

Therapeutin Oder Spionin? Qualitative Interviews With German Senior Managers

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Abstract: Despite the fact that qualitative interviews are reputed to be an effective method of obtaining data from organizational elites, studies are concurrent on a number of obstacles which surround the interviewing of senior management. Problem areas flagged by the literature include issues of access and suspicion towards the interviewer as an outsider. Welch et al (2002) posit that, to successfully engage with executives in an interview setting, the researcher needs to adopt a position between two roles: *therapist* and *spy*. This paper presents experiences with interviewing senior-level HR managers in German organizations. The author attempted to overcome some of the established barriers to interviewing internationals and organizational elites. However, as the paper argues, unique working experience collected in Germany gave the researcher insights into how to interact with senior German managers. In particular, the researcher drew on a previous role as a language trainer to create a method of engaging managers. The semi-structured interviews that followed were free from barriers and resulted in the gathering of rich data which enabled the researcher to better understand processes, networks and relationships.

Keywords: qualitative interviews, organizational elites, cross-cultural research, business management research

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that qualitative interviews are reputed to be an effective method of obtaining data from organizational elites (for example, senior managers) because of the scope of qualitative research collect detail and to explore nuances (Welch et al, 2002), studies are concurrent on a number of obstacles which surround the interviewing of senior management. Issues surrounding the complexity of interviewing senior management may be further compounded if the organizational elites to be interviewed are from a different cultural background than that of the interviewer. Furthermore, if the language in which the interviews are conducted is a foreign language for the interviewer, how might this impact on the extent to which rich data may be collected? These are pertinent questions for the study of research methods as the growth of global business has led to an increase in cross-border research (Welch and Piekkari, 2006) and, additionally, there has been an internationalization of higher education, with a substantial increase in the number of international students conducting postgraduate and doctoral research outside their home countries (Altbach and Knight, 2007).

Welch et al (2002) posit that, to successfully engage with executives in an interview setting, the researcher needs to adopt a position between two roles, *therapist* and *spy*. But is this really necessary? This paper suggests evidence to the contrary. Having engaged with the literature on interviewing internationals and organisational elites, the author attempted to overcome some of the established barriers when interviewing senior-level HR managers in German organisations, by

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drawing on past work experiences, including as a foreign language trainer. The semi-structured interview approach used was free from barriers and resulted in the gathering of rich data which enabled the researcher to better understand the processes, networks and relationships.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section draws upon the academic literature, in order to discuss the barriers to the qualitative interviewing organisational elites and cross-cultural research, as well as recommendations to overcoming these hurdles. Section three describes the methodology of the author's research and provides an overview of the author's background. The fourth section of the paper explores the results of the author's methodology and shows how her method was effective in overcoming the expected limitations to senior management interviews. The final section draws this paper to a conclusion.

2. Researching business elites using qualitative methods

Qualitative interviewing provides an effective method of collecting data from business elites because it allows for rich, in-depth conversations (Welch et al, 2002; Yeung, 1995). In senior management interviews, this level of detail can be useful, for example, because it allows for a consideration of how management perspectives have shaped the organisation, particularly if management interviews are followed by interviews with other organisational members. Yet, according to the literature, there are number of barriers surrounding the use of qualitative interviews with senior management. These hurdles relate to overcoming barriers to access, dealing with imbalances in the power relationship between the researcher and the researched and the willingness of the respondent to speak openly. The next subsection explores these issues in more detail.

2.1 Barriers to interviewing business elites

If exchange relationships are based on unequal distributions of power, then the interview relationship is no exception. The relationship of the researcher and the researched must be carefully considered; yet, as Kvale (2006) indicates, the question of power is frequently omitted within the literature on qualitative research. The power dynamics inherent in the interview process need to be examined from both sides because the balance of power can easily be greater on one side than the other. To a certain extent this distribution of power depends upon the identities of the researcher and the respondent (Welch *et al*, 2002). Some interviewees may be intimidated by being interviewed by an academic (Welch *et al*, 2002); nonetheless, organisational elites hold power themselves and, therefore, are different to other samples discussed in the research methods literature.

Examining an unequal distribution of power from the interviewer-interviewee side, interviewers should be aware of the risk of dominating the interview and leading the respondent to answer in a particular way that does not necessarily correspond to their true feelings. The *social desirability effect* may cause respondents to provide answers which, instead of reflecting the interviewee's true perspective, relate to what they think the interviewer would want to hear and/or would place them in a positive light (Bryman and Bell, 2003).

