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## To cite this version:

Thi My Hanh Huynh, Anne Bartel-Radic. Doing qualitative field research in Vietnam. Guttormsen, D., Lauring, J., Champan, M. (Eds.). Field Guide to Intercultural Research, Edward Elgar, pp.321-328, 2021, 10.4337/9781788970129.00035 . hal-03566089

**HAL Id: hal-03566089**

**https://hal.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/hal-03566089v1**

Submitted on 13 Sep 2023

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Huynh, T. M. H., & Bartel-Radic, A. (2021). 26. **Doing qualitative field research in Vietnam**. In: Guttormsen, D. S., Lauring, J., & Chapman, M. (Eds.). (2021). *Field guide to intercultural research*. Edward Elgar Publishing. p. 322-328.

# Doing qualitative field research in Vietnam

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we aim to provide insights into the Vietnamese culture and context, and practical tips for researchers who carry out qualitative fieldwork in Vietnam. This chapter is based on doctoral research in the field of organizational behavior, conducted by the first co-author, a Vietnamese female lecturer in Danang University of Economics. She was supervised by the second co-author, a German female professor working at a French university. The PhD was sponsored by the Vietnamese government as one of 911 projects that allow university lecturers to do their PhD abroad in an international university. Within this research, we have conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with Vietnamese participants in varied job functions in public and private hospitals, and in universities in the city of Danang in the center of Vietnam.

The first part of this chapter will provide tips for how researchers can more successfully conduct field research in Vietnam: first, how the Vietnamese non-cultural context affects qualitative interviewing; second, how the Vietnamese culture affects interviewing; and third, how cultural differences between Vietnamese and Western scholars impact the research process.

## CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS IN THE VIETNAMESE CONTEXT

This first section focusses on lessons learned on qualitative fieldwork in Vietnam that are related to the country's overall context, but not specifically to culture in the sense of deeply rooted basic assumptions (Schein, 1985).

### Preparation of the Semi-structured Interviews

In the Vietnamese context, it is useful to send the respondents an overview of the research issue in order to prepare for the interview. In our research, before starting the interviews, we sent a brief explanation of the definition of the concept and its dimensions, in Vietnamese, to the 60 prospects for the interviews, via e-mail. Then, two experts were hired to help revise the interview guide, in order to adapt it to the organizational and professional contexts of the participants. Those contexts strongly differ between public and private organizations, and according to the (medical or higher education) sector. An advisor for each of the two sectors helped revise the questions before starting the interviews. In addition to giving advice, these two experts were invited to conduct a pilot semi-structured interview and to attend the very first interviews led by the author; thereby, they helped to adjust the interview guide. The experts were paid to give their contribution within a week, and to help to contact the 50 interviewees who finally took part in our research. In this book, Zølner (Chapter 12) and Mazonde (Chapter 20) engage in the importance of local help when conducting surveys in countries where questions might be lost in translation. We went further than that in this research, because the field researcher was already a local. However, in the Vietnamese context, we consider that it is really useful to get help and advice from members with long-term experience and in managerial positions in the targeted organizations or sectors.

**The Timing of an Interview**

A second important issue to consider when conducting fieldwork in Vietnam is the routine of a working day in Vietnam, which is flexible and starts early at 7.30 a.m., but people usually leave from home earlier, at about 6.30 a.m. For some doctors and nurses, coffee time or a breakfast before their morning meeting is an ideal moment for a one-hour interview. The evening always ends late at about 11 p.m. Having dinner together or an appointment after dinner in a coffee shop is also a good moment for an interview.

An hour and a half appeared to be an ideal duration for an interview during our fieldwork. The interviewees were asked open-ended questions and situational questions to provide examples of what they observed in practice or what played a role in this situation at their workplace. The timing for an interview should be an hour and a half maximum. A longer duration may lead both interviewers and respondents to become tired and drift away from the topic. Less than an hour and a half seems too short because an introductory discussion and warm-up time is crucial, and this usually takes between 15 and 20 minutes. Over time, the interviews were conducted in an increasingly relaxed atmosphere. We learned how to identify the best moment to stop the interview and recognize when the interviewees felt too tired.

**Advantages of Being a Vietnamese Interviewer**

It is highlighted in the literature (Zhang & Guttormsen, 2016) that being from the country and speaking the local language has strong advantages for leading qualitative fieldwork. This clearly also applies to Vietnam. In Vietnam, friends and family relationships can help in approaching the interviewees more easily. We intended to interview people in both public and private organizations. The university and the hospital were our first choices because the first author is a lecturer at the university and her husband a doctor in the regional hospital. Thirty of her colleagues and 20 of his participated in the semi-structured interviews. Although she works at the university, we asked another colleague to help her to review the interview guide, and we did the same in the hospital where her husband works.

