Communicating cross-culturally in asylum interviews

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Summary

This briefing considers what is known about the challenges of inter-cultural communication: how culture can shape what is remembered and how it is expressed in language and behaviour. A narrow cultural lens and one that relies on research conducted extensively with Western European or North American can result in an erroneous judgement about how the statement of a person seeking asylum should look and be communicated. The potential for this to have a negative impact on credibility will also be considered.

In the asylum context, the interviewer and interviewee (i.e. the person seeking asylum) commonly have different culture, values, language and ways of understanding the world. Layer on top of this the challenge of an interview taking place in a second language (e.g. English) or via an interpreter. Both are operating in less-than-optimal conditions.

The task of the interviewer is to elicit a detailed narrative and the interviewee to disclose personal details including factual, verifiable information which may include an interpretable account of intimate and/or distressing experiences. The applicant is expected to share confidences, perhaps for the first time and with clarity, consistency, and coherence with the person in authority, a stranger. The interviewer and decision maker then determine if the account is a truthful, credible one. Most commonly there is an expectation of consistency both within and across different interviews/interviewers and often within a *culture of disbelief.*

A narrow cultural lens

Much of the research literature on eyewitness memory and cues to deception has relied on making generalisations based on studies conducted with participants from Western, Educated,

Industrial, Rich Democratic (WEIRD) contexts. In recent years the impact of a narrow cultural lens on interview outcomes has been addressed within the literature on eyewitness memory[1][2].

Cultures are commonly contrasted between individualistic versus collectivist ways of seeing oneself. In individualistic societies, it is the unique attributes, qualities, and dispositions of the individual that dominates. In collectivistic societies, the self is seen more in relation to and dependent on one's social grouping or community. A distinction is also made between *low-context communication*, typical for individualistic societies (e.g. British and Dutch) and *high-context communication*. The former is direct and relies on the communicator being explicit in what they are talking about. High-context communication typical for collectivistic societies (e.g. Chinese and Arab) assumes a shared understanding within a given context.

Culture and Memory or Remembering

Cultural background plays an integral part in what we remember and what we choose to report. Culture can either directly or indirectly impact how something is remembered and the specificity or detail of that memory. Research shows that those from individualistic cultures tend to recall in the first-person perspective and provide more detail and those from collectivist cultures are more likely to drop personal pronouns (such as "I") from sentences in favour of highlighting joint perspectives and actions[3]. This could disadvantage an applicant as an interviewer will not be able to ascertain the information source. In such cases, it is essential that the interviewer asks the applicant to clarify if they themselves experienced something directly.

Interviewers should also be mindful of cultural taboos on language which pose further barriers to disclosure and translation in interpreter mediated interviews. In many cultures, people consider it socially unacceptable to describe sexual acts and therefore use euphemisms or vague language instead. That together with the shame associated with becoming a victim of sexual abuse can explain a delayed disclosure of abuse or a reluctance to give details[4].

The social hierarchy in the interview

Communication between the interviewer and interviewee may be hindered if the interviewer is seen as an authority figure and power distance is high. For example, in the high-power distance culture of Indonesia, rules of behaviour to show politeness and proper manners known as *tata*

[1] Anakwah, N., et al.,(2020). Cross-cultural differences in eyewitness memory reports. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *34*(2), 504-515

[2] Drenk, D., et al (2024). The influence of culture on witness testimony: An interdisciplinary scoping review. *Amsterdam Law Forum, 16*(1), 3–20.

[3] Kashima, E. S., & Kashima, Y. (1998). Culture and Language: The Case of Cultural Dimensions and Personal Pronoun Use. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *29*(3), 461-486.

[4] Vredeveldt, A., et al. (2023). Culture, trauma, and memory in investigative interviews. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 1–21.

karma may prevent children from disclosing abuse to police investigators.[5] In societies with high-power distance, the desire to agree with a person in authority may outweigh the desire to provide an accurate description. An illustrative example is provided by researchers[6], who found that Sub-Saharan African respondents were significantly more likely to respond 'yes' than Western European respondents when an experimenter (likely perceived as an authority figure) asked them if they had seen an object before, regardless of whether they had actually seen it. This 'acquiescence response style' may be more common in collectivist cultures but could also arise as a result of neurodiversity and demographic characteristics such as gender, age, social class and educational background.

