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Thinking about Cross-Cultural Differences in Qualitative Interviewing: Practices for More Responsive and Trusting Encounters

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Abstract

Existing methodological efforts subsume the interview into broad epistemological abstractions, neglecting actual mechanics of the interview as practice, and dismiss linguistic and cultural asymmetry in the interview as a matter of (in)adequate resources. Reflecting on 24 semi-structured interviews exploring social media use among Hong Kong youth, this article develops a culturally sensitive approach that democratically exposes the way cultural norms surface in communication, using strategies which (a) transform the dialogical mechanics of an interview—reflecting back and encouraging; (b) transform the positionality of the researcher—building intersubjectivity and emotional rapport; (c) transform the context of the interview—making shifts in space, language, and presentation. In doing so, a culturally sensitive approach generates practical recommendations for (a) humanizing the researcher to dismantle power imbalances and social distances and (b) naturalizing the interview into a more conversational form, both of which combine to expose the cultural logics that govern action and interpretation whilst constructing results into intimate narratives of people's life-worlds.

Keywords

Qualitative Interview, Dialogue, Culture, Power Relations, Positionality, Intersubjectivity, Narrative Construction, East Asia

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Thinking about Cross-Cultural Differences in Qualitative Interviewing: Practices for More Responsive and Trusting Encounters

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Existing methodological efforts subsume the interview into broad epistemological abstractions, neglecting actual mechanics of the interview as practice, and dismiss linguistic and cultural asymmetry in the interview as a matter of (in)adequate resources. Reflecting on 24 semi-structured interviews exploring social media use among Hong Kong youth, this article develops a culturally sensitive approach that democratically exposes the way cultural norms surface in communication, using strategies which (a) transform the dialogical mechanics of an interview—reflecting back and encouraging; (b) transform the positionality of the researcher—building intersubjectivity and emotional rapport; (c) transform the context of the interview—making shifts in space, language, and presentation. In doing so, a culturally sensitive approach generates practical recommendations for (a) humanizing the researcher to dismantle power imbalances and social distances and (b) naturalizing the interview into a more conversational form, both of which combine to expose the cultural logics that govern action and interpretation whilst constructing results into intimate narratives of people's life-worlds. *Keywords: Qualitative Interview, Dialogue, Culture, Power Relations, Positionality, Intersubjectivity, Narrative Construction, East Asia*

Efforts to deconstruct the mechanics of interviews as a key, popular qualitative research method for gathering or generating data have gravitated around a loosely bound structure defined by the environment: interviewing face-to-face or via telephone; (re)designing the types of questions according to research inquiries—chief among them being narrative or "storied" data exploring the "whys" and "hows" of experience (Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Holt, 2010); determining how to structure questions in an interview (Britten, 1995); determining how to structure the interviewer's relationship with interviewees in light of the former affecting the latter's responses (Kaiser & Priebe, 1999; Landy, Cameron et al., 2016; Landy et al., 2016); examining the extent to which an interview is structured or unstructured (Galletta, 2013; Wengraf, 2001); and theorizing about the researcher-researched relationship during qualitative interviews (Qu & Dumay, 2011).These components have also been retheorized in connection to distinct social relations recursively bound up in the (social) body of the researcher, including personal interests (Rossing & Scott, 2016) and power relations within institutions (Boydell et al., 2017; Burawoy, 1998).

But these foci ultimately demonstrate a fundamental power imbalance in interview mechanics in which the researchers alone hold the authority to represent the voices of their participants (as proponents of participatory action research have argued; Kong, 2018; Taylor & Rupp, 2005). These mechanics hold *a priori* assumptions of linguistic and cultural symmetry in the act, setting, and relations of the interview process itself, wherein interviewers and interviewees understand each other's language and culture insofar as they do not need lingual translation for the full text or commonly used sayings or proverbs, as is often the case with intercultural communication (Günthner, 1991). Our methodological understanding of how to

explore cultural symmetries and differences in existing interview methods is insufficient. Indeed, despite their importance in an increasingly globalized world and academy, linguistic and cultural asymmetry are commonly dismissed as purely matters of (in)adequate resources. For instance, cultural and linguistic differences are not seen as sources of research data or areas in which interviewees' cultural concerns emerge, but simply as logistic challenges to the researcher to overcome by hiring interviewers or transcribers local to the research community of interest. Failing to do so is construed as an inability to do so because of lack of resources. Furthermore, allowing cultural, linguistic, and interpretive disagreements between interviewee and interviewer, considered "failures" of a data collection attempt, to even happen in the first place is considered taboo (Jacobsson & Åkerström, 2013). But, as Jacobsson and Åkerström assert (2013), these disagreements are actually worth exploring as sources of data, which shed light on areas of deep cultural concern and the importance of culture.

Cultural differences are not meta-data that can simply be ignored, but are valuable data sources that expose how cultural norms affect the way participants think and form their responses. Thus, ignoring culture would ultimately play into a postcolonial impulse in the academy to ignore or repackage the cultures and experiences of subjects from the Global South into narratives convenient for scholars from the Global North (see Connell, 2007, 2014). Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) landmark *Decolonizing Methodologies* shows the extremes of this impulse: how research has historically been used as a tool of cultural and colonial oppression on subalterns by silencing, dismissing, and rewriting their experiences for the benefit of researchers from historically colonizer nations.

