

Interviewing for Research - Issues in Interviewing

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Bias

No matter how neutral and unbiased we consider ourselves to be, there are certain inevitable factors which will influence an interview situation. Consider how the following attributes of both interviewer and interviewee might have an effect on an interview:

- Gender
- Age
- Ethnicity/nationality
- Religion
- Political persuasion
- Education
- Academic viewpoint

Think about how would you describe your personality and how this might influence your relationship with another person. Why has the interview been arranged, and why has the person you are interviewing agreed to be interviewed? Try to be aware of the possible biases you and the interviewee bring to an interview situation. Consider how they may effect your verbal and non-verbal behaviour, the way you ask your questions, the way they are answered, the way you interpret what you are told.

For example, one factor which may effect proceedings in an interview is the relative standings of individuals in relation to the authority invested in jobs, position in society, or personal expertise and knowledge. A young academic may be talked down to when interviewing a professor, captain of industry, or politician; someone with no academic background may feel exploited by someone with an academic background who has the backing of an academic establishment; in a medical or social work interview the interviewee may believe that the interviewer is able to provide help and may adjust their responses accordingly.

As an interviewer, it is usually you who are perceived as having knowledge, education and the intellectual authority this brings with it. You can go somewhat towards redressing this imbalance in the interview situation by fully informing interviewees of what is happening at all times in the process, arranging interviews at times and places which are convenient to them, and listening carefully to what people have to say.

An example of how gender and age may effect the way a story is told:

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/question1.html>

An example of the way an interviewer may effect the way a story is told:

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/question2.html>

Rapport

Particularly if you see your interviewee on more than one occasion it is likely that some sort of rapport or relationship will be established. Some approaches to interviewing stress that you should keep the interviewee at a professional distance, while others claim this is unrealistic and both participants should be of equal status, the interview being more like a conversation. While your philosophical approach to research may suggest one way more than another, a bit of both is often a common compromise.

- Be polite and remember your basic manners from the start. Particularly with older people, but generally too, don't use first names without checking that people are happy with this.
- Your appearance counts; try not to over or under dress.
- Be friendly but be aware that this is not a friendship (you may disagree with this!).
- Relax.

Good technique when asking the questions will help to build rapport. Look at the *Asking the Questions* section of this website.

It is not unusual for an interviewee to ask you, the interviewer, some questions about yourself. This raises the question of how much of your self you should disclose; say too little and you may appear distant or uninterested, or say too much and you may over shadow the interviewee. By all means answer any questions, but try to keep the answer fairly brief and not talk too much about yourself, the interview isn't supposed to be about you. What you can give to the interviewee is your undivided attention and a professional approach. You are in a position to give your interviewee a voice through your work, and to respect what they have said in the way you present it.

If you're not sure about this, ask yourself the following questions:

Reciprocation

What do you and your interviewee call each other?

Would you accept presents from your interviewee?

Would you let your interviewee mend your car?

Interview Culture

On a home visit would you accept

- A cup of tea/coffee/water?
- Alcohol?

Self-disclosure

Would you talk about the sort of day you've had?

Would you talk about your home/background?

Would you give your home phone number?

Social Contact

Would you accept

- A wedding invitation?
- An invitation to a party?

Would you lend money?

It is important to bear in mind that in some circumstances an interview may not be a pleasant experience. Talking about personal matters can be stressful and may cause anxiety in the interviewee, and possibly in the interviewer as well. Researchers engaged in projects dealing with emotive subjects often have debriefing sessions when they can talk about their experiences, but these may not be available for the interviewees. Researchers are rarely trained in counselling, are usually not equipped to deal with extreme emotional situations, and should always consider whether an interview may cause more harm than good.

Ethnic/Cultural Considerations

Consider that in some communities:

- It is essential to have a written introduction to someone before approaching them for an interview.
- A female/male may be the wrong person to interview a male/female.
- A young person would be seen as disrespectful if they quizzed an older person.
- People avoid eye contact when listening or when talking.

For example, in some Native American, Asian, African, and Hispanic cultures, looking down and avoiding direct eye contact is a sign of respect, and it may be insulting to make eye contact.

There is more information about cultural differences at this Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory website, 'Culture, Communication and Language': <http://www.nwrel.org/cnorse/booklets/ccc/4.html>

It is true that some people do not like interviewing outside of their own academic/social/cultural experience. Likewise, some people may never take to you as an interviewer because of their perception of your academic/social/cultural background. For your part, if you are going to be interviewing people from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds from your own, you should make yourself aware of the possible issues involved. If someone is from a different culture they may not see situations in the same way as you, they may not speak the same language, but this does not mean they are in any way less intelligent than you. It is important not to

shout, use jargon, stereotype or generalise. Be professional, treat everyone with respect, don't talk down to people, don't defer to them unnecessarily. Be aware of relevant cultural practises.

Interpreters

If you find yourself interviewing via an interpreter, your interviewee's words will be communicated to you either via a relative, a friend or acquaintance, or a professional interpreter.

A relative, friend or acquaintance will understand both the verbal and cultural language used. However, as in most interview situations, there are some things an interviewee won't want to tell family members or acquaintances, while a relative may not feel comfortable relaying family information to you.

Professional interpreters cost money and you may not always be able to find one who speaks the appropriate language. While you will probably get an accurate interpretation of the verbal language, some of the cultural language may get lost if the interpreter is not acquainted with that particular culture.

Ask the interpreter to:

- Speak clearly
- Correct any mistakes as soon as possible
- Ask for clarification if words or meanings aren't clear
- Give a word for word interpretation rather than a summary

As an interviewer you should:

- Keep the questions short and to the point
- Give enough time for both the question and the answer to be translated
- Ask for clarification if, after a long discussion, you are given a short translation
- Avoid using the third person (i.e. ask Mr. Smith if he takes sugar)

Both interviewer and interpreter must respect the confidentiality of the interview.

Communicating with Deaf People

The main points to remember when interviewing anyone who has a hearing impairment are:

- Don't shout, talk slower.
- To aid lip reading, try and keep your face in what light is available. Don't cover your mouth with your hands.
- Make sure hearing aids are turned on.

More information can be found at:

The RNID website

http://www.rnid.org.uk/information_resources/factsheets/communication/factsheets_1_eaflets/communication_tips.htm

Lola J. Lee is a deaf person who has provided tips for being with deaf people on her website:

<http://www.his.com/~lola/deaf.html> (1 February 2005)

After the Interview

It is often said that 90 minutes is long enough for one interview, although it can be easy to forget the time and carry on longer. When the interview comes to an end accept any hospitality offered, if it seems appropriate, and make sure that you leave the interview on a positive note.

If you are asking the interviewee to sign a release/copyright form, it is important that you read through the form with them and make sure they understand why they are signing the form and the terms they are agreeing to. From a legal point of view you must have the 'informed consent' of your interviewee before you can use the information contained in the interview. Informed consent means that the interviewee is aware of all the possible uses that may be made of the interview. For more information see the [Copyright and Ethics](#) page of this website.

Make sure all your paperwork has been signed, that times and dates for follow up interviews are set, that the interviewee is aware of any further action that needs to be taken, and that the interviewee knows what you propose to do with their interview.

If you have recorded the interview, refer to the notes on this website about [Archiving Recordings](#).