Effective Strategies for Cross-Cultural and Cross-Linguistic Research Interviewing

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Effective Strategies for Cross-Cultural and Cross-Linguistic Research Interviewing

Personal interviews are an important component of the methodology for carrying out qualitative evaluation research. Interviews enable researchers to access information that is not attainable through direct observation or document reviews. According to Patton (1990, p. 278), the qualitative interview allows researchers to "enter into the other person's perspective," thereby gaining an understanding of the person's feelings, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. In other words, the qualitative research interview "makes it possible for the person being interviewed to bring the interviewer into his or her world" in a way that no other research methodology allows (p. 279).

Because of the interview's unique ability to provide otherwise inaccessible information, investigators have used qualitative interview methodology extensively in evaluation research within the context of development projects and programs. Qualitative interviews with project participants enable researchers to "understand the complex ecological, sociological, and cultural situations with which the project must deal" (Casley and Kumar 1988, p. 10). Moreover, Casley (1993, p. 2) states that qualitative interview methodology is responsive to "the value of seeking out and soliciting in an unprejudiced manner the views, ideas, and aspirations of those who are the participants in, and, to some extent, the subjects of the development process."

However, qualitative research interviewing is a highly complex process that is full of procedural and ethical difficulties and dilemmas, particularly when conducted within the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic context of many development projects and programs. This paper examines the issues surrounding cross-cultural and cross-linguistic interview research, including issues related to language, culture, reliability, validity, and authenticity. It addresses the many ethical issues related to cross-cultural interview methodology, along with issues related to interview format. Finally, it presents recommendations for conducting cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research interviews.

Language Issues

Investigators conducting cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research interviews must consider various issues related to language. Among these issues are concerns about equivalence, translation, and the use of interpreters.

Concepts of Equivalence

The most obvious issue confronting cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research interviewers is that of language, particularly when they are unfamiliar with the language of the research subjects. One of the primary objectives of interviewers is to
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ensure that the translated interview is equivalent to the interview they designed in their language. Although this appears to be a translation problem, direct translation does not necessarily ensure the equivalence of interview questions. Achieving linguistic equivalence within a cross-linguistic interview is a highly complex process, complicated by the existence of various kinds of equivalence and of methods for demonstrating equivalence.

Researchers have identified several different types of equivalence, the aim of which is to remove the specific influence of language on participants’ responses. The most obvious type of equivalence is vocabulary equivalence. Vocabulary equivalence ensures that the translated words and phrases “reflect not only the obvious meaning but also the important nuances of the original term” (Sechrest, Fay, and Zaidi 1972, p. 44). While a seemingly simple task, achieving vocabulary equivalence may be complicated by the existence of many words that have no equivalent in another language. Furthermore, translated words that appear to be equivalent to the original may, in reality, have quite different meanings in the second language.

The second type of equivalence is idiomatic equivalence. Sechrest, Fay, and Zaidi (1972, p. 45) state that the object of idiomatic equivalence is to “insure that when idioms are used in a translation they are equivalent in meaning to the idioms used in the original, and that the general level of idiomatic speech in the two languages is approximately equivalent so that one does not seem more scholarly, more tilted, in some other way different from the other.”

A third type of equivalence, grammatical and syntactical equivalence, “arises from the fact that languages differ widely in their grammars and syntaxes and these differences are often critical to the meanings in various translations” (Sechrest, Fay, and Zaidi 1972, p. 46). Difficulties with grammatical and syntactical equivalence most frequently originate from differing verb forms and parts of speech, and are most problematic within longer passages.

Another type of equivalence, experiential equivalence, demands that translations “utilize terms referring to real things and real experiences which are familiar in both cultures, if not exactly equally familiar” (Sechrest, Fay, and Zaidi 1972, p. 47). To achieve experiential equivalence, researchers should ensure that the experiences addressed within their interview scripts are familiar to the study’s participants.

Finally, conceptual equivalence, which is closely related to experiential equivalence, addresses the problem of “ensuring that the concepts used in the measures, interviews, or other translated materials are equivalent in the two cultures” (Sechrest, Fay, and Zaidi 1972, p. 49). Problems of conceptual equivalence arise when words or phrases that are easily translated imply or connote different meanings in the two languages and cultures. To achieve conceptual equivalence, researchers should ensure not only that the relevant concepts exist in both cultures, but that they exist in a manner that is equivalent or comparable.

Pareek and Rao (1980) have identified two additional types of equivalence. Measurement equivalence addresses the problems of “researchability, comparability of contexts, comparability of response, and comparability of reliability and validity” (p. 131). Functional equivalence “exists when the behavior in question has devel-
op ed in response to a problem shared by two or more cultural groups" (p. 131). For example, a group of researchers conducted a study in a small country that had been subject to frequent and severe periods of drought. During this study the researchers noted that members of this community moved frequently, traveled in large groups, and often relinquished responsibility for their children to other members of the group. These researchers designed a subsequent study, to be conducted in a different country, to examine these observed behaviors further. They quickly realized, however, that the study was ill-conceived, because the behaviors of the participants in the first study had developed in response to the experience of years of drought. These behaviors were not functionally equivalent, or even comparable to, the behaviors of the second community, which had never experienced drought to the same extent.

Translation

While direct linguistic translation may not solve all equivalence problems, it is clearly an important component of most cross-cultural and cross-linguistic interviews. The two most common forms of translation are back-translation and decentering. Back-translation refers to the process during which a bilingual individual translates a question or passage into a target language, and then another bilingual person, who is unaware of the original version, translates the question or passage from the target language back to the original or source language. Ideally each question or passage should undergo several rounds of back-translation, with different bilinguals translating without knowledge of the original passage (figure 1).

Related to the back-translation process is the concept of decentering, which refers to a process "in which the source and the target language versions are equally important and open to modification during the translation procedure; one language does not contain content that must be translated without change to the other" (Brislin, Lonner, and Thorndike 1973, p. 38). In other words, no language assumes a central or dominant position during the translation process. Individuals from the target community, or at least individuals who are fluent in both the language of the community as well as the language of the researchers, are needed for decentering. By using the two languages equally throughout the entire process of writing and translating interview questions, the decentering process limits the potential for cultural and linguistic bias within the interview script.
In addition to the use of back-translation and decentering, cross-linguistic researchers recommend that interviewers use the context-redundancy principle when designing interviews. This principle “states that concepts should be surrounded by similar and contrasting ideas so that the purpose of the original concept will be clear” (Brislin, Lonner, and Thorndike 1973, p. 3). Likewise, they recommend that researchers write at least two alternative questions for every concept addressed. Therefore interviewers can rephrase the question when necessary without changing the original meaning.

Brislin, Lonner, and Thorndike (1973) suggest that if the question or passage that results from the rounds of back-translation and decentering is equivalent to the original version, researchers may assume that the translation is acceptable. He and others contend that unless researchers adhere to these procedures, they “can never be sure that the answers one gets from two different cultures are answers to the same questions” (Segall 1986, p. 271). However, reliance on these methods does not necessarily guarantee that researchers have achieved equivalence. Deutscher (1973) notes that knowing when translated passages or questions are equivalent to the original is extremely difficult, and he argues that “back-translation can instill a false sense of security in the investigator by demonstrating a spurious lexical equivalence” (p. 167). Others have noted that back-translations tend to retain the grammatical structure of the original version, making the text easy to translate, yet “worthless for the purpose of asking questions of target-language monolinguals, since its grammar is that of the source, not the target” (Brislin, Lonner, and Thorndike 1973, p. 41). Researchers are advised not only to use back-translation and decentering, but also to work closely with members of the target community in the preparation of interview materials.

The translation process is further complicated when researchers use highly educated translators who speak and write differently than the subjects of the research study, therefore making it unlikely that the target sample will understand their translations. A possible solution to this problem is strict adherence to the decentering process and the “use of translators who have good acquaintance with the language as used by the prospective respondents” (Sechrest, Fay, and Zaidi 1972, p. 44). The involvement of members of the target community in the design and implementation of the evaluation, commonly referred to as participatory evaluation, will also dramatically improve the likelihood that research subjects will understand translated interview scripts and that the scripts will be equivalent to the original language.

