3.2. Interviewing in IB, IM and CM research projects (Balázs Vaszkun)

3.2.1. Introduction to the Interview Method

The interview method is a qualitative research technique widely used across various disciplines, including the social sciences, psychology, and business research. Interviews involve direct, verbal interaction between the researcher and the participant, allowing for in-depth exploration of complex issues, personal experiences, and subjective perspectives. The method is particularly valuable when the research aims to gather detailed information that cannot be easily captured through quantitative methods such as surveys or questionnaires. Such cases include international configurations where interpreting quantitative results can be especially challenging due to cultural / geographical / national differences. Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, depending on the research objectives and the level of flexibility required (Drew, 2014; Yeung, 1995; Zhang & Guttormsen, 2016).

3.2.2. Types of Interviews

Structured Interviews

Structured interviews follow a predetermined set of questions, which are asked in the same order to all participants. This approach ensures consistency across interviews, making it easier to compare responses and identify patterns. Structured interviews are useful when the research aims to gather specific information from a large number of participants, particularly when the focus is on quantifiable data or when the research requires standardised responses (Bryman, 2016; Rashidi et al., 2014).

However, the rigidity of structured interviews can limit the depth of the data collected, as participants may not have the opportunity to elaborate on their answers or discuss topics outside the scope of the predefined questions. This limitation makes structured interviews less suitable for exploratory research where the aim is to uncover new insights or understand complex phenomena.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews combine the consistency of structured interviews with the flexibility of unstructured interviews. The researcher prepares a list of key questions or topics to be covered during the interview but allows for deviations from this guide based on the participant's responses. This approach enables the researcher to explore issues in more depth while still ensuring that all relevant topics are addressed across interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful in research that seeks to understand participants' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions, as they allow for a more conversational and interactive exchange. The flexibility of this method also makes it easier to adapt the interview to the participant's cultural and contextual background, which is especially important in international management research.

Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured interviews are the most flexible and open-ended form of interviewing. In this approach, the researcher has a general topic or set of themes to discuss but does not follow a strict interview guide. Instead, the interview flows naturally, with the participant guiding the direction of the conversation. This method is particularly useful for exploratory research, where the aim is to gain a deep understanding of the participant's experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2015).

Unstructured interviews allow for rich, detailed data collection, as participants are free to discuss what they consider important. However, the lack of structure can make it challenging to compare responses across different interviews, and the data analysis process can be more time-consuming and complex.

3.2.3. The process of conducting interviews

Preparing for the Interview

Effective interviewing requires careful preparation, including defining the research objectives, selecting appropriate participants, and designing the interview guide. The researcher must have a clear understanding of the research questions and how the interview data will contribute to answering them.

Selecting participants is a critical step in the interview process. In qualitative research, participants are often selected through purposive sampling, where individuals are chosen based on their relevance to the research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In international management research, this might involve selecting participants from specific industries, cultural backgrounds, or organisational roles that are pertinent to the study's focus.

The interview guide is another essential component of preparation. Even in unstructured interviews, having a list of key themes or topics ensures that the conversation remains relevant to the research objectives. In semi-structured and structured interviews, the guide includes specific questions that will be asked of each participant. The questions should be open-ended to encourage detailed responses and should be worded in a way that is clear and culturally appropriate for the participant (Roulston, 2010).

Conducting the Interview

During the interview, the researcher must create a comfortable and trusting environment for the participant. Building rapport is crucial, as it encourages participants to share their thoughts and experiences openly. The researcher should be an active listener, paying close attention to the participant's responses and asking follow-up questions to probe deeper into relevant issues (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

In IB / IM / CM research, as we have seen before, cultural sensitivity is particularly important during the interview process. The researcher must be aware of and respect cultural norms related to communication, such as differences in verbal and non-verbal cues, expressions of hierarchy or deference, and attitudes towards discussing certain topics. This cultural awareness helps ensure that the participant feels comfortable and that the data collected is accurate and meaningful.

The interview should be recorded with the participant's consent, as this allows for accurate transcription and analysis of the data. Taking notes during the interview can also be helpful, especially for capturing non-verbal cues or contextual details that may not be evident in the audio recording.

