on representativeness in relation to key characteristics of the population rather than sample size or response rate per se (providing we have sufficient power in the data to undertake quantitative analyses). That said, Table 1 – based on Cranet data – shows that response rates can also fluctuate across rounds of survey data collection due to prevailing conditions for conducting research: high response rates can sometimes result in lower sample sizes (often due to the method of data collection adopted). Compare, for example, a response rate of 97% in Belgium in 2014/15 resulting in 143 responses, whereas 19% in 2008/9 resulted in 240 responses.

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Table 1. Example response rates and sample sizes over four rounds of Cranet survey data collection across 13 partner countries

	1999		2004/5		2008/9		2014/15		
	Response rate	n	Response rate	n	Response rate	n	Response rate	n	Average response rate
Australia	21%	240	21%	259	13%	110	14%	395	17%
Austria	14%	230	14%	270	10%	203	12%	229	13%
Belgium	21%	282	14%	230	19%	240	97%	143	38%
Cyprus	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	38%	90	35%	87	37%
Denmark	11%	520	19%	516	13%	362	10%	206	13%
Finland	31%	290	22%	213	11%	136	16%	182	20%
Germany	14%	503	8%	347	11%	420	5%	278	10%
Greece	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	100%	214	33%	188	67%
Iceland	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	41%	138	37%	119	39%
Israel	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	13%	114	24%	119	19%
Lithuania	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	14%	119	11%	145	13%
Netherlands	14%	234	37%	397	31%	116	4%	167	22%
Norway	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	9%	98	34%	196	22%
Sweden	37%	352	22%	383	15%	282	14%	291	22%
Total	**20%**	**2651**	**20%**	**2615**	**24%**	**2642**	**25%**	**2745**	**25%**

n/a: Data were not collected in that country for that survey round.

Non-response bias is, of course, a concern in cross-national survey research (Chidlow *et al.*, 2015). In Cranet, we aim to achieve as high a response rate as possible given the data collection constraints noted. While some authors provide a list of ways of assessing the presence and impact of non-response bias, such as comparing early and late responders (Cascio, 2012), others suggest caution about disregarding findings that are based on low response rates. Referring to it as somewhat 'elusive', Rogelberg and Stanton (2007, p. 198) highlight that without 'good information about presence, magnitude and direction of nonresponse bias, ignoring the results of a study with a 10% response rate – particularly if the research question explores a new and previously unaddressed issue – is just as foolish as assuming that one with a response rate of 80% is unassailable'. We would therefore urge researchers to move beyond response rates alone and instead to consider the reasons behind low response rates (as well as possible bias in higher response rates) in order to gain a true understanding of the reliability of their sample.

Equivalence across countries

International comparative management research requires considering not only the type of respondents in the sample, but also the ability to communicate appropriately with these respondents to ensure that the data collected are both reliable and valid. Scholars have focused on the need for construct equivalence across countries to ensure that commonalities and differences unearthed by the research arise from variations in the phenomenon, rather than occurring as a result of measurement problems (Cascio, 2012; Hult *et al.*, 2008; Mullen, 1995; Riordan and Vanderberg, 1994; Tomas *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, comparative management research requires that any construct included in a survey means the same thing in each country if meaningful comparisons are to be made.

We suggest that there are two potential foci for equivalence across samples in international comparative management surveys. The first is the need to use multiple languages, since using a common language such as English might obscure country-level differences (Harzing, 2005; Harzing *et al.*, 2013). This emphasizes the importance of taking steps to ensure translation leads to conceptual, metric and functional equivalence in international comparative surveys (Cascio, 2012), using processes such as back-translation (Brislin, 1976; Cascio and Aguinis, 2011; Usinier, van Herk and Lee, 2017) or other techniques (Harpaz, 2003) to avoid measurement error or bias being introduced, and to ensure an appropriate sample can be reached. Construct equivalence is valuable in all comparative research, but our experience suggests a tension here between the need to compare across

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countries while considering local variation. An over-emphasis on direct construct equivalence might damage the perceived relevance of the survey to potential respondents and users of the data in different country contexts.

