



Adopting a cultural humility approach in international criminal investigations

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Abstract

The most important form of evidence in international criminal investigations is information from people. This is often obtained by interviewing individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Recent articles drawing attention to the role of culture in investigative interviews have recommended the development of culture-specific guidelines. Here, we argue that rather than detailed guidelines, we need a change in mindset. One promising approach is that of “cultural humility”, a concept borrowed from the medical field. Based on the scientific literature and Oñati expert panels, we developed an investigative interviewer training inspired by cultural humility. We tested its effectiveness with 28 investigative interviewers from different professional fields. Here, we reflect on the practitioners’ experiences and feedback on the training and propose a new way forward to improve cross-cultural investigative interviewing. Adopting a new mindset should not only promote the well-being of interviewees but also facilitate the collection of valuable information in international criminal investigations.

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Key words

Cultural humility; investigative interviewing; cross-cultural communication; police training

Resumen

La forma más importante de evidencia en las investigaciones penales internacionales es la información proporcionada por las personas. A menudo, esta se obtiene mediante entrevistas a individuos de diferentes orígenes culturales. Artículos recientes que llaman la atención sobre el papel de la cultura en las entrevistas de investigación han recomendado el desarrollo de directrices específicas para cada cultura. Aquí, argumentamos que, en lugar de directrices detalladas, lo que necesitamos es un cambio de mentalidad. Un enfoque prometedor es el de la «humildad cultural», un concepto tomado del ámbito médico. Basándonos en la literatura científica y en los paneles de expertos de Oñati, hemos desarrollado una formación para entrevistadores de investigación inspirada en la humildad cultural. Hemos probado su eficacia con 28 entrevistadores de investigación de diferentes ámbitos profesionales. Aquí reflexionamos sobre las experiencias y los comentarios de los profesionales sobre la formación y proponemos una nueva forma de mejorar las entrevistas de investigación interculturales. La adopción de una nueva mentalidad no solo debería promover el bienestar de los entrevistados, sino también facilitar la recopilación de información valiosa en las investigaciones penales internacionales.

Palabras clave

Humildad cultural; entrevista investigativa; comunicación intercultural; formación policial

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1. Introduction

Despite technological developments, the most important form of evidence in international criminal investigations remains information provided by humans. Without information from eyewitnesses, victims, suspects, insiders, and expert witnesses, it would be impossible to arrive at a well-informed judgment. Therefore, it is crucial that individuals are interviewed in a manner that promotes the collection of statements that are as accurate and complete as possible.

Investigative interviewing has been the subject of research over many decades (Denault and Talwar 2023, Meissner *et al.* 2023, Mindthoff and Meissner 2023). This has provided important insights into which interviewing methods can facilitate the retrieval of information from memory and, conversely, which interviewing methods carry significant risks of obtaining incorrect information and false confessions. Importantly, the research has also informed practice, for example, by incorporating scientific insights into the “Principles on effective interviewing for investigations and information” (Méndez *et al.* 2021) adopted by the United Nations in 2021. However, most research to date has not taken into account the cultural background of the interviewer and interviewee. Indeed, like most psychological research fields, the majority of participants in investigative interviewing research has come from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies, which represent only 12% of the world population (Henrich *et al.* 2010, Apicella *et al.* 2020). This means that most of what we know about how to interview individuals is based on only a small and atypical subset of the world population.

Calls for more diverse research populations in investigative interviewing research have appeared recently (e.g. Anakwah 2022, Hope *et al.* 2022, De Bruïne *et al.* 2023, Vredeveldt *et al.* 2023). These articles have made an important contribution by drawing attention to the role of culture in investigative interviewing. Often, the authors conclude that culture-specific interviewing guidelines are needed. Similarly, in the funding proposal for the current research, we stated that one of our goals was “to design and test evidence-based interview guidelines” (Cordis 2019). However, after studying this subject matter for nearly six years, we have changed our minds somewhat on this approach. We have come to the realisation that developing culture-specific guidelines would not solve the problem for several reasons. One is a practical one: it would be impossible to capture all potential cultures, subcultures, tribes, societies, nuances, and exceptions in guidelines. Any interviewing guidelines would almost inevitably be incomplete, imprecise, and quickly outdated. A counterargument to this reason could be that an imperfect guideline is better than no guideline, and to some extent, we would agree. But there is a more fundamental problem with culture-specific guidelines: in isolation, they could actually do more harm than good.

