EDITED BY

MICHAEL
MORAN

MARTIN
REIN

ROBERT E.
GOODIN

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So the wonder of words, and the wonder of each new meeting, lies in part in the discoveries we can share in inter-views, if we listen for far more than words, for far more than intentions too (Coles 1989; Reich 1994).

4. But what Obstacles make Interviewing Tough?

Talking about interviews is easy, but conducting them can be much tougher. Who are you, after all, to interview someone else? What will they think, once you start to ask questions? How badly have they felt treated by other interviewers—and how will that predispose them to treat you? What are you doing for them? Will they have any reason to trust you? Let's review several of the obstacles that you might face.

4.1 How Do You Look Before You Ever Open Your Mouth?

Consider all the non-verbal signals you send when you approach another person to "do" an interview. How do you dress (casually, formally, officially)? How do you smell (full of aftershave or perfume)? How do you arrive (by bus, by foot, by car, whose car)?

The South African official who warned us about the dangers of bringing a tape recorder to interviews unannounced was not alone. Speaking of her experiences as a young planner in Jerusalem, Sarah Kaminker recalled walking in neighborhoods with official-looking maps and having people stream out of their houses, once with rocks. Another planner spoke of introducing herself in a community meeting, and she recalled how she was then greeted as the representative of the city's powerful planning agency: "A guy got up in the back of the room and started yelling at me that his family had lost their home because of what we had done—but I hadn't even been born when that had happened!"

In such cases, these planners teach us, interviewers often send signals before they ever open their mouths. They way they dress, drive, equip, and identify themselves shapes the expectations of others, expectations for which the interviewers have some responsibility too.

4.2 "Mere Words" Matter

If interviewers use language that interviewees find strange, overly formal, obscurely technical, ambiguous, or arrogant, their interviews will fail. The language of our

questions will shape not just the language of answers but perhaps whether any answers will be forthcoming at all.

In a striking story of intercultural negotiations, Shirley Solomon quotes a Native American tribal leader's experience of the silencing effects of the formal procedures and language of Robert's Rules of Order: He says, "In those meetings where it's Robert's Rules of Order, I know that I either have nothing to say or what I have to say counts for nothing" (Forester and Weiser 1995).

The point here reaches far beyond "Robert's Rules" or parliamentary or other formal procedures. The language of our questions, and the language in which we might presume a conversation to unfold, can discourage, intimidate, humiliate, or otherwise silence many people with important experiences and knowledge to share. If we neglect these languages of interviewing and instead assume some supposedly "neutral" terminology, we risk not only keeping ourselves stupid but undermining future cooperation and weakening our future relationships as well.

4.3 Safety Matters

When those asking the questions and those being asked have histories between them, histories of distrust and inequality, interviews will be more complicated than they would otherwise be. Those asking the questions sometimes think that their own "good intentions" should be enough to pave the way to successful interviews, but they can face rude surprises. Ken Reardon writes of taking planning students to East St Louis to interview community leaders about prospective local projects they might work on—only to find that they would be interviewed in turn, if not grilled, and then told pointedly by community leaders of the long history that residents had suffered as objects of previous generations of university researchers (Reardon et al. 1993).

In any situation of conflict, too, parties will be reluctant to "tell all" to third-party mediators for just the same reasons that very few of us "tell all" to many others: we very reasonably worry about how others will use the information we might disclose, especially if others might come to see us in some partial light or take advantage of that information. Even "students" can have difficulties doing interviews if community residents fear that their words will not be accurately reported or that the confidentiality they've assumed (or have been promised) could be violated.

The more general point is simple enough: the more afraid interviewees feel about having their words used against them, the more limited will be the utility of the interview results. Interviewers need to know that these issues reach far beyond their ostensible "good intentions," of course, for they conduct their interviews on institutional stages, in historically and politically staged contexts that frame every word they speak.

4.4 Theoretical Blinders

Interviews can run aground on other rocks too: the interviewer's theoretical frame-work may be so selective, so narrow, that he or she cannot grasp effectively, much less adequately report, what's been said or what's significant about it (Umemoto 2001).

Robert Coles puts this beautifully, quoting William Carlos Williams here: "Who's against shorthand? No one I know. Who wants to be shortchanged? No one I know" (Coles 1989, 29).

We do interviews to learn, but we need to ask questions to help others help us, and sometimes our preoccupations, our own selective attention can work not just to focus attention too partially, but to mislead us as well. We might "frame" a question as a matter of time and resources, for example, and not really hear an answer that hints that the problem of limited resources is really humiliation, not economic capacity.

