

## The influence of cross-cultural interviewing on the generation of data

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*We investigated the trustworthiness of qualitative data elicited during cross-cultural interviews and problematised data generation as a vital contributor in cross-cultural data collection. An Interview Process Model was adapted from the Response Process Model of Miller and Cannell, and used to understand how responses might be elicited differently in a cross-cultural interviewing situation than during mono-cultural interviewing, and specifically which data would be generated for collection and ultimately for analysis and interpretation. In this study, the concept 'cross-culture' was focused on three dimensions and/or discourses, namely, race, gender, and language. The two researchers were of different race, gender, and language, and were therefore assumed on occasion to evoke different perceptions and responses from interviewees, influencing the data offered for collection. An interview protocol was devised to distinguish a cross-cultural interview from a mono-cultural interview. The findings are discussed with caution and further reverse study is recommended.*

### Introduction: interest of the research

South Africa is a country with diverse cultures and a history which in its very essence is socio-politically orientated. Such elements of diversity should bring with them caution in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of any data derived from cross-cultural interviews. Researchers should be questioned closely on the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of their collection, analysis, and interpretation of data in their qualitative research when these involve participants who differ from them in dimensions such as mother tongue and/or culture. Language is generally an important variable in research as it either facilitates data generation or could give rise to unauthentic data to be collected for interpretation.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2003:121) draw attention to the fact that interviewers and interviewees' alike bring their own, often unconscious, experiential and biographical baggage [*sic*] with them into the interview situation. In most South African research this could include particular cultural considerations, frequently also with socio-political connotations. During the interview, a reciprocal relationship and interaction of question and response between the interviewer and the interviewee are expected but certainly cannot be guaranteed always to proceed similarly from both sides. In a country such as South Africa with 11 official languages and numerous ethnicities, research findings are open to much criticism when a variable such as language is not acknowledged in data generation and collection. For instance, the one language Sesotho might in one aspect encompass the ethnicities of Mopedi, Motswana, and Moshoeshoe. Could we then expect data generated from this mono-lingual yet diversely ethnicitified context to be uniform? Cultural influences on the data would indeed seem unavoidable.

The interest in this research, then, focused on the responses that would be elicited when the interviewer is from a different culture to that of the interviewee. For instance, when a white person interviews a black person, will a similar response be elicited on the same question as

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1 We prefer interviewee to respondent because of the issue of discourse, to emphasise the equal status and, especially, to recognise equal initiative in the process of data generation.

when the interview situation is reversed, or when the interviewer and interviewee are of the same race?

### **Data generation**

The research was on the generation of data in a cross-cultural interviewing situation as opposed to data collection *per se*, because we were interested in the making up of data and not merely the collection of data that are there. We argue that data collection by means of interviewing sometimes misses some elements that the meaning of the context could add, especially in a cross-cultural situation. Data collection is generally taken to be concerned with the information that is offered, somewhat regardless of the processes that make those data available. Generation of data is a deep process influenced by the factors and nuances of the specific interpersonal communication and the frames of reference that actually contribute to making the data available. The context of events, thoughts, and feelings that lead up to a response and in which the response is then made should be taken into consideration, as constituting a totality of the circumstances operant while the data are being generated and are ultimately yielded for collection. We argue that the generation of data should therefore at all times be the object of the researcher's reflective sensitivity to his/her questions and the interviewee's responses, and the context in which these are formulated, which should together then form an additional framework to co-direct and/or co-inform the data interpretation. This is essential especially in cross-cultural interviewing where numerous social, socio-political, personal, and financial considerations are at play at participant level and therefore demand acknowledgement when data are collected and analysed.

### **Culture**

It is interesting to note that current literature (Berry, Poortinga, Segall & Dasen, 1992:166; 2002:226; Biesheuvel, 1987:2; Matsumoto, 2000:23), when defining culture, frequently refers to the definition of Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952:181), which is over 50 years old, and perhaps this should be taken as a reflection of a perception of the permanent, established nature of cultural representations:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; cultural systems may on the one hand be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952).