This is illustrated by an anecdote shared by a practitioner during one of our interview training sessions. In preparation for an interview with a Yezidi witness, this practitioner and her colleagues had educated themselves about Yezidi culture and learnt that it is forbidden in that culture to wear blue clothing. They had, therefore, all made sure not to wear blue on the day of the interview, but to their surprise, the Yezidi witness came in wearing blue. Of course, this is an innocuous example: the interviewers did not offend anyone by NOT wearing blue. However, it points to a potentially more serious risk: if

interviewers assume they know a lot about a particular culture and that they are “culturally competent”, their assumptions about the people from that culture could lead them to the wrong conclusions. Anecdotes cited in the medical literature suggest that this is precisely what happens when medical professionals consider themselves culturally competent. For example, doctors or nurses may have learnt in a cross-cultural course that individuals from a particular culture exaggerate their pain, and subsequently conclude that the patient in front of them does not need pain relief (Tervalon and Murray-García 1998, Zemouri *et al.* 2024; for more on bias in medicine, see Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, 2019).

In the medical field, this has led to the development of a new approach called “cultural humility” (Tervalon and Murray-García 1998). Cultural humility was developed as an alternative to (Lekas *et al.*, 2020) or evolution of (Greene-Moton and Minkler 2020) cultural competence. Tervalon and Murray-García explained that it is impossible to ever become sufficiently competent in communicating with individuals from different cultures than our own. This is because individuals are highly complex and hold numerous intersecting identities. The intersectionality approach (Crenshaw 1989) holds that different aspects of an individual’s identity intersect to form a unique experience. For example, Black women are “disadvantaged in ways that go beyond simply being Black or being a woman” (Weiss, Nell *et al.* 2025, p. 12).

Tervalon and Murray-García suggest that becoming culturally humble can be a tool for effective cross-cultural communication. To achieve this, we need to (a) accept our ignorance and become genuinely open in communication, (b) commit to continuous lifelong learning, (c) practice critical self-reflection, with a focus on ourselves (e.g., how who we are might impact communication, in the same way we frequently make considerations for the other person in the conversation), and (d) consider power dynamics, aiming to recognize and mitigate power imbalances in the communication. Finally, Tervalon and Murray-García emphasised the importance of individual and institutional accountability, suggesting that more attention should be paid to how institutions might impact cross-cultural communication. For example, certain policies might diminish or encourage cultural humility.

In this article, we present the development and initial evaluation of a training programme for investigative interviewers based on cultural humility. We first outline how we developed the two-day training programme. Next, we present qualitative data on the experiences and feedback from three initial training sessions we organized at our university with 28 investigative interviewers who regularly interview people from different cultures, coming from various branches of the police and the judiciary in The Netherlands. Finally, we propose a new way forward in investigative interviewing. We hope that this application of the cultural humility approach will inspire other socio-legal researchers and practitioners to consider how cultural humility could play a role in their own research or practice.

2. Developing the training

Inspired by the concept of cultural humility, we developed a two-day training programme on cross-cultural communication for investigative interviewers. This comprised the final stage of a six-year research project on culture, memory, and

reporting, funded by the European Research Council. The goal of the training was to translate the research project's findings into practical applications and communicate the research findings to a relevant professional audience.

After developing an initial version of the training programme, we organized a roundtable discussion and conducted three expert panels during a workshop on international criminal investigations hosted by the Oñati International Institute for the Sociology of Law (Ferra 2024)¹. The purpose was to solicit feedback from academics and practitioners (18 experts divided over three panels) and, alongside them, reflect on the content, structure, and format of our training programme. Each expert panel was facilitated by a different member of the research team. Experts were asked to review the various sections of the proposed training programme and provide their thoughts and recommendations. The feedback gathered during the expert panels was audio-recorded and subsequently used to refine the training programme. This resulted in modifications to the content, structure, and format of the training. Moreover, the feedback provided a unique opportunity for us to reflect on the training programme's limitations.

The final training programme addressed four central themes: a) cultural differences in memory and reporting, b) trauma and culture, c) interviewing in cross-cultural contexts, and d) cultural humility as a tool for effective cross-cultural interviews. The two-day programme consisted of a mix of talks and interactive exercises. The talks were delivered by five members of the research team (Prof. Annelies Vredeveldt, Dr. Fenia Ferra, Prof. Laura Weiss, Gabi de Bruïne and Dylan Drenk) and two external experts (Prof. Lorraine Hope on rapport in cross-cultural interviews and Dr. Rebecca Tipton on working with interpreters in investigative interviews). The interactive exercises were designed to encourage practitioners to reflect on and apply the insights gained to their own interviewing practice. For example, practitioners were asked to engage in group discussions on specific statements, analyse interview transcripts from cross-cultural police interviews to identify cultural factors discussed in the talks, and design their own interview plans based on the cultural humility approach.

