



Cross-Cultural Interview Practices: Research and Recommendations

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Introduction

Although they can take on a wide variety of forms and can occur at different parts of a selection process (Anderson & Witvliet, 2008; Posthuma et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 1999), job interviews are perhaps the most common method used to select employees across cultures (Huffcutt & Culbertson, 2011; Macan, 2009). Although research has examined best practice solutions for maximizing the utility of interviews in general (e.g., increasing interview structure; Huffcutt et al., 2013), the importance of *cross-cultural considerations* has often been overlooked in both research and practice, with much of the best practice research being informed by a more “Western-centric” approach. The purpose of the present white paper is therefore to describe some of the research to date on the role of culture in job interviews, practices in different regions, practical considerations, and next steps. We describe the research on interviews around the world and the implications of these findings in terms of applicant reactions, behaviors, interview use and design, and bias and stigma.

When Might You Encounter Culture in Interviews?

There are several cases in which cross-cultural considerations may emerge in the interview setting (Roulin, 2017). For example, an individual may be applying for a job in a different cultural context from their own, or an interviewer may be interviewing an applicant with a different cultural background from themselves (e.g., a new immigrant or fellow citizen with a different background) or be working in a new cultural context with which they are not familiar. More broadly, a multinational organization might attempt to implement more standardized selection protocols across various locations.¹ There are also a number of global developments that bring to the forefront the importance of cross-cultural considerations in interviewing. For instance, increased digitization in selection and interviewing (Tuzinski & Kantrowitz, 2016), such as video interviews (Lukacik et al., 2020), may lead to broader geographic applicant pools. This reliance on workers in more diverse geographic settings may be further compounded by the increased move to flexible and work-from-home arrangements accelerated by the pandemic, and competition for talent that drives organizations to look for talent more widely (Ryan & Derous, 2021). These factors, combined with the changing demographics of workplaces and increased migration and globalization (Ghemawat & Altman, 2019) increase the likelihood of cultural factors influencing the interview.

What Is Culture and Why Does It Matter?

To better understand how culture impacts interviews, it is helpful to first consider culture and its conceptualization. Although a complex topic, one should differentiate country from culture. At a broad level, considering country-level differences are certainly important. Each country has different legislation around acceptable hiring practices (Myors et al., 2008). Moreover, there are differences in labor markets, economic situation, competition for talent, and more. Although most cross-cultural studies of interviews have used country as a proxy for culture, culture can vary both within and between countries, and different countries may have similar cultures. As such, although country-level differences are important to consider, and culture partly accounts for differences in selection practices between countries (Ryan et al., 1999), understanding culture goes beyond consideration of country boundaries.



Building true and rich understanding of any single culture requires a complex and multifaceted approach

Although there are a number of definitions of culture, generally culture tends to describe the norms and values of a group. Building true and rich understanding of any single culture requires a complex and multifaceted approach; however, several frameworks have been proposed by cross-cultural scholars that provide a “workspace” for cross-cultural comparisons, albeit at a cost of (over)simplification. Nonetheless, these frameworks have been subjected to extensive validation work, and as such, they can provide useful lenses through which to make broad cross-cultural comparisons. In one example, according to the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) framework (House et al., 2002), cultures vary on nine dimensions, such as *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *gender egalitarianism*, *performance orientation*, and *in-group collectivism*.²

Because culture drives expectations, norms, and values, it can play a prominent role in the interview, including:

- interview use and design (e.g., structure, types of questions, characteristics of the interviewer, and number of interviewers; Posthuma et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 1999),
- applicant reactions to the interview (e.g., Anderson & Witvliet, 2008), and perceptions of whether the selection process is fair (Steiner & Gilliland, 2001),
- applicant self-presentation behaviors, including acceptable means of presenting oneself (Arseneault & Roulin, 2021; Wong & Phooi-Ching, 2000) and faking (Fell et al., 2016), and
- bias and stigma at the pre-interview initial impression, during the interview, and post-interview and decision-making stages (Derous et al., 2016).

Below, we describe some background on interviews, and describe findings and insights from several regions of the world with an eye towards the important factors listed above.

Background

Approaches to the Interview

The research on employment interviews has relied on three main approaches, each of which has implications for how culture impacts interviews.

