

Book Reviews

Field guide to intercultural research (a review)

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As befits an issue devoted to intercultural studies, the *Field Guide to Intercultural Research* is an appropriate opportunity to introduce a collection of 26 essays by over 40 authors representing over 20 nationalities, sharing their research in East Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe and discussing questions of fieldwork research theory, organisation and management. Divided into three sections, the book focuses on intercultural research into international business differences. Part 1 deals with practical issues, such as interviewing research subjects and collecting and processing data. Part 2 examines theoretical themes, and Part 3 addresses regional themes, reporting on research projects on China, Thailand and Vietnam, Africa, including Nigeria, and the Middle East, including Lebanon and the Arabian Gulf. Overall, the book is a useful resource for post-graduate research students undertaking intercultural fieldwork as part of their studies or their work.

But what do we mean by fieldwork and international business studies? As Malcom Chapman says in his foreword, fieldwork is a method of study derived from social anthropology. Social anthropology is defined as the study of human societies, cultures, and their development in the Oxford Dictionary. International business studies are about the differences in business management styles in different nation states around the world. Chapman argues that fieldwork

needs to examine not just the theories of business but particularly the views of experienced business practitioners, as is amply illustrated in the book.

Part 1 contains an interesting review of how to interview successful business 'elites' by William Harvey. Elites, in this context, are senior managers and officials in organisations. Especially, if you are interviewing senior people for fieldwork for an MA dissertation or PhD thesis, Harvey can provide excellent advice based on theory and his own experience. Harvey identifies three types of interviewing technique, neo-positive, romantic and localist. Neo-positive focuses on the facts. Romantic focuses on social interaction and building rapport. Localist focuses on the interaction and the social context in which the interview happens. In preparing the interview be sure you state what you want to achieve and how it will benefit the interviewee and their organisation. Be prepared to adapt to the environment of the interviewee be it formal or informal. The aim is to be in an environment where you as interviewer can build a rapport with the interviewee.

In conducting the interview it's important to consider the interviewee's time availability and to ask before you start if they have any questions or concerns. It will be helpful if you frame the interview at the beginning by giving an overview of the research and explaining why their insights are important and how you think

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your research can benefit them. This ensures the person you are interviewing understands what you need and provides a clear structure. It also gives the interviewee the opportunity to have the last word on the subject under discussion and make sure they make any final points they need.

It's important to remember that many senior executives travel a lot. Harvey notes Hillary Clinton, as US Secretary of State, was alleged to have travelled 956,733 air miles during her time in office. That's equivalent to flying around the world 38 times.

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In Part 2, Professor Christoph Barmeyer addresses the key issue of building intercultural rapport to ensure successful research. Together with Eric Davoine, a French colleague and co-researcher, he addresses rapport between German and French researchers. In doing

so they draw on Helen Spencer Oatey's three dimensions of rapport management: behavioural expectations, face sensitivities and international wants or goals. By face sensitivities Spencer-Oatey means recognising the value of the other through showing respect for social and cultural values and attributes.

In their chapter Barmeyer and Davoine examine the differences between German and French attitudes to research and to managing the relationship between their relative academic positions and seniority and how it affects the field research interview process.

They also point out that a good rapport can diminish research quality, especially when confidential information is offered leading to subsequent interview withdrawal or wiping the recording. Another factor is that a positive experience with the organisation researched or person interviewed may mean that potentially negative information and data is ignored. In conclusion, Barmeyer and Davoine stress the importance of appreciating that the type of intercultural reaction can vary in the course of the research and to act accordingly.

Part 3 is devoted to reports on regional fieldwork surveys. All the chapters make interesting reference to the challenges of fieldwork but the chapter on interviewing Vietnamese nurses and doctors by a Vietnamese and a German researcher raised points of particular importance for any researcher. First is timing. When is the best time to schedule an interview and how long should it last? In Vietnam the authors found breakfast/coffee time and fairly late evening were good, but no interview should last longer than one and a half hours maximum. If one and a half hours seems long remember that an introduction of fifteen minutes or so is usually part of the interview warm-up. Second is local support. If you are interviewing in a new country or a different region of a country, the support of locals who know the area and can help with any cultural or language difficulties due to regional differences will be worthwhile. Third is how to ask questions. Vietnamese interviewees are fairly 'high context' and don't like giving wrong answers that might be corrected. Therefore, they may prefer to give indirect answers. It is important to learn about the local communication style and frame your questions accordingly to get a response you can use. Fourth, how do you thank your interviewees? William Harvey stressed the importance of 'thank you' emails but in some environments a small present, even small amounts of money, may be preferable. All these will help build a climate of mutual trust that will get you the information you need.

In her afterword at the end of the book, Fiona Moore of Royal Holloway College, University of London, offers advice to researchers examining the cultures of business communities and business practitioners. She identifies three points. First, she refers to the gap between academia and business practice, endorsing Michael Chapman's argument that international business is detached from academic reality although, as can be seen in the previous book review, intercultural researchers, and writers like Robert Gibson link intercultural theory closely with business management methodology and examples from international business practice. In Fiona Moore's view it is important for the researcher to approach the case study of business practice honestly and with reflexivity. Her second point refers to business culture itself. We need to remember

that many of the business practice principles and methodologies, such as human resource management, originated in the United States, the world's first industrialised country, but may be interpreted differently in different business environments. Her third and final point refers to the distinction between tacit knowledge, based on personal impressions and specific cultural approaches, and data based explicit knowledge which itself may be subject to the researcher's own opinions. In summary, she says both the fieldwork researcher and the subject of the research need to develop a critical mindset to analyse the meanings attributed to knowledge.

All in all, then a useful and comprehensive guide for academic researchers, particularly into international business practice and its relationship to culture, covering principles and practice of effective fieldwork.

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