# 1 A Guide to Interviewing across Cultures

Have you ever been involved in an "interview from hell," where the interviewer and interviewee didn't understand each other, didn't feel comfortable with each other, and didn't exchange information efficiently or accurately? This can happen to any of us, even when both parties are the same gender, age, religion, and ethnic background. But it's even more likely to occur when there are cultural differences between the two parties. This book is designed to help prevent uncomfortable misunderstandings from sabotaging your interview and to teach you how to overcome the barriers created by cultural differences.

In your work you probably conduct interviews—at least sometimes, and maybe often—with people who are not "just like" you. They may differ in some obvious way such as race, age, or gender or in less immediately noticeable ways such as religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, health status, educational background, or social class. Despite such differences, if you are well prepared and motivated, your cross-cultural interviews can achieve your goals.

This book has more to do with the *process* of cross-cultural interviewing than with its *content*. The content will vary according to the focus of the interview: physical or mental health, social welfare, criminal justice, education, or the law. Each of us pays attention to different factors, depending on what we need to learn from the interview.

Most interviews are designed to guide important decisions such as determining guilt, devising medical or mental health treatment plans, deciding custody or the disposition of social work cases, making hiring or college admissions decisions, or influencing someone's access to services. Many interviews are evaluative, designed to determine the level or kinds of care or services needed or the qualifications of the interviewee. Journalists and researchers conduct interviews to collect data and shape their ideas.

The purpose of interviews usually goes beyond just *gathering information*, although that is a crucial part of why we interview. In addition, we're also *building a relationship*. Most of the time, we're trying to do this *efficiently* in a context of too few resources—too little time, staff, facilities, and money. Often, we're expected to produce reports or make decisions quickly based on our interviews. Thus we don't have the luxury of fishing around carelessly. We need to be especially focused and well prepared for cross-cultural interviews.

Consider the following examples:

- A doctor or nurse interviews a child and his parents to figure out how to ease the child's suffering.
- A custody evaluator interviews divorcing parents and other family members to help develop a viable parenting plan.
- A social worker interviews a homeless family that needs a variety of services.
- A counselor conducts an intake session with a person who presents (voluntarily or in response to a court mandate) for treatment.
- A psychotherapist interviews a new client who has suicidal thoughts.
- A police officer interrogates a person suspected of having committed a crime.
- A forensic interviewer questions a possible victim of child abuse.
- A school psychologist or counselor queries a child and her family as part of an educational assessment.
- An attorney interviews potential clients about the feasibility of representing them.

In all these cases, the interview has to produce information that is accurate and relevant, which requires a productive working relationship. The process cannot take too much time, and it must use the limited resources at hand. Usually, the initial interview provides a platform that supports future additional interventions.

Interviews are driven by these three realities: our need to get information, our need to create a useful working relationship, and our need to make it happen in situations that may be far from optimal. Often the cir-

cumstances are politically charged. For instance, various groups may be seeking outcomes that conflict with each other.

Voltaire urges us to judge people by their questions rather than their answers. This notion highlights the inescapable fact that our questions and our style of questioning reflect who we are as people. We need to look in an imaginary mirror as we ask our questions. Do we express not only skillful professionalism but also respect and caring? Only if we succeed in conveying this impression will people answer our questions openly and provide the information we need.

The people we interview may be different from us in small and large ways. This difference may be so significant that we need to plan carefully to adjust our tactics, demeanor, approach, tone, language, office seating arrangements, body language, and so forth, to get the job done right.

The word "interview" itself comes from the joining of the prefix "inter," meaning between or among, with the word "view," meaning a seeing, looking, or inspection. That is, an interview is the intermingling of distinct ways of seeing; this is especially clear in a cross-cultural context. We must ask ourselves how our knowledge or lack of knowledge of people from a given culture affects the interview process.

## A MULTICULTURAL FRAMEWORK

Most of us have been trained to conduct interviews using a universalist approach. That is, we learned to interview people in the same way regardless of their specific culture. This approach emphasizes the similarities among peoples and ignores their differences. At first, it might seem that we are treating people more fairly if we interview all of them in the same way. Unfortunately, this approach usually ends up shortchanging interviewees who come from minority cultural groups. That's because a one-size-fits-all approach is based on interview styles, formats, and questions that were modeled on the majority group. This book is filled with examples of why this does not work. The simplest example would be interviewing all people in the English language when some of them do not understand English. To use another straightforward example, if we habitually shake hands with interviewees before we speak with them, not realizing that this is offensive to certain religious groups, we would sabotage our effort to establish rapport with people from those groups.