Thus, we must actively work to reach across language and cultural barriers as well as understand the cross-cultural differences themselves and how they affect participants' speech and action because neglecting the role of cultural norms in interviewing practices leaves blind spots in assessing the veracity of data. By veracity, I do not refer to some positivist, objective truth lurking at the heart of an experience. I mean how well what is reported and what is *recorded* are how participants truly feel. It is well known, for instance, that cultural norms produce different logics among different groups, anticipating dissonant modes of action in response to comparable social circumstances (Au, 2017; Bekerman, 2007; Horenczyk & Bekerman, 1997; Triandis & Trafimow, 2001). Transposing these concerns into research practice, greater attention is warranted for the way cultural norms shape or censor respondents' answers, particularly in an artificial conversation setting. When we neglect these connections, we risk blindsiding ourselves to the influence of cultural norms on people's behavior in our data collection, results, and analysis. Participants in East Asian cultures, for instance, may feel less inclined to answer honestly when they concern the reputations of their contacts, for fear of offending them and out of respect for social harmony as a value (Au, 2017). If we simply hired translators to conduct interviews and analyzed responses in such a culture the same way we do in North American culture, we would be failing to account for how cultural norms influence participant responses.

Thus, cultural norms must be investigated by permitting participants to act them out—and catching them in the act, almost as an undercover operation that the researcher must integrate into, explore, and expose as a detective might. Detecting cultural norms as they naturally occur in participants' communication best enables deeper understandings about how they shape logics and discourses in ordinary social life. As a classic writing tip goes, show, don't tell. What we should look for is how participants show what they mean, just as much as what they tell us. For example, if we ask participants directly about how they feel about someone's outfit, particularly one they dislike, they might feel prompted to lie or mask their dislike with politically correct explanations about personal taste—that there is nothing wrong with the outfit, per se; it simply is not right for them. But if our goal was to understand the formation of fashion trends, then it would be important to understand why they disliked it in

terms of design, trendiness, appropriateness, utility, and context. Instead of directly asking about how participants feel about said outfit, we might consider starting off with a different point of reference such as asking them whether they themselves would wear this outfit. The nuance between the two is such that the second question turns the question's subject and focus onto the participant; there is no risk of offending someone else, like with the first question. This practice too is not universal, as it works best in collectivistic cultures that actually do prioritize collective well-being, but nevertheless exposes the need for such "tweaks" to our interview practices to accommodate for local cultures different from our own. From this exchange, we would also glean the outline of a norm or value that shapes how participants think about social relationships and how social harmony is an important value for participants to observe, in this case.

To this end, I aim to introduce strategies that ultimately improve cultural sensitivity and awareness in interviews, as well as reduce barriers to elicit honest, comfortable, and emotional accounts. Such strategies work to naturalize the interview and humanize the researcher by creating a relationship conducive to more responsive and trusting encounters in face of cross-cultural differences and which account for these differences in the schemas, norms, and values that participants make use of to create meaning (Pugh, 2013; Swidler, 1986).

The challenge is that when researchers enter the dynamic of an interview in such a cultural environment, they are placed into a position of power that presents challenges to obtaining honest information, but whose characteristics are hard to expunge. The problems range from the positionality of the researcher as a role, to the artificiality of the interview, to subtle shifts in how to word questions, all of which must be tailored to circumvent, rather than trigger, awkwardness, distress, and fear in the cultural norms adhered to by respondents. As will also be shown, cultural norms of deference to authority prevalent in collectivistic cultures such as Hong Kong, as will be explored, mandate self-censorship, distress, and awkwardness in the construction of a social distance with the researcher (Barbalet, 2017).

Responding to these challenges, the strategies I discuss transform the interview context itself into a more natural form, such as a conversation and remold the power and authority characteristics embodied in the person of a researcher by humanizing them not before, not after, but *during* the interview (see also Roulston, 2011b; Roulston, DeMarrais, & Lewis, 2003). Although this is already done in many studies of interviews, there is little attention on how this can be done with interviewees from a different cultural background than the interviewer. I articulate these strategies in the context of a research project investigating social media use among youth in Hong Kong through 24 semi-structured interviews. I will glean insights from studies of reflective listening, social influence, and communication in educational and social psychology literatures to flesh out the actual dialogical mechanics of the interview process itself on the micro level. Throughout, I push towards the need for greater attention to cultural sensitivity and awareness, not only out of respect for interviewees, but as a vehicle for improving interviews as a research practice.

"Naturally Occurring Culture" in an Interview

I broadly define culture as norms or collectively decided social standards that govern certain behaviors and interpretations in patterned ways. Even if it is more often unseen, it shapes the things we do see as researchers. This means, as we move towards the goals of developing cultural sensitivity and awareness, we must elicit honest, confessionary speech from interviewees and afford them the freedom to think, initiate, and act. Only in doing so can we understand the culture that influences their decisions. This has particularly important connections to conversations, which are important for understanding unfamiliar cultures. Interviews as conversations realize an ideal discursive medium in which the choices people

make for what to say and do most closely mirror those in their daily lives. Rather than essentializing participant subjects, this approach is simply taking stock of cultural norms that are collectively interpreted, agreed upon, and acted out in my own experience and corroborated by an immense literature on *guanxi* or Chinese social networks (see Barbalet, 2015, 2017; Bian, 2018; Lin, 2001; Park & Luo, 2001; Xin & Pearce, 1996).

Operationally, this means a good quality interview is one in which participants also take the initiative to make such "confessions," facilitated by our decision to validate their opinions, to listen openly, and to encourage them to reveal their experiences. Thus, what makes for a good interview is not necessarily a low research to participant speech ratio, but by the sheer quantity of information the participant confesses.

In virtually all of my interviews, participants demonstrated reluctance to "confess" at the beginning. Thus, I also needed to work to establish a sense of trust and comfort using strategies to insert myself into the interview. Symbolic interactionist scholars assume that intersubjectivity simply exists *a priori* with every social exchange—that it just is (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2006; Klein & Myers, 1999; Myers & Newman, 2007; Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). But this is not the case in many interviews. "Confessions" from interviewees require personable trust, which is hard to achieve in a formalized interview structure. This is often how problems of dishonest accounts come up; interviewees simply report what is socially acceptable or when they do not speak up at all. Keeping this in mind, I needed to establish trust as an interviewer and rework my identity as a conversant (Roulston, 2011a, 2011b). Only by contributing to the dialogue almost as an equal participant in a conversational structure did we establish trust; only by showing my participation in the conversation did participants contribute and dialogue flow. This best operationalized the interview as a qualitative research tool by eliciting confessionary accounts and so permitting us to see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is looked at but seldom seen (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. vii).

