



Collecting rich qualitative data on business relationships and networks in CEE countries: Challenges and plausible solutions

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ABSTRACT

Collecting rich qualitative data in business-to-business market context, where respondents are more reluctant towards investing time in academic research, may impose several barriers for researchers. In particular, challenges may emerge in collecting data and establishing its trustworthiness in Central Eastern European (CEE) countries, due to a distinct business context that has developed over several historical instances.

The aim of this paper is to investigate and understand the methodological challenges of collecting rich qualitative data on business relationships and networking in CEE countries. The countries in focus are Russia, Croatia and Hungary. In order to achieve our aims, we critically reflect on personal experiences and consult the literature on conducting research in the aforementioned countries. The contribution of the paper lies in context-sensitive implications for methodological specifics and plausible solutions to overcome barriers to conducting qualitative research on business relationships and networks in CEE countries.

1. Introduction

Studies on business-to-business (B2B) marketing and knowledge of business relationships and networks have advanced rapidly since the IMP Group was formed in the 1970s (cf. Möller & Halinen, 2000). Traditional models and theories of business marketing have been changed and adapted to a new economic order, in which networks of connected business actors are playing the pivotal role (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). Furthermore, since the establishment of the IMP Group, rapid globalization has led Western businesses to seek new opportunities and establish their position in new markets. This has motivated companies from developed Western countries to engage more proactively in business relationships with companies from emerging markets, including Central Eastern European (CEE) countries. Business network and relationship phenomena are, thus, inherently international.

Although it has been almost three decades since the communist regime in CEE countries collapsed, the mindset of business people in these countries might still be entrenched in past ideologies and cultural specifics. This can pose barriers both to doing business and conducting research in those countries. Additionally, the focus on business network and relationships may pose yet more challenges for research, due to its complexity (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). Although there has been a growing amount of business network research in the context of CEE

countries, most of the business network and relationships studies are still conducted from a Western perspective (cf. Lowe, Ellis, & Purchase, 2008). Thus, while network theory is firmly established in developed markets, and its concepts are familiar to Western-based companies and managers, the same concepts may have different connotations for CEE-based companies and managers, due to the different socio-cultural context (cf. Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994). Quantitative surveys in emerging CEE countries may, thus, be compromised by a simple misunderstanding of concepts used in questions, and thereby produce largely distorted results. Qualitative methods may therefore provide better results.

Qualitative methods are widely used in Western-based B2B marketing research and IMP Group studies, in particular through the application of interview-based case studies (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). Solely in the Industrial Marketing Management (IMM), 105 case studies were published during the period 1971–2006 (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010). Furthermore, qualitative research techniques have been particularly recommended for studying emerging markets (including CEE countries), due to their unstructured nature and greater ability to uncover new constructs and provide in-depth understanding of situational and contextual factors (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006; Craig & Douglas, 2001). However, most of the research in CEE markets has been conducted in a quantitative manner (e.g. Martin & Grbac, 2003; Miočević & Crnjak-Karanovic, 2012; Radaev, 2013; Sheresheva & Kolesnik, 2011).

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Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with individual managers form the main tool for data collection in qualitative studies, and are widely used in Western business network research. As managers are the principal subjects of an interview situation, the contextual conditions should be considered when planning research on business networks and relationships. An interview is similar to any other interaction situation, such as interacting with customers or colleagues, and is embedded in the local social context (Alvesson, 2003). Here, we adhere to a localism view, where an interview (including pre-interview interactions) is an act, which often follows certain scripts or logic, based on past experiences, and socio-historical and cultural context (Alvesson, 2003). We deem it necessary to understand the socio-historical context of the country in which an interview with a manager is situated.

This paper is descriptive in nature and aims to understand the challenges of conducting qualitative research on business network and relationships in CEE countries. We focus in particular on three emerging countries, namely Russia, Croatia and Hungary, chosen for their common historical background, especially related to the communist regime, and concurrently several socio-historical differences. Additionally, the authors have adequate experience of conducting business network research in these countries. Motivated by this focus we address the following research questions: 1) How is socio-historical background related to barriers to conducting research in Russia, Croatia and Hungary? 2) How can these barriers be overcome and rich qualitative data obtained from Russian, Croatian and Hungarian firms and businesspeople? In order to achieve the aims we reflect on our research experiences in the focal countries and consult previous literature. Based on our research experiences, we focus especially on face-to-face, semi-structured, and to some extent narrative interviewing. Thus, an interview guide present during the interviews acted as an initiating trigger for the respondents' storytelling rather than a strict protocol to follow. The story emerged from a dialogue between the respondents and the researchers, minimizing researcher influence.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce the context of the study, providing information on socio-historical peculiarities of the focal countries. Second, we provide a brief discussion on the methodologies applied in previous business network and relationships research in Russia, Croatia and Hungary. Third, we present a review and critical reflection on the challenges a researcher might face when conducting qualitative face-to-face interviews in these countries, and, based on personal experiences, provide plausible solutions to overcome these challenges. We conclude with a summary of the findings, after which we discuss the contributions of the study and implications for further research.