In this research, we argued somewhat to the contrary, although acknowledging the history of the philosophy of culture. The anthropological criteria of the Kroeber and Kluckhohn definition (for instance, the permanence over time) are indeed also questioned by Kagitcibasi and Poortinga (2000:134), who challenge the view that these aspects defining culture can still be meaningful in a time of global communication and influence. Hermans and Kempen (Kagitcibasi & Poortinga, 2000:134) like-wise argue that cultural boundaries are essentially fluid.

As a base of our argument, we therefore find it necessary to reflect on the position taken by Kagitcibasi and Poortinga (2000:134), that culture changes in relation to factors such as situation, person, and environment, that culture is therefore contextually driven, and that researchers are consequently forced to consider which constituent aspects of the context of culture might essentially influence their specific research. We endorse their hope (Kagitcibasi

& Poortinga, 2000:134) that this will weaken the frequent identification of 'a culture' with 'a country'.

It is further acknowledged that our research was based on actual South African realities which need fine constructive theories to deconstruct them. As we aligned our argument with Kagitcibasi and Poortinga, we remained constantly aware that aspects such as gender and race remain a permanent description. However, it is in the epistemology adhered to in this research that our argument was supported. For instance, Dolby (2001) indicates that race in her study was defined in terms of brand labels, choice of music, popular spots (for instance, night clubs), sports, and so forth. Culture, then, is experienced or lived at the particular moment in time and is dynamic and ever changing. Each individual has his/her own 'culture' of which he/she shares some aspects with other people in the particular context. Kim, Park and Park (2000:67) emphasise that culture is an emergent property of individuals interacting with their natural and human environment. Culture is not concrete, although artefacts are often included in a definition of culture. Matsumoto (2000) explains that the concept is broad in meaning, *inter alia* encompassing norms, rituals, values, customs, beliefs, and the heritage of a particular group of people from a society in a particular context, or, we would add, from the same socio-political perspective.

### **The cultural factor in the research interview**

The non-permanence of culture carries the implication of an ever-changing interview situation. The cross-cultural research interview has at least two participants, an interviewer and an interviewee. Here, the beliefs, norms, values, rituals, behaviour, habits, learning, language, age, gender, race, and contexts of both participants must be taken into consideration as possible contributory factors to the generation of data. The interviewer approaches the interview with specific communication objectives. The same is true for the interviewee. The researcher has his/her own culture, which includes the convention of setting questions and the expectation of having them answered in a certain manner. The interviewee brings to the interview situation his/her own culture and therefore the convention of responding in a certain manner. In any interaction a culture of power can be at play between participants and it can take various forms and degrees. A culture of 'I ask and you respond' with its obverse of 'You ask and I respond' already demarcates, for instance, a specific culture of power between the interviewer and the interviewee.

During an interview, the participants engage in an exchange of information with each other. There already exist, what we would call, 'cross-interactions' and 'cross-exchanging' of information. Cross-interactions and cross-exchanging of information, although expected to be reciprocal on the grounds of interaction, can be hampered by specific factors in respect of one person and/or the other. For instance, the interviewer posing the question(s) and/or the interviewee giving the information might consciously or unconsciously experience difficulties in understanding the other. The difficulty in understanding might be due to factors such as the interview situation *per se*, language differences, or cues given or gathered by any one of the participants, or socio-political insensitivity. Difficulty in understanding one another will have a negative influence on the interpretation of information exchanged during an interview situation. Consequently, the information generated might actually reflect various forms of misinterpretation and therefore interviews may yield irrelevant, incongruent, or inaccurate data for collection.

Pareek and Venkateswara Rao (1980:143) and Tseng (2001:766) also point out that an

interview is by its very nature a complex situation and that the complexity may be intensified by extraneous factors affecting the interviewer and the interviewee themselves and therefore affecting communication between the participants. In the act of communication, the background factors of the interviewer and the interviewee function as referential filters (*inter alia*, cultural filters) for the coding and decoding of messages. Personal archives are brought into the interview situation and therefore affect and direct the data being generated (Cohen *et al.*, 2003:121; Miller & Cannell, 1997:362; Pareek & Venkateswara Rao, 1980:143).