So in a mediation once I asked a young man, as I tried to check what I thought I'd heard, "So, because you're working, you don't have much *time* to do the things that your father's talking about here?"—and when he replied, "Yeah, right, it's hard to do," I missed the significance of his answer altogether. But his father who was sitting across the table didn't miss a thing and exclaimed: "Oh! (I get it!) This is hard for you! Sure, of course; Yes, I can see that it is . . ." and their whole conversation then turned from arguing and bickering to a real search for cooperation. The point, it turned out, was not about time at all, but about the father's pressure, the son's pride and embarrassment to admit that what the father was asking was difficult because of his job's demands, the father's having been fooled by the son's brave face—and only now, with the son hinting and the father seeing past the blinders of my question about "time," were the father and son able to try together not only to address the supposed "issues" at hand but to improve their relationship as well.

4.5 Presumptions Can Blind Interviewers and Interviewees Alike

Robert Coles warns us that patients can have presumptions about what their doctors wish to hear, and so what those doctors learn through their questions can be limited accordingly. Similarly, professionals of all kinds bring presumptions of what others know or don't know, what they will be able or unable to respond to, what they will be willing or unwilling to talk about, and so what they (or we) learn will be shaped accordingly.

Lawyer-turned-mediator Gordon Sloan suggests the influence that such presumptions can have. Talking to parties participating in a Vancouver Island land use mediation that he had convened, he found many parties telling him that they were quite willing to talk to others, but they then said quite confidently of their adversaries, "But they'll never talk to us!"

Sloan tells us, instructively, that he found himself saying then to several of these parties, "Funny thing: that's exactly what they said about you!" and found them responding, in surprise, "They did?!?" (Forester and Weiser 1995).

Here presumptions reach past what gets asked to the very possibility of discussion and dialogue in the first place!

4.6 Professional Education as a Source of Blinders and Bias

Our own training encourages us to pay attention selectively, to ask some questions and not others, to see some responses as relevant and not others, to treat some claims and some emotions as significant and others as less so. So in the first part of this chapter we read one planner's warning: if we work with people who've invested years of work and commitment in their neighborhoods, and our own professional self-image leads us to suppress *showing that we care* about those places, those commitments, and that real work, we can very well then seem not to be sensitive, impartial, and professional, but callous, unfeeling, and distant—and if we seem to be blind and unresponsive, we will inspire not confidence and reassurance but resentment (Sandercock 2003; Krumholz and Forester 1990, 256).

If our training misleads us to think of emotion as simply a distraction from rationality—as if irrelevant facts could not be just as distracting—that very training will have saddled us with a terribly thin, emaciated idea of rationality, as Martha Nussbaum has so often argued (1990). We can learn through emotions as well as from facts, which explains why in the face of complex problems we might seek counsel from those capable of feeling as well as thinking. Consider the risks of taking advice—about anything important in your life—from someone with lots of brains but with no emotional sensitivity, no emotional awareness or responsiveness.

4.7 Impatience

It can be hard to listen sensitively, or be difficult emotionally to spend the time required to understand someone, when as interviewers we're itching to "get to the point" (or to the next interview!). So having patience as an interviewer can be an art form. New questions can so easily derail a train of thought, and part of the wonder of doing any good interview is enabling surprise, enabling the person being interviewed to bring something wholly new into the conversation: a distinct turn of phrase, a way of putting something, a new idea, an angle that's important, a sense that "I've never really thought of it that way before" (Weiss 1994).

But interviewers may think, after all, that they "don't have all day," and they have others to talk to and other work to do (and so do the interviewees, of course!)—and

so interviewers have to be careful: if they show signs of impatience, they're likely not only to shorten the interview, but to get canned and ready-made answers instead of the thoughtful, if less crisp, responses that will really be fresh and instructive.

4.8 The Fear of Loss of Control

Not only can patience be in short supply, but so can confidence. When an interviewee seems to be wandering, interviewers have a judgement call to make: do I interject or interrupt to "bring them back" to the topic at hand, or not? Questions often provoke unintended responses, and these can be the most interesting of all or be the most irrelevant—and good interviewers must know the difference!

Questions can provoke strong emotions too, and when they do, in unanticipated ways, interviewers will wonder what they've been missing, what they should have known but didn't, and more: they will wonder if the strong emotions they've provoked will threaten (or help to redirect) the flow and direction of the interview itself.

The more an interview matters, at times, the more emotional the response of those questioned may be. Asked about grievances or the responsibility of others or promises made or betrayed, respondents may quite reasonably become angry, cynical, distressed, disgusted, perhaps prone to go off on a screed that can threaten all but the most experienced interviewer.