Challenging credibility across cultures

Deception detection across cultures is even more challenging, and difficult because we are relying on our Western stereotypes of how someone behaves when lying or telling the truth. Much of the literature on deception detection is based on so called WEIRD samples and therefore cannot be applied across different cultural groups. Asylum officials in the West typically come from individualistic cultures and rely on their own cultural stereotypes about truth and lies in making judgements about likely credibility[7] and within a culture of disbelief. The use of level of detail and specificity as an indicator, as discussed earlier, is particularly problematic when assessing the credibility across a cultural divide.

Interviewers are often tasked with retrieving specific details (such as date of birth, marriage etc.); however, applicants may not use calendar dates to keep track of life events in rural areas; similarly, locations and timing of events may not be recalled or described objectively. The specificity of a memory report may also be impacted by depression and traumatic responses to negative life events and be associated with what has been referred to as 'overgeneral memories'.[8] It should also be noted, however, that psychopathology may be undiagnosed and some cultures do not classify psychopathology such as depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

A decision maker may challenge credibility by asking why someone who was suffering or subject to harm did not speak out sooner. A complex array of social context, systems and social ecology (characteristics of societies, culture), including belief systems, norms, values expectations, and environmental stressors, can impact whether victims disclose.

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[5] Hope, L., et al (2022). Urgent issues and prospects at the intersection of culture, memory, and witness interviews: Exploring the challenges for research and practice. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, *27*(1), 1-31.

[6] de Bruïne, et al (2023). Culture and credibility: the assessment of asylum seekers' statements. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 1–23.

[7] Herlihy, J., Gleeson, K., & Turner, S. (2010). What assumptions about human behaviour underlie asylum judgments? *International Journal of Refugee Law*, *22*(3), 351–366.

[8] Moore, S. A., & Zoellner, L. A. (2007). Overgeneral autobiographical memory and traumatic events: An evaluative review. *Psychological Bulletin, 133*(3), 419–437

A culture of honour may encourage tolerant judgments of men's sexual aggression against women, especially in situations when the sexual assault occurs within an intimate relationship[9]. If someone feels they are to blame this could explain why they did not reach out for help within their home environment or community. Norms about expected gender roles could also explain why victims are fearful and reluctant to disclose sexual violence to authorities and other outsiders, with negative consequences for mental health.[10]

For example, in the DRC, survivors of sexual violence are seen as "soiled" or shameful, and most are thrown out of their homes by their husbands or families, leading to homelessness.[11] The social and economic implications in turn can impact disclosure.

Cross cultural differences in emotion

When it comes to describing and interpreting emotions, it should be noted that not all languages have a word for 'emotion' itself and emotion vocabularies in some languages are limited. For example, native speaks of Luganda, a native language spoken in Uganda have the same word for 'anger' and 'sadness' *okusunguwala*. The word for love in Samoan *alofa* also means sympathy/pity. A recent cross-cultural survey on emotional lexicons of 2,500 languages, found that the only emotion word that was used across all cultures was 'feeling good' while 'feeling bad' occurred in 70% of languages, 'love' in less than one third and anger/proud in less than 20%[12].

Besides difference in language for emotion, people seeking asylum are sometimes perceived as not sufficiently emotional or not displaying the 'appropriate' emotion when they are talking about negative life events.[13] Such 'inappropriate' emotional displays can be interpreted as a sign of deception. For example, rape survivors are perceived as less credible if they display neutral or 'incongruent' emotions[14] even though this may reflect a coping mechanism or a cultural expectation that one does not show a sign of weakness. The research shows that when these stereotypes are discussed and taken into consideration in decision making it can reduce this bias in interpretation of emotion.

This is illustrated nicely by a cross-cultural research project comparing a North American sample with an East African "hunter-gatherer" community. The North American's emotions were experienced as 'internal' mental states associated with subjective feelings and linked with

[9] Canto, J. M., Perles, F., & San Martín, J. (2017). Culture of honour and the blaming of women in cases of rape. *Revista de Psicología Social*, *32*(1), 80-107.