The information exchanges during a cross-cultural interview will furthermore be either authentic or unauthentic. In this research, the concept authentic was preferred to correct or accurate because the interest was in the event of generating the data and not the data *per se*. Authenticity of data depends on the capability of the interviewer to elicit unbiased and genuine responses from the interviewee (Pareek & Venkateswara Rao, 1980:143) and, we would add, with the minimum of selective editing of the information to be shared.

The etic/emic situation determined by the interview and the roles played by the interviewer and the interviewee in the interview situation, bring up further distinction in the cross-cultural interview. 'Etic', also referred to as 'culture-general' (Berry *et al.*, 1992:232) and 'universal' (Berry, 1980:12), refers to the study of a culture from the outside. 'Emic', also referred to as 'culture specific' (Berry *et al.*, 1992:232), 'internal' or 'individual' (Berry, 1980:12), denotes a study from within a culture by an insider (Tseng, 2001:765). Cross-cultural researchers alert us to the view that many researchers tend to disregard the etic/emic perspective on their relationship with participants when collecting and analysing data (Berry, 1980:11; Berry *et al.*, 1992:232; 2002:291; Kagitcibasi & Poortinga, 2000:130; Kim *et al.*, 2000:63-64; Tseng, 2001:765). This neglect is certain to influence events during data collection and consequently also influence the data, the findings, and the interpretation.

In this research, the Interview Process Model was adapted for use from the Response Process Model of Miller and Cannell (1997:362) (see Figure 1). The Interview Process Model indicates the complexity of answering a question during an interview. Biased communication might be ascribed to the background factors that the interviewer and the interviewee use as archives and filters in the interview situation.

The relevance of the Interview Process Model relates to the process by which the interviewee responds selectively to questions during a cross-cultural interview and the effect that the culture of the interviewee and the interviewer may have on the response ultimately given. Hence it highlights the potential of generating different data, specifically premising the equal status of the participation of the interviewee and the interviewer as far as data generation is concerned. The responses yielded during the research may differ in respect of data aspects such as volume, range, emotional expression, content and formulation of content.

In this research, the concept of culture was focused on only three dimensions and/or the discourses that might arise from them, namely, race, gender, and language. The focus was on examining whether any of the three dimensions and/or discourses actually had an influence on the data yielded during an interview and, if so, how data generation was influenced. We envisaged that the findings may have contributed to the methodology of qualitative cross-cultural research and perhaps also cast a glimmer of light on the weight that acculturation may currently carry in the new South Africa.

Wilkinson (in Ponterotto, 2003:467) defines race as "a category of persons who are related by a common heredity or ancestry and who are perceived and responded to in terms of external features or traits". Matsumoto (2000:211) clarifies the concept of gender as the role of the be-

