Overcoming Barriers: Qualitative Interviews With German Elites

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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. 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

Individuals in "positions of power within social or organizational systems" (Kezar, 2003:395), or organizational elites, are, therefore, often gatekeepers of information and potential sources of rich data for researchers. Yet, as the literature testifies, this group is difficult to access. Despite the fact that authors(see Morris, 2009) agree that qualitative interviews provide an effective means of obtaining data from organizational elites because of the scope of qualitative research collect detail and to explore nuances (Mason, 2002; Welch et al, 2002), studies are concurrent on the obstacles which surround the interviewing of elites. The problem may be further compounded if the organizational elites to be interviewed are from diverse cultural backgrounds, leading to issues including cross-cultural differences and language barriers (Herod, 2012; Mikecz, 2012).

A growing, but still limited, body of literature on interviewing elites exists (Morris, 2009), with recent studies focusing on elites from such diverse backgrounds such as sport (Moore and Stokes, 2012), healthcare (Goldman and Swayze, 2012), employment relations (Herod, 2012) and politics (Mikecz, 2012). For the field of business management, however, little has been documented, beyond issues of access (see, for example, Laurila, 1997; Leblanc and Schwartz, 2007) on the challenges of interviewing senior managers and this is surprising considering the breadth of literature within this domain where the key respondents have been managers. A key article is that of Welch et al. (2002), which makes some interesting recommendations for interviewing management. In regards to interviewing across borders, there is a varied body of literature that deals with cultural barriers but, as with the elite interviewing literature, there are few studies which are pertinent to business management interviewing exclusively.

Developments in global business have led to an increase in cross-border research (Welch and Piekkari, 2006), and, at the same time, there has been a gradual 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). With this plethora of interest in international research, it may be argued that there is a need for more literature which deals explicitly with the challenges of interviewing international business elites and how to overcome these. This paper attempts to do just this.

Whilst the overarching objective of the paper is to add to both the interviewing elites and cross-cultural interviewing literature, it is positioned specifically at filling a gap in business management research around interviewing senior managers from different cultures. The paper is based on the experiences of interviewing German organizational elites by a British researcher. Having engaged with the literature on interviewing internationals and organizational elites, the author attempted to overcome some of the established barriers when interviewing senior-level HR managers in German organizations, by drawing on past work experiences, including as a foreign language trainer. The semi-structured interview approach used was free from barriers

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

2. Barriers to interviewing business elites and suggested responses to close gaps between the researcher and the researched

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 organization, particularly if management interviews are followed by interviews with other organizational members.

Yet, according to the literature, elite interviews present challenges in the form of barriers to access, imbalances in the power relationship between the researcher and the researched and reluctance on the part of the respondent to speak openly. Where hurdles exist, suggested responses are made by various authors. This section explores these issues in more detail.

2.1 Power dynamics, insiders and outsiders

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).

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).

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*. Elsewhere in the literature, there is a discussion of the researcher as an insider or an outsider (Morris, 2009), and all discussion of power dynamics within interviews and the extent to which managers may speak candidly depend on the extent to which the interviewer is perceived as an insider.

Some interviewees may be intimidated by being interviewed by an academic (Welch *et al*, 2002); yet, organizational elites hold power themselves and, therefore, are different to other respondent groups discussed in the research methods literature. Organizational elites may be dominant from the outset, 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). Moreover, 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, an elite 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. This idea of dominance through physical spaces has been documented in other literature (see for example, Ornstein, 2013), as well as tying in with wider literature around organizational culture (especially in the work of Schein, 2010).

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).

The above observations share a common theme; that regardless of where power is held, the researcher must engage in what Morris (2009: 213) refers to as "duplicitous" strategies in order to uncover the real story. Authors offer different advice around how the researcher should present him or herself to the respondent and there is some consensus in the literature around expectations of the interviewee as being dishonest and deliberately trying to hide the truth (Morris, 2009).

For business management researchers, Welch et al. (2002) make some useful recommendations. Beginning with the initial stage of gaining access, they suggest that 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.

How, then, may this gap between academic and manager be addressed? Welch et al. (2002) posit that academic researchers possess an advantage in elite interviews because of their knowledge about the sector, its policies and practices. This may be welcomed by senior managers who cherish the opportunity to discuss organizational problems with an informed third party, as well as a chance to familiarize themselves with new developments in their field. The researcher, thus, becomes a vehicle for the discussion and clarification of ideas managers might have for the organization and this endows the researcher with a greater insider status. In other words, the researcher becomes a critical friend. However, Welch et al. (2002) also recommend that the interviewer exerts caution, as being too well-informed carries a risk of managers feeling threatened and, consequently, reluctant to reveal information in case it leads to their organization being reported in a negative light. The researcher, therefore, becomes an outsider once more.