Often, *culture specific* trainings can lead people to see difference among groups and lose touch with both universal issues and individualism. When all we see is cultural difference, we are apt to miss factors that mark people as individuals, such as personalities, dreams, age, gender, sexual ori-

entation, and personal history. When we overemphasize culture to the exclusion of other factors, we risk treating some people as if they're exotic or stereotypical. We have an obligation to learn about the interviewee's culture. At the same time, we have an obligation to consider each person's *individuality* without being hampered by oversimplified stereotypes.

When we use a multicultural approach to interviewing, we see people both as individuals *and* as members of cultures. We see individuals within the context of their cultures, and know that this enhances our work. But we don't need to abandon all we have learned about interviewing. Like interviewees, we, too, are cultural beings. We bring our own habits, preferences, and worldviews into our interviews. This book also helps interviewers be mindful of the ways our own cultures shape our mindsets.

## HOW INTERVIEWS DIFFER FROM OTHER KINDS OF CONVERSATIONS

An interview can be formal or informal, carefully planned, or relatively spontaneous. Although interviews often appear to differ little from other kinds of conversations, they do have important distinguishing characteristics. We need to keep these characteristics in mind when planning and conducting our work:

1. The conversation has a definite purpose. The interviewer has particular goals in mind. The interviewee may share the same goals or may be hoping for a completely different outcome.
2. The interviewer and interviewee have a defined relationship. This relationship usually involves some kind of hierarchy, and most often the interviewer is the more powerful participant. The interviewer determines which questions will be asked and when, and how the results will be presented. The stakes are ordinarily much higher for the interviewee than for the interviewer.
3. Information flows primarily in one direction—from the interviewee to the interviewer. Certainly many interviewers take advantage of the situation to inform the interviewee about matters such as services available or processes and procedures that might follow from the discussion. However, the primary purpose of the interview is to gather information from the interviewee. As one of my professors told me in graduate school, "If you're doing more talking than the interviewee, you may be conducting a lecture but you're not conducting an interview."
4. The interviewer plans and organizes the interaction, directing the conversation with specific goals in mind. True, the interviewee can exert a

certain amount of control by being more or less willing to discuss certain topics. But it's the interviewer who structures the process.

5. The interviewer follows guidelines concerning confidentiality, but interviewees are usually free to reveal to others as much as they want about what transpired. That is, while patients interviewed by a psychiatrist can tell anyone they want about what was said during the interview, the psychiatrist is restricted by ethical guidelines and legal mandates to limit severely what he or she communicates about the interview and to whom.

As professionals, we know that interviews are unlike other kinds of conversations; but this may not be readily apparent to someone who is not familiar with our particular kind of interview. For example:

> The Gomez family arrived at a municipal office to complete an application for housing. The parents thought they were requesting an apartment they were entitled to receive—they did not understand that they were also being evaluated for their suitability to live in the housing units and their eligibility for a government rent subsidy. As the administrator asked increasingly intimate questions, such as the sources of the family's income and whether anyone in the family had been convicted of crimes, Mr. Gomez grew concerned and angry. The line of questioning made him suspicious about the nature of the housing office and the intentions of the person behind the desk. He did not understand that this situation was an interview and that these questions were directed to *all* applicants and thus formed part of the usual process. Because of his lack of familiarity with the norms of the interview, he answered in a hostile manner and was not able to present himself in the best possible light.

## ORIENTATION TO THIS BOOK

Various chapters in this book will help you avoid an interview situation like the one that frustrated Mr. Gomez and his interviewer. For instance, Chapter 2 discusses preparing for an interview, the information that needs to be gathered beforehand, who should be invited to participate, and other initial decisions. Chapter 3 discusses biases and boundary issues that may distort the interviewing relationship. Chapter 4 focuses on building the interview relationship: how to establish rapport and convey respect, concentrating on the early parts of an interview. With the proper preparation before an interview and the right orientation at the beginning, the Gomez family would have understood the nature of the interview more clearly, would have been

more comfortable with the interviewing situation, and—because of the friendlier relationship—probably would have cooperated more fully with the interviewer. In short, the interview would have been more successful.