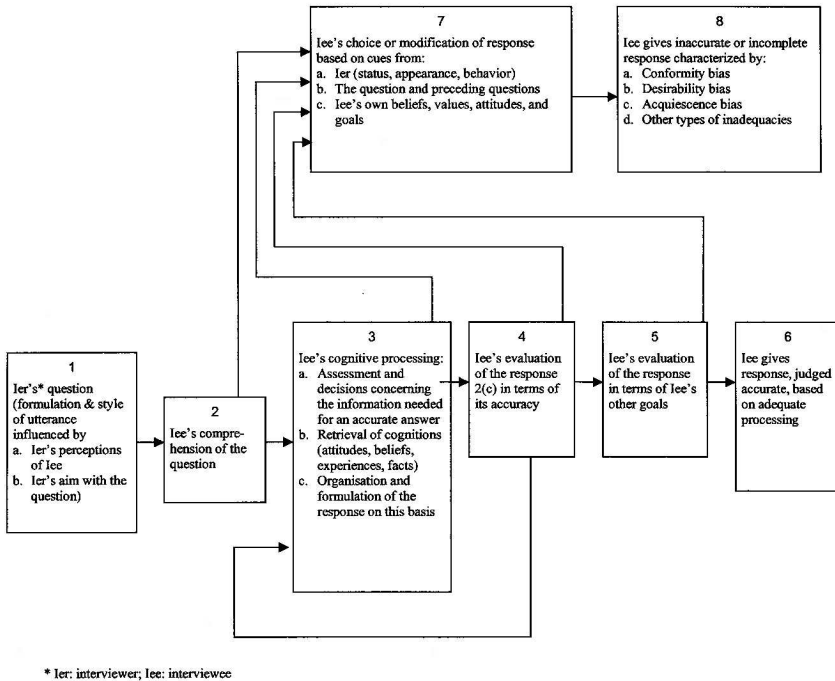


Figure 1 Interview Process Model (adapted from Miller & Cannell, 1997)

behaviour or patterns of activities that a society or culture deems appropriate for men and women. Language can be defined as a means of communication and a style of expression of people of a particular ethnicity (Little Oxford Dictionary, 1998:365).

## The research

The research focused on the responses elicited from the interviewee when the interview was conducted cross-culturally, investigating

How does cross-cultural interviewing influence both the question(s) and responses of the participants in respect of data aspects such as volume, range, nature, and formulation of content, the selection of details by the interviewer to follow up and/or omit, and the selection of details by the interviewee to share and/or omit?

The study therefore looked at interpreting the mono- and cross-cultural interaction between the researcher and the interviewees.

The paradigm adhered to in the research was relativism, with emphasis on examining holistic and qualitative information and using an interpretive approach of understanding. (Cohen *et al.*, 2003:29; Husén, 1997:17). To analyse and interpret the influence, that race, gender, and language may have in the generation of data, involved capturing the meanings of the

interacting others, and recovering and reconstructing the interactions of such other participants in the interview situation. An enterprise of this nature involves the analysis of meaning in a social context (Cohen *et al.*, 2003:29), to uncover the influence of the discourse that might unfold as a result of the three dimensions of interest and/or of the context in which they are occurring.

Cohen *et al.* (2003:35) summarise interpretivism, the approach followed in this research, as an approach that sets out from an acknowledgement of that which is uniquely individual. The research acknowledges human actions as continuously reconstructing social life and therefore subjectivity, and hence the researcher is personally involved in its epistemological view. The approach emphasises the interpretation and understanding of actions and/or meanings rather than causes, presenting findings of a descriptive rather than an explanatory nature. The qualitative and dynamic nature of the study is reflected more accurately by intertwining the descriptions of the participants and method of research in the following section. In like manner, constant movement is indicated between the findings and the discussion, rather than following the conventional mode of separate presentation.

### **Participants and method**

Two interviewers, Interviewer A (white, female, and Afrikaans-speaking) and Interviewer B (black, male, and Sepedi-speaking), participated in the research. Mono- and cross-cultural interviews were conducted with six teachers. The six teachers (blacks and whites, males and females) were purposively selected, based on the learning areas that were of interest to Researcher A. The content of the interviews addressed the Academic Self-Concept of Grade 7 learners in two South African school contexts, namely Full-Service Inclusion Schools that enrol learners both who experience and do not experience impairment-related barriers to learning, and Special Schools that enrol only learners who experience impairment-related barriers to learning and therefore provide special education services, for instance, the use of a lapel microphone for learners with hearing difficulties.

The strategies used were semi-structured interviewing and non-participatory observation. The interview protocol was divided into two sessions conducted by the two interviewers (see Figure 2).

During Session 1, the interview was conducted by Interviewer A, while Interviewer B took the role of non-participatory observer, taking the opportunity to note and record the responses made. Session 2, which followed directly, was conducted on selected responses and/or questions from Session 1, to ascertain whether new and/or more information (or clarification) could be elicited and whether this would differ from the data generated in Session 1. In Session 2, Interviewer A left the room, thereby endeavouring to remove any effect that her role might have created during Session 1. The interviews were audio-taped. Both interviewers made field-notes.