The Use of Interpreters

Some cross-cultural researchers have suggested that researchers who wish to conduct interview research within a community that speaks another language have no acceptable alternative other than to learn the language of the culture. LeCompte and Preissle (1993, p. 94), for example, state that “to achieve the degree of understanding required for unraveling the behavior and belief patterns under study, many trainers of fieldworkers insist that no researcher really can hope to study a people adequately through interpreters.” Others, however, argue that mastering a second language with the level of fluency required to conduct research interviews is not
Helpful Hints: Writing and Translating Interview Scripts for Linguistic Equivalence

- Decenter, that is, work closely with individuals who are native speakers of the language (and dialect) in which the interviews will be conducted and, if possible, who are members of the community in which the research will occur. Make sure that no one language assumes a dominant position during the writing and translating of the questions.
- Back-translate, that is, have a bilingual individual who has not seen the original interview script read the translated script and translate it back into the original language. Compare the back-translated version with the original. Repeat this process several times with “blind” readers.
- Avoid using idioms, jargon, slang, or colloquialisms.
- Keep passages or questions as short and simple as possible.
- Write two alternative questions for every primary question or concept so that interviewers have back-up questions when an interviewee fails to understand a primary question.

possible, nor is it necessary. The reality is that a great deal of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research interviewing will require the use of interpreters.

In many ways, however, interpreters can complicate the cross-cultural research study. For example, interpreters create additional layers of translation that increase the likelihood of misunderstandings. They must translate the interview questions and then the subjects’ responses. This second-hand interpretation of questions and responses provides many opportunities for misinterpretation. If researchers have no knowledge of the language of the interview, they are unable to monitor interpreters’ translations and interpretations, and therefore cannot be certain of the equivalence and clarity of the questions and the accuracy of the responses.

In addition, many researchers have noted that interpreters are often from a different social class or have a different status than research subjects. They are typically more educated and their socioeconomic level differs from that of their research subjects, and they therefore bring different experiences and values to the research situation. This difference in subculture may hinder interpreters’ ability to comprehend and translate the deeper meanings and subtle nuances of the subjects’ responses. Patton (1990, p. 338), who describes the use of interpreters as “fraught with difficulty,” adds that interpreters “often want to be helpful” by rephrasing questions and summarizing and explaining subjects’ responses, thereby contaminating the interview data.

While the use of interpreters is clearly a complicated and challenging endeavor, interpreters who are not only familiar with the target language, but also the target culture, can be of great benefit to the research design, implementation, and interpretations. Interpreters’ knowledge of the target culture may enable researchers to design projects and write interview protocols in a manner that is culturally sensi-
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Helpful Hints: Working with Translators and Interpreters

- Select translators and interpreters who are not only from the same cultural and linguistic background as the research participants, but also from the same social or class background.
- Take advantage of interpreters' unique knowledge of the target culture by involving them in all phases of the interview process, including designing and writing the interview and interpreting and analyzing responses.
- Use participatory evaluation methods in which members of the target community participate in all aspects of the research project whenever possible.

Munroe and Munroe (1986, p. 118) state that an interpreter from the “selected culture group can provide aid with the indigenous language, research-relevant information concerning the sociocultural system, and personal advice about guidelines for getting along in an unfamiliar setting.” Furthermore, such knowledgeable interpreters may offer insights about the contexts through which the meaning of subjects’ responses should be interpreted, thereby increasing the validity of the findings. Reporting on her investigation of Azorean workers, Goldstein (1995, p. 589) states that “working with a linguistic and cultural interpreter provided me with the sociocultural, sociolinguistic background knowledge necessary for understanding the talk and the lives” of the research subjects. Researchers can therefore minimize the potential for bias created by interpreters while also enhancing the validity and authenticity of the research design by working effectively with interpreters.

Beyond Words: Cultural Differences

In addition to the difficulties related to conducting interviews in an unfamiliar language, cross-cultural researchers also confront issues related to cultural differences. Ting-Toomey (1983, p. 5) has described culture as a “screening device” through which all words, behaviors, and events are perceived and interpreted. Culture determines what is expected of members of a community and which behaviors are judged as proper or improper in a particular social situation. The research interview is a culturally-bound activity, and researchers must be aware of the many ways that culture can influence a research interview.

One of the aspects of cultural difference that may influence the research interview process is the target community’s level of familiarity with Western scientific beliefs and methods. The lack of familiarity with Western research methods may complicate many aspects of the research project. For example, the task of informing research subjects who are unfamiliar with Western research of the purposes and procedures of the study can range from complicated to impossible. Furthermore, the concept of an interview, particularly a research interview, is one that is foreign to many people from certain cultures. The experience of permitting a stranger, typically one from another
Box 1 Cultural Differences: Interview Norms and Expectations

An evaluator arrived at the home of a man living in a village in Brazil to conduct the first interview of an evaluation project. The evaluator had given the interview a great deal of thought, and wanted to be respectful by not taking up too much of this busy man’s time. His objectives were therefore to conduct the interview in a clear, direct, and efficient manner. The family of the man who was to be interviewed had spent a great deal of time preparing for the visitor who was coming to see them. They had cleaned their home, dressed in their formal clothing, and prepared a special meal. When the visitor arrived, informed them that he was not hungry, and proceeded immediately to ask them direct and rather personal questions, and then to write down their responses, the man and his family were confused and insulted. As the food became cold, they attempted to engage the visitor in a polite conversation about the weather, farming conditions, and his travels, to which they received only short and rather abrupt responses. Eventually, the visitor, who was frustrated and angry because the man would not answer his questions, left, and the man and his family agreed not to participate in any more visits from “evaluators.”

culture, into one’s home to ask a series of questions would be “perceived as an alien social situation by most peoples of the world” (Deutscher 1973, p. 179) (box 1).

Thus interviewers should learn as much as possible about the communication norms and styles of interaction of the target culture before beginning the interview process. In emphasizing the importance of this preparation, Goldstein (1995, p. 589) states that:

Because interviews themselves can suppress native communication routines, the interviewer needs to conduct a limited amount of sociolinguistic fieldwork on the native communication routines prior to interviewing research participants. The success of the research interview with speakers of other languages depends on the researcher’s capacity for allowing native communication patterns to work their way into the research situation.

Having examined the communication patterns of the culture in which the research project will be conducted, researchers should consider the communication norms demanded by the interview process and determine whether the two sets of norms are compatible. They may redesign the interview to make it more appropriate for the target culture, or they may decide that their norms for interviews are incompatible with those of the target culture and decide to use a research design that does not rely on interviews.

Researchers’ sociolinguistic fieldwork prior to interviewing should include an investigation of topics that are appropriate or inappropriate for the target culture. Patton (1990, p. 339) cautions that “researchers cannot simply presume that they have the right to ask intrusive questions, and many topics may be taboo.” Many
cultures, for example, do not share Western norms of the acceptability of discussing oneself and one’s experiences. Asking research subjects to discuss their experiences may therefore unsettle them, and thus jeopardize the interview. Pareek and Rao (1980, p. 162) note that “in some cultures people are constrained by their inability to articulate their own impressions, feelings, and actions.” Even topics that are discussed openly in Western cultures may be considered intensely private, or even taboo, in other cultures. Within such cultures, researchers may choose to question a third party when seeking information regarding issues that may be perceived as private, such as sexuality, wealth and property ownership, and individual histories. In some cultures, for example, individuals are not accustomed to or comfortable discussing themselves or their families. In such situations, a third party may provide information about others within the community. A third party may also be a key informant, perhaps someone who has been involved in the research project, who may be willing to discuss matters that would otherwise be considered taboo. Researchers should examine cultural differences both in those things that participants are able to talk about and those things that they are willing to talk about. Researchers using information supplied by a third party should always consider the reliability of the information when analyzing their data.

In addition to cultural differences in topics that are taboo, culture dictates the conditions under which individuals can discuss different topics. Goldstein (1995, p. 588) explains that “different groups of people have differing kinds of restrictions on who may ask what questions of whom and under what circumstances.” Therefore, in addition to investigating appropriate topics and questions, interviewers must consider who is being interviewed, because issues such as gender, age, and marital status may influence the appropriateness of questions (box 2). Furthermore, they must examine the following questions:

Box 2 Cultural Differences: Behavioral Norms

As a component of an evaluation of an environmental sanitation project in a rural village in Somalia, evaluation workers, all of whom were male, were conducting individual interviews with community residents. Through their discussions with community leaders during the planning phase of the evaluation, the evaluation workers decided that to facilitate an open and confidential discussion between interviewers and participants, the interviews should be conducted in the privacy of the participants’ huts. Furthermore, researchers decided to interview only the women of the community, because it was the women who were almost exclusively responsible for maintaining the sanitation system. The evaluation workers were surprised and confused when the women refused to be interviewed. Shortly after the interviewers began attempting to schedule the interviews with the women, the men of the community, who had previously supported the project, quickly decided that the continuation of the project was not in the community’s best interests. The evaluators eventually realized that attempting to meet with married women alone in their huts was extremely inappropriate in this culture.
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- With whom is it appropriate for the participant to discuss these topics?
- Where is it appropriate for the participant to discuss these topics?
- Under what circumstances is it appropriate for the participant to discuss these topics?

Researchers must take such cultural norms into account not only when designing the interview, but also when interpreting the responses. Many cross-cultural researchers have discovered that in some cultures providing responses that will please or satisfy the interviewer is the norm, while in other cultures misleading strangers is the norm (Brislin 1986).