Chapter 5 continues with the theme of the relationship by focusing on nonverbal communication: how to avoid offending in the way you use your body in interviews and how to interpret the interviewee's nonverbal signals. Chapter 6 addresses interviewing people who have a different native language from the one used in the interview. It discusses some of the research on memory and feelings when people speak in their native language versus a language they acquired later, and ways interviewers can achieve the best possible results when speaking with someone whose native language is different. Chapter 7 discusses some of the challenges of using language interpreters in interviews, and ways to make the interpreted interviews successful. Chapter 8 is concerned with reasons why interviewees may be reluctant to discuss certain topic areas and ways to handle these challenges. Chapter 9 focuses on special issues in interviewing children and adolescents and supplements the topics related to youth that are scattered throughout the book. Chapter 10 gives tips on how to write and present unbiased reports. Chapter 11 discusses issues that are particularly relevant for people from specific professions. Chapter 12 discusses some of the most common misunderstandings that occur in cross-cultural interviews and ways to avoid these. The "Afterword" offers further encouragement and professional development suggestions for those working to become more culturally competent as interviewers.

Each chapter contains a discussion of the topic, including a variety of text boxes designed to provide in-depth information on a particular area. Many of these text boxes are highly practical and can be used to guide your interviewing practice. The chapters also contain a section "Questions to Think about and Discuss." If you hate this kind of section, please just skip over it. People who read this book individually may find that such a section helps them reconsider some of the complexities discussed in the chapter and apply the issues to their own work. My books are also often adopted in academic courses, and these questions may be used to spark discussions or writing assignments in the college or university context. Finally, agencies sometimes use my books to structure regular meetings on cultural competency, asking the staff to read one chapter a month, for instance, and then organizing the discussions around the chapter questions. Each chapter concludes with a list of related resources for further reading. These are mostly books, because books are often easiest for people to obtain through their libraries. Where books on the topic are not available, I have listed a chapter, article, or online resource.

This book overflows with examples. The names and identifying infor-

mation have been changed, and in some cases these are composites designed to illustrate several principles at once. These examples have been drawn from my own clinical work, research, supervision, and trainings. Where the examples are not from my own work their source has, of course, been cited.

## CULTURAL COMPETENCE IS AN ETHICAL ISSUE

Everyday interviewing decisions (even minor ones) concern ethical principles, and should be considered seriously. We need to be especially cautious when working with a person from a culture that is different from our own, where we are less apt to understand the full implications of what we say and do. The risk of accidentally stumbling into an ethical minefield is greater in cross-cultural encounters.

Interviewing decisions with ethical implications concern gifts, interpreters, assessment instruments, and our choice of words in writing or testifying about an interview. In my attempt to avoid jargon I don't always name the ethical principle being discussed in this book. These include respect for persons, deception, coercion, confidentiality, safety, privacy, justice, beneficence, and nonmalfeasance.

Most major professional organizations include the provision of culturally competent services in their list of ethical mandates. In that sense, this is a book on professional ethics, and ethical issues abound in every chapter.

## CASE EXAMPLES: CROSS-CULTURAL INTERVIEWS THAT CRASHED

In this next section I provide somewhat extreme case examples of cross-cultural interviews that failed and refer you to chapters in this book that would be helpful to interviewers who face similar challenges.

*Hassan: Educational Testing with a Hitch*

Hassan, a 16-year-old Somali refugee whose official records say he is 14, became known as a bit of a troublemaker at his school in Columbus, Ohio. His family moved to Columbus 2 years ago after spending a dozen years in a refugee camp in Kenya. Because of his consistent low academic grades, Hassan was about to be held back in sixth grade, meaning he would be placed in a class with 12-year-olds. He was clearly well along in puberty and already towered above his classmates. He told his guidance counselor and his teacher that he simply

would not stay back another year—that he would drop out entirely rather than be held back. At a loss as to how to help Hassan, the counselor referred him for a comprehensive learning assessment.

The school district did not have experience or a clear policy concerning testing students in a language other than English or Spanish. The district's one Somali tutor, Siyat, had secured permission for the assessment from Hassan's mother. The mother had never set foot in a school, could neither read nor write in any language, and could speak only a few words of English. She spent most of her time at home with her five children. Siyat was asked to serve as interpreter for tests to be administered in English. Siyat's English was itself rather basic, and he knew nothing about educational testing. During the assessment he chided Hassan for not being able to complete certain tasks, warned him that if he didn't start doing better he'd be stuck in a class with little children, and inadvertently provided incorrect instructions from time to time because he did not understand the tasks.

The tester had no idea what the interpreter, Siyat, was saying but felt she had no choice but to trust him. For her part, she was at a loss as to how to handle the unusual testing conditions. She didn't know what to do about the slower timing of the tests necessitated by the interpretation process. She was aware that certain vocabulary was beyond Hassan's grasp, such as the words "drizzle" and "nightmare" which appeared in a reading passage, but didn't know how to factor in his status as a novice in the English language. Hassan grew more and more frustrated. At one point the school guidance counselor walked into the testing room and began to speak with the school psychologist. Siyat was certain they were speaking about him. When they laughed and smiled while looking in his direction, he grew disgusted and stormed out.

