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CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR CONDUCTING INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

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Cross-cultural management research is a valuable but complex and error-prone endeavor. The main challenges the authors encountered in conducting a multinational research project included nonequivalence of key concepts, cultural stereotypes, assumptions of universality, and difficulties in comparative analysis. The authors identified crucial questions that need to be asked at each stage of the research for it to be both reliable and valid. These questions address such pitfalls as the importance of focusing on culture as an independent variable, the cultural dynamics of the research team, and the importance of translation and of finding culturally equivalent definitions of key concepts.

Keywords: *comparative public management; cross-cultural research; translation issues; comparative methodology; international research*

In the field of public administration, attention to practices in different parts of the world has not been the norm. Unlike political science, which has developed a well-established subfield of comparative politics, comparative study has never held a central place in public administration research or teaching (Baker, 1994). American public administration, in particular, has been characterized by its ethnocentrism.

Comparative administration developed after World War II when postwar reconstruction assistance led to exposure to foreign administrative procedures (Heady, 1966). Robert Dahl was one of the first scholars to note that comparisons had been largely ignored in public administration up to this point. In a 1947 article for *Public Administration Review*, he insisted on the

fact that “as long as the study of public administration is not comparative, claims for ‘a science of public administration’ sound rather hollow” (Dahl, 1947, p. 8). During the cold war, concern about the spread of communism was a trigger for some important comparative works.¹ Both comparative politics and administration gained significance in their potential to contribute to containment of Soviet ideologies and totalitarian administrations. Comparative administration subsequently peaked in the early 1970s, when the American Society for Public Administration merged the Comparative Administration Group with the International Committee to create the Section on International and Comparative Administration.²

After the burst of interest in the 1960s and 1970s, comparative administration has maintained only a modest, slightly decreasing presence. Riggs (1991) reflected on this trend by saying,

I continue to think that the underlying reason for this decline has been our own ethnocentrism in continuing to view American public administration, and the truly exceptional solutions we have found for coping with our peculiarly presidentialist problems, as a general paradigm for the field as a whole. (p. 475)

Attempts to revive the field of comparative public administration have been made more recently by Baker (1994) with the edited volume *Comparative Public Management*, Chandler (2000) with *Comparative Public Administration*, Heady (2000) with the sixth edition of *Public Administration: A Comparative Perspective*, and Jreisat (2002) with *Comparative Public Administration and Policy*. In these readers, most of the authors acknowledged the lack of truly comparative studies in the field and called for a renewed effort. As Jreisat noted, “Although scholars continuously produce comparative studies of public and private administrations within single countries, much less research has been conducted on cross-cultural levels” (p. 4). There are exceptions, such as Mouritzen and Svava’s (2002) comparative study of politicians and administrators in the local governments of 14 western countries, but such novel and comprehensive public administration studies are scarce.

Indeed, the comparative administration literature typically contains two types of international research that are quite limited in their goals: (a) parochial studies, that is, research conducted in one country by native researchers where culture is not considered a variable and where the research findings are assumed to be universal, applying to all industrialized countries; and (b) polycentric studies, that is, studies that describe management and

organizational practices in individual foreign countries. In these, the focus of attention is on how things work in these particular settings, with no attempt at universality or reproduction in another environment.

Truly comparative research that seeks to identify both similarities and differences in the practices of public administration across nations is rare. Riggs (1991) contends that the goal of comparative public administration research should be to identify and compare the problems encountered by different governments in attempting to implement a particular solution or service while paying attention to the specific cultural context in which it takes place. This is often difficult to achieve, as there is a lack of consensus on the importance of cultural influence on administration. Research in business management pioneered by Hofstede (1980) emphasized culture as an important variable in determining managerial attitudes and behavior. However, as Jreisat (2002) remarked, in the field of public administration, "there is no agreement on the importance or on the method of measurement of cultural influence on organization and management" (p. 5).

Comparative, cross-cultural research may be sparse in public administration, and in other fields, because it presents significant challenges to both the researcher and the research consumer. Distinguishing factors that are universal from those that are context specific is a difficult task. Some portion of the behavior in a particular setting may be explained by extrinsic, or universal, factors, while at the same time intrinsic factors play a role in explanation that is not generalizable (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). The quality of the research design and attention to the cultural dimensions of the phenomenon studied will determine the accuracy of comparison. Adler (1983) distinguished five fundamental difficulties in conducting comparative research whether in sociology, business, political science, or public administration: (a) how to define culture, (b) how to recognize a studied phenomenon as culturally specific, (c) how to avoid cultural bias, (d) how to design a methodology that is equivalent across cultures, and (e) how to avoid misinterpretation of results. In addition, she mentioned problems that are present at each stage of the research project such as "selecting the topic, sampling, translation, measurement, instrumentation, administration of the research, data analysis, and interpretation" (p. 36).

These difficulties also present themselves to readers of cross-cultural research. Research consumers seldom have a clear understanding of the various contexts for a cross-cultural study or an appreciation of the difficulties and possible errors introduced by research design choices, translation, and interpretation.