In addition, styles of interaction and conversation vary across cultures. Western norms generally dictate that interview questions are clear, concise, and direct. Other cultures, however, may perceive such direct questioning as offensive, particularly when discussing matters considered to be private. Chu (1993, p. 5) cautions against the use of direct questions in cross-cultural interviewing: "Direct questions, while more efficient, may bring about less cooperation because of differences in value systems, linguistic codes, biases, etc., between the interviewer and the interviewee." Other cultures, however, may perceive indirect or open-ended questions as inappropriate or confusing. Furthermore, the use of hypothetical situations is common practice in Western interview research, yet people from many other cultures are unaccustomed to "what if" questions, and are therefore unlikely to be able to formulate a reply.

In addition to differences in communication norms and styles, cultures differ in terms of frames of reference, and these differences can have profound effects on a research interview. The different life experiences of different cultural groups shape their world views, thoughts, and perceptions (box 3). Differences in these shared experiences and in related beliefs, values, and expectations will influence the subjects' use of language, behaviors, and interpretations of the interviewer and the interview situation. Therefore, an individual's interpretation of and response to a situation, and specifically to an interview situation and interview questions, is grounded in that individual's historical, social, and cultural reality.

These fundamental differences in the ways in which people view the world can create numerous difficulties and misunderstandings during cross-cultural and cross-linguistic interviewing. The way that an individual perceives and interprets an event or phenomenon, for example, is largely influenced by that person's culture. Deutscher (1973, p. 172) states that "the symbolic meaning of physical phenomena varies from culture to culture, and that variability is reflected in language." Interviewers who do not share the sociocultural background of their interviewees may misunderstand the subtle nuances and connotations of verbal language, as well as of body language and interaction style.

Because of the differences in cultural experiences and social realities and the resulting differences in language and communication norms, researchers often encounter problems in operationalizing concepts for the research interview. In other words, researchers often experience difficulty in translating the concepts that are part of the research study into language that the research participants will be familiar with and
Box 3 Beliefs, World Views, and Frames of Reference

An evaluator was sent to investigate why a development project in Brazil was failing. This project was designed to help the local community respond more effectively to the area's frequent flooding and prevent the massive damage caused. During interviews, the evaluator asked the participants about their views of how the community could more effectively plan for and prevent the flood damage. The evaluator was surprised and confused to realize that the participants could not comprehend or respond to her well-structured and well-prepared interview questions. Subsequent discussions with local leaders led the evaluator to realize that the members of this community believed that the flooding was a punishment from God for the sins of the community, and that it was their duty to accept the wishes of God without question. To attempt to prevent flood damage, they believed, was disrespectful to God. The evaluator thus realized that her evaluation, as well as the entire project, was designed and implemented in a way that was inconsistent with the local community's beliefs and frames of reference.

will understand. Researchers whose projects and interviews are conceptualized, designed, and written in a Western language and with a Western frame of reference bear the risk of "imposing conclusions based on concepts which exist in their own culture but which are foreign, or at least partially incorrect, when used in another culture" (Brislin 1986, p. 139). Although interviews that were redesigned and rewritten using the back-translation and decentering techniques are more likely to be culturally appropriate, "there is no reason to believe that these purified items will measure the phenomenon as experienced by people in another culture" (p. 139). The involvement of members of the target culture, who are knowledgeable about the norms, expectations, and experiences of the target community, in all aspects of the design and implementation of evaluation research will resolve many of these issues.

Several assumptions are typically incorporated in the research interview that are inconsistent with the reality of other cultures. For example, many cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research projects are developed with a presupposition of the superiority of Western scientific methods or of Western "ways of knowing." Not only are the assumptions of the Western scientific method unfamiliar in many cultures, but they may also be inconsistent with the beliefs of members of other cultures. As a result, researchers encounter difficulty not only in explaining to different cultural groups the relevant components of their scientific techniques, such as the concepts of an interview, a questionnaire, confidentiality, anonymity, and so on, but also in involving them in the process in such a manner as to obtain valid, reliable, and authentic data.

Other Western assumptions are frequently embedded in research interview questions. For example, Deutscher (1973, p. 183) argues that "the process of answering a question is also the process of making a decision: In many societies only certain individuals are perceived as having a legitimate right to do that." In addition to the assumptions about decisionmaking, many interviews assume that subjects have opinions
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**Helpful Hints: Dealing with Cultural Differences**

- Before designing the evaluation project, examine the target community’s familiarity with Western scientific methods, as well as their communication patterns, norms, and styles. Redesign the interview accordingly.
- Find out which topics are sensitive or taboo with the target culture before designing the interview.
- Avoid topics that participants consider to be private and those that they are not accustomed to discussing.
- Consider using a third party, key informant, or a series of individual interviews to obtain sensitive information.
- Investigate the styles of conversation of the target culture before designing the interview. Determine not only whether members of the culture use direct or indirect communication styles, but also the extent to which statements or questions that are hypothetical, speculative, imaginary, or theoretical are used within the participants’ language.
- Before designing the interview, conduct a thorough investigation of the community’s history, sociopolitical climate, beliefs, values, and expectations, as well as the manner in which these factors influence the ways that community members perceive, interpret, and respond to events and issues.
- Participatory evaluation methods, in which members of the target community are involved in all aspects of the development and evaluation process, minimize the likelihood of the research design being incompatible with the target culture. Thus researchers can avoid many problems related to different communication norms and styles, frames of reference, experiences and expectations, and “ways of knowing” (see Narayan 1993 and World Bank 1996 for in-depth discussions of participatory methods).

on the topic that is the focus of the interview. Opinion formation, like decisionmaking, is a culturally-bound phenomenon, and while most individuals in Western societies have opinions about most issues, the same cannot be assumed for individuals from other cultures. Deutscher (1973, p. 183) explains that “in many tradition-based societies, the mechanisms for opinion formation may be completely absent.”

**The Use of Technology**

Researchers throughout the world have discovered the numerous advantages technological devices such as the tape recorder, Dictaphone, video camera, and lap-top computer offer. While these devices often enable researchers to carry out their fieldwork more efficiently and comprehensively, their use can create problems within some cross-cultural settings. The presence of a tape recorder or a video camera may inhibit participation by research subjects, particularly those who are unfamiliar with such devices. In some extreme situations, a community’s lack of familiarity with recording devices or cultural or religious prohibitions against being
“captured” on tape may prevent individuals from participating in interviews or may significantly alter the nature of their participation, thereby decreasing the validity of the data.

In light of these issues, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic researchers should carefully consider whether or not to use technological devices prior to initiating fieldwork. Discussions with key informants and community elders about such devices will provide researchers with an understanding of how participants might react to the presence of tape recorders, video cameras, and other devices. Researchers who decide that the use of technology may be appropriate even though participants may be unfamiliar with it could benefit from conducting preliminary or “mock” group interviews with the participants using the technological devices. Such interviews would provide participants with the opportunity to become accustomed to the presence of recording devices, thereby decreasing the chances that subsequent interviews would be significantly influenced by the presence of these devices (box 4). Furthermore, mock interviews also allow researchers to gauge the participants’ reactions to the devices and to determine whether they should use them in subsequent interviews.

In situations in which researchers determine through discussions with key informants or mock interviews that using technological devices would significantly influence the behavior and participation of subjects, they should not employ such devices during the interview process. However, other alternatives remain. For example, researchers could conduct interviews in the presence of one or more assistants who would be responsible for taking detailed notes about the participants’ comments and behaviors. A lap-top computer may facilitate this task, although as with such devices as tape recorders and video cameras, researchers should first

**Box 4 Using Technology**

As an integral component of a development project in Nigeria, project personnel and community members had created farmers’ clubs. To evaluate the success of these clubs, evaluators planned to conduct several focus group interviews. Recognizing the advantages provided by tape recorders and lap-top computers, the evaluators asked community leaders whether they thought the presence of such technology would distract or disturb participants. The leaders stated that although there was no cultural prohibition against being captured on tape, participants were unfamiliar with such technology, and they could therefore not be certain how participants would respond. The evaluators decided to hold a mock interview to see how the participants would respond to the technology. During the interview, participants quickly became accustomed to the tape recorder, and eventually seemed to forget it was there. However, the use of the lap-top appeared to be extremely distracting. Thus the evaluators decided that during subsequent interviews, they would use a tape recorder, but not a computer. Instead of the computer, they would bring an assistant to the interview who would take detailed notes.
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Helpful Hints: Using Technology

Before deciding whether to use technological devices during interviews, discuss the use of such devices with key informants. Conduct a mock interview using the devices to familiarize participants with such technology and assess their reactions. When such devices are not used, have assistants take detailed notes during the interview, and use a Dictaphone to record thoughts immediately after the interview.