Sample and Methods

In this section, I review the study sample and methods of this study, the data for which I have drawn from a larger project on social media use. I will also briefly discuss cultural norms of status and positionality that ordered my perceived identity and my relationship to interviewees at the beginning of the interview. In doing so, I set the stage for subsequent sections where I discuss how I changed my positionality with respect to this ordering during the interview process.

My criteria for selecting participants of my study were social media users between 18 and 25 years of age. I recruited 24 participants, all of whom were students, from local Hong Kong universities. In terms of gender, 6 were men and 18 were women. Three were from Mainland China and 21 were from Hong Kong. I asked questions centered on their use of social media, their choices of which social networking sites they used, the functions and resources they use, the ways they interact with others online, the ways they represent themselves online, comparisons between online and offline behaviors, and reflections on their and others' profiles as representations of the self.

Since most interviewees were female and local Hong Kong or Mainland Chinese, the combination of my ethnicity, my linguistic capacities, and my gender formed an "outsider within" (Collins, 1986) position that sharpened my reflexivity. As a Hong Kong Chinese-Canadian man, I was ostensibly an "outsider," standing out with my fluency in English in a way that reordered perceptions about my position. Participants spoke in English at the outset and assumed I did not speak Chinese or apologized when they needed to speak in Chinese with me. They were also quick to clarify whenever they used slang common to locals. For instance, one participant described the overload of any one type of material on his newsfeed as *xiban*,

then immediately asked if I understood what the term meant, perhaps assuming I did not. Reflective of Hong Kong's recent past as a British colony, fluency in English in the city-state is associated with a higher social class and an international education, seen as a marker of greater prestige, intelligence, ability, influence, and worldly culture. Thus, I conducted interviews in both English and Cantonese, in which I shuttled between the two to measure subtle shifts and distinctions in behavior for each. Combining better English fluency with my gender as a male and my position as a researcher, power differences and social distances emerged between myself and interviewees that shuttling between two languages and changing locations were able to help gauge. I changed locations between an ergonomic, personal office with couches and a research office designed for meetings, as well as interviews and surveys. Participants who entered the former were comparatively more responsive to prompts and less hesitant to occupy the space than those in the latter.

Naturalizing the Interview into Conversation: Reflective Listening and Encouragement

In counselling, reflective listening has been articulated as a strategy to facilitate sharing information and solving problems in dyadic contexts (Rogers, 1951), predominantly consisting of "[understanding] what it is the sender is feeling or what his message means… then [putting] his understanding into his own words (code) and [feeding] it back for the sender's verification" (Gordon, 1970, p. 50). But since its original psychoanalytical conceptualization in parenting, mediating the relationship between parents and their children, reflective listening has gained prominence in widespread applications and examinations in dyadic relationships beyond personal and pedagogical settings to include professional ones. Recent developments have expanded this scope to business, unearthing its potential for reducing distress in dyadic interactions, and ultimately improving communication through more honest and penetrating conveyances of meaning (Rautalinko & Lisper, 2004).

Indeed, interviews, face-to-face or otherwise, can similarly be conceptualized as dyadic relationships whose characteristics, problems, and needs mirror those of communication in the dyadic settings identified in business and counseling. To produce a conversational structure in the interview to observe naturally occurring culture, there exists the need to alleviate the stress of being interviewed, to empower interviewees, who may defer too often to the authority of the interviewer, discussed later, to close the distance native to the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, proxies of expert and layman roles that warrant obedience to authority (Blass, 1999), to create a human, comfortable environment in which interviewees are performatively ensured not only of confidentiality, but of empathy. In doing so, I encouraged openness as much as honesty—taking the initiative, for instance, to confide nuances of their reflections in interviews, rather than disclosing only when prompted or asked. There are, after all, levels and areas of details that interviewers may not even be aware of, and so fail to prompt or tease out, and which would go unexplored if interviewees do not take the initiative to tell interviewers.

These problems were particularly pronounced for interviews with Hong Kong youth in my social media study. Among my sample, young, female interviewees were consistently hesitant to elaborate about their experiences unless prompted and altogether unwilling to take the initiative to tell me things which I did not ask about, irrespective of how important they were to them. Suki, a 22-year-old female, initially always asked permission for answers and rebuking herself for misinterpreting my questions. This is not a judgment against timidity or shyness. In fact, it was the contrary. Like many others, whenever I asked Suki a question, even if open-ended, she would respond with short, few-word answers. It was as if she was waiting for me to determine what was important to her. Probing was not successful, and so I needed an alternate way to convey that I wanted to hear her story, from her perspective, and to inform her

that I would not judge her honesty. I needed to create an environment and build a relationship that made her feel comfortable enough to do so.

> Interviewer: What's your background?
> Suki: Hong Kong. Do I need to tell you where my parents are from?
> Interviewer: No, no, it's alright. What year are you?
> Suki: 1995.
> Interviewer: Sorry, I mean what year in university you are.
> Suki: Oh! [she covers her mouth] I'm so sorry!
> Interviewer: It's quite OK! [laughs]
> Suki: [laughs] I'm in year two but going into year three.

As can be observed, Suki was overly apologetic for misinterpretations, potentially a sign of deference to my position (or just a part of a respectful character when interacting with others, especially strangers). But understanding this was instrumental to overcoming it. She followed my lead which I leveraged to direct the interview into laughter and a more relaxed, conversational environment. Indeed, others demonstrated the same awkwardness initially—the same hesitation and rigidness in answering questions with as few words as possible, without expressing their own thought. This does not mean that close-ended questions are bad, for they also have their place in complementing open-ended questions, as will be discussed later. Rather, this simply refers to how participants may respond cursorily to even open-ended questions, and whose answers have room for elaboration. For instance, a participant may say he/she feels a certain way, but without explaining how or why.

