Talking like a manager: promotion interviews, language and ethnicity

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Summary

The research

The aim of the study was to understand the discourse processes in promotion interviews in ethnically and linguistically diverse areas and identify some of the wider organisational cultures and practices which may act as a barrier to promotion. This research was the second part of a project on ‘Job interviews, ethnicity and disadvantage’. The first part of the project, Talk on trial: Job interviews, language and ethnicity (DWP Research Report No. 344) focused on interviews for low paid jobs in service and manufacturing jobs.

The study used a mix-method approach: discourse analysis of promotion interviews from three companies, case studies of two of the companies using semi-structured interviews and data from trialling the DVD on job interviewing skills with six organisations, including the two case study companies. Twenty-two promotion and selection interviews were video or audio recorded and analysed using an interactional discourse analysis approach. Brief pre- and post-interviews were held with candidates, decision-making sessions were observed and interviewers gave feedback on recorded interviews. Sixty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted in the two case study organisations and DVD trialling sessions were audio recorded and analysed using an interpretive discourse analysis approach.

Key findings

There are persistent but intangible barriers to ethnic minority groups progressing into management positions. While some of these relate to specific practices, most notably the interview itself, others are only overcome if organisations address the more general issues of race equality that affect satisfaction and morale. For example, being part of the shopfloor community acts as a double barrier to promotion for ethnic minority staff who have to manage accusations of ‘selling out’ from both the larger shopfloor community and from their ‘cultural’ community.

There were many good practices, both informal and formal, that were closing the gap between official statements and the reality of some persistent disadvantage. However, there were still institutional norms and local attitudes that had the potential to negatively affect ethnic minority progression.
First generation ethnic minority candidates fared less well than other candidates in interviews. This supports the conclusion from the earlier study, although a smaller data base and fewer successful applications overall means that this finding must be treated with caution.

The cultural and linguistic demands that are peculiar to the selection interview produce a ‘linguistic penalty’ which is likely to affect ethnic minority candidates born abroad more than other groups. While the requirements of the interview produce challenges for most candidates, its linguistic and cultural demands disadvantage this group disproportionately.

While formal procedures in place in organisations are a necessary element in overcoming or preventing barriers to progression for ethnic minority groups, they are not a sufficient one. Many of the factors that demotivate staff from applying for promotion or inhibit their access to social networks and social capital, such as the processes of socialisation with managers that would help them to ‘talk like a manager’, relate to informal practices and ethnically-based affiliations. Similarly, formal procedures for selection interviewing and training in diversity and interviewing skills, although prerequisites for establishing racial equality and giving the appearance of objectivity, do not engage with the detailed processes of the job interview or scrutinise them for the potential they have for indirect discrimination.

Issues of ‘culture’ in diversity discourses tend to be over-ethnicised, while the culture of job interviews is under-ethnicised. Social relations and practices in ethnically diverse workplaces are often talked about in the well-worn terms of general ‘cultural and ethnic differences’. Conduct and practices viewed by management as inappropriate are attributed to ‘cultural behaviour’ based on fundamentally different values. Such attributions can lead to the ethnic stereotyping of minority groups and an over-emphasis on ethnic differences.

By contrast, the social and cultural/language aspects of the selection process are underestimated and not recognised in terms of the white (Anglo) majority ethnic culture. The competency frameworks of the interviews, the criteria (many of them hidden) and the inherent contradictions of the interview process, together, are characteristic of a certain, and widely recognised, organisational culture based on the majority group cultural practices. The interview is presented as an objective, transparent and institutionally defensible procedure but detailed analysis shows that it is a distinctly human and subjective process in which candidates are sorted primarily on the basis of their personality. Managing this tension requires cultural/communicative knowledge which remains implicit. The culture shock of the interview, particularly for ethnic minority candidates born abroad, is rarely acknowledged. In terms of a diversity and equality agenda, the selection interview is still a paradox. The rhetoric of respecting difference cannot be easily reconciled with the interview’s culturally determined criteria.
The largely hidden demands on candidates to talk in an institutionally credible style are similar in both low-paid and management interviews. The competency frameworks are similar in both levels of interviews as are the expectations to align to the interviewers and to the particular blend of work talk, analytic talk and more personal talk which comprises the ‘linguistic capital’ expected in job interviews. However, in the promotion and management interviews, there is a much greater focus on displaying a management persona, much tighter relevance requirements and tougher implicit criteria in terms of authenticity.

While many aspects of workplace life have been reviewed for their potential for creating or preventing fair practice and outcomes, including the general design of interviews and the assessment process overall, the detailed interactional processes of the interview remain largely unscrutinised. Its cultural power remains in tact as a persistent barrier to those who have less access to and experience of the communicative style and knowledge of the interview required to succeed at it.

Recommendations

**Recommendations on organisational practices**

Organisations which still rely on goodwill and informal procedures need to adapt more formal procedures, including ethnic monitoring and formal procedures for recruitment and selection.

Many of the identified good practices such as shopfloor language training, mentoring, preparation and support for the interview and open systems of communication are transferable to any organisation where ethnic minority groups are not progressing into management posts.

However, formal procedures are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for creating fairness in promotion. Organisations need to consider the gaps between formal procedures and local practices and recognise that formalisation does not cover all aspects of racial equality and fairness.

More formal and wide-ranging systems for mentoring those who are considering, or might consider promotion should be introduced. Once these are in place, the mentors need to develop extensive and informal relations with mentees so that the latter can be given the opportunity to be socialised into ways of talking like a manager and into the specific linguistic/cultural demands of the competence-based interview.

Staff with the potential for promotion but who are identified as needing to improve their communication skills in English, should be offered training tailored to their needs. In-company language training which integrates English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) expertise with the company’s communicative requirements should be made available.
Staff with the potential for promotion should also be offered training in ‘people skills’.

Restructuring and operational changes can have a negative impact on ethnic minorities’ opportunities and motivation for applying for promotion. Organisations need to consider whether ethnic and linguistic penalties are increased by these changes and what action needs to be taken.

Some of the barriers that ethnic minorities face are discursive and cultural or stem from ethnic minorities’ sense of position and identity. An organisational culture which is committed to countering racism needs to make racialised discourses and stereotyping unacceptable.

Policy recommendations on the management selection/promotion interview

Organisations need to recognise that the management selection interview is a highly culturally-specific event, reflecting the normative values and styles of the majority ethnic organisational culture. It transforms ordinary workplace talk into an intense regime of display and judgement where acceptability is narrowly and implicitly defined.

Consideration should be given to dispensing with the interview completely or at least re-weighting the interview in relation to other assessment centre activities which are more likely to simulate the presentation of self in the usual settings of the workplace. The selection interview is a unique encounter which is not replicated in any other aspect of working life and is open to criticism that it can be indirectly and unwittingly discriminatory.

Organisations need to scrutinise their own practices in the interview. A habit of video/audio recording a sample of interviews and using these data in the design and training for interviews would contribute to an understanding of the culturally-specific nature of interviews and the need to support both interviewers and candidates in managing it.

In the case of internal promotions, organisations need to consider the role of information on candidates not elicited in the interview. Since this information is clearly salient to decisions, organisations need to come clean about its use and decide how to factor it into the overall assessment.

Training and professional development for interviewers should include:

- awareness of the dangers of ethnic minority candidates’ perceived discrimination which can occur because of the gap between their perceptions of their performance and how they were rated by interviewers;
- more detailed awareness raising on the difficulties that a competency-based framework presents to candidates, particularly those born abroad;
• more awareness of the gap between formally assessed competencies and the criteria used in decision-making, some of which is ‘hidden’ from the candidate;
• more understanding on the cultural pre-suppositions on which this framework is based;
• a better appreciation of the particular cultural style that is required at interview, with candidates expected to blend professional, personal and organisational discourses;
• an improved understanding of the significant role that interviewers play in creating a positive or negative dynamic for the candidate.