2.2 Culture and Language

Wider literature presents further concerns for the business management researcher. A primary consideration lies in the extent to which cultural differences impact upon international business (Welch et al., 2002). Hofstede's (1980, 2001) cultural dimension framework is useful in helping the business management researcher to grasp how culture impacts on organizations in various ways as a result of diverse perspectives on status and hierarchy, attitudes to risk, collectivism and paternalism versus individualism, as well as masculine and feminine society and social structures. These cultural variations shape national institutions, which for business management researchers are of interest due to their impact on labour markets, corporate governance, employment practices and training (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Hence, the researcher needs to aware of, and familiar with, these differences within organizational policies and practices, as well as varying attitudes to work and work organization.

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 (1995:4) study of managerial stereotypes indicated that "German managers were perceived by their British counterparts to be more hardworking, that is, more industrious, meticulous, structured and workaholic". Avoiding stereotypes is part of the researcher's remit in avoiding bias.

Inextricably linked with culture, is the issue of language which may represent a further barrier to effective interviewing, as native language may be important in gaining access to respondents and to establishing trust (Andrews 1995; Tsang, 1998). Being interviewed in a foreign language can have a negative impact on the ability of the interviewee to express him or himself fully, as well as to feel comfortable and to open up to the researcher (Tsang, 1998). Andrews (1995) and Tsang (1998) recommend 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), being interviewed in the mother tongue may create a more conducive atmosphere to expression and the building up of rapport (Andrews 1995; Tsang, 1998). It may, in addition, prove beneficial in gaining access and creating trust between the researcher and the researched (Andrews, 1995).

If the researcher does not speak the native language of his or her respondents, then an interpreter may be engaged. Yet, the interpreter represents an outsider to the research process who "produces noise, artificiality and an absence of tempo" (Usunier, 1998: 92). Consequently, the addition of this third person may undermine the trust and rapport that the researcher must work hard to secure.

Researchers may also 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.

Despite being able to overcome any language barriers, 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. Researchers need to be aware of other forms of communication norms within interviews, including non-verbal communication, which may differ between cultures (Brislin and Yoshida, 1994; Samovar et al., 2011), and interviewing practices which may not be appropriate within cultures other than the interviewers' own (Briggs, 1986). 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.

This section has outlined the barriers which may exist between the researcher and the researched and has indicated some of the recommendations from the literature to close these barriers. Whilst much of the useful literature on interviewing elites comes from diverse fields, there is a clear consensus in these studies around the problems of power dynamics, language and culture. Recommendations by Welch et al. (2002) are especially pertinent for business management researchers and highlight how specialist knowledge held by the researcher may overcome initial barriers, especially access, which, as the generic business literature indicates, is the biggest documented obstacle for interviewers wishing to speak to senior managers and other high-level executives. The next section introduces the researcher and outlines the research process and its data collection method, in order to present a successful case of interviewing senior managers qualitatively.

3. The qualitative interview process – background, methods and results

The aim of this section is to introduce an approach to interviewing elites which was successful in overcoming the challenges outlined in the section above. Firstly, some contextual information about the background of the author is presented, as this is important in demonstrating the insider/outsider problem of access and power dynamics. The next step is to indicate how the researcher approached the data collection because the chosen method was able to further transcend barriers around power and interaction, as well as to engage and interest respondents and to encourage them to speak open and candidly.

3.1 Overcoming barriers to interaction

This subsection introduces the professional and academic backgrounds of the author. The importance of understanding culture has already been discussed and, as this subsection will demonstrate, the researcher had already developed an understanding of the target country, its culture and had some insider experience of German organizations. The outcomes of the researcher's prior links with Germany correspond directly to debate within the literature around the extent to which culture and language are barriers to be overcome. In terms of academic affiliation, it is important to outline this as, firstly, it corresponds with Welch et al.'s (2002) recommendations on establishing oneself as an expert and, secondly, the author aligned herself with two research institutions in Germany which helped to gain access to senior managers.

3.1.1 Professional experience and linguistic competence

Whilst the importance of the researcher guarding him or herself against stereotypes has been highlighted, it is widely documented that German society places emphasis on punctuality, attention to detail and reliability (see, for example, Aspe, 2012; Berger; 2012). Within a business context, these cultural expectations are also to be noted. The researcher was already familiar with German social norms, having spent a considerable period of time in Germany and working in several positions across a period of fifteen years. One professional role had been a managerial post, which gave insights into German business protocol. Significantly, the researcher had achieved a high level of linguistic competence in German and was very comfortable in using German as a working language.