### **Data analysis**

For the purposes of this study, the verbatim interview transcripts of only those participants who met the selection criteria, i.e. of both mono- and cross-cultural formation with the interviewers, were analysed. Two teachers met the criteria: one white, female, Afrikaans-speaking and one black, male, Sepedi-speaking. The responses, possibly related to factors of race, gender, and language, the focus of this study, were identified. Themes possibly related to only these dimensions of culture and which could lead to further analysis were identified. The identified

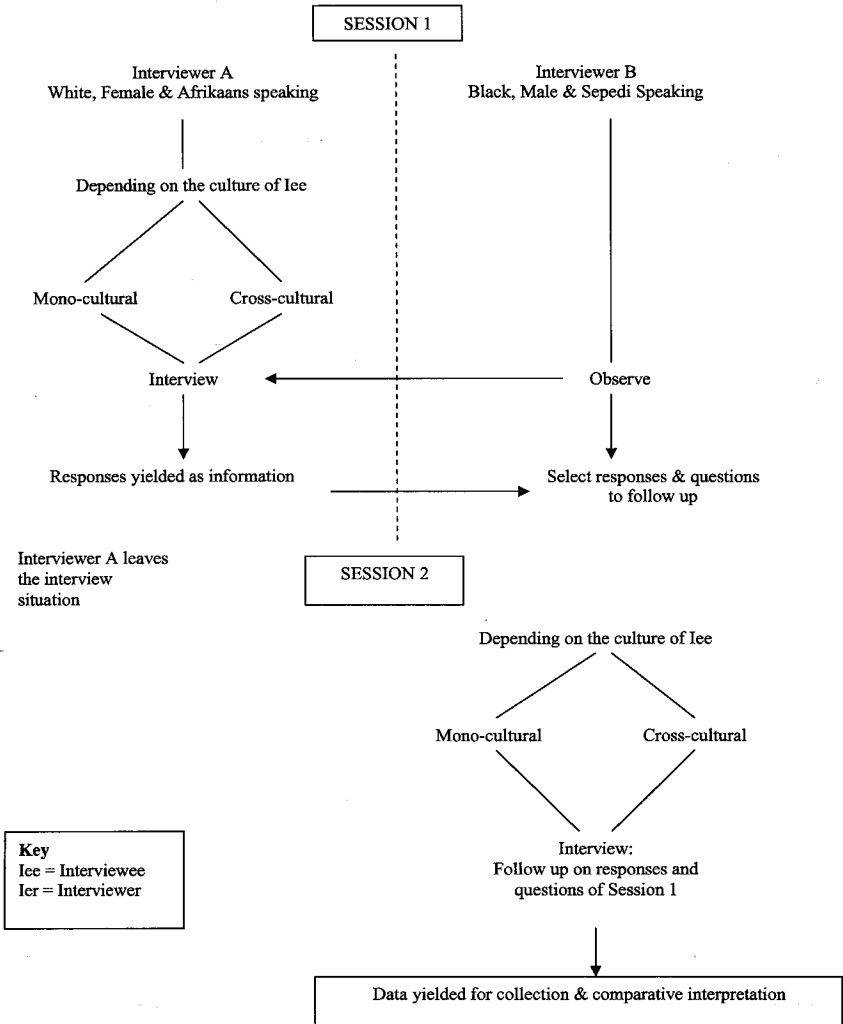


Figure 2 The interview process

data were scrutinised for any discourses that might have influenced the responses. A comparative analysis of Session 1 and Session 2 data in relation to particular data aspects, namely, volume, range, emotional expression, content and formulation of content, was conducted on:

- data generated (for instance, was the information referential, new, relevant, coherent, and/or explanatory in respect of the question?)
- questions clarified
- responses verified

The analysis included comparing whether the responses generated in the follow-up interview session were

- shorter or longer and new content was introduced for further clarification, and which response of the two then showed possible cultural influence (for instance, whether information deemed sensitive was shared in both interviews or not);
- shorter or longer but no new information was generated, and which response of the two, if any, showed possible cultural influence (for instance, responses that might have been clouded or lack for expressions such as '*as you know, in our culture...*');
- merely repetitious, showing no possible cultural influence.

### Findings and discussion

Data generated during this research appeared to vary somewhat in accordance with similarity and difference in respect of the cultural dimensions represented by the interviewer and the interviewee. However, the majority of the responses were repetitious, quite as expected, suggesting that a certain kernel of information was not affected by the mono-/cross-cultural context of the interview. Trends apparently not affected by the cultural context were presented first.

