

# Conducting qualitative research in Russia: Challenges and advice

## 1. Introduction

The key purpose of business research across national borders is to acquire new insights that help improve the likelihood of success when conducting international business. Conducting business across borders often implies uncertainty due to multiple differences between the domestic and foreign markets. These differences can relate to market size, business size, distribution, economic and political institutions, consumers' expectations, and buyers' preferences. They can also relate to culture, which has a large impact on human behavior (Usunier, 1993). Indeed, coping with cultural differences can be a particular challenge in developing international business strategies. One reason is that business strategies are often built upon domestic cultural values that may not fit a targeted foreign market. A classic example of this phenomenon is the negative reaction to McDonalds' attempt to impose the American "smiling" culture when entering the Russian market, as Russians often find smiling at strangers to be a false and deceitful act (Usunier, 1993).

Firms expanding abroad may thus benefit substantially from conducting international business research. Such research is, however, subject to some of the same challenges that business actors face. Cross-cultural business research is not straightforward for several reasons, including that culture is context specific and has a profound impact on the way that people perceive, think, and behave (Kluckhohn, 1951; Hall, 1976; Clark, 1990). Furthermore, as the cultural background influences how different constructs are defined (van de Vijver and Leung, 1997), a researcher collecting data in foreign cultural contexts may pose research questions that make no sense within that culture. Recruiting respondents may also present a particular challenge when operating in a foreign cultural context (Michailova, 2004), even the tracking of relevant respondents may be challenging in a foreign context. Even the meaning attached to being interviewed may vary across cultures; the interviewer may be viewed as a dreaded government agent or a friend of the leader (Brislin et al., 1973), which will naturally hamper the respondents' openness.

The use of qualitative, explorative approaches may, due to its probing nature, be advantageous in terms of avoiding misunderstandings and misinterpretations when conducting research in new cultural contexts. For example, conducting face-to-face interviews with the respondents give the researcher an opportunity to clarify and explain unclear parts of the interview. The strength of qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviewing, lies in their ability to examine dynamic and context-dependent phenomena (Parkhe, 1993; Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991). Achieving this objective in foreign cultural contexts demands cultural intelligence and sensitivity from the researcher, which in itself is challenging. However, research into the methodological challenges involved in conducting international business research has largely been confined to examination of quantitative methods, such as administration of standardized mail surveys (see, for example (Cavusgil and Das, 1997). In spite of a plea for more exploratory and theory-generating studies in international business research and a growing recognition of the benefits associated with qualitative methods (Doz, 2011), there has been little examination of specific challenges arising from their application in an international context (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004; Yeung, 1995).

This paper addresses the pitfalls and challenges that a Western researcher (a Norwegian) may encounter when conducting in-depth interviews in Russia, which has become a substantial market for foreign trade and investment. The cultural differences between Russia and West European countries are significant and in many cases challenging (Fey and Shekshnia, 2011). Conducting qualitative research strongly demands in-depth understanding and interpretation of human values, perceptions, and behavior. It is therefore a challenging yet rewarding means of exploring values and perceptions in foreign cultures. Since the typical respondent in international business research is a powerful member of the elite, such as a business manager (Welch et al., 2002), we focus on three critical elements from the literature regarding interviewing elite persons: gaining access, attaining trust and openness, and balancing power in the interaction with the respondents.

In the next section we address the relevant literature regarding the use of qualitative research methods and interviewing of elite persons. Russian cultural characteristics, such as a hierarchical structure, particularism, chauvinism, and suspicion of foreigners (Snaveley et al., 1998; Hofstede et al., 2010; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1993) may create challenges for foreign researchers in terms of gaining access, balancing power, and attaining trust and openness. Thus, we describe these key cultural characteristics of Russians and discuss them in

relation to conducting in-depth interviews in Russia. Based on the literature review and our own experience conducting research in Russia, we describe the pitfalls and challenges of performing qualitative research in a foreign cultural context such as Russia before providing suggestions regarding how these pitfalls and challenges may be overcome.