2. Russia, Croatia and Hungary: socio-historical context

Socialist and communist ideologies still exert a strong influence on the modern economic and business development of post-communist countries. Social norms of behavior, values and beliefs affected by the reality of socialism can still be found in business practices, despite the business environment shifting towards a market orientation during the last two decades (Runst, 2013).

As the key state of the Soviet Union, Russia was guided by the Marxism-Leninism ideology grounded on state ownership and control of the assets and means of production, a centrally-planned economy, and the elimination of private property and competition (Neill & Collins, 1964). During the Soviet period, Russia exhibited typical characteristics of collectivism, and hostility towards foreigners. Historically, the development of Soviet society has resulted in the formation of specific values or norms of behavior, such as being reticent in public, giving more credence to word-of-mouth than the official state-owned media,

not relying on the rule of law, appreciating corruption and power hierarchy (Rozov, 2011). Another distinctive feature was lagging industrial development; large manufacturing organizations had to source and manage all goods inputs internally, complementary parts had to be produced in one place and there were no buyer-seller relationships typical to a competitive market. An industrial network under bureaucratic control and a lack of cooperation incentives from the state frequently resulted in illegal social network formations based on nepotism and interpersonal cooperation for various benefits (Nieminen, 1999). Providing favors and interpersonal loyalty had more influence on business processes than official arrangements (Lewis, 2006).

As a consequence of the socio-historical background, the Russian "post-soviet personality" has a low degree of trust in outsiders (Mattsson & Salmi, 2013), is suspicious of everything new, respectful of social hierarchy, distrusts institutions, idealizes past achievements of the state, and fosters "blat" (Rozov, 2011). Conventionally, "blat" may be explained as favor via personal relationships (Johanson & Johanson, 1999). This network of social connections was developed during Soviet times as a response to the shortage of goods and services. Along with privileged access to products, "blat" opened doors to prestige universities, jobs and promotion. It is based on the exchange of favors between closely related people such as family members, friends and neighbors, rather than on monetary relations. The essential elements of the social network include resource exchange, strong personal relationships, and interpersonal trust (Jansson, Johanson, & Ramström, 2007).

Croatia experienced 45 years of Communist party rule, which left a certain imprint on the leadership and business management style. Historically, compared to other communist nations, Croatian politics and culture were influenced by catholic religion and Austrian influence. Croatians consider themselves closer to Western culture and values. Although Soviet Russia and Croatia (as a part of the former Republic of Yugoslavia) shared ideas of communism, their ways of development towards "the brighter future" had diverged by 1948, the latter looking towards a more liberal approach to the country's governance (Holmes, 1997).

Croatia was similar to the Soviet states in its pathway towards industrialization. However, Croatia adopted a specific approach to socialism, i.e. a self-management system of industrial relations aimed at the decentralization of decision-making processes in industries (Zupanov & Adizes, 1981). This system replaced the Soviet style centrally-planned regime at the beginning of the 1950s. Self-management pursues the relative decentralization of industrial relations and fortifies the free market forces of labor and manufacturing, while following general governmental guidelines. Additionally, this system supposes that managers and workers are subject to no hierarchical differences and are equal in rights and benefits. Moreover, managerial staff is elected by the workers. Organizational management is executed based on collective participation and cooperation, which has democratic principles. The managerial decision-making process was more oriented to solving problems than bargaining. It was exactly this approach to self-regulation that resulted in Croatians being initially skilled in entrepreneurship and highly competitive. However, similarly to Russia (Shirokova & McDougall-Covin, 2012; Weck & Ivanova, 2013), such aspects as trust and personal networking are still crucial to business relationships development in Croatia (Zabkar & Makovec Brencic, 2004).

The Hungarian socio-historical context is at the same time similar to and different from that of Russia and Croatia. Similarity is seen in its pathway following the Second World War, as it was under a communist regime until 1989, after which came a hard period of transition to post-communist capitalist country. However, there are some differences as

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