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Crossing Cultural Barriers in Research Interviewing

Roberta G. Sands

University of Pennsylvania, rgsands@sp2.upenn.edu

Joretha N. Bourjolly

University of Pennsylvania, jerri@sp2.upenn.edu

Dorit Roer-Strier

Hebrew University

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Abstract

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Keywords

African American, barriers, cross-cultural interviewing

Comments

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PRACTICE AND
TEACHING OF
QUALITATIVE
SOCIAL WORK

Crossing Cultural Barriers in Research Interviewing

Roberta G. Sands

University of Pennsylvania, USA

Joretha Bourjolly

University of Pennsylvania, USA

Dorit Roer-Strier

Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

ABSTRACT

This article critically examines a qualitative research interview in which cultural barriers between a white non-Muslim female interviewer and an African American Muslim interviewee, both from the USA, became evident and were overcome within the same interview. This interview and two follow-up interviews are presented as a 'telling case' about crossing cultural barriers. The analysis focuses on seven phases of the interview (cultural barriers, warming up, crossing the racial barrier, connecting as social workers, connecting as women, connecting as students, and crossing the tape recorder barrier). The discussion outlines the pre-interview and during-interview barriers and facilitating conditions and related implications for cross-cultural qualitative research interviewing.

KEY WORDS:

African American
barriers
cross-cultural
interviewing

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Muslim Cultural differences between an interviewer and interviewee challenge interviewers' ability to enter into a meaningful conversation, no less 'collect' valuable 'data'. Whether one is practicing social work or engaged in teaching or research, one is likely to encounter cultural barriers that defy one's best efforts to traverse. Although social workers have made a substantial contribution to literature on cultural competence (e.g. Fong, 2001, 2004; Lum, 2007), and have integrated diversity and feminist theory (Gutiérrez and Lewis, 1999), they have given little attention to cross-cultural research interviewing. The authors aim to address this gap by applying cross-cultural, postmodern, and feminist thinking to a qualitative research interview.

This article presents a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984) in which the cultural barriers between the interviewer and interviewee became evident and were overcome within the same interview. The interviewer is a white, non-Muslim female social work graduate student from the USA; the interviewee is an African American, female social worker who converted from Christianity to Islam. This interview and subsequent follow-up interviews are 'telling' because the case and the circumstances surrounding it 'serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent' (Mitchell, 1984: 239). We present this case cautiously, taking into account a postmodern understanding of culture as complex, multifaceted, and evolving. We hope that our readers, like us, are on a journey toward increasing their awareness and sensitivity to situations like the one we will describe that can emerge in qualitative research interviewing.

BACKGROUND

Interviews are purposeful social interactions that are usually organized around questions posed by the interviewer to the interviewee (Kadushin and Kadushin, 1997). Cross-cultural interviews are those in which the interviewer and interviewee have different cultural memberships. The cultures of interest are typically national, ethnic, societal, or social units, but the interview is also affected by the meaning the respective culture attributes to age, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomic status (Shah, 2004), which can also be viewed as cultures. Thus, cross-cultural interviews can cross multiple boundaries simultaneously.

During the past decade, increased attention has been given to the complexities of conducting cross-cultural interviewing (Ryen, 2001). Researchers have identified challenges related to cross-cultural barriers, insider-outsider issues, collaboration, and overcoming cultural boundaries.

Barriers to Cross-cultural Communication in Interviewing

Cross-cultural hurdles may be present prior to the beginning of the study. Difficulties in gaining access can arise when gatekeepers or participants deny access

or erect physical or social barriers (Shah, 2004). Even if physical access is granted, participants may be reluctant to allow social access because of the interviewee's assumptions about the researcher based on his/her gender, age, status, and personal characteristics (Shah, 2004). Similarly, interviewers may be insecure, uncomfortable or afraid to interview across class, sex, race, or ethnic lines (Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Shah, 2004).

Prospective interviewees may perceive that the interview will be threatening (Shah, 2004). Their reluctance may be based on vulnerability to litigation, secrets, sensitivity to being asked about certain topics, and disadvantaged power relative to that of the researcher (Adler and Adler, 2001; Ryen, 2001). Reluctance may also be based on concerns that members of the dominant culture will use the interview to further institutional agendas and legitimize social inequalities (Briggs, 2001).

Looking specifically at the beginning phase of cross-cultural therapy, Keenan et al. (2005) refer to misunderstandings and 'misattunements' that occur in this early phase as 'micro ruptures'. These are subtle interactional shifts that disturb the quality of the working alliance due to maladaptive patterns on the part of the client, therapist misunderstandings due to cultural differences, and asymmetrical power relations. They are expressed by withdrawal (e.g. indirect communication of negative feelings, surface compliance, avoidance, and distancing) or confrontation (e.g. overt expressions of disagreement about the goals of therapy or overt negative feelings toward the therapist).