## 2. Qualitative research in international business research

Use of qualitative research methods may involve review of documents and application of various types of observation and interview techniques. Interview-based research studies are particularly well suited for conducting exploratory and theory-building research (Eisenhardt, 1989) or when conducting research into a topic that cannot be meaningfully examined by administration of a questionnaire (Daniels and Cannice, 2004). Here we focus on the use of in-depth interview, which are defined as a face-to face verbal interchange (Fontana and Frey, 1994) between a researcher and an informant with the purpose of understanding the latter's experiences and perspectives (Welch et al., 2002). In in-depth interviewing, the interviewer asks open-ended and/or discovery-oriented questions to deeply explore the respondent's feelings and perspectives on a subject, and thus offers an opportunity to acquire rich information from each respondent (Daniels and Cannice, 2004).

In-depth interviewing may involve exploration of complex issues, and in some cases deeper probing into participants' responses may be required. Such interviewing allows for more flexible and spontaneous exploring of new lines of inquiry (Pedhazur and Schmelkin, 1991) Doing so may be particularly advantageous when interviewing across cultures or operating in unknown territories where cultural peculiarities may hinder respondents from answering questions. It may also be advantageous in situations in which planned questions are revealed irrelevant for the specific context. The interaction between interviewer and respondent allows greater opportunities for motivating the latter to provide more accurate responses and for providing the former with the means of coping with sources of errors that generally go undetected when using questionnaires (e.g., those related to question wording;(Pedhazur and Schmelkin, 1991). The face-to face interview setting makes it more difficult for respondents to avoid answering certain questions (Pedhazur and Schmelkin, 1991) while allowing the researcher to explain complex matters, eliminate irrelevant questions during the interview process, and observe the respondent while answering, that last of which may provide additional valuable information and insight (Pedhazur and Schmelkin, 1991).

However, attaining these advantages requires that certain requirements be fulfilled. In this paper we focus on issues related to (1) obtaining access, (2) managing power asymmetry between the interviewer and respondent, and (3) assessing the openness of the respondent when conducting in-depth interviews in Russia. Operating in a foreign cultural context compounds the issues relating to cultural differences (Herod, 1999; Mikecz, 2012). Not only is gaining access to the correct respondents of critical importance but also establishing a good atmosphere and trust with the respondent, which encourages the respondent to open up and share information. The atmosphere and ease of opening up in the interview setting can be highly influenced by the perceived power distribution between the parties. Successfully addressing these aspects can be especially challenging for a foreign researcher as an outsider representing a different culture, and failure to do so may hinder access and create distance between the interviewer and the respondent, and prevent trust establishment. The researcher must be able to incorporate foreign contextual processes and phenomena into theoretical explanations; that is, to adapt to and recognize the impact of context on the research process (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 2004).

### 3. Interviewing the elite

Due to limited research addressing qualitative research methods in an international context, and the fact that the respondents in international business research is often an elite person, we draw attention to some of the challenges identified in the literature addressing challenges with interviewing elites (Mikecz, 2012; Ostrander, 1993; Herod, 1999; Hunt et al., 1964). One popular definition of an elite is “a group in society considered to be superior because of the power, talent, privileges etc. of its members” (Hornby et al., 1983). The term elite is applied to a person or group considered well known, famous, distinctive, or important (Moore and Stokes, 2012). In traditional business organizations, the elite group can be seen to comprise the top echelon of the firm (Giddens, 1972). Elites have also been loosely defined as those with particular expertise (Burnham et al., 2004). Corporate elites tend to be visible individuals both within and outside their organizations, and their presence has been found to affect the interview situation and quality of data in many ways (Welch et al., 2002). Elites are often found to take advantage of their position by trying to influence the research goal and control the reporting of the data (Welch et al., 1999).

The respondents in international business research are usually persons occupying a senior or middle management position who have functional responsibility in an area, enjoy high status in

accordance with corporate values, have considerable expertise, and possess a broad network of personal relationships (Welch et al., 2002). The typical respondent in international business research resembles or is an elite person representing the top echelon of a firm and possessing particular expertise. Challenges addressed in the elite literature regarding gaining access, balancing power, and attaining quality information (Welch et al., 2002) appear appropriate in discussing interviewing challenges when conducting international business research.