In the words of Yuki, an 18-year-old female from Hong Kong, her lack of confidence "was because her English was not very good." Thus, part of the solution to overturning interviewees' lack of confidence, in which the problems of awkwardness and willingness to be speak are bound up, is to rely upon strategies that (a) divert their attention away from their language skills and, in the same breath and (b) confirm that researchers not only understand what they want to express, but are nevertheless undeterred and remain genuinely interested in interviewees as people, more than subjects. Throughout, these efforts push towards a more naturalistic form of dialogue, remolding the interview against the contours of a conversation. Here, reflective listening strategies were particularly useful for overcoming such confidence and communication issues that my interviewees demonstrated. Innovations within the scope of reflective listening have generated seven categories of utterances with which to maximize the efficacy of reflective listening (Lindh & Lisper, 1990): minimal encouragement, direct encouragement, reflecting fact, reflecting emotion, recapitulation, and open- and closed-ended questions on fact and questions on emotion. Each of these, as will be demonstrated, can be transposed into interviews to resolve problems of and improve their overall experience. These strategies are not meant to be seen as universal, but as another set of options for other researchers to apply to their own research settings for their own ends.

Minimal and Direct Encouragement

Minimal encouragement, consisting of short utterances such as "uh-um" or "yes" or nodding (Davis, 1986; Mansfield, 1991; Ralph & Thorne, 1993 and direct encouragement, involving verbal prompts to "continue" or "go on" (Rautalinko & Lisper, 2004) combined to assure interviewees that they were understood, and that I remained interested in what they had to say. At the same time, they reproduced and maintained an intersubjective flow throughout the dialogue, something that not only marked my overt interest, but which was native to conversations in the everyday, and so brought a sense of naturalism to the interview that

alleviated its stress. The reverse was true as well. That is, once interviewees grew accustomed to my subtle encouragements, they would often reciprocate them, indicating their genuine investment in the interview not as a dispensation of data, but as a conversation welcome to the sharing of opinions. Throughout, markers of such a transformation—towards a conversation—surfaced in micro level cues reflected in interviewees' behavior and my own reflections.

For instance, during my interview with Sophia, a 22-year-old female, the mutual exchange of such encouragements (i.e., signaling agreement with the other party by saying "yeah," nodding) generated a more fluid conversation (shifting the interview structure to a more conversational form) that coincided with deeper explorations of meaning and feelings.

> Interviewer: So when people I guess go to your profile…
> Sophia: Yeah.
> Interviewer: Let's say Instagram and Wechat, because you post more there right…
> Sophia: Yeah.
> Interviewer: What do you think they look for?
> Sophia: Hmm… there isn't very much about some personal information on Wechat. No. Just the name, the country, the gender, and then nothing.

Her encouragements had become more vocal and interruptive, being voiced, for instance, when I was still speaking, which confirms my success at drawing out active listening in replicating a conversation. More importantly, it shows the first steps in establishing a sense of trust that worked to shatter the cultural deference and awkwardness inspired by the authority figure that I represented. And as she did so, I myself felt more motivated to reciprocate with encouragements and affirmations in a way that further structured our dialogue into a conversation, rather than an interview.

> Sophia: No, it's different. I think it's normal that people you are very close, they don't interact with you.
> Interviewer: Okay.
> Sophia: Yeah. But as for some close friends, I will think that way.
> Interviewer: Okay, you will feel more, "they don't like me," that kind of…
> Sophia: Yeah, yeah – exactly.
> Interviewer: Okay, I see. So what if they like your post, and as you're going to like their stuff back, you realize that their stuff is not very interesting to you – would you still like it?
> Sophia: I guess I will.
> Interviewer: Uh huh.
> Sophia: Yeah.
> Interviewer: Okay. And what do you think… Hmm, I guess what does giving a like mean to you?
> Sophia: People give me a like, what does this mean to me?
> Interviewer: Yes.
> Sophia: I don't know. Because one kind of people is that they really appreciate what you post and then they give you a like. And another kind of people is that they don't even look at what you post, but they always give you a like. It is just kind of habit for them. Yes, I have these two kinds of friends."

Again, Sophia appeared to feel comfortable enough to use encouragements in a conversation, the same way I did, and began providing more elaborative answers over time, drawing closer

to honest, confessional accounts of her experiences. In a similar vein, establishing emotional rapport within the immediate context of our discussion warranted two additional types of exchange, marking its transformation into a conversation, each corroborating feelings the other attempted to convey. Sensing my trouble in finding a word to describe her feelings ("Okay, you will feel more, 'they don't like me,' that kind of…"), Sophia did not correct me, but quickly nodded and expressed her understanding *before* waiting for me to finish. Thus, she was essentially assuring *me* that I was understood, that my inability to find a word did not burden the expression of my feelings, and that she remained nonetheless empathetic and interested rather than the reverse. And as we became mutually protective of each other's cues and positions in this conversation, we were not only invested in each other, but had successfully negotiated our location on a common social wavelength and a bond of trust, understanding, and respecting the intentions, expressions, and feelings we both showed to each other. This parallels "filling in" each other's sentences when either person has visible difficulty in finding a word. For Yu, a 21-year-old female, comparable tendencies could be observed in our discussion:

> Interviewer: … So when you are on Facebook or Instagram then, I guess you said you like stuff more than you comment on stuff, right.
> Yu: Mm.
> Interviewer: What would actually motivate you to comment on something?
> Yu: Hmm... Curiosity.
> Interviewer: Curiosity.
> Yu: Yes.
> Interviewer: Really? So… give me an example.
> Yu: Hmm… Maybe my friends go to a place or eat a food that I never try and I found that… I will keep seeing their post.
> Interviewer: Okay. And what would you comment on if you were to keep seeing their post?
> Yu: Maybe I would not comment on the post.
> Interviewer: You wouldn't comment on the post.
> Yu: Yes, I just check out. Some of them, I will. If they are my close friend, I will like their post. If they are just an acquaintance, I just...
> Interviewer: [after five seconds passed] … ignore it?
> Yu: Yes!
> Interviewer: So what actually makes you like something?
> Yu: [Something] colorful and give me some feeling that's fresh and new, something that I've never seen before. Maybe yesterday my friend went to a hotel and try some desserts that something like a really large cake with ice cream…

Rather than apologizing, Yu accepted my "fill-in" ("ignore it") and proceeded to give examples of what criteria she held for distributing likes, even taking the initiative to illustrate her response with a detailed example. While it is possible that she felt awkward or embarrassed, it did not seem to affect the natural conversational structure we had created. Encouragements were exchanged two ways and throughout the entire excerpt they acted as both signs and motivators of active engagement that encouraged honest reflections from interviewees.

Reflecting Fact, Emotion, and Recapitulation

Reflecting fact, reflecting emotion, and recapitulation are all essentially variants of a fundamental practice that calls upon exploring and understanding the sender's message and putting it into one's own words (Horne, Vatmanidis, & Careri, 1994) without altering its meaning (Gordon, 1970). These strategies corroborated the veracity of the participant's statements by demonstrating that I successfully understood what they wished to express, alleviating their concerns about their ability to convey meaning in English. Female interviewees were quiet, reflective of Chinese norms of avoiding disruption or drawing attention to one's self (Au 2017; Au & Chew, 2018), which presented problems for later data transcription as they risked not being heard by the audio recorder or needed more prompts for elaboration. Anticipating these difficulties, reflecting back or repeating parts of their responses not only served as means of communication, but as an important resource for detecting faintly spoken key phrases or words in subsequent data analysis. For instance, Sophia noted that "if somebody has a big difference in their online identity and real-life identity, I would say I trust their real-life identity more," but her voice trailed off and her words slurred near the end, prompting fears that the recording device did not record it. I then repeated "you trust real life more," to demonstrate reflective listening and so the audio recording device would not miss this important detail.

Furthermore, these strategies anticipated a mode of reframing questions or answers to appear as new conversation topics. Doing so potentially resolved actual misunderstandings between myself and interviewees. Whenever interviewees misunderstood me, reframing questions allowed my meaning to be better understood. And whenever I misunderstood interviewees, reframing answers provided new ways for them to answer the same question in different ways or to elaborate on their answers in more easily understood ways.

Returning to the above excerpt with Yu, reflecting back was a form of encouragement itself by corroborating my attention and understanding, at the same time it pushed the conversation along by prompting her to elaborate on the things that she had said, and *without* my having to *explicitly* request that she do so. As such, it maintained a conversational flow that replicated a naturalistic dialogue.

Reflecting back also draws justification from the psychological investigation of attitude recall issues in survey research (Pasek & Krosnick, 2009, p. 41). That is, reminding people enables researchers to circumvent respondent problems of forgetting previous answers and past experiences. At the same time, it builds a narrative continuity out of such experiences by assessing attitudes at multiple points to triangulate overall attitude *changes*. Thus, bringing reports of past topics and experiences into dialogue with those being dealt with in the present part of the interview, essentially accomplished through reflecting back, replicates key characteristics of the very narrative continuity traditionally sought by qualitative research (Gergen & Gergen, 1986): employment, ordering experiences in terms of a beginning, middle, and end; identity-construction, affirmed through (re)telling stories (Mishler, 1986); and interconnectivity—making sense of different experiences in terms of one another, ultimately constructing broader narratives.

Humanizing the Researcher: Intersubjectivity and Power Relations

Although reflective listening "does not send a message of [the receiver's] own, such as an evaluation, opinion, advice, logic, analysis, or question" (Gordon, 1970, p. 62), it involves a complex picture in the context of cultural differences. For Yuki, the artifice of the interview setting itself was a prominent stressor. Before I even met her, she had stood outside the survey researcher's room, whose door was closed by default. Not until someone else (a faculty

member) knocked on the door on her behalf did I realize she was there. She entered and, shuffling around in her seat, told me before the interview began, “I’m quite nervous.” I asked her why, to which she replied, “Because it’s my first time doing an interview.” Despite my assurances that there was nothing to be worried about, she remained visibly tense, rigid in posture, and stuttered in her speech.

This sentiment was shared by others in various forms. Even for older, more senior students such as Lee, a 23-year-old female, the same anxieties surfaced. She exhaled deeply and confessed that her language skills were not good, addressed me as “sir” and apologized in advance if I did not understand her. With Rebecca, a 20-year-old female from Hong Kong, no anxieties surfaced until I began, off the record, with a brief introduction about myself as a researcher and my aims through the research project. She giggled nervously, clasping a hand around her mouth: “Wow, so serious now.” This clearly indicated to me that both my position and the perceived demands of participating in an *interview* were fundamental precursors of imbalanced power relations and subsequent social distances, awkwardness, and anxiety. Furthermore, this anticipated that shifting the dialogue into more research topics would likely revive the same severity, prescribing the need for strategies to naturalize the interview into a conversation.

Indeed, I needed to account for the rigidness common in an interrogational interview structure and accentuated among Hong Kong female individuals who were culturally submissive to those in higher positions of power across axes of education, linguistic fluency, and occupation. In addition to my encouragement and reflection, I accomplished attempted to replicate a friendly conversation out of the interview through displays of emotion and empathy. This, in turn, proffered four interrelated functions: (a) shrinking the social distance between myself and interviewees, (b) humanizing myself, (c) building intersubjectivity in a way that allows a dialogue, and (d) alleviating the distress that an interview caused. Although intersubjectivity is always present, it can be weakened in interviews in which the interviewer is distant, unengaged, and/or interrogational—leading participants to become reluctant to respond or to refuse to respond entirely, effectively self-censoring themselves.