So control can often be an issue negotiated all the way along an interview. Like their interviewees, interviewers too have purposes and limited time and limited capacities to understand and assess what they hear—and so they might reasonably fear losing control of interviews when respondents have very strong views or stronger emotions.

4.9 Posturing Threatens Successful Interviews

Sound bites threaten interviews no less than they subvert substantive political discussion. If interviewers hope to explore fresh material rather than pre-scripted "pat" answers, then they have to be careful not simply to evoke respondents' "posturing" instead of their more candid replies.

Parties can posture for many reasons. They may distrust the interviewer and so fall back on tried and true answers. They may worry that the interviewer will reveal sensitive information and so not disclose anything that's not already "canned." They may have little time and rely on "tried and true" answers. They may presume that the interviewer wants well-rehearsed, well-thought-out, and prepared answers, and so posturing becomes a way to appear 'prepared' and in control. In these ways and

others, interviewees can withhold fresh and thoughtful responses, and their interviewers can learn little, perhaps and very likely never knowing what they are missing.

5. So, to Overcome these Obstacles, What can Help us to Inter-view Well?

So you're going to do a series of interviews, and you're reasonably a bit apprehensive about how they might go. What can you do to avoid some of the obstacles just discussed? What can you do to learn a good deal rather than wasting your time? There's a good deal you can do, so consider first at least these dozen or so suggestions:

5.1 Think about Ceremony and Rituals of Indirection that Allow Talk

Conversation just doesn't happen. Especially when controversial issues are involved, interviewers may need to build relationships if they're going to be able to ask good questions and get good answers. Tel Aviv public official Baruch Yoscovitz put this wonderfully once when he described the experience of a Japanese planning colleague who'd worked on a major transportation infrastructure project in metropolitan Tokyo (Forester, Fischler, and Shmueli 2001, 39). "How'd you manage to do it?" Yoscovitz recalls asking. He found the answer striking: "Over two thousand cups of tea."

Curiously here, the rituals of meals, breaking bread or sharing tea, allow interviewees to see what sort of person they may be dealing with in the interviewer: is this someone who just wants to "hit and run," to ask pre-scripted questions quickly and leave, or does this person bring a broader agenda? Given our situation, what's appropriate here? And in these same rituals, of course, interviewers may build trust and rapport and learn as well.

5.2 Remember that People Care about Much More than they Say

If we know not to take people "literally," as if everything they mean could possibly be expressed in their words, we know to look beyond words, to take what we hear as indications, metaphors, expressions, practically produced accounts in specific

(interview-structured) situations. So we know that what we hear is almost always provisional, not the "last word," always incomplete. Once we understand that speakers very often care about much more than they can put into words, we can treat their words as doors to yet other of their concerns, beliefs, worries, commitments, and more—even as we must also be careful about reading too much into what they've said (Spirn, personal communication, 2003).

Just as we must listen for more than mere "words," so do we read quotes not just for "words" but also for meanings and implications, clues and cues, hints and tips to matters of concern far more complex than any simple sentences might literally render. If we resist being too literal as we listen to answers, we might remember the saying that "a picture's worth a thousand words"—and apply that thought to the many pictures that our interviewees paint in our conversations.

5.3 Recognize Emotions as Modes of Vision Tied to Cognition (No More Distracting than "Facts"!)

We should listen carefully to the emotional tone of what we hear, and we should appreciate emotions as being equally capable of either distracting us from *or* leading us to "the truth of the matter" at hand (including a party's strategic posturing!). At the risk of repeating a suggestion made above: if we think about it for a moment, we can see that anyone with a deeply hidden agenda can use an appeal to "the facts" to distract others just as much as they ever might use "emotion" for the same ends. But more ironically: the appeal to "facts" might distract us even more subtly (as if "the facts" were simply, out of any context, free of any selectivity, independent of any language of representation, just "the facts").

So instead of assuming either that "the facts" ever speak for themselves or that emotions of fear or anger or suspicion have little to teach us in a specific case, we should try sensitively to learn through such emotions rather than try pre-emptively and blindly to suppress them as "non-rational," "misleading," or "distracting." We can learn through another's fear or anger, for example—if we listen closely—for fear and anger are typically related to evaluative judgements and cognitions: a resident fears losing their neighborhood's "character" if "other people" start to come in, and a sensitive listener might now probe for issues of class or racial stereotypes associated with the fear of "other people." Or a resident's anger at "City Hall" might be understood to involve not just what "City Hall" allowed to happen last time, but the lack of any recognition on officials' parts respecting residents or concerning what actually happened.