A few exceptions have been found that draw attention to challenges in conducting qualitative research in international business (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004; Michailova and Liuhto, 2000; Yeung, 1995; Welch et al., 2002; Hunt et al., 1964). Hunt et al. (1964) found that cultural differences have distinguishing effects upon an interviewer's success in handling problems with gaining access, co-operation, and respondent candor in their interviews in the United States, Austria, and France. They did not, however, explain these differences in terms of the cultural differences between these countries. Yeung (1995) found that use of a qualitative research method was most beneficial for collecting rich data and maintaining flexibility in his research of Hong Kong transnational corporations. He addressed the difficulties related to reaching the correct respondents and gaining access, and described the need to use qualitative research methods to be able to remain flexible and solve possible misunderstandings and misinterpretations when they occur (Yeung, 1995).

Michailova and Liuhto (2000) argue that research that is not grounded in a context lacks relevance and validity in both methodological and analytical terms. While they examined problematic methodological difficulties related to gaining access, secrecy and distrust, and use of recording and feedback when conducting research in East European transition economies, they did not address the even more complicating factor of being a foreign researcher coping with these challenges in a foreign cultural context. For instance, they did not address the fact that developing personal contacts to gain access to respondents may be more challenging for a foreign researcher than a local one. In their discussion of interviewing foreign elites in relation to positionality, an indication of whether the researcher is treated as an insider or an outsider, both Herod (1999) and Mikecs (2012) stress the importance of cross-cultural understanding when interviewing foreign elites, but neither addresses specific cultural characteristics that may pose methodological challenges.

While elites have some common traits, they are also likely to have differing identities that emerge in distinctive contexts and environments. This will necessarily have implications for interviewing them (Moore and Stokes, 2012), and thus requires knowledge of the specific research context.

#### 4. Russia and Russian cultural characteristics

“...Russia is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma...”

Winston Churchill (1939)

Despite being made in 1939, the above quote by Churchill is still often used to illustrate the complexity of Russian culture. Russia is often characterized by Westerners as a country difficult to comprehend because of its cultural background, and Russians' behavior often seems unfamiliar and different from that of Westerners. The “mystery” is reinforced by the fact that the country was “closed” from the rest of the world for more than 70 years in the Soviet era, during which international contact and information flow within and outside Russia was limited and strictly controlled by the State. This situation led to a narrow-minded vision of both outsiders' view of Russians and Russians' view of foreigners.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has experienced massive economic growth. Indeed, Russia has become a key player in the global energy market, and its potential as a burgeoning market for consumer and industrial goods and services is huge (Puffer and McCarthy, 2007). Russia has opened up for the global economy, and the opportunities in the Russian market of more than 140 million inhabitants are abundant. Because of its economic development, Russia is considered one of the world's fastest growing markets (together with Brazil, India, and China) and is forecasted to maintain a growing influence in the global economic and political spheres (Alon et al., 2010). However, many business ventures in Russia have failed, often due to inattention to large cultural differences and a unique and challenging business environment (Fey and Shekshnia, 2011). Thus, increased knowledge and understanding is needed to succeed in the Russian market.

To contribute to the literature regarding the facilitation of business operations and co-operation with Russians, more in-depth understanding of how business is conducted in Russia is needed. For this purpose, conducting qualitative research is a valuable approach, but it is not without

challenges. Several questions that must be addressed when performing qualitative research are the following: How does one contact possible respondents in Russia? How does one arrange interviews with Russian respondents? How does Russian suspiciousness and use of a hierarchical structure influence access to respondents? How does one encourage Russian respondents to open up and share information? Gaining awareness of the cultural characteristics of Russians and the challenges that they may pose to conducting research is highly valuable for researchers planning to conduct in-depth interviews in Russia. Westerners need to invest more serious, conscious effort into becoming familiar with various cultural dimensions when conducting research in Eastern European countries (Michailova, 2004). An overview of some of the cultural characteristics of Russia and their comparison with a Western country, in this case Norway, is listed in Table 1. These characteristics are further discussed in relation to challenges with gaining access, balancing power, and attaining openness with Russian respondents.