First, the *psychometric approach* has dominated selection research in the 20th century and remains central today. It has focused on identifying interviewing techniques that help increase validity and reliability while reducing adverse impact or legal issues. The best example of this approach is arguably the development of the structured interview (see Levashina et al., 2014 for a review). From this perspective, best practice recommendations are to ensure questions are job related, use behavioral and situational questions, ask the same questions to all candidates, reduce unstructured rapport building (i.e., discussion of hobbies and interests), and have standardized evaluation criteria. This approach tends to view the interview more as a “test” of knowledge, skills, and abilities, an approach that tends to be more common in certain regions of the world, such as the U.S. (Posthuma et al., 2014).

Second, the social process or *social interaction approach* represented an attempt to bridge applicants' and organizations' perspectives and possibly reduce the science–practitioner gap (e.g., Derous & De Witte, 2001). By considering the interview as a social interaction, it has helped explore user reactions, preferences, behaviors, and biases. For instance, this line of research has helped examine why hiring professionals sometimes reject research-based recommendations (e.g., prefer to rely on unstructured interview and intuition-based decisions); how stigmas, stereotypes, and bias can influence interviewers' judgments of applicants; what interviewing practices are expected or preferred by applicants; or how applicants try to make a good impression in the interview. This second approach is particularly important when considering cross-cultural interviews, because what is considered an appropriate interviewing technique or behavior likely depends on one's cultural background. This can have important implications for applicant reactions, or expectations and judgments of applicants who do not exhibit the expected behaviors. The first two approaches have also contributed to establishing legislation protecting applicants against discrimination.

Although there are some differences in some regions, one should expect an interview to be part of the hiring process in many cultures.



Third, a *dynamic approach* to interview research has emerged (e.g., Bangerter et al., 2012). This explores how applicants and organizations need to adapt their behaviors to remain effective and competitive, for instance considering job market factors, contextual elements, or technological changes. This is important to consider from a cross-cultural perspective, as it highlights the importance of the need to adapt practices depending on contextual factors.

Cross-Cultural Interview Research to Date

Consistent with the approaches listed above, cross-cultural interview research has focused on how countries and cultures differ in terms of how interviews are designed, who is conducting the interview, the types of questions asked, how applicants react to interviews, and how applicants behave in interviews. Overall, these findings indicate that there seems to be widespread use of the interview as a method for hiring, and generally positive reactions (Anderson & Witvliet, 2008; Ryan et al., 1999). Although there are some differences in some regions, one should expect an interview to be part of the hiring process in many cultures.

There is, however, *significant variability across cultures* in how interviews are designed, who conducts interviews, and how applicants behave in the interview. For example, Posthuma et al. (2014) found that the proportion of interviews conducted by men versus women varies widely, with fewer women conducting interviews in Taiwan and fewer men in Russia. Similarly, whether all applicants are asked the same questions, and the type of questions can vary. For instance, applicants are more likely to be asked the same standardized questions in Australia than Italy (Ryan et al., 1999). In terms of question content, whereas in the U.S. fewer than 1% of interviewers asked about family planning and marital status (likely due to legal restrictions), more than 30% of interviewers asked about these in Russia or Taiwan. In addition, Ryan et al. (1999) demonstrated that the number of interviews one goes through to get a job (ranging from 2 to 3.66) and the number of interviewers may

vary. As such, applicants from different cultural backgrounds may expect different interview content. Finally, how applicants try to make a good impression may vary. For example, Bye et al. (2011) compared applicants in Turkey, Ghana, Norway, and Germany, and found more impression management behavior in Turkey and Ghana. Similarly, there appear to be cross-cultural differences in attitudes towards faking (Fell et al., 2016), which indicates that “applicants from different cultures may enter selection situations with different mindsets” (p. 65). For example, countries high in in-group collectivism, high power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, and low gender egalitarianism have more positive attitudes to faking.

Although we acknowledge there are large differences within geographic regions (as we describe below), this framing can help draw practitioners in different regions to areas of interest, and highlights where research has been conducted and where there are notable gaps.

Overall, this relatively limited work indicates a number of areas in which cross-cultural considerations may play into the interview. Below, we describe some region-specific research on interviews. Although we acknowledge there are large differences within geographic regions (as we describe below), this framing can help draw practitioners in different regions to areas of interest, and highlights where research has been conducted and where there are notable gaps. In addition, although we have not covered all regions of the world, we focus on the areas where our authorship team has expertise, and where there is more research on which to draw.

