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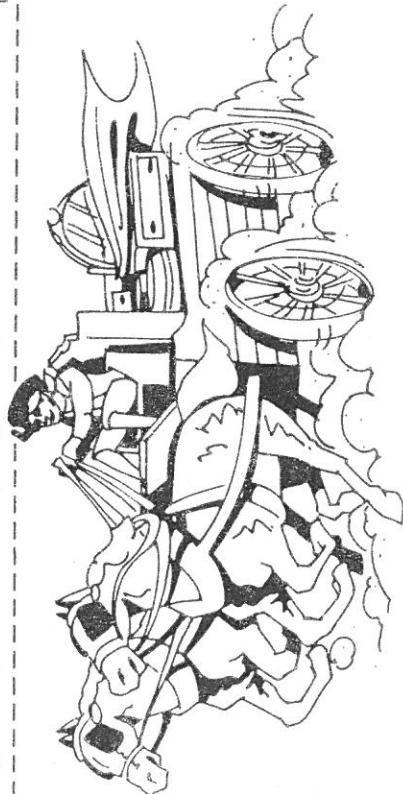
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# Person-In-Culture Interview: Understanding Culturally Different Students

Linda Berg-Cross  
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**ABSTRACT.** The Person-In-Culture Interview (PICI) is a 24 item open ended interview that explores significant cultural and personal values and world meanings. The questions in PICI are derived from the four major motivational theories of our time: psychodynamic psychology, humanistic psychology, family (systems) psychology and existential psychology. The PICI has been developed to train therapists in cross cultural understanding, to help build therapeutic alliances with culturally different clients, and to increase racial and ethnic tolerance among students and community leaders.

There is a growing racial and ethnic derisiveness apparent in many communities and college campuses across America. Each cultural group wants to maintain its identity, get respect for its uniqueness, and socialize future generations to honor one's heritage. Unfortunately, respect for other cultures is not keeping pace with the pride and possessiveness one feels for one's own particular heritage. Intergroup animosities are being fueled by deep ethnic identifications and shallow appreciations for the life styles of other groups.

Strong emotional ties with ancestral groups are also creating fric-

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tion with the socio-political needs and developmental patterns of the planet that stress greater and greater interdependence, interaction, interrelatedness, and common values. Historical pushes to homogenize are being resisted by conservative, intra group cultural pride. The blossoming of expanded social contacts that has long characterized the American college experience is in danger of being replaced by insulated, alienated subgroups who resist all but the most superficial types of co-existence.

The combined effects of polarizing group interests and reactions against cultural homogenization are fueling racial and ethnic divisiveness. Xenophobia and racial antipathies are even apparent at the level of professional training where the desire for specific training to meet the needs of specific ethnic groups seems to be outpacing the desire for conceptual cross cultural or transcultural training perspectives.

### CROSS CULTURAL COUNSELLING AND THE PERSON-IN-CULTURE INTERVIEW

There is a great need for effective therapeutic tools that allow therapists to reach out to a culturally diverse group of clients. This is particularly true for therapists who deal with college students. Ethnic minority students are an increasing proportion of the college population and will soon represent over 25% of all college students (U.S. Government, 1988). Such students are under particular stress; the normal storm and drang of adolescence is compounded with problems such as immigrant status, generational conflicts with acculturation, prejudice and discrimination. Yet, traditional mental health services are often ineffective or unresponsive to their particular needs (Sue & Morishima, 1982).

Among the factors that can create therapeutic obstacles when the therapist is from a different cultural background than the client are: different communication patterns; values; and explanations concerning the causes and solutions of problems as well as different social and interpersonal needs (Youngs and Marks, 1986).