Insiders, Outsiders, and Positionality

Interviewers with *insider* status in a particular culture are thought to have advantages over those with *outsider* status in surmounting cultural barriers. Insiders can more easily gain access to participants and are better equipped to create an environment in which people feel comfortable and are willing to talk freely (Shah, 2004). Indigenous cultures may regard outsider researchers as 'social intruders', who are 'uninvited' and 'unwelcome' (Shah, 2004: 565). On the other hand, outsiders are able to achieve acceptance as persons who can be taught (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Interviews by outsiders have the advantage of bringing to the surface taken-for-granted meanings, which tend to be assumed and thus glossed over when the interviewer and interviewees are from the same culture (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

The division of statuses into insider and outsider simplifies a relationship that is complex (Merriam et al., 2001). The interviewer and interviewee occupy multiple positions in relation to each other, any of which may be shared or unshared. Positionality refers to the interviewer's social location, personal experience, and theoretical stance; the interpersonal and institutional contexts of the research; and the effect of these on the interview process (DeVault, 1999; McCorkel and Myers, 2003; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). It includes the

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interviewer's race, gender, class, and other factors that are culturally relevant to the interaction. From the perspective of feminist theory, multiculturalism, and postmodernism, these positions are not fixed and can shift when the context changes (Merriam et al., 2001). Thus, one can be insider in one context and outsider in another, or partially insider and partially outsider, depending on different shared experiences or locations (McClelland and Sands, 2002; Merriam et al., 2001).

Differences in positionalities suggest that power relations enter into the interview process. An interviewer's education, university affiliation, race or ethnicity may be intimidating to the interviewee. Nevertheless, interviewees possess power when, for example, they refuse to be interviewed or withhold information (Hall, 2004). In order to create more balance in the interviewer-interviewee relationship, some researchers negotiate collaborative relationships with the interviewees (Merriam et al., 2001).

Interviewing as a Collaborative Process

The traditional approach to research interviewing has been to regard the interviewee as a passive 'vessel' that supplies answers to the interviewer (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 7–8). Alternatively, one can view interviewing as a collaborative process in which the interviewer and interviewee co-construct meaning (Ryen, 2001). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) have described interviews that recognize that both participants contribute to what is constructed and the way in which the process unfolds as 'active interviews'. This conceptualization acknowledges that there is mutual influence between the interviewer and interviewee and that the interview process and content develop from changes in the context and 'give and take' between the interview participants (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 65). Because active interviewing assumes that the interviewee is knowledgeable and possesses agency, it appears to have potential for use in cross-cultural interviewing. Furthermore, it is compatible with feminist interviewing and narrative therapy, which are also collaborative and non-hierarchical (Brown and Gilligan, 1992; DeVault, 1999; Nichols and Schwartz, 2006).

If an interview is active and collaborative, the feelings of both the interviewer and interviewee will affect the process. As Davison (2004) asserts, research interviews conducted by social workers can be emotionally intense and deeply personal, arousing strong feelings of identification and anxiety. On the other hand, interviews offer interviewees 'space' in which to 'reflect on, reorder and give new meanings to past, difficult experiences' (Birch and Miller, 2000: 190). An interviewer's 'listening and witnessing the disclosure of personal narratives' may turn out to be therapeutic for the interviewee (Birch and Miller, 2000: 194).

Overcoming Cross-cultural Interviewing Barriers

Whether individuals use a collaborative approach or conduct interviews from the position of an insider or outsider, barriers may exist. To overcome them,

Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest that interviewers develop rapport and a relationship, address fears and concerns with empathy, and build a common language by finding or creating shared experiences. Shah (2004) suggests training researchers to be culturally aware and avoid stereotypes; cultural matching of researchers and participants; and the use of cross-cultural teams. Building cultural competence requires the development of awareness, knowledge and skills (Fong, 2001; Lum, 2007). This can be a lifelong process because being culturally competent with one person or group does not mean that one is competent with another.

METHODS AND CONTEXT

This analysis is based on an interview that was part of a study of the impact of African American adult women's conversion to Islam on the family of origin. We examined the following data: (1) an audiotape of an interview with a convert; (2) a detailed transcript of this interview; (3) the interviewer's student paper; (4) follow-up interviews with the interviewer (by e-mail) and the interviewee (in person, conducted by the African American author) two years after the initial interview; and (5) the transcript of the second interview with the interviewee. We used the follow-up interviews to help us understand the feelings and interpretations of the interviewer and interviewee, such that their perspectives become part of the data and data analysis.