We follow Brislin's (1976) advice regarding back-translation in our Cranet research. Such translation is inevitably more complex when multifaceted notions are being discussed, and therefore simplifying the type of data collected has been a pragmatic and valuable solution. For example, we collect facts and numbers (rather than opinions and feelings), reducing the translation issues considerably. This allows for greater transparency of the data collected, which is of fundamental importance when designing the research. We urge researchers to maintain the simplicity of the data that they are collecting wherever possible.

Our second focus includes not just the equivalence of constructs but also the equivalence of facts. For example, in construct equivalence, we would want to ensure that a comparative survey of employee engagement yielded comparable results whereby the construct of employee engagement was similarly understood in all countries involved. Factual equivalence is related to whether the question being asked is relevant in all country contexts or whether a particular question should be removed for certain countries. For example, asking whether organizations in one country undertake a practice that is legally required in the country risks either loss of credibility or a not very useful 100% positive response; in another country, there may be no such law and whether they have such a practice may be relevant.

It is important, therefore, not only to consider equivalence across constructs, but also to recognize different cultural and institutional understandings of topics. Respondents are likely to be deterred from completing a questionnaire that makes little sense to them in their context. We argue therefore that it is more important to consider differences explicitly when designing a cross-national survey in order to ensure that questions remain legitimate across nations, rather than aiming for identical questions across countries.

To develop conceptual equivalence, commentators suggest the use of teams of researchers from each of the countries being studied who are positioned to have an emic view (i.e. be informed about the issues that are likely to arise as a result of contextual factors) (Harpaz, 2003; Harzing *et al.*, 2013). Just as qualitative research has been argued as essential for understanding the local context (Cheng, 2007), we posit the need for local partners when conducting etic quantitative research. In Cranet, there is a local partner in each country from which we collect data. In-country research partners can adapt a study to be relevant to the local context, identify an appropriate sample and interpret the study's results through a local lens (Harzing *et al.*, 2013). Local researchers, therefore, are essential in identifying the extent to which intended constructs will be understood in the local context (Sinkovics, Penz and Ghauri, 2008), in translating to ensure necessary equivalence, and in considering the most suitable time and method for data collection.

Data collection procedures

Although consistent survey delivery and data collection procedures across country samples can enhance the comparability of data collected (Chidlow *et al.*, 2015), whether the same data collection procedure will work in all countries is questionable. The options are to insist on the same data collection procedures and potentially fail to collect data from some countries, or to compromise and allow different ways of collecting data across countries. The same tension between sampling consistency (between countries) and appropriateness (within countries) is manifest here: we suggest that data collection techniques are less critical and more open to compromise than other aspects of international comparative management research in order to achieve reliable data.

Survey data can be collected electronically online, on paper, by mail, by telephone or technology-facilitated meetings, or through face-to-face interviews (Harzing *et al.*, 2013). Each method has its own advantages and disadvantages related to feasibility, cost, time and response rates that can be achieved, but these advantages and disadvantages vary across national contexts. Insisting on identical data collection procedures across countries risks not attaining the desired sample of respondents or a reasonable response rate – or indeed it may simply make the study unachievable. A workable response is more important than ensuring identical collection techniques. For example, Wang and Rafiq (2014) demonstrate how data collection techniques had to differ between China

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and the UK in their comparative study of product innovation due to reliability issues: in China, there was a need to conduct telephone interviews rather than mailing questionnaires, although the latter was considered appropriate in the UK.

For the Cranet research project, we encourage country partners to use methods that are most appropriate in their location. For example, in the USA and UK, we use online data collection, while in other countries paper-based surveys, or (as in Greece) researchers sitting with participants to complete the survey, are more appropriate. Rather than standardize data collection methods, Cranet sets criteria for the data collected, and asks each country partner to complete a questionnaire explaining the details of their data collection so that we can explore any potential bias relating to the methods used (see Appendix 1 in the online Supporting Information). The information from these questionnaires is often reported in the methodology section of publications and used in the interpretation of findings, for example, to identify any possible biases or limitations in relation to the results.

Collecting data over time adds an additional layer of complexity. The form of longitudinal data collected varies with purpose. Assessing changes in individual perceptions of a management practice will ideally be carried out with panel data from individuals, while assessing changes in the prevalence of certain policies or practices requires sequential collection of comparable data. An advantage of panel data is that it allows for the identification of actual changes in the use of practices over time in the same organizations. However, such data are not without their methodological challenges (Certo and Semadeni, 2006). A practical disadvantage with panel data is that although it shows us what is happening within a particular set of organizations, we cannot see more structural changes that might be happening within a whole sector or economy.