Emotions can disclose important information, but interviewers have to listen sensitively so they can probe—or they will just miss the cues, miss the tips, and learn less than they very well might in the practical case at hand.

5.4 Realize that Messiness Matters, and Details Help

Mediators need to do careful interviews with parties before they might ever bring them together to try to settle a few of their differences. One mediator—call her Mary—shared a time-tested strategy she has often used: to do a good interview, she remembers to let her interviewees get past their first fifteen minutes, past their tried and true routines, their favorite summaries of "what it's all about"—so she can, then, learn a lot from the details of their less rehearsed and less reductive accounts.

Mary teaches us that interviewers can be held hostage to these summary stories, the favorite phrasings, the practiced simplifications of interviewees, so we ought deliberately to press for further elaboration, for the details, for unexpected angles that can reveal both new information and also at times a better understanding on the part of the interviewees themselves. So we might often ask, for example, "Can you say a bit more about how that happens?" or "Can you give me an example of that?"

5.5 Moving Beyond the Rush to Interpretation

Robert Coles warns young doctors that patients may often only tell them what they think the doctors wish to hear. So too in social research can interviewers miss important insights if they fail to appreciate the preconceptions that their interviewees have of the interview process and the interviewer's purposes. Coles warns us to beware of "the rush to interpretation," our own temptations to interpret too quickly, to jump to premature conclusions because of our own lack of time, our own anxiety about getting "the point," our own over-confidence, or simply our own inability to listen well.

The same problem arises in the world of public policy. So students of the field pass along "Goldberg's Rule:" Instead of asking someone, "What's the problem?" ask them instead, "What's the story?"—so you find out not just one narrow perspective on "the" problem at hand, but a broader fabric of relevant details that might do justice to the complexity of what's actually going on (Forester 1999*a*).

5.6 Moving Beyond Contextual Blinders

Recalling their interviews, mediators of public disputes have said some strange things about the parties to those disputes. Sometimes, mediators suggest, parties seem not to have thought very thoroughly about their own "interests" in a given case and seem instead to focus their attention much more narrowly on goals, objectives, positions, or outcomes they hope to achieve.

What sense can that make? If the parties themselves haven't thought these things through, who in the world has? But now, if we don't treat these mediators as blind or condescending here, we can actually learn from these curious comments: parties understandably express "what they want" within the contexts of what they take to be possible, within the frameworks of relationships and institutional possibilities that they take for granted as "realistic."

So too if we were interviewees: our answers would depend on some institutional context we assumed, on some set of possibilities we took to be plausible. So we might believe "the City Council will never allocate funds to honest work on race relations," and so we might not "waste time talking about irrelevancies," things that will never happen (Forester 2005).

The challenge for interviewers here is a complex and theoretically intriguing one: in a world in which everyone has limited vision, limited rationality, we may need to call into question taken-for-granted assumptions that severely restrict what might actually be thought to be politically possible. So interviewers can try to be explicit about contingencies: "If, somehow, the City Council were to consider funding for work on race relations," for example, "what would you recommend? If that were possible, what might you support? Advise?"

Mediators face a related difficulty when they do interviews: parties may fear being exploited if they reveal what really matters to them. Of course, when parties who are interdependent all do this, when they all misrepresent what they care about, they set themselves up ironically and tragically for failure. They make it much more difficult to "trade" across their different priorities. So failing to take advantage of mutually beneficial exchanges—actually possible and mutually beneficial reciprocity, each giving what matters less to them in order to get in return what matters more to them—they reach lose–lose agreements: agreements, but agreements that are "lousy" for both parties relative to what they really might have achieved if they had taken advantage of their differences in priorities, concerns, worries, fears, or "interests" (Susskind et al. 1999; Forester 1999a).

The more general problem for interviewing is this: if interviewees fear being exploited in any way for being truthful, the interviewer may not learn very much, not even that (or why) the interviewee is perhaps quite rightly afraid. What can interviewers do? They can bring a keen sense of politics to their interviews and a practical awareness of the political settings that frame and loom behind them.

If interviewers seem oblivious to those institutional contexts, as if their "good intentions" alone were all that mattered, they will not likely inspire confidence and trust. But they can try to build trust and protect their interviewees in many ways: acknowledging political contexts, clarifying just how they will use interview materials, at times ceasing to take notes or turning off tape recorders, perhaps bringing trusted third parties along, and perhaps most importantly creating their own track record of living up to their word, building relationships over time.