Training and professional development in interviewing skills and diversity should also include an understanding of the significant role that interviewers play in creating a positive or negative dynamic for the candidate. Misalignments between interviewer and candidate are the responsibility of the interviewer as well as the candidate.

Any training for interviewers should recognise how demanding the role is and should design the selection process so that interviewers do not have to ask questions, actively listen, interact with follow-up questions, clarifications, etc and keep notes of the interview.

Training and preparation for candidates should draw on the analysis presented in this report, including providing support on how to: interpret the abstract formulations used in asking competency questions; use and blend the three different discourses that successful candidates have control of; produce well structured stories which subtly convey the speaker’s perspective.

**Specific recommendations related to ethnic minority candidates born abroad**

The training and support recommended for all interviewers and candidates is particularly important in relation to candidates born abroad. The focus should be on differences in communicative style and the implicit expectations of the interview: finding a middle way between discretion and display, supporting claims with evidence and managing the social relationships of the interview.

This group also need more advice on the purpose and conduct of the interview. While interviewers look for an holistic picture of the candidate through the style in which they answer (mainly competency-based) questions, candidates born abroad expect more opportunity to talk explicitly about their different life experiences.

Specific feedback should be given to unsuccessful candidates on the detailed reasons for this lack of success.

Some flexibility within the competency framework would allow candidates with foreign work experience (FWE) to have this accounted for more systematically.
Interviewers could also be given more training in how to negotiate FWE with candidates.

Interviewer training should also include: some understanding of why this group of candidates often present themselves in ways which are judged as overly positive; and some acknowledgement of the social capital they have acquired as members of an ethnic minority group.
1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This research was the second part of a project on ‘Job interviews, ethnicity and disadvantage’. The first part of the project, *Talk on trial: Job interviews, language and ethnicity*, was carried out between 2004/05 and focused on interviews for low paid jobs in service and manufacturing industries in the public and private sectors. This research showed that the interview process can inadvertently disadvantage ethnic minority groups and that the interview requires a level of communicative ability not required for the job. Ethnic minority candidates born abroad are particularly disadvantaged by the interview requirements (Roberts and Campbell, 2006).

The second phase of the project looked at promotion interviews and some of the wider cultural and organisational practices which can, unwittingly, create a ‘glass ceiling’ for ethnic minority candidates. The great majority of these interviews are for junior management positions, some of them part of the internal labour market and some are with external candidates.

1.2 Aim and objectives

The aim of the study was to understand the discourse processes in promotion interviews in ethnically and linguistically diverse areas and identify some of the wider organisational cultures and practices which may act as a barrier to promotion.

The objectives of the study were to:

- identify some of the organisational cultures, systems and practices related to promotion interviewing and the recruitment of junior managers, which may disadvantage ethnic minority groups in the workplace;

- analyse the discourse processes of promotion/management interviews and identify whether ethnic minority candidates were particularly disadvantaged by these processes.
In addition to this, a further objective was to produce a DVD training package on good practice in job interviews, based on the *Talk on trial* study of low-paid job interviews. As well as being used to promote better employment practice within organisations, the trialling of the DVD was also to be used as a method of collecting data on organisational cultures, systems and practices.

1.3 Ethnic minority groups and the labour market

Recent research shows the sheer persistence of ethnic minority disadvantage in the labour market (Clark and Drinkwater, 2007, Berthoud and Blekesaune, 2007, Heath and Cheung 2006, Modood *et al.*, 1997). These studies also show an increasingly complex employment picture, with some groups faring much better than others. While for some groups the ‘ethnic penalty’ (Heath and Cheung, 2006) persists at all levels of employment, others are well-represented in both lower skilled and professional jobs.

However, the ‘snowy peaks’ (Phillips 2003) of most organisations remain, with ethnic minority groups under-represented in more senior management positions. While this can be partly attributed to the disadvantage that ethnic minority graduates face in the labour market (Modood *et al.* 1997), there is another route to management through promotion from the shopfloor or other junior level posts. It is this route which is the focus of *Talking like a manager*. While some candidates had degrees, the jobs were not designated as graduate level positions. Instead, the interviews concentrated on their skills and management experience and potential.

Studies of recruitment and progression in employment show that ethnic minority groups are less likely to tap into the informal routes within an organisation and faired less well in promotion opportunities (Carmichael and Woods, 2000). Experience and perceptions of discrimination in employment remain at high levels (Wrench and Modood, 2000) and may affect both opportunities and motivation. So, the ‘ethnic penalty’ suffered by ethnic minority groups in trying to rise up the management ladder is at least partly the result of indirect and unwitting discrimination.

1.4 Disadvantage and unwitting discrimination

Ethnic minority groups can be disadvantaged by the apparently neutral workplace cultures, relations and practices which tend to exclude them (Noon and Hoque, 2001, Sanglin-Gant, 2005). One such apparently neutral practice is the job/promotion interview which relies upon subjective, culturally influenced judgements of candidates’ ways of presenting themselves (Silverman and Jones, 1976, Jenkins, 1986). These, in turn, rely on the socio-cultural assumptions and communicative styles of both interviewers and candidates.
The psychological literature on discrimination and the job interview has focused on certain variables such as interview structure, questions and panel composition to assess the impact on ethnic minority candidates (see Roberts and Campbell, 2006, for an overview and discussion). However, the contradictory nature of these findings suggests that the social dynamics of the interview need to be researched in detail to understand more subtle processes of disadvantage and discrimination (Posthuma, Morgeson and Campion, 2002).

Both the earlier study and this research drew on the literature from discourse analysis and sociolinguistics to identify the detailed discourse processes which lead to judgements of candidates. These studies examine the interaction between interviewer and candidate, not just the main questions asked, but how all questions, comments and negotiations of meaning are managed within the orthodoxy of the interview. They also analyse the candidates’ contributions as they draw on their communicative style to present themselves as competent, adequate and plausible candidates.

1.5 Discourse and sociolinguistic studies

The British selection interview is the product of western cultural discourses about organisations, the role of the individual and the institutional requirements of sorting and selecting people (Adelsward, 1988, Gee et al., 1996, Auer and Kern, 2000). The successful negotiation of the interview depends upon the interviewer and candidate sharing a definition of the interview situation, which is implicitly referred to and marked by indirect cues (Roberts, 1985, Linell and Thunquist, 2003). This shared definition gives candidates guidance on the interactional conventions of the interview: how formal or informal to be, when and how to take turns, how to pick up indirect cues and be alert to misunderstandings and how to repair them. Where a shared definition is lacking, often as a result of social and cultural divisions or distance between interviewer and candidate, the encounter becomes problematic and candidates are at risk of failing (Erickson and Shultz, 1982, Roberts and Campbell, 2005).

Discourse analysis shows how these cultural discourses are worked out at the micro level of interaction. It is also at this level that the candidates’ contributions are judged and where differences between interviewers’ and candidates’ communicative style may have a negative impact on candidates. Different groups, whether they use English as their heritage or expert language or not, may use culturally specific styles of communicating which are different from local or standard English. These differences include a range of rhetorical and self-presentational features: how personal or impersonal to be, what to stress and what to play down, how to structure examples and arguments, how much to assert and how much to show through example, use of idioms and the largely unconscious features of intonation and rhythm (Akinnaso and Ajirotutu, 1982, Tannen, 1989, Linde, 1993, Roberts and Campbell, 2006).
Since both sides interpret and judge the other according to their own conventions, misjudgements about personality, intention, ability and attitude can routinely be made (Gumperz, 1982a and b, 1992, 1996, Birkner, 2004, Campbell and Roberts, 2006). Many of these misvaluations arise from the fact that differences in communicative style are processed unconsciously and so uncomfortable moments and apparently irrelevant or incoherent responses are treated as failures in competence or attitude. So there is a communicative dimension to discrimination based on the language and cultural demands and hidden assumptions of the job interview. Using the analogy of the ‘ethnic penalty’, we term this the ‘linguistic penalty’.