During the second session of the interviews, in both mono- and cross-cultural situations, some responses were clarified and/or expanded, possibly on account of the interviewees' need to be understood as well as the interviewer's request for clarification of what had been said in Session 1. Interviewees also tended to refer to responses made in the first session by means of remarks such as, '*As I already mentioned*', presumably as a confirmation of authenticity.

The objective of the question generally seemed to be of major concern to the interviewees. They repeatedly indicated difficulty understanding a question and frequently asked for question clarification. Also, they tended to express uncertainty about whether a response was appropriate or not and therefore sought to know if they had '*answered*' the question. In this regard, similar concerns were raised during all the mono- and cross-cultural interviews.

Comparative and noticeable differences were, however, identified in respect of the content of the responses. For instance, in the mono- and cross-cultural situations, the interviewees constructed different pictures of the involvement of parents in the school activities. If the researcher had in this case analysed data collected only from the cross-cultural interview situations, parents would have appeared to be by and large uninvolved, thus contributing to a certain interpretation. Such a judgmental conclusion would have been in marked contrast to the recognition of the problems concerning parental involvement as these became apparent from the data collected in the two mono-cultural interview situations, and that were phrased more circumspectly and connoted mutual or insider understanding between interviewee and interviewer.

During the mono-cultural interviews, signs of ease and comfort were observed more markedly in interviewee behaviour. This could be an important consideration concerning the generation of data, as it might ultimately have influenced the sort of data yielded for collection and interpretation. However, what might have had an even stronger influence on the generation of data could have been the interviewees' self-assessment of what information they needed to



give in order to respond appropriately and authentically, and what cues or frame(s) of reference in the interview situation were relevant to respond to. The context of these expressions of uncertainty most often suggests attribution of such behaviour to the interviewee's knowledge, and not to the focused dimensions of culture *per se*. Some of the variance in the duration of the interviews as well as in the responses could then also be explained by the indirect factor of knowledge rather than of culture.

Experiential knowledge indeed appeared to serve as a prominent source from which the interview data were generated. During all four interviews, interviewees tended to refer to their experiences. Even so, the experience-based responses might have been affected by extraneous cues including the race, gender, and/or language of the interviewer as seen from the viewpoint of the interviewee, since some responses contained allusions to shared experiences.

Interviewees' responses seldom related to issues that might have been linked to politics — yet a thought-provoking finding was that the political topic and mention of affiliation to the government featured only in mono-cultural interviews. This could suggest that people who share dimensions of culture may open up to each other and talk about sensitive issues more freely than when culturally associated differences are perceived, as in the cross-cultural interviews. This observation in itself begs consideration of the possibility that, in present-day South African society, the perception of cultural dimensions of difference may, for many, still be rather stereotypically linked to socio-political affiliation. The implications of cross-cultural interviewing effects on politically sensitive research questions are then obviously dire.

Bias appears to have influenced some of the responses generated during all four interview sessions, and at least some of it appears to have been related to the dimension(s) of culture represented by the particular pair of participants. The questions especially prone to evoke an expression of bias showed up as those which touched a sensitive nerve and awakened emotions such as anger (for instance, in referring to disrespect from learners), or feelings of powerlessness (for instance, in referring to the role of parents). A number of substitute responses were noted during both cross-cultural interviews, seemingly to fulfil the interviewee's conformity bias by giving the response presumed to be expected by the particular interviewer. Those responses obviously betrayed a degree of untrustworthiness and were important to consider during the interpretation of the data collected cross-culturally. The social desirability bias also might have played a role in the responses elicited during both cross-cultural interviews.