ONE EXPERIENCE: THE NEW MODELS OF COLLABORATION PROJECT

This article describes a recent comparative research study that focused on collaboration across multiple organizations as a method of delivering government services. We briefly review the study, which included case studies in Canada, the United States, and Europe. We then reflect on the challenges of conducting this comparative public management research and offer recommendations for designing and executing future studies of this kind.

The study focused on public management practices that embody collaboration between one government organization and other organizations in the public, private, or nonprofit sectors. In the last decade, governments in both industrialized and developing countries have sought to deliver public services through such new working relationships. These public service delivery innovations are often enabled by the use of advanced information technology (IT). These new methods of collaboration are important not only because they address sectors of activity that were previously the exclusive domain of government but also because they involve new kinds of relationships within and across sectors. In these service delivery collaborations, a formal agreement among the parties about purpose and responsibilities is only a starting point. The relationships go beyond traditional interagency agreements and standard contracting arrangements and tend to evolve into more organic forms that share both tangible and intangible risks, benefits, and resources (Préfontaine, Ricard, & Sicotte, 2001).

In addition, those collaborations that reach outside government embody a worldwide trend toward a progressive disengagement of government in certain areas of service delivery and a greater reliance on private or nonprofit sector expertise. These approaches are illustrations of the phenomenon that Milward and Provan (2000) call the "hollow state," the situation in which government provides the framework or shell of authority for public services but does not have the capacity to fully implement or operate programs on its own. Instead, implementation responsibility is shared or delegated to other sectors in society.

The search for more effective methods of delivering public services has taken place in many countries. In recent decades, Great Britain and France opted to delegate many services previously provided by the government (e.g., management of natural resources, transportation, and communication) to the private sector. The Thatcher government implemented a vast privatization program in the early 1980s in the belief that private management could be more efficient. The privatization program contained two parts

consisting in the sale of publicly owned small companies and denationalization of the large public sector monopolies in the utilities, communication (British Telecom), and railway industries. In 1993, the British government launched the Private Finance Initiative to speed up and facilitate public-private partnerships for infrastructure projects (Préfontaine et al., 2000).

France began to experiment with privatization in the 1980s under Prime Minister Jacques Chirac. Immediately after forming the new government, Chirac initiated a 5-year plan for privatization that concerned 65 enterprises. The plan involved the possibility of shareholding by small investors, mostly employees, promoting a form of popular capitalism. The first privatization effort sold part of the petroleum-petrochemical conglomerate Elf-Aquitaine, although the government retained 50% of the shares. Later, financial conglomerates such as Paribas, Société Générale, and Compagnie Générale de Suez and utility companies such as Compagnie Générale d'Électricité were put on the market.

Historically, the United States took a less radical approach to these ideas. Following a period of modest increases in outsourcing and subcontracting with the private sector, the U.S. government introduced policies designed to downsize the public work force, make it more accountable, and improve its responsiveness and efficiency. These included the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act, the 1996 Information Technology Management Reform Act, and the National Performance Review (later the National Partnership for Reinvention) under the Clinton presidency. As it sought models capable of higher performance, the American government looked to both internal reforms and its relationship with the private and nonprofit sectors. Early efforts focused on procurement reform and led to the introduction of more flexible purchasing and negotiating models that promote greater private sector involvement in decision making and pay for performance based on results-oriented agreements. At the same time, federal government agencies were encouraged to develop new strategies and relationships within government to address performance improvements. These involved multiagency consortia such as the Federal Geographic Data Clearinghouse and efforts to improve intergovernmental functions across federal, state, and local levels.

Similarly, in recent years, Canada has departed from a more conservative approach to one that strongly encourages government agencies to collaborate to provide integrated services that better respond to citizen and business needs (Government of Canada, 1999). To achieve this goal, Canadian federal agencies and provinces have begun to experiment broadly with new interorganizational relationships within government and between government and private and nonprofit organizations.

Scholars have begun to document and study these new organizational relationships for carrying out public service functions. In the early 1990s, Osborne and Gaebler (1992) compared the energy and pervasiveness of the reinventing government phenomena to the Progressive Era or the New Deal but noted that this time the reform took place not only in the United States but worldwide:

Today the world of government is once again in great flux. The emergence of a post-industrial, knowledge-based, global economy has undermined old realities throughout the world, creating wonderful opportunities and frightening problems. Governments large and small, American and foreign, federal, state, and local began to respond. (p. XVI)

Although Osborne and Gaebler acknowledged the existence of a global trend in reinventing government, they were criticized for not offering any international examples (Heeks, 1999). Recently, other researchers tried to fill this gap. For example, the book *Reinventing Government in the Information Age: International Practices in IT-Enabled Public Sector Reform* includes contributed cases from Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America (Heeks, 1999). In another effort to study international instances of collaboration, the Economist Intelligence Unit and Anderson Consulting (1999) published a study on the status of public-private partnerships and other forms of networked organizations worldwide.

In 1999, the G8 Government Online Group undertook a multinational study of electronic democracy, citing examples from local, regional, and national governments of the United States, Canada, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Iceland, Sweden, Finland, and the United Kingdom. This study provided insights into how public agencies use IT to deliver more efficient citizen services and emphasized the need to share these experiences (Clift & Osberg, 1999). These studies complement the annual work done at the Global Forums for Re-inventing Government that started in 1999. The international forums gather high-ranking representatives from government, the private sector, and significant international organizations. Partner institutions include the United Nations Development Program, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Capital Development Fund. The fourth annual forum held in 2003 in Morocco focused on partnerships between government and other organizations to achieve democracy and development.