1.6 ‘Linguistic capital’ and the ‘linguistic penalty’.

The term ‘linguistic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1991) does not just refer to general fluency in English but consists of the rhetorical and self-presentation resources that are acceptable in interview contexts. Although these are formal events with their own orthodoxy, they are also social encounters where interviewers are assessing candidates as people able to engage with others. So, the interview requires different modes of discourse which are relatively more analytic and distant, on the one hand, or more informal and self-displaying, on the other. Linguistic capital, like social capital, depends on the resources linked to individuals’ social relationships. While social capital accounts for the relative value of resources and connections within social networks, linguistic capital relates specifically to the power of communication and discourses. Where these networks give people access to knowledge of how one ought to speak in institutional settings and fluency in ways of speaking that are considered ‘legitimate’, then they will be able to acquire linguistic capital. So, an individual’s network of social relations is crucial in determining their ability to conduct themselves with ‘the proper rules of behaviour’ in the interview (Bourdieu, 1991).

Candidates who have not been socialised into networks where appropriate linguistic capital can be accessed, suffer a ‘linguistic penalty’. We draw this term directly from the notion of linguistic capital. It is used in a somewhat different sense from the ‘language penalty’ described by economists where it refers to a general, undifferentiated lack of fluency as a fixed variable, alongside other factors which impact on ethnic minority employment success (Leslie and Lindley, 2001). This report argues that the linguistic penalty is not fixed but is shifting and interactionally produced. It also depends upon subtle aspects of language use, cultural knowledge and social evaluation which can only be identified through detailed discourse analysis.

Few studies in employment research have examined the linguistic or cultural penalties of selection procedures. Two exceptions are the Commission for Racial Equality’s (CRE’s) critique of psychometric tests (CRE, 1992) and the study of British Rail’s personality test. This was seen as indirectly discriminatory because questions about relations with people, thinking style, feelings and emotions were
considered to rely on the values, beliefs and norms of the dominant culture. It can be argued that the selection interview also relies on such cultural assumptions but it is rarely subject to such criticisms (for exceptions see CRE, 1985 and EOR, 1996) or complimented for its fairness. It is assumed, even in detailed racial equality research on recruitment and progression that if formal systems are in place, that good practice is also (Liff and Dale, 1994, in press). As with the earlier study, this report shows that practice is mixed and that formal systems do not guarantee a fair interview. It is only through video/audio recordings and detailed analysis that the role of the interview in the career progression of ethnic minority groups can be adequately considered.

1.7 Outline of the report

Chapter 2 describes the discourse analytic methods used on the selection interviews and the ethnographic approach taken in the two case studies of ethnically and linguistically diverse organisations. Chapter 3 steps back from the interview itself, to examine some of the organisational cultures and practices which affect opportunities and motivation to apply for promotion in the two case study organisations. A complex picture emerges of both support and barriers. Chapter 4 looks at perceptions of the selection interview and the criteria used by interviewers in coming to their decisions. Chapters 5 and 6 identify the different discourse modes that candidates use in their responses and the seamless blending of these modes of talk that constitutes linguistic capital. The first of these focuses on occupational/professional discourses where candidates are expected to fit their work experiences into the competency framework of the interview. Chapter 6 describes the more analytical language of organisational discourses, and the personal discourses that display the self and engage with the interviewer. Chapter 7 examines the interactional features of the selection interview, how a positive or negative dynamic sets in relatively early and how the conduct of interviewers is implicated in a candidate’s success or failure. The final empirical chapter, Chapter 8, discusses how candidates from ethnic minority groups who were born abroad, experience the negative dynamic particularly intensely. Chapter 9 outlines conclusions and recommendations.
2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The study involved two kinds of data: ethnographic data on practices and perceptions of equal opportunities obtained from semi-structured research interviews and recordings of selection interviews. While organisations made every effort to facilitate the research process, it was much easier to collect the semi-structured research interview data than the recordings of selection interviews. Video (or in a few cases, audio) recordings of promotion/management interviews are highly sensitive for both interviewers, organisations and candidates. Together with the Talk on trial data, these data constitute, to our knowledge, the only large data set of real video-recorded job interviews in the UK. In comparison with the earlier study, there was much more reluctance expressed by candidates to be video or audio recorded. We assume that this was because there were higher stakes involved. The difficulty of obtaining data meant that an opportunistic approach was used and this has implications for potential generalisations from our sample.

2.2 Methodology

A discourse analysis methodology was used to examine the discursive practices of informants. Discourse is defined as language in use and spoken discourse as talk and non-verbal communication. Discourse analysis connects societal level knowledge, values and assumptions to the detailed ways in which we talk, write and interact. This study focused on two aspects of discourse: Firstly, the study analysed the talk-in-interaction of selection interviews: how speakers design their turns at talk, how interactions are sequenced and managed, speakers’ choices in terms of grammar, vocabulary and rhetoric and the largely hidden ways in which meaning is conveyed through intonation, rhythm, pausing and so on. Secondly, it looked at how informants use discourses of ‘race’, ‘fairness’ and ‘equality’ in the workplace and at interview. The study explores how such discourses are used as resources for individuals to position themselves and their organisation in relation to diversity and opportunities for progression.
The analysis of the semi-structured research interviews is based on interpretive approaches to the data, treating it as accounts constructed of language, in interaction with the researcher (Erickson, 1986, 2004, Silverman, 1993). Informants use talk artfully to account for their social worlds and construct identities and social relationships. Since interviews are interactions between researcher and informant, the researcher's own identity and questioning must be treated reflexively (see below).

The analysis of the selection interviews drew on a branch of discourse analysis called Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS). The focus of IS is on cultural and linguistic diversity in stratified multilingual societies (Gumperz, 1982a and b). IS draws on ethnography, conversation analysis and linguistic analysis. We also draw on aspects of narrative theory, in particular the way that narrative and rhetorical practices are used to construct the teller’s identity (Tannen, 1989, Holland et al., 1998 and Linde, 1993).

IS uses highly detailed analysis to uncover tacitly applied and largely unnoticed culturally influenced interpretive practices. These may be the cultural practices of the organisation as realised in the interviewers’ questions or ethnic minority cultural styles and assumptions about the interview. However, there is no assumption that because a candidate is identified as from an ethnic or linguistic minority group, the interview is necessarily ‘intercultural’. Culture can only be understood as part of action and interaction rather than standing outside it, and people do not automatically represent a ‘culture’ when they speak (Auer and Kern, 2000).

The IS approach is consistent with the practices of the interview itself, where ‘the devil is in the detail’. Judgements of candidates rely on how they talk as much as the content of talk and even this is dependent upon fleeting, and largely unnoticed, interpretive processes. This leads to small interactional moments being used to make categorical statements about personality and competence. For example, a candidate who pauses quite often may be assessed as ‘not firm enough’. IS can identify these small moments and can then raise questions about the fairness of judging candidates on the basis of them. IS also sheds light on the inherent variety in, and improvised nature of, interviewer questions and follow-ups.

This linguistically-informed methodology entails scrutinising data in detail and so limiting the amount of data that can be analysed. Although the data base for this study is a small sample from which to draw conclusions about the impact of the interview, it is a relatively large sample in terms of understanding the micro-detail of talk-in-interaction which has the potential for creating a specific impact on particular groups.