3. Practitioners' experiences and feedback

Once the development phase was completed, we offered the training to investigative interviewers from The Netherlands. We held three two-day training sessions with 9-10 interviewers per session (28 interviewers in total), which took place between November 2024 and March 2025. The interviewers came from diverse professional fields, including police investigators, judges, and legal advisors. Most of them specialized in international crimes, but there were also some specialized financial crime investigators who regularly interviewed people from different cultures. The majority had many years of experience, but a few more junior investigative interviewers also participated.

We explained to the potential trainees that we had recently developed the training programme and were offering it free of charge, because we wanted to observe how it would go in practice and obtain feedback from practitioners. We also collected quantitative data during pre- and post-training mock interviews, which will be analysed

¹ F. Ferra, *Gathering input on a new investigative interviewer training program*. Paper presented at the Oñati International Institute for the Sociology of Law workshop on *Opening the black box of international criminal investigations: Challenges of culture and practice* (13-14 June 2024).

in a future article. Here, we describe what we learnt from the discussions during the training, the feedback we received from practitioners, and our own reflections on the training. We discuss each of the four training segments in turn, followed by a consideration of the limitations of this research.

3.1. Cultural differences in memory and reporting

The first part of the training focused on cultural differences in memory and reporting relevant to investigative interviews, as identified in cross-cultural research. It also highlighted cultural factors in the identification of individuals and objects. Finally, it presented examples from field research involving police interviews from South Africa (Weiss, Nell *et al.* 2025).

One classic cultural dimension proposed by Hofstede (1980) is the distinction between collectivism and individualism (see also Hofstede 2001, Hofstede *et al.* 2010). In collectivist cultures, people place more importance on their group memberships and social relationships, whereas in individualist cultures, personal achievements and uniqueness are considered more important. Another cultural dimension proposed by Hofstede is power distance, which refers to the extent to which people expect and accept unequal distribution of power in society. Although Hofstede proposed six cultural dimensions in total, collectivism-individualism and power distance have received the most research attention. Hofstede's cultural dimensions have been rightfully criticized because they oversimplify cultural differences and are not fully supported by empirical data (see Hope *et al.* 2022). Yet, much of what we know about cultural differences in memory and reporting centres around the dimensions of collectivism/individualism and power distance. We therefore referred to these dimensions in our training programme as well.

In addition to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, one cultural phenomenon particularly relevant in legal cases is the concept of "vicarious memory" (Pillemer *et al.* 2015, Pillemer *et al.* 2024), referring to the observation that people from some collectivist societies may report others' experiences as their own (see also Weiss, Van Rosmalen *et al.* 2025). This has been illustrated in interactions at international courts and tribunals in which the true source of the information was revealed only after repeated questioning, as in the example below from the Ndindabahizi case at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, cited by Combs (2010, pp. 94-95).

DEFENSE: Were you a direct witness of the death of Mr. Charles Munyanhindi?

WITNESS: Vuguziga himself came to brag about it and, furthermore, that is why he is presently in detention.

DEFENSE: Were you an eyewitness? Did you see, with your very own eyes, Vuguziga strike Charles Munyanhindi?

WITNESS: I have told you that Vuguziga himself was boasting about having killed him and today he has confessed to having killed him.

PRESIDENT: But all we are interested in now is to find out whether you saw the event, and that implies either a yes or no answer.

WITNESS: I did not see it with my own eyes, but I know that he is the one who killed him.

More generally, there are cultural differences in how individuals describe events and tell stories (for overviews, see e.g., Wang 2021, De Bruïne *et al.* 2023). People from individualist cultures typically provide more detailed, specific, and lengthy descriptions of events than people from collectivist cultures. One specific problem highlighted in the international criminal law literature is that witnesses are sometimes unable to specify dates or times, which is often crucial in a legal context. Combs (2010, p. 22) provides the following example from the Special Court for Sierra Leone:

Q. Do you know whether it was in the year 1999 or the year 2000? 1999 or 2000?

A. These things, Pa, I do not understand these things. When you tell me 1990 I don't understand. I don't even say months, I only understand [inaudible] numbers. I really don't understand anything. (*Prosecutor v. Brima et al.*, Case No. SCSL-2004-16-PT, Transcript, Apr. 8, 2005, at 20)

Although illustrative examples such as these prove that problems with vicarious memory and inability to specify dates can arise during cross-cultural trials, it should be noted that a recent empirical analysis of court transcripts from the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda revealed that such problems may not arise as frequently as often thought (Drenk *et al.* 2026).² Nonetheless, it is important for interviewers to be aware of the potential for cultural differences in the way individuals report about events.

