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BIAS IN INTERVIEWING

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(TITLE)

BY

Barbara Hires Owens  
B.S. in Education, 1958, Eastern Illinois University

**PLAN B PAPER**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY,  
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1963

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YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS PLAN B PAPER BE ACCEPTED AS  
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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Everyone engages in some type of interviewing each day. Many discussions may not be recognized as interviews but, nevertheless, good or poor interviewing techniques are constantly being used. The two-way exchange of ideas is as old as man's existence.

After participating in an interview, each interviewer has usually assumed that he was using the best techniques for obtaining the information he was seeking or performing the therapeutic service that was asked of him. Everyone starting to interview wishes there were a list of rules he could follow. Many books and papers have been written by people from different schools of thought stating the "dos" and "don'ts" and proper techniques of interviewing from a particular point of view. It is, however, impossible to enumerate a complete list of infallible rules because interviewing takes place between human beings who are much too individualized to be reduced to formula. No matter what system (directive, non-directive, or eclectic) one follows he must recognize that people participate in different kinds of interviews.

Numerous authors classify interviews in different areas. Erickson listed the employment interview, the

disciplinary interview, the informational interview, and the counseling interview as illustrations of the different types.<sup>1</sup> Warters listed diagnostic and therapeutic interviews as two other general classifications.<sup>2</sup> Some interviews are to obtain information, some to give help, but most involve a combination of the two. In many interviews, the main objectives are (1) to obtain knowledge of the problem to be solved, (2) to secure sufficient understanding of the troubled person, and (3) to see the total situation so the problem can be solved effectively.

Each interview is different. The information the interviewer has about the person coming to the interview may be in different quantity and quality. The interviewee may have heard about and have formed certain impressions of the interviewer. After the interview begins, each person looks at, thinks about, and forms judgments about the other. This situation has been referred to as a circular response in which there is stimulus and response with every response becoming a stimulus for another response and the interviewer and interviewee generally stimulating each other in new ways as the interview proceeds. It is obvious, then, that each participant is affected by this interaction. Garrett stated:

Interviewers must have more than casual knowledge of the important role in human motivation of influences

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<sup>1</sup>Clifford E. Erickson, The Counseling Interview (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1950), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Jane Warters, Techniques of Counseling (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1954), p. 300.

other than the conscious and the rational. They should apply this knowledge to an understanding not only of their clients' personalities, needs, prejudices and emotions, but also of their own. The wise maxim of the Greeks, "Know Thyself," applies especially to interviewers.<sup>3</sup>

It is the purpose of this paper to explore various influences which can cause bias or error in the making of decisions or judgment by the interviewer about the interviewee. The influences were assumed to affect undesirably the validity of interview judgment in the proper interpretation of the information obtained in the interview.

The counseling interview is the type of interview considered for this paper. Strang stated: "The interview is the core of the counseling process and communication is the core of the interview."<sup>4</sup> Through conversations the student comes to see himself more clearly because he comes to understand better than before how he feels and what he thinks about certain matters of special significance to him.

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<sup>3</sup>Annette Garrett, Interviewing--Its Principles and Methods (New York: Family Welfare Association of America, 1942), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Ruth Strang, "Communication in the Counseling Process," National Association of Women Deans and Counselors Journal, XXVI (October, 1962), 11.

## CHAPTER II

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COUNSELING INTERVIEW

## Definitions of Counseling

Counseling and interviewing are not synonymous. Counseling is a broad process in which interviewing is only one procedure involved in the total process. Counseling strives to attain two main goals: Increasing the counselee's feeling of personal adjustment and increasing his actual effectiveness in society.

Robinson defined counseling as ". . . types of two-person situations in which one person, the client, is helped to adjust more effectively to himself and to his environment."<sup>5</sup>

A definition of counseling by Talbert stated:

Counseling is a personal face to face relationship between two people, in which the counselor, by means of relationship and his special competencies, provides a learning situation in which the counselee, a normal sort of person, is helped to know himself and his present and possible future situations so that he can make use of his characteristics and potentialities in a way that is both satisfying to himself and beneficial to society, and further, can learn how to solve future problems and meet future needs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Francis P. Robinson, Principles and Procedures in Student Counseling (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>E. L. Talbert, Introduction to Counseling (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1959), p. 3.

In accepting these definitions, interviewing then becomes the face to face relationship, the core or central part of counseling. Every counselor uses the interview as a basic and central technique. Almost all guidance services are established so that the counselor can do a better job, through the interview, of helping students with their problems and their plans.