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Burman (1997) suggests that interviewers may utilise their status to gain trust and to display an empathy with the respondent, suggesting that interviewers have the capacity to exploit their position in an interview and dominate the process, or, as Mauthner *et al* (2002) refer to it, to *fake friendships*. From the interviewee-interviewer perspective, a power shift in favour of the interviewee can occur from the beginning when the researcher struggles to gain access to the person because of their position (Welch *et al*, 2002). Gaining access to elites, who will already have busy schedules, may be a time-consuming and arduous process and these individuals may be reluctant to make time for appointment (Yeung, 1995).

Once the locus of power has been biased in favour of the researched, it is difficult to correct the imbalance. The researcher may deliberately hold back on any problematic and potentially sensitive questions in order to keep the interview going (Cochrane, 1998). Since interviews usually take place on the territory of the interviewees, the interviewee might use their own space to present themselves in a position of dominance (Fitz and Halpin, 1995). Interviewees may believe themselves to have superior knowledge and dominate the interviews, challenging the research and the actions of the researcher (Welch *et al*, 2002). This may have the effect of interrupting the interview to such an extent that little useful data can be collected. Welch *et al* (2002) posit that age difference can also affect the power locus within the interviewing relationship. In their research, older managerial respondents were sometimes found to adopt paternal behaviour towards younger researchers; others showed irritation at being asked what they perceived to be irrelevant questions (Welch *et al*, 2002).

A further barrier to effective interviewing is that of culture and language. The native language may be important in gaining access to respondents and to establishing trust (see e.g., Andrews 1995). Moreover, being interviewed in a foreign language can have a negative impact on the ability of the interviewee to express him or herself fully, as well as to feel comfortable and to open up to the researcher (Tsang, 1998). Yet, knowledge of the language is not enough because linguistic command is only one aspect of the interview (Briggs, 1986). Additionally, researchers need to be aware of other forms of communication within interviews, including non-verbal communication, which may differ between cultures (ref), and interviewing practices which may not be appropriate within cultures other than the interviewers' own (Briggs, 1986). Therefore, it is the interplay between language and culture that arguably creates the greatest barrier.

One significant area related to culture is the issue of stereotypes which figures largely within the corporate world as elsewhere in society (Cooper and Kirkauldy, 1995). In the case of German managers, Cooper and Kirkauldy's (1995) study of managerial stereotypes indicated that "German managers were perceived by their British counterparts to be more hardworking, that is, more

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industrious, meticulous, structured and workaholic” (p.4). Avoiding stereotypes is part of the researcher’s remit in avoiding bias.

As Welch et al (2002) indicate, international business is made complex because of cultural issues. Culture impacts on organisations in various ways including - to borrow from Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) cultural dimension framework – status and hierarchy, attitudes to risk, collectivism and paternalism versus individualism, masculine and feminine society and social structures. These cultural variations shape national institutions, which, in turn, impact on employment practices, including reward, selection, training, employee representation and voice. Hence, the researcher needs to be aware of, and familiar with, these differences within organisational policies and practices, as well as varying attitudes to work and work organisation.

2.2 Closing barriers between the researcher and the researched: Recommendations from the literature

Having presented some of the barriers to interviewing organisational elites and international research, this section sets out recommendations from the literature on how to close or minimise these barriers. In particular, this section will introduce Welch *et al*’s (2002) *therapist and spy* metaphor, which gives this paper its title.

The first barrier presented in the previous section referred to overcoming inequality in the power relationship between the researcher and the researched. The literature suggests that, beginning with the initial stage of gaining access, the researcher needs to present him or herself as a professional, in order to reduce any potential gaps between the academic and the business world (Welch *et al*, 2002). Whilst academic and linguistic competencies may figure largely in terms of gaining access, Welch *et al* (2002) argue that it is the narrowing of the gap between academics and manager that requires attention.

In terms of overcoming the hurdles surrounding culture and language, Andrews (1995) recommends that, wherever possible, the native language of the interviewee should be used. If the researcher is able to demonstrate competency in the native tongue of his or her research subject(s), this may prove beneficial in gaining access and creating trust and rapport (Andrews, 1995). Tsang (1998) argues that being interviewed in the mother tongue creates a more conducive atmosphere to expression and the building up of rapport. If the researcher does not speak the native language of his or her respondents, then an interpreter may be engaged. Yet, as indicated by Usunier (1998), the interpreter represents an outside to the research process that “produces noise, artificiality and an absence of tempo” (p. 92). Having said this, linguistic competence on the part of the researcher cannot compensate for a lack of familiarity with the *communicative norms* of society (Briggs, 1986), which are underpinned by cultural differences. To remove or minimise cultural bias, interviews should be conducted neutrally (Holtstein and Gubrium, 1995). A pilot study is helpful in identifying initial problems and/or mistakes within interview questions.