Although all of these studies, publications, and conferences looked at the experiences of several countries, most followed the idiographic or polycentric research model—the study of multiple individual national experiences with no attempt to discover their universal elements.

The study reported here took the forgoing efforts one step further. Its goal was not only to report the experiences of collaboration efforts in various countries but to do so using a consistent method of data collection and description and, most important, to compare these efforts to understand the fundamental elements that transcend national boundaries. The objective was to undertake more than a series of polycentric studies where trends in several countries are described. Instead, we designed a comparative study where we could address the extent to which a universal understanding of the benefits and barriers to collaboration exists and try to determine the extent to which models, methods, and experiences can be shared.

THE RESEARCH TEAMS AND SPONSORS

The research project started at the initiative of le Centre Francophone d'Informatisation des Organisations (CEFRIO), a research center in the Province of Quebec, Canada, and the Center for Technology in Government (CTG) in the United States. The two organizations signed a cooperative research agreement in August 1998 and launched *New Models*, their first joint project, the following year. After creating a research design and constructing a case study framework and data collection guidelines, the two major research centers recruited additional partners to conduct the study in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Three different funding agencies were involved. In Canada, the study was sponsored by the contributions of 18 public and private sector CEFRIO partners. The U.S. portion of the study was sponsored by the Digital Government Program of the National Science Foundation. In Europe, the Cellule Interfacultaire Technology Assessment sponsored two case studies, one in Belgium and one in Germany. Table 1 presents the research institutions that participated in the project.

The research collaborators, located in four different countries, managed the project and their respective responsibilities through a series of face-to-face meetings, interim teleconferences, and electronic data exchanges. CEFRIO and CTG, the senior research partners, met more often and together ensured that the research design and methodology were consistently applied by all the participating investigators.

THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Researchers at the two main organizations designed a conceptual model that covers macro-, meso-, and microcomponents of the collaboration projects that were to be studied (Préfontaine et al., 2001). This model (presented in simplified form in Figure 1) represents influential factors at

TABLE 1
Research Partners

United States
 Center for Technology in Government, University at Albany, State University of New York
 University of Maryland, Baltimore County
 Indiana University

Canada
 Centre Francophone d'Informatisation des Organisations
 Université du Québec à Montréal
 University of New Brunswick
 École Nationale d'Administration Publique
 École des Hautes Études Commerciales
 École Polytechnique de Montréal

Europe
 Cellule Interfacultaire Technology Assessment, Belgium
 University of Bremen, Germany

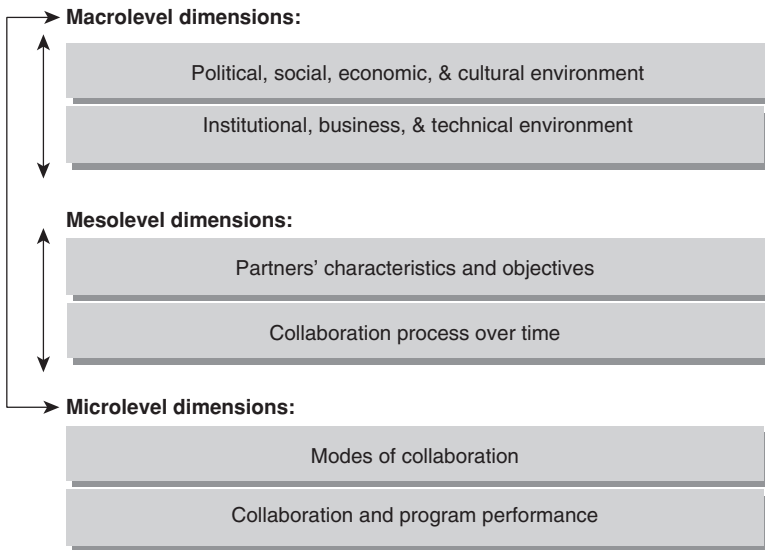


Figure 1: Simplified Conceptual Model

these three different levels and the ways in which the dimensions influence one another. The model also comprises a time dimension as it takes into consideration the different stages of the collaboration process and

accounts for development over time. The model guided data collection in all the cases. As described below, each dimension represents a number of specific variables that were either directly observable or discernible through interviews with the participants in each case.

The first two dimensions document the macroenvironment. Earlier studies of multiorganizational projects show that the variability and variety of these environments are significant factors in determining the focus and limits of technology-supported collaborations (Dawes & Pardo, 2002; Dawes, Pardo, Connelly, Green, & McInerney, 1997). To evaluate the possibility of transferring successful experiences among countries, it was necessary to identify country-specific political, social, economic, and cultural factors (elements of Dimension 1) that have an impact on the collaboration process or use of IT (Clift & Osberg, 1999; Lubatkin, Calori, Very, & Veiga, 1999). Similarly, the institutional (generally legal), business (economic), and technological environments needed to be considered.