Investigate whether the presence of the lap-top computer might inhibit or alter subjects’ participation. Researchers who use a Dictaphone to record their impressions should do so immediately following interviews so as to capture their reflections on the interview before the passage of time distorts their perceptions. Some researchers in this situation choose to use concealed recording devices; however, because of the ethical issues related to informed consent, this is not recommended.

Reliability, Validity, and Authenticity

Like any research project, evaluation research projects that use cross-cultural and cross-linguistic interviews face potential bias from many different sources (table 1). The cultural and linguistic issues confronting cross-cultural researchers increase the potential for bias that exists within any study. In addition to the issues of reliability and validity, cross-cultural researchers must be aware of the issue of authenticity. Pareek and Rao (1980, p. 154) define authenticity as “the total capability to get unbiased and genuine responses from the respondent.” Researchers must also remain aware of the potential sources of bias, so that they can design and conduct their study in a way that will minimize the potential for bias while maximizing the authenticity of the findings.

Possible sources of bias derive from both interviewers and respondents. Brislin, Lonner, and Thorndike (1973) and Brislin (1986) identified seven potential respondent biases. The rudeness bias occurs when respondents interpret the interviewer’s behavior and questions as rude and inappropriate. The hostility that emerges from these perceptions can influence the interviewee’s responses. The I-can-answer-any-question bias typically originates from the respondent’s belief that not answering the interviewer’s questions would be rude, even when the respondent has no knowledge or opinion about the topic. Similarly, the courtesy bias occurs when respondents provide the answers that they believe will satisfy or please the interviewer, regardless of the accuracy of those answers. In some cultures, for instance, respondents typically perceive interviewers as agents of the government and, often out of fear, tend to promote government policy in their responses. The sucker bias occurs when “respondents give nonsensical answers in the spirit of fun, to see how much of their silliness the interviewer is willing to record” (Brislin 1986, p. 163). Brislin,
Table 1 Possible Sources of Respondent Bias

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of bias</th>
<th>Participant's attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The rudeness bias</td>
<td>“The behavior of this interviewer is rude or inappropriate, and I don’t want to be spending time with him. I’ll just answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to his questions so he’ll leave.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The I-can-answer-any-question bias</td>
<td>“This nice interviewer came all the way here to talk to me, so it would be rude for me not to answer his questions, even though I have no knowledge or opinion about the subject he wants to discuss.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The courtesy bias</td>
<td>“This nice interviewer came all the way here to talk to me, so I will say whatever I think he wants to hear.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The social desirability bias</td>
<td>“I want this man to like me and to think that I am intelligent, so I am going to say whatever I think he wants to hear, even if what I say isn’t quite true.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sucker bias</td>
<td>“I will respond to this man’s questions by saying things that don’t make sense, just to see how much of this nonsense he is going to write down.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The status difference bias and the racial difference bias</td>
<td>“This man, a member of an enemy tribe, wants me to talk to him about tribal relations?? I’ll have to be very careful about what I say, and I obviously can’t say what I really think.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lonner, and Thomdike (1973) also note that within some cultures it is acceptable, or even expected, to challenge or try to deceive outsiders. The social desirability bias derives from respondents’ attempts to portray themselves in the most favorable light. The status difference bias and the racial difference bias emerge from the obstacles to communication created by the differences between the interviewer and the respondents. Differences in status or ethnicity may cause feelings of intimidation, hostility, or even fear, in the respondents, thereby influencing the authenticity of their responses.

In addition to these biases, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research is particularly susceptible to other threats to reliability and validity. Several of these threats result from interviewers’ ability to interpret and derive meaning from the responses and behaviors of the respondents. For example, cultural communication norms may dictate that respondents answer questions indirectly, thereby complicating the interpretation of responses. Interviewers’ subjectivity may also influence their ability to interpret responses accurately, particularly when the cultures and languages of researchers and subjects differ significantly. Lewis and Geroy (1991, p. 11) note that the cross-cultural researcher “does not have an insider advantage; behaviors may appear totally different to those performing them than to the researcher observing them.”

Other potential threats to reliability and validity include sampling and instrumentation biases. The most common cross-cultural sampling bias occurs when researchers use easily accessible samples. Because of their willingness to volunteer themselves for a research project, the members of an easily accessible sample may not be representative or characteristic of the group or culture under study. Research-
Helpful Hints: Reducing the Likelihood of Bias

- Develop a thorough understanding of the target culture, including, but not limited to, communication norms and styles, behavioral expectations, beliefs, and values.
- Work closely with members of the community during all phases of the design and implementation of the study so as to develop research procedures that will minimize the potential for bias. Use participatory evaluation methods whenever possible.
- Use purposeful sampling strategies so that the sample represents individuals with a wide variety of perspectives, experiences, and viewpoints.
- Consider instrumentation carefully. Either develop culturally-specific instruments or protocols that meet the needs of the study and are sensitive to the unique characteristics of the community or adapt existing instruments. Whenever possible, include members of the community in the process of designing or modifying instruments.

Researchers must therefore try to reduce sampling bias and to remain aware of their ability to interpret and generalize their findings. Instrumentation bias is common within cross-cultural research because of the use of instruments or interview protocols that were designed for members of a quite different culture. Lewis and Geroy (1991, p. 23) argue that "translated instruments run the risk of item non-equivalence, and instruments and protocols developed in one cultural matrix may miss important aspects of a phenomenon as seen by people in other cultures." Similarly, Pareek and Rao (1980, p. 130) caution that "unless interview schedules are culture-specific, they may not be able to elicit valid and authentic data." Many cross-cultural researchers recommend that investigators create culturally-specific interview protocols or modify existing protocols and instruments to increase the reliability and validity of the interview. However, efforts to increase an instrument's cultural specificity decrease the instrument's cross-cultural equivalence. Cross-cultural comparisons are therefore highly complicated.

Finally, some researchers have questioned the appropriateness of using Western scientific methods and research designs to conduct research in cultures whose ways of knowing and belief systems are radically different. This concern highlights the importance of understanding the target culture and relating research and instrument design to that culture. Researchers who are knowledgeable about the target culture may be better able to anticipate potential biases and to reduce those biases by modifying their research design, sampling procedures, instrumentation, or interview process.

Key Informants

The use of key informants, a common practice during qualitative evaluation studies, creates other possible difficulties and pitfalls. Key informants have proven to
be effective sources of information about aspects of community life, behavior, or history that researchers cannot otherwise access. Similarly, key informants can provide explanations and insights about events or behaviors that researchers have observed, but do not fully understand. However, the "danger in using key informants is that their perspectives will be distorted and biased, thus giving an inaccurate picture of what is happening" (Patton 1990, p. 264).

Like most individuals, key informants enter the research interview with their own histories, experiences, biases, and agendas, all of which are likely to influence the manner in which they perceive and interpret events, therefore calling into question the reliability of the information they provide. Furthermore, key informants are frequently selected on the basis of their status within a community, which provides them with unique access to or understanding of a particular event or subject. For example, evaluators of development projects often consider village chiefs, elders, teachers, and local government officials to be valuable key informants. However, such unique status within the community also presents the possibility that the information these key informants provide is unlikely to be representative of the experiences and perspectives of the community as a whole.

Although the use of key informants raises questions about bias and reliability, when used effectively and cautiously, they can provide information that is critical to the research process. Casley and Kumar (1988, p. 24) argue that "even those with a vested interest may prove to be useful if their allegiances and prejudices are taken into account in analyzing their observations." Thus researchers are responsible for selecting key informants wisely, remaining aware of the extent to which informants' experiences and biases are likely to influence their responses, and recognizing that their responses cannot be considered reliable if they are used to provide information that is beyond their direct experiences. The use of several key informants selected to represent diverse viewpoints, concerns, and experiences will enable researchers to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of particular events or behaviors, and will thus increase the reliability of the information obtained.

**Helpful Hints: Working with Key Informants**

- Work with several key informants, and select them from a variety of diverse groups, statuses, or positions within the community so that the data obtained will represent the experiences and perspectives of the community as a whole.
- Do not ask key informants to provide information about events or issues that are beyond their direct experiences.
- Recognize that key informants enter the research interview with their own histories, experiences, biases, and agendas, all of which are likely to influence the way they perceive and interpret events. Take these potential biases into account when analyzing the key informants' observations.
Ethical Issues

Cross-cultural, cross-linguistic researchers also encounter a number of ethical issues, including the insider-outsider debate, politics and exploitation, and the sponsorship of the research.