Two of the authors listened to the audiotape of the original interview a few times along the lines suggested in Carol Gilligan's 'Listening Guide' (Brown and Gilligan, 1992). They listened particularly for verbal and nonverbal indicators of the nature of the interviewer-interviewee relationship and changes in the tempo of the interview over time. All three authors read the transcript of the original interview several times, and each wrote an interpretation in which they divided the interview into structural units or phases and identified and discussed salient moments in the interviews. In this article we integrate our responses.

This interview is situated in the context of intergroup relations in the USA early in the 21st century. Cross-cultural interactions between African Americans and whites occur against a history of slavery and institutionalized racism in the USA. Relations between African Americans and whites continue to be problematic, particularly on the interactional level, where there often is mistrust. Since September 11, 2001 and the war in Iraq, tension between non-Muslims and Muslims has escalated. The predominantly Christian society has had little contact with Muslims, regardless of their religious beliefs, ethnicity, or race. Accordingly, mistrust on the part of a Muslim in an interview conducted by someone from a dominant American cultural group may be viewed as 'adaptive' (Keenan et al., 2005).

In this 'telling case', the interviewer and interviewee had several commonalities. Both were women, Americans, native speakers of English, and engaged

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in social work. By keeping the shared variables constant, we could examine the impact of race and religion. Furthermore, we were able to observe differences based on the race of the interviewer when the African American member of our research team conducted the follow-up interview. The Israeli team member provided an 'outsider' perspective in analyzing the data and the interactions within the interview.

This analysis is affected by the knowledge and positionalities of the authors, the interviewer, and the interviewee. The authors bring their knowledge of the other interviews conducted in this study (all three of us); personal experiences as white and Jewish (two of us) and African American and Christian (one of us), American (two of us) and Israeli (one of us) women (all of us); and cross-cultural understanding gained from clinical practice and multicultural education (all of us) and social interactions with Palestinian Muslims (one of us). The interviewer is a white, 'mostly agnostic', 'sometimes Unitarian', and 'sometimes Episcopalian' single woman, 27-years old, who was a social work graduate student at the time this interview took place. She considers herself a feminist. The interviewee is an African American woman who is a convert to Islam, 50-years old, married, the mother of a 14-year-old daughter, a college graduate, and employed as a social worker. At the time of the follow-up interview, the interviewer was learning Arabic and studying Muslim culture in Eastern Europe and the interviewee had changed jobs and was completing a graduate degree.

In order to protect confidentiality, we are calling the interviewer 'Jill' and the interviewee 'Aisha'. Jill conducted this interview as part of a group project in a qualitative research course taught by one of the authors. For this course, she was responsible for recruiting her own interviewee and was furnished with an interview guide, consisting of open-ended and suggested probe questions, that was developed by the authors. After making numerous attempts at locating a Muslim woman to interview, Jill learned about Aisha through a fellow student, an African American woman who attended the same mosque as Aisha. During Jill's initial telephone conversation with Aisha, the latter expressed some concerns about being misinterpreted in an interview. Proceeding to schedule an interview at Aisha's home, Jill found no one at home when she arrived. After being chased away on foot from the neighborhood by a couple of young men (a traumatic event for her), Jill left telephone messages that were not returned. Eventually Jill was able to arrange to interview Aisha by telephone.

THE INTERVIEW

In our examination of this interview, we divided it into phases that reflect our cultural orientation. We begin by describing the initial phase in which the cultural barriers were prominent.

Interviewing in the Face of Cultural Barriers

The tape-recording of the interview began with Jill's checking the sound quality, explaining what she expects of Aisha, and apologizing about the questions she was going to ask. Jill said, 'Just answer the questions . . . I realize that a lot of these are repetitive but if they are, just answer them in any way you feel comfortable'. Next Jill began to ask the questions on the study's interview guide, including suggested probes, one by one. Aisha responded to Jill's questions with requests for clarification, sighs, and long pauses. For example:

- Jill: How did your family's practice of religion affect you?
- Aisha: How does the family?
- Jill: Yeah, how did your family's practice of religion affect your life?
- Aisha: You mean, when I was a child?
- Jill: Yeah, when you were a little one, yeah.
- Aisha: How-how they practiced it affected me?
- Jill: Yeah, what-what do you think?
- Aisha: (Sigh) (long pause) Um
- Jill: It could be now or it could be now even, if you would like to talk about now.
- Aisha: Um (long pause) I mean, it just (sigh)
- (To herself): how did they practice affect me?
- Jill: And if it's not at all, you're welcome (slight laugh) to say that, too.
- Aisha: Okay. No. Well, I guess you could say not at all.
- Jill: Not at all? Okay. (Goes on to the next question)

Jill reacted to Aisha's apparent lack of understanding the question by clarifying, paraphrasing, introducing an option requiring a minimal response, and saying 'Okay' upon receiving such a response. Repeating this pattern over several single-spaced pages of transcript, Jill obtained thin 'answers' to the questions, while the interview seemed stymied.

