

# Cross-Cultural Interviewing: Part 2

**T**he beginning of every interview or interrogation revolves around the elements of rapport. Rapport between people is a level of comfort or trust that the other person has your best interests at heart. Effectively, “this person cares about me” is our conclusion.

This is difficult enough when cultures don’t clash, but when there are strong cross-cultural differences and language problems, the issues can be exacerbated. There is already a significant difference between the dynamics of an interview or interrogation, then add into the mix cultural issues, and the simple becomes complex.

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While researchers differ on the exact time it takes for people to make their first judgment about another, they all agree it is not long. Every human being reads another’s verbal and physical behavior and then predicts whether they like or trust the other person. It is a combination of demeanor, voice, personal space, interview location, and a host of other things that, when added together, create rapport between people. Once a judgment is made about another person, that conclusion is difficult to change. There is no question a common heritage and language gives one a step up on developing rapport.

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## Establishing Rapport

Developing a personal relationship is the key to success regardless of the culture. This can be shown by expressing interest in the other person’s comfort and showing a combination of empathy and compassion for the individual’s situation. While we face these situations as a regular part of our jobs, we can never forget the person may be frightened, uncertain, and confused, so the interviewer must adjust accordingly to open a dialogue with the individual.

While the interviewer has his own agenda, he must give appropriate respect to his subject. Even simple attempts to establish rapport may trigger resistance since the person is looking through his own lens of reality. Someone who has experienced discrimination may see a slight where none was meant because of his personal history. If a person has English as a second language, his poor speech may be interpreted by the English speaker as unintelligent.

The interviewer’s voice is going to send volumes of information to another person. Striving for a calm, steady speech pattern will go a long way to quiet even those who do not understand the language. People will also have a different interpretation of someone who is speaking a guttural language, like German or Arabic, which may sound angry to the unaccustomed listener. This interpretation is common to a number of languages or dialects, such as Greeks, Israelis, African Americans, Poles, Italians, and Arabs to name a few. Many of us from the United States are unaccustomed to the emotional speech patterns of other cultures and may misinterpret this for anger. The context of the conversation and behavioral features of the individual will help in sorting out the true meaning of the situation.

Every culture has some element of saving or losing face as part its members’ behavior. The interviewer has to balance the fact that merely participating in an interview may cause shame for some. This may increase resistance and reduce cooperation from the individual. Sometimes it is the interviewer’s questions that trigger shame as the interviewer explores the topics. In other instances it may be the repetitive nature of the questions that makes the subject question whether he is being believed. The “cognitive

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interview”—an interview designed to assist a witness’ recall—seeks to help deflect these thoughts by a series of instructions prior to beginning the interview.

Another way to establish rapport in most situations is by listening. Probing questions may make an individual feel as though they are being interrogated, while using narrative or open-ended questions encourage the person to respond with longer answers that provide more information. This allows the interviewer to observe the perspective of the subject and what he feels is important, rather than contaminating the view with the interviewer’s words or bias. The interviewer then uses probing questions to clarify or expand the narrative, which makes sense to the subject who has been allowed to speak freely about his situation. The open narrative question is especially important to those cultures that may be less open to speaking freely in social contexts or those they find intimidating.

## Nonverbal Response

The nonverbal world is also something an interviewer can focus on in a cross-cultural interview. While it is difficult for a non-native speaker to associate specific movements with a part of the individual’s response, it may be apparent to the translator. The more often an interviewer can work with the same translator, the more aware the translator will become of what the interviewer finds valuable. Plus, the translator can be a valuable source of cultural information and insight into the subject’s demeanor.

During a cross-cultural interview, the subject is constantly sending information on the nonverbal channel through his movements, gestures, and posture. Translators and native speakers can often help interpret the behaviors for the interviewer. However, the interviewer can, in general terms, observe the basic emotional displays and accurately identify the emotion in cross-cultural interviews.

More difficult is to establish the exact cause of the emotional response. The basic human emotions of fear, surprise, anger, happiness, sadness, disgust, and contempt are recognized by people across the globe.

These emotional displays may be modified by different cultures to minimize or mask the emotion during conversations. The British, Japanese, and American Indian all, to some extent, learn to control their emotions to conceal what they are feeling. We should also mention there are appropriate non-verbal behaviors that should accompany the emotional display; however, these may change from culture to culture.

For example, in most of the English-speaking industrialized nations, people will look down, talk slowly, frown, and avert their eyes when delivering bad news. In contrast the Japanese may smile as they inform another of the problem and may do the same when they are regretful or ashamed. This is the cultural way the Japanese express regret.

While the basic emotions are cross-culturally recognizable, there are differences in how much people will move their face and brows. The more stoic expressions come from the Asian cultures, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, who avoid extremes of behavior, including the basic emotions. To many Western cultures who are unfamiliar with the Asian expressions, this lack of facial

affect leaves an impression of deception or non-cooperation, which may be totally incorrect.

A strong contrast to the Asians is the Middle East, African American, Latinos, and Jews. These groups often express themselves with stronger emotional displays, such as weeping, flailing arms, deep breathing, or calling out to God when expressing anguish or suffering. One can imagine the strong behavioral cultural differences of how the loss of a loved one may be expressed in these opposite cultural settings.

These cultural norms may also lead to concealing how much

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something hurts them physically or emotionally. The expression of pain is seen as a sign of weakness in many Asian cultures, while Puerto Ricans and Dominicans may loudly express their feelings of pain. Arabs and Middle Easterners may loudly call out for God’s help while covering their face with their hands in response to pain or bad news. To those unfamiliar with these cultures, it may seem overly dramatic and even phony.

## Physical Touching

Cultures may also differ in how much they touch and what it means when they do. The dominant groups in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada tend to touch much less than other cultures, such as the Slavic, who hug, kiss, embrace, and shower verbal endearments on those they care about. Another example, touching someone on the shoulder to give comfort as done here in the United States would be insulting in the Middle East or Asia. For Muslims and certain other religions, it is not permitted to touch a member of the opposite sex unless they are related, but they may welcome a touch by a member of the same sex.

In many cultures males and females will walk arm-in-arm or holding hands with members of the same sex with no hint of sexual attraction. Touching varies significantly and should be treated carefully so no offense is given or taken, and when done while interviewing, it should be used sparingly, if at all.

We will continue this discussion in our next column. ■