At the mesolevel, characteristics and objectives or motivations of the different participants in the projects and the collaboration-building process were studied. Participation in cooperative projects is usually motivated by the need to secure greater control of or access to necessary resources or to establish favorable exchange relationships (Ouchi, 1980; Williamson, 1991). However, cooperation remains an admittedly difficult process in most settings (McCaffrey, Faerman, & Hart, 1995), and the conflicts that result affect the way in which the participants design and carry out their relationships. The collaboration-building process per se, from inception to implementation, was therefore also observed. The research literature suggests that specific success factors can be identified at each stage of the collaboration process. This includes such factors as trust (Gulati, 1995; Landsbergen & Wolken, 1998; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994), leadership (Trice & Beyer, 1993), the presence of a champion, and the support of top management (Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1992; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995; Weiss, 1987).

At the microlevel, we examined the structure and day-to-day operation of the collaboration. Some were highly structured with clearly assigned roles, others adopted a more informal structure with roles evolving as conditions changed. Collaboration methods (including the different governance schemes adopted), the nature of risks and benefits, the distribution of authority and control, resource sharing, and interorganizational management of the collaboration process were all studied. We expected the governance scheme to determine the power structure, the relationships among partners, the participation of stakeholders (Hill & Hellriegel, 1994), and the overall success of the collaboration process (DeHaven-Smith & Wodraska, 1996; Lambright, 1997; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998; Simonin, 1997).

Finally, we assessed the performance of the collaboration project in terms of the project itself and the service delivery program it supports. DeLone and McLean (1992) identified six measures of information system success: system quality, information quality, use, user satisfaction, individual impact, and organizational impact. Pitt, Watson, and Kavan (1995) added service quality. We looked in our analysis for these performance factors and for differences between initial expectations and eventual perceptions of service performance (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990).

THE CASE STUDIES

The research partners elected to use the case study method to capture the structural, organizational, and political complexities that accompany collaboration projects and that, most likely, are culture specific. For cases to be included in the project, they had to have reached an operational stage and fit our definition of collaboration: "A reciprocal and voluntary agreement between two or more distinct public sector agencies, or between public and private or nonprofit entities, to deliver government services." In general, the following characteristics are present in each collaboration project selected:

- A minimum of two distinct organizations
- A formal agreement about roles and responsibilities
- A common objective, activity, or project aimed at the delivery of a public service
- The sharing or allocation of risks, benefits, and resources—both tangible and intangible

Although the cases shared the characteristics noted above, they also represented three common types of collaborations: public-public (or intra-governmental), public-private, and public-nonprofit collaborations. Table 2 provides a brief presentation and summary of all the cases studies.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data for each case were collected through two methods. Interviews with the main participants in each collaboration project constituted the main method of data collection. For each case, researchers conducted semistructured interviews with 8 to 12 knowledgeable participants. These include initiators, sponsors, executive champions, project leaders, and staff responsible

TABLE 2
Cases in the Study

<i>Project</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Focus</i>
United States		
Access Indiana	public-private	Public access to state government information and transactions
FirstGov.gov	public-private	Public access to federal government information
IRS e-file	public-private-nonprofit	Filing of personal income tax returns
NYS Geographic Information System Coordination Program	public-public-nonprofit-private	Data sharing and development of expertise
Canada		
Ambassadeur	public-NGO	Citizen Internet exposure and training program in rural areas
BonjourQuebec.com	public-private	Quebec tourist information and transactions portal
Cadastre Quebec	public-private	Real property tax mapping
E-Commerce for Occupational Health & Safety Claims	public-private	Claims processing for workers compensation
InfoEntrepreneurs.org	public-NGO	Extranet linking local chambers of commerce
Initiative Service Canada	public-public	Online government information to citizens
One-Stop Business Registration	public-NGO	Unique kiosk allowing electronic filling of all forms required to open a new business
Ontario Business Connect	public-private	Unique kiosk of government services to businesses
Partners in Change	public-private	IT system to manage welfare benefits delivery
Europe		
Bremen online	public-private	Public access to city information and transactions
Hotjob.com	public-private	Job offers portal

NOTE: IRS = Internal Revenue Service; NYS = New York State; NGO = nongovernmental organization; IT = information technology.

for different aspects of the project, such as technology infrastructure, marketing, legal affairs, or human resources. The interview protocol contained questions related to project initiation (history, scope, management), to the technology solution used, to the collaboration process (participants, negotiation, objectives, conflicts), and to the performance of the project. The second method of data collection was document analysis, including a review of laws, regulations, contracts, project plans, and other written materials pertaining to each collaboration project and its context. These secondary data from legal documents and official or published sources described the environmental factors and also provided a way to compare the official record of collaboration against the opinions that were gathered in the interviews. Data were coded and analyzed using a qualitative data analysis software package (Atlas TI). A coding scheme keyed to the specific variables that make up each dimension of the conceptual model was applied. Each case narrative was written following a standard format.

MAIN CHALLENGES OF CONDUCTING A COMPARATIVE PUBLIC MANAGEMENT STUDY

In this section, we reflect on the main challenges we encountered in conducting this ambitious public management research project across two continents and four countries, involving nearly a dozen researchers speaking three different languages and coming from different academic and research institutions.