**Table 1** Comparison of cultural characteristics of Russia and Norway

Norway	Cultural characteristic	Russia
Low	Power distance	High
Low	Collectivism	Moderate
Low/moderate	Uncertainty avoidance	High
Low	Particularism	High
Flat	Organizational structure	Hierarchical
Democratic	Leadership style	Autocratic
Low	Suspiciousness	High
Low	Chauvinism	High
Sequential	Time orientation	Synchronic
Naive	Suspiciousness	Suspicious
Trustful	Trust	Distrustful
Formal	Formality	Informal

## 5 Challenges related to conducting interviews in Russia

### 5.1 Gaining access

Gaining access to respondents is the first prerequisite of conducting in-depth interviews (Cochrane, 1998). Gaining access to the right people for an interview can be challenging and time consuming, and is referred to as *the* problem in qualitative research (Gummeson, 1991). Access to elites is regarded as particularly difficult because they, by nature, establish barriers that set their members apart from the rest of society (Hertz and Imber, 1993). Gaining access to foreign elites has been found to increase the complexity of the research situation even further (Herod, 1999). Having less familiarity with foreign organizations than with domestic ones



makes identifying and arranging contact with the elites more difficult. While some have claimed that negotiating access is a game of chance, not of skill (Buchanan et al., 1988) Michailova and Liuhto (2000) found in their study of Eastern Europe that succeeding at data collection is not the art of the possible but the art of making the impossible possible. More specifically, they claim that gaining access to respondents in Eastern European countries is not a question of chance, but of knowing how things work in these countries and acting accordingly. Since having a personal network is important to gaining access, there is a need to build one and take advantage of it (Michailova, 2004).

Welch et al. (2002) found that much time may be required to gain access to elites and that many restrictions and limitations may be imposed even when access is gained. They also found differences in countries' professional gap; that is, differences in professional value between the academic community and the commercial culture. For instance, a close relationship has been found between the academic world and the business community in Nordic countries (Björkman and Forsgren, 2000), whereas businesses are more likely to be wary of or indifferent toward encounters with academics in Australia. Such differences may also create challenges with gaining access across cultures (Björkman and Forsgren, 2000). Russians, for instance, have limited experience with being interviewed for research purposes. Also, the vast majority of employees in Eastern European organizations have been found to be highly suspicious of and to act negatively toward strangers from universities and business schools (Michailova, 2004). Such lack of familiarity with cooperating with researchers may impose additional challenges to gaining access in Russia and attaining openness. Russians in particular have generally been found suspicious of foreigners and their intentions (Rivera et al., 2002). People in the Soviet Union were strongly influenced by their simultaneous reception of propaganda regarding the superiority of the Soviet state and negative information regarding foreigners, particularly Westerners with their "gniloi" capitalism ("rotten capitalism"; Barnes et al. 1997). The resulting Russian attitude toward foreigners still prevails in many cases and may influence Russians' willingness to meet with foreign researchers.

In Russia, the simple process of locating respondents can be challenging, as a different and unreliable postal service system, and lack of or incorrect phone numbers or addresses may pose challenges (Yeung, 1995; Daniels and Cannice, 2004). Lack of systematically collected and filed information needed for identifying potential organizations/respondents may create additional challenges (Michailova, 2004). Eastern European countries lack a systematic system

for collecting information at different levels, and have no reliable databases, files, registers, or archives that may provide the preliminary information that the researcher needs at the pre-access stage (Michailova and Liuhto, 2000). When calling organizations/companies, researchers may reach a receptionist who is difficult to get past, or be sent through to many different departments and people in an endless round dance. Additionally, the Russian high power distance may increase the challenge of gaining access to the right contact. Power distance refers to how different societies manage human inequality and is a measure of the interpersonal power or influence between a leader and a subordinate as perceived by the less powerful of the two (Hofstede, 1980). Russia is known for having large power distance and using a highly hierarchical organizational structure in both business and society (Hofstede et al., 2010). According to Hofstede (1980), cultures with a high power distance have a higher tolerance for inequality, entitling power holders to certain privileges and leading them to view other people as a potential threat to their power who can rarely be trusted.