Attempts to overcome these barriers have traditionally relied on learning the values and lifestyles that typify various cultures and then changing one's own behavior to be sensitive to these cultural

factors. Cross cultural counselling approaches, such as those developed by Ibrahim (1985) and Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), have stressed the importance of understanding the world view and values of a client's culture. These models rely on universal values which exist on a continuum; each cultural group is seen as emphasizing different aspects of these values. For example, the five cultural dimensions found in Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's model include (1) beliefs about human nature (good, bad, mixed); (2) relation of humans to nature (scientific, supernatural, harmony); (3) activity orientation (doing, being, becoming); (4) time orientation (past, present, future) and; (5) relational (individualistic, collateral group, lineal group). Therapists try to understand how various cultural groups express their values along these continua.

Unfortunately, the more one deals with individuals from a particular culture, the more apparent it becomes that most people, while displaying many expected culturally bound behaviors and attitudes, have many core values and life guiding perceptions different from their cultural stereotype.

In the real world, errors of stereotyping can indeed become more problematic than errors of cultural insensitivity. Instead of communicating more effectively, cultural knowledge devoid of personal knowledge inevitably leads to stereotyping and an inability to relate empathically.

Besides cultural knowledge, a variety of cross cultural training approaches are geared towards developing one-on-one therapy skills that help individuals bridge cultural differences: development of racial consciousness in the therapist has emphasized increased knowledge of self (Ponterotto, 1988); experiential involvement with other cultures has been proven successful as a way to buy credibility with culturally different clients (Mio, 1989); structured learning and behavioral approaches have stressed modeling, role playing and reinforcement to foster therapist-client comfort; and interpersonal process recall has emphasized self confrontation and mutual recall through feedback as a path for mutual understanding (Pederson, 1982).

The proposed Person-In-Culture-Interview (PICI) is a training device that allows therapists to break down multiple cultural barriers to understanding. At the same time, it allows a therapist to be

sensitive without stereotyping any particular client. It is a one-on-one, open ended 24 item interview with the goal of birthing a deep human encounter between individuals with culturally different backgrounds. PICI is designed to let the therapist share a particular client's world view. The interview is constructed so that both cultural and idiosyncratic values will be spontaneously revealed in the course of the interview by the client. It is an exercise that allows therapists to become cognizant of the important cultural experiences in a client's life as well as the very unique, personal visions that shape each client's sense of self. Clients share both the cultural values that they cherish and the personal, hard to reveal values that have been forged from the interaction between the mega culture, a specific subgroup and a unique personality.

### **STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE PERSON-IN-CULTURE-INTERVIEW**

PICI is a 24 item open ended interview that a therapist can give a client or any two people can give to one another in a structured context with the goal of furthering cultural understanding. PICI uses a traditional interview format so that it can be incorporated into any usual intake interview.

The philosophy behind the interview format is that there are basic needs in all human beings and that the method by which those needs are met is culturally derived. By asking about these basic drives, culturally relevant issues are more likely to emerge. The Person-In-Culture Interview is based on the four major motivational theories of our time: psychodynamic psychology; humanistic psychology; family (systems) psychology and existential psychology. Questions are generated from each theory in a direct manner (to be discussed in detail below).

The PICI has been developed to train therapists in cross cultural understanding, to help build a therapeutic alliance with culturally different clients, and to increase racial and ethnic tolerance among community leaders.

During PICI training workshops, participants are told to pair off and give each other the interview. Participants are further instructed to pair off in such a way that they are interviewing someone who

appears to be very different from themselves. Invariably, these interviews are profound learning experiences and sometimes lead to intense interpersonal bonding. The effect is similar to a group encounter session, although here the time together is brief (one to two hours) and very intimate (one-on-one). We have been struck most of all by the genuine respect that the individuals have for one another after PICI. In therapy sessions, clients often remark that they feel the therapist really "knows" them after the interview.

The PICI process relies on individuals being open to communicating with a "trusted stranger" about a variety of intimate topics. Some cultural groups that value privacy might be expected to have great difficulty or discomfort during the interview. However, our experience is that this does not happen. Perhaps, it is because we urge people not to answer questions if they would feel uncomfortable sharing their answers. Our experience is still limited to urban, educated populations and undoubtedly there are a number of situations where PICI would be contraindicated. Until we have more experience we need to safeguard each and every participant and terminate the exercise if a person appears unduly distressed or uncomfortable.

