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## **Challenges and promoters during international fieldwork in Lebanon**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter aims to explore how the Lebanese context and culture influence qualitative fieldwork in Lebanon. Qualitative research is based on a comprehensive aim that seeks to answer the questions 'why' (explanations) and 'how' (description) (Dumez, 2011). Even though the use of qualitative methods has increased considerably in international business research, researchers applying these methods are still facing obstacles and difficulties. Qualitative research requires relational, behavioral and negotiation-related skills to access the field and to collect relevant data.

Lebanon is a small country located in the Middle East near the Mediterranean Sea and is characterized by the hospitality, cultural diversity and the multilingualism of its population. Lebanon recognizes 17 communities or religious groups, the main seven of which are Maronites, Sunnis, Shiites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Druze and Armenians. This diversity explains why Lebanon is known as 'a mosaic of religions and communities' (Kattar, 2011). The Lebanese people's desire to live together has never wavered, despite years of war. In Lebanese society, the different communities are defined by religious parameters, but they are able to relate to each other in terms of shared beliefs, practices and spiritual values. This makes Lebanon a natural fit for people from different religions and backgrounds.

The tips and lessons learned mentioned in this chapter mainly originate from qualitative research led by the first author in 2018 and 2019 as a part of her thesis on cultural diversity and innovation in the non-profit sector in Lebanon. We collected and analyzed qualitative data through semi-structured interviews in a single case study of an international non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Lebanon in two different locations. The interview participants were volunteers of the NGO and the interviews lasted between 30 and 80 minutes.

This chapter is organized as follows. We will first present our experience of the promoters of qualitative field research in Lebanon. Thereafter, we will examine the obstacles we have been confronted with during our studies. To conclude, we share some lessons learned in solving these challenges, and we give practical tips for qualitative research in Lebanon.

### **PROMOTERS OF QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH IN LEBANON**

The main promoters of qualitative fieldwork we have experienced in Lebanon are cultural diversity, multilingualism, and hospitality.

#### **Cultural Diversity in Lebanon**

Cultural diversity is a typical dimension of the Lebanese culture, which originates from the encounter of many civilizations over thousands of years. Lebanon, located at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and Africa, is like a mosaic, characterized by a diversity of cultures, traditions, and religions. These diverse influences are evident in the extraordinary richness of skin color, social class, education, language, cuisine, the arts, and the country's religious heritages.

Lebanon has an Arab culture colored by Western influences. This gives the Lebanese people an 'ethnorelative' attitude (Bennett, 1986), helping the society to open up opportunities for intercultural learning. In cultures where such traits are clearly present, individuals and organizations develop more intercultural competence (Bartel-Radic, 2013), defined as the ability to understand the specifics of intercultural interaction and to adjust to these specifics by actively constructing an appropriate strategy for interaction. Because of its strong cultural diversity, grounded in a high level of diversity in religious (confessional) communities, languages, education, and foreign influence, Lebanon is a fertile ground for studying issues related to diversity and international management.

### **The Multilingualism of the Lebanese People**

Lebanon is also characterized by its multilingual diversity. It is a particularly complex type of diversity because it deeply affects what people do (skills and performance) and who they are (identity) (Church-Morel & Bartel-Radic, 2016). Research in international business has shown that in qualitative research interviews, language is more than an issue of translation (Welch & Piekkari, 2006). In addition, in this book, Bruce W. Stening (in Chapter 11) and Mette Zølner (in Chapter 12) emphasize the importance of language when doing intercultural research. Recent trends in linguistics and philosophy insist that language is a cultural resource that (re)produces the social world (Duranti, 1997).

The education system in Lebanon reflects this language diversity. Standard Arabic, French, and English serve as languages of instruction owing to the presence of foreign influences. During the French Mandate (Decree No. 2079, dated June 20, 1924), the teaching of both the Arabic and French languages was made compulsory in private schools. After the independence of Lebanon from French governance in 1943, the number of schools teaching English as the second foreign language increased, especially after the 1970s when English became the major language of worldwide communication (Bacha & Bahous, 2011). Lebanon's multilingualism removes many barriers, eases communication processes, and facilitates field research. Stahl and Brannen (2013) state that similarity in language-diverse work contexts can be part of an individual's attraction to the diversity found in international business environments. Furthermore, Zhang and Guttormsen (2016) highlight that language has a crucial role in creating rapport and trust between the interviewer and the interviewees, especially in the process of seeking to schedule interviews and gain access to individual informants. The challenge for the interviewer is to formulate questions appropriately to reduce potential misunderstandings and ensure accurate information retrieval (Welch & Piekkari, 2006).