ACCOUNTING FOR CULTURAL FACTORS

One problem in our preliminary model was the way it accounted for cultural factors. Although the main elements of the political, social, and economic environment and the next level of environmental factors (legal, technological, and business domain) were captured by our design, the general political philosophy and the cultural elements that underlie them were not easily discerned. One reason for this lack is that our model deals with culture only at the macrolevel (i.e., in Dimension 1) and does not lead to significant understanding of its effects on the other dimensions at the meso- and microlevels. More important, culture is not only contextual but behavioral. Its influence is felt in every aspect of the projects, embedded in the way people think, perceive, and act. This observation follows the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (aka Whorfian hypothesis) that says that two groups using different linguistic systems, English and French for most of our

cases, will have different modes of thinking and will perceive things differently. In essence, the two groups will have different worldviews:

The "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Sapir 1929/1958 p. 69)

The original research design called for data about the variables in Dimension 1 to be drawn exclusively from secondary sources rather than from the open-ended interviews. Although political, economic, and social factors do seem to be adequately described in secondary sources, we found that culture is best captured in the interactions with participants and then in the discussions among the investigators. We identified important cultural factors having an impact on the different projects taking place in the United States and Quebec by comparing responses to the same interview questions. As described below, these cultural differences appeared to be much deeper and more pervasive than expected.

CONCEPTUAL EQUIVALENCE OF KEY MANAGEMENT TERMS

Early in our research, we realized that key concepts associated with management had different meanings in our different cultures. For example, leadership is viewed differently in the cases we studied in the United States and Quebec. Although leadership was identified as a critical success factor in both countries, what respondents meant by leadership differed greatly. The Americans referred to a personal style, skill, or ability to trigger trust among participants, whereas the Quebec respondents referred to the authority that a leader has to impose a set of rules and his or her ability to make sure all participants follow them strictly. Key individual actors emerged in the U.S. cases whose personal commitment, situational assumption of responsibility, and volunteerism were constantly noted as critical to the development and outcomes of the projects regardless of their formal positions. By contrast, the leadership elements of the Quebec cases were very much tied to the effective execution of the formal roles that various people played.

Interestingly, the French language has no word for leadership. This may well reflect the tradition of French administration in which leadership is embedded in the authority of a formal position rather than associated with personal action. If we believe the Whorfian hypothesis to be valid, we may say that the French-speaking group has a distinct

understanding of the concept of leadership, as the language itself does not contemplate leadership as a quality independent from formal position.

Another important concept that carried different meanings in the two languages is stakeholder. In both the United States and Quebec, the concept of stakeholders included direct participants in the projects (e.g., the various public agencies involved and any private or nonprofit partners). However, in the United States, stakeholders also included a variety of indirect participants, including customers or clients, funders, advocacy organizations, policy makers, the media, and others. In the Quebec cases, stakeholders were understood to be only those who had a direct role in the project. In the American cases, stakeholders included anyone who cared about and could influence the existence or results of a project. Citizens are clearly one of the central stakeholders in any American government service project. In Quebec, by contrast, clients or citizens are considered a separate group and are not included under the category of stakeholders.

If we look at the direct translation of *stakeholder* in French, we encounter the expression *parties prenantes*, which literally means “parties taking part in.” From the literal translation, it is easy to see how the conceptual meaning of the two translations differs.

SKILLS OF THE TRANSLATOR

Another methodological problem in a cross-national study is translation. As Temple (1997) stressed, translation “is not merely a technical matter that has little bearing on the outcome. It is of epistemological consequence as it influences what is found” (p. 614). To find conceptual equivalence of specific terms, a translator requires not only knowledge of the two languages to be translated but also a deep understanding of the cultures involved. Equally important, the translator needs to be knowledgeable about the field or discipline of the research. Without this knowledge, grave errors and misinterpretation can occur. However, it is often difficult to find a translator who possesses the language skills, cultural understanding, and disciplinary knowledge necessary to produce an accurate translation of the research material. For example, the first English translations of our data collection protocols and literature reviews (which were produced initially in French) were made by an independent translator who was not involved in the research project and not expert in the organizational or public administration literature. As a result, many misinterpretations

were subsequently discovered and corrected by a member of the American research team who is native French, fluent in English, and familiar with the research material and the complexities of the languages. The fact that a backup translator was available proved very useful.

Translation problems continued to arise as we applied a coding scheme originally developed in French. We carefully documented these problems and how they were solved to increase the validity of our study. In another instance, the German case (Bremen online) was written in English by German researchers. When it was reviewed by the American researchers, many aspects needed discussion and clarification to transpose it into more idiomatic English for its final version. As Birbili (2000) emphasized, "Reports of research which involves the use of more than one language need to include a thorough description of the translation-related issues, problems and decisions involved in the different stages of the research process" (p. 4).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MULTINATIONAL PUBLIC MANAGEMENT RESEARCH PROJECTS

As we have seen, cross-cultural management research is a complex and error-prone endeavor. The culturally specific and the universal may be blurred if not enough attention is paid to accuracy and equivalence of the research design and methodology. The research team is likely to make errors that may affect the validity of the study. Table 3 presents the main issues we encountered and the sources of risk for those errors that we identified.