Russia is further characterized as a collectivistic culture (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005; Bollinger, 1994). Collectivism is often described as the opposite of individualism. In individualistic cultures, all individuals are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family, while in collectivistic cultures people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups that continue to protect them throughout their lifetimes in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Collectivistic cultures are known for being highly dependent and reliant on personal networks, both in business and personal life (Ledeneva, 1998; Butler and Purchase, 2004). This dimension of culture may have a profound influence on choosing research methods and conducting research in Russia, particularly regarding the restricted access to the right people to interview and problems with obtaining information that may be encountered.

According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012), challenges regarding forming relationships are related to Russia being a particularist culture. The key difference between universalist and particularist societies is the focus on rules of behavior (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2012). In universalistic cultures, rule of law is very important and rules are more important than relationships; legal contracts are drawn up and are seen as trustworthy, and all are expected to honor the law. In particularistic cultures, in contrast, there is often an absence of defined legal systems and relationships determine what gets done in business, politics, and society (Michailova and Hutchings, 2006). Forming personal networks is essential

for gaining access in Russia (Michailova and Liuhto, 2000). According to Michailova and Liuhto (2000), the researcher's informal networks, such as those composed of family and friends, is sometimes the only option for identifying respondents in the field and gaining access in Eastern European countries such as Russia. Doing so, however, may not be helpful for a foreign researcher. A Western researcher may not have the necessary personal networks for gaining access in Russia or have any networks that can be of assistance in gaining access and legitimizing one's research purpose.

Aspects related to perception of time may also create challenges when operating in Russia. According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012), time perception can be characterized as either sequential or synchronic. While Western countries often have a sequential orientation, Russians have a more synchronic orientation, meaning that they have a more relaxed relationship to time and perceive time as continuous and diffuse and appointments as approximate (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2012). Challenges thus arise in their interactions with more sequentially oriented cultures, such as Norway, in which time is tangible and appointments are kept strictly and scheduled in advance. For example, planning an appointment just for the following week can be considered to be planning too far in advance for Russians (Rivera et al., 2002).

## **5.2 Power balance**

The power balance between the interviewer and the respondent is often claimed to be important for collecting information in an interview situation. As the power advantage typically favors the researcher (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998), the researcher is advised to endeavor to achieve balance to encourage the respondent to open up. However, when interviewing elites, this power balance is often in favor of the respondent, which creates challenges in both gaining access to obtaining information from respondents (Welch et al., 2002; Rice, 2010). The extent of the power imbalance may be influenced by other cultural factors, such as a culture's tolerance for power inequality (i.e., extent of high/low power distance).

The elite's expertise and societal power may strongly influence the information provided in an interview. As elites are often "professional communicators" (Fitz and Halpin, 1995), the researcher is at risk of being patronized by them (McDowell, 1998). Welch et al. (2002) described how elites in one interview setting attempted to fully control the interview, even trying to direct the data collection, and lectured the researcher about how to interpret data. The

challenge of protecting the research and the researcher's integrity from powerful elites was also emphasized by Ostrander (1993), who described the risk that the researcher be put into the position of a "supplicant" so humbly grateful to obtain an interview that he or she is unwilling to ask critical or demanding questions (Cochrane, 1998). Elites have been found to exploit their power advantage even more when there is an age or gender gap between the responder and the researcher (Welch et al., 2002).

When conducting research in Russia, the Russian high power distance may contribute to an even more apparent power asymmetry and difficulty in gaining access to and obtaining information from the correct respondents. A high power distance, an autocratic management style, the concentration of power at the top of a highly rigid hierarchical scale, the existence of authority based on positions, and a low emphasis on participation in the decision-making process are all characteristics of Russian hierarchy (Muratbekova-Touron, 2002) that may create problems in research situations. Top-level business leaders in Russian organizations may not prioritize spending their time talking to researchers, while middle-level managers may be reluctant to open up and share information that is not first approved by their leaders.