Practitioners' responses to the training segment on cultural differences in memory and reporting were quite varied. Some indicated that this information was not new to them – that they were already aware of all these cultural differences. Others said that they had learnt many new things. For example, one investigative interviewer reported that she had experienced in the past that witnesses would not specify the date or time, even after multiple requests, and had found it very frustrating. Thanks to the training, she understood that this was not necessarily due to the witness's unwillingness, but could simply reflect an inability to provide such specific information. This constitutes an important realisation. In the past, the interviewer had assumed the witness was unwilling to supply the information, which would likely have undermined the trust between the interviewer and the witness. In the future, if the interviewer keeps in mind that the witness may be unable rather than unwilling to supply the information, this will likely result in a more friendly and open interaction, which has been shown to facilitate the elicitation of more accurate and reliable information from witnesses (Méndez *et al.* 2021).

3.2. Trauma and culture

The second section of the training revolved around trauma and culture. It highlighted cultural differences in how events are experienced, how trauma is expressed, and how memories of traumatic events are recounted. It also addressed racial and institutionalised trauma and how to support traumatised interviewees.

The extent to which an event is experienced as traumatic, and psychological resilience towards trauma, may be influenced by cultural values (Vredeveldt *et al.* 2023). For example, an important cultural value in Japan is *gaman*: the ability to endure the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity (Mangali and David 2018). Similarly, a

² D. Drenk *et al.*, 2026. *Testifying at the ICTR: Time and space constructions*. Manuscript in preparation.

study conducted in Australia found that Sudanese refugees tend to approach trauma with stoicism and a desire to “move forward”, reflecting high resilience towards trauma (Savic *et al.* 2016). This also means that for Sudanese refugees, “getting on with life rather than dwelling on or “thinking about problems” may be more helpful than many Western psychotherapeutic approaches” (Savic *et al.* 2016, p. 80).

In a similar vein, the way trauma is expressed is partially determined by cultural background. Whereas individuals in WEIRD cultures typically report psychological symptoms such as depression or anxiety after experiencing a traumatic event, individuals in other cultures often report somatic symptoms, such as dizziness, headaches, or a sense of bodily heat (Vredeveldt *et al.* 2023). After the Rwandan genocide, many survivors experienced a cultural syndrome called *ihahamuka*, which includes shortness of breath as a core symptom (Hagengimana and Hinton 2009). Importantly, this means that interviewees may not express emotion in the way that investigators or judges might expect. Cultural norms may also put constraints on what survivors of sexual violence can talk about and what emotions they can express (Drenk *et al.*³ Thetela 2002).

Cultural differences in the experience and expression of emotion are not only observed for victims and witnesses, but also for suspects in legal cases. For example, Aboriginal people in Canada tend to suppress expressions of their emotions, which can make them appear deceptive or suggest a lack of remorse (Porter and ten Brinke 2009). When discussing this during the training, one of the practitioners shared another example of an apparent lack of emotion on the part of the suspect. The practitioner used to work as a lawyer and observed that many of her Muslim male clients would express remorse about their actions to her in private, but would seem completely unremorseful and uninterested when they appeared in court. This often caused friction with judges and may have resulted in harsher sentences. Thus, certain cultural norms may prevent victims, witnesses, and suspects from expressing emotions in public, which may disadvantage them in their legal case.

One of the group discussions during the training programme addressed the role of shame culture in investigative interviewing (for more on shame as a barrier to disclosure, see Vredeveldt *et al.* 2023). Practitioners noted that shame prevented some interviewees from discussing events that had happened to them or actions they had taken. They discussed potential ways to mitigate the inhibiting effect of shame and encourage interviewees to share their experiences. For example, one practitioner suggested that interviewers could tell a suspect that they understood why the suspect had committed certain criminal actions. Another practitioner shared that in one interview, investigative interviewers had asked the suspect to talk about the acts he had committed in the third person (e.g., the suspect saying “he hit her” when he was talking about what he did himself). However, we cautioned that approaches such as these could be considered minimisation tactics (i.e., offering the suspect sympathy, understanding, face-saving excuses, or moral justifications), which have been shown to increase the risk of false

³ Drenk, D., Shenouda, M., Holá, B., and Vredeveldt, A., 2024. *Myriad meanings: Coded language and euphemisms at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda*. Paper presented at the Oñati International Institute for the Sociology of Law workshop on Opening the black box of international criminal investigations: Challenges of culture and practice (13-14 June 2024), currently under review.

confessions (Kassin *et al.* 2025). An alternative suggestion to tackle unwillingness to talk about shameful events was to ask the interviewee about the events surrounding the shameful event, so that at least their statements on those aspects could be checked against other evidence.