In Cranet research, for example, if we had used panel data over the 30-year period covered by our survey, we would not have accounted for the trend of manufacturing organizations making way for service firms as the dominant source of economic growth in many developed economies, or for the rise of technology firms. In other words, if we had not changed our sample of organizations, the evidence would have become increasingly less representative of the economy as a whole in many of the countries that we were studying. Since representativeness and relevance is the goal of the Cranet cross-national research, it was more appropriate that the research should focus on trend data that are collected 'on the same set of variables for (and perhaps at) two or more periods to include non-identical but comparable cases in each period' (Menard, 2007, pp. 2–3). This repeated cross-sectional form of non-cohort longitudinal analysis is 'well-suited to examine change in values of variables in relationships' (Menard, 2007, p. 6).

It is also important in longitudinal or trend surveys to identify an appropriate time for distributing the survey. Harzing *et al.* (2013) highlight that variations in the time that surveys are distributed may affect comparability of responses. Scholars have also noted that time lags are often inevitable in the case of international comparative research (Edwards, Marginson and Ferner, 2013; Schnabel, Zagelmayer and Kohaut, 2006). We have noted in our Cranet research a tension between restricting the time period in which country data can be collected and the desire to include as many countries as possible and to develop representative samples. Do you exclude a major economy from your research because they have missed the deadline? This is, of course, a question that can only be answered in the context of the particular study in question. The reality that has emerged over three decades of experience with Cranet is that an extended period of time (e.g. 2 years) is required to coordinate data collection from multiple countries, as not all data collection activities can or will happen simultaneously. Again, we suggest that the adoption of ideal, rigid time periods might not be the best approach in large-scale, multi-country surveys, depending on the variables being measured and how quickly they change over time.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider the implications of, for example, a 2-year time difference in collection of data. In line with Edwards, Marginson and Ferner (2013), the Cranet survey focuses on activities that are not likely to change quickly. However, it is important to realize that sudden economic changes (such as those associated with the 2008 global economic crisis) might affect results if data are collected on either side of these events. Researchers can examine any concerns related to temporal differences in data collection periods by comparing the results collected at different times and by controlling for

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these time differences (Edwards, Marginson and Ferner, 2013).

Conclusions

Our key message is that international comparative management research needs to balance the standard requirements of rigorous demands regarding sample representativeness with the need for local contextuality and sample relevance. As researchers collaborating across countries, we need to balance the ability to produce standardized research that fits a formula for 'best practice' with the need to adapt how we go about understanding local issues and contexts and ensuring sufficient and appropriate data collection in each country under investigation (Lazarova, Morley and Tyson, 2008). Adopting both an emic and etic approach (Berry, 1989) to research design is therefore both necessary and, of course, a challenge.

In this methodological contribution, we have called attention to the central challenge of sample selection and data collection when researchers collaborate to collect comparative data across several countries over multiple points in time. In this effort, we have argued that there is a need to consider not only the rigour or representativeness of sampling, but also the relevance of the sample within each country, and we have highlighted some of the tensions that arise between these two objectives. We argue that sample relevance (i.e. collecting data from respondents relevant to the research question in the focal countries) should be a primary concern alongside rigour when designing cross-national comparative management studies. Thus, in raising this relevance criterion, we focus on the need to contextualize samples to the country and the study, rather than focusing simply on rigour (i.e. absolute adherence to methodological standards) at the expense of understanding the local population or local prevailing circumstances.

In making these arguments, we have drawn on examples from the Cranet research. Most of these challenges relate to a core dialectical tension, namely the need to be both sufficiently consistent in approach so as to ensure sample representativeness and comparability, while also taking into account the need to be relevant to the local context in each of the countries included. The challenge of managing this balance is one that must inevitably engage all scholars involved in large-scale, multi-time-point, cross-national management studies. Responding with a methodological pragmatism vested in striking an appropriate balance between the rigour necessary in order to ensure the collection of usable, valid and reliable comparative data on the one hand, and what is contextually feasible given the unique preferred methodological traditions on the other, offers, in our experience, the best prospect of realizing and sustaining the research endeavour.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Supplementary Material

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