The Insider-Outsider Debate

Among the most contentious ethical issues within cross-cultural research is the insider-outsider debate. This debate focuses on the ability of outsiders, who differ from the research subjects in terms of their race or ethnicity, gender, level of education, status, or other characteristics, to interpret the lives of the research subjects clearly and objectively. According to Merton (1972, p. 15), the "insider doctrine holds that one has monopolistic or privileged access to knowledge, or is wholly excluded from it, by virtue of one's group membership or social position." Proponents of this doctrine believe that only members of the target group, who have shared the life experiences of the subjects, are capable of and ethically permitted to examine the lives of the target group. They contend that "only through continued socialization in the life of the group can one become fully aware of its symbolisms and socially shared realities; only so can one understand the fine-grained meanings of behavior, feelings, and values; only so can one decipher the unwritten grammar of conduct and the nuances of cultural idioms" (Merton 1972, p. 15).

The outsider, who has not experienced the life and experiences of the target group, cannot begin to comprehend the subtle meanings of behavior, and therefore "has a structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien groups, statuses, cultures, and societies" (Merton 1972, p. 15). According to this doctrine, the outsider, "no matter how careful and talented, is excluded in principle from gaining access to the social and cultural truth" (p. 15). In addition to outsiders' alleged inability to comprehend any culture other than their own, proponents of the insider doctrine argue that outsiders' research interests are different from, and generally incompatible with, insiders' interests and needs. Merton (1972, p. 16) states that "this argument goes something as follows: The insiders, sharing the deepest concerns of the group, or at least being thoroughly aware of them, will so direct their inquiries as to have them be relevant to those concerns."

Numerous cross-cultural researchers support the premises of the insider doctrine. Oscar (1970) argues that the level of trust established between the interviewer and the interviewee determines the reliability and authenticity of subjects' responses, and that trust is often based on the shared racial origin or group membership of the interviewer and the subject. Likewise, Smith and Tayeb (1988, p. 154) believe that "members of a given culture share complex systems for decoding meaning in another's behavior that may be inaccessible to outsiders." Similarly, in reporting on their research in Africa, Hanna and Hanna (1966, p. 292) conclude that "no confidence can be placed in the results" of a cross-cultural study if the ethnicity of the interviewer is not matched to that of the respondents. Of her research on ethnic minorities within the United States, Lewis (1973, p. 587) states that "while blacks, among themselves, exhibit a variety of opinions and impressions, such differences
generally fall within the perimeters of a common experience. Since an outsider lacks the experience, his views more often fall outside these perimeters, no matter how sympathetic or well-intentioned the attempt."

However, many researchers question the validity and feasibility of the insider doctrine. Arguing against the insider doctrine, Merton (1972, p. 22) states that "individuals have not a single status, but a status set: a complement of variously interrelated statuses which interact to affect both their behavior and perspectives." Therefore, even if an interviewer’s ethnicity matches that of the respondents, the interviewer is likely to differ from the respondents on other, important characteristics, such as gender, level of education, religion, economic status, and so on. In addition, the insider doctrine fails to acknowledge the variability of opinions, behaviors, attitudes, and experiences even within a particular group.

Strict adherence to the insider doctrine not only renders most cross-cultural research invalid, but also deprives the research community of the unique contributions that only outsiders can make. In many instances, researchers’ outsider status may enable them to observe aspects of the target culture that are unobservable to insiders. Referring to the unique position of the outsider, Lewis (1973, p. 587) states that “an outsider can perceive things that are so deeply ingrained that they escape the insider; he can stand back and delineate alternatives simply because he is not involved.”

In many instances, the extent to which interviewers’ status and characteristics influence the responses of the subjects, and therefore the reliability of the study, may depend on the topic of the study. For example, analyses of studies that included cross-racial interviews suggest that when the interview topic is not race related, the interviewer’s race does not influence the subjects’ responses. Interviews that deal with race relations, however, may be more susceptible to bias when the interviewer’s race does not match that of the respondents. While acknowledging that the interviewer’s status has the potential to bias responses, Pareek and Rao (1980, p. 165) state that such bias “is so small as to be practically negligible.”

The various statuses of interviewers and participants are clearly important to the reliability of any cross-cultural study, and deserve a great deal of attention during the conceptualization and design phases of the study, and throughout the implementation of the study and analyses of the data. Researchers must consider the topic of the investigation, the characteristics of the culture and its people, the amount of time that they can devote to fieldwork, the depth of insight required by the analysis, and the feasibility of locating and training qualified interviewers from the target culture. While many researchers recommend that, whenever possible, interviewers and respondents share similar backgrounds, many characteristics of interviewers, other than their ethnicity, gender, or culture, will influence the quality and reliability of the data obtained. For example, interviewers’ interpersonal and cultural sensitivity may enable them to transcend the status differences between themselves and their respondents. Likewise, the extent of interviewers’ knowledge and understanding of the target culture, language, and people will influence the insight that they bring to the interview situation. Therefore, while interviewers’ characteristics and status are certainly relevant and worthy of consideration, they are not the only variables that will influence the interview and the resulting data.
Helpful Hints: Conducting Interviews as an Outsider

- Work closely with members of the target community throughout all phases of the study. This will help to ensure that the research reflects the community’s concerns and priorities, and that the study is implemented in a manner that is consistent with the community’s values, beliefs, and needs.
- Consider the topic of the study when determining the feasibility of using interviewers who do not share the respondents’ culture, ethnicity, gender, and so on. Interviews that deal with race relations, for example, may be more susceptible to bias when the participants’ race does not match that of the interviewer.
- Take into account the characteristics of the culture and its people, the amount of time that can be devoted to fieldwork, the depth of insight required by the analysis, and the feasibility of locating and training qualified interviewers from the target culture when deciding who will conduct the interviews.
- Select interviewers whose interpersonal and cultural sensitivity is highly developed, and who possess in-depth knowledge and understanding of the target culture and community.
- Have interviewers spend time as participant observers before the beginning of data collection. This will enable them to become more familiar with the subtle nuances of the community and its culture, while also allowing trust to develop between the interviewers and the participants.
- Recognize that your outsider status may bias the respondents, and take this potential for bias into account when analyzing the data.
- Recognize how the various characteristics and statuses of the participants may influence the way they perceive and interpret events and issues, and take this into account when interpreting data.
- Recognize that your outsider status may give you an advantage by allowing you to “perceive things that are so deeply ingrained that they escape the insider” (Lewis 1973, p. 587).

Politics and Exploitation

Many of the other issues that confront cross-cultural and cross-linguistic researchers emerge from the politics that are inextricably linked to cross-cultural research and the historically exploitive nature of many cross-cultural studies. Warwick (1980, p. 320) explains that “cross-cultural research is political to the extent that it reflects or affects the ability of actors to impose their will, pursue their interests, or enjoy legitimacy in the exercise of authority.” The political nature of cross-cultural research renders it a virtual minefield of ethical dilemmas.

One of the most serious ethical issues relates to the perception of cross-cultural research as opportunistic and exploitative. There is a widespread belief that cross-cultural research emerged from ethnocentric beliefs and has historically exploited and marginalized subject cultures to pursue the academic or missionary objectives of Western researchers. Merryfield (1985, p. 16) expresses this ethical dilemma when
she asks: "Does cross-cultural evaluation reflect cultural imperialism? Is the scientific paradigm a Western construction of reality that should not be forced on people who do not accept its basic assumptions?" She argues that these issues "call into question the assumptions of Western superiority in evaluation personnel and procedures" (p. 16).

This ethical "controversy is likely to be highest when the study deals with groups that have been dominated or exploited by the larger society" (Warwick 1980, p. 344). Even today, most of the subjects of cross-cultural research satisfy this criterion of historical domination or exploitation. Maynard (1974) cites the example of the American Indians as an illustration of the historically exploitative and opportunistic nature of cross-cultural research. Working with a frequently studied group of American Indians, he noted that the community had identified the following three primary grievances against anthropologists:

- The constant invasions of privacy, which contribute to the feeling that nothing is sacred for Indians
- The failure of anthropological research to bring any tangible social benefits to the communities studied
- The failure to make the results of research available to the communities studied (p. 345).

The perception that subject cultures are dependent on the agency conducting the research heightens the ethical tensions caused by the potentially exploitative nature of cross-cultural research. The unique context of development projects and programs may intensify subjects' perception that their dependency compels them to participate in the researcher's agenda, and thus increase the potential for ethical difficulties.

**Sponsorship of Evaluation Research**

As a great deal of cross-cultural research is financed by sponsoring organizations, this intensifies the perception of dependency and the potential for exploitation, and thus complicates the sociopolitical context of evaluation research. Many of the ethical dilemmas that emerge during sponsored evaluations relate to the extent to which sponsoring agencies influence various aspects of the research process. Warwick (1980, p. 321) states that "when cross-cultural research is directly or indirectly linked to the sponsoring organization's or nation's policy objectives, serious ethical questions can be raised about the 'macropolitics' of the project." Issues related to the design of the evaluation project may arise when sponsors whose perspectives and objectives are vastly different from those of the target community frequently confront researchers. Furthermore, sponsors often have the ability to influence the goals, questions, and procedures of research projects, thereby raising questions about whose interests and needs the study will serve, and at whose expense.