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In cases where interpreters for interviewing across cultures may be required, some researchers will engage native speakers to transcribe, proofread or analyse interview recordings or notes (Welch and Piekkari, 2006). This could lead to questions about validity (Kapborg and Berterö, 2002), as well as issues surrounding who is the *insider* and who is the *outsider* (Welch and Piekkari, 2006). The interviewer might be perceived as an insider to the research and to the interview, whereas the translator might perceive him or herself to be the *insider* because their native speaker fluency allows them to pick up on nuances of expression, tone and body language which an *outsider* to the culture might overlook.

Welch *et al* (2002) argue that to be successful in gaining access to organisational elites and maintaining openness, the researcher needs to adopt a position somewhere between a *therapist* and a *spy*. Being familiar with the company, its problems and having done some background work on the person to be interviewed, endows the researcher with a greater *insider* status; however, Welch *et al* (2002) suggest that being too well-informed runs a risk of the researcher appearing to be a *spy* and, thus, an *outsider* once more. Managers may feel threatened by this kind of researcher and be reluctant to reveal information in case it leads to their organisation being reported in a negative light.

Instead, a researcher should present him or herself as knowledgeable about the sector, its policies and practices, and willing to listen. According to Welch *et al* (2002), organisational elites may welcome the opportunity to speak to the interviewer about current debates because they frequently do not have enough time to read the literature themselves. The researcher becomes a vehicle for the discussion and clarification of ideas managers might have for the organisation. In this way, the researcher adopts a *therapist* role. It should be clarified, nonetheless, that Welch *et al's* (2002) metaphorical use of *therapist*, within the context of interviewing organisational elites differs from interview scenarios where there might be a “proximity of intimate personal research interviews to therapeutic interviews” (Kvale, 2006: 482).

To conclude this section, Welch *et al* (2002) posit taking the middle ground between a *therapist* and a *spy* is the most preferable course of action. To achieve this, researchers should take on the role of an *outsider* who is respected in his or her own academic field, is interested in the organisation, knows something about the sector and is ready to listen and act as a sounding board for the manager being interviewed (Welch *et al*, 2002).

3. The qualitative interview process – methods and results

This section outlines how the researcher approached the data collection, as well as providing contextual information about the background of the author.

3.1 Overcoming barriers to interaction

The importance of understanding culture has already been discussed. German society is perceived as placing emphasis on punctuality, attention to detail and reliability (Aspe, 2012; Berger; 2012) and these cultural expectations are also to be noted within a business context. The researcher had spent a considerable period of time in Germany prior to beginning the research project. Prior to entering academia, the author had worked for over a decade as an English language instructor. In Germany, she had prepared managers for international assignments and, consequently, the researcher had developed some useful methods of breaking the ice with German managers, establishing her credentials, facilitating and eliciting; in other words, overcoming issues which are akin to the barriers for qualitative researchers interviewing organisational elites. She had also held a managerial post in Germany, which gave insights into business protocol. Based at two well-known research institutions in Germany during fieldwork, the researcher profited from these affiliations.

Strong organisational skills, as well as good time management, were deemed to be essential to communicate. The researcher sought to create a first impression of professionalism, as well as to respect the time set aside by the managers for the interviews. The first step to creating a professional first impression was, therefore, through the initial contact, where managers were contacted formally by letter, followed up by a telephone call.

The strategy for organising the semi-structured interviews was, therefore, based on techniques developed by the researcher throughout her experience as an EFL instructor. As a language teacher, the researcher had constantly set up oral exercises with her students, whereby they were encouraged to engage with the words or phrases cue cards. This approach minimised the input of the trainer, whilst increasing the output of the students. Hence, it was decided to follow a similar approach in the interviews because this would remove the researcher from taking the lead in the interview and the depth and detail associated with qualitative interviewing.

Interviews typically began rather formally, with the researcher conscious of power metaphors (room layout, distance between interviewer and interviewee). Initial small talk assured the respondents that the interviewer was capable of conducting the interview in the German language. This was integral to building up rapport (Oakley, 1981). After this, the cards which would structure the interviews were laid out upon the table.