The spirit of cooperation of the Vietnamese people, especially of the young people, helps to accelerate the interviews. A dozen of our interviewees were our alumni, aged from 20 to 30. Some of them had just graduated and started to work with a high degree of motivation and commitment to their workplace. Others had already worked for several years and had more experience and maturity. All of them had followed a marketing research course during their undergraduate studies that had given them foundational knowledge on doing research. This increased their willingness and enthusiasm to contribute to this academic research.

In intercultural fieldwork, language diversity is always a challenge, but not only an obstacle to be overcome. Language diversity contributes to shaping communication, defining identities and power structures (Church-Morel & Bartel-Radic, 2016). In this book, Bruce W. Stening (in Chapter 11) and Mette Zølner (in Chapter 12) emphasize the importance of language when doing intercultural research. In this study, the interviewer was a native speaker and the Vietnamese language was used between the interviewer and the interviewees. Clearly, speaking Vietnamese with all the interviewees who shared the same native language was a strong advantage. It made the interviewer feel more comfortable in understanding the way the respondents expressed their ideas, especially when they shared the same local dialogue and vocabulary. For example, some of the respondents came from the nearby regions and cities such as Quang Binh, Hue, Danang, or Quang Nam, and used local vocabulary like ‘chi’,

‘mô’, ‘răng’, ‘rứa’.1 It would have been difficult for an interviewer coming from the north or from the south of Vietnam to understand these words.

## THE IMPACT OF THE VIETNAMESE CULTURE ON QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

Some aspects to be considered during qualitative fieldwork in Vietnam are clearly related to deeply rooted cultural basic assumptions. The Vietnamese culture is an endogenous culture from the Red River civilization, but it is also strongly influenced by the Chinese after its long Chinese occupation and a feudal period that lasted for more than 1000 years. Among the external cultures penetrating Vietnam, Confucianism and Buddhism are characterized by respect towards ancestors, male domination, family hierarchy, the value of relationships, responsibility and obligation (Nguyen, 2009). Confucianism, developed from the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (Goldin, 2011), has been defined as a worldview, an ethical system, a political ideology and a scholarly tradition. According to Confucianism, the individual is not a detached entity but part and parcel of his or her relationships (Yao, 2000). Two of Hofstede’s dimensions (Hofstede, 1991) are strongly related to Confucianism, and are particularly salient in the Vietnamese culture: power distance and collectivism. The Vietnamese culture ranks very high on both of these dimensions. Communication styles are very implicit, because Vietnam is a ‘high context culture’ where the shared context embodies an important part of the message (Hall, 1989). Finally, the ‘village’ has always been a crucial organizational unit in Vietnamese social life and the agricultural ‘village culture’ is a significant character of the Vietnamese culture (Nguyen, 2017).

### Thanking the Interviewees

For each interviewee, a small gift including a symbolic amount of cash money or a supermarket voucher were offered to express gratitude for their participation in the research. Just one person from the university and two interviewees from the hospital refused this gift because of their very close friendship with the author over a long period of time. The symbolism of a small amount of money for granting an interview differs greatly between the Vietnamese and the French cultures. While it is almost a mandatory gesture of politeness and courtesy in the Vietnamese context, a French interviewee would be offended if he or she was offered some euros. The French sociologist Philippe d’Iribarne (1989) has shown that in the French culture, helping somebody is a positively valued behavior, but as soon as this specific activity (like granting an interview) is paid for, especially if the amount of money is small, interviewees are likely to be offended. The financial ‘reward’ symbolically signifies that the interviewee is a servant from a low social class (in the sense of the *Ancien Régime*, before the French Revolution).

In addition to the small gift, the list of the interviewees was saved, and a ‘thank you letter’ was posted after the end of the research as an additional way to express gratitude and show courtesy.

### The Fear of ‘Wrong Answers’

When interviewing Vietnamese respondents, one of the most difficult hurdles to overcome was their fear of being criticized by others. It is a specific of the Vietnamese culture that people love to be always right. This leads to the fear of being wrong, being told they are wrong, or being criticized. Before starting the interviews, we pledged to make no comment or judgment about the information they provided us, and that all information would stay strictly anonymous. However, the respondents always intended to give ‘positive answers’ with nice

words, to avoid any judgment. Therefore, it is useful to formulate questions concerning specific events, a precise story concerning the interviewees themselves, or describing a situation that has happened in the past. For example, to the question of whether they saved energy in the workplace, we would certainly have received a 'yes' without any further information. That is why we asked them about the activity they were used to doing before leaving their office, or about the kind of documents they usually print, and in what way. These kinds of questions can bring out more interesting and helpful information. In another situation, if we had asked the interviewees if they intended to follow any program to improve their skills and acquire new knowledge in order to increase their performance at the workplace, the answer would definitively have been 'yes'. Vietnamese people love to depict themselves in a positive light and they fear being criticized as a passive person. Therefore, it is preferable to ask them about their professional projects and the way they intend to realize them.