The following section contains the 24 questions and a sampling of the range of responses one gets from various ethnic minorities. The individuals quoted throughout this article are all students or friends of students at Howard University in Washington, D.C.. Names and other identifying information have been changed to protect anonymity.

### **PSYCHODYNAMIC QUESTIONS**

All people try to increase the amount of pleasure they experience and decrease the amount of pain that they feel. This assumption has been the cornerstone of both Freudian psychodynamic theory and Skinnerian behavioral theory. Of course, neither of these theories assumes that people are conscious of what pleasures they are motivated to obtain and/or what pain they are motivated to avoid. However, the conscious representation of these needs reflects culturally acceptable derivatives and hence would be ideally suited for our needs. Besides seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, psychodynamic



theory postulates that all human beings have enormous needs to deal with feelings of shame and anger (Strachey and Freud, 1985). The following seven questions are intended to help us understand how an individual reflects on culturally appropriate and personally meaningful expressions of basic psychodynamic drives:

1. (FOR WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS) What are the most enjoyable activities in your life? What types of activities, interactions and thoughts are most rewarding?  
(FOR CLIENTS) What would be the best (most pleasurable) part about getting rid of your problem?
2. (FOR WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS) What are the most enjoyable activities for the other members of your family? Are there different activities, interactions and thoughts that are most rewarding?  
(FOR CLIENTS) Why would your family be happy to have you get rid of this problem? (What would be most pleasurable for them?)
3. (FOR WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS) In general, what type of experiences are particularly painful for you?  
(FOR CLIENTS) In what way do your current problems create pain for you?
4. (FOR WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS) What type of experiences have been most painful for the other members of your family?  
(FOR CLIENTS) In what way do your current problems create pain for your family?
5. During the past year, can you remember any experiences that are particularly embarrassing for you?
6. When you get angry, how do you express it?
7. How do the different members of your family express anger?

The typical diversity of responses one obtains in response to this set of questions is illustrated by the following answers in response to question 5, "During the past year, can you remember any experiences that were particularly embarrassing for you?" Notice how the Russian woman feels shame about her professional persona and inferior as an immigrant with an accent. Similarly, the African Amer-

ican feels shame when he is perceived as incompetent, but the story has the added tension of perceived racism.

### **Zelda, Age 37, Russian**

"For me, it was embarrassing, my job at the Harbour Country Day School. In Leningrad, I taught English for 10 years. There when I spoke with an accent, made a mistake or used a word incorrectly, no one cared. Here, I teach ESOL (English as a second language) and I got terribly embarrassed the first few months. For the first four or five months I was afraid to open my mouth around the other teachers. I felt so embarrassed teaching English without speaking English better than I do. Every teacher and secretary spoke better than I. I was even embarrassed teaching the children who did not speak English.

And I remember that when people asked me what I taught, I would tell them that I taught Social Studies. I couldn't make myself say that I was teaching English — so I would say Social Studies.

Then after a while, I felt that I speak much better when I am not in the school. I didn't have the complex then. I didn't have people around me who I knew. I didn't have to compare my speech to theirs."

### **Charlie, Age 28, African American Graduate Student**

"Well, I teach a psychology course and my students are predominantly Caucasian. I pride myself on having everything in order. One day I gave a particular syllabus to the class. I hadn't had time to proof it. I got to class late and I had a Caucasian male in class who had trouble dealing with me. I was ten minutes late to the first class and he was like making it very clear . . . "Are we going to have this the rest of the term? You came in here sort of late. I knew you said you got caught on the bridge — whatever bridge that is . . . and I'm just wondering if this is how it's going to be." That is how he got started.

There was a mistake with the date and the name of the textbook. And it was embarrassing because I have a tremendous amount of composure and it was hard for me to remain composed in that situa-

tion without jacking him up. Because I knew it was full of prejudice.”

On the question, “When you get angry how do you express it?”, an African American uses a cultural musical outlet to express himself, while the Russian mother’s anger seems to be exacerbated by the stress of acculturation.

