
INTRODUCTION

MANY PEOPLE in many different professions conduct interviews. Social workers are only one such group. But for social workers, interviewing is a pre-eminently important activity. In fact, carrying out most of their responsibilities depends on interviewing. Social work interviews differ from those of other professional groups in some crucial ways, reflecting what is unique about social work. This book describes the general art of interviewing as adapted and used by social workers in a social agency setting. Both experienced and inexperienced practitioners, struggling with the recurrent problems of interviewing and seeking specific guidelines and answers, may profit from an explicit examination of the interview. We hope this book will stimulate self-assessment.

A major part of the book is concerned with the techniques of social work interviewing. *Technique* has a bad sound—cold, mechanical, inhuman, manipulative: applicable to things but not to people. The word deserves to be rescued, its image refurbished. Techniques are devices whose application enables us to accomplish our purposes, to carry out our professional responsibilities. They are clear formulations of what we should do in a given situation to offer our service effectively and efficiently.

Technical skill is not antithetical to spontaneity. In fact, it permits a higher form of spontaneity. The skilled interviewer can deliberately violate the techniques as the occasion demands and apply techniques with greater discrimination. Awareness and command of technical knowledge have other advantages. To be technically skilled is to be prepared; to be prepared is to experience less anxiety; and less anxiety increases the interviewer's freedom to respond fully to the interviewee.

Competent artistry requires mastery of technology. The French have a saying: "It is necessary to know geometry to build a cathedral; building a

cathedral is, however, an act of faith”—and, we would add, an artistic creation. But neither the act of faith nor the art would be possible without the knowledge of geometry.

Another objection to concern with technique derives from the sentiment that technique is unimportant, a poor second to the feeling the social worker has for the client. If the worker's attitude is right, everything will be right; if it is wrong, no technical expertise can rescue the interview from failure. The viewpoint is expressed well in a Chinese maxim: “When the right person uses the wrong means, the wrong means work in the right way; when the wrong person uses the right means, the right means work in the wrong way.” But what, then, is the power of the right people using the right means in the right way? Surely they accomplish more and do it more efficiently than the right people using the wrong means even if they do work in the right way.

Many might say that if they had to choose between feeling and technique, they would choose feeling. Perhaps so, but if we have to choose between these qualifications, we have already done the client an injustice. We should be able to offer the client an interviewer who is both attitudinally correct and technically proficient. The best interviewer combines the appropriate feelings and attitudes with skilled interviewing techniques. The emphasis should be on the geometry, the technical knowledge that gives substance to our faith and enables us to implement our goodwill.

The greater measure of truth lies, as is so often the case, not with “either/or” but with “both.” If technique without feeling is ineffectual, feeling without technique is inefficient. If technical competence without compassion is sterile, compassion without competence is an exercise in futility.

A good relationship is a necessary but not sufficient condition for good interviewing. Good technique permits optimum use of a relationship. A good technician working in the context of a modest relationship is apt to achieve a better outcome than a technically inept interviewer in an excellent relationship. The emotional response of the interviewer may be unfailingly correct. Yet feeling does not automatically translate into effective interview behavior. And clients respond more to behavior than to feelings. Only as feelings are manifested in behavior—verbal, nonverbal, open, or covert—do they have an effect on the client.

Teaching good interviewing technique is a matter of guiding the student to learn how to manifest the appropriate feelings behaviorally by applying the correct techniques, because correct techniques are the behavioral translation of the helpful attitude. But can a book teach social work interviewing tech-

niques? The answer is, of course not! “Knowing about” is clearly different from “knowing how.” Ultimately, we learn interviewing only through doing. But even though *to know* is a far cry from *to do*, it is still an advance over not knowing what action is desirable. A book on interviewing is like a manual on courtship. No manual can tell lovers how to achieve their aims. But such books can, according to Dexter (1970, 24), “suggest some of the issues and tactics which are worth thinking about, consideration of which can make victory somewhat more likely.”