Each interview consisted of twelve themes. The themes for discussion were presented to the interviewees on pieces of red cardboard (see Figure 1 for an example). In this way, respondents could immediately see the selected topics for the interviews with the understanding that nothing was hidden from them, including how the session would proceed.

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The use of cue cards in qualitative interviewing is well documented (see, for example, Block and Erskine 2012; Willis, 2005). Visual aids make it easier for respondents to express or understand ideas. Red cardboard was chosen deliberately for making the topic cards. This was based on the researcher's own classroom experiences that, when faced with a choice of different coloured cards, students (both male and female and of all ages) tended to choose red cards over cards of any other colour. This is backed up, to some extent, by research into adult learning environments and the impact of colour on the learning experience. According to this research, adult learners are encouraged to be more engaged with an activity if warm colours, such as red, are used (Burrus, 2001). Consequently, the researcher decided that, based on research by Hawkins (1991, cited in Burrus, 2001) into the role of colour in stimulating adults and past experience of using red cardboard, bringing themes printed on to red card into the interview-setting might enhance the willingness of the respondents to engage with the task.



Figure 1: Example of how topic cards were presented to the respondents

After the cards had been laid out, the interviewer summarised the themes and indicated to the respondents it was acceptable to omit any topics with they wished not to engage, such as any not pertinent to the organisation.

The participants were then encouraged to sort through the cards and to direct the flow and emphasis of the interview themselves by prioritising the topics. In the next step, the manager was invited to comment on why he or she had placed this card at the head of the pile and why this issue was of the greatest significance for the organisation. In this way, the interviewer only needed to speak when it was time to move to a new topic and/or to ask for clarification. The ratio of participation within these interviewer/manager dialogues was 25/75.

The interview ended when the topics on the cards had all been worked through and a final open question from the researcher had been asked: "do you have anything to add? Something that we haven't discussed but you think is important?" This final question sometimes meant that the tape recorder was switched off because the respondent wanted to speak confidentially. After the

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interviews, the data was transcribed in German. Pertinent passages from the interviewees were later translated into English to be used as quotations when the research was written up.

3.2 Results of the qualitative interviewing method used

Many managers were initially uneasy about being interviewed. This was evident in their speech and in their body language. Some had brought the original contact letter with them with accompanying notes jotted on the page as a form of preparation. However, once the cards were presented and they were able to see the topics clearly presented in front of them from the outset, most managers relaxed visibly. Managers were then encouraged to handle the cards themselves and to prioritise the themes.

From the layout of the cards, the extent to which some issues were more important than others could be recognised, as well as how one issue impacted upon another. All respondents used the relevant cards to create structure to their interview and used each subsequent card as a signpost to mark the beginning of one topic and the ending of another.

In many cases, the interviewees engaged very quickly with cards and began to place the cards at right angles to another on the table. In this way, the respondents made connections between the topics identified corresponding issues. The incorporation of language classroom techniques, designed to elicit information and encourage dialogue, were, therefore, successfully employed, in order to encourage interviewees to speak freely and candidly, without the need for constant reinforcement from the interviewer. In particular, the success of the strategy seemed to mirror the effects of using cue cards in the language classroom; the cards broke down some of the barriers which occur naturally within an interview when the researcher and the researched meet for the first time. If a respondent felt uncomfortable with a particular topic, he or she could move on immediately to the next one.

Furthermore, physically handling the topics seemed to facilitate the thought process. Having their hands occupied, appeared to enable the participants to become more deeply engaged with the interview process and disengaged from their workplace environment. Some managers rearranged the cards to form a kind of map, which outlined the casual patterns of change within the company (see Figure 2 for an example). They drew on this map to discuss change and continuity within their organisation and to orient themselves through the process.

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Figure 2: Example of how respondents interacted with topic cards

Interviews were intended to last about forty-five minutes, but the majority lasted between one and a half hours and three hours. This suggests that managers reacted positively to the interview process. But more significantly, a quarter of the respondents, themselves, remarked favourably on the interview strategy. Comments from the participants included that they had found the interview to be well-structured, interviewee-friendly and enjoyable. This feedback was especially surprising given the negative picture surrounding the interviewing of organisational elites presented by the literature.

3.3 Discussion: The approach, contextual factors and their roles in surmounting obstacles to research

As the results of the fieldwork indicate, the researcher successfully navigated a number of the barriers suggested by the literature for interviewing organisational elites, especially those from a different culture. This section will discuss where obstacles to interviewing organisational elites were overcome and focus on how this was done.

