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**Doing research in Russia and Vietnam: some lessons from the field**

**Abstract:**

This article deals with how to approach field research in the area of International Business in two countries that have not been very explored up to now: Russia and Vietnam. Based on the experience of two researchers who used qualitative methods for their research, the paper shows how they were forced to adapt their approach to be effective in each context. To do so, the paper resumes a series of practical points, in particular about the interviews, notably how to get in touch with the information owners, how to obtain an interview, how to obtain the cooperation of the interviewee, how to deal with cultural differences, etc. The paper ends with a general conclusion on the constraints of time management and gives some comparative elements about the two countries treated.

**Keywords:** international business research, culture, ethnography, qualitative personal interviews, Russia, Vietnam

Empirical research in international affairs has increased over the last twenty years (Watson, 2012; d'Iribarne et al., 2020; Barmeyer, Bausch & Mayrhofer, 2021). The anthropological approach allows for capturing reality (Sciberras, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988, 1998; Wright, 1994; Ybema et al., 2009) while effectively complementing the information stated by sedentary researchers (Emmet, 1991). While this approach is encouraged, most of the literature describing qualitative methods, notably in English (Alexandre, 2013; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Gheondea-Eladi, 2014), even those covering international trade specifically (Hair Jr. et al., 2011), outline a standard technique that should be applicable in all conditions and territories, which is criticized widely by non-native English speakers (Usunier, 2010; Dumez, 2016; d'Iribarne et al., 2020; Horn, Lecomte and Tietze, 2020). Based on a positivistic posture, they often insist on the importance of keeping the same method everywhere, at the risk of breaking internal consistency and undermining the epistemological and methodological validity of the research (Creswell, 2009).

However, all ethnographic research is a social process (Hyman et al., 1975) that connects researchers to their research fields and, more precisely, to the interlocutors from whom they hope to recover information (Ybema et al., 2009). The way two individuals relate and exchange depends greatly on their cultural affiliation, whether national, regional, organizational or personal (Bochner, 1982; Yousfi, 2013; d'Iribarne et al., 2020; Barmeyer, Bausch & Mayrhofer, 2021). It can even be considered that, in some cases, the researcher intervening in the organization becomes a creator of a specific culture (Fletcher, 2002). Clearly, these considerations lead us to perceive the researchers' adaptation to their environments as necessary for the success of any empirical research project. So, this paper emerged from a discussion between two fellow researchers who had worked in two culturally distant fields, Russia and Vietnam, and another colleague with a long experience in cross-cultural management issues.

If the collection of information proved particularly demanding in both cases, it seemed to us that there were many points in common between the two contexts, particularly the difficulties or constraints encountered, perhaps specific to their socio-historical environment. The data mobilized here were compiled from field reports on interviews conducted between March 2011 and December 2014 for Vietnam and between February 2011 and October 2018 for Russia. The paper will be structured around the difficulties met in each situation; the approach will be descriptive and practical, helping researchers who may be faced with the same requirements to allow them to step back and test some approaches they may not have thought of. In other words, the idea behind our reflection is to identify obstacles that are unlikely to be encountered in the Western context and to provide solutions to overcome them.<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. Some difficulties encountered in field research among unfamiliar countries

When we look at the methods used in anthropological research, we notice that interviews play a fundamental role. Empirical research consists in exchanging, most often face-to-face, with people considered to be able to provide valuable information (the knowers) (Macdonald and Hellgren, 2004). For some time, and even more so since the COVID-19 crisis, these interviews have often been conducted online. We will return to this development in the case of the two countries concerned.

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<sup>1</sup> At this precise moment, if the question arises as to the interest of the information collected on Russia, a country that will not be the same once the war is over, the information concerning it can nevertheless be useful when it is necessary to rebuild relations with its inhabitants, or even to understand what is happening there.

In this particular research context, what are the various difficulties that the researcher may face in his or her search for information? The first obstacle lies in the way of accessing the organization and the person holding the information (Macdonald and Hellgren, 2004), bearing in mind that our interlocutors are most often managers (Welch et al., 2002). Once the people have been identified and the first contacts made, it is not always easy to obtain an interview and move on to its concrete implementation. In particular, it is necessary to be able to travel to meet the person and get them to confide in you to give you the information you need. "It is first and foremost an encounter between the researcher and the participant, as well as with the context in which the interview takes place." (Bissonnette, 2019).

Conducting an interview is not a scientific process (Cawthorne, 2001), and the researcher's role is to try to get the best out of each situation. Sometimes, the difficulty may come from potential interviewees not being necessarily aware of the academic process (Macdonald & Hellgren, 2004, p. 16) due to a gap between companies and the academic world or simply a lack of conviction of its interest.