To avoid these errors, we have identified several issues that need to be considered before undertaking an international research project. At each stage of the research—research design, execution, and analysis—crucial questions need to be asked for the cross-cultural research endeavor to be both reliable and valid. Table 4 presents the main issues to consider and questions to ask at each stage of the multinational research project.

RESEARCH DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

The design process for a cross-cultural study should involve careful reflection on at least four topics.

Type of cross-cultural research to be undertaken. Researchers should define the type of cross-cultural research that they intend to conduct.

TABLE 3
Common Errors in Cross-Cultural Research

<i>Type of Error</i>	<i>Sources of Risk of Occurrence</i>
Nonequivalence of key concepts	Literal translation Culture captured only or mainly from documentary sources
Cultural stereotype	Unicultural research team Polycentric study design
Universality assumption	Ethnocentric study Consideration of culture as a constant and exogenous variable
Poor comparative analysis	Different agendas of the research teams Pressure to publish or deliver different kinds of results

Threshold questions such as, "Is the focus of the research on finding differences, similarities, or both?" will have to be answered in the design stage. As mentioned earlier, cross-cultural management research studies can be classified into several categories. Adler (1983) offered one useful typology of cross-cultural studies. She distinguished among four broad categories of cross-cultural management studies: (a) parochial, (b) ethnocentric, (c) polycentric, and (d) comparative research. Each type of study starts with different assumptions and calls for different methodologies. By explicitly choosing the type of study to be undertaken, the researchers are better able to reflect on the nature of the project and to specify the research questions that can be addressed.

Selection of countries. The researchers should have a clear rationale for the countries selected for the research project. Why were particular countries selected? In what ways are they comparable? According to Sartori (1994),

If two entities are similar in everything, they are the same entity, if they are dissimilar in everything, they are not comparable. The comparisons in which we should engage lay in between these two extremes whose attributes are in part shared (similar) and in part non-shared (incomparable). (p. 17)

The danger is to select countries because of convenience, proximity, or familiarity, which does not constitute a valid rationale (Oyen, 1990). Instead, "The selection of countries should be based on theoretical

TABLE 4
Issues to Consider for Designing and Conducting
Cross-Cultural Research

<i>Issues to Consider</i>	<i>Specific Questions to Ask</i>
Research design	
Type of cross-cultural research	What type of cross-cultural management research will be undertaken? Parochial, ethnocentric, polycentric, or comparative?
Selection of countries	In which countries will the research take place? What is the rationale for choosing these countries?
Number of cultures and languages involved	How many cultures are we accounting for? What is the main language spoken in each country? Are there regional dialects? Are there multiple official languages?
Culture as a variable	How is culture to be defined for purposes of the study? How will cultural data be captured? Secondary sources, interviews, observations, other?
Execution	
Composition of the research team	Will the investigators come from different countries or cultures or from one? Will all countries of interest be represented on the research team? Will bicultural or multicultural researchers be included? How will members of the team work together?
Conceptual equivalence	What are the core concepts of the study and how are they defined? Is the translation of these key terms literal or conceptual?
Research instruments	Will the design and administration of the research instruments produce equivalent results across countries?
Selection of translators	Does the translator have strong knowledge of the languages and cultures involved? How well does the translator understand the field under study?
Analysis	
Culturally specific versus universal findings	Which behaviors, constraints, or incentives observed are culturally specific? Which appear to be universal?

TABLE 4 (continued)

<i>Issues to Consider</i>	<i>Specific Questions to Ask</i>
Cross-country analysis	What is the nature of the cross-country analysis? Juxtaposition of national analyses, emphasis on differences, emphasis on similarities? If there are multiple sponsors, what kinds of products are expected and when?

dimensions of the research, not on the opportunistic availability of access to particular cultures” (Adler, 1983, p. 38). The countries in our study were similar along important dimensions. For example, all are advanced Western democracies with market economies and equivalent levels of technological development. Important differences were expected in such areas as the management style, policy focus, and scale of the collaboration projects.

Cultures and languages involved. In addition to considering the number of cultures involved in the research project, researchers should also pay attention to subcultures and regional languages or dialects. Cavusgil and Das (1997) found in cross-cultural management studies “very little attention being paid to cross-cultural methodology at the within-country level. Distinct and very palpable differences exist at the cultural level across different parts and communities in highly heterogeneous countries” (p. 83). In our research study, as an example, we had to acknowledge and account for the fact that Canada has two distinct cultures: Francophone Quebec and Anglophone Canada. The two regions have different languages, traditions, and lifestyles.

Accounting for culture. Lastly, researchers should think about how they are going to define and collect data about culture. Tayeb (2001) contended that “culture is almost impossible to observe and ‘measure’” with precision, so it is important to develop a working definition that can be explained and used in a practical way. Some of the problems in accounting for culture include the danger of oversimplification by relying too heavily on a few polarizing dimensions, the interaction of cultural factors with noncultural ones such as occupation or race, and (in management research especially) the interacting influences of national culture and organizational culture. Our experience bears out these problems.

