

## INTERVIEWS II: THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES

### 2. HUMANISTIC FRAMEWORK: VERBAL AND NONVERBAL SKILLS

#### 2.1. Verbal Attributes

Verbal skills largely pertain to the development of empathic understanding. The interviewer communicates respect for people being interviewed by giving them the courtesy of explaining why questions are being asked. The point of feeding back to the interviewee how the interview is going, and by offering a few words of thanks, support or praise the interviewer makes the respondent see how worthwhile the process is. Two further attributes convey how the interviewer values respondents and their contributions are minimal encouragement/ silence and paralanguage.

- **Minimal encouragement and silence** - Minimal encouragement that is, noncommittal noises like 'mm-mm', 'ah-ha', 'go on', 'yes' convey the interviewer's interest and encourage the respondent to continue without getting in the way of the discourse. Research provides evidence that inexperienced counselors respond much more quickly than experienced counselors and point out that this minimal encouragement of the experienced counselors led to longer periods of talking by the client. This research suggests that if an interviewer always waits 5 seconds before responding, the respondent is likely to initiate further discussion in 25% of cases. During research, when the interviewer has felt intuitively that a respondent seems to have more to say about a topic, often it seems, while they are considering disclosing something of a critical nature, an extended period of silence following a remark has catalyzed its development. This ability to tolerate silence has been surprisingly difficult to cultivate and needless to say, that in numerous other situations a burning desire to move on to another theme has no doubt, foreclosed on additional useful material. In the same type of situation a descriptive comment like "You looked like you were going to add something has proved useful".

The converse can also be true. Respondents sometimes ramble and meander along at great length. It is both patronizing and disrespectful to let the respondent run on when no attention is being paid to what he or she is saying. It is respectful of both the person being interviewed and the

interviewer to make good use of the short time available to talk. It is suggested that the first step to remedy this is to stop giving the verbal and non-verbal encouragement described above. If this is not successful a sensitive interruption is appropriate, for example "Let me stop you there for a moment and check out something you mentioned earlier."

- **Paralanguage** - As already mentioned paralanguage refers to the messages contained in speech beyond those which the words are intended to convey. The important point to reiterate here is that respect, acceptance and trust need to be felt by the interviewer, in order that paradoxical messages are avoided. It is no use knowing that this attitudinal quality is beneficial to the interaction. It is no use attempting to convey this through the tone of speech, because unless the interviewer truly has those attitudes, paralanguage will convey contradictory messages to the respondent and be detrimental to the interview.

## 2.1 Verbal skills

The interviewer of course, uses a range of verbal skills for developing understanding of the respondent's perspective. This is usually considered to be the interviewer's range of questioning techniques, but there are also useful lessons to be learned from the fields of counseling and psychotherapy. These include the skills of probing and careful reflection of discourse to validate interviewer interpretation and development of respondent's expression of both explicit and tacit thought processes. A summary of verbal skills is included below;

1. **Questioning** - Generally in qualitative research, the aim is to enable the interviewee to talk freely and openly about aspects of their life experience. In this situation open questions are the main instrument used in collecting the data. However, the goal of understanding must not overpower the interviewer's empathic position, nor their respect, acceptance or trust. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to be sensitive to how the interviewee may be affected by different questions and various question formats. So at the start of the interview it may be appropriate to ask a number of factually oriented or straight forward questions to develop the respondents' sense of security. These type of questions request uncomplicated descriptions, behaviors, actions or experiences and encourage the respondent to talk descriptively. Some researchers argue that opinions and feelings which are

linked to this descriptive information are more likely to be accurate as the respondent has just verbally relived the experience.

The advantages of open ended questions are their ability to be flexible; allow probing; develop understanding; test knowledge; encourage cooperation and rapport; test belief; produce unexpected or unanticipated answers; elicit unthought-of relationships or hypotheses. The last point made here is important. Skillful interviewing can help the respondent to organize their thoughts and feelings in ways more coherent or more communicable than previously. In this way not only are explicit understandings communicated, but tacit understandings can be made accessible to the data collection process. This enriches the research process, particularly where the development of new theory aims to be grounded in the perspectives of the respondents. However, the interviewer must be careful in the construction of open ended questions.

The truly open ended question does not presuppose which dimensions of feeling, analysis or thought will be salient to the interviewee. The truly open ended question allows the person being interviewed to select from among that person's full repertoire of possible responses. In this way the respondent is allowed to construct responses in their own terms and not be programmed by those of the interviewer. So in order to reflect a truly constructivist positioning the question might need to be rephrased.

- 2. Reflection of Content** - According to research, the ability to give feedback to a respondent regarding the main content of what has been said is one indication of accurate empathy. It is however important to avoid parroting the respondent by repeating their words exactly as this is likely to sound insincere. An accurate paraphrase indicates listening and empathy and allows the respondent to correct any misconception. Indeed if the interviewer is confused, an expression of this confusion demonstrates congruency and honesty on their behalf and respondents are usually happy to have the opportunity to clarify any misconception. Research illustrates the multiple and idiosyncratic ways that individuals construe their experience. A concise reflection of content can bring together respondents rambling discourses, while at the same time providing them with an opportunity to verify the interviewers interpretation. It has been experienced that respondents will also paraphrase rambling questions from the interviewer. As already mentioned, responding without judging or evaluating what has been said is another way of communicating empathy.