Fulfilling the need to interview several representatives from one company/organization may also be challenging in Russia. Involving several people from the same company/organization in an interview can be perceived as an act of discourtesy, and may be interpreted as a means of control or re-examination that evokes comparison to the less desirable aspects of the former Soviet system (Nilssen, 2002). Fulfilling this research need may require maintaining a delicate and difficult balance, and often requires obtaining approval from top-level management, regardless of the level of the intended respondents.

### **5.3 Openness**

The respondents' degree of openness when interviewing elites is an area of debate. Openness is a concern, given that elites often are responsible for representing and maintaining particular organizational policies and objectives (Welch et al., 1999). It is a special concern among senior executives, who are often expected to speak on behalf the organization as if they were the organization itself (Thomas, 1993). The researcher may experience gaining nothing more from an interview than could have been gained from reading press statements or annual reports (Welch et al., 2002). When conducting interviews in a foreign context where secondary information is lacking and often hard to find, as in Russia, these nuances may be harder to

detect, and one is even more reliant on obtaining the needed information from the respondents. For instance, obtaining information about Russian companies, such as company revenues, from secondary sources such as the Internet is an almost impossible task, whereas such data is regarded official information, accessible to all, in Norway.

Interviewers must always remain aware that a subject is not obliged to be objective and tell the truth (Berry, 2002) and that it is important to gain the respondents' trust in order to collect high-quality data (Harvey, 2011). A foreign researcher trying to gain trust from a Russian respondent may face particular challenges, as Russians consider trust to be personal and taking time to build (Voldnes et al., 2012). During the Soviet era, Russians' distrust of not only each other also the Soviet system necessitated the creation of informal, personal networks for the exchange of personal favors to protect individual or group interests (Butler and Purchase 2004; Ledeneva 1998). This experience from the Soviet period, when neighbors and even relatives revealed sensitive information about each other to the State, has resulted in Russians being both suspicious and distrustful (Hallén and Johanson 2004). However, there is very little time to build trustful relationships in an interview setting, and Russians often restrict their trust to the people in their in-group of personal networks. As previously explained, the in-group is a group of individuals with whom the collectivist is willing to cooperate, while the out-group is a group with whom the collectivist shares no common interests (Triandis, 1994). Thus, for a foreign researcher, the challenge of obtaining valuable information is complicated by the fact that being a foreigner automatically places one in the out-group, and working one's way into the in-group may require more time than an interview setting allows.

Age, gender, and cultural gaps have been found to have a varying influence on levels of openness and response quality across cultures (Hunt et al., 1964; Michailova, 2004; McDowell, 1998; Cavusgil and Das, 1997). The existence of such gaps may be a double-edged sword; while they may encourage a respondents to patronize a younger, female, or foreign researcher, they may also make the respondent more willing to open up (Welch et al., 2002). In interviewing elites from Latin countries, such as Italy, Spain, and Mexico, researchers describe how the respondents would often respond to the "flattery" of female researchers (Welch et al., 2002). Being a foreigner can either be a challenge to openness, as status as an outsider may hamper trust, or an advantage, as respondents may be more willing to speak freely to an outsider (Welch et al., 2002). The extent of openness may also be related to concerns regarding anonymity and spread of information.

Age, position, and gender have been found to be of great importance to Russians (Snaveley et al., 1998). As Russian men tend to be sexist (Voldnes et al., 2012), a young, female researcher may have problems being perceived seriously and may not be able to obtain information. Indeed, as a young female conducting research in Russia with an older, more experienced male colleague, I have personally encountered challenges with regard to being considered equal to my male colleague. Russians prefer to deal with someone in a position of authority and view discussions with younger officials as temporary and impersonal at best, insulting at worst (Snaveley et al., 1998).

A serious challenge in obtaining information from Russian respondents is Russians' culturally ingrained resistance to sharing information (McCarthy and Puffer 2002). As Russian employees believe knowledge to be a source of personal power and status that symbolizes their importance to the organization, they may withhold information for the sake of maintaining individual power and status (Engelhard and Nägele, 2003). In a situation in which information is considered a source of power and control, everything is considered a "commercial secret" in Russia (Muratbekova-Touron, 2002).