Depending on their working definition of culture, researchers can determine how they will attempt to capture data about this variable. We defined culture as consisting of several specific characteristics taken from

Hofstede's (1998) model. Hofstede analyzed a major survey on employees' attitudes and values conducted by IBM in all its subsidiaries in 40 countries. His analysis revealed four dimensions that are different among countries and characterize culture: (a) power distance, which we interpreted as distance between the citizen and government (real or perceived); (b) individualism-collectivism, which is related to social norms and which Hofstede (1994) defined as "the degree to which people in a country have learned to act as individuals rather than as members of a cohesive group" (p. 13); (c) masculinity-femininity, or "the degree to which 'masculine' values like assertiveness, performance, success and competition prevail over 'feminine' values like the quality of life, maintaining warm personal relationships, service, caring, and solidarity" (p. 13); and (d) uncertainty avoidance, that is, the extent to which a society tries to deal with uncertainty about the future. The fourth dimension is particularly relevant for public administration as "the stronger a culture's tendency to avoid uncertainty, the greater its need for rules" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 147). Later, after conducting another cross-cultural survey including China, Hofstede (2001) added a fifth dimension: (e) long-term versus short-term orientation, or the extent to which Confucian virtues associated with forward thinking such as persistence and thrift are emphasized over virtues associated with the present and the past such as respect for tradition.

These cultural dimensions are particularly relevant to our study of projects necessitating collaboration among the participants (i.e., requiring them to overcome individualism) and involving new technology that implies a certain risk (i.e., requiring them to overcome uncertainty avoidance). For example, Steensma, Marino, Weaver, and Dickson (2000), in their study of technology alliances in five countries, concluded that "a resource dependence explanation for technology alliance formation is strongest for societies that maintain cooperative values and avoid uncertainty" (p. 951). However, as noted above, we found data collection about these variables particularly challenging. Because culture is mainly behavioral, it is not easily understood from analysis of secondary sources. A key lesson, then, is to define cultural variables in ways that can be observed.

EXECUTION

Execution is particularly complex in cross-cultural studies. We highlight three issues.

Composition of the research team. The first decision in this area is whether to use a unicultural or multicultural research team. Risks and

errors can result from either choice. The researchers might hold preconceived stereotypes about the culture to be studied that interfere with the scientific investigation. This is particularly problematic because the risk of stereotyping runs in both directions. Stereotypes can be based on inaccurate or incomplete knowledge about a foreign culture. They can also flow from implicit familiarity and lack of reflection about one's own culture.

Many elements of culture, as we have seen, cannot readily be captured from secondary source documentation nor directly the subject of a particular question in an interview. As participants in a project may be less able to identify cultural biases than an outsider who finds them unfamiliar, we found great value in having a multinational team working on the cases. The comparative approach helps identify the cultural context of each project by highlighting idiosyncrasies. Therefore, it was crucial that members of the different national research teams work together, especially when we came to the cross-cases analyses. In hindsight, we suspect it might have been even more useful, for example, for the American team to do a few interviews for a Canadian case and vice versa to see if some major cultural differences strike the interviewers. At the same time, having each national team do the interviews in their own country had its own value. The fact that cases were prepared by a native researcher helped assure understanding of the context, nature, and goals of the projects. To get the best results, we now believe that interviews should be done by the native teams but should include an outside researcher who would conduct or observe one or two interviews in each case and reflect on any cultural differences noted.

In addition, some research on cross-cultural management studies recommends the use of bicultural researchers who have knowledge of two different languages and cultures. One member of the American team fit this definition, and her involvement was very helpful in our study. The inclusion of multicultural researchers on a team "helps increase functional equivalence by reducing the chances of intercultural misunderstandings or passive submission to the chief investigator's paradigm" (Cavusgil & Das, 1997, p. 74).

Our experience leads us to conclude that multinational research teams are better suited to cross-cultural management studies, despite the fact that they are more difficult to recruit, organize, and manage. A team composed of researchers from all the countries involved in the research study brings expertise on the macroenvironments in which the research project takes place, and this minimizes errors of interpretation. Such a team has the natural benefit of being a ready-made (albeit small) multinational audience for the results, one that can be critical and probe the findings for weaknesses, omissions, and questionable assumptions. This works most easily,

of course, when the investigators share working knowledge of one language for these discussions (in our case, this was English). Nevertheless, they must guard against letting that one language and its underlying cultural framework dominate the expression of their conclusions.

Conceptual equivalence. A second consideration is the necessity of having conceptual equivalence in the case studies to ensure the validity of the study. Comparative scholars assert that “in order to compare something across systems, it is necessary to have confidence that the components and their properties being compared are the same or indicate something equivalent” (Teune, 1990, p. 54). In our study, we encountered many problems with equivalence across the cases that were exacerbated by translation. Management terms such as *leader* and *stakeholder* did not communicate the same meaning when they were translated literally between French and English. In addition to the outright lack of exact counterpart words, literal translation misses the nuances of language. Birbili (2000) offers a useful suggestion for dealing with this type of problem in a multicultural study: “On those occasions where two languages do not offer direct lexical equivalence . . . one’s efforts should be directed towards obtaining conceptual equivalence without concern for lexical comparability” (p. 2). For example, to adequately capture leadership in the American sense, we opted to translate leadership into French with the definition “ability to bring participants together to share a common vision” rather than seeking a literal translation of the word. In dealing with the idea of stakeholders, we found we needed to differentiate between direct participants and others who have an interest in a project to make valid comparisons among the cases. We then proceeded to review other key concepts in our model to be certain that we were not using literal translations where we should have been seeking conceptual equivalents.