Clearly, someone can know all about the techniques of interviewing and yet be unable to apply them effectively. Some gifted practitioners also perform brilliantly without being able to say what they do or how they do it, often achieving success while breaking all the technical prescriptions. Further, the contention that good interviewers are born, not made, has some truth to it. Some intuitively gifted people seem to have a natural competence in the art of good personal relationships, of which interviewing is only a special example. But both those with a natural aptitude and those who interview well without knowing exactly what it is they are doing can profit from a conscious examination of their art. Whatever the limits of our natural capacities, learning may extend them.

We must recognize in the objections a desire to protect the existential magic of the good interview. Some fear that dispassionate didactic analysis destroys the creative spontaneity of the intuitively gifted clinician. Yet our support of schools of social work and our conduct of in-service training courses confirm the profession’s confidence that interviewing can be taught. Generations of student social workers have encountered the problems that confuse and frustrate student workers today. Some solutions have evolved and are part of practice wisdom and the professional knowledge base. There is no reason that beginning interviewers should not be provided with the cumulative experience of others as a basis for their own practice. What we attempt here is to describe and codify some helpful responses that the discipline of social work has developed in dealing with recurrent situations and difficulties that workers encounter in field interviews.

Although the book has social work as its setting and context, the content is relevant and applicable to human service interviewing generally. Practitioners and students of different human service affiliations and in different human service settings will, we think, find the content both familiar and useful.

Within the human service family people conduct interviews in vastly different ways. Their methods vary in terms of the objectives—intake interview,

social study—case history interview, diagnostic assessment, mental status interview, intervention treatment interview. Some interviews are distinguished by the particular problems of a specialized client population—child abuse interviews, substance abuse interviews, eating disorder interviews. Interviews vary in terms of the theoretical identification of the interviewer. Some interviewers are oriented toward psychoanalysis, others toward behavior modification or Gestalt, and so on.

But however diverse these varieties of interviews are in terms of specifics and details, all human service interviews—whatever the purpose, whatever the specific client population, whatever the target pathology, and whatever the theoretical orientation of the interviewer—have a great deal in common.

The intent of the book is to focus on the common factors that we can identify and explore. *All* interviews follow a similar sequence. And *all* human service interviewers use similar techniques—attending, reflecting, paraphrasing, questioning, clarifying, summarizing, confronting, and interpreting—with varying degrees of emphasis and in different combinations. And *all* human service interviews require a positive relationship between interviewer and interviewee as a prerequisite for success.

By translating common interview elements and characteristics in terms of a specific occupational setting—in this instance the social work context—readers interested in and identified with social work are not burdened with the task of translating general interviewing dicta to their field. Because its examples come from the world of social work, this book provides the translation. Social work readers will immediately recognize the applicability of the techniques described here and will be familiar with the content.

This is the fifth edition of a book first published in 1972; a second edition was published in 1983; a third edition in 1990, and a fourth edition in 1997. Fifteen years have passed since the last edition of *The Social Work Interview*. During that time, a large volume of research has been published that has relevance for interviewing—on the helping relationship, on culturally competent practice, on the use of interviewing skills, and on the involuntary client. The need to update the content in a fifth edition seemed necessary.

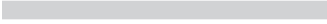
The fifth edition of the book differs from the fourth edition in several ways:

- All chapters have been revised to include relevant research published after 1997.
- The chapter on nonverbal communication has been moved to the first section of the book as chapter 4. This change reflected our thinking that

nonverbal communication is integral to understanding the interview as communication.

- The chapter on relationships is now chapter 5 and was moved so that the chapters on the phases of the interview follow one another consecutively.
- The chapter on cross-cultural interviewing has been completely revised to focus on culturally competent interviewing of the elderly, and of racial/ethnic and sexual minority clients.
- A section on breaking bad news has been added to chapter 8.

THE SOCIAL WORK INTERVIEW



PART ONE

**GENERAL ORIENTATION AND BASIC
CONCEPTS OF INTERVIEWING
AND COMMUNICATION**