Within the social media study, these objectives were operationalized in a less artificial conversation. To this end, I brought myself, my own feelings and personal reactions, into the dialogue to help close the emotional gap where problems of power distinctions and self-censorship were anchored. For instance, speaking to Winnie, a 19-year-old female from Hong Kong, I expressed amazement when she told me she was already a year-three student entering year four who expected to obtain her degree before 20:

> Interviewer: So where are you from?
> Winnie: Hong Kong.
> Interviewer: What year are you?
> Winnie: Year-three student.
> Interviewer: So how old are you?
> Winnie: I'm 19.
> Interviewer: 19. Year three!
> Winnie: Because I was born in October [smiles].
> Interviewer: Wow, that's pretty fast!
> Winnie: Yeah [laughs].
> Interviewer: So you're almost done your degree then.
> Winnie: Yeaaah! Yeah. And I'm studying a four-year program.
> Interviewer: And you're going to be 20 when you finish. That's amazing.
> Winnie: [Laughs].

After taking the lead in demonstrating enthusiasm and showing emotion to her responses, she responded by following suit. Doing so began building a naturalistic conversation out of the artificial interview; rather than rigidly sticking to scripted questions or deviating *only* to create prompts that were nevertheless explicitly research-related, I transformed the conversation into a dialogue rather than a monologue. As I did so, she, like others, felt less "put on the spot," and visibly became more comfortable and revealed more of her experiences without needing prompts. She laughed, told jokes, and spoke more conversationally about her relief at finishing her program. Essentially, the distance between us, the gap built into the positions that we played, shrunk the more she felt empowered. In turn, she felt more able and confident to disclose what *she* deemed was important to my questions, being proactive in deciding the contents of our exchange, rather than reactive in responding to my questions alone.

Later in our conversations, for instance, and to further establish the intersubjective nature of our conversation, I used humor that not only brought myself into the discourse, but also dismantled the initial distance prescribed by the positionality of power that I seemed to embody:

> Interviewer: How often do you post on Facebook?
> Winnie: Facebook... Maybe once or twice a year.
> Interviewer: Wow. Is there any other reason, besides your friends not using it?
> Winnie: Yeah, because basically the target audience is different. Some of my friends are using Facebook more, especially the older generation, not Instagram.
> Interviewer: Older generation, like me [laughs].
> Winnie: [Laughs, waves her hand jokingly].
> Interviewer: How long do you think you can remember content that you see online on average?
> Winnie: Mm... maybe just two or three days. It depends on how impressive the content is.
> Interviewer: So not very long, right. What would really make you remember something then?
> Winnie: If it's something new to me. Oh! For example, I just read a feature article about the love story of blind people in Hong Kong – so it's something I never learned before.
> Interviewer: That's pretty cool. Can you describe your most memorable interaction with someone then?
> Winnie: Mmm… I would say maybe some conversations on Facebook with my friends. Because there's like a friend and she's depressed at that time, but at that time I'm only classmates with her. We weren't close friends. I know that maybe we are facing the same struggle, so I messaged her and asked her if she wanted to have some oral practice together, because I know she was taking the exams at the time. So I used it as an excuse to ask her out and check with her if she wanted to talk to someone. And that's the most memorable interaction with someone. Since then we chat a lot on Facebook and we just move on from then.

Her shift in attitude—from reactive (i.e., simply responding to whatever I had asked of her and carefully containing the content of her response to what I asked) to proactive (i.e., actually taking the initiative to tell me what she cared about, elaborating much more carefully and at length than before, and essentially deciding on her own what was important to say) became evident as I combined these conversational, intersubjective strategies. By investing my emotions and interest in a natural form of dialogue, one that she might have with friends, she did the same. Without the need for prompts, she actively, and *excitedly,* took the initiative to

provide long, narrative examples of the phenomena in question (i.e., what type of content was memorable), and in confiding the details of what would otherwise be very personal stories drawn from her past experiences (i.e., a friend dealing with depression). For Rebecca herself, she appeared slightly uncomfortable, checking her phone often throughout the interview. Rather than shrug it off with a dismissive, professional attitude, I asked her if everything was alright, letting her know that if she needed to make a call, she was free to do so. The interview was paused, during which time she called her mother. She returned to the interview much more focused, comfortable, and open in her answers, now seeing the process as a dialogue part of everyday life, able to be paused, broken off, and restarted, rather than belonging in a distant, closed-off world insulated from the demands of reality.

For Jay, a 24-year-old male from Mainland China, the same practice of inserting my personality into the dialogue early on worked, beginning with situational humor.

> Interviewer: ... So about how long would you say you use social media then? Say, in a day.
> Jay: Hmm... well… [long pause].
> Interviewer: How many hours in a day, would you say?
> Jay: Hours? Maybe two?
> Interviewer: Two per day?
> Jay: Yeah, maybe two. After I get back home, I have bath, have dinner, all the time I'm surfing Facebook and collecting some news through Facebook or Instagram.
> Interviewer: Even in the bath? [Laughs].
> Jay: No, no, after, after. Of course [laughs].

