

Guidelines for Conducting Interviews

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NOTE: This document is intended as an outline to be discussed further in class. Do not expect to be able to fully understand all points without further explanation.

This is a set of guidelines drawn from various sources and from several years supervising students conducting interviews. Some of the points are drawn from material on interviewing; some from material on effective psychotherapy. Each point will be discussed in class. If this list seems overwhelming at first, don't panic: it's not as bad as it sounds. Use this list to prepare for interviews, and use it after each interview to review your own strengths and weaknesses and to identify areas to work on next time. The purpose of the list is to help you learn to conduct a more effective interview, and to help you discover what particular things seem to work for you.

Several of the guidelines listed are insights gained from studies of effective psychotherapy. It is essential to remember, however, that the purpose of these interviews is **not** to conduct therapy, or to help the individual, or to counsel him/her, or to change him/her in any way. The purpose is solely to get to know him.

As I will discuss and re-emphasize in class, participation in the interview must be entirely voluntary, and you must contact me immediately if there is any reason to believe there is any potential for damage, harm, or discomfort on the part of the interviewee.

1. Do not assume the only goal for the interview is for you to get information. Possible goals include:

- give information. (e.g. ground rules; voluntary participation; confidentiality.)
- establish relationship.
- get information.

2. Giving information:

- answer questions.
- discuss practical details (scheduling, time, place, etc.).
- possibly overview of interviews, topics, etc.

3. Establishing a good relationship. Consider the following concepts from psychotherapy:

- concept of "rapport" from client-centered therapy; "relationship therapy."
- be non-judgmental.
- avoid negative labels and negative attributions (e.g. weak ego, etc.)
- don't reassure too much.
- avoid premature assumption that you "understand" the problem or situation.
- avoid "minimizing." (e.g. 'Don't worry about it'; 'I'm sure it will be ok'; etc.)
- be aware of nonverbal behavior (theirs; yours).
- maintain good eye contact.

4. Time and place.

The setting is very important. You must both have time and not be in a rush to finish. You must arrange a private location where you will not be interrupted.

5. Privacy and confidentiality.

Discuss this with your interviewee. You should never identify the person by full name: not in class discussion groups, not in written reports, not to me privately (with exceptions we will discuss), not outside of class.

6. Goal of these interviews: understanding the individual.

- The concept of empathy. Empathy vs. sympathy.
- Goal: not so much to get down verbatim answers to questions as to get to know the person so well that you know how he/she would answer. "Feel what it would be like to be in her shoes."

7. Attitude and approach.

- may be more important than details of specific tactics.
- therapist attributes may be relevant (Carl Rogers):
 - accurate empathy.
 - non-possessive warmth (caring).
 - genuineness (honesty, "congruence").
- be yourself.
- make the other person feel at ease.
- be open, interested, accepting, non-judgmental, aware of the other person's frame of reference.

8. Concepts of "unconditional positive regard" and "nonjudgmental reply."

- concepts from Carl Rogers, client-centered therapy.
- Values of nonjudgmental reply: shows acceptance; elicits further talk. (Maybe.)
- Caution about "sympathy":
 - avoid "that's too bad" etc.
 - ALSO avoid "that's great". WHY?

9. "Active listening"

- allow the other person to talk.
- adopt the framework of listening to the other person instead of waiting to get your turn to say what you want to say.
- nonjudgmental reply.
- describe rather than evaluate.
- avoid "that's bad." Also avoid "that's good." (Why?)
- paraphrase. "I hear you saying that...." "Sounds like you"
- focus on feelings. Reflect feelings.
- notice nonverbal behavior.
- be attentive. Be "fully present."
- maintain good eye contact.
- allow time for reflection. (Become more comfortable with periods of silence.)

10. Use of open-ended questions.

- You will get a lot more information if you use open-ended questions rather than questions that can be answered simply by saying "yes" or "no."
- Avoid "multiple choice questions."

11. Use of one-word prompts.

- This is a very effective way to encourage a person to keep talking without interrupting the flow of conversation or directing the conversation the wrong way. However, you must be aware that you can greatly influence the direction of the further discussion by the word you choose. Examples:

- "I always seem to get so upset."
 - ("Always?") (OR, "Upset?")
- It makes me so angry when people are so insensitive."
 - ("Insensitive?") (OR, "People?") (OR "Angry?")

12. Probing for specifics.

"I hope X will open up to me" is not sufficient. It is up to you to probe (gently!) for additional details, thoughts, feelings, and information. It is important that this be done with thoughtfulness, tact, and care. But it often must be done if you are to get specifics instead of vague generalizations.

Examples:

- X: "Some people are easier to talk to than others."
- You: "Why do you think that is?" (Bad question: see below.)
- X: "Some people are more understanding" (DON'T stop here: you should be asking yourself What does that mean??)
- You: "How can you tell?"
- X: "Don't know. Just can."
- You: (What next???)

13. Use WHAT questions rather than WHY questions.

Two reasons not to use WHY questions:

1. _____
2. _____

14. Ask for examples to clarify:

- "Can you think of an example of that?"
- "Do you remember the last time that happened?"
- concept of "paint me a picture."

15. After probing: summarize and check your perceptions.
 - Review:
 - we've been talking about ...
 - it seems like ...
 - Check for agreement:
 - does that sum it up?
 - is there anything I'm missing there?

16. After probing: return to check "is there anything else?"
 - make sure you haven't missed another whole area.
 - "so you said you feel ... Is there anything else about the situation that bothers you?"

17. If things aren't going well, STOP.
 - Don't just plug along with both you and X getting more and more uncomfortable.
 - Sometimes a useful tactic is to label what's going on in the interview.
 - "You seem like you have something on your mind..."
 - "You seem uncomfortable..."
 - "I feel uncomfortable...."

18. Don't be afraid to take notes (or use a tape recorder?)
 - "I hope you won't mind if I take notes once in a while to be sure I keep things straight."
 - (Often X will help out: be sure to write down that")
 - Taking notes may be especially helpful during #15, 16 above.

19. Leave some uninterrupted time for yourself after the session.
 - review what happened:
 - what we talked about.
 - physical description of person and setting.
 - nonverbal behavior.
 - what was not talked about; what was avoided.
 - your own behavior, thought, and emotions during the interview.
 - make notes, or expand on notes taken during session, or dictate a report.
 - review other notes or guidelines for interviewing (such as this handout) and consider strengths and weaknesses of the interview.
 - make notes to yourself for next time:
 - general guidelines.
 - specific topics to pursue.
 - "remember to ask about..."

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