In and outside Germany, the researcher had amassed a decade's worth of experience as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructor. In this role, in Germany, she had mainly offered language tuition for German managers, especially those requiring preparation for international assignments. However, recommendations from past students, led to new requests from further managers to focus on preparing presentations in English, translating and updating curriculum vitaes and other work on designing and translating company materials into English. Through this extensive work with managerial clients, the researcher developed some useful methods of breaking the ice with German managers, establishing her credentials, facilitating and eliciting. In other words, the researcher had already developed coping strategies to overcome issues which are akin to the barriers for qualitative researchers interviewing organizational elites.

3.1.2 Academic Affiliation

The case on which this paper is based centres around a research project focusing on how German companies manage ageing workforces. Hence, the study required interviewing senior Human Resource managers. In order to be better placed to access secondary source materials, as well as to conduct interviews, the researcher spent eight months in Germany. During fieldwork, she was based at two well-known research institutions, the Hans Böckler Foundation in Düsseldorf and the Max Planck Institute in Cologne. Due to the prestigious nature of these institutions, and their excellent links with local companies, the researcher profited from these affiliations during fieldwork.

3.2 Conducting the qualitative interviews

This section sets out how the interviews were conducted and emphasises the extent to which the professional and academic backgrounds of the researcher were inextricably linked with the success of the interviews.

3.2.1 Initial contact

The first contact with managers was through two letters were sent out on headed paper from the research institution. The first letter was composed by the researcher and outlined her academic qualifications, as well as the aims of the project and the topics to be discussed in the interviews. The second letter was from the research institution; not only did this vouch for the credentials of the researcher, but also exhorted managers to participate in the study. The preliminary contact was followed by a telephone call, which had several important functions. Firstly, this confirmed the content of letter and allowed for any necessary clarification around participation; secondly as potential respondents were contacted only a few days after the letter was sent, a timely telephone call helped to create a first impression of professionalism, as well as gave the researcher the opportunity to indicate respect for the time managers would need to set aside for the interviews; finally, speaking on the telephone in German confirmed the linguistic competence of the researcher. Fifty companies were contacted and, eventually, thirty-five interviews were conducted.

3.2.2 Interview process

The strategy for organizing the semi-structured interviews was based on techniques developed by the researcher throughout her experience as an EFL instructor. As a language teacher, the researcher set up oral exercises with her students, engaging them through words or phrases printed on cue cards. This approach minimised the input of the trainer, whilst increasing the output of the students. The researcher made a decision to follow a similar approach in the interviews because this gave the respondent the lead role in the interview and encouraged them to speak freely, and to reach the depth and detail within their responses which is associated with qualitative interviewing.

Interviews typically began rather formally, with the researcher conscious of power metaphors (room layout, distance between interviewer and interviewee as seen in Ornstein, 2012 and Schein, 2010). 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, a series of cards were laid out upon the table.

Each interview consisted of twelve themes and these themes for discussion were presented to the interviewees via the card placed on the table. As see Figure 1 demonstrates, the cards were made from red cardboard. By placing the interview themes on the table at the beginning of the interview, 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.

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 organization.

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 organization. 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.

Interviews ended when respondents had worked through all the topics on the cards. The respondent posed a final open question: “do you have anything to add? Something that we haven’t discussed but you think is important?” In a few cases, this final question led to the recording device being switched off because the respondent wanted to speak confidentially. After the interviews, the data was transcribed in German. Pertinent passages from the interviewers were later translated into English to be used as quotations when the research was written up.

3.3 Results of the qualitative interviewing method used

Having described the method of conducting the qualitative interviews, this final subsection presents the outcomes of the process. As it will be explained, bringing classroom techniques into the interview room were helpful in reassuring elites about the interview and, once underway, the majority became engaged in the activity. However, this subsections also reiterates what has been emphasised in the first subsection, namely, that the professional and academic background of the researcher also helped to overcome some of the documented barriers related to interviewing elites, such as power relations, cultural difference and a lack of responsiveness from interview participants.

The first observation to make is that many managers were initially uneasy about being interviewed; this was evident in their speech and in their body language and several had even brought the original letters of contact with them, with accompanying notes jotted on the page as a form of preparation. However, once the topic cards were presented and they were able to see the topics in front of them, most managers relaxed visibly.

Not until the researcher felt that managers had lost some initial reservations, did she encourage them to handle the cards 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 organization and to orient themselves through the process.