Analysing Interview Data

The analysis of interview data typically involves transcribing the recordings, coding the data, and identifying themes or patterns. Transcription is the process of converting the audio recording into written text, which can then be systematically analysed. While transcription can be time-consuming, it is a critical step in ensuring that the analysis is based on a detailed and accurate record of the interview (Gibbs, 2018). Coding involves categorising segments of the text according to themes or concepts that are relevant to the research questions. In qualitative research, coding can be either inductive, where themes emerge from the data, or deductive, where the researcher applies a predefined coding framework based on existing theory or literature (Saldana, 2021).

Once the data is coded, the researcher can begin to identify patterns, relationships, and insights that address the research objectives. This may involve comparing responses across different participants, exploring how certain themes are expressed in different cultural contexts, or examining how the data aligns with or challenges existing theories in the field of international management.

3.2.4. Applications of interviews in international and comparative management

Interviews are a valuable research method in the field of IM/CM, where understanding the complexities of cross-cultural interactions, global business strategies, and organisational dynamics is crucial. Below are some specific use cases that illustrate how interviews are applied in international management research.

One of the primary areas where interviews are extensively used in international management is in the study of cross-cultural management. Understanding how cultural differences affect managerial practices, communication styles, leadership behaviours, and employee expectations is critical for multinational corporations (MNCs) operating across diverse regions (Singh et al., 2017).

For example, interviews can be used to explore how managers from different cultural backgrounds perceive and implement leadership practices (Vaszkun et al., 2022). A study by House et al. (2014) as part of the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness) project used interviews to examine cultural variations in leadership styles across different countries. The interviews revealed significant differences in how leadership qualities such as assertiveness, collectivism, and power distance are valued and practised in various cultural contexts.

In another study, researchers used interviews to investigate how expatriate managers adapt to the cultural environment of their host countries and how this adaptation impacts their leadership effectiveness (Tung, 1982). The interviews provided insights into the challenges expatriates face, such as cultural misunderstandings and resistance from local employees, and identified strategies that successful expatriates use to overcome these challenges.

International Human Resource Management (IHRM) is another area where interviews are frequently employed. IHRM involves managing a diverse workforce across different countries, including recruitment, training, compensation, and performance management. Interviews are particularly useful for understanding how HR practices are adapted to local cultural and legal environments and how these adaptations affect employee outcomes.

For instance, interviews can be used to explore how MNCs develop and implement global talent management strategies. Scullion and Collings (2011) used interviews with HR managers in MNCs to investigate how companies identify and develop high-potential employees for international assignments. The interviews revealed that while companies often have global talent management frameworks, these frameworks need to be flexible enough to accommodate local differences in talent availability, employee expectations, and career development practices.

Interviews are also used to examine the effectiveness of expatriate management practices. Interviews with expatriates and HR managers can provide insights into the challenges of expatriation, such as cultural adjustment, family integration, and career progression (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). These interviews can help organisations identify best practices for supporting expatriates before, during, and after their assignments, ultimately improving expatriate retention and performance.

In the context of global strategy, interviews are often used to explore how companies develop and implement strategies that balance global integration with local responsiveness. Interviews can provide rich, detailed information about the strategic decision-making processes in MNCs, including how companies identify opportunities and challenges in different markets, how they allocate resources across regions, and how they manage the tension between global standardisation and local adaptation.

For example, interviews with senior executives can reveal how MNCs approach market entry decisions, such as choosing between exporting, licensing, joint ventures, or wholly owned subsidiaries (Johanson & Vahlne, 2003). The insights gained from these interviews can help researchers understand the factors that influence strategic choices, such as market potential, competitive dynamics, and regulatory environments.

Interviews are also valuable for studying organisational change in MNCs, particularly in response to globalisation. For instance, interviews with managers and employees can be used to explore how globalisation impacts organisational structures, communication flows, and decision-making processes (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2008; Csedő, 2006). These interviews can help identify the challenges and opportunities that arise from globalisation and provide insights into how organisations can manage change effectively across different regions.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and business ethics are increasingly important topics in international management, particularly as MNCs are held to higher standards of social and environmental responsibility. Interviews are a useful method for exploring how companies develop and implement CSR strategies across different cultural and regulatory contexts.

Interviews with CSR managers can provide insights into how MNCs align their CSR initiatives with local expectations and norms (Matten & Moon, 2008). These interviews can reveal the challenges of implementing global CSR standards in regions with different legal and ethical frameworks, as well as the strategies that companies use to gain local legitimacy and stakeholder support.

