

# Cross-Cultural Interviewing: Part 1

**T**he United States has been described as being a “melting pot” of different cultures and races. Immigrants come to live in the U.S., and then, to one extent or another, they begin to change as our national norms and culture become an extension of who they were. U.S. citizens living abroad are changed in the same way when they live in another country.

We read with interest Dr. Hollinger’s column relating his recent visit to Singapore and the massive use of cameras in that country (see January-February 2012 page 26). As with all our international training programs, it is important to know the culture and history of the country and people we will be dealing with. Even more difficult are our seminars for the Department of State where we may have as many as thirty representatives from different countries attending the same program.

## Potential Interview Pitfalls

Most readers will be called on to interview in the United States, which as we all know can have significant cultural diversity. Certainly one of the most problematic areas is the individual’s ability to speak the English language. An interviewer who speaks the individual’s language will have a step up on any interviewer who has to use a translator. Even speaking a smattering of the language can often establish rapport with the non-native speaker.

Here are some other potential cross-cultural problems:

- The interviewer gives more credence to a person who speaks English more fluently than those who have difficulty with the second language. There may also be a bias to think a person is less intelligent or competent if they don’t speak English fluently.
- During some interviews there may be a necessity to fill out paperwork. This must be done tactfully since in some countries, a person’s word is as powerful as a signed document. In other countries people may sign documents without reading them because they believe that to read them carefully would convey mistrust of the interviewer.

In any interview the interviewer needs to create a working relationship with the individual in order to obtain the necessary information often under less than optimal conditions. When we observe the cultural and language differences, we may miss the person’s uniqueness of personality and personal history that may tell a different story about our observations. This is to say there is a danger of treating the person as a stereotype or the caricature we expect to see.

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## Cultural Assimilation

The best way to understand any culturally rooted practice is to consult with someone who is familiar with the culture. It may be useful for an interviewer to understand the length of time the person has been in the United States, who they live with, and where they reside. For example, Native Americans can differ greatly if they were raised on a reservation where there was a strong adherence to tribal traditions versus alone in a large metropolitan area. If an interviewer has a large population of a particular cultural group, he will be more successful if he can better understand their perception of everyday life.

People will change culturally depending on how assimilated they have become to their new country. Some immigrants will not evolve culturally because they isolate themselves in their own native enclaves in the new country. Because they are surrounded by their own language and culture, they have no need to assimilate to the language and surroundings.

Chicago, for example, like most major metropolitan areas, has neighborhoods where foreign immigrants congregate. One can go to Chinatown and hear native Chinese fresh to the country conversing with second-generation Chinese who still strongly adhere to the Chinese culture.

More typical is the integrated immigrant who has begun to assimilate to the United States culture. They generally speak English and are able to interact comfortably with others outside their culture. These types of immigrants may still adhere to their own culture and family practices when they retreat into their own homes, but they are capable of successfully living in the U.S. Their children are also likely to be assimilated into the dominant culture where they live, play, or go to school. Unfortunately, there may be strong cultural disconnects between the family and the child’s outside life, which can cause problems within the family between young and old. Generally, by the third generation, immigrant families have begun to be totally assimilated into the U.S. culture. In our home our grandparents’ native language and most traditions have been lost as we later generations are separated in time from those with ties to the “old country.”

Culturally there will be some people who will be more traditional in their cultural practices and relationships. People who move to the United States when they are older tend to retain the culture of their home country. Some people moving to the United States in their younger years struggle with the conflict of the old and new ways, feeling comfortable with neither. Other individuals

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retain the tradition of their old culture while valuing their new situation. For these people there is a strong sense of belonging to both cultures. This leads to them maintaining the old culture or melding the language, food, holidays and traditions of their old country with those of the new.

## Mix of East and West

It is clear that simply saying someone is Chinese would lead us to a stereotype neglecting the individual's personal choices and personality. In Singapore, for example, 75 percent of the population is Chinese, 14 percent Malay, and about 8 percent Indian. However, there is a strong British influence since it was an important trading colony dating back to 1819. The city sports English signs and has English as one of its official languages. English is even the language of choice for business and politics. Singapore's legal system is based on English common law, as is the United States.

Even though there is a strong British influence in Singapore, there is also a clear and significant Chinese cultural component, plus influences from its neighbors Indonesia and Malaysia. Like the Chinese, Singapore has a social structure that centers on the family. The society emphasizes respect for the elderly and mutual group harmony over the importance of the individual. As in China, retaining personal dignity and saving face are important in all aspects of a person's life. Creating harmonious relationships is a critical component of the Singapore culture; it is the group or family where one goes for support.

Because there is often a reliance on hierarchy, there is a strong respect for age and status resulting in business interactions that

may be more formal with a strict protocol. There is a strict chain of command and often relationships take time to develop, but a calm demeanor is favored over a more aggressive style.

Singapore is an interesting mix of East and West. On the one hand, there have been thousands of years of Chinese culture and religious practices, and, on the other hand, there are several hundred years being a strong trading partner with the West.

It was interesting discussing interviewing with investigators based in China and Singapore. Most noteworthy was the comment that the best interviewers in Singapore were non-confrontational and used tactics that allowed the subject to save face. Our experience is exactly that—an interviewer who is friendly and non-confrontational will produce more admissions and information than one who acts aggressively.

## Soliciting Your Experience

As more organizations become global there will be an increasing need to understand other cultures and the unique traditions associated with them. This will require investigators to manage the interviews in ways that complement the laws and culture in which they are working. Here in the United States as more and more immigrants join our ranks, investigators need to understand the person's culture and his relative assimilation into ours.

In our future columns we intend to focus on ways of building rapport and conveying respect across cultural barriers. In addition, we will address common problems and misunderstandings in cross-cultural interviewing. If anyone has specific questions, situations, or experience in cross-cultural interviewing, we would love to hear from you as we prepare these upcoming columns. We can be reached at [dzulawski@W-Z.com](mailto:dzulawski@W-Z.com). ■

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