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Our impression of this early phase of the interview is that the interviewer and the interviewee had a difficult time connecting with each other, with both appearing uncomfortable and anxious. Jill asked questions quickly and in a technical manner. We noticed that Jill's 'Okay' responses cut off communication rather than opening up the conversation to deeper inquiry. Although it may appear at first glance that the interviewer is unskilled, we attribute the awkward character of this interaction to anxiety because she demonstrated a high level of proficiency later on in the interview.

In the follow-up interview, Aisha said that she was cautious in the beginning for a number of reasons. For one, the interviewer was white, creating some cultural discomfort. Second, she was worried that Jill, like other people she has known, would misinterpret or distort what she learned about Muslims. As Aisha explained, this was 'because anything we say, anything we do, we don't just represent ourselves . . . we represent all Muslim women, all Muslim men, all Muslims or American Muslims'.

Furthermore, Aisha reported that she was taken aback by questions about her family and her childhood religious experiences because she expected the interviewer to focus on her conversion and Islam. In an email letter, Jill said that she sensed that although Aisha agreed to be interviewed, she expressed some reluctance during their pre-interview exchanges and before the formal interview began. Jill had felt angry that Aisha was not home and was conflicted about 'forcing' herself on Aisha by moving ahead with the interview. As expressed in class, Jill wanted to succeed in her course requirement and was truly interested in the topic but dreaded making her interviewee uncomfortable. After reading the transcript, Jill recognized that the early part of the interview was 'stilted'. She recalled thinking, 'Okay, keep it going, (and) maybe she'll warm up'.

Warming Up

Jill began to overtly express interest in Aisha about six minutes into the interview, when the discussion was about Aisha's conversion process. Here Jill introduced follow-up questions that departed from the interview guide. In a parallel way, Aisha offered longer and more thoughtful responses. Jill asked Aisha about her family's reaction to her conversion, learning that her mother strongly objected to her changed dress. When Jill inquired about Aisha's relationship with her mother and grandmother, she offered Aisha more time than previously to reflect and responded with, 'That's interesting' or 'Oh, interesting'. Jill continued to use the word 'Okay,' but now it meant, 'Go on. I'm listening'. In a few instances they engaged in cooperative speech, with Jill completing Aisha's sentences, demonstrating high involvement and solidarity (Tannen, 1994). In the follow-up interview, Aisha said that she was more comfortable during this part of the interview, particularly where the questions focused on her religious

journey. She shared that she was defensive when asked about religion in her family because religion was not meaningful to her during childhood when she did not have any choice.

The Interviewee Assumes the Expert Position; Interviewer and Interviewee Connect as Women

Close to 18 minutes into the interview, Jill departed from the interview guide to inquire about the sect Aisha's uncle identified with. After indicating that he was a Sunni, Aisha explained that he was not a member of the Nation of Islam and gave a lengthy explanation why this organization was political rather than religious. Aisha's voice on the audiotape became more energetic here, suggesting a change in the interaction and a turning point in the interview. Displaying her extensive knowledge of Islam and the Muslim community, Aisha assumed the position of expert, with Jill taking the role of learner.

Returning to one of the last questions on the interview guide, Jill asked, 'Based on your experiences, what advice would you give to other women who've joined religious groups and their families?'. Aisha recommended that women do research on the basic principles of the religion, how it is practiced, and how the religion views women. This response seemed to prompt Jill to ask, 'As a woman, what attracts you to Islam?'. This question, which probably sprung from Jill's feminist orientation, gave Aisha another opportunity to demonstrate her expertise and for the two of them to connect as women.

The conversation opened up even more when Jill said that she was 'curious to know' if Aisha would give an example of how she would talk to her daughter about her role when she reached puberty. Aisha said that she has talked to her daughter about not choosing a career in which her representation as a Muslim woman would be challenged and explained that she told her daughter that she has the option to dispute unfair practices towards Muslim women. Jill responded by saying that it sounds as if Aisha has a bit of a political streak in her, a comment that is markedly different from Jill's detached posture in the beginning of the interview and shows that she had connected with Aisha on a personal level. The interview evolved into a conversation with stories about the struggles Muslim women have faced in the domains of nursing, teaching, and public service. Jill used the word 'discrimination' to depict Aisha's examples and demonstrated emotional involvement by saying 'interesting' here and there.