Elenkov (1998) argued that Russia's fairly high level of power distance, along with its high level of uncertainty avoidance and low level of trust, encourages minimal disclosure of company information that is crucial to effective corporate governance and knowledge sharing. Uncertainty avoidance is defined as the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations (Hofstede et al., 2010). Strong group affiliation and suspicion of out-group members have created "knowledge-sharing hostility" among Russians (Michailova and Husted, 2003). Michailova and Husted (2003) found that the lack of knowledge sharing among Russians was related to the fear of making and admitting mistakes. Collectivism and particularistic social relations in Russia have been found to lead to development of intensive social relations among organizational members, which facilitates knowledge and information sharing between in-group members in organizations (Michailova and Hutchings, 2006). Russian collectivism and particularism creates challenges in information sharing with out-groups. The Russian reluctance to engage in information sharing with out-groups results in severe methodological constraints when trying to extract information from businesses/organizations for research purposes.

Communication and information sharing are also highly connected with language skills. The transfer of information is restrained by the use of different language systems. Many expressions simply cannot be translated, and interpretation of information can be difficult due to different culturally bound schemes of interpretation (Engelhard and Nägele, 2003). Misunderstandings seem to occur not as a result of problems in literal translation but rather etymological problems in ascertaining meaning (Camiah and Hollinshead, 2003). According to Snively et al. (1998) "...the Russians often mean different things, even when using the same words..." Misunderstandings and misinterpretations can occur when people from different cultures have different worldviews, provide and use different contextualization cues, differ in the way that they say things, and/or express values in a different way (Shuster and Copeland, 1996). Rivera et al. (2002) also pointed out the challenge of translating certain concepts into Russian. Although some phrases can be literally translated into Russian, their meaning may be subject to a wide variety of interpretations (Rivera et al., 2002). Use of an interpreter in an in-depth interview is time consuming and tiresome for both the researcher and the interview object, provides the researcher with less control over the information given, places much responsibility on the interpreter, and poses the risk of misunderstandings and misinterpretations. However, using an interpreter provides the researcher with more time to absorb the answers and formulate proper follow-up questions.

## **6. Coping with the challenges: some advice**

Thus far we have addressed the challenges with conducting in-depth interviews in Russia through discussing several cultural characteristics of Russia that may influence access to respondents, the balance of power, and the level of openness in the interview setting. We argue that the cultural characteristics of Russia (listed in Table 1) all pose challenges for conducting in-depth interviews in Russia, especially for foreign researchers. Conducting research in foreign cultures requires certain interpersonal skills in addition to traditional research skills (Daniels and Cannice, 2004). However, knowledge and awareness of the challenges and proper preparation may help many foreign researchers succeed at conducting valuable qualitative research in Russia. In this section we provide some advice regarding the means of coping with the challenges that may arise.

To gain access to respondents, Rivera (2002) and Michailova (2004) stress the necessity of using one's personal network. As discussed above, foreign researchers may not find their

personal networks helpful, or may not even have any in Russia. To help gain access to the appropriate respondents in Russia, foreign researchers may find it helpful to ask a prominent and highly regarded person with the “right” contacts in Russia to approach the interview subjects (Nilssen, 2002). Researchers are recommended to draw attention to their institutional affiliations and use personal connections where possible (Welch et al., 2002; Ostrander, 1993). They are also recommended to invest time in preparing for initiating contact with Russian researchers, Russian research institutes, or universities, and to use their connections to gain access. Another way of gaining access is to request one highly profiled person, such as a senior manager of a highly respected company, to act as a “sponsor” for the research project by, for example, asking the senior manager to send a letter to other business managers requesting their participation. Doing so, however, can be time-consuming and costly, and even pose the risk of bias in sampling, as some people may refuse to become involved in the research project because of antipathy toward or competition between them and the “sponsor” (McDowell, 1998). Also, using such a process may confine the researcher to a particular viewpoint sanctioned by the “sponsor” (Welch et al., 2002). Without having and utilizing either direct or indirect networks, gaining access to Russian businesses may be an impossible task.