A related issue arises when sponsoring organizations have a stake in the outcome of the research (box 5). Rossi and Freeman (1993, p. 111) caution that "sponsors of evaluations may turn on evaluators when the results contradict the policies and
Box 5 Dealing with Sponsors

Evaluators of a nutrition project in Mali found themselves confronting endless dilemmas relating to the interests and agenda of their sponsoring organization. Initially, the sponsors sought to implement the project in a manner that project personnel believed to be inappropriate for the needs and characteristics of the community. Second, the sponsors challenged the use of their funds for research purposes, stating that the funds could be better spent on food rather than research. When the sponsors finally agreed to fund research, they sought control over the research questions and methodologies. When the emerging research findings began to show that the nutrition project was only modestly successful, the sponsors immediately withdrew their funding from the research.

programs they advocate.” Scudder (1993) recounts such an experience in his description of the evaluation of an irrigation and resettlement project in Sri Lanka. When the evaluators concluded “that the potential of the project was not being realized due to a number of deficiencies, the initial reaction of the government officials and donors was to dispute their accuracy because of the nature of the methodology” (p. 41).

The complexities of balancing sponsors’ perspectives and interests with those of the target community are intensified when evaluations receive funding from multiple sources. In such situations researchers may be “confronted with individuals and groups who hold competing and sometimes combative views on the appropriateness of the evaluation work and whose interest will be affected by the outcome” (Scudder 1993, p. 407). Rossi and Freeman (1993, p. 409) advise evaluators to “accept the fact that their efforts are but one input into the complex mosaic from which decisions and actions eventuate.”

Evaluations that are funded as a component of a larger development project encounter other related issues. Because such evaluations are not the primary focus of the development project they may, for example, receive low priority both in terms of financial resources and the interests of the sponsors. Sponsors whose primary interests relate to development and who may be skeptical of devoting scarce resources to research exacerbate this problem. Likewise, sponsors who want to avoid evaluation results that contradict their policies may consider evaluation to be a threat to the pursuit of their objectives and agenda.

Other Ethical Issues

Many of the ethical issues that plague any research project, such as the moral behavior of the researcher, the obtaining of informed consent, and the offering of incentives to subjects, are not only of concern within cross-cultural evaluation studies, but also assume additional ethical dimensions. For example, researchers are widely expected to behave according to the norms dictated by their society and the scientific community within that society. However, cross-cultural researchers must con-
Helpful Hints: Dealing with Ethical Issues

- Conduct a great deal of preliminary investigation of the culture and community to be studied to identify their norms of ethical behavior. Design data collection procedures and interview scripts in a manner that is consistent with these norms.
- Work closely with members of the community during the conceptualization and design of the study.
- Be prepared with tactful and respectful excuses for not participating in any rituals or behaviors that conflict with your moral, ethical, or religious norms before entering the field.
- Consider the effect that gatekeepers will have on research participants. Arrange your entry into the community in such a way that participants are unlikely to be biased against you because of your relationship with the gatekeepers.
- Work closely with members of the community (using participatory evaluation methods) to ensure that the study is presented to the community and consent is sought in a way that participants are likely to understand.
- Make sure that the anticipated results of the study are meaningful to the community. This will facilitate the participants’ understanding of the purposes of the study.
- “Pay well but not extremely well, make gifts to community members on an occasional rather than regular basis, and be prepared with a reasonable limit and/or excuse if and when personal loans are requested” (Munroe and Munroe 1986, p. 128)

cern themselves not only with the norms of their own society, but also the norms of the cultures in which they are conducting their research. This may create numerous ethical dilemmas when the set of norms within one society differ vastly from that of another society. Warwick (1980, p. 321) states that “a relatively unique problem in the cross-cultural study arises when there are diametrically opposed moral understandings in the various societies about the proper behavior of the investigator.”

Cross-cultural research interviews present innumerable instances in which these conflicting norms create ethical tensions. For example, Western researchers frequently challenge the norms of other cultures in the types of questions they ask (which members of other cultures often perceive as private and offensive) and the situations they present (such as asking a woman to be interviewed by a man in private or without the consent of her husband or an elder). Cross-cultural researchers thus ought not only to ensure that they are abiding by the norms of ethical behavior, but also concern themselves with the issue of whose norms they are following.

Cross-cultural and cross-linguistic evaluators should also be aware of the extent to which their work may be susceptible to the influence of others, namely the “gatekeepers” from whom they must gain access to the field. Warwick (1980, p. 347) asserts that a “key ethical issue in many studies is the researcher’s political validation to enter the community; just where this validation comes from can be a
significant issue. "The gatekeepers who facilitate the researchers' entry to the community may not only attempt to influence the design and methodology of the study, but may also indirectly influence the way that community members perceive the evaluators and the research project.

Attempts to obtain the informed consent of research participants are also often problematic within cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research. The researchers are ethically obliged to ensure that participants understand the purposes and procedures of the research and how the resulting data will be used. However, achieving such understanding can be extremely difficult when the research participants not only speak a different language, but are also completely unfamiliar with Western concepts of research and evaluation. Other related concepts, such as the research interview, anonymity, and confidentiality, will likely also be confusing to these participants. Pareek and Rao (1980, p. 137) argue that the issue of informing subjects "is the most serious ethical question in cross-cultural research."

Another ethical dilemma concerns payments or other incentives offered to research subjects in exchange for their participation in the research project. Cross-cultural and cross-linguistic interviewers may experience difficulty in communicating the offer of payment to potential subjects who do not understand the language and probably also do not understand the concept of payment for what appears to be a conversation. By contrast, communities whose impoverished and dependent status make them likely targets for much cross-cultural research often perceive educated interviewers and their sponsoring government or organization as a source of assistance. The phenomenon of dependency, therefore, may lead potential research participants to infer offers of assistance even when none have been presented. Although Pareek and Rao (1980, p. 137) recommend that research participants and the target community "should obtain something of value for their participation in the study," they caution that "if favors are given only to get the information from the respondents, this raises ethical questions."

While payment or other compensation for the time and efforts of research subjects is widely accepted, such payment may create additional dilemmas in cross-cultural situations. For example, such payment tends to reinforce the dependent status of the subject group, members of which may, as a result, turn to researchers for additional assistance. Under what circumstances and to what extent researchers involve themselves in the struggles of their subjects may be an ongoing ethical dilemma.

Types of Interviews

While the aforementioned issues are relevant to virtually all cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research interviews, the format of the interview will, to some extent, determine the nature of the issues and difficulties that arise during the interview process. The decision to use individual interviews, focus group interviews, community interviews, or a combination of the three, for example, will influence the implementation and nature of the study, as well as the resulting data.
Off-site project directors learned that an agency responsible for distributing fertilizer in Benin was performing poorly. The directors asked the evaluation staff to conduct research interviews with agency officials and project personnel, who were members of the local community, to establish the causes of the problem. Because previous visits to the site and discussions with project staff had not been productive, evaluators decided to conduct in-depth individual interviews with each official and staff member. The individual interview format proved to be effective. Although conducting the interviews was time consuming and relatively expensive, evaluators soon realized that many of the staff members had serious concerns about the conduct of on-site project leaders; concerns that they were unwilling to discuss in the presence of their coworkers. Having obtained data about the project’s day-to-day operations and the participants’ concerns, the evaluators were able to recommend ways to manage the project more effectively.

**Individual Interviews**

The individual interview format offers several advantages (box 6). For example, individual interviews enable researchers to explore issues in-depth to an extent that is not possible with group interviews. In addition, individual interviews afford participants the privacy to respond to inquiries in an honest and forthcoming manner without divulging personal information within a group forum. This may be particularly advantageous for evaluators conducting research within communities whose culture dictates that a level of secrecy be maintained about personal matters. Limitations of the individual interview include the cost and time required to conduct individual interviews; the tendency of the discussion to diverge from the original purpose, thereby limiting the comparability of interviews; and the susceptibility of the interview to interviewer effects.

**Group Interviews: Community Interviews and Focus Group Interviews**

Group interviews, including community interviews and focus group interviews, offer evaluators several advantages that are not possible within individual interviews. First, the group interview enables researchers to obtain information in a rapid and economical manner. Second, the group setting may offer a sense of security to participants who are unfamiliar with the researcher and the research situation. This sense of security “reduces individual inhibitions and thereby provides information which might not otherwise be revealed” (Casley and Kumar 1988, p. 27). Finally, information gathered during group interviews “is sometimes more accurate than that obtained in individual interviews because respondents are reluctant to give inaccurate answers when they may be contradicted by other participants.” Limitations of this methodology include interviewers’ inability to explore issues in depth, participants’ reluctance to discuss politically sensitive or personal
issues in public, and the susceptibility to interviewer biases. Furthermore, researchers’ ability to moderate the discussion, pose questions, and comprehend the dialogue is limited when they have a less than comprehensive understanding of the target culture and are less than fluent in the native language.