This discouraging story illustrates numerous issues that are discussed in greater depth throughout this book. First, having inaccurate documents is common to many immigrants and refugees from less industrialized nations. (This is discussed in Chapter 2, "Preparing for the Interview".) Second, a youngster's history of trauma as a survivor of war and refugee camps can easily be missed by educational institutions that see him in his current context but fail to understand the implications of his early life. Hassan's difficult history and the precarious position in which he and his family still find themselves could contribute to a situation in which the child would appear in school to be a troublemaker or intellectually deficient, when neither of these judgments would be correct. (These are discussed in Chapter 9, "Interviewing Culturally Diverse Children and Adolescents.") Although Hassan's mother's permission was formally sought for

the assessment, it is unlikely that she understood the full implications of the assessment or the options available to her. The testing situation itself was rife with problems, many of which are discussed in Chapter 7, on interpretation. And finally, Chapter 5 on nonverbal communication discusses ways to avoid the kind of misunderstandings that were created by the psychologist and counselor's misguided exchange of knowing looks.

*Elena: Applying for a Job in Human Services*

Elena Sanchez was excited about her upcoming interview for a new job in human services. She was optimistic that there would be a good fit between her interests and qualifications and the position she sought. She reviewed the agency website in advance, printed out an extra copy of her résumé, and checked out how she looked in her best suit one final time in the mirror, satisfied that she would make a good impression.

Sam Jones, the human resources officer, was looking forward to interviewing Elena, optimistic that he would then be able to pass on her materials to the committee that would conduct the final screening. His agency had been criticized for not being sufficiently diverse ethnically and for not having enough staff who could work comfortably with their Spanish-speaking clients, and so Sam was especially pleased when he came across Elena's résumé among the applications, as her name certainly sounded Hispanic.

When Sam greeted Elena, he suddenly felt confused. She looked White. She didn't seem to have an accent. He was distracted as he asked her questions about her work history, trying to figure out her ethnic background. He pointed out that her résumé said that she spoke Spanish and asked her where she learned it. "In high school and college. I spent my junior year in Mexico and I'm completely fluent. I use it every day," she replied. "Do you have any other relationship with Mexico?" he asked. "I visit at least once a year—I love Mexico!" she answered.

Sam was feeling frustrated by his inability to determine Elena's background. Finally he asked her, "And what's your ethnic background?" Elena looked at him, stupefied, knowing the question was illegal. "I would like you to consider me based on my qualifications, not my background," she replied. At that moment, Elena decided to withdraw her employment application and called an end to the interview. She knew she could be good at the job and she knew she could work well with the Spanish-speaking clients, but she had no intention of accepting a job where the decision to hire her hinged on her ethnicity—this was not an agency environment she would enjoy.

Sam wondered what had gone wrong and mused to himself that

he still couldn't tell "what" Elena was. Maybe she was a second- or third-generation Latina immigrant. Maybe she acquired her last name through marriage. Maybe she was the product of a mixed couple, Latino and something else. He never found out. The agency missed out on someone who would have been a valuable employee.

In this case example we see a well-meaning interviewer who has unwittingly alienated a potential employee. The section on taboo topics in Chapter 8 and common misunderstandings in Chapter 12 might have helped Sam avoid making the mistakes he did.

*Clara: Distortion in a Mental Health Assessment*

Clara, 25, grew up in a poor family in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She is now living in a college town in the midwestern United States where she moved with her husband, a college professor 20 years her senior, and two children, ages 3 and 5. She had dropped out of high school in Rio shortly before the day she met her husband—he approached the stand where she was selling juice in a park and immediately grew entranced with her. They had originally planned for her to take her GED (General Educational Development) test and attend college, but she became pregnant shortly after arriving in the United States and settled instead for taking a few classes in English as a Second Language. She said she spent her days caring for the house and children, cooking the elaborate meals her husband enjoyed, and surfing Brazilian websites on her home computer. Her husband had encouraged her to seek psychotherapy for her frequent tearful and angry outbursts.

In the therapy intake session Clara seemed irritable and emotional, occasionally sobbing loudly, sighing deeply, and clenching her fists. She described her intense worries about the future of her marriage. She feared that her husband would abandon her and cut off all contact with the children, leaving them in difficult economic straits and very much alone, as her own father had done to her mother. She was also afraid he might send her back to Brazil, where she said she would be ashamed to show her face, and where she believed her prospects for economic security were even slimmer than in the United States. Clara said she spoke to no one about her concerns other than God and her grandmother, who had died the year before. Clara told the therapist that she knelt before an altar each day, lit a candle, and prayed to her grandmother, the Virgin Mary, and several saints for protection.