At all levels of this obstacle course, there is also the problem of the information obtained and its use. Some researchers have, for example, emphasized the effects of the hostage syndrome, which can lead the investigator to adopt without criticism the positions of a manager (Fletcher, 2002) or of the company concerned. We can even ask ourselves whether this syndrome might not apply to researchers whose cultural background influences their judgment. On the other hand, interviews produced a great deal of detailed information. At some point, it was necessary to ensure that this information was understood, that important points were not overlooked, that cultural differences were taken into account, and that information from interviews was reconciled with that from other data sources. Finally, researchers must ask themselves how many interviews they must conduct

(Pettigrew, 1990) in order for their data to be credible, without forgetting that they must project themselves into the future by estimating the time needed to carry them out (Mintzberg et al., 1976) and to monitor the saturation point and at which moment it has been reached (Dumez, 2016).

Our inventory mentioned above will serve as a guideline for describing the difficulties encountered in the two countries and influenced by their own cultures: Vietnam and Russia.

## 2. The cases of Russia and Vietnam: Lessons from these research fields

The accessibility of information is a major problem for any researcher. If this task is relatively difficult in France and many countries, it is often more difficult in countries like Russia and Vietnam.

### 2.1 The necessity of a personal recommendation

First of all, it is difficult to imagine a positive reception of your request for an interview if you do not have a form of recommendation. Being recommended means the potential interviewer has full confidence in the person acting as an intermediary. Here we can already eliminate recommendations from certain distrusted company departments, such as the human resources department. In addition, to have real weight, the recommendation should be formalized, in writing or verbally. A simple statement such as "I am writing to you from X" would probably not be taken seriously.

The intervention of the person who made the recommendation can become more obvious when the interviewee asks the intermediary to participate in the interview, as has happened several times in Russia. In this case, it often happened that the person concerned answered some questions instead of the central interlocutor, making the analysis of the information much more difficult.

The recommendation is not always sufficient to obtain an interview. We have seen that the interlocutors sought were generally leaders. In the context of Russia and Vietnam, it is difficult to set up a long and deep interview with them. However, the fact that the researcher is a foreigner can create surprise and, in many cases, facilitate contact.

In addition, in Vietnam, as in Russia, researchers have become accustomed to distributing questionnaires remotely. While this anonymous approach, similar to official entities, has spread rapidly, the anthropological method based on semi-structured interviews is still not widespread. For this reason, it is often necessary to describe the process and explain what you intend to do with the information collected. In Russia, the blockage was very strong because we were trying to study a case of failure. More than in Europe, the approach seemed absurd: several interlocutors we met questioned the interest of analyzing this failure, advising us to forget about it instead and move on to something else.

So, while the recommendation is certainly helpful, it is not sufficient. In Vietnam and Russia, in particular, one of the authors saw that it was extremely difficult to contact the person concerned and obtain an appointment. One problem is that managers do not always respond to emails, and above all, they find it difficult to block an interview date more than a week in advance.

In the research conducted between 2011 and 2018, the managers always limited themselves to indicating their agreement, accompanied by a note like "Contact me when you are in Moscow", without mentioning any phone number. Having a contact number is key to making any interview attempt a reality in Russian. If the researcher does not have the person's mobile number, she or he must not hesitate to use other solutions to get it: search on Google, ask the person who recommends her or him, contact colleagues of this person or managers of partner or competitor companies.

Once in possession of the number, everything becomes possible, with probably more ease than in the French context. More than e-mails or other written material, the oral relationship is the best way to get an interview. Nobody in Russia will be surprised to receive a call from a complete stranger. On the contrary, it is proof of a certain ingenuity.

Among all the attempts one of the authors tried in his research, the most effective move was the following: ask the intermediary to contact the person you want to meet, write to him/her to explain the outline of your project, and ask for an appointment, send him/her a text message a week before the approximate date you want to meet to let him/her know that you are going to call him/her, and then start making more calls at the beginning of the week to get an appointment. It is always best to text him with the agreed-upon date right after you hang up, as well as on the morning of the meeting.

Using a cell phone is also very useful for getting the address of the place where the interview will take place. In more than 90% of the interviews with Russians, the interviews did not occur in the company but in a restaurant or café, sometimes at the airport or in a park. Most meetings also took place outside normal working hours, late at night, or on Sundays. Although we are unsure why this is the case, we can suggest several hypotheses. First, the security control procedures, most often carried out by independent companies, are long and tedious. It may be simpler to reserve them for purely professional cases.

## 2.2 Select appropriate spaces for interviews

Secondly, it is probably easier to deal with certain issues in an environment different from that of work. Russians, in their huge country, spend a lot of time on the move. It is often easier to arrange a late meeting somewhere on the way home. Some of the elements mentioned above for Russia are



also found in Vietnam. For example, in Vietnam, it seems preferable that the meeting is not known by the management and be kept as confidential as possible. It is illustrated by the fact that many interviewees reject any audio recording.