In addition to the aforementioned advantages and limitations of group interviews, community interviews, to which all members of a community are invited, present their own particular issues and challenges. For example, community elites, such as tribal chiefs or community elders, tend to monopolize community interviews (box 7). Such elites may tend to speak on behalf of others, while simultaneously inhibiting their participation. Likewise, the larger group setting restricts opportunities for all participants to contribute to the discussion.

Focus group interviews, to which researchers invite a small number of purposefully selected individuals, enable researchers to exercise greater control over the interview, while also allowing participants to engage in more substantive dialogue (box 8). However, because participants are specifically selected by the researchers, the information obtained is subject to selection effects, and therefore may be of questionable reliability and will not represent the experiences and perspectives of the community as a whole. In addition, the various statuses of the partici-

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**Box 7 Community Interviews**

Investigators were conducting a series of interviews in an East African country to evaluate an area development project that had been extremely successful in motivating farmers to establish farmers’ clubs. Evaluators decided to use the community interview format because (a) they had a limited amount of time to complete the evaluation; (b) the participants did not know the interviewers, and the evaluators felt that the participants would be more comfortable in a group of their neighbors and friends; and (c) the interview was not going to address personal or private issues. The team leader, concerned about the domination of meetings by a few local leaders, held a focus group interview with these leaders immediately before the community interview to seek their views on the success of the farmers’ clubs. During the subsequent community interview, he included the following remarks in his introduction: “I have just met with some of your leaders to talk about the farmers’ clubs, and now I’m interested in what everyone else has to say. In fact, when I was coming here, my boss told me that he was interested in knowing the views of all the people at this meeting. He actually promised me a raise if I succeeded, otherwise he might even fire me. So please promise me that all of you will participate in the discussion. If you don’t, you will have to give me a piece of land so that I can join you.” These remarks provided a hint to the leaders that they were not to dominate the discussion, and they gave the team leader an excuse humorously to encourage the other participants to join the discussion.

*Source:* Adapted from Casley and Kumar (1988).
Box 8 Focus Group Interviews

Researchers were evaluating a community management project in India. The principle objective of this project was to create a system of community management in which all members of the community actively participated. During their preliminary work as participant observers, however, the researchers noted that community leaders, all of whom were more affluent men, were controlling the system. The researchers therefore decided to conduct a series of small focus group interviews designed to obtain the views of all community members. The community leaders were invited to one focus group, teachers and local project personnel to another, farmers and craftsmen to another, women to another, and finally the members of the lowest caste to another. These focus groups, each of which contained no more than ten participants, enabled the participants to discuss matters openly without being inhibited by the presence of members of another social group or class. The researchers were thus able to obtain data about the diverse views and perspectives of members of the community.

Parts may restrict their willingness to communicate with one another. Casley and Kumar (1988, p. 35) explain that

In the stratified societies of the developing world, participants drawn from different social and economic strata may be unwilling to interact on the basis of equality. Status differences impinge on interpersonal communication. Persons of lower status generally are reluctant to talk in the presence of their perceived superiors.

Helpful Hints: Conducting Group Interviews

- When conducting a community interview, invite community elites and elders to a preliminary interview that you hold immediately before the community interview. This strategy serves two purposes: it decreases the chances that the elites will repeat themselves during the community interview, and it allows you to state publicly that you have already heard from the elites and are interested in what other community members have to say (Casley and Kumar 1988).
- When you wish to obtain data from a representative sample, conduct several focus group interviews with different groups within the community. Select a homogeneous group of participants for each meeting. For example, invite only the community elites and elders to one meeting, individuals from the middle strata of the community to another, and individuals of lower status to another. This strategy increases the likelihood that focus group participants will talk openly in the interview, and will also help you obtain data that is representative of the diversity of the entire community.
Monitoring and Impact Evaluations

Evaluations that employ monitoring, impact, and rapid appraisal methods are susceptible to virtually all the issues discussed. At the same time, the use of these methods in a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic context creates concerns that are unique to each methodology.

Monitoring Evaluations

Rossi and Freeman (1993, p. 164) define program or project monitoring as “the systematic examination of program coverage and delivery.” Monitoring evaluations enable researchers to gather data that will provide information about whether the way that a project has been implemented is consistent with its design. According to Valadez and Bamberger (1994, p. 7), data produced by monitoring studies allow researchers to “determine whether the project is being implemented efficiently, is responsive to the concerns of the intended beneficiaries,” and to detect and correct problems during the course of the project. Researchers can also use monitoring studies to “measure whether projects and programs are achieving their intended economic and social objectives, as well as contributing to sectoral and national development objectives” (p. 7).

The use of monitoring evaluations offers researchers evaluating development projects several advantages. These evaluations are typically not constrained by the time limitations that often exist within impact and rapid appraisal evaluations, thereby allowing researchers to spend generous amounts of time within the target community (box 9). This is particularly important in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research, as it allows researchers to develop a sensitivity to various aspects of the community’s culture. They may therefore explore the subtle nuances of the community’s language, customs, behaviors, and expectations before beginning data collection. Likewise, the greater length of time that researchers can generally spend in the community during monitoring evaluations provides opportunities for developing a rapport and a sense of trust with the residents of the community. This not only permits researchers to become increasingly accustomed to the community and its people, but also allows community members to become comfortable with researchers, thereby decreasing the potential for subject effects. Finally, the extended period of time provided by monitoring evaluations also grants researchers the opportunity to conduct multiple visits to target sites, to conduct repeated interviews with participants, and to triangulate data collection by obtaining information from numerous sources. These advantages increase the reliability of the data and decrease the potential for inaccurate interpretations and conclusions.

Impact Assessment

While monitoring studies are designed to evaluate aspects of an ongoing project, the primary goal of an impact assessment is “to produce an estimate of the ‘net effects’ of an intervention—that is, an estimate of the impact of the intervention uncontaminated by the influence of other processes and events that also may affect the behavior or conditions at which the social program is directed” (Rossi and Freeman 1993,
Box 9 A Monitoring Evaluation

Researchers were conducting a monitoring evaluation as part of a project to build and operate a primary school in a remote village in Chad. The evaluation sought to determine whether the project was being implemented efficiently and was responsive to the community's needs and concerns. Specifically, evaluators sought to assess the quality of instruction; how much the children were learning; and whether the content and instructional methodologies were consistent with the experiences, values, and needs of the community. Components of this evaluation, which spanned two years, included carrying out participant observation within the school; observing community planning meetings during which the school was discussed; administering literacy tests to the students; and holding individual, focus group and community interviews with teachers, students, parents, local leaders, and the community as a whole. The researchers shared information gathered from these sources with the community and project personnel on an ongoing basis, and changes were made accordingly to improve the school's effectiveness in meeting the community's needs.

The primary advantage of impact assessment is that it enables researchers to obtain useful information in a rapid and economical manner. This is particularly relevant in many development projects, for which funding may be limited and where stakeholders may prefer to invest scarce resources in improving the conditions of the target community rather than in research projects. Moreover, the complexity of traditional research designs may be exceedingly burdensome to carry out in remote communities in developing nations. In addition to time, cost, and complexity issues, Valadez and Bamberger (1994, p. 209) note that the relative simplicity of impact assessments "can strengthen the participation of intended beneficiaries in the planning and management of projects and programs that will affect their lives."

The time-efficient nature of impact assessments, while an advantage in many situations, is also a limitation of this methodology. Impact assessments often deny researchers the time to develop rapport and trust with participants; become familiar with the community's beliefs, expectations, and cultural nuances; and decide which methods of data collection are most appropriate. Furthermore, because impact assessments typically dictate that researchers collect data in a time-efficient manner, they may be confined to single interviews, observations, or site visits, thereby increasing the potential for bias caused by observer and subject effects. Similarly, the limited amount of time devoted to the evaluation increases the potential for misunderstandings and inaccurate interpretations.

Rapid Appraisal Methods

Like many impact assessments, the advantage of rapid appraisal methods is that they allow researchers with limited time and resources to gather relevant informa-
Box 10 Rapid Appraisal

Evaluators were conducting a rapid appraisal as part of a project to build and operate a primary school in a remote village in Niger. The scope of this evaluation was extremely limited and focused. Its primary purpose was to determine whether the school had been built, whether instruction was taking place in the school, and whether instructional materials were in the school. Evaluators were on-site for a week, during which they visited the school, recorded details about the building's physical structure, counted the number of teachers and students, and conducted an inventory of materials and supplies.

tion by means of their more limited and focused approach (box 10). For example, evaluators of a project to build a school in a rural village may conduct a rapid appraisal evaluation to determine whether the school is occupied, whether the books and supplies remain in the school, and how many children attend the school. An evaluation of the quality of instruction or the level of student achievement, however, is beyond the scope of rapid appraisal methods.