### **The Hospitality of the Lebanese People**

The Lebanese people are very welcoming and generous. The warmth and kindness that the Lebanese offer to everyone is something that makes foreigners fond of this country. This friendliness frequently creates an attachment between Lebanese people and foreign researchers that can increase their chances of success when doing their interviews, since it makes them feel more comfortable and excited to do more interviews, boosts their willpower and reduces their stress, and thus help them reach their goals.

Moreover, Lebanon has a long tradition of university education, research and science policy. A high percentage of the population attains secondary and higher education with no distinction based on gender. The influence of foreign models on higher education in Lebanon remains strong. Lebanese universities have pursued an increasingly active international development policy, and have signed numerous agreements with foreign universities,

particularly French ones (to date, there are about 500 French–Lebanese interuniversity agreements). In 2012, 35 percent of the Lebanese students moving to France left to complete a double-degree (UNESCO, n.d.). That was the case for the first author of this chapter since she went to France to finish her master’s degree that was a partnership between the Lebanese University and *les Mines de Saint-Etienne*. The international experience of many Lebanese alumni adds to their openness towards international researchers.

Therefore, the hospitality towards foreign researchers is particularly salient in Lebanon. Lebanese citizens and companies highly appreciate foreigners and foreign graduates. Consequently, access to organizations is even easier for foreign researchers or Lebanese with foreign qualifications, than for Lebanese researchers (Dubruc, Mekdessi & Khawaja, 2018).

When we contacted the volunteers to make appointments for the interviews, we highlighted that the study was led by a French university. Field actors explicitly showed interest in participating in the study because of foreignness of the university, and because the results of the study might be presented at international conferences. During the interviews with the volunteers, they were very welcoming. They facilitated the process of making information available to the researcher, and they openly discussed the strategic orientations and narrated the history of the organization. The interviewees seemed to appreciate talking about their organization and their professional and private lives. They offered several meetings and interviews and suggested they talk to other actors to talk about their experience. We were allowed to record the interviews, and nobody requested control of the analyses of the qualitative data.

## **OBSTACLES TO QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH IN LEBANON**

Despite the above characteristics that facilitate research in Lebanon, others might negatively affect and hinder qualitative field research.

### **Confessionalism**

The racial, ethnic, and religious fault lines that still run through Lebanese society are so central for the Lebanese government and politics that they are mentioned in the Constitution and other core governing documents (Kattar, 2011). Legally, the Lebanese political system does not require religious representation, but informally the system and all its institutions are based on the acquiescence of sectarian religious groups. Community laws govern everyday life more than the civil laws of the state do. For instance, political decisions require a process of consensus building among religions. The political system’s focus on sectarian leadership has emphasized a sectarian identity and sense of belonging, which in turn exacerbated social and political cleavages among the Lebanese (Beyond Reform & Development, 2015). Confessionalism in Lebanon is an official religious diversity scheme that distributes institutional power proportionally among various religious communities. Lebanon is based to secure balanced power sharing. Hence, confessional diversity is restricted to power distribution among different religious groups (Syed & Özbilgin, 2010). Access to work opportunities or meetings is dependent on one’s confessional belonging rather than on one’s talents. Therefore, one cannot access a position if one does not belong to a certain confession. This aspect also limits the possibilities for researchers to contact any organization without taking into consideration the sectarian background.

The first (Lebanese) author of this chapter is a Muslim, but both her name and the way she dresses could also be seen as Christian. This ambiguity has already eased access to the field in the past, because actors from the Christian community welcomed her in meetings and

discussions as if she were a member from their community. In some cases, they later understood that she was a Muslim, but this no longer had any impact on the relationship and field access at that time.