After establishing a light-hearted atmosphere, Jay became visibly more at ease, smiling, more vocal, and being very engaged throughout. Later in our conversation, when I asked him about the same point about describing his most memorable interactions, he exhibited the same openness as Winnie:

> Interviewer: Okay. So about how long would you say you can remember content you see online? You see an average post…
> Jay: Aha. [laughs, nods]
> Interviewer: … how long it's going to be there in your memory?
> Jay: Ha… very short.
> Interviewer: Very short?
> Jay: I think. Hmm… If you ask me, I can't remember the post I like yesterday. Already!
> Interviewer: There we go.
> Jay: Already! Because I like tens of, maybe hundreds of posts a day. Because I do think, when I like... Hmm, how to say that... Well, I almost like every post my friends have posted, then I shift away. And the articles I've read, just like and, yeah finish. That is the happy life, I do think.
> Interviewer: I see. I see. So why do you think you don't remember? Because there is too much stuff?
> Jay: Too much. Of course. Because, like when I have surfed the Facebook maybe for two hours, I have read maybe 10 or 20 articles, news or such kind of stuff. And, well, you can't remember anything, within that period of time, short time. So I do think, now, I do remember at that time. But, you ask me to recall it now, I can't do so.

With Jay, my strategies of reflecting back and encouragement had successfully *attained reciprocity*. For instance, as with Yu and others, Jay used encouragement actively, even naturally interrupting me when I was speaking, to maintain a conversational flow and to assure *me* that he was invested, at the same time I was understood. He would nod and laugh whenever I made jokes. He would also remark on how my questions were "good questions," and even helped me rephrase my question to better identify what I wanted to find out (i.e., "so your question is really about why I avoid commenting, right?"). And although Jay did not recount his most memorable materials, it became very apparent that it was an inability to do so, rather than an unwillingness to do so. That is, he visibly thought out loud, voicing his thought in the process of his attempts at recollection, and honestly reported his thoughts as they occurred, reflecting a level of trust, sympathy, and connection only found in natural, friendly conversations. When I asked why he tended to avoid posting personal posts, he replied:

> Ahh… that's a kind of pressure, isn't it? Ahh, I fail think of it. Maybe… ah, you remind me of one thing actually. I really don't like some… a so-called friend who is not close enough, yet they will comment on my latest update. I don't really like it, because I will have some imagination, like "what's your business about my post?" It's not your business actually. I add him or maybe I accept his friend request because of, well, one more friend is better than one more enemy. It's just a posture. For this posture, I'm not sharing my views or my feels on anything with you. Just some kind of posture.

Though I did not ask about the nature of his inability to recall, he proactively reported the minute details of his experiences and his interpretation of forgetfulness itself—how he purposely used his inability to remember, or at least did not resist it, as a unique mode of achieving happiness. For my part, I stayed engaged throughout, adding minimal and direct encouragement to maintain a conversational flow, which, in turn, facilitated the comfortable, empathetic atmosphere.

Shifting Contexts: Space, Language, and Framing

Working towards the imperative of dismantling the power structure and authority figure imposed upon my person per cultural norms of patriarchy and social class, I developed alternate strategies specific to local East Asian culture and tested them in the field. In addition to converting the interview as data collection session into a more naturalistic setting, these strategies were preoccupied with transforming space, language, and different dialogical ways of wording and presenting inquiries.

Space itself was an anchor of social distance. Interviews were conducted within a large research room designed for survey research and meetings. Twenty cubicles with computers and telephones bracketed its periphery, whilst an oblong wooden desk stood at its center, housing rows of comfortably-spaced computer chairs at the ready. Upon entering the survey research room, many were afraid of occupying the space. For Yuki, and others, she appeared uncertain of what to do, and only sat down after I told her to. She kept her backpack clutched on her lap the entire time, despite there being plenty of space available on the table and chairs around her and the fact that even I had kept mine in plain view on a chair myself. It appeared as if, in addition to myself, the space *itself* was alien to her, not only in terms of unfamiliarity, but in that it commanded the same deference that my position did. The space for the interview was a representation of an institution, crystallizing a looming sense of power that imposed on their agency and will to freely think and speak.

Keeping this in mind, I tried conducting interviews in a different room: a colleague's much smaller office with some bookshelves, a computer chair, and a long couch. Here, I sat across from interviewees on the couch in an effort to be seen less as the "owner" of the space, and as much a "guest" as interviewees possibly on the same level. Interviewees within this setting were just as awkward and rigid at first but were comparatively *more likely* to respond to warm leads and open up quicker. Returning to Suki, she was very rigid but did not hesitate in the same way to place her belongings down or occupy space. And despite her initial rigidity, she warmed up quickly with encouragement, coming to even reveal her deep fears and joke and laugh with me.

> Interviewer: How would you feel if you posted anything personal at all on WeChat?
> Suki: I will feel nervous, perhaps… many stories about government just watching the people [laughs]. I just read too many of that stuff. So I feel scared.
> Interviewer: So it's not just other people, it's the government that you're afraid of too.
> Suki: Yes.
> Interviewer: What makes you afraid of the government? There aren't any criminals there.
> Suki: Perhaps someday I will make a joke about something, but they consider that serious and I will be in jail.

Previously in the interview, Suki had told me that she refused to post personal information or any posts about herself on social media out of sheer fear of potential criminals who may be watching, prompting me to inquire about her fear of the government. Although her fears were laughed off, they are very much grounded in the wake of political tensions between Hong Kong and China and the apparent danger that looms large for dissident citizens. Recent examples have included the popular Occupy Central in 2014, the renowned Causeway Bay Books disappearances involving the Mainland Chinese-organized kidnapping of Hong Kong book merchants who sold works by political dissidents in 2015, to kidnappings of perceived dissidents from all economic strata and professions that have persisted till present, echoed by local civil rights activists.

To my surprise, Suki did not only disclose her fear of the government to me but was willing to expand into some detail about it. These fears were simultaneously corroborated aloud by Leela, a 25-year-old female from Mainland China who told me,

> I don't post much politics. Because… I'm afraid that the government will see it. Because I know a friend who did post something on some political page, and after that, he got blocked by from that page. After that, I don't know who's watching. And I don't want to not be able to go back to China.