#### Definition of an Interview

Interviewing may be defined in various ways. Lefever, Turrell, and Weitzel stated:

. . . interviewing is both a science and an art, holding a central place in the guidance program because of the counselor's opportunity at the one time to foster warmth, human relations, and to apply scientific educational principles.<sup>7</sup>

Kahn stated: "The interview, in short, is an interaction process, and both the interviewer and the respondent contribute to the communication that results."<sup>8</sup>

Erickson's definition was typical of those used by writers in this area. He stated: "A counseling interview is a person-to-person relationship in which one individual with problems and needs turns to another person for assistance."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>D. Welty Lefever, Archie M. Turrell, and Henry I. Weitzel, Principles and Techniques of Guidance (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1950), p. 349.

<sup>8</sup>Robert L. Kahn and Charles F. Cannell, The Dynamics of Interviewing (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1960), p. 23.

<sup>9</sup>Erickson, loc. cit.



The counseling interview has several particular characteristics. It is a person to person relationship. The interviewer or counselor has assumed or has been assigned the responsibility of helping the counselee. The counselee has some needs, problems, blocks, or frustrations he wants to attempt to change or satisfy. The welfare of the counselee is of central concern to the counselor and both are willing and interested in an attempt to find some solution to the counselee's difficulties.

#### Interviewing as a Counseling Technique

Interviewing is but one technique in counseling, but as previously stated, it is considered the core of the counseling process by most authorities.

Each counselor and counselee will need to determine what the purposes of their interview should be. The counseling interview itself varies in purposes, characteristics and outcomes according to the basic needs to be served. The interview might be introductory, evaluative, information-getting, information giving, or for therapeutic purposes.

Experience and research show that not all counselors will be successful in getting accurate information from all counselees. The counselee must perceive the counselor as being "within range" of communication.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the counselor would desire to have good rapport and understanding with the counselee. When the counselor is not perceived in this

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<sup>10</sup>Strang, op. cit., p. 14.

manner biased information is likely to be the result. In most interviews the counselee does not initially perceive the counselor as being "within range" as he is reluctant to discuss his background and personal problems.<sup>11</sup> Yet something about the interview situation or the behavior of the counselor affects the outcome of the interview.

The counselor interviewing is an emotional being. He must try to make valid judgments on good and bad days, and in good and trying situations. In discussing the interview situation, Gross and Weinland wrote:

Sensations from all over the body--sights, sounds, muscular sensations, aches and pains--combined with memories and anticipation--contribute to the way you feel at this instant. Minor unobserved things creep in to influence the way you feel. Similarly, insidious influences often creep in to take one's attention away from essential factors in a judgment.<sup>12</sup>

Judgment can be described as an activity half-way between guess and measurement. In judging, things are evaluated which are not completely known or measured. When the problem of judgment is broken into parts, examination is made (1) of the man who makes the judgment, (2) of the nature of the facts used in sizing up a person, and (3) of the methods of making a judgment.

In an interview situation, there is personality against personality. People are often classified by habit,

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<sup>11</sup>Edmund G. Williamson, Counseling Adolescents (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1950), p. 138.

<sup>12</sup>Margaret V. Gross and James D. Weinland, Personnel Interviewing (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1952), p. 71.

and there is a tendency to react to the classifications in about the same way. Therefore, the less that is known of a certain group, the more unified it becomes in our imaginations. Persons tend to be evaluated according to types and not as specific individuals.

Evaluation should not be done according to type, but the judge should estimate the degree of the type that the individual possesses. He should enumerate the number and strength of characteristics. He must individualize rather than generalize the person.

A dichotomy can be set up in the interview situation. The information given by the counselee may be misinterpreted in part or entirely by the counselor.

Kahn and Cannell thought in terms of a true value, which represents the level of the attribute we want to measure, and in terms of an observed value, which represents the measurement we actually obtain.<sup>13</sup>

The interviewer or counselor judges answers. Then he codes them according to what he is looking for or seeking. Therefore, bias of the counselor can affect the recording of an answer. His bias may be his guide.

In classifying information after the counselee has given it to him, the interviewer must use his own judgment as to the meaning of the reply and the meaning of the answer categories with which he is supplied. These judgments can vary widely.

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<sup>13</sup>Kahn and Cannell, op. cit., p. 72.

### Definition of Bias

Whether or not a given technique or formulation is biased depends upon the objectives to be achieved, and bias can be evaluated only in relation to those objectives. If information-getting interviews are thought of as involving measurement, it becomes impossible to call a question biased or unbiased merely by stating the question. Both the questions and the objectives must be known before a judgment can be reached.

When errors of judgment result in a systematic piling up of inaccuracies in a single direction--either a consistent overestimation or a consistent underestimation the judgment is referred to as biased.<sup>14</sup>

A good definition of bias, then, is the intrusion of any unplanned or unwanted influence in the interview.<sup>15</sup>

The counselor has to be considered as a person whose judgment is fallible and who is subject to substantial errors and biases. All this does not suggest, however, that the interview should be discarded as an ineffective counseling technique. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the sources of bias and to develop methods for eliminating them.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

## CHAPTER III

## SOURCES OF BIAS

There really seems to be no adequate way in which to dissect an interview and classify it into unrelated sources of judgment error. Errors that are made because of biases of the counselor actually are in effect during the entire interview. Trying to find a cause and effect answer is futile. No one has determined how much one error influences another error, thus affecting the final outcome of the interview. Error may build upon error; or, error may counteract error.