Another topic covered in the training was how racial and systemic trauma (Holmes *et al.* 2024) might impact cross-cultural communication in investigative contexts. Racial trauma can be experienced at the individual, institutional, or systemic level. It shares some similarities with post-traumatic stress, but it focuses on the collective experience. Racial trauma accounts for individual but also for collective traumatic experiences as a result of exposure (and re-exposure) to race-based stress and discrimination (Comas-Díaz *et al.* 2019).

The section on trauma also included a talk on how to support traumatised interviewees, delivered by a member of the research team who is also a trained clinical psychologist and has worked for the Victims and Witnesses Section at the International Criminal Court. One of the topics that arose during the group discussion was the importance of choosing the right words when talking to interviewees who may have suffered trauma. For example, in many cultures, seeing a psychologist is associated with stigma. Therefore, one of the practitioners recommended that witnesses and victims are asked if they would like to see a “doctor” rather than a “psychologist”. The same practitioner also observed that there is little aftercare for interpreters involved in interviews about traumatic events. In one case, an interpreter had to tell a family that their child had died. After she had informed them, she was simply sent home. The interpreter eventually decided not to interpret in such settings anymore. Thus, in investigative interviewing settings, it is essential not only to consider the potential traumatic impact on the interviewee but also to consider how the interview may affect the interviewer, the interpreter, or other individuals involved.

3.3. Interviewing in cross-cultural contexts

The third part of the training programme focused on cross-cultural communication in investigative interviews. In this segment, the trainers presented research showing the importance of how questions are formulated in investigative interviews, cultural considerations when establishing rapport, the influence of power dynamics, and insights on the role of interpreters in cross-cultural interviews.

A key distinction in the literature on cross-cultural interactions is between high-context and low-context communication (Hall 1976). In individualist societies, people typically employ a low-context communication style, characterised by direct and explicit communication that focuses on the content of the message. In collectivist societies, people typically employ a high-context communication style, characterised by more indirect and implicit communication that focuses on providing context. An example from a recent cross-cultural study involving investigative interviews (De Bruïne *et al.* 2025) is that witnesses from individualist societies tend to focus more on the details of the event that are relevant to the police investigation (e.g., what happened and what the perpetrator looked like), while witnesses from collectivist societies tend to provide more contextualisation of the event (e.g., what moral lessons may be learned from the event). Similarly, a legal adviser in our training shared an anecdote about a Rwandan witness

who just wanted to engage in small talk for the first hour of the interview, asking the interviewers what they thought of the country and so on. The investigator, on the other hand, just wanted to get to the point. This is a classic example of a clash between high-context and low-context communication styles, which can interfere with information-gathering. Some interviewees need the space to contextualise the events before they can delve into the heart of the matter, and interviewers would be wise to provide this space if they want to gather the information they need.

A crucial element of investigative interviewing is building rapport, that is, establishing a positive working relationship with the interviewee (for a recent review, see Brouillard *et al.* 2024). The Méndez Principles recommend that interviewers build rapport with the interviewee by “establishing common ground with respect to mutual interests, identity, or attitudes” (Méndez *et al.* 2021, p. 9). Rapport-building can be challenging at the best of times, but is particularly tricky in cross-cultural interviews (Hope *et al.* 2022, Ng *et al.* 2023). Probably the most well-known example of behaviour that could harm or hinder rapport, depending on cultural background, is maintaining eye contact with the interviewee, which is considered polite and friendly in some cultures, but impolite or threatening in other cultures (Akechi *et al.* 2013). During the training, practitioners offered many lesser-known examples of behaviours that are considered impolite in certain cultures, such as blowing your nose in Japan or serving cold drinks in Rwanda. These examples illustrate that providing culture-specific background information to investigative interviewers can be beneficial in reducing the likelihood that the interviewer unintentionally offends the interviewee, which could harm rapport. Later in this article, however, we will argue that this background information should be merely supplementary to a more fundamental change in thinking.