North America. Much of the research on interviews has been conducted in North America, and so given general familiarity with these literatures, we will not focus much on this here. Lievens (2007) noted that in both the United States and Canada, the existence of rigorous employment standards (e.g., *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures*; EEOC et al., 1978) means that features of interview such as job-relatedness of questions, and equal opportunity are frequently emphasized. Lievens (2007) cites the legal climate of these countries, but also influential professional associations (such as Society for Human Resource Management) for the increasing popularity of structured interviews. Overall, interviews are ubiquitous in North America (Ryan et al., 1999), are more likely to be structured than in some other countries, and tend to be stricter around asking questions that may discriminate based on legally protected statuses, such as family status (Myors et al., 2008). In terms of applicant behaviors, use of more “honest” self-presentation behaviors (i.e., selling yourself attractively through self-promotion and ingratiation) seems very common, with “deceptive” self-presentation behaviors (i.e., inventing qualifications to appear more qualified) somewhat less common, although still used relatively frequently in modest degrees (Bourdage et al., 2018).

Australia. The most recent available evidence regarding practices in Australia is from an unpublished prevalence study of 69 talent acquisition managers by Kirk et al. (2021). That study suggested that Australian practitioners have embraced the structured face-to-face interview format, with a very strong adoption of standard questions, and most using standardized rating scales and note taking. In terms of more modern approaches, adoption of asynchronous video interviews in Australia is relatively low (around 25%), and these interviews are more often rated intuitively rather than in a standardized manner. The use of automated scoring is extremely uncommon. Australia and New Zealand also include Indigenous groups, the Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and Maori people. For these groups, employment interview best practices are to allow candidates to bring a support person (e.g., Wong & Phooi-Ching, 2000). Moreover, Australian Indigenous people may avoid eye contact or use long silences to signal respect or allow others to speak first; these behaviors should not be considered a signal of a lack of understanding (Maxwell, n.d.).

Europe. Western-European interview practices are comparable to those in other Western countries (including the U.S.), possibly because of a shared cultural heritage. Yet, differences have been reported too in terms of interview structure, format and topics discussed, as well as interviewers' expectations about candidate behavior. For instance, whereas structured interviews are on the rise (Schuler et al., 2007), unstructured interviews are still popular in many Western-European countries especially when compared to the U.S. (Steiner, 2012). In terms of interview format, panel interviews seem to be used more in some European countries (like Denmark and Finland) than in others (like Belgium). In addition, topics discussed may vary—one study (Posthuma et al., 2014) reported greater focus on interview questions related to candidates' family background (marital status, children), salary expectations, and values in Belgium than in the U.S. Moreover, in some Central- and Eastern-European (CEE) countries, it is not uncommon to ask women about family plans and use this information for selection purposes (Glass & Fodor, 2011). Much less is known about interview practices in CEE countries and Russia, although anecdotal evidence suggests that connections are more important in this region (Yakubovich & Kozina, 2007). However, some empirical evidence suggests that Western practices are becoming more common (Hendley, 2021). Finally, ethnic majority interviewers may value other impression management tactics than ethnic minority candidates typically use, pointing to interviewers' ethnocentric focus on the ideal interview and candidate (e.g., Deros, 2017).

Africa. Based on the work to date, interview practices in Africa appear to be similar to those in the West, yet notable differences do exist. Interviews also form the backbone of selection systems in many African countries (Anakwe, 2002; Arthur et al., 1995; Ryan et al., 1999) and they are equally favorably perceived (e.g., Visser & De Jong, 2001). Interview formats consisting of high structure, and those using panel interviews were more popular in South Africa compared to international norms (Ryan et al., 1999), although international good practice standards tend to be more closely followed in industrialized African nations, compared to those with largely informal economies (De Kock, 2018). Applicant self-presentation behaviors in Africa may diverge in important ways from Western norms. For example, self-presentation tactics in Ghana and South Africa may be culture specific, as they emphasize humility, social harmony, interrelatedness, and compassion (Mtshelwane et al., 2016; Sandal et al., 2014). These interviewee tactics may reflect underlying cultural patterns such as humaneness, collectivism, and elevated power distance—themes that are salient within many Sub-Saharan African societies (House et al., 2002). Despite these unique interview trends, more research is needed in Africa as the bulk of studies emanate from a few countries (Lievens, 2007). For example, we need a better understanding of interview practices in Francophone countries and regions where Indigenous African dialects predominate. With its rich ethno-cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, the continent is poised for research on cross-cultural interviews.