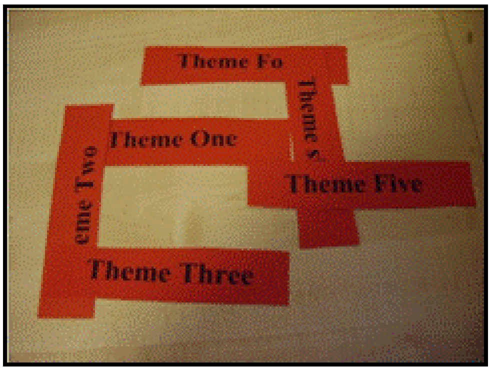

Figure 2: Example of how respondents interacted with topic cards

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 organizational elites presented by the literature.

This section has presented an interesting case of a research study, whereby the researcher drew on her own personal background to design a method of qualitative interviewing which was successful in leading to the collection of rich data from senior managers. The next section will revisit the academic literature discussed in section two and compare the outcomes of the case and the methodology of the author with the barriers and challenges outlined in the literature.

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

Despite the literature identifying issues including access to elites, inequality in power relationship, candidness of response, as well as linguistic and cultural barriers, these did not pose problems in this case. As section three has delineated, the particular personal circumstances of the researcher were largely responsible for driving the data collection process. Interestingly, 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. This section will discuss where obstacles to interviewing organizational elites were overcome and focus on how this was done and the extent to which the approach mirrored suggestions made by the literature.

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 and showed respect for the time of the managers (Yeung, 1995).

The telephone conversation also, arguably, represented a first step in addressing power dynamics as it established academic credentials on the part of the researcher, as well as demonstrating that she had knowledge and experience of working in Germany. Hence, the gap between academia and managers identified by Welch et al. (2002) was narrowed.

The follow-up telephone 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 and this was achieved through a brief self-introduction, leading to many 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, the researcher also discussed her professional experiences in the country.

The insider/outsider problem of the positioning of the researcher within interviewing has been alluded to in section two and this section has already been emphasised that the attempt to present the researcher as an insider began at the pre-interview stage. Breaking the ice at the first stages of the interview was an important further step to continue presenting the interviewer as an insider. This helped to create trust and commitment and there was, therefore, no need to engage in some of so-called 'clever' strategies summarised by Morris (2009) which researchers have used to engage interviewees.

As discussed in section two, in the interviews, there was a short initial period of discomfort for many respondents and some 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 ethical considerations and to explain how the interview would be structured. Later, as established, the cue cards were partly responsible for creating an environment conducive to collecting rich data.

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. However, the design of the interviews was innovative as the researcher borrowed ideas from the language classroom and used them to interview elites. Whilst it may be suggested that the researcher had an advantage, having used these techniques previously, the method could be adopted and used successfully in other elite interviewing, as the outcomes were favourable.

Red cardboard was chosen deliberately for making the topic cards and 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 chose 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 (see, for example. 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, as well as her own 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.

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, addressing and strengthening the relationship between the researcher and the researched and identifying and overcoming barriers to interviewing requires attention and the process begins early on. Moreover, there needs to be a 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.

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 organizational elites. There are a number of excellent recommendations made by the academic literature which should be useful in overcoming hindrances. Section two presented an overview of the obstacles to interviewing which appear in the literature and proposed solutions. Key themes are around culture, power and the extent to which researchers may need to present themselves in a certain way not only, in the first instance to gain access, but also to establish credibility and trust. Much of the literature, as Morris (2009) indicates, suggests that researchers may employ underhanded or duplicitous tactics in order to draw the interviewee and to create trust.

This paper has shown that barriers to interviewing elites may be surmounted through the way in which the researcher appears to the researched and, is therefore, concurrent with other studies that for academic researchers, organizational elites are more likely to agree to be interviewed if they perceive the interviewer to have knowledge of the sector and the business, as well as offer themselves as a critical friend. There was no need to implement any of the 'clever' strategies suggested by the literature. The researcher was able to demonstrate professional and academic credentials, which were also related to the business culture of German, thereby overcoming a further barrier of cultural difference. Moreover, the researcher brought a unique combination of professional and personal background, as well as linguistic competence, that were instrumental in the success of the research.

What is perhaps most worthy of note in this case is that the data collected was rich, as interviews were relatively long and managers spoke candidly. Whilst, to some extent the openness of interviews was related to the good rapport which had been created prior to discussing the interview themes, the way in which the qualitative interviews were designed and structured were the main drivers of success. The researcher used techniques from the language classroom to encourage communication and keep the interviews well placed. Therefore, this paper goes some way to adding to the literature on interviewing elites by offering a further perspective on how to engage interviewees and how to broach subjects about which elites may be reluctant to speak openly. Having said this, it may be argued that the technique for interviewing managers may not work in all circumstances, especially as the personal circumstances of the researcher drove the process and it is, thus, necessary to test this method with further groups of elites and with other interviewers.

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