2.3 Design and data collection

The study used a mix-method approach: discourse analysis of promotion interviews from three companies, case studies of two of the companies using semi-structured interviews and data from trialling the DVD on job interviewing skills with six organisations, including the two case study companies.
2.3.1 Promotion/management interviews

In the case of two organisations, the interviews were for junior management positions. The interviews were held at the end of a one- or two-day assessment process in which candidates undertook a range of tests and activities. With the third organisation, promotion interviews to higher grade shopfloor positions and team leader posts were held after applicants had completed some shopfloor tests. Recordings were made of any interviewers and candidates who agreed to be recorded and so the final data set was an opportunistic sample. About half the candidates were unwilling to be filmed or taped but some of this group were willing to participate in a research interview. Twenty-two management/promotion interviews were recorded (20 video-recorded and two audio-recorded) from three companies. Seventeen candidates were recorded, five of them twice with different interviewers. Field notes were made of decision-making meetings (wash-ups) and an opportunistic sample of video recorded interviews was used to obtain detailed video-prompted feedback from interviewers. Candidates were interviewed briefly before and after interviews, where possible. Twenty interviews were held with candidates after their selection interview (13 with video-recorded candidates and seven with candidates who had not given consent to be video-recorded).

In the pre- and post-interview discussions with researchers, candidates were asked about their expectations of the interviews and whether they were met, self-evaluation of their own performance, comparisons with other interviews they had experienced and how they rated the interviewers.

2.3.2 Case studies

Two of the three organisations where selection interviews were recorded agreed to be research sites for exploring the wider context in which these interviews take place. Semi-structured interviews were used to identify cultures, systems and practices related to management/promotion interviewing that act as barriers to the progression of ethnic minority groups in the workplace. A total of 62 interviews were carried out: 42 were with a mix of senior and middle managers, HR personnel, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) work-based teachers, union representatives and shopfloor staff (of these, six were telephone interviews because of practical difficulties of face-to-face interviews). Some additional ethnographic data were collected during the seven days of observation, for example, informal conversations during the assessment days with interviewers and candidates. Twenty interviews were post-interview discussions with candidates (see Section 2.3.1) who came from both shopfloor staff and junior management groups since some candidates were already acting managers and team leaders when they applied for promotion.
Table 2.1 Details of the 62 informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group A</th>
<th>Group B</th>
<th>Group C</th>
<th>Group D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>senior, middle managers, HR and teachers</td>
<td>junior management/team leader</td>
<td>union representatives</td>
<td>staff/operatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic minority: 3 male, 2 female</td>
<td>Ethnic minority: 19 male, 2 female</td>
<td>Ethnic minority: 2 male</td>
<td>Ethnic minority: 3 male, 1 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White: 5 male, 10 female</td>
<td>White: 5 male, 5 female</td>
<td></td>
<td>White: 4 male, 1 female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 20 Total: 31 Total: 2 Total: 9

The aim of the interviews with Groups A and C was to identify: organisational cultures and practices which relate to diversity, organisational policies and procedures that lead to ethnic minority advancement, the processes of recruitment and promotion, in particular related to interviews, and the importance of interviews within these processes. Those in Group A who interviewed candidates regularly were asked about: the qualities they looked for in candidates, cultural factors in relation to interviewing candidates from different ethnic minority backgrounds and their perceptions of the interview process in terms of design, particular questions asked and any training or preparation they had received. The focus of interviews for Groups B and D was also on organisational cultures and practices and in particular their perceptions of social relations, equal opportunities and diversity. They were asked about their reasons for applying for promotion, or not, and their knowledge of the promotion process. They were also asked about how discrimination was tackled in their organisation and whether they considered that they had ever been discriminated against.

2.3.3 DVD trialling sessions

The DVD ‘Successful at Selection’ (Roberts et al., 2007) was based on the earlier research and is a training tool for job interviewers who interview candidates from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Part of the design of the current project was to collect data while trialling the DVD in training sessions to enrich the semi-structured interview data collected in the two case study companies. These data were ‘volunteered’ during the group work components of the training rather than explicitly elicited and were general reflections on diversity rather than specifically on aspects of promotion and progression.

Fifty-nine managers, union representatives and trainers took part in six sessions. The two case study companies hosted training sessions (with 21 participants), the other sessions were with Jobcentre Plus, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), a university and a group of self-employed trainers. These sessions were either tape-recorded or detailed field notes were made. The different levels of data collected and analysed are summed up in Figure 2.1.
Data for the outer circle were largely collected through semi-structured interviews with Groups A and C. Data on the discursive setting were collected from all four groups and at the DVD trialling sessions. Data for the inner circle, as well as the video/audio recordings, were collected from interviews with all four groups, particularly candidates and interviewers. The promotion/management interview is the core of this research, embedded within both the formal procedures and the systems of social organisation of each organisation, and like both of these wider contexts is produced and reproduced through discourse.

2.3.4 Quantitative data

Very little quantitative data were made available. Even though high quality monitoring was carried out in two of the organisations studied, a decision was taken not to use the quantitative data, based on ethnic monitoring, because it was liable to misinterpretation. Only by providing detailed contextual information could it be interpreted adequately and this would have jeopardised the anonymity of the organisations.
2.4 Analysis

Both more general discourse analytic and IS methods were used to transcribe and analyse the data. All the selection interviews and the research interviews were transcribed (except for the small number of telephone interviews where detailed notes were taken). Detailed notes from the DVD workshop sessions were trawled for relevant comments on the perceived barriers to ethnic minority promotion and management selection interviews. The research interviews were then qualitatively coded, taking a case by case, line by line approach. All the selection interviews were reviewed, annotated and indexed to identify uncomfortable moments, misunderstandings, trends in candidate contribution and different types of interviewer conduct. Thematic case studies were then carried out on a core of three contrastively matched pairs of candidates to focus on the different ways in which interviewers and candidates co-constructed the interaction.

2.5 Profile of companies

Qualitative research was conducted in London and the Midlands. A concern was to recruit from areas which were ethnically diverse because they are more likely to attract higher numbers of ethnic minority people (Carrington et al., 2000). Brief profiles are given of the three organisations where video-recorded interview data were collected. The first two were also case study organisations where on-site ethnographic data collection was carried out. There are no detailed profiles of the organisations that workshop participants came from, except for the workshops with the two case study organisations.

2.5.1 Factory Foods

Factory Foods is a medium-sized food processing company based in the Midlands and part of a large international company. Factory Foods is ethnically diverse, with white British staff in the company a visible minority on the shopfloor. A large proportion of staff in Factory Foods have been described as coming from Kurdish, Pakistani and Polish backgrounds. There are also staff from Greek, Latvian, African and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds. There is anecdotal information to suggest that a high proportion of team leaders are from ‘non-white’ and ‘white’ ethnic groups but that there are no ethnic minority staff in middle or senior management roles. The respondents interviewed came from Kurdish, Pakistani, Polish and white British groups.

2.5.2 Services Ltd

Services Ltd is a large national company in the service sector. Data collection took place in (South and North) London and in the West Midlands. The London-based sites had high levels of diversity and the office in the West Midlands had medium levels of diversity. Staff have been described as coming from ‘Asian’, ‘black’, ‘Chinese’, ‘mixed’, ‘other’ and ‘white’ backgrounds (Services Ltd diversity
data pack). The respondents we interviewed came from a variety of ethnic groups including those from African, Caribbean, Indian, Malaysian and white British or ‘white other’ backgrounds.