**Sean, Age 24, African American**

“If it is spontaneous anger, I usually say the traditional four letter words. But if someone made me angry and I had time to reflect on it, I usually go down in my basement and play on some African drums. My wife can tell when I am angry because I play very loudly.”

**Laura, Age 32, Russian**

“Since we came to the United States it is much harder for me to control my temper. It seems as though I am always shouting at my son. At home, I don’t ever remember yelling. I feel like I am a different person — like I have lost all my patience.”

### HUMANISTIC QUESTIONS

Humanistic theories of human development state that human beings have basic needs that are hierarchically arranged; until the needs at the bottom are met, higher needs are not experienced. Once the basic needs are met, however, the next level of needs emerge with the same intensity and need of satisfaction as was experienced with the more basic needs. The following 11 questions ask about satisfaction of needs based on Maslow’s hierarchy (Maslow, 1968):

8. Do you have enough money to eat well?
9. Does your family have enough money to eat well?
10. Do you feel safe where you live?
11. Does your family feel safe where they live?
12. What types of things make you feel safe?

13. What about the rest of the family? What type of things make them feel safe?
14. What type of things make you feel important?
15. How do the people in your family get that feeling of importance and self esteem?
16. What type of things make you feel that you are living life to the fullest?
17. If you “fit in” at home and in your community, tell what a normal day would be like? What type of normal day are you striving for?
18. Each little community has certain images of a successful person. In what ways would your community judge you to be successful or unsuccessful?

Questions such as 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 tend to deliver universal answers, at least in the urban centers where we have been using the questionnaire. The following are responses to “What makes you feel safe?”

**Zelda, Age 21, Russian**

“That I won’t get robbed. That there is always someone at home. That we always know each other’s schedule.”

**Elbashir, Age 23, Sudanese**

“That I have enough money to eat. And that I am safe and that my family is safe from harm.”

**Linda, Age 19, Maryland**

“Knowing that my family is alive and well.”

Some of the most culturally revealing answers occur to question 14. A student from Ghana feels important due to her family identification and family achievements; an African American gathers importance by being an intellectual mentor to his children and financially able to buy them toys; a male student from Sudan feels most important when the family seeks out his opinion.

**Nkrumah, Age 26, Ghana**

"It is most important that I'm a member of this family. Bearing that last name. I feel comfortable with myself. And I feel proud of my achievement in terms of getting the money to fund my education. When I worked full time and wasn't going to school I did a good job. Everything I did, I feel I did well. I excelled and the members of my family excelled.

I am an Arozneyerg and I am proud to be a member of this family. I can share with them and they with me. When my sister does this and that it makes me feel so proud. We gloat in each other's glory in a way."

**John, Age 30, African American**

"It is very important to me to take my kids out and let them know that I am in charge. Like if we go to a museum, I try to explain what each of the exhibits is about. My six year old is very inquisitive and keeps on asking me questions. I usually try to give her complete answers. Since I am more informed than most people about such things often other patrons will stop and listen and ask questions themselves. Also, it is very important for me to have enough money in my pocket so that when I am in Toys R US with the kids, I can just take out the money and buy them what they want."

**Elhassan, 25 Years Old, Sudan**

"Usually when people ask my opinion before they make a decision — an important decision in the family. The effort you make to know someone's opinion is very important. It is OK not to follow their advice but you must listen to it. For example, when you get married it is very important to ask members of the family if they agree to the marriage and to hear all their opinions. There will be hurt feelings and bad relations if they are not consulted in the very beginning."

What types of things make you feel you are living life to the fullest (self actualization question)? Like many of the other questions, this one produces a mixture of unique responses, culturally rooted responses, and universal responses.

**Paul, 20 Years Old, African American**

"I would want to have high self esteem. I would like to financially be able to do the things that I want. And I would like to have someone that I care about to share my free time."

**Lana, Age 32, Ghana**

"In the morning, I would go to work. It would be a professional job that I liked and where I could use my education. Then in the evening, I would like to be able to come home and share time with my family and neighbors."