[10] Dworkin, E. R., & Weaver, T. L. (2021). The impact of sociocultural contexts on mental health following sexual violence: A conceptual model. *Psychology of Violence, 11*(5), 476–487

[11] Mukenge M, Kady AM, & Stanton C (2010). *Funding a Women's Movement Against Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo: 2004–2009*. Global Fund for Women

[12] *Conrad Jackson et al Emotional Semantics show both cultural variations and universal structure, Science, 366, no. 6472 (2019) 1517-22.*

[13] Herlihy, J., Gleeson, K., & Turner, S. (2010). What assumptions about human behaviour underlie asylum judgments? *International Journal of Refugee Law*, *22*(3), 351–366.

[14] Dahl, J., Enemo, I., Drevland, G. C. B., Wessel, E., Eilertsen, D. E., & Magnussen, S. (2007). Displayed emotions and witness credibility: A comparison of judgements by individuals and mock juries. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *21*(9), 1145–1155.

psychological experiences while the East African's emotions were more likely to be described as bodily sensations and physical experiences. The East African's also focused more on their shared experiences and the needs, perspectives and motivations of others compared with North Americans. This directly applies when looking at how negative experiences are disclosed in an asylum interview. The challenge for the interviewer and decision maker is to be able to understand and make allowances for these cultural nuances in eliciting and evaluating testimony.

Interpreters in Investigative Interviews

Investigative interviews in cross-cultural contexts, that require an interpreter to translate, present unique challenges and can affect the interview dynamics. A scholarly review of interpreter use in the asylum context[15] identified 3 issues of concern for the asylum applicant which could inhibit disclosure: (1) mistrust of the interpreter and concern about breaches in confidentiality; (2) the interpreter lacking specific cultural knowledge (e.g., about the interviewee's religion) to translate statements accurately; (3) that an interpreter could unintentionally distort the tone of the interviewer's questions. For example, a clarification question may be phrased by the interpreter as a challenge. A recent study indicates that emotions evoked in the interpreter could hamper the accuracy, neutrality and completeness of a translation[16].

Should interpretation be as literal as possible to convey meaning during testimony or should interpretation consider local culture when deriving meaning for testimony?[17] The research clearly suggests culture can influence translation by interpreters. This in turn means, 'decision makers may not hear the testimony exactly as the witness had intended it'[17].
The challenges of inter-cultural communication and development of cross-cultural communication training for asylum officials is currently being developed in a project headed by Dr Annelies Vredeveldt and colleagues at the Amsterdam Laboratory for Legal Psychology.[18]

Recommendations

The cultural background of an asylum applicant can determine (1) what is remembered; (2) how much detail is provided; and (3) how that individual may come across in an interview. It cannot be assumed that individuals who come from the same country or continent will necessarily present in the same way. When it comes to what is reported, both the consistency and level of detail can vary with how the interviewer interacts with the applicant, the interviewer's questioning style and the mode of communication via an interpreter. All these factors could in

[15] Selim, H., et al. (2022). A review of psycho-legal issues in credibility assessments of asylum claims based on religion. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, *30*(6), 760–788.
[16] Morrison, L. et al (2024). The impact of emotionally accurate information on interpreting accuracy in a mock asylum interview, Applied Cognitive Psychology
[17] Drenk, D., et al (2024). The influence of culture on witness testimony: An interdisciplinary scoping review. *Amsterdam Law Forum, 16*(1), 3–20.
[18] https://allp.nl/

turn impact demeanour or displayed emotions which should not be relied upon as an indicator of credibility. The threshold for what constitutes a reasonable and credible account may need to be lowered accordingly. Adhering to a research-based interviewing model and awareness of how cultural differences impact memory and communication are central to high quality interviewing and decision-making processes.

Further Reading and Resources (these should all be open access)

Vredeveldt, A., Given-Wilson, Z. & Memon, A. (2023). Culture, trauma, and memory in investigative interviews. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 1–21.

Hoemann and Mesquita (2024) How culture shapes the stories we tell about our emotions, https://behavioralscientist.org/culture-shapes-stories-of-emotion/

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Professor Amina Memon is a highly skilled researcher and educator with 35 years of expertise in the field of Cognitive and Social Psychology. Current research projects include the effects of trauma on memory in cross-cultural contexts, the reliability and credibility of testimony in asylum and refugee case decisions, cognitive bias, the potential of Artificial Intelligence to assist with processing and decision making in migration. She co-directs the Centre for the Study of Emotion and Law at Royal Holloway https://csel.psychologyresearch.co.uk/

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