2.5.3 Supermarket X

Supermarket X is a large national chain, part of an international company. Data were collected from London where the sites have high levels of diversity.

Both Services Ltd and Supermarket X had clear equal opportunity policies and strong statements on diversity. Services Ltd is a participating organisation in Race for Opportunity. Supermarket X aims to match recruitment to the ethnic profile of a particular area and both companies require interviewers to go through diversity training before becoming part of the selection team. The focus of the training is on collecting only objective evidence.

2.6 Selection interviews in the three sites

2.6.1 The interview element in the selection process

The context of the data collection differed in the three sites but in all cases the organisations considered the interview as the most important element in the selection process. In Factory Foods, the interviews were for team leader positions or upgrades to higher graded operative posts. For the team leader positions, there was also a technical, on-the-job test in which prospective team leaders had to reach a target score over a period of time. In Services Ltd, the aim was to fill all the junior management positions from internal promotion. The interview was the final selection process at the assessment centre where a variety of other tasks were used. At Supermarket X, the interview was also the culmination of an assessment day but all applicants for the junior management posts, at that time, were external to the organisation. This study only researched the selection interview element of the assessment day.

2.6.2 Comparison with the earlier study

In the earlier study, Talk on trial, there was a clear distinction between ethnic minority British and white British success rates, on the one hand, and the much lower success rates of candidates born abroad, on the other. In this study there is no such clear picture. This is for several reasons: Firstly, difficulties in obtaining consent to video or audio record was much more difficult so that only 17 candidates were recorded (five of them twice since in one organisation each candidate was interviewed twice). This is too small a number from which to make any generalisations. Secondly, only three of the 17 candidates were successful and there were exceptional circumstances in appointing one of the three, so there is relatively little evidence of what counts as successful. Thirdly and related to this, since the majority of candidates were unsuccessful, the interview presented a major hurdle to nearly all candidates whatever their ethnicity. However, a detailed
analysis of the interviews and decisions made (see Chapters 5 to 8), indicates a trend in line with the earlier study.

2.7 A note on ethnicity, culture and language

This report looks at ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ ethnic minority groups. These groups included ‘black Caribbean’, ‘black African’, ‘Caribbean/white’; ‘Indian’ and other groups; and ‘white’ and ‘white other’ groups (e.g. Polish, Lithuanian backgrounds). We use the term ‘ethnic minority’ problematically and recognise that while it suggests a singularity of black and ethnic minority experience, experiences differ widely between, and within, ethnic groups. Ethnicity is constructed out of overlapping categories based on colour, nationality, religion, culture and language. People often move between ethnicities by using bilingualism, dual nationality, multiple identities and repertoires of cultural knowledge (White, 2002) and is used as a strategic resource rather than as something inherited (Gilroy, 1987, Hall, 1990, 1992, Rampton, 1995). The mix of ethnic, cultural and linguistic resources serves to accomplish an individual’s sense of identity or, more usually, identities. Ethnic minority groups who have grown up in the UK are likely to have a range of language resources which can be used strategically in different situations. With those born and educated overseas, how they talk in the selection interview is much more likely to invoke an ethnic background since their style is more prone to be influenced by their expert language and associated cultural knowledge. These different styles of self-presentation are then linked to generalisations about ethnic groups.

In this study, ethnic self-identification was used to categorise the 17 candidates who agreed to be recorded. Some chose to use well known ethnic monitoring categories such as white or black British, while others identified themselves in terms of nationality, e.g. Rumanian, Jamaican or by language/ethnicity, e.g. Panjabi.

2.8 A reflexive note on ethnic positionings and the research process

The fieldwork was carried out by two researchers, one white British, one Afro-Caribbean British. There is ample literature relating to the ‘race of interviewers’ effects (Rhodes, 1994) and this research also acknowledges that the data collected were, in part, structured by the ways in which the researchers were positioned. There was some evidence that the degree to which informants were relatively guarded or open about other ethnic groups depended upon the race of the interviewer. For example, white informants were more likely to hedge their statements to the black researcher with comments such as ‘I hope that doesn’t seem racist’. And white informants were more open about intercultural conflict and negative ethnic stereotyping with the white researcher. Similarly, Afro-Caribbean informants called up a shared perspective on institutional racism with the black researcher while other black managers who seemed to have somewhat distanced themselves
from the black community talked more openly to the white researcher. These differences are a reminder that informant data are not ‘facts’ but constructions to be interpreted reflexively and that having two researchers from different ethnic backgrounds provides for a range of informant positions that would have been limited by having researchers from only one of these backgrounds.
3 Organisational practices and workplace discourses affecting promotion opportunities

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is based on semi-structured research interviews and observations in the two case study organisations: Factory Foods and Services Ltd. Interviews with middle and senior managers, Human Resources (HR), junior managers, union representatives and shopfloor staff form the core of the data analysed. The DVD trialling sessions and observations and informal discussion at the assessment centres are also used.

This chapter identifies some of the practices and discourses that either support or discourage ethnic minority groups from applying for junior management posts or promotion to senior operative or supervisory positions. Both organisations use the internal labour market and also appoint from external applicants. Many of our findings relate directly to opportunities for internal candidates but are equally relevant with external ones since they too have to learn to ‘talk like a manager’ in their current jobs, if they are to be successful in applying for management jobs elsewhere. The first part of the chapter looks at organisational practices and the second part at some of the managers’ and staff’s perceptions and experiences of diversity and racism and ways of tackling it.

3.2 Access to informal networks

Gaining access to management culture through ‘informal ties’ and communication networks, where managers and staff talk together, helps prospective candidates to consider applying for promotion and to be socialised into talking like a manager.
These networks may be the result of good social relations between individuals or mentoring and may be initiated when someone ‘stands out’ as having management potential. As well as the social capital, loosely defined as ‘networks, norms and trust’ (Putnam, 1996), that shopfloor staff may have developed through ethnically-based networks, informal networks with managers can offer another form of social capital (albeit within relations of power, Zetter, 2007) and so a form of ‘bridging’ which offers some of the linguistic and cultural resources needed for the promotion interview.

3.2.1 Relationship to managers: ‘the tap on the shoulder’

Workers’ relationship to their managers strongly influenced their chance of applying for promotion and being prepared for the selection process. Managers stated that it was common for management to ‘promote their own people’ and that jobs routinely went to the ‘sitting tenant’. Promotion within the unit was often the result of building positive relationships with managers who would give a ‘tap on the shoulder’ to selected workers. This led to relevant experience and encouragement and advice on career progression and how to manage the interview. A middle manager at Services Ltd commented that with suitable candidates he would: ‘sit down and have a chat with them, give them tools, so that when they take the assessment they’re able to tackle it successfully’. In Factory Foods, a senior operations manager was keen to promote a Kurdish team leader because he had good technical skills but had to advise him on his ‘people skills’ – how to request the workers in his team rather than order them – because she was concerned that the non-Kurdish workers would ‘bite (his) head off’ if he spoke to them without using conventional politeness strategies.

3.2.2 Informal mentoring

Both organisations recognised the value of informal mentoring. Staff and management in Services Ltd identified both mentoring and role models as important. The presence of role models of the same ethnicity was emphasised by some ethnic minority staff and managers (see Davidson, 1997). Where there were few or no ethnic minority middle and senior managers, staff found it difficult to see themselves in such positions and were less confident about putting themselves forward. For example, James an ethnic minority union representative commented:

‘I was lucky because being in London there were a few peers I could look to in terms of not being discouraged from coming forward in the first place. The problem is that black people don’t feel they have the potential to put themselves forward because they don’t see people of their ethnic makeup in positions of responsibility.’