**Miriam, 23 Years Old, Russian**

"For me, first of all it is important that I like my job. That I can stay on the phone when I have free time and that I have some friends and people with whom I can communicate. That I can go different places is very important — that I can read magazines, newspaper and have the opportunity to go to the theater."

**FAMILY QUESTIONS**

While the field of family relations and dynamics is still in its infancy, empirical research has continually found two basic dimensions that characterize families: how power is distributed among the family members and the cohesiveness within the family (Figley, 1989). The following two questions will help individuals share information about how their family is organized.

19. Draw me a "psychological map" in which you are the center of the universe. Who are the people closest to you (psychologically)? Who are the people most distant from you? Draw a straight line between you and each person with whom you have good communication. Draw a dotted line between you and the people in your map with whom you have dysfunctional, aversive, or strained communications. Draw a zig zag line between you and those people with whom communication is infrequent.

20. Draw me a totem pole of the important people in your life. Put the weakest person on the bottom. Put the most powerful person on the top. Pretend the totem pole is 100 feet high and people can be placed on any of 100 steps—each one foot higher than the next. People can share “steps” on the totem pole. Be sure to include yourself and anyone in the community or elsewhere who is very important in your life.

Stereotypes are broken in the examples below: An African American puts his grandfather as the most powerful person in the family; a student from Ghana cannot differentiate the members of her family on this dimension; and a musician from New York puts his boss in the position of the most important person in his life.

**Charlie, Age 28, African American**

“100 Grandfather, 75 Son (age 6), 50 Mom, 30 Aunt and Uncle, 0 Society.”

**Christopher, Age 28, Ghana**

“I think of the community as my family. I don’t think I can do it because I cannot think of anyone as being most important and anyone as being the weakest. Because I don’t look at it that way.

If we talk about sharing respect and listening to everyone, I can do that. I can put father and mother on the top and go down from the first sibling to the youngest sibling. Not that I wouldn’t show my younger brother respect but if I had to listen to someone, I would be obliged to listen to my older brother first. Not that my younger brother isn’t important but things just have to go from father to mother to first sibling, all the way down to the youngest.”

**Woody, Piano Player, Age 33, New York**

“At the top, 80 is my boss. My parents are maybe a 50. And around 30 are my friends.”

## EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS

Existential psychologists feel that people have a need to confront the most basic philosophical issues of their existence. Existentialism is the oldest and most radical of the healing arts and has been used by many therapists to transcend cultural and national boundaries in their quest to understand and treat a particular client (Von-tress, 1988). The following four sets of questions are derived from the basic questions posed by existential psychology (Yalom, 1980).

21. What are your religious beliefs?
22. On a day to day basis, how do you learn new things? Who gives you new information? How do you go about learning new information?
23. What are your feelings about death?
24. Do you feel your life is meaningful? Who do you feel has a meaningful life? Why?
25. What types of things do you feel you are responsible for on a day to day basis as a human being?

What types of things do you feel your family is responsible for?

What type of things do you think your society/community is responsible for?

Responses to the death question are some of the most unique and personally revealing in the interview:

**Mina, Age 23, Ghana**

“I am very scared of death. I’m especially afraid of death because I am so far away from home and my parents are getting older. It’s something you know is going to happen one day but you wish it wouldn’t happen. I don’t live in constant fear but it is something that bothers me. I don’t know how I will handle it. I’ve experienced very few deaths. I had an aunt die when I was quite young and I remember I did not handle that well. I pray harder each day, “God keep them.” But at the same time I have to be realistic. I know someday one of them is going to die.”



### **Rose, Age 29, African American**

"I had a relative that had a stroke — my mother. Everyone in the family looked to me because I am the most sensitive about how to handle these things. I can honestly say that I'm very comfortable about death. In fact, I call it entering the transition. I'm very comfortable with it. But if it were very close to me, someone in my nuclear family, I'm not sure how I would handle it because it would alter my life so dramatically. The only reason I personally fear death, is that my children are little and still need my guidance every day."