- 3. Reflection of Feelings** - Respondent's feelings about things are usually an important part of making sense of their life world. Sometimes these feelings are expressed precisely, but at other times they are unclearly defined or leak out in non-verbal clues. Either way the interviewer can add further dimensions to the data collection by reflecting back their interpretation of these feelings, as discussed above with respect to content. It is the reflection of implicit or tacit feelings often registered through non-verbal stimuli, which can produce the most stimulating dialogue. But (and this is a large BUT), it should be remembered that the interviewer's construction of feelings may be quite different from those of the respondent, so it is crucial to enter his feeling world as sensitively as you can.

This particularly applies when the respondent's words seem to be incongruent with non-verbal messages. This may be perceived in a tremor in the voice, agitated fidgeting or a pained expression around the eyes. The interviewer perceptions can be tested by reflecting back their interpretation of non-verbal messages pertaining to respondent's feelings or emotions. For instance, respondents may reflect more deeply on this, or simply deny the emotion. Whatever the actual fact, the point is best not pressed. In such cases it is advised that it may be inadvisable to confront a person too early, as you may be threatening an habitual defense for coping with their anxiety, which is necessary for survival. Some respondents will return to the point later if they wish to explore the point.

- 4. Reflecting Meaning** - This can most simply be achieved by the interviewer reflecting back to the respondent both content and feeling of the interaction. For example, "You felt anxious about the activity because people were watching you." In this case the respondent replied that she felt that she may be judged by the audience. If the reflection does not match the respondent's perspective they have the opportunity to correct the interviewer's interpretation of the situation (this is often not achieved in less responsive interview styles). The interviewer should also be alert to sustained passages from the respondent, and in this case it is useful to summarize the main themes and feelings to promote clear understanding. Where a clearer picture is not forthcoming the interviewer may need to probe deeper.

**5. Probing Deeper** - Probing respondent's perspectives is an important aspect of developing understanding. Probes ask in sensitive and neutral ways for more detail or clarification. Everyday language is however, sometimes complex and filled with unsurfaced, hidden and superficial meaning, which is used, not for communication but defense. The speaker can be unaware of the defense where it is a subconscious protection against fuller understanding of painful or difficult realization, and it is pointed out much of the time, people collude to accept a conversation that has missing information. To ask for missing information could create an embarrassing or emotionally charged situation.

An often heard phrase from the counseling world is "What I hear you saying is..." followed by a restatement of the unspoken message. Some point out that this can be a highly potent intervention, but it should be used carefully, particularly with respondents familiar with counseling who may perceive it as jargon at best or patronizing at worst. There are a number of ways in which we limit our communications, through deletion, distortion and generalization. Once alerted to these limitations they can be addressed by interviewers in their quest to develop empathic understanding. In doing this it should be born in mind that the respondent may not have previously assimilated the awareness which is being sought, and so the probing needs to be pursued with an empathy for the challenging nature of the process which the respondent is being asked to undertake. It should also be noted that non-verbal messages may also be probed if they appear to be relevant to the research process. This can be extremely challenging for the respondent and a good rapport and great sensitivity are required for this type of probing.

### **2.3. Non-Verbal Skills and Messages**

Respect, acceptance and trust are displayed not only in the things that an interviewer says to a respondent, but in their demeanor. Human relations literature points to a number of aspects of non-verbal behavior that can be applied to interviews. Observation of successful counsellors has produced the following guidelines;

- Maintain a relaxed alertness, body leaning slightly forward, arms open and unfolded.

- Keep an effective eye contact, softly focusing on the interviewee, allowing the gaze to move gently to other parts of the body.
- Move in synchronicity with the other person, and avoid fidgeting or compulsive movements (like nail biting).
- Avoid physical barriers such as desks or chair arms, and distracting situations (is there a phone nearby?)
- Maintain a relaxed breathing pattern.

These points indicate the significance for interviewers of raising awareness of the impact of posture, eye contact, facial expression, proximity and touch, and are dealt with in detail in the human relations literature. It is thought that non-verbal messages account for 93% of all communication. This figure is contentious, and it is true to say that we still know little conclusively about non-verbal communication, perhaps because the meaning of non-verbal communication is so highly contextualized. This summary of the knowledge about non-verbal communication that we can be fairly sure about is outlined below;

- Non-verbal communication plays an important part in all relationships, which the participants recognize and understand.
- The main way of expressing emotion is through non-verbal communication.
- Non-verbal communication acts as a meta-communication and makes a statement about the relationship between people.
- The information given by non-verbal communication is difficult to control and is often a statement of a person's true feelings. Unconscious processes may be leaked out.
- It is difficult to be aware of your own non-verbal communication because it is not common to be given feedback on the effect you have on other people.

For these reasons the interviewer should pay attention to the types of non-verbal being given by the respondent.

## **2.5. The Role of Listening**

Before there is understanding, the interviewer must listen. There are researchers that advocate the use of tape recorders in order to enhance the ability to remain attentive during interviews. In discussing this, the difficulty of the listening process is also conveyed. One's full attention must be focused on the interview. One must be thinking about probing for further explication or clarification of what he is now saying; formulating probes; linking up current talk with what he has

already said; thinking ahead to putting a new question that has now arisen and attending to the interviewee in a manner that communicates to him that you are indeed listening. Listening in dialogue is listening more to meanings than to words. In true listening, we reach behind the words, see through them, to find the person who is being revealed. As an interviewer or researcher you will have to rephrase what the respondent has said, and check it out with them to make sure that what left their mind and heart arrived in my mind intact and without distortion. This highlights the reactive nature of listening to understand and the importance of probing. This listening does not end with the completion of a respondent's sentence. It's suggested that attentive silence can be used to give the speaker time to think about what he has said, experience his feelings and formulate his next statement. The listener can use the time to demonstrate attention, observe body language, and think about his communication. In this way the interviewer begins to attend to the life world of the respondent, make sense of the communication and formulate strategies to develop her understanding.