However, for others, the fact of being supported and mentored was key, rather than whether ethnicity was shared. For example, Graham, an ethnic minority senior manager in Services Ltd, spoke positively about mentoring relationships but did not mention the ethnicity of his mentors or whether shared ethnicity would have helped him to progress:
There have been a number of managers along the way who have managed me and I thought well their management style was one that I’d like to do and you know, so therefore I’ve always kind of thought, it doesn’t matter who you are dealing with, it’s to treat people with respect…So yes there have been a number of individuals who have mentored me, and I’ve sat and chatted to…and looking back and saying in any given situations how would I like to be treated.’

The benefit of these informal arrangements and encouragement was clear to respondents. However, in both organisations mentoring tended to be initiated only informally and was often transient. Also, it tended to be described in terms of general support and there was no mention of the more extended relationships with mentors that would provide the conditions for socialisation into management styles of self-presentation crucial for the promotion interview.

While the mentoring role of managers does not necessarily marginalise ethnic minority staff (as some of the examples above show) where close relationships between staff and management are linked to their ethnically marked social networks, there is the potential for built-in disadvantage. For example, a Kurdish Iraqi factory floor worker had spoken to his manager about promotion but there had been no follow-up. He did not know his manager well and did not know whether there would be an interview or what skills or competencies he would be expected to display. He had only a general idea of what would be required: ‘You have to ‘learn everything about the factory’.

3.3 Informal systems

In the more traditional environment in Factory Foods, informal systems for promotion and selection for training or the allocation of work had led to perceptions of favouritism or unfair discrimination and may have contributed to existing ethnic tensions. Production pressures had led to some groups being ‘selected in a different way’. Some white managers implied that the recent promotion of ethnic minority group staff had not followed standard procedures. The pressure on managers to achieve targets meant that the less immediately pressing demands, such as equal opportunities, got sidelined, as other research has shown (Sanglin-Grant, 2005). In Factory Foods there was no guarantee that an application form led to being considered for the post and certain jobs were offered to those already identified as ‘having a suitable bent’. In this company there were no job descriptions or person specifications for factory floor and team leader jobs as ‘managers knew what they were looking for’ or such descriptions were rather vague or standardised. As one shopfloor worker remarked: ‘I’m not sure how it would work – sometimes they seem to interview everybody and pick someone, other times it’s handed on a plate to you’.

Opportunities to access training varied across organisations. Services Ltd ran a learning centre open to all where employees are paid one hour to learn for every hour of their own time that they put in. In Factory Foods workers could access
language training. Generally, frontline staff received little formal training and informants considered that training opportunities were more easily accessed by those who had good relationships with their managers. Even where training was on offer, it tended to be technical training in IT, maths and procedures rather than the communication and ‘people’ skills that interviewers were looking for in promotion interviews. Such skills are acquired informally through social networks and informal opportunities for contact with management which depend upon good relationships between manager and frontline staff, as we mention above. However, in both organisations, there were examples of informal training and support, often where a manager became aware of a particular need (as in the example in Section 3.2.1). In Factory Foods, one manager provided daily support to a worker who was hoping to become a team leader. These examples of informal training and support demonstrate goodwill on the part of management but tend to be ad hoc and so not easily sustained and also reliant on existing good relations, rather than open to all.

Informal systems of work allocation had also led to perceptions of favouritism and real and perceived inter-ethnic conflict. It was widely reported that the same individuals tended to be picked by managers for job opportunities or overtime offers were perceived as being ethnically based, either towards the white majority group or towards minorities: ‘You only chose them because they are Kurdish’.

Formalised manager-staff communication networks and meetings offered opportunities to access information about current and changing practices, job information and how managers were thinking. In Services Ltd there were procedures to ensure communication lines between staff and managers were open, including weekly team meetings and bi-annual anonymous employer opinion surveys. In Factory Foods, there were shopfloor meetings but communication practices tended to be more informal. Where there are few or no shopfloor meetings, only informal feedback from interviews and no routine access to information, only those with a special relationship with their manager can begin to build any standing in the organisation.

3.4 ‘Standing out’

‘Standing out’: displaying a certain kind of visibility as an individual is key to promotion (Wajcman, 1998). A typical comment by one senior manager was: ‘employees who put themselves forward so the manager will remember them, and show willingness’ are the ones marked out for promotion; ‘they have to show initiative and stand out’. In a context of informal systems and reliance on good relationships with managers, ‘standing out’ for ethnic minority employees is problematic. Given that this group are under-represented in management, they may already feel visible enough as an ethnic minority and can be reluctant to make themselves doubly visible in case this attracts negative attention. For example, a junior office worker commented that having established good relationships with colleagues despite ethnic divisions, she was unwilling to take the step of
additionally marking herself out by going for promotion (and see Sections 3.13 and 3.14).

Comments from ethnic minority staff in Factory Foods illustrate the lack of access to the informal understandings of the qualities required to be promoted and so the difficulty in learning how to ‘stand out’. For many, working hard and being willing to do overtime and ‘learning everything about the factory’ were seen as qualifying you for promotion. And many had rather a narrow view of leadership: that you had to be ‘strong’ and would have to shout a lot. The ‘have to be hard working’ view of some ethnic groups was reinforced by management: ‘they think if they do overtime and co-operate they can get promotion’. Such views echo common discourses of ethnic minority workers in the 1970s and 1980s (Roberts et al., 1992). There was also a perception that being a manager required distinctive qualities that contrasted with being a worker which was summed up as: ‘crap worker but good manager’. Just doing your current job well is not what is required. So ‘being willing and interested’ is interpreted and displayed differently by different groups and these differences feed into management perceptions of more general differences (see below).

Informal systems and practices rely on good relationships between managers and workers but the very conditions for developing these relationships are themselves informal. So this can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. Reliance on individuals ‘standing out’ as a pathway to promotion is problematic for any minority group who are already perceived as different. Informal practices have the potential for both real and perceived indirect discrimination.

While formal processes are necessary to ensure openness and parity in accessing opportunities for promotion for all groups, these formal systems need to include opportunities for informal contact and socialisation over time. For example, mentoring systems need to be formalised but once established they need to be organised to allow considerable exposure to management modes of talk through the development of informal relations.

### 3.5 Organisational changes and structures

The under-representation of ethnic minority groups in middle and senior management has been widely reported. Many current structures and changes within organisations create contexts which have the unforeseen potential to negatively affect ethnic minority promotion. Some of these are responses to new developments within the organisation, others are long-standing. The ‘snowy peaks’ of senior management (Phillips, 2003) are perceived as beyond the reach of junior managers who may feel trapped at a given level. Our data reflected some of these wider issues and their possible impact on ethnic minority progression and promotion. They also raised other questions of equality related to gender and class which are beyond the scope of this research.
3.5.1 Organisational changes

Both Factory Foods and Services Ltd had been affected by the ideology of the ‘new capitalism’ in which organisations are less centralised, permanent employment is much more uncertain and there is a new order of ‘lean’ management and flattened hierarchies. This ‘new work order’ (Gee et al., 1996) has social and cultural implications that have a particular effect on the communication skills expected of managers at different levels. Many ‘people issues’, such as dealing with complaints and selection interviewing were beginning to be devolved to operational managers and, in some cases, were designed to reduce the influence of the union. But, by contrast, at the lowest level of management, power and status were seen to be reduced. Both these trends were perceived as having an effect on ethnic minority group promotion.

While there was a wide perception that ethnic minority groups were quite well represented at team leader level, there was also awareness of a downshift in status for this group. In one organisation, the most junior management position was described as ‘tokenistic’ and there were comments that the title of ‘team manager’ did not mean as much as it used to. There were perceived to be few rewards and not much chance of further promotion. Many at this most junior level were ‘acting’ managers who could stay in this position for an extended period and had to be part-time worker and part-time manager. This was seen as having an impact on motivation to progress and also meant that there was a bigger gap between supervisory roles and management positions.