The following divisions of bias are arbitrarily drawn. Other classifications and chronological order have been used. Yet, these areas, which were hard to separate because they are not unrelated, give one view of the total situation.

## Attitudes

Attitudes will affect the result of the interview in the degree to which the content of the interview itself makes those attitudes relevant. The counselor brings to the relationship his own predetermined attitudes, which may profoundly affect the relationship.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Warters, op. cit., p. 306.

In their book, The Dynamics of Interviewing, Kahn and Cannell stated that if the respondent is sensitive to the interviewer's attitudes and concerned about giving the "correct" answer, the responses actually obtained become a complex mixture of the respondent's own attitudes, the interviewer's attitudes, and the respondent's assessment of what the interviewer would consider the correct or appropriate answer.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the personality factors of the counselor are an integral part of his judgment. There are emotional involvements which will enter the situation. The way in which the counselee perceives the attitudes of the counselor can cause him anxiety. If the counselee becomes hostile, the reactions of the counselor will certainly affect his behavior during the remainder of the interview.

#### Background Characteristics

People who, in various ways, are about the same type person as the counselor or interviewer are often looked upon more favorably.

#### Age

An individual's age determines his attitudes toward many topics. Oftentimes it is difficult on the part of both participants in the interview to perceive and understand the other's attitudes due to the experiences, whether limited or varied, that they have encountered.

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<sup>17</sup>Kahn and Cannell, op. cit., p. 189.

### Sex

There are significant differences in the way males and females perceive situations and make judgments. Some studies have found males to be more extreme and daring, females more restrained and conservative. Wallach found that women were more conservative than men when unsure of their decisions and more extreme than men when very sure of their decisions.<sup>18</sup>

The level of certainty of decisions in question and the particular subject matter they concern, must be known before any definite finding can be traced.

### Race

The racial status of the counselee may have an effect on the way the counselor reacts to him. Also, the race of the counselor can cause reactions in the counselee which will influence the outcome. Whether the feeling is one of approval, dislike, embarrassment, or pity, either or both of the participants can be affected. Various studies have shown that if both participants are of the same race more truthful, as well as greater quantity of answers, will be given.

### Religion

No doubt this bias would be hard to detect. Most people, particularly in an interview relationship, would

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<sup>18</sup>Michael A. Wallach and Nathan Kogan, "Sex Differences and Judgment Processes," Journal of Personality, XXVII (1959), 63.

never admit that religious preference could bias their thinking. Yet what they think and what they say may be entirely different.

Certain concepts of religions other than the counselor's own may not be accepted. He then stigmatizes the counselee with his religion and the mind of the counselor is no longer open to the person. It is often hard not to categorize the respondent as a Jew, Catholic, or Protestant.

### Status

This classification would include appearance, dress, socioeconomic level, and education. Reaction to these sources of bias can be both positive and negative.

In general, it is known that people are more anxious to communicate with those above them in the hierarchy rather than those below.

The general appearance and dress of the counselee would perhaps cause hasty judgment by the counselor.

The counselor who is faced with a highly intelligent counselee may use a higher level of vocabulary than usual because it is important to him to feel that the counselee perceives him as an intellectual equal, or preferably above. Words then may disguise truth. Rapport is often difficult to establish in both these situations.

### Morals

Morals are a vital and necessary force in the structure of any society. Yet sometimes they lead us to misjudge other people.



There is much danger and futility involved in passing judgment on people's morals. Not the passing of judgment as to the rightness or wrongness of such diverse attitudes but the understanding of their cause should be the aim of the interviewer, for only the latter will be helpful to him with the situation. It is essential to refrain from trying to impose one's own moral judgment upon the client.<sup>19</sup>

### Categorizing

Transferred judgments are often incorrect. The habit of attributing the characteristics of one person to another who is closely related in some way many times is a cause of error. People do not fit the stereotypes often attributed to them.<sup>20</sup>

Attention should be given the simple methods of typing a person like: "He is a great talker; you know the type."<sup>21</sup>

Often habit responses to groups of people on the basis of stereotypes are created. Stereotypes become a handicap when the individual person is being judged.

According to Kahn and Cannell, the interviewer must then get "in role" during the interviewing process, even if this requires him to compartmentalize or wall off many of the viewpoints and attitudes which he holds as an individual.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Garrett, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>20</sup>Gross and Weinland, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>22</sup>Kahn and Cannell, op. cit., p. 200.