### **Nepotism**

Nepotism is one of the biggest problems in Lebanon that negatively affects the development of organizations and of the economy (Syed & Özbilgin, 2010). In Lebanon, friendships and family relationships might considerably help to approach interviewees more easily. Personal networks can be situated at the level of family relations, confessional belonging, or political affiliations. They will have a considerable effect on the researcher's field access by enhancing or hindering the process of contacting organizations. You may need a relational network, a specific religion, or an important professional title or position to get positive feedback and enter specific organizations.

### **Organizational Culture**

Other constraints also hinder qualitative fieldwork in Lebanon. Few companies are open to the world of research and are committed to 'win-win' partnerships with researchers from the public sector. The divide highlighted by Zhang, Levenson and Crossley (2015) between the vast majority of management research on the one hand, and practice of management on the other, can clearly be observed in Lebanon. Research strategies such as action research are equally appealing to both organizations and researchers (ibid.), but remain rare in Lebanon. Companies in Lebanon consider that establishing research partnerships with public researchers represents an additional workload or even a waste of time without a particular benefit. Unfortunately, young researchers in particular often do not know how to convince them to overcome these barriers, also because universities do not support PhD students to get accepted into companies to do their research. Young researchers have difficulty 'selling' themselves because they lack prestigious professional titles and achievements. This can explain the predilection of young researchers for quantitative rather than qualitative research, to avoid wasting time when being rejected.

However, a distinction should be made between universities that have the ambition to do serious research and linking teaching to research, and those that do not or cannot. In April 2006, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, in the presence of the General Director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Kōichirō Matsuura, inaugurated the new Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (STIP) in Beirut. This STIP plan was supposed to work towards the integration of all national resources and spare no effort to strengthen cooperation among scientists and the economy in Lebanon (UNESCO, n.d.). Lebanese researchers try to fill the gap through many initiatives such as seminars on qualitative research, and university-business cooperation. Moreover, the Doctoral School of Law, Political, Administrative and Economic Sciences (EDDSPAE) of the Lebanese University organized a partnership with the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), the Regional Doctoral Consortium in Economics and Management (CODEG) and the Rally of Lebanese Leaders and Entrepreneurs (RDCL) in November 2016. These initiatives aim at promoting qualitative research, and at explaining the ways companies and organizations can mutually benefit from them. Such seminars are organized by Lebanese and foreign professors and researchers and are levers for linking the world of research and the world of business more tightly together.

### **Reliability of Information**

Organizations want to portray a positive image of themselves. Thereby, they may obscure some information on the difficulties they are facing. In addition, they sometimes do not rely much on their staff to implement key activities, and they do not reveal their strategies to all of them. Hence, the reliability of the information collected through qualitative interviews should be questioned, and information should be double-checked. Thus, when choosing the interviewees, we must make sure that they are the right persons for the needs of the research, and that they will be able to deliver accurate and reliable information. This aspect increases the importance of data triangulation, which aims to interview several people with different status from the same organization, and to compare their answers.

### **CONCLUSION – PRACTICAL TIPS AND STEPS TO UNDERTAKE**

Lebanon is known as an intercultural microcosm since it is a small country with high cultural and religious diversity, and a rich cultural heritage. This cultural diversity has been shaped by the events that happened over time (among which French governance, war, and emigration) and the close contact with other cultures. However, the Lebanese emigrants have always kept strong ties with their homeland. This has led to a multilingualism that plays an important role in the history of the Lebanese society and cultural practices.

We can conclude from the above developments with some lessons and tips for those who want to do research in Lebanon:

- The multilingualism of the Lebanese people will facilitate the communication process, create trust between interviewer and interviewees, and smooth the process of contacting interviewees and scheduling interviews.
- The hospitality of the Lebanese people and especially to foreigners will help foreign researchers to smoothly accomplish their mission.
- Confessionalism can obstruct your work, so avoid discussing sectarian topics unless it's a matter of your study.
- Nepotism has a significant effect in Lebanon, therefore having a good relational network, an important professional title or knowing people with good positions can significantly affect your work in a positive way.
- Researchers should emphasize the importance of their research for the studied organizations in order to be accepted by organizations to collect field data.
- The interviewees should be chosen very carefully to permit access to reliable information.

Despite the past studies that have focused on cultural diversity in Lebanon, the country, its organizations and its people offer a rich ground and considerable interest for future intercultural fieldwork.

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