Persistence in attempting to gain access is very important. The researcher may have to call again and again in order to gain access to the relevant person, and then be prepared to arrange an interview. After doing so, the researcher may have to call again to make sure the appointment still stands. As Michailova (2004) stresses, the researcher must be prepared for surprises, as interviews are often rescheduled without informing him or her. When the researcher has scheduled an appointment, he or she must arrive punctually and wait patiently for the respondent to arrive without showing impatience or acting insulted for his or her tardiness, but rather show appreciation for his or her participation. Western punctuality may not be reciprocated in Russia, but researchers must arrive punctually, even if it means waiting. Thus, when planning a research trip to Russia, it is essential to maintain a flexible and open schedule. Planning a very strict schedule with several interviews per day may often lead to failure in collecting information and missed interviews.

Challenges remain even after scheduling an interview, including attaining openness to obtain not only information itself but the desired kind of information. As previously mentioned, Russians are unaccustomed to being interviewed or revealing information about their thinking and behavior. It is essential for the interviewer to be sensitive by very carefully explaining his



or her intentions and the rationale behind the research questions, as well as, of course, that all information will remain anonymous.

The literature shows that when interviewing elites, the power advantage is in favor of the respondent and not the interviewer (Morris, 2009). It is therefore important for the researcher to seek balance in order to obtain information. Some sources have advised researchers on how to “disarm” elite respondents (Morris, 2009). To be taken seriously by elite respondents, researchers are advised to acquire knowledge of the respondents and their company, and become well prepared for the interview (Zuckerman, 1972). By doing so, researchers can show respondents that they know much about them and their organization. Rivera (2002), however, disagrees with this advice, claiming that revealing that one knows much about the respondents in Russia may raise respondents’ doubts concerning anonymity. We find Rivera et al.’s (2002) view to accord more strongly with our own experience and address the suspicion toward foreigners and limited interviewing experience of respondents. We therefore argue that researchers should give no indication that they know anything about the respondents’ backgrounds, and indicate that they have collected only official information.

To help avoid Russians’ from feeling uneasy when sharing information and putting them in a difficult situation because of the strict hierarchical system of their organizations, it might be beneficial to interview top management. If doing so is not possible or desired for research purposes, it might be beneficial to obtain the cooperation of top management so that they approve the interviewing of lower management.

Building trust is, as mentioned above, not easy to achieve within a typically brief research period. However, several initiatives can assist researchers in gaining trust. One is to request a prominent and highly respected person to make the first contact with the respondent to explain the research intentions and how the research is beneficial (Nilssen, 2002; Rivera et al., 2002). Another is to stress the fact that there are no right or wrong answers to interview questions and that the only information desired is the respondent’s opinion. While it might be beneficial to meet the respondent more than once, doing so is often challenging, given that research budgets are often restricted.

As age, gender, and position can influence both access to respondents and the information revealed, it may be valuable to consider carefully who will conduct the interviews. For one’s

research to be taken seriously, it might be beneficial that the interviewer have a high academic degree, have much experience, or even be male.

In regard to linguistic challenges, it is, of course highly beneficial to speak Russian when conducting research in Russia. However, if doing so is not possible, it is very important to employ an interpreter who is not only highly fluent in both languages but also has knowledge of the researcher's special field to be able to use adequate terminology.

## 7. Concluding remarks

This paper identifies the cultural dimensions influencing and summarizes the knowledge regarding conducting in-depth interviews in Russia for development of practical recommendations for foreign researchers. As stressed throughout, identifying the possible challenges that one may face before conducting research into international business in Russia is highly beneficial. The use of qualitative research methods in international business research may, as was described, offer many advantages, including the collection of rich data allowing for deeper understanding. However, challenges related to the existence of strong cultural differences may impede realization of these advantages. Above all, collecting valid and reliable data requires the researcher to demonstrate interpersonal skills and cultural sensitivity (Daniels and Cannice, 2004). The recommendations provided here may help researchers prepare for the early stage of interviewing in a manner that helps them avoid some of the pitfalls that may have a negative impact on the cost and quality of their research when operating in a culturally complex country such as Russia.

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