One of the most heated topics of discussion during the training programme was the role of interpreters in investigative interviews. The specifics and boundaries of their role are not always clear, as discussed in more depth elsewhere (see e.g., Evans *et al.* 2019, Walsh *et al.* 2020, Wilson 2020, Drenk *et al.* 2024). Opinions among the practitioners in our training were also divided. Some argued vehemently that the interpreter should be like a translation machine: they are only allowed to translate and not to provide any cultural context. Others argued, equally vehemently, that the interpreter would not do their job properly if they did not provide cultural context where needed. Similarly, some investigators appreciated advice from interpreters on how to phrase a question differently, or even suggestions to ask additional questions that the interviewer had not considered, while others were strongly opposed to interpreters interfering with the questioning in any way. The only thing the practitioners seemed to agree on was that the interviewer is the one in charge of the interview and the interpreter should never take over control of the interview, which, in practice, they sometimes do. Practitioners reported examples including interpreters purposefully altering the question in their translation because they believed it would be a better question, interpreters taking the initiative to ask the interviewee additional questions without consulting the interviewer first, and interpreters arguing with the witness about the content of their answer. Finally, the practitioners wondered to what extent the interpreter should be involved in rapport-building. This would be an interesting topic for future research.

3.4. Cultural humility

The fourth and final part of the training programme brought all the lessons learnt together by introducing the cultural humility approach. We showed a brief documentary that explained the concept of cultural humility (Chavez 2012) and then discussed how this way of thinking might be valuable in investigative interviewing contexts. We proposed that the interviewer should adopt a humble stance, be open to learning about the person in front of them, and be flexible in adapting their interviewing approach as needed. We discussed how culture, acting in conjunction with other intersecting identities held by the interviewees, might aggravate “the inherent power imbalance” in the interviewing room (Méndez *et al.* 2021) and emphasised the importance of openly acknowledging and attempting to mitigate interview-related power imbalances, but also structural and systemic power imbalances (Brøndum 2023). Finally, we asked practitioners to work in small groups on a culturally humble interview plan, encouraging them to reflect upon how they could apply this new way of thinking to their own interviewing practice.

One concrete example of how interviewers could incorporate cultural humility into their interviewing practices is by carefully considering the role of the interpreter. Just like interviewees and interviewers, interpreters bring their own intersecting identities to the interview room. It is important to think about how these might contribute to the power dynamics in the interview. This can be accomplished through incorporating reflective practices before, during, and after the interview. Even though there is a lack of information on the role of interpreters in the preparation stage of interviews (which seems to depend on institution-specific policies and practices; Amato and Gallai 2024, Pöllabauer 2004), we would suggest that interpreters are actively involved in the reflection at all stages. It has even been suggested that interpreters could, with the introduction of appropriate supporting policies and training, act as “power brokers” (Rudvin 2005).

Practitioners’ responses to the idea of adopting a cultural humility approach were mixed. Some indicated that they saw the value in this way of thinking and commented that it was a truly novel concept to them, one they had never considered before. After working on the culturally humble interview plan with her colleagues, one practitioner said:

We strive to be culturally competent but this training has made us realise that you can also overdo it. We always prepare really well to learn about the cultural background of the interviewee and we create expectations from that, but those may also bias you. Maybe we need to allow for more organic interactions to occur, to provide space for things you don’t expect.

Yet, we also encountered resistance to the concept of cultural humility. A few practitioners remarked that they did not really “get it”. They said that the documentary was a little “artsy fartsy” and “too American” for them as down-to-earth experienced Dutch investigators. This type of reaction was also informative to us; it highlighted the reality that not all practitioners will readily adopt the concept of cultural humility. The same practitioners who were sceptical also made comments that indicated a belief in cultural competence – several said that they had not learnt anything new about culture in the training programme, and that the practice interviews they had conducted had not

been challenging at all. They suggested that perhaps if they had been paired with an interviewee holding identities more unfamiliar to them (e.g., “a Muslim woman”), they would have needed to make more of an effort. These remarks suggest that these practitioners were convinced that they were culturally competent and did not need to adopt a new way of thinking. Ironically, however, when the interviewees in those practice interviews that the practitioners had described as not challenging, were asked to rate the interviewers’ performance, they indicated that they had not felt comfortable with the interviewer. This illustrates that there is still work to be done on the interviewing skills of these experienced practitioners, but that we were unable to convince all of them of the potential value of the cultural humility approach. We thus need to reflect and improve upon the way we present the approach to increase our chances of getting even the more sceptical practitioners on board.

One potential improvement to our presentation could involve changing or elucidating the terminology we use. We observed that the word “humility” caused some confusion and even some resistance amongst practitioners in our training programme. When one looks up the definition of “humility” on Google, the first definition that comes up is provided by Oxford Languages: “the quality of having a modest or low view of one’s importance”. During the training, one investigator looked up the Dutch translation for “humility” and found the Dutch word “nederigheid”, which corresponds to this definition. Our discussions with practitioners made it clear that they perceived this definition quite negatively, as being submissive or bowing down to the interviewee, which they would not want to do in their interviews. In contrast, our idea of humility is more in line with the second definition that comes up in the Google search, from the Merriam-Webster dictionary: “freedom from pride or arrogance”. This corresponds more to the Dutch translation “bescheidenheid”, humbleness. When we suggested this definition and translation for the concept of “humility”, the investigators were much more receptive to the idea. Thus, our intensive discussions with practitioners revealed the importance of using the right terminology and framing the training at the appropriate level for practitioners – otherwise, they will not adopt the new approach.