In Russia, in such a vast country where everyone seems to have adopted an opportunistic approach, there can be many surprises too. For example, a person who asked you to contact him or her when you arrived in Moscow may be on the move to Togliatti or St. Petersburg the day you arrive. That's why planning longer stays (two or three weeks) and multiplying alternative plans is better. If you have planned a busy schedule, your interlocutors will not be surprised if you have to change an appointment at the last moment. Similarly, in Russia, it is important to insist and impose yourself. Your contact may tell you he or she is unavailable on the interview day. Do not be satisfied with this information! Show your disappointment and negotiate a later arrival or another appointment.

### 2.3 The necessity to plan a period of special presentation before the interview

Attending an interview is not always enough to get interesting information. In the French context, the researcher usually reiterates the broad outlines of the research before moving on to the planned questions. The various methods advise the researcher to remain as neutral as possible in asking the questions. In our experience, this is impossible in countries like Russia or Vietnam. It is essential to plan a period of preparation that aims to prove your competence and legitimacy on the subject and to create a certain closeness with the interviewee. In the Vietnam context, perhaps more than in the Russian context, this period is also used to demonstrate that the information revealed will remain confidential (Nguyen, 2006).

This phase can last ten to fifteen minutes. The researcher must explain why he or she started this project, shows his or her knowledge of the subject, and mentions the names of a few people he or

she knows. During an interview with the Russian subsidiary of a German company, one of the authors gave an example of what can happen if the researcher does not take the time to build trust with his or her interviewee. The person he met answered like the director of his company would have done at a formal briefing. The interview was very quick, ending about 20 minutes after the start.

#### 2.4 Establishing trust: A key issue

In both countries, once trust is established, it is always possible to go very far; the two researchers were indeed able to see certain interlocutors several times, with a total duration of six hours in Vietnam and four and a half hours in Russia (in the case of this research, it was not useful to go further). One should never be forgotten that in both countries, interpersonal relations are marked by systems of goodwill exchange: this is the "Guangxi" in China (Chi & Seock-Jin, 2018), or the "Quan hệ" in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2015) or the "Blat" in Russia (Ledeneva, 1998). Therefore, it is essential to remain attentive to the demands of one's interlocutors to maintain the quality of the relationship.

In Vietnam, for example, one of the authors was asked several times for advice on the schooling of the family's children, whereas in Russia, the other author was asked to react to the company's plan to set up in Europe. In the same vein, the researcher in Russia tested an approach that incorporated the cultural habit of exchanging small gifts in the Russian context. At the end of the interview, he offered several times a box of chocolate or French cookies to some interlocutors, a modest gift considering the estimated income of these people. The reaction was always very positive: a surprise mixed with an expression of joy. Each time, this allowed us to re-launch the discussion for about twenty minutes and to tackle more difficult points.

The need to create trust with the interlocutor leads us to wonder about the effectiveness of remote interviews. It may be possible to achieve the same result, but if in doubt, we advise avoiding this choice at the beginning of a research project, when every piece of information is essential. Although our experience remains limited in this respect, we have noticed that the few interviews conducted at a distance lasted less time than those conducted in person: 25 to 35 minutes compared to 60 to 70 minutes.

### 2.5 Be prepared to lower productivity during the process

We want to conclude our remarks with a fundamental point for any researcher working in this type of context: the productivity of the process. In the two countries, and for different reasons, the number of useful interviews carried out during, for example, a period of one month is lower than what we were used to in France. In the case of Vietnam, the main reason was the slowness of the process, as the period needed to build trust is generally longer than in the Russian context. In addition, one of the authors had the impression, in the Vietnamese context, that it was necessary to conduct several successive interviews to obtain quantity and quality information. In the Russian context, the problems were more related to the difficulty of obtaining appointments, the distances, and the dispersion of the interview locations.

When we look at the number of interviews carried out in these two countries, we arrive at an average of seven to eight interviews per week, or one and a half per day, a figure that seems low compared to what happens in research carried out in a Western context, notably the French one.

### Conclusion

As we can see, there are some lessons taught by unfamiliar fields. In conclusion, we would like to

point out that there are many similarities between Vietnam and Russia, which confirms the impression we got during the two researchers' conversations with the third author. There are, however, some interesting differences. The Vietnamese situation is characterized by a greater distrust of how information might be used (so it is advised not to ask to record and to avoid too much visible note-taking). On the other hand, even if it is not known, research work is admired in Vietnam, which is far from the case in Russia. Moreover, there seems to be a fundamental difference in the attitude to adopt during the identification and contact phase, with the Russian terrain requiring greater determination and assertiveness.

These few reflections, the fruit of our experience of research in two different contexts: Russia and Vietnam, show the need to adapt the research method to the local context to take into account how the researcher's approach may be perceived and integrated by the cultural patterns characteristic of each country in terms of interpersonal relations. At last, as we have seen, one must be aware that these fields may be more difficult than French and Western researchers are used to and that the interview process will take longer than in a French or Western context for the reasons we explained above. It gives a strong illustration of what this Euram workshop is about.

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