

be like a simple medical appointment—one visit and the cure would be imminent (M. O'Neill, personal communication, June 2007).

As we interact with people, whether in their homes, in our offices, or in some other place, we must be careful not to reject or judge harshly certain of their customs simply because they are unfamiliar to us. Learning about a person's cultural group, family, and individual history will help us understand them. Questions about their degree of acculturation and how they live their culture or cultures on a daily basis will help us know how to adjust our interviews. As in so much of life, doing our homework before an interview so we arrive fully prepared will help us do a better job and conduct a more productive, valid, and pleasant interview.

Questions to Think about and Discuss

1. What are some of the ways prior records can help orient you before an interview?
2. What are some of the potential hazards of relying on prior records for information?
3. Remember an occasion when you interviewed more than one person at a time. What were some of the advantages and disadvantages of conducting the interview this way?
4. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of interviewing a person in his or her home as compared to conducting an interview in your office.
5. Think of a person from a particular cultural background. Consider the way that person's degree of acculturation or acculturation style might affect the interview process in your setting.

RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL READING

- Lynch, E. W., & Hanson, M. J. (Eds.). (2004). *Developing cross-cultural competence: A guide for working with children and their families* (3rd ed.). Baltimore: Brookes.
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Sommers-Flanagan, J., & Sommers-Flanagan, R. (2003). *Clinical interviewing* (3rd ed.). New York: Wiley.

3 Biases and Boundary Issues

This chapter focuses on biases and boundary issues that can affect the interviewing process. Biases distort what we see, how we act, the weight we give to particular behaviors or statements, and how we write about the interviews. Some biases are basic processes within our own psyches. They affect our colleagues, our interviewees, and ourselves.

Appropriate boundaries can be difficult to determine in many human encounters, particularly where they involve people from distinct cultural groups. Boundary violations can be a cause or a result of various biases in interviews.

BIASES

Several kinds of bias can create distortions in our interviews (Miller, 1984). These include *motivational bias*, in which the interviewer or the interviewee is motivated to provide a particular kind of outcome to please a person or group. As an example of motivational bias on the part of an interviewer, a police officer might want to find incriminating evidence against a suspect because of pressure from a commanding officer to "get the guy." Or, consider an entitlement officer who has been told her office needs to cut its caseload by 20%, and thus she is eager to find evidence in interviews that



the interviewee does not need certain services. Examples of motivational bias for interviewees include eagerly searching the interviewer's face for indications of "the best answer" in order to make a favorable impression. These problems of motivational bias are described frequently throughout this book as we discuss ways to check our own motivations and those of the interviewee to make sure they are as free from coercion and distortion as possible.

Motivational biases sometimes have a cultural element. Sometimes staff members of an organization are told they need to increase or decrease the number of people from a particular group who obtain a service or who are subject to a penalty. This might influence interviewers to code interviewees incorrectly, assigning them to the wrong cultural group, or it might influence them to skew the outcome of an interview in subtle ways. Interviewees may also be subject to cultural motivational biases. For instance, they might be motivated to perform better (or worse) when interviewed by a person from a particular ethnic group.

Notational bias can also lead us to distorted impressions. This refers to the instruments we use for measuring and our terms, categories, forms, and so on. We discuss this subject at greater length in Chapter 10 on writing reports.

A third class of biases is referred to as *cognitive biases*. These are thinking errors caused by the simplified information processing strategies that people use; these affect our ability to engage in thinking processes such as remembering and estimating. *Observational biases* are a subcategory of cognitive biases that limit and distort our ability to observe properly.

UNBIASED OBSERVING

I once complained to an art teacher about not being able to draw. She said that it was all a question of *seeing*; if I could learn to see accurately I would be able to draw. I think the relationship between seeing and drawing is parallel to the relationship between observing in interviews and writing notes. That is, if we can be truly present for the person in front of us in an interview and observe that person without distortion, we will be far more likely to write about that person without bias. Unfortunately, several psychological processes together increase the likelihood of discriminatory biases in our observations when we interview people from social groups that differ from our own.

The first stage of memory is encoding, where we perceive things sufficiently to commit them to memory. We may notice details through any of

our senses. This stage may be tinged with serious bias when we interview people from differing backgrounds. What we notice and fail to notice as we conduct our interview and take notes will influence our final report.

Observational and Cognitive Biases That Can Affect Interviewing, Taking Notes, and Writing Reports

- *Confirmatory bias* is the tendency to notice what we expect to see, while ignoring or discounting the rest. This tendency is one reason that stereotypes persist—we are apt to notice aspects of individuals that confirm our stereotypes about members of that group.
- *Fundamental attribution error* is the tendency to view others' actions as stemming from their personalities or other enduring characteristics, while underestimating the influence of the *situation*. This can be problematic when, for instance, we write a report based on one interview with a person without checking with other documents, additional interviews, or other sources of information. If the interviewee felt particularly sad, angry, weary, physically ill, sleepy, or suspicious in that one interview for some reason, or was so paralyzed with anxiety that he or she did not perform well, we might have a tendency to assume this is an enduring characteristic, rather than a transitory result of the particular situation.
- *Halo effect* is the tendency to allow one aspect of a person's appearance or personality to "spill over" and influence our global evaluation of that person. For instance, good-looking people are often seen as more outgoing and kinder than people who are considered less attractive. This also works with more negative characteristics, so that people who are considered less attractive are assumed to have other negative characteristics. It is easy to see how this tendency might distort an interview report. If, for instance, an interviewee's clothes give off a food aroma that's disagreeable to the interviewer, or if the interviewee wears clothes that the interviewer considers in poor taste, or if the person uses language awkwardly, the interviewer might tend to rate that person more negatively on a variety of other unrelated characteristics. Interviewers might be similarly biased by an interviewee's skin color, accent, or other external, superficial characteristics: These might bias our perceptions of the entire interview, and influence the interviewer's ratings of more important characteristics (such as trustworthiness, honesty, and intelligence).
- *In-group bias* is giving preferential treatment to others whom a person perceives as being from his or her own group. As interviewers, we could show in-group bias without even being aware of it. In any given day I could—unintentionally—focus more on people who are similar to me in age, sex, race, social class, political orientation, religion, or other characteristics. I might just feel more comfortable with these people who are similar to me and therefore feel more disposed to helping them.
- *Self-fulfilling prophecy* is the tendency to engage in behaviors that elicit results that will confirm our own beliefs. This can work in a negative or a positive way. For instance, a physician might approach an Italian or Latina woman brusquely if he has

Interviewing Clients
across Cultures
A Practitioner's Guide

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*To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains,
but to live in a way that respects and enhances
the freedom of others.*

—Nelson Mandela

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