Rapid appraisal methods share many of the same limitations as impact assessments. For example, the time constraints related to rapid appraisal typically necessitate the use of small, nonprobability samples, which introduces the potential for selection and observer effects, and limits the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, time constraints also limit the extent to which researchers can explore the culture and people being studied, thereby increasing the possibility that interpretations and conclusions may be inaccurate and biased. These issues and others limit the reliability and validity of the information obtained, and thus create uncertainty about the quality, accuracy, and thus the usefulness of the findings. As a result, “the credibility of such information, and consequently, of the decisions based on it, tend to be low in the eyes of others” (Kumar 1993, p. 12).

A Checklist of Recommendations for Conducting Cross-Cultural and Cross-Linguistic Interview Research

Cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research is often complicated by numerous issues relating to language, culture, ethics, and reliability and validity. However, by following certain guidelines, investigators can conduct cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research in such a manner that yields valuable and reliable results.

Before the Interviews

Perhaps the most critical component of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research occurs before researchers enter the field. Recommendations for comprehensive preparatory work include the following:
- Conduct an in-depth investigation of the target culture and people not only
before entering the field, but also before making definitive decisions about the
scope and design of the research project.
- Develop an understanding of the communication patterns, behavioral
norms, and customs of the community to be studied.
- Become familiar with the socioeconomic and sociopolitical contexts in which
the subjects live.
- Conduct a thorough literature review prior to beginning the interview pro-
cess. Brislin (1986, p. 156) argues that “if researchers are familiar with the
written ethnographic materials about a culture, they are respected by the
indigenous people. If researchers show they have a good knowledge of lo-
cal customs, as learned through their library study, then indigenous hosts
are quicker to cooperate with the investigation.”
- Do not rely solely, or even principally, on a review of the literature in ob-
taining background information on the community to be studied. Work with
other researchers who have studied the community, and, most important,
include members of the community in all aspects of the research project as
much as possible.
- Consider spending time in the community before finalizing any decisions
about the research design. This will significantly increase your understand-
ing of the community and help you make decisions that are sensitive and
responsive to the community’s unique characteristics and needs.
- Become familiar with the language of the subjects. Work closely with a mem-
ber of the target community who speaks both the community’s language
and dialect as well as that of the research team.
- Use a team approach, in which technical specialists, behavior specialists,
and culture specialists assist not only with the background investigation of
the community, but also with the design and implementation of the study.
- Involve members of the target community in the conceptualization, design, and
implementation of the research project as much as possible.
- Involve key informants from the target community who can assist with lan-
guage and translation issues and who “can provide research-relevant infor-
mation concerning the sociocultural system and personal advice about
guidelines for getting along in an unfamiliar setting” (Munroe and Munroe
1986, p. 118). These informants can also help with the research design and
the design of instruments and protocols to ensure that they are appropriate
for and sensitive to the culture and its people and with the interpretation of
responses.
- Whenever possible, use participatory evaluation methods (see table 2 for a
comparison of conventional and participatory evaluation). The World Bank
(1996, p. 3) defines participatory evaluation as “a process through which stake-
holders influence and share control over development initiatives and the
decisions and resources which affect them.” The involvement of stakehold-
ers, especially the members of the community that is the focus of the project,
in all aspects of the project’s conceptualization, design, and implementation
Table 2 Differences between Conventional and Participatory Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Conventional evaluation</th>
<th>Participatory evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who</td>
<td>External experts</td>
<td>Community members, project staff, facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What</td>
<td>Predetermined indicators of success, principally cost and production outputs</td>
<td>Community members identify their own indicators of success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How</td>
<td>Focus of “scientific objectivity,” distancing of evaluators from other participants; uniform complex procedures; delayed or limited access to results</td>
<td>Self-evaluation; simple methods adapted to local culture; open, immediate sharing of results through local involvement in evaluation processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When</td>
<td>Usually upon project completion, sometimes also at mid-point</td>
<td>Merging of monitoring and evaluation, hence frequent small evaluations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why</td>
<td>Accountability, usually summative, to determine if funding continues</td>
<td>To empower local people to initiate, control, and take corrective action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Increases local ownership and accountability. Participatory evaluation therefore increases the likelihood that evaluation findings will be put to use and that the project’s results will be sustained, while also helping to ensure that the study is not exploitative, contributes to the community’s interests and needs, and produces authentic and valid results. For a more in-depth look at participatory evaluation see Narayan (1993) and World Bank (1996).

- Be willing to follow an emerging research design that is responsive to the issues and information to be encountered during the implementation of the study.
- Pretest interview protocols with members of the cultural, linguistic, and gender groups to be included in the study.
  - Ask pilot interviewees to express their perceptions of the appropriateness and coherence of particular topics, questions, or phraseology.
  - Be attentive to nonverbal responses and subtle cues that might indicate a lack of understanding of a question or concept or discomfort with a particular topic.
- Undergo a thorough self-examination of one’s own beliefs, values, perceptions, and biases. According to Peshkin (1988, p. 20): “The points of view, belief systems, and personal purposes of the researcher influence all research decisions and research acts.” Researchers who have a thorough and honest understanding of their belief systems and purposes are more likely to prevent those characteristics from biasing the research. Similarly, consider the “vital importance of self-awareness about the culture and political assumptions that are built into the very concepts and methods used within a discipline” (Warwick 1980, p. 326). The issue of self-awareness “becomes more urgent when there is an evident power differential between the families and the researcher” (Harry 1996, p. 292).
- Consider the possibility of beginning the study as a participant-observer. This strategy provides an opportunity to observe the behaviors, norms, and customs of the target community before beginning the interview process. Furthermore it provides an opportunity for the participants to become accustomed to
your presence within the community, and for you to begin to develop trust and rapport with community members.

While in the Field

- Use triangulation. Virtually all cross-cultural and cross-linguistic researchers agree on the importance of triangulation of data sources. The use of multiple data sources enables you to confirm and enhance your findings and interpretations, thereby increasing the validity and authenticity of your results. Furthermore, triangulation limits the problems of equivalence by allowing for different methods of data collection to address the different kinds of equivalence.
  - Use various interview formats, including individual interviews, focus group interviews, and community interviews.
  - Work with a variety of key informants selected for their diverse experiences and viewpoints.
  - Consider other data collection methods, such as direct observation and document reviews, to substantiate findings from the interviews and to create a more comprehensive evaluation.
- Remain sensitive and responsive to issues that arise during a cross-cultural evaluation. Because one of the primary purposes of qualitative cross-cultural interviewing is to understand the perspective of an individual from another cultural milieu and elicit meaning from that perspective, researchers must be receptive to subtle cues sent by the respondents or by the situation itself. Patton (1985, p. 94) refers to this characteristic as “situational responsiveness,” which he defines as “a genuine openness to understanding the important idiosyncrasies of each evaluation, so that design, measures, processes, and findings are situationally appropriate, relevant, and useful.” He states that this requires a sensitivity “to culture in all its manifestations: political culture, program culture, organizational culture, local community culture, interpersonal norms, societal traditions, and local cultural values” (p. 94). Researchers’ ability to obtain valid and reliable data to a large extent depends upon their ability to exercise a sensitivity to and respect for the numerous differences they will encounter in a cross-cultural situation.
- Use your subjectivity as a tool to help you observe, understand, and document the social reality of research subjects. This ability enables researchers to become aware of characteristics of the individual or culture that insiders would not typically notice.
  - Use your “affective reactions to what you are observing as clues to things that need to be examined and analyzed further” (LeCompte and Preissle 1993, p. 92).
  - Use your own culture “implicitly to make comparisons with the one under investigation” (LeCompte and Preissle 1993, p. 93).
  - Address these subjective reactions to a culture or its people with a great deal of background knowledge regarding the culture and with caution to ensure that these reactions enhance rather than bias your interpretations.
Peshkin (1988) describes qualitative researchers’ “well-informed subjectivity” as their ability to use their affective and subjective responses to a situation, as well as their in-depth knowledge of a culture and its people, to illuminate rather than bias their findings.

Conclusion

Conducting cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research is a complex and difficult process. Researchers must not only consider linguistic, cultural, and ethical issues before they enter the field, but must also remain cognizant of these and other issues throughout the course of fieldwork, data interpretation and analysis, and reporting of findings. However, qualitative interviewing, when conducted effectively, enables interviewers to understand the perspective of another person whose subjective reality may be quite different from their own. Therefore, when conducted by skilled, informed, and highly sensitive researchers, qualitative interview research offers access to information that is inaccessible through other research methods and that is uniquely valuable within and beyond the research community.

References


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