Despite the literature identifying issues including access to elites, inequality in power relationship, as well as linguistic and cultural barriers, these did not pose problems in this research case. Significantly, some of the techniques adopted by the researcher to eliminate those barriers in qualitative research were similar to those highlighted in the literature, including linguistic competency, the use of interpreters, and, significantly, drawing on the work of Welch *et al* (2002), the stance between *therapist* and *spy*. But, as the above section has shown, special circumstances connected to the researcher were largely responsible for driving the data collection process.

As the literature demonstrates, gaining access to the right person is an initial hurdle (Welch *et al*, 2002). Through the researcher's affiliation with two prestigious research institutes, the first contact was made easily and directly and, through a carefully and correctly worded letter, followed by a telephone call. This demonstrated an appreciation and understanding of German business culture, where networks are important and contact is formal, as well as established competence in the German language.

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The follow-up phone call developed the contact by establishing a personal connection, which had important repercussions for all stages of the research process, not only the initial access phase. Here, the researcher aimed to create an *insider* identity, in order to avoid being considered a *spy*. This was achieved through a brief self-introduction and facilitated, in a number of cases, because the potential interviewees asked the researcher where she had learned to speak German. As Briggs (1996) argues, an ability to speak the language cannot compensate for not being able to pick up on other norms related to communication; hence, it was helpful to be able to emphasise that the researcher had amassed a considerable amount of time in the country. Moreover, adding that she also had worked in Germany, in a managerial capacity, demonstrated the researcher's professional credentials and affiliations with the research institutions, fits with the description of *therapist* attributes.

Once the interview was organised, and the interviewer and interviewee first met, there was a short initial period of discomfort for many respondents. Some, as already discussed, had drafted out pre-emptive responses, in order to be prepared. Thus, the several minutes spent at the outset to outline the aims of the study, discuss some ethical considerations and to explain how the interview would be structured was useful in reaffirming the objectives of the interviews and the freedom of respondents to opt out of certain questions. As established, the cue cards were partly responsible for creating an environment conducive to collecting rich data.

The classroom techniques were effective because they combined aspects which addressed the issues of power dynamics, openness and the need for clarification, whilst creating a non-threatening and, eventually, pleasant atmosphere. The secondary effect of the cue cards becoming vehicles for expressing cause and effect allowed for a hands-on approach for recipients which, again, broke down barriers.

As the literature indicates, assessing the relationship between the researcher and the researched and identifying and overcoming barriers to interviewing requires consideration of contextual factors. In this case, it is clear that special conditions existed that enabled barriers in qualitative research to be surmounted. The researcher's background meant that she had a good understanding of German cultural norms, as well as a professional grasp of the language which enabled her to transcend the many of the barriers faced by an *outsider*. These include being able to gain access, to understand how to approach German senior management, which linguistic conventions to be used, the ability to interview in the native tongue and, finally, drawing on the experiences of language teaching, how to elicit and facilitate.

To revisit Welch *et al* (2002) metaphors, as a *therapist*, the interviewer is endowed with knowledge and/or credibility within his/her field, as well as being able to offer a sympathetic ear to a stressed manager who can find an outlet for his/her workplace challenges. The therapist, thus, becomes an

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insider. The *spy*, nonetheless, is a sinister figure, who never moves beyond the periphery. In this case, it can be argued that the respondent did not appear to take on the persona of *spy* in the eyes of the respondents; yet neither did she become a *therapist*. Respondents reacted positively to the interview process and spoke candidly; whilst some managers saw the interviews as an opportunity to let off some steam about particular issues in the workplace, this appeared to have more to do with managers becoming relaxed during the use of the cue cards than perceiving the researcher in a *therapist* role. Hence, whilst the researcher may have displayed some of the characteristics of *therapist* or *spy*, the special circumstances created, in part, by her previous work experiences in Germany allowed for the collection of rich data.

4. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to outline how one case of qualitative data collection transcended some of the barriers which the literature posits surrounding the interviewing of organisational elites. There are a number of excellent recommendations made by the academic literature which should be useful in overcoming hindrances. In this case, nevertheless, it is the special circumstances related to researcher which shaped and drove the qualitative research process. As this paper argues, it was the unique combination of professional and personal background, as well as linguistic competence, that were instrumental in the success of this research. Thus, the author became neither a *Therapeutin* nor a *Spionin*.

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