The language factor in the data generation during the interviews must certainly not be interpreted only in terms of a dimension of culture. Conducting an interview in an additional language may be expected to influence the data yielded for collection rather strongly on at least two further counts — the participants' relative power of expression/comprehension in the medium of the interview, and the power relations perceived by the participants on account of the relative status of the home language of each. The utterances of both participants during the cross-cultural interview where the interviewer was white, female, and Afrikaans-speaking and the interviewee was black, male, and Sepedi-speaking were relatively lengthy, strongly unlike the brief utterances in the obverse cross-cultural situation. The relatively voluminous exchanges in the first case might have been related to the fact that the interviewer was comfortably ensconced in using her first language, or also to some social bias or understanding, expecting a black person to require some elaboration of the questions to aid comprehension. The latter consideration seems to find a balance in the somewhat patronising tendency on the part of the white, female, and Afrikaans-speaking interviewee when speaking to the black, male, and Sotho-speaking interviewer, to resort to repeating an answer in different ways, for instance, '...

kyk ...' (look), '... hoe kan ek sê...' (how can I say) and '... ek bedoel ...' (I mean). On the other hand, the brevity of the latter interview might have been partly attributable to the expressive language challenge experienced by the black, male, and Sepedi-speaking interviewer in having to probe for data through the medium of Afrikaans.

Therefore it is again demonstrated that researchers, when conducting interviews, should be acutely aware of the possible existence of personal bias related to considerations of difference such as in status, beliefs, and attitudes and should recognise that this may affect their research in influencing the manner in which they relate with the interviewee.

The context within which each response is given needs to be taken into consideration as well during data interpretation. This was brought home by the fact that the second session, in revisiting responses from the first session, introduced a temporal context in addition to manipulating the cultural factor and thereby might have influenced the volume of particular responses, rendering them more clarified, or lengthy, or informative.

## Conclusion

This research attempted to explore the complexity of a cross-cultural interview situation. We acknowledge that very little can be concluded from an analysis of such limited data and that factors other than dimensions of culture could have contributed to the data yielded for collection. Yet the results of the study did suggest that a cross-cultural interview could indeed generate data that should not be interpreted without reference to the composition of the dimensions of culture of that interview. Cross-culture has been experientially and situationally defined, so it is of relevance for researchers to be sensitive to the context of their data collection acts and behaviours, by each time constructing their own context-specific delimitations of culture and cross-culture and acknowledging influences on data generation that could be attributed to the cross-cultural situation. During the data collection, researchers should, moreover, at all times take cognisance of the culture-related constitution of the interview situation in formulating their questions and negotiating responses.

It was pointed out earlier that culture itself is a process happening in a given context. The study voiced that cross-cultural interviewing occurs within a given environment best described by the contextual and attributable composition of similarities and differences between the interviewer and the interviewee, as participants, and that this composition of attributes should be identified and recognised as possibly having an influence on the generation of data.

Clearly, more studies should be undertaken on cross-cultural research methodology. This study should itself be followed up, *inter alia*, by using an interview protocol with an alternating sequence of follow-up interviews, to avoid one-sided comparison as well as a possible power-effect stemming from the perceived position of Interviewer A as superior to Interviewer B. Teams conducting cross-cultural research should include members of all cultural groups participating so as to bring the emic meanings to the interpretations of what might be etic from the position of the so-called 'sojourners' (researchers conducting research in a culture which is in any dimension(s) different from their own). Promoting open, trustworthy collaboration between the researchers and the participating community calls for an honest information consultation with the indigenous people in the community. Since cross-cultural studies may be embedded in discourses, discourse analysis in respect of the power relations at play in the interview situation should be undertaken, not only to protect the trustworthiness of the findings, but also to deepen understanding of the relationship of discourse to dimensions of culture.

It is vital in cross-cultural research for researchers to be aware of their own cultural back-

ground and of the fact that this may influence the cross-cultural interview in respect of formulating questions and selecting which questions to follow up and which data to record as relevant, therefore always holding the potential of losing or reading too much into the data generated during a cross-cultural interview. Researchers should therefore be aware of the influence of perception of any difference, constantly reflecting on their own position and behaviours as well as on those of their research participants. The researcher should be at peace with the knowledge that there is nothing 'wrong' with being different from the research participants. It is of paramount importance for the researchers to be honest about their limitations in respect of knowledge and understanding of the culture of the research participants and to seek consultation with colleagues who represent the participants more closely in cultural respects.

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