The types of questions where answers could be interpreted as being right or wrong, such as Yes/No questions or questions concerning the future, should also be avoided. This also applies to questions requiring a judgment or an opinion. Despite careful formulation of the questions, the fear the Vietnamese have of being wrong must also be considered during data analysis.

## THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VIETNAMESE AND WESTERN SCHOLARS WITHIN THE RESEARCH TEAM ON QUALITATIVE FIELDWORK

In the final section of this chapter, we turn to cultural diversity within the research team. As mentioned, in Vietnam, the power distance is strong and the communication style is highly implicit. In particular, younger or less experienced researchers fear criticism from more senior researchers. They are therefore reluctant to show their 'work in progress', to share the difficulties they are confronted with. While in Western individualist cultures, learners progress through an active trial-and-error process, the Confucian collectivist tradition suggests that learners need a competent teacher to guide them (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Moreover, Far Eastern cultures have a working and learning style where all information is first gathered, and a work perfectly completed, before it is shown to superiors. As a consequence, particularly more junior Vietnamese members of a research team will tend not to articulate their ideas, analyses and conclusions explicitly, especially if they differ from former interpretations, or those of the senior researchers. This contrasts with a Western 'trial-and-error' style where work in progress is there to be shown, 'tested' and continuously completed.

Again, because of the highly implicit communication style and high power distance, less experienced Vietnamese researchers in particular might show a tendency to not answer questions clearly because it is interpreted as disrespectful to reply to senior professors and researchers. The distinction that is currently made in Western research between 'a question' (expecting an answer) and 'a comment' (which is not to be answered) might not be familiar to Vietnamese researchers and might make the research dialogue less fruitful if it is not clarified at the beginning of the collaboration.

In our research, we clearly experienced these difficulties, but similarities between both scholars in private life situations (both being mothers of young kids) represented a shared context that encouraged communication and trust building. Whether such common grounds can be built on or not, it is very important for intercultural research teams to set up a climate of mutual trust in which results and discussions can be shared, otherwise the interpretation of more senior researchers will dominate those of the more junior ones. This will have a strong

negative impact on qualitative fieldwork if the junior researchers come from Vietnam, know the culture and context of the country, and speak the language.

## CONCLUSION: PRACTICAL TIPS FOR RESEARCHERS DOING QUALITATIVE FIELDWORK IN VIETNAM

To conclude this chapter, let us resume our insights in terms of practical tips for researchers intending to do qualitative fieldwork in Vietnam. Researchers should pay particular attention to avoiding any social desirability bias. In Vietnam, people want to present themselves in a positive way, and this might influence their answers more strongly than in the Western world. Moreover, Vietnamese are afraid of giving wrong answers. Therefore, interview questions should not concern people's knowledge or self-evaluation, but rather focus on events and on their activities or projects.

Two aspects of qualitative interviewing in Vietnam might seem surprising for researchers from the Western world: doing the interviews outside office hours and sometimes even very early, or late at night, and thanking every interviewee with a small amount of money. However, this gesture is important to show gratitude to the interviewees for having given their time and to maintain harmony in the relationship.

Including Vietnamese researchers in the research team is very important. Personal and professional networks of the Vietnamese researchers will be crucial in getting access to the field. Doing the interviews in Vietnamese will permit a much more accurate understanding of the interviewee's point of view. Mutual understanding will be optimal only if the interviewer and the interviewee originate from the same region of Vietnam (north, center, or south), because dialects differ to a considerable extent. However, even if the team includes a Vietnamese researcher, we advise hiring (and rewarding) experts from the field to adapt the interview guide to the specific context and ease access to the interviewees.

Within international research teams including members from different levels of seniority, it is necessary to put time and effort into building mutual trust so that Vietnamese junior research fellows accept sharing work in progress and their interpretation of the data, otherwise they might remain rather passive and adopt the senior researchers' interpretation, even if the latter have a poorer knowledge of the context and the data of the research.

## NOTE

1. Chi = 'what', mô = 'where', răng = 'why', rứa = 'that'.

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