These confessions indicate an important shift in the social constructions at work or those which have been dismantled. That is, the tense political climate surrounding the Chinese government and its efforts to curb dissent even in social life are well-known. Moreover, universities in Hong Kong, prominent public institutions which also receive funding from the government, evoke the perception of holding unknown relations with Mainland China—not subservient, but surely unable to defy orders. Given my stated position within a university and the fact that her interview would be recorded, I had expected them, particularly Leela, for whom the risks were much greater, to self-censor such fears. That they instead decided to confide such fears in me signaled a transformation in my position, from researcher to confidante, our dialogue from

interview to conversation, and the contexts of its perception from a data collection session to a mode of socializing and self-expression, altogether moving towards a bond of trust that resulted from the culturally sensitive strategies I outlined, as well as the change in space from more institutional to more personal environments.

Language fluency and its perception, more importantly, were also anchors of social distance. When I made the switch to Cantonese, interviewees grew at ease when they spoke, but were also apologetic. They felt like they had burdened me with their inadequate English skills. Yuki and Lee, for instance, required the entire interview to be conducted in Cantonese. They both thanked me for my understanding and what they saw to be a large compromise on my part. Yet, even for them, like the rest of the interviewees, they would not take the initiative to speak in Cantonese. Furthermore, they would revert to English whenever I did, following my initiative, despite the fact that I had emphasized they could use any language they felt most comfortable with, resonating with deferential behavior found in social network and management studies of Chinese individuals towards their perceived superiors in occupational or professional *guanxi* (Chen, Friedman, Yu, Fang, & Lu, 2009; Davidson, Van Dyne, & Lin, 2017; Liu & Shi, 2017). Yet, perhaps English *was* the most comfortable language for them, not for the ability to express themselves, but for the fact that it would not "burden" me. Even when I spoke in Cantonese, interviewees would at times keep replying in English, hesitant to breach some unspoken custom of respect or politeness towards me by burdening me. As such, I would let them do so, for pushing the issue would have caused even greater discomfort than speaking in a less familiar language. Resonating with the East Asian, Confucianist principle of maintaining harmony with others in contexts of socialization (Au, 2017), the fear of burdening others and being polite to others demonstrates that deciding the language of interviews depends on and urges sensitivity to a myriad of cultural and social factors, more than just linguistic capability.

In the same vein, ways of framing or asking questions also played a role in communicating with interviewees.

Vignettes

Consistent with the Confucianist norms of harmony, interviewees would sometimes hesitate to openly state opinions that were too "offensive" or insulting towards others. Here, reflecting back sometimes posed a problem. When reflecting back such opinions, it could seem like an accusation to interviewees, rather than a neutral reflection to make sense of their experiences. To resolve these issues, I resorted to using vignettes, depictions of unnamed, fictional others whose opinions would then be evaluated by interviewees.

Silence

Silence itself deserves attention as a tool to navigate cultural norms of submission, which predict awkwardness. To alleviate these concerns, silence must be moderated. The duration of silence is naturally acceptable, to wait for interviewees to think before responding, but culminates in a sense of being "put on the spot" for interviewees if prolonged. In such instances, I would reflect back again to reframe the question differently or add more context drawn from their previous responses, in order for interviewees to better answer the question and feel more comfortable for the rest of the conversation.

Ease of Tasks

From survey research, reducing task difficulty eases comfort and interest in answering (Pasek & Krosnick, 2009, p. 33), both of which are actually characteristics fundamental to interviews with collectivistic cultures as well, as we have seen. To this end, although open-ended questions are critical for obtaining reflections on emotions, built on the ability to elaborate details, they deserve balance with close-ended questions—"breaks" for participants that facilitate a sense of progress and confidence in their ability to answer. Moreover, close-ended questions are useful for providing the same reference to all participants, stimulating recall of past experiences and answers, and ease of analysis if all possible answers are known, such as superficial concerns. On this note, wording should also be less complex, ambiguous, and technical, written with less advanced vocabulary and grammar for interviewees less familiar with the language of the interview to answer.

Flexibility

Interview questions should have templates for guides (semi-structured design), whilst being open to being reordered in presentation. Some interviewees misunderstood my question, in which case they provided broad answers that spoke to an array of questions that I had prepared. Reordering my questions not only built narratives by ordering experiences (Bowen, 2008), but accommodated for a more natural conversational flow when I subsequently asked questions and prompts out of order.

Pilot Interviews

To accommodate for problems of cultural differences and communication with culturally diverse interviewees, it becomes important to test your question design with pilot interviews. For instance, I discovered in my interviews early on that participants' use of particular social media platforms were different than my expectations. Interviewees from or who had contacts in Mainland China used WeChat and Weibo more often than Facebook and Instagram, which were, in turn, more often used among participants whose social circles were predominantly based in Hong Kong or abroad. As such, I screened for platform use in subsequent interviews, and redesigned some questions to become specific to the particular functions of each social media platform.

Discussion

Interviewing members of collectivistic cultures, such as Hong Kong or other East Asian cultures, may present language barriers and cultural differences that culminate in deeper, more complex challenges to understanding respondents. It may at times even be *less* comfortable for interviewees to speak in their mother language per a desire to defer to my position as authority.

In response, a culturally sensitive approach includes strategies to transform the dialogical mechanics of an interview into a conversational structure through ways of reflecting back and encouraging, and in so doing, transforming the positionality of the researcher. A culturally sensitive approach adds to qualitative research practice by generating practical recommendations for (a) humanizing the researcher to dismantle power imbalances and social distances and (b) naturalizing the interview into a more conversational form, both of which combine to expose the cultural logics that govern action and interpretation consciously and unconsciously through norms, schemas, symbols, meanings, rituals, and practices—whilst accomplishing all the same the narrative constructions that preoccupy existing approaches to

interviews. It must be noted that power can also be an enabling constraint. Achieving a more conversational structure for the interviews was only a result of my ability to leverage my position and guide each interview towards this goal.

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