The therapist, Jean, was a married Lutheran midwesterner in her 50s who had recently completed a graduate degree in counseling, having returned to school after her children left home for college. Jean had

little personal or professional experience with people from backgrounds unlike her own but had a good heart and was committed to doing right by her clients. Jean asked Clara if her husband was "also Black." Clara didn't seem to understand the question and when Jean explained that she was asking about race, Clara replied that she herself was "not Black" but rather was "light brown." When Jean asked Clara for details about her relationship with her husband, including her satisfaction with their sex life, Clara stared at the floor and grew silent. After that question, Clara answered mostly in monosyllables and avoided eye contact.

Jean felt uncomfortable with Clara and attributed her discomfort to Clara's apparently disordered personality. Jean thought Clara was histrionic (overly dramatic) and overly dependent on her husband. She thought Clara's speaking with her dead grandmother was a sign of a possible psychosis and death wish. She thought Clara's fears about deportation and her "peculiar" responses to the questions about race and sex indicated paranoia or a thought disorder. Jean's overall impression was that Clara had one or more personality disorders and was inappropriate for psychotherapy. Jean thought Clara would be better served by a psychiatric consultation to determine which medications might reduce her depressive, anxious, and possibly psychotic symptoms. Jean shared her conclusions with Clara. Jean also encouraged Clara to join one of the local churches so she would feel less isolated. Clara walked out of the clinic and never returned. That night, when Clara's husband asked about her appointment, Clara replied that the lady was a pervert who thought she was crazy and wanted to give her drugs and convert her to religion. "Just like I expected," she said. In her report on the intake, Jean wrote that Clara was a "Black mother of two, with apparent histrionic and paranoid tendencies, who appears unable to establish a therapeutic alliance. I recommend a psychiatric evaluation for possible depression with psychotic features."

Jean misinterpreted Clara's nonverbal emotional expressions as indicative of a personality disorder. Rather, they may have simply been the way her culture expresses her feelings of dislocation, sadness, and worry about the future. (Cultural variations in emotional expression and nonverbal communication are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively.) Second, Jean asked Clara direct questions about her race and sexuality, without seeming to understand the sensitive nature of these questions and the different ways these issues are handled in different cultures. (Styles of questioning and how to handle taboos are discussed in Chapter 4, "Setting the Right Tone," and Chapter 8 on addressing reluctance, respectively.) Finally, Jean appeared to underestimate the power of her position as a mental

health counselor and the complexity of referrals to a psychiatrist and to church. (These kinds of issues are discussed throughout the book.)

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

These brief descriptions of interviews provide us with windows through which we can view various failures to connect well across cultures. The consequences of such failures depend on the purpose of the interview but may include interviewees not being able to develop their potential and facing serious unnecessary problems. The consequences of failed interviews for the interviewer include frustration, feelings of impotence, lost opportunity, and an inability to deliver services at the highest professional level. The societal costs are innumerable. They include depriving society of the full gifts of its members, possible consequent increases in crime, tensions across cultural groups, and general strife and alienation.

While this book is intended to offer practical suggestions and help you overcome technical difficulties in cross-cultural interviews, I hope it will also convey some of the spirit needed in cross-cultural contacts. We know that in some interviews we will be exposed to descriptions of emotional and physical pain, injustice, and horror—forms of suffering that were previously unfamiliar to us. We may sit with people who are in agonizing predicaments and whose emotions are raw. We may be facing our own prejudices and inherited discomforts. Sometimes we may tend to focus too much on the technical aspects of interviews so we can avoid the difficult feelings that would otherwise emerge in discussing sensitive topics (Gunaratnam, 2003a). We have to make certain that we are not so busy being "technically correct" that we lose touch with our own—and the interviewee's—humanity.

### Questions to Think about and Discuss

1. What are the three major concerns in interviews, whatever their professional context?
2. Discuss differences between interviews and other kinds of conversations.
3. Describe a successful interview that you conducted with someone who differs from you. Describe the differences, how you handled them, and the reason you think the interview was successful.
4. Describe an interview you conducted with someone who differs from you that you think was less than successful. Describe the differences between you and the interviewee, how you handled them, and the reason you think the interview was not successful.

## RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL READING

Sue, S., & Sue, D. (2007). *Counseling the culturally diverse (5th edition)*. New York: Wiley.

Webb, N. B. (2001). *Culturally diverse parent–child and family relationships*. New York: Columbia University Press.



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