Behavior in the interview role requires the suppression of personal feelings or beliefs during the exercise of this function.

#### Halo

This bias is difficult to separate from categorizing and sensations. Often there is a like or dislike for individuals without knowing the reason for this feeling toward them. This tendency to make a single generalized judgment of the whole person has been referred to as "halo."<sup>23</sup>

Not all halo is invalid, and it should not be eliminated because it is inherent in the nature of personality, in the perceptual process, and in judgment.

This tendency to rate others complicates the counselor's clear view of specific personal traits. If one is to avoid the halo effect, he needs to think in terms of specific traits and strive for objectivity in his judgments.<sup>24</sup>

#### Here-and-Now

The things that are immediately present tend to be recognized most keenly. The presence of a person may have unwarranted importance in a decision. The behavior of either participant has a bearing on the outcome. The counselee's sensitivity to the counselor's attitudes, particularly the counselor's attitudes toward him, is likely to be great and can readily bias the interview results.

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<sup>23</sup>Warters, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>24</sup>Richard A. Fear, The Evaluation Interview (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1958), p. 36.

In relation to the "here-and-now" bias, Kanfer proved that interpretations, as a global category of interviewer's behaviors, differ from exploratory or information seeking statements in their immediate effects on the interviewer's verbal output.<sup>25</sup> Interpretations tend to shorten the duration of the responses following them by the counselee. In this type of situation, the behavior of the counselee has been changed and he may not be able to say what he really means. This information would seem to be a recommendation for more non-directive methods.

#### Projections

In some instances a maladjustment in the counselor could disturb his judgment of the counselee. Gross and Weinland cited the example of the interview by Mr. X who was very conscious of his distinct foreign accent. He was having the interview to hire new personnel but could not hire anyone with a similar accent, nor could he bear to have such a person near him.<sup>26</sup>

This example could be applied to a counseling situation. The counselor must definitely be aware of his own feelings to help the counselee satisfactorily, but these feelings must be controlled. The counselor who introduces his own feelings into the interview is injuring his power of exact observation and clear thinking.

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<sup>25</sup>Frederick H. Kanfer, "Experimental Modification of Interviewer Content in Standardized Interviews," Journal of Consulting Psychology, XXIV (1960), 535.

<sup>26</sup>Gross and Weinland, op. cit., p. 77.

### Sensations

Often bias is caused by the effect of favorable or unfavorable sensations. There is much in human nature to indicate that the counselor can often be influenced too much by his senses.<sup>27</sup>

Well-proportioned, well-groomed, handsome people with pleasant voices will often be favored to a greater extent than they deserve. The opposite effect often happens with less fortunate people.

The type of speaking voice, general appearance, command of language, poise, and presentation of ideas, all have an effect on the judgment of the counselor.

### Theories

Obese people are happy. Redheads have bad tempers. People from the South are lazy. Any and all general theories, such as these, need to be closely examined when applied to judging people. Such theories or generalizations are many times likely to govern one's thinking and behavior.<sup>28</sup>

The background of the counselee can be misleading when the counselor is influenced by these types of theories. A counselor may fail to give a counselee sufficient time and opportunity to answer a question because he is convinced, on the basis of the counselee's background characteristics, that the counselee has little to offer.

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

If the counselor is not careful, the counselee will detect his feelings about these theories and communication will be hampered, and the attitudes of the counselor may influence the opinions of the counselee.

## CHAPTER IV

## SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper was to explore various influences which operate in interview situations and are sources of bias. It was found that attitudes, background characteristics, categorizing, halo effect, here-and-now, projection, sensations, and theories are all contributing factors in a valid interview. These do not exhaust the contributing factors but definitely influence the interaction between the counselor and counselee.

Because no two people are alike and because the needs of each counselee differ, a neat formula for the elimination of bias cannot be postulated. What is defined as bias in one situation need not be bias in another. Different needs and different motives make each interpersonal relationship unique.

Elimination of bias is indeed difficult. Rating scales have been developed to help overcome the halo bias. It is impossible to bring about changes in background characteristics, but it is possible to change the way a counselor behaves during an interview or even to change some of his attitudes toward his race. The counselor needs to think in terms of specific traits about his counselee and to strive for objectivity in all his judgments.

Warters stated that the counselor should be a well-adjusted person who has achieved balance in his life, has gained insight into his own problems, and does not need to discuss or reflect them during his talks with students.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, proper training, additional knowledge about human growth and development, an understanding of people, experience, good personal characteristics and a sincere desire to help others are all ways to minimize the biases that are responsible for errors in judgment in interviewing.

The counselor must strive constantly for the two ultimate goals in counseling: (1) to increase the counselee's feeling of personal adjustment and (2) to increase his actual effectiveness in society.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Warters, op. cit., p. 302.

<sup>30</sup>Robinson, op. cit., p. 17.

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