Crossing the Race Barrier

After Jill recognized that Aisha has been 'on the frontlines' fighting for the rights of Muslim women, Aisha mentioned that she also faces difficulties in her job as a social worker. Jill responded by asking Aisha whether she faces any specific challenges over being Muslim or African American at work. Aisha said that there are challenges in both race and religion and discussed her own feelings of being

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unsafe making home visits in predominantly white neighborhoods, fearing that clients will call the police on her.

In asserting that white neighborhoods are unsafe, Aisha presented a counter-narrative (Andrews, 2002) to the view in the dominant white culture that African American, Latino, and poor neighborhoods are dangerous and white neighborhoods are safe. Aisha continued her story by sharing some strategies she uses to protect herself on the job and explained that she feels safe in integrated but not single-racial group neighborhoods. Remarkably, Jill draws a parallel with her experience as a white person coming into Aisha's neighborhood and standing out as someone who does not belong:

Aisha: . . . Parts of (integrated neighborhood) you'll find uh Indian populations; and you'll find Pakistani; you'll find a variety of populations in their neighborhoods so you're not, you're not considered to be an oddity when you go into that neighborhood. (Jill: Okay.) You may not be known in the neighborhood, but you're not like, 'Why is she in my block?' (Jill: Right, I got it.) That's the issue in (mentions two neighborhoods).

Jill: Well, it's just like when (laughing) I came to *your* house the other day (laughing).

Aisha: Right. Yeah. I mean there are areas that are so segregated (Jill: Sure.) that you do stand out. (Jill: Sure.) For instance, when you come to this area, yes . . .

Here we see both interview participants acknowledging Jill's experience, which had been a backdrop and barrier to this interview.

Concluding that Aisha's fear is related to being 'around a lot of white people', Jill opened the door for Aisha to reveal painful experiences surrounding her being among the first African American girls to integrate a Catholic school in the late 1960s. She described an incident in which she and her friends were 'attacked by area youth' while waiting for a bus after a school dance. When the girls tried to seek safety at the school after this event, the nuns at the school refused to admit them. As a result of the girls' parents' advocacy and the support of a 'white liberal' principal, the girls had police protection at the bus barn until they graduated.

When Aisha talked about her experience of being attacked and the response of the nuns, Jill showed a great deal of interest in the story and Aisha's feelings. Jill then asked for specifics about the incident so she could find the back newspaper article. In this interaction, Jill demonstrated that she was moved by the story and would continue to think about it. Here the two of them seemed to bond in terms of the value of social justice.

Connecting as Social Workers

Following up on Aisha's reference to her work with clients on social justice issues, Jill asked Aisha for her advice to white social workers working with African American Muslim women. This question was not on the interview guide but came instead from Jill. Once again, when Jill sought advice on an issue, a wellspring of information poured forth. Aisha talked about working with Muslim families and the need to be aware of cultural norms. She was critical of Americans identified with the dominant culture who expect others to accommodate to their way of doing things.

In response to Jill's request for specific recommendations for white social workers, Aisha said that they need to become aware of how they are perceived. If people fear you because of your race, you will be seen as a threat and this has to be addressed first. The worker has to explain his/her role and not come across as an authority figure. Jill then added something that she learned from this interview: 'And if you're a white worker in a predominantly African American and Latino neighborhood, you're obvious', which Aisha confirmed. Aisha recommended that the social worker ask the family permission before doing anything – 'you cannot act like the police' – suggesting that in a first encounter with a person of a different race one should dismantle the power hierarchy.

Aisha continued to expound on culturally competent social work practice with little prompting. She explained that male social workers should not shake hands with Muslim women or go to their homes when the women are alone. She also described remarks made by her supervisor of African Puerto Rican descent that were culturally insensitive toward Muslim families. In complaining to Jill about the supervisor, Aisha treated Jill like a supportive colleague. Aisha explained that when social workers are not culturally competent, clients will not answer the door, answer telephone calls, or respond to letters. In making this statement, Aisha opened up the possibility that she as well had reservations about being interviewed, reflected in not being there when Jill came to her house or responding to telephone messages that she left. In the follow-up interview, Aisha said that she was reluctant to have someone she did not know come into her home.

Connecting as Students

Continuing to talk about the insensitivity of her supervisor, Aisha referred to a class on race and ethnicity that she took in college. This move appears to be a way of connecting with Jill as a student. With Jill's encouragement, Aisha acknowledged and was critical of segregation by race and ethnicity within Muslim communities, demonstrating an intimacy that had developed between them. At this point Aisha crossed the barrier of the 'official story'. Aisha seemed to trust Jill enough to step out of her position as a representative of the Muslim community and talk about what she would like to see changed.