Selection of translators. Careful selection of translators is the final issue in this category. The translator should be fluent in the two languages and knowledgeable about the cultures involved. This means not only being bilingual but, ideally, having spent significant time living in the two cultures. In addition, the translator should be very familiar with the field of the research study. Translators often specialize in and are more familiar with the vocabulary and concepts of particular fields. Therefore, it is important to select a translator with the appropriate specialization to avoid errors in translation that stem from specialized vocabulary or specialized use of otherwise common terms. We disagree with the standard recommendation to use a second translator to back translate into the original language as a

quality check. This method is not only more expensive, it also does not catch these kinds of errors and may actually compound them. The translation is also generally better when it is done in the translator's native language (Adler, 1983). Therefore, where translations are from English to French, a native French speaker is a better choice of translator than is a native English speaker.

ANALYSIS

Culturally specific versus universal findings. The conceptual model must allow the researchers to distinguish behavior, constraints, structures, or other variables that are culturally specific from those that are universal. Two kinds of errors can happen in multinational studies that blur the distinction between these two types of findings. The first is cultural stereotype, which can be found mainly in polycentric studies where the focus is on differing attitudes and practices in several countries regarding a particular issue. When the emphasis is placed on differences rather than similarities, there is a tendency to exaggerate. Similarly, the universality assumption is encountered in ethnographic studies where a research study conducted in country A is reproduced in country B. Here, the focus is on similarities in the different countries, and, in the search for common attributes, too little attention may be paid to conceptual equivalence. Our team had to overcome a tendency to assume too much about the effects of political, economic, and technological similarity among the countries studied. Comparative studies that focus on both similarities and differences have more of a balanced view. However, even in these studies, the risks of falling into cultural stereotyping are high when the researchers conducting the study are not collaborating with native researchers. The study may include cultural biases that are likely to influence the interpretation of the results.

Cross-national analysis. Bournois and Chevalier (1998) remarked that in a cross-cultural research project,

after so much effort [is] dedicated to data collection and analysis, there is a strong temptation to produce an international report that is only a sheer juxtaposition of national results. There is under-exploitation of results. Not enough time is taken to meet again and to discuss common or conflicting frameworks of analysis. (p. 211)

Often, in a research project conducted by a multinational group, data collection is carried out by each national team and then analyzed to first

produce separate national reports. The second stage, a cross-cultural or cross-national analysis of the results, is often a much more complicated endeavor because of the language problem and physical distance between the different research teams. Faced with the complexity of the task, investigators often neglect this part of the research, although it can constitute the most important aspect of the whole project. Consequently, truly comparative analysis is not often undertaken even though the original research design aimed at that final purpose.

Negligence of the cross-cultural analysis stage may also result from external pressures imposed on each national research team or from divergent research agendas. Whenever investigators involved in the project are working in different institutional settings, their research agendas or pressures to deliver results may vary. A research team composed of academics feels great pressure to publish scholarly articles on the research results. In a private or not-for-profit research organization, delivery of the final report to sponsors might be the top priority. Some sponsors appreciate academic productivity, others want practitioner-oriented products. These external pressures often differ in terms of intensity and timing so that cross-cultural analysis might not be possible, even if desired. Our project experienced some of these conflicts, which we addressed by identifying all the different products we were individually and collectively obliged to generate. We then handed off the various kinds of work at different times to different investigators depending on their availability and their needs to respond to particular external demands. The result was a project that moved more slowly than we would have liked and one that went through quiet periods when researchers in the different institutions were responding to their own unique demands. However, we also believe the mixture of sponsors and research specialties within the overall team (public management, business management, information policy, political science) pushed us to develop a richer understanding of the material, even though this depended on infrequent face-to-face conversations.

CONCLUSION

Conducting a public management research project that involves the collaboration of researchers and sponsors from different countries poses particular challenges. Given increasing interest in international public management experiences, we need to learn how to study and evaluate them more effectively. Our aim in writing this article about our

experiences in one multinational public management research project is twofold. First, we believe these studies are important to the field of public management; we want to encourage more of them by sharing with interested researchers the kinds of issues they might face and the possible approaches they might take to resolve them. In this respect, we have addressed such pitfalls as the importance of focusing on culture itself as an independent variable, the cultural dynamics of the research team, and the importance of translation and of finding culturally equivalent definitions of key concepts. In addition, we wish to raise awareness among readers and consumers of international research literature about the same issues. If we want to be able to apply lessons learned in one country to another or to discern the universal elements of public management that apply across nations and cultures, we must be certain that this kind of research reflects careful attention at each stage to the issues. Without this attention, we, at best, limit real comparison or, worse, threaten overall validity.

NOTES

1. For example, see Rostow (1960) or Almond and Coleman (1960).
2. International administration is distinguished from comparative administration as its focus is agencies that promote international or regional cooperation and not national administrations.

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