East Asia. Cultural differences between East Asian countries and Western-European countries have prompted decades of research, with a particular focus on countries such as China and Japan. Generally, interviews in East Asia seem to have somewhat stronger customs and more often tend to be unstructured. However, much of the research has focused on self-presentation behaviors. Employment interviews revolve around self-representation, and cross-cultural research indicates substantial differences in this regard between East-Asian and Western-European cultures, but the findings sketch differences in both directions. On the one hand, attitudes towards faking seem more positive in countries that match East-Asian typical GLOBE values, such as conformity (Fell et al., 2016). Some evidence suggests that for Chinese applicants, it might be more acceptable to construct stories than to acknowledge not being able to respond (König et al., 2012; Lievens, 2007). On the other hand, in a Western setting, East-Asian applicants appear less comfortable describing their personal accomplishments (Lim et al., 2014; Wong & Phooi-Ching, 2000) and seem to display fewer ingratiation tactics (i.e., humor, smiling, and engagement), leading to lower hireability ratings (Paulhus et al., 2013). Indeed, differences between interview “how-to” manuals also suggest that different types of self-presentation are prevalent in East-Asian and Western-European cultures (Goetz, 2006). For example, Japanese manuals promote conformity

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more than American manuals, and Japanese manuals promote speaking in a loud voice, whereas German manuals promote a calm voice. In addition to the differences with Western settings, we note substantial cultural differences within East-Asian countries between applicant behavior of various ethnic groups (Wong & Phooi-Ching, 2000). For example, confidence seems a preferred strategy for applicants with a Japanese background and modesty for those with a Chinese background.

Bias and Stigma

Despite their popularity, interviews are subject to bias due to the way human interviewers conduct interviews and process candidate information. Such considerations may be particularly important to consider in a cross-cultural interview context.

Even before the actual interview starts, recruiters form initial impressions (e.g., from candidates' resumé, social media information) that may steer interview questions and anchor interviewers' final evaluations (Derous et al., 2016). Such heuristic decision making may be particularly strong for stigmatized candidates (Buijsrogge et al., 2021), like those with a different cultural background than the interviewer. This may also impact the design of the interview. Swedish majority interviewers, for instance, prepared interview questions on *person–culture* and *person–group fit* rather than *person–job fit* when short-listed candidates had an ethnic-minority sound-

ing name (i.e., Arabic) versus ethnic-majority sounding name (i.e., Swedish; Wolgast et al., 2018). Hence, the interview's validity may be jeopardized if decision making is based on job irrelevant information, like applicants' ethnic appearances (e.g., names, looks, accents; Deprez-Sims & Morris, 2010) and cross-cultural differences in behavior (e.g., impression management tactics, see Bye et al., 2014).

In addition, some interviewers may be more prone to biased decision making, and this may depend on one's ethnic/racial attitudes (Derous et al., 2017) and the type of ethnic minority group to which the applicant belongs (Krings & Olivares, 2007). In terms of solutions, literature suggests increasing interview structure can help to alleviate subjectivity and mitigate racial/ethnic bias like in-group favoritism (De Kock & Hauptfleisch, 2018; Levashina et al., 2014). Despite this, there can still be a large adverse impact against minority groups (Roth et al., 2002), and more studies are needed about the kind and amount of structure needed to mitigate/avert bias (Dipboye et al., 2012). Finally, besides characteristics of the interviewer, candidate, and the interview, contextual factors such as organizations' diversity policies may affect bias and validity (Madera & Hebl, 2013).

Implications for Practice

Organizations are increasingly pledging to improve diversity and inclusion (Romansky et al., 2021), and science is exploring tangible steps that can be taken. For instance, more broadly, building diversity competence with

cultural awareness training may help to improve diversity through reducing access discrimination (Hays-Thomas, 2016). Specifically for employment interviews, many lessons can be drawn from the research on cross-cultural differences. We identified several challenges and provide advice on how these can be met in Table 1.