3.5. Limitations of the research

Although the present research provided important new insights, it also had some limitations. First, the qualitative nature of this study is associated with both benefits and drawbacks. On the positive side, it allows for in-depth, meaningful feedback and experiences that provide insight into the potential benefits of the training and how it could be further improved. On the negative side, it does not provide insight into whether the training would be effective in practice: whether investigative interviewers would actually use it and whether it would improve the interaction with the interviewee or the quantity or quality of information gathered. Thus, our observations here may indicate that there is potential for the training to enhance investigative interviews, but we would need more data on its effectiveness before we can draw any firm conclusions.

Second, as we were using the practitioners’ feedback to improve our training with each iteration, the three training sessions were not identical in nature. Most notably, the first training session was provided in a hybrid format (one day remote learning followed by one day interactive sessions at the university), which we changed to a fully in-person format (two days at the university) for the second and third session because we

discovered that the hybrid format did not work – most trainees had not watched the videos or prepared the assigned readings, which made the subsequent interactive sessions (which built on that preparation) much less effective. This meant that the practitioners' feedback and experiences presented here did not cover exactly the same training programme. Interestingly, most of the resistance and negative feedback discussed above was observed for the first group who received the hybrid training, suggesting that a fully in-person format might work better than a hybrid format.

4. A new way forward

Our discussion so far makes it clear that cross-cultural interviewing is a challenging endeavour. What can we do to improve the situation? One suggestion raised during a group discussion in the training was to avoid cross-cultural interactions altogether; that is, attempt to match the cultural background of the interviewer to that of the interviewee. Although this may not always be practically feasible, if an interviewer of the same cultural background as the interviewee is available, it might be a good idea to match them. Some practitioners in our training commented that this seems to work quite well in practice. Nonetheless, this approach could also raise some concerns. First, there may be ethical objections to implementing an “own-culture only” policy; for example, if South African police officers were only allowed to interview witnesses from the same cultural background, that policy may remind some of Apartheid. Second, anecdotal examples suggest that some witnesses might prefer an interviewer from a different cultural background, for example because they are worried that someone from their own community might spread gossip about them. Similar concerns have been expressed in the context of asylum interviews, where asylum seekers have reported being distrustful of interpreters who have the same cultural background, because they view them as representatives of the state that persecuted them (Selim *et al.* 2023). Third, the assumption that the interviewer is “culturally competent” may be particularly strong when an interviewer is from the same cultural background as the interviewee, which could actually reduce the interviewer’s sensitivity and consideration of the unique identity of this particular interviewee. Thus, we do not believe the problems surrounding cross-cultural communication can be fully solved by matching the cultural background of the interviewer to that of the interviewee.

The adoption of the Méndez Principles by the United Nations (Méndez *et al.* 2021) constituted an important step in improving investigative interviewing practices, but the Principles pay little attention to the role of culture. Vredeveldt *et al.* (2023) proposed some concrete ways in which research findings on culture, trauma, and memory could be incorporated into each of the six Méndez Principles. In line with the cultural humility approach, however, it is perhaps even more important to emphasise that not every recommendation will be universally applicable to every interviewee. For example, the Méndez Principles recommend that interviewers establish rapport with the interviewee by discussing mutual interests or other topics that have the potential for social bonding. However, one of our trainees, who specialized in financial crime, remarked that he interviews many high-ranking officials who refuse to engage in conversations that are irrelevant to the legal case, and, in fact, might be offended or feel not taken seriously if the interviewer tries to bond with them by trying to find mutual interests. Similarly, even though the Méndez Principles (and decades of research) advocate rapport-based and

non-coercive interviewing methods, a study with Moroccan suspects showed that friendly behaviour (i.e., interviewer behaviour that was coded as “kind” by independent coders based on video recordings of the interview) could also backfire: Moroccan suspects were more likely to refuse to provide information when the interviewer displayed friendly behaviour (Beune *et al.* 2010). One potential explanation for this is that individuals from certain cultures, particularly cultures with high power distance such as Morocco, might respect interviewers more if they adopt an authoritative rather than a friendly attitude. These examples illustrate that interviewing recommendations are not one-size-fits-all.