Interviews can also be used to explore ethical dilemmas faced by managers in international contexts. Interviews with managers in emerging markets can provide insights into how they navigate complex ethical issues, such as corruption, labour rights, and environmental sustainability (Donaldson, 2016). These interviews can help researchers understand the factors that influence ethical decision-making in different cultural and institutional environments and identify best practices for promoting ethical behaviour in MNCs.

Innovation and knowledge transfer are critical areas of research in international management, particularly as MNCs seek to leverage global knowledge networks to drive innovation and competitive advantage (Pörzse et al., 2012; Sára et al., 2013). Interviews are often used to explore how knowledge is transferred within and between organisations in different countries, and how cultural and organisational factors influence this process (Csedő, 2023; Csedő et al., 2023).

For example, interviews with R&D managers and engineers can provide insights into the challenges of transferring knowledge across geographically dispersed teams (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). These interviews can reveal how differences in language, communication styles, and organisational cultures impact knowledge sharing and collaboration, and how companies can overcome these barriers to facilitate innovation.

Interviews are also used to study the role of subsidiary units in the innovation process. For instance, interviews with managers in MNC subsidiaries can provide insights into how subsidiaries contribute to global innovation initiatives and how they adapt global innovations to local market conditions (Birkinshaw & Hood, 1998). These interviews can help researchers understand the dynamics of innovation in MNCs and identify strategies for fostering innovation across different regions.

3.2.5. Challenges and considerations in using interviews in international and comparative management

While interviews are a powerful research method in IM/CM, they also present several challenges that researchers must address to ensure the validity and reliability of their findings.

Cultural sensitivity is a critical consideration in conducting interviews in international management research. Researchers must be aware of and respect cultural differences in communication styles, power dynamics, and social norms. For example, in some cultures, it may be considered inappropriate to challenge authority figures or to discuss certain topics openly. Researchers must navigate these cultural norms carefully to ensure that the interview is conducted in a respectful and culturally appropriate manner (Hofstede, 2002).

To enhance cultural sensitivity, researchers can engage in cultural immersion or training, consult with local experts, and use culturally adapted interview guides. Additionally, employing local interviewers who are familiar with the cultural context can help build rapport with participants and ensure that the interview is conducted in a culturally appropriate way.

Language barriers can pose significant challenges in IM/CM interviews, particularly when the researcher and participants do not share a common language. Misunderstandings or misinterpretations can occur if the interview questions are not clearly understood or if the participant's responses are not accurately translated (Brislin, 1970).

To address language barriers, researchers can use professional translators or interpreters, and they should ensure that the interview guide is translated and back-translated to maintain the accuracy of the questions (Temple & Young, 2004). Researchers should also be aware of the nuances of language, such as idiomatic expressions or cultural references, that may not translate directly across languages.

Gaining access to participants and building trust are critical challenges in international management research, particularly when interviewing high-level executives or participants in sensitive positions. Researchers must establish credibility and build rapport with participants to encourage open and honest communication. To gain access, researchers may need to leverage personal networks, obtain referrals from trusted individuals, or collaborate with local institutions that can facilitate introductions. Building trust involves being transparent about the research objectives, ensuring confidentiality, and demonstrating cultural sensitivity throughout the interview process (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

The analysis and interpretation of interview data in international management research can be challenging due to the complexity and richness of the data as well. Researchers must carefully code and categorise the data, identify patterns and themes, and interpret the findings in the context of the cultural and organisational environment. One challenge in data analysis is ensuring that the coding process is consistent and reliable, particularly when multiple researchers are involved. Researchers can use coding software or develop a coding manual to standardise the process. Additionally, researchers must be aware of their own biases and ensure that their interpretations are grounded in the data rather than influenced by preconceived notions or cultural stereotypes (Miles et al., 2014).

3.2.6. Conclusion

Interviews are a valuable and versatile research method in the field of international and comparative management, offering rich, detailed insights into the complexities of cross-cultural interactions, global business strategies, and organisational dynamics. The method's flexibility allows researchers to explore a wide range of topics, from cross-cultural management and expatriate adaptation to global strategy, CSR, and innovation.

However, conducting interviews in international management also presents significant challenges, including cultural sensitivity, language barriers, access, and data analysis. Researchers must carefully navigate these challenges to ensure that their findings are valid, reliable, and culturally appropriate.

Despite these challenges, the insights gained from interviews are invaluable for advancing our understanding of international management and for informing the practices of multinational corporations operating in an increasingly globalised world.

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