But paradoxically, junior management were also seen as taking on new demands. And some informants considered that this could be demotivating for ethnic minority groups who would not want to expose themselves to more difficult personnel issues which could be exacerbated by race (see the concerns about double visibility above). Handling people and grievances at a local level with less HR support could also mean that issues of discrimination were dealt with more informally, possibly putting ethnic minority groups in a more vulnerable position.

3.5.2 Changing role of Human Resources departments

The well known divisions between HR and operational sides of an organisation were again reflected in this study (Collinson et al., 1990). Whereas HR was described by an operational manager as comprising ‘slipper-wearing do-gooders’, HR managers saw operations as ‘tough’ and ‘uncompromising’ and unaware of the importance of equal opportunity issues. The divisions in terms of function, priorities and control strategies (formal bureaucratic procedures compared to operational autonomy and informality) tended to make HR remote so that even where there were strong policies in equal opportunities and diversity, these were not easily mainstreamed (see below).

There was increasing focus on people and leadership skills as day to day HR functions were pushed down to operational level. These skills tended to be acquired informally through social networks (see above) and were crucial in assessing
candidates in the interview. So ethnic minorities may be further disadvantaged if their social networks do not include people at management level. In addition a more remote role for HR could also undercut the equalities agenda in the selection interview practices.

3.6 Operational changes

3.6.1 Technical changes

Rapid expansion and past and future changes to operational processes had tended to destabilise ethnic minority promotion prospects or shift the focus to other aspects of diversity. In Services Ltd, the move towards more mechanisation and so more part-time and flexible work, usually associated with a female workforce, together with a largely female HR department, may account for a current focus on gender rather than ethnic minority issues.

In Factory Foods rapid expansion over the last five years led to large numbers of recently arrived ethnic minority workers being employed in a factory where white and south Asian workers had traditionally been employed. In the early years of this expansion, many Kurdish refugee and asylum seekers were employed and, more recently, Polish workers. Several Kurdish workers were promoted, through informal means, to team leader and line manager jobs. With less expansion but more changes in the running of the plant planned, the Kurdish line managers were exposed to criticism that they are not the managers of the future and may find themselves unable to get promotion beyond team leader level (see below).

3.6.2 Impact of operational changes on levels of communication required

Changes in work practices, with more responsibility devolved to junior management, led to the introduction of a language policy in Factory Foods. As part of the promotion criteria, candidates are required to pass the Skills for Life in English as a Second Language at Level One. This new policy has led to some ethnic minority candidates being unsuccessful, although they were assessed positively in other ways: ‘I don’t think he’s going to pass his [language] test which is a great shame because he’s got the drive and so on’. It has also led to some increase in interethnic tensions since those who were promoted in the pre-test era may speak poorer English than those who now find they cannot be promoted because the language bar has been formalised and is now at a level beyond their functional capacity on the shopfloor.

The company had an arrangement with the local college’s ‘outreach scheme’ for a ‘language bus’ to come to the factory one day a week to offer workers language learning and to assess them. Although this aspect of the language policy offers an opportunity to many staff, in practice it can affect promotion prospects negatively. The main reason for this is the lack of joined-up thinking between the college and the company. College diagnostic tests (designed to place people) are used as pass/
fail tests by the company; there is little understanding of the language requirements of Level One (by the company) or their relationship to the communicative demands of the team leader job (by both company and college) and of the length of time needed to make tangible progress when classes are only once a week. In addition, both sides rely on the individual motivation of staff without taking account of local conditions such as shift times, shopfloor lines where few workers speak English as their expert language and which, therefore, offer little chance of language development, lack of information about the classes and long waiting lists for those who had heard of the language bus. Such language policies, although less formalised, were commonplace in the 1970s and 1980s (Roberts et al., 1992) and reflect the persistent use of language as a means of restricting promotion prospects for certain groups of ethnic minority workers.

3.7 Age structuring

Rationalisations about promotion decisions were frequently made in terms of age, favouring ‘younger, dynamic’ candidates who were ‘hungry’ for promotion. Reasons for rejecting older applicants related to their inflexibility in times of changing management roles. As senior managers commented:

‘Some junior managers have been here a long time and it’s hard to get them to change – in some ways it’s easier for newer entrants to pick it up’. Innate ability was another reason given: “people who are real stars tend to rise up through the company early on because they’re so hungry for it, they start covering senior roles quickly”.

This ‘age structuring’ of promotion counts against ethnic minority groups for several reasons. They may have progressed more slowly in their careers because of discrimination or may have moved to the UK and had to dramatically shift career. There may also be more hidden reasons, such as concerns about ‘standing out’ (see above) which may inhibit them from displaying a hunger for promotion or a lack of the social networks which might position them closer to management.

3.8 The discourses of community as a barrier to promotion

The organisational and structural factors feed into, and are fed by, the organisational and community discourses which circulate both formally and informally and influence both promotion opportunities on the one hand, and the motivation to apply for promotion, on the other. The rest of this chapter examines these different discourses.

The most pervasive discourses centred on constructing ‘the other’, those people perceived as separate from one’s own community. These discourses emphasise difference and define ‘others’ in terms of general stereotypes or, while being aware of this ‘othering’ work, distance themselves from it. Alongside this discourse of
difference spoken by both workers and management, managers also talked of adapting to change and of downplaying difference, seeing all their staff as ‘the same’.

Notions of community are a useful way of looking at the social relations in multi-ethnic workplaces. Historically, the idea of ‘community’ harks back to an ideal world in which people are united by common norms of behaviour and shared traditional values (Tönnies 1974). It reflects a romantic and homogeneous concept of community. As such it provides networks of similar people who protect members from ‘others’. In this way the workings of a community can be exclusionary and negative. In Factory Foods there was a strong rhetoric of ‘community’ with much nostalgic description of the old ‘family environment’ when all the workers were white and strong personal bonds had been forged over time. As one team manager said: ‘...So very much a family environment you came to, you enjoyed work...it was your social life, it was brilliant... Now its predominately ethnics rather than whites here...so that’s a big change’. In this construction of the company as a family space, an implicit contrast is established between the white ‘familial community’ and the collective of ‘ethnics’. Differences in work behaviour, interpersonal relations and inability to speak ‘red hot’ English were used to set apart ethnic minority groups as ‘other’ (see Section 3.9).

Being part of a ‘community’ reinforces a sense of belonging and gives social capital to those who are members of it. But it can also be experienced as oppressive and limiting within the constraints of a particular workplace. In Factory Foods, many white British workers were still on contracts based on the old shift system while ethnic minority workers were on the new system which offered much less flexibility. By opting to stay on the old contracts, this group were effectively excluded from promotion. This sharing of a particular hardship, fostered the spirit of community, a ‘mutuality of the oppressed’ (Williams, 1976). These work practices also encouraged the forming of segregated lines, with some largely white lines. And although senior management were keen to develop integrated lines, the grouping of workers along ethnic lines because of different shift systems led to fewer opportunities for ethnic minority workers to use and develop their communication skills in English. Several respondents from this group expressed concerns about this.