364 ■ Qualitative Social Work 6(3)**Bonding again as Women**

Jill moved the interview to closure by returning to the final question on the interview guide, 'Do you have anything left to add about family relations and religious change?'. At this point Aisha talked about the perception that non-Muslim women have of Muslim women that 'once we put a veil on our heads that our IQ goes from 100 to 15'. Aisha described an incident in which a non-Muslim African American woman asked Aisha why she wasted her money getting her hair done at the hairdresser when she was going to cover it up anyway. Aisha said that she told the woman that the *hijab* is an outer covering; that when she is inside her home, she takes it off. Connecting with Jill as a woman, Aisha described the female psyche as one that involves doing things that make one 'look pretty' and 'feel attractive'. Near the end of the tape, Jill completed Aisha's statement that when she is at home, 'I want my hair . . .' with 'to look nice'. In contrast with the awkward way this interview began, the two women were now in harmony.

Crossing the Tape Recorder Barrier

After the tape ended and Jill thanked Aisha for the interview, Aisha had more to say. Based on Jill's notes on this exchange, Aisha provided answers to questions that were handled superficially in the early part of the interview and offered additional information about family members' feelings. She talked about a change in her relationship with her mother after her conversion and concluded that her mother 'just really didn't respect Islam'. Aisha also revealed that she was sexually harassed when she was younger and explained how these experiences contributed in part to her decision to become a Muslim. Although it took her 10 years to get adjusted to wearing a veil, since then 'no one has ever touched me'. In addition, Aisha talked about a new women's group that she is part of that has the purpose of protecting Muslim women who are being mistreated by their husbands. In describing this activity, Aisha bonded further with Jill as a feminist and an activist.

DISCUSSION

The interview between a white non-Muslim woman and an African American Muslim woman that we described enabled us to learn about theoretical issues that enter into interviewing in the face of cultural barriers. Through our analysis, we were able to identify the pre-interview barriers and facilitating conditions; barriers that were present during the interview; and factors that enabled the participants to surmount cultural barriers. Besides sharing what we learned, we will discuss the implications of this case for qualitative social work cross-cultural interviewing.

Pre-interview Barriers

Reflecting on the interview during follow-up, both interviewer and interviewee acknowledged that barriers related to race and religion were present prior to the telephone interview and impeded their communication in the beginning of the interview. Both thought that the barriers receded in the course of the interview. Interestingly, Aisha said she could tell from the voices of the interviewers that Jill was white and the interviewer for the follow-up interview was African American. In comparison, the telephone conversation to arrange the follow-up interview and in the interview itself, rapport was established quickly.

Both interviewer and interviewee had pre-interview experiences that aroused feelings of apprehension about proceeding (Keenan et al., 2005; Shah, 2004). Jill's going to Aisha's home where no one answered the door and being chased by young men in Aisha's neighborhood left Jill feeling angry and vulnerable. Pre-interview barriers on Aisha's part had to do primarily with prior experience with racial discrimination in her school and elsewhere. Aisha was also sensitive to the misrepresentation of Muslims, especially since September 11, 2001 (Keenan et al., 2005), and the perception held by some people (including her mother) that Muslim women were subjugated, and felt responsible for accurately representing Muslims.

Although Jill initially discerned Aisha's hesitation to participate, she did not explore Aisha's feelings about being interviewed in her home. Midgley (1981) argues that the use of dominant western approaches with cultural minorities is a form of 'professional imperialism'. Because it is normative in the USA to conduct in-home research interviews, Jill automatically presented this to Aisha as the only option. After making the unsuccessful home visit, Jill suggested a telephone interview, which Aisha found more comfortable. Although Jill herself had ethical concerns about imposing on Aisha and proceeded nonetheless, Aisha relayed in the follow-up interview that her hesitancy had to do with their racial differences.

Pre-interview Facilitating Conditions

Two pre-interview conditions seemed to facilitate participation in the interview. For one, Jill learned about Aisha through an African American Muslim fellow student, who was Aisha's friend. In the follow-up interview, Aisha stated that she agreed to participate because her friend led Aisha to conclude that the study was credible. Thus, referral by an insider who could vouch for her was important means for Jill to gain access (Adler and Adler, 2001). The other pre-interview facilitating condition was Jill's socio-demographic profile. Because of gender norms in the Muslim community, a female interviewer is more acceptable than a man in an interview with a woman. In the follow-up interview, Aisha said that she was comfortable with Jill's being young, as young people are open to learning.