The new way forward we propose in this article is to adopt the cultural humility approach in investigative interviewing. That is, interviewers should be aware that they “don’t know what they don’t know” and be humble in their approach toward the interviewee. They should familiarise themselves with the cultural background of the interviewee, particularly noting cultural customs and taboos that could help them prevent offending or embarrassing the interviewee, but at the same time, realise that not all cultural observations apply to every interviewee. Further, they need to take time to critically reflect on their own cultural background, norms, and expectations. They should be genuinely open and curious about learning more about the person in front of them and acknowledge or mitigate (as much as possible) the power imbalance in the room. This can be achieved through critically reflecting on the roles, cultures, and intersecting identities brought into the interviewing room by all members present, including interviewers, interviewees, and interpreters. After all, each person is a unique individual with many potential intersecting identities (Crenshaw 1989, Gjerde 2004, Lekas *et al.* 2020). A memorable popular-culture illustration of the idea that each person is unique is the scene in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, when Brian hypes up the crowd, saying “you’re all individuals, you’re all different!” and the crowd cries out in unison “yes, we are!” except for one man, who says “I’m not...”.

A central concept within the cultural humility approach is to consider not just how the unique characteristics of the interviewee might impact the interaction, but also how your own characteristics might. Just like a witness or suspect, each interviewer brings a unique mix of identities to the table, as well as specific expectations that come with their professional role (e.g., an interviewer who works for the United Nations may need to adopt a more formal interviewing style than an interviewer who works for an NGO). It is important for interviewers to reflect on how their background and expectations might impact the interaction with the interviewee. Furthermore, interviewers should not assume their own background and expectations are the norm; instead, they should critically reflect on them and, where appropriate, discuss them with the interviewee. For example, one of the practitioners in our training said that she often tells witnesses that she is “a little strange” in what she expects, namely very precise details about the event (e.g., exactly who said what when); not the type of information you would usually include in a normal conversation but required for legal evidence. With this explanation, the practitioner achieves three things: (1) she explicitly voices her expectations, (2) she explains why she has these expectations, and (3) she avoids creating the impression that what she expects is “normal” or “good”. This is a good example of clear and open communication that also contributes to acknowledging power dynamics in the interview

and to some extent mitigating them – another important component of the cultural humility approach.

5. Conclusion

Cross-cultural communication is ubiquitous in today's society, and presents its own unique challenges. To improve cross-cultural investigative interviews, we can learn from how these challenges have been approached in different disciplines, such as the medical field. The concept of cultural humility, developed for medical professionals, is just as relevant for investigative interviewers. We recommend that the investigative interviewer is humble, open to learning about the interviewee, and reflects on their own role and the power dynamics of the interaction. In fact, the cultural humility philosophy has the potential to change the way we think with respect to all cross-cultural interactions discussed at the Oñati workshop and in this special issue, from the investigation stage (Bouwknegt 2024, Hope *et al.* 2024, Knust 2024, Stewart 2024, Tredici 2024)⁴ to the courtroom (Combs 2024, Drenk *et al.* 2024, Michels *et al.* 2024, McDermott and Hausknecht 2024, Schot 2025).⁵ All actors in international criminal cases should be aware that they can never be fully "culturally competent" – there is always more to learn.

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⁴ Bouwknegt, *The past is a foreign country: Reflections on investigative cultures that investigate across cultures*; Hope *et al.*, *Communication errors in online interactions: Examining cultural differences in perceptions of rapport and preferred recovery strategies*; Knust, *The use of new technologies in international criminal investigations*; J. Stewart, *Drawing on the experience of prosecuting at the international level in multicultural environments*; Tredici, *The challenge of investigating and prosecuting international crimes*. Papers presented at the Oñati International Institute for the Sociology of Law workshop on *Opening the black box of international criminal investigations: Challenges of culture and practice* (13-14 June 2024), currently under review.

⁵ Combs, *Ignorance really is bliss: The case for ignoring cultural differences in mass atrocity trials*; Drenk *et al.*, *Myriad meanings: Coded language and euphemisms on trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda*; Michels *et al.*, *The Witness Feedback Project: Self-reported symptoms of trauma and depression before and after testimony by witnesses and victims of atrocity crimes at the International Criminal Court*; McDermott and Hausknecht, *ICC judges' perceptions of user-generated evidence: Insights from a qualitative study*. Papers presented at the Oñati International Institute for the Sociology of Law workshop on *Opening the black box of international criminal investigations: Challenges of culture and practice* (13-14 June 2024), currently under review.

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