While the PICI tends to be a serious and emotional encounter between people, many have moments of infectious humor and witty life observations. Consider the following response to the question, "What is the responsibility of the community?"

### **Aluko, Age 27, Nigerian**

"I feel that the community is responsible not just for their own sons and daughters but for any child in the community. In my country, everyone looks after each child in the community. If a child is fighting or crying, you go out and find out what happened — even if it is not your child."

Or let us say you sit and do not get up on the bus for a person older than you — you get a knock on your head — even if you do not know that person. If you know who it is and go home and tell your mother, she will call and thank the person for disciplining you. But I notice it is different here. You can't say anything to anyone's child. It is none of your business and you'll get a lawsuit!"

## **APPLICATIONS OF PICI FOR COLLEGE PSYCHOTHERAPISTS**

College psychotherapists can utilize the Person-in-Culture Interview in many different settings. It is useful to use as part of an expanded intake when the therapist is faced with a student who is culturally different from him/herself and/or when the client is an international student. We believe that the PICI strengthens the therapeutic alliance and allows the therapist to learn of important cul-

tural factors early on in the treatment process. It is also likely that the PICI would be useful when a chosen treatment strategy needs to be reconsidered or the client seems very resistant to engaging in the therapy process.

The most exciting format for college psychotherapists is to use the PICI to increase racial and ethnic tolerance among college students. Resident assistants, campus leaders, dorm residents, commuters, and international students would all benefit from PICI workshops. PICI workshops have the participants interview one another and, as stated previously, it usually takes a good one and a half to two hours for both partners to be interviewed.

Procedurally, the workshops involve four steps: (a) explaining the rationale and purpose of the interview; (b) letting individuals walk around the room looking for someone "very different" from themselves to choose as a partner; (c) conducting the PICI interviews and; (d) regrouping and processing how much stereotyping, cultural education and unique personality traits came out in the interviews.

The rationale and purpose of the workshop can be described to students in the following way: "All people share certain common needs and desires. Depending upon our cultural experiences and our own personality, we have each devised complex and unique ways of satisfying these basic needs and desires. Today we are going to have the opportunity to learn about another human being. In less than two hours, there is a person in this room with whom you will feel much closer. You will learn about how their culture has shaped them and how they have resisted certain aspects of their culture. They will learn similar things about you. The process of learning about one another comes from asking each other 25 universal questions. These questions are based on four theories of personality: psychodynamics; humanistic psychology; family systems; and existentialism. They cover the basic areas of human concern and will expose the influence of your community, family, and religion. The questions also are designed to let your idiosyncrasies and unique values emerge. This is an opportunity for a deep human encounter. It is a chance to break down stereotypes and experience the potential for intimacy with someone outside your usual circle of friends. If you are uncomfortable answering any of the questions, please just

tell your partner to skip that item and go on to the next one. Otherwise, enjoy the experience. The more you put into it, the more you can potentially receive."

After the explanation, students should spend a good minute or two milling around before deciding who appears to be "very different" than themselves. Individuals who appear lost or unable to choose a partner should be guided by the leader so the process is not labored or embarrassing for any of the participants.

The interviews can occur in a large room with the dyads paired off in little clusters but it is much better if each dyad has a private space in which to conduct the interview.

When processing the interview, the leader can ask for volunteers to describe their reactions or can choose a panel to discuss what they learned from the experience while the rest of the participants serve as the audience. After the detailed comments of the panel, the audience is invited to participate in the discussion.

Groups of 30 participants usually allow for adequate diversity among the dyads. With larger numbers of participants it becomes difficult to adequately process the experience during the last segment of the workshop. The therapists should always make themselves available to individuals who were distressed by the interview or need to discuss the experience with the group leader.

College psychotherapists can also run PICI workshops for faculty, staff, or administrators with the goal of increasing both sensitivity to cultural differences and acceptance of the uniqueness of each individual. The format would be similar to the one described above for students. Hopefully, readers of this article will adapt and expand the PICI format to further cross cultural understanding in their own communities and offices.

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