366 ■ Qualitative Social Work 6(3)**Barriers Present in the Interview**

Besides the pre-interview barriers, several barriers were present during the interview itself. So far as we could determine, Jill did not adequately describe the purpose of the interview to Aisha, leaving the impression that the interview would be exclusively about Aisha's conversion and Islam. There was no opportunity, too, for Aisha to ask questions about the interview. Furthermore, there was no preliminary chit-chat phase that can facilitate rapport and help the interviewee make the transition from an ordinary conversation to an interview (Kadushin and Kadushin, 1997). This abrupt movement into the formal interview may have contributed to the initial awkwardness.

Aisha found the early questions about her family and religious upbringing jolting because they did not seem relevant. Yet she addressed them spontaneously after the tape recorder was turned off. Accordingly, we conclude that these questions were introduced too early in the interview. Although we had gone through many drafts of the interview guide and had interviewed other women before Aisha without similar consequences, more attention should have been given to determining which questions were potentially sensitive. It is also possible that conducting this interview by telephone placed a high premium on words. A telephone interview does not allow the participants to observe each other's non-verbal behaviors, which might have been assuring.

During the early phase of the interview when multiple 'micro ruptures' (Keenan et al., 2005) occurred, Jill and Aisha's initial positionalities and perceived power relations may have contributed to their difficulty connecting. Jill came to the interview representing the privileged, white, non-Muslim majority and a major research university. Aisha was socially located in minority racial and religious cultures. Aisha may have believed that Jill possessed enough power to misrepresent her, Muslims, Muslim women, and Islam. Jill may have viewed Aisha as having power to withhold information, therefore preventing her from completing her required course assignment (cf. Hall, 2004). Furthermore, Jill began the interview positioning herself as an authoritative interviewer and Aisha as an answer-providing 'vessel' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). She followed the interview guide closely, pushing the interviewee to provide any response, even one that lacked substance.

Facilitating Factors in the Interview

We were able to identify facilitating factors from the follow-up interview with Aisha and places in the interview where the interaction seemed warmer and more intimate. In Aisha's opinion, the barriers dissipated when Jill showed a genuine interest in what she had to say about her experiences as a Muslim woman, and Jill's listening without interrupting the flow of the conversation. Aisha concurred with us that the interview reached a turning point when Jill asked questions about Islam and Aisha's conversion. During that interaction,

Jill shifted to a non-authoritarian stance in which the interviewee was the expert, thus, altering the positionalities of the interview participants (Merriam et al., 2001). The interview became active and collaborative (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Jill began to make reflective statements, demonstrated empathy, and communicated a nonjudgmental attitude. Although Jill continued to ask questions from the interview guide, she inserted her own probe and follow-up questions and added additional questions. Jill sounded more relaxed and Aisha was involved. Aisha's responses became longer and more conversational, incorporating examples and stories.

In keeping with the change in positionalities, at several points in the interview, Jill asked Aisha for her advice to other women who joined a religious group that was different from that of their families of origin and white social workers working with African American Muslim women. The nature of these questions, which had the words, 'from *your* experiences' and '*your* advice' seemed to trigger responses from Aisha on both personal and professional levels. Aisha appeared to have moved from a position of vulnerability to one of knowledge and strength.

Another facilitating condition was their talking openly about the pre-interview barriers. Observing parallels between Aisha's apprehension about going into white neighborhoods when she stands out as an African American Muslim and her experience being harassed in Aisha's neighborhood where she stood out as white, Jill acknowledged the 'elephant in the room' and Aisha concurred. In addition, Jill phrased her questions so as to highlight race, religion, and gender and their interaction. For example, Jill asked, 'If you were to make a recommendation for *white* social workers that work with *African American Muslim women*, what would you recommend?'

Although Jill is a member of the privileged majority that is responsible for racism, through her empathetic listening, she was able to create a safe space for the interviewee's pain (Birch and Miller, 2000). The creation of a safe space is one of the most important aspects of the cross-cultural interview and is basic to creating an intimate environment in which the parties can join on the basis human characteristics such as caring, sensitivity, and hope for social change. Once this connection was established, the two of them were able to talk about their commonalities (cf. Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The building of bridges based on their commonalities as women, social workers, and students, as well as their shared values, was another factor that facilitated cross-cultural communication.

Recommendations for Cross-cultural Qualitative Research Interviewing

On the basis of the challenges this interview presented and how they were overcome, we make the following recommendations for cross-cultural qualitative research interviewing.

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In accordance with Shah (2004), we suggest the use of cross-cultural teams in cultural research. This affords interviewees the opportunity to be interviewed by same race or other characteristic interviewers and allows the team to consider 'insider' and 'outsider' views (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

Involving Key Informants

Involving key informants or trusted members of a cultural community is crucial to gaining access to interviewees in cross-cultural research. Once the contact is made, however, the researcher/interviewer needs to work at gaining social access (Shah, 2004).