5.7 Take Small Steps, Make Small Offers

Imagine that someone wants to interview you about your childhood. If they begin by asking, "Were your parents successful?" what's likely to happen? You might ask in turn, "Well, what in the world do you mean by 'successful'?" Or if you defer to the interviewer and accept her terms, you might now feel put in a bind, as if you had to decide upon a first "yes or no" answer, "successful" or not, and then give subsequent answers that would back up that first answer.

Interviewers might do much better, it would seem, to ask for evidence rather than for summary judgements: to ask for information or stories that might support overall judgements (perhaps about anyone's "success") later in the research process. This means that as interviewers, we have to resist the temptation to ask our interviewees to do our work for us.

So if we want to find out what sort of parents (or alternatively, residents, neighbors, activists, patients, and so on), for example, Sue and Chris are, we'll do far better to ask them for evidence (How do you spend time with your children? How do you respond to your children when they …?) rather than to ask them point blank, "What sort of parents (and so on) are you?"

In part, this means interviewers must build trust; they must take small steps with interviewees to show that they are interested in the details of experience that matter, not just in easy summary judgements. Small steps build confidence; they invest time and attention; small steps are far less threatening (and less obscure) than big overall questions that overreach and so eventually underachieve. Asking, "How does this political process work?" might ask for such a summary account, and it might signal such ignorance of the process that the question itself may prompt a far more reductive response than the interviewer really wants (and than the interviewee would be willing to give).

Big questions need to be broken into pieces, so interviewers can ask interviewees to walk with them in small steps rather than to jump in front of them in big leaps. Interviewers who ask smaller questions will threaten less, build trust and confidence more, and produce surprising results as well.

5.8 Deflecting the Blame Game: Probe Possibilities Too

As Mary suggested above, interviewers, like mediators, can be held hostage to familiar but reductive rationalizations, whether we call them "scripts" or "raps" or "bones to pick" or "spiels" or "homilies" or political doctrines. But they can do better, too, not only by asking for details and examples, but by asking their interviewees for positive suggestions, for proposals, for offers, for possible solutions to problems at hand. This move accomplishes several objectives at once: it moves beyond a "blame game," it searches for value to be protected and honored, and it asks the interviewee

to take responsibility as an agent not just to lay blame, but to imagine constructive alternatives too.

Mediators find this "future orientation" to be axiomatic, for the blame game escalates easily and displaces contingent and constructive offers, "What if we tried X, Y, Z? Could we do A, B, C?" Similarly, interviewers can probe not only for the allocation of blame, but for the suggestion of possibilities too—and enrich their research results by doing so.

In a land use case a mediator we'll call "Monica" put this search for proposals this way:

Whenever somebody put something negatively, I would just try to find a positive idea there.

I'd try to turn it around to a positive idea. So someone would rant and rave, somebody could become angry about houses being built in cornfields, let's say   they didn't want to see that, and they mentioned something about a land trust in the course of talking. So I'd pick out that idea, and I'd say, "So are you saying it would be good if we had a local land trust that could try to protect some of this land?" and they'd say, "Yes."

So it was really a question, whenever anybody spoke negatively, of trying to turn it around into a positive suggestion, or just coming back with, "Well, what would you like to see happen?"

That set the tone for our meetings, and it really set the tone for our organization as a whole about what we're trying to do   which is find positive solutions.

5.9 Let a Sense of Humor Break Presumptions

Having a sense of humor does more than produce smiles and laughter. It conveys to interviewees that an interviewer has a sense of perspective about her work, that she is not so earnest, so narrow-minded, or so grimly serious that the interviewee must worry from the very beginning, for example, about giving "inadequate," "wrong", or "stupid" answers. Bringing a sense of humor does not only lighten the work for the interviewer, but sharing that sense of multiple perspectives encourages interviewees, too, to share the contradictions and complexities, the riddles and peculiarities they see in cases at hand.

Sharing a sense of humor signals to the person being interviewed that the interviewer is not in full control of the situation; he or she doesn't know all the answers; he or she is prepared for the unexpected, for multiple meanings and views, for not just a soberly serious attitude but for the contributions that a playful approach might make as well.

Having a sense of humor in this way can help build trust and ease the anxieties of interviewer–interviewee relationships; it can align questioner and respondent together collaboratively in the face of ambiguous and puzzling, complex, and contentious subjects. Not least of all, having a sense of humor can make it possible for both interviewee and interviewer to face very difficult, even painful subjects, recognizing them and yet not being held hostage to them (Forester 2004a; Sclavi 2003).