Table 1

Level	Challenge	Advice
Interview design	<p>Typical interview design (e.g., the questions, format, number of interviewers) varies between cultures. Using design choices that an applicant is unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with may lead to communication errors between the interviewer and the applicants, introduce error into the decision process, and negatively impact applicant perceptions of fairness (e.g., job relatedness of questions, opportunity to perform) and of the organization.</p> <p>Depending on their culture, applicants may have expectations of the interview process and norms that will be inconsistent with those of the interviewers.</p>	<p>Generally, structured interviews have been demonstrated to be effective in many cultural contexts and in most cases should be the preferred method. However, especially if working in a new context, take the time to understand these differences and norms. The content of a structured interview should be constructed with an eye on cultural differences. For this purpose, the design of an employment interview and its evaluation criteria should:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Involve individuals from the cultural background(s) of potential applicants in interview design and evaluation criteria design and/or be evaluated by professionals with cross-cultural awareness, whose expertise will depend on the expected applicant pool, and 2. allow for a degree of flexibility to allow for different cultural preferences (Lim et al., 2014; Sandal et al., 2014). 3. Consider how to reduce bias and stigma in evaluation across interviewers. Some steps that have been suggested include interviewer training, Some steps that have been suggested include interviewer training, building structure into both the interview content and the evaluation components (Levashina et al., 2014), and using multiple structured interviews in the selection process (McCarthy et al., 2010). <p>To remove ambiguities and create shared expectations, organizations and interviewers should be transparent about the interview content, types of questions, number of interviews and interviewers. Organizations and interviewers should take care to explain their processes and expectations to applicants in advance and even consider sharing questions and qualities to be assessed prior to the interview.</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Level	Challenge	Advice
Interviewers	<p>Normative self-presentation behaviors and ways of interacting in employment interviews can differ between cultures. These differences can potentially lead to misinterpreting applicant behaviors, resulting in inaccurate assessments.</p> <p>It is difficult for one interviewer to be knowledgeable about all cultures.</p>	<p>Individual interviewers should, at a minimum, develop cultural awareness to better interpret and understand applicants' behaviors (Fell, 2016), and be aware that their own expectations for applicant behavior may not be culturally congruent or may be prone to misinterpretation.</p> <p>This is especially important because interviews with a multicultural applicant pool are likely to find a wide and complex range of self-presentation behaviors (Sandal et al., 2014). Hiring managers should also be supported by recruiters trained in cultural awareness.</p> <p>Have an interviewer/panel member with the same cultural background as the applicant where possible, as members of those groups may better understand self-presentation behaviors that diverse candidates typically use (e.g., Deros, 2017) or help put the applicant at ease.</p> <p>In addition, in some cases, the use of translators can allow individuals to express themselves in their own language or avoid misinterpretations. This can be particularly helpful in regions where there is more linguistic diversity or lack of a common language</p>
Environment	<p>Although generally highly used, the interview may not necessarily be as common everywhere. For example, preliminary evidence (e.g., Boss et al., in press) suggests in some cultures that we have not covered (e.g., parts of the Middle East), employment interviews may be less common. Ryan et al. (1999) tentatively suggested that using uncommon selection instruments might make an employer seem rigid or strange, potentially negatively impacting applicant reactions.</p> <p>Each country will have different legal considerations, protected groups, and formally accepted practices.</p>	<p>Carefully evaluate common personnel selection practices if the expectations are unknown and, based on the gathered information, consider alternatives if employment interviews appear to be rare.</p> <p>Interviews need to be designed and carefully considered in such a way that they do not either directly or indirectly discriminate against protected groups in the region (e.g., by asking questions that may indirectly tap into a protected group). Myers et al. (2008) provide a thorough review of 22 different countries, but also be aware that legislation changes over time and organizations and interviewers should thoroughly review the current local legal landscape.</p>

Next Steps

Above, we outline key considerations in cross-cultural interviewing. This is a critical topic that is only poised to become more prominent, and we hope that the above demonstrates that (a) culture can have a robust impact throughout the interview and on many important interview outcomes, and that (b) integrating and understanding culture in the interview context is not simple or easy, and requires a great deal of consideration.

Importantly, although we have reviewed research and findings from a number of regions, we would note that there are several large gaps in terms of best practice understanding to date. Even though the authorship team is composed of researchers from around the world, and we describe findings from a number of regions and cultures, these descriptions of findings are often based on older research, or confined to specific countries or groups within a region. We recognize that there may be large differences both within broader regions of the world, and within countries. Given the time and effort required for cultural understanding, we would suggest that moving forward, more systematic research should be conducted in cross-cultural settings, with a particular emphasis on collaborative partnerships with researchers and practitioners in those settings. These partnerships are similarly important for practitioners. Partnerships will enhance their own cultural awareness and help to critically examine each aspect of the interview design and evaluation with an eye towards culture, direct and indirect discrimination, and applicant reactions and behaviors. An important part of this process will be to involve diverse individuals who understand a culture throughout the selection process.

Notes

1 For a review of culture and selection practices more generally, see Ryan et al. (2017).

2 Other common frameworks for culture include Hofstede's (2001) framework, and the Schwartz (1994) value framework. As Posthuma et al. (2014) note, there is certainly overlap between each of these frameworks. For the interested reader, we cite these frameworks so they can be referred to.

Culture can have a robust impact throughout the interview and on many important interview outcomes, and integrating and understanding culture in the interview context is not simple or easy, and requires a great deal of consideration.



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