Transparency

It is important that the purpose of the interview and study be clear from the first contact. It is recommended that before beginning, the interviewer outline the kinds of topics that will be covered and offer the interviewee an opportunity to express any concerns or ask questions about the content of the questions, the interview process, or how data will be used.

Incorporate Choice

We suggest that interviewees be given a choice where the interview is to be held, with a telephone interview as an alternative. Telephone interviews are used in qualitative research when people are uncomfortable having a stranger come to their home, prefer not to travel, or are unable to meet in person because of social, economic, or physical reasons. The use of telephone interviews in cross-cultural studies was found to be a viable alternative provided that interviewees are prepared and aware of the subject areas in which the interview will focus (Lavee and Ben-David, 1992; Lavee et al., 1997; Miller, 1995). Additional options within the interview might include interviewees not answering questions that make them feel uncomfortable or interviewers turning off the tape recorder when requested.

Timing and Ordering of Personal Questions

It is crucial that interviewers respect the interviewee's feelings about what is personal. Therefore, we recommend that prior to conducting cross-cultural interviews, researchers inquire of members of the relevant culture (here, African American Muslims living in an urban area in the USA) what is considered personal or intrusive. Based on what one learns and considering the potential for individual differences, we recommend adjusting the timing and ordering of questions so that sensitive questions are asked later in the interview or not at all.

Acknowledging Differences

We suggest that the potential impact of obvious cultural differences be brought to the surface at the time the interviewer is contacted or in the beginning of the interview. Furthermore, we advise that interviewers ask how interviewees feel or if they have any concerns about being interviewed by someone of a different race, religion, or other characteristic and if so, offer the option of being interviewed by someone of the same culture.

Positionality and Style of Interviewing

In cross-cultural research there is a special need for sensitivity to how the interviewer positions him- or herself in relation to the interviewee. In this interview with a woman who is a member of racial and religious minority cultures in the USA, a non-hierarchical collaborative, interviewing style that honored the interviewee's expertise contributed to the development of intimacy. The interviewer's shifting from treating the interviewee as a 'vessel' to an active contributor and colleague enabled the interviewer to reveal deeper layers of her story (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

Joining where there are Commonalities

Even if the interviewer and interviewee are different in some ways, there are likely to be some areas of commonality that can serve as cultural bridges. We recommend that interviewers identify commonalities and build upon them in the course of the interview.

Opening up Space for Pain

An interview with someone from a different culture provides the interviewee with a unique opportunity to explain issues that she or he is not likely to discuss with an interviewer of the same race, religion or culture. Such an interview can provide space in which the interviewee can talk about the pain of discrimination, misconceptions, and oppression with an interviewer who listens and responds empathetically and recognizes the interviewee's pain. In our case, it elicited a rich counter-narrative. Opening up space can result in a cathartic, therapeutic experience and an atmosphere of intimacy (cf. Birch and Miller, 2000). The effect may be even more pronounced where the interviewer is initially regarded as the oppressor.

In sum, this 'telling case' suggests that in order to cross cultural barriers, qualitative social work researchers need to be sensitive to pre-interview experiences and within-interview interactions that evoke vulnerability and fear; and enhance their skills in developing conditions that will facilitate the dissolution of barriers and the creation of openness and trust. We identified several strategies for crossing boundaries and thereby improving the quality of a research

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interview. Most of these strategies will also enhance cross-cultural clinical social work interviews.

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Roberta G. Sands, PhD, is Professor, School of Social Policy & Practice, University of Pennsylvania, where she teaches courses in clinical social work practice, qualitative research, and women's issues. Her recent qualitative research focuses on intergenerational family relations, spiritual/religious transformation, and the evaluation of cultural competence. Address: University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Policy & Practice, 3701 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104–6214, USA. [email: rgsands@sp2.upenn.edu]

Joretha N. Bourjolly, PhD, is Associate Professor/Clinician Educator and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy & Practice, Philadelphia, PA, USA. Her research agenda involves family relations and religious change in African American families; evaluating

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the development of cultural competency; and access to and utilization of health care services by vulnerable populations. Address: University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Policy & Practice, 3701 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6214, USA. [email: jerri@sp2.upenn.edu]

Dorit Roer-Strier, PhD, is Senior Lecturer at the Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. She is currently heading the master's program in social work. She is specializing in qualitative studies in families coping with cultural change and training for culturally sensitive social work research and practice. Address: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, Israel 91905. [email: msdiri@mscc.huji.ac.il]

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