

Issues of international intercultural research

The narrative interview process

Presentation by Gerhard Fink

at PDW Academy of Management 2002
Doing international research: problems and
solutions

It is **impossible** for a theory of behavior to be simultaneously

general

precise

and

simple.

W. Thorngate, "In general" vs. "it depends": some comments on the Gergen-Schlenker debate. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 2, p. 404-410

quoted by
Karl E. Weick, *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, © 1969, 1979 by Addison-Wesley Publishing Company (German translation by Suhrkamp Verlag 1985, p. 54-64)

Important literature in cross cultural studies is

general and simple:

4 culture dimensions [power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity]

developed by **Gert Hofstede**

(e.g. G. Hofstede, Culture's Consequences. Sage, Beverly Hills 1980)

7 culture dimensions [universalism/particularism, individualism/collectivism, affectivity/neutrality, specific/diffuse cultures, status achievement/ascription, synchronous/sequential time, relation to nature]

developed by **Fons Trompenaars**

(e.g. F. Trompenaars, Riding the Waves of Culture. Understanding Diversity in Global Business, Chicago 1983)

Although highly influential because of generality
and simplicity

these theories are **insufficient** to understand issues
in
intercultural management.

Intercultural management:

**Interaction between and among
people from different cultures in the
context of management and
business**

For this we need:

**Precise, detailed information about
what is happening in the context of
management and business**

=

contrary to general and simple!

The technique of **narrative interviews** allows to collect information/data without having a theory readily at hand.

It is a **hermeneutic method** employed before theory building.

Theories are based on some knowledge which is ordered and organized in a if → then framework, i.e. a theoretical concept.

With narrative interviews we collect **short stories** about critical incidents in intercultural interaction in management which will be ordered and organized in a second step, when we begin to understand what's happening in international intercultural management.

Understanding the interview process:

When are people **willing and able to tell little stories** about remarkably different behavior of their counterparts in international intercultural business and management?

They must

- a) have **experienced** something
- b) find it to be a **worthwhile** story
- c) be **willing** to tell the interviewer
- d) still **remember** the incident

Whether our counterparts have experienced something we find out during the interview.

Give them a chance to remember!

Tell them in advance that you hope to be told little stories about remarkable incidents personally experienced by the interviewed person (at the telephone when you make the appointment or in writing before you go to the interview).

A story is worthwhile to be told if the **interviewed person can impress** the interviewer:

Tell them why the experience of the interviewed person is unique and very important.

The interviewed person is willing to tell little stories, if she/he finds the interviewer sympathetic, if she can help the interviewer to solve a difficult task.

Interviewed persons find interviewers who belong to their own culture more sympathetic and trustworthy.

Interviewed persons do not want to look bad or to lose their face.

You can create sympathy by showing similar habits during the interview (e.g. taking the same drink as the interviewed person).

Interviewed persons are more willing to tell little stories if they **feel important**.

They are **willing to help** the poor student who is collecting information, but does not understand the world.

When you are told little stories support your counterpart by telling that this is an amazing or interesting experience.

Come back to stories only half told and try to get to the final point.

Insert a few control questions after you were told a little story:

"Why do you think did the person from the other culture behave like this?"

"How do you cope with that? Isn't that difficult to cope with?"

The responses to these questions are supportive in the interview process **and** help at a later stage to distinguish between interests, values and prejudices.

All narrative interviews must be **taped**.

You should produce a **transcript** of all narrative interviews and analyze the written text.

You should identify in the transcript complete **short stories** with a clear beginning and an end from **stereotypes** and culture related remarks.

After each interview **reflect** on your interview experience, what went well, what wrong – and why? Ask experienced interviewers for advice.

Make a first summary analysis of the first 4-5 interviews, after 12 interviews, 18 interviews and at the end of a series of interviews.

Organize the incidents by similarity of event.

Usually after 12 interviews you will have a record which covers all important types of incidents.

After 25 interviews you will be able to identify the most important types of incidents (you may establish a rank order by how many respondents did mention a similar type of incident).

For final assessment
you need people from the counterpart
culture to tell you whether the incidents
you have been told so often are
culturally determined.

You ask these people: "Are these
incidents which were experienced in
the specific business/management
context due to culturally determined
different behavior?".

Let them explain to you **what** is the
"normal behavior" in the other culture
and **why**?

How we organize our research:

Master theses

Doctor theses

Working groups of master and
doctorate students

International intercultural conference
series

Interviewers / research partners in
other countries

National and international research
contracts