In both Factory Foods and Services Ltd, the sense of management as very much ‘other’ was perceived as a barrier to promotion by respondents from all ethnic groups. In both companies there were anxieties expressed by some ethnic minority staff, particularly women, that being a manager required you to be tough and strong: ‘team leaders job has too much tension that’s why they got mad very fast – they too much shouting or something that’s why maybe I’m not really rushing to be a team leader’. Within Services Ltd issues of membership and belonging led to perceived constraints in opting for promotion. Many frontline staff, both white and ethnic minority groups, spoke of a strong sense of community in terms of ‘all staff working as a team’ which provided support and reassurance. As most of the
respondents were white or Afro-Caribbean, this may also reflect the erosion of felt difference between these groups in the wider society (Modood et al., 1997). Although the rhetoric of ‘community’ was of unity and inclusiveness, in order to belong, individuals had to remain ‘authentic’ members of the collectivity. This meant not becoming a manager or going for promotion. As one shopfloor worker said: ‘How can I say this, if I became a manager here you think how staff will turn, they would turn, they would turn against you saying “oh him”.

The community of frontline workers is therefore restrictive in terms of promotional aspirations. While this is the case for white and ethnic minority workers alike, there is a double pressure for the latter. As well as the division between management and staff, the under-representation of ethnic minority groups at more senior levels, meant that going for promotion was seen by those of similar ethnicity as betrayal of their ethnic group within the frontline collective (see Section 3.4 and Davidson, 1997): ‘A lot of people are afraid to make that step’ as one shopfloor worker commented. ‘Community’ therefore acts as a double barrier to promotion for ethnic minority staff who have to manage accusations of ‘selling out’ from both the larger staff community and from their ‘cultural’ community.

3.9 Cultural differences and stereotyping

The notion of ‘cultural behaviour’ was used to stereotype ethnic minority groups both positively and negatively. There were many positive comments about ethnic minority staff’s hard work and capacity to endure difficult conditions. As one senior manager in Factory Foods said ‘they have done a brilliant job’. Particular groups tended to be singled out for positive comment. Those from Eastern Europe, notably Polish groups, were described as more able, educated and more integrated:

‘These Polish workers have a good work ethic. They have a few difficulties with the language, and they need helping along, but they understand what you want them to do and get on with it, if I can crudely distinguish between black and white.’

(Senior manager in Factory Foods)

Such stereotypes are quick to take hold and there was anecdotal evidence from one of the DVD workshops of organisations that had asked an employment agency only for Polish workers. But when problems later emerged, all Polish employees were sacked and the agency was told not to send any Polish people in future. So even a positive ascription is just another stereotype which can work against members of the group in the longer term. However, where positive and negative stereotypes of different groups are held, increasing diversity in the workplace may reinforce some of the negative stereotypes as they are contrasted, in this case, with newer arrivals who themselves identify more closely with the white majority than as an ethnic minority group.

‘Cultural behaviour’ tended to be equated with different and unacceptable behaviour. At Factory Foods, there was evidence that some ethnic minority workers
were constructed as child-like and emotionally volatile with an adversarial style of
team leadership unsuitable for the less hierarchical new work order:

‘They just fly off the handle a little bit because they don’t understand where
we are coming from…and I’m just like “go upstairs, calm down for a little bit,
and then think about it”…they just get a bit sort of hot-headed at times’.

(Middle manager, Factory Foods.)

Wider societal discourses may shape these comments about emotional, irrational
behaviour among ethnic minority groups (Modood et al., 1997, Wodak, 1996).
While seen as too forceful with other employees, in interaction with managers and
more formal settings, ethnic minority workers were perceived as over-conciliatory
and suspiciously over-enthusiastic ‘saying the right thing not the true thing’
(middle manager, Services Ltd) and so characterised as dishonest (see Roberts et
al., 2006 for how this plays out in low-paid job interviews). Both characterisations
positioned certain groups as unsuitable for management responsibilities. While
these differences were highlighted, there was also a discourse of accommodation,
a recognition that managers had to do some adapting too: ‘Obviously, there’s
going to communicate with them [ethnic minority staff]’ (Senior manager,
Factory Foods). The overall picture was of management struggling to be fair-
minded, appreciating the hard-work of their shopfloor staff but also frustrated by
interactional differences.

In Factory Foods there was a general concern that the ethnic minority staff were
limited in terms of the work they could do and poor language skills was often
used as a proxy for a more general assessment that they were capable of rote
work but not innovating. Questions were raised about whether ethnic minority
team leaders could take on the new demands of the company. Some of the white
supervisory staff considered that ethnic minority staff on an equivalent grade
had less responsibility than them and these arguments, as well as reinforcing the
different communities in an organisation, served to construct ethnic minority team
leaders as having limited potential: ‘[We] need to raise that level a bit so now…it’s
tough as it is because these guys [ethnic minority workers] have done a brilliant
job…but almost they’re not really good enough to take us to that next step’
(Senior manager, Factory Foods).

These negative assessments may have been exacerbated by feelings of insecurity
among white management, some of whom were much less formally qualified
than certain ethnic minority staff.

The perceived limitations of ethnic minority groups, therefore, were seen as a
challenge to the future of the organisation. As one senior manager from Factory
Foods said: ‘Again they can run our lines, they understand what the meat is,
they understand what the veg looks like…but where are they going to take us
forward?’

New production processes required both technical and people skills but many of
the ethnic minority team leaders were perceived as having reached their potential
and as having limited communication and management skills. As well as language and other limitations, local arguments also stressed the transgressive presence of ethnic minority staff driving away white workers and taking a lot of the jobs. While male ethnic minority workers were seen as taking jobs, the under-representation of ethnic minority female workers was explained in terms of women as unambitious homemakers. In an environment where promotion is dependent on ‘standing out’ such stereotypes act as a barrier to individuals’ career prospects.

The responses in the data paint a complex picture of ethnic relations and one that is somewhat removed from recent debates on ethnicities and community in the social science literature. These studies tend to agree that more separateness (as in ethnic work lines where all workers are from the same ethno-linguistic background) or denial or distancing from some of the inevitable tensions and sense of difference of ethnic diversity are not solutions. Rather they argue for a more permeable sense of community forged across difference (Hall, 1992, Massey, 1994, Sibley, 1997). In these new social sites, difference is acknowledged, negotiated and contested with a view to creating new understandings and breaking down cultural and racial stereotypes.

These notions are distinctly aspirational when related to the complex ethnic politics of the workplace. For example, in the DVD workshops, there were concerns expressed about the need for ‘standards’ in terms of values and conduct that ‘everyone of every race should have to adhere to’ to ‘take on Anglo-Saxon norms in a corporate sense’ (DVD workshop participant). But participants struggled to decide what these standards would be. This tension between laying down norms, on the one hand, and acknowledging and communicating about difference, on the other, reflects the wider discourses in society and the experiences of ethnic minority workers in other workplace research. However, moves towards a more open communication system in which differences can be negotiated as part of forging a new community are already part of Services Ltd new practices (see below).

3.10 Language and cultural practices

Differences in language, communication and social relationships were frequently cited as possible barriers to promotion. ‘Language ability’ was treated in an undifferentiated way as if all communicative tasks required the same level of skills and groups of ethnic minority workers in Factory Foods were stereotyped as having ‘below primary level school English’ (see Section 3.6.2). General societal discourses about language testing and citizenship leaked into comments about the need for language testing as a step towards integration. Limited language ability was also linked to general intelligence (rather than educational qualifications) and tended to be used as a proxy for other negative characteristics.

The use of a common shared language other than English on the shopfloor was invested with suspicion: ‘[when people speak their own language] then people hear the conversation and feel uneasy, think they’re talking about them, and can
add up two and two and make five...people can misperceive things, and this festers in the mind and leads to attitudes, so if you cut out talking your language you cut that away’ (Middle manager, Services Ltd). And this suspicion was extended to ‘ethnic managers’ and projected on to what they might be saying to their staff with whom they shared a common language: ‘Asian managers might be saying in their own language “come on you buggers” and this would not reflect the style of management’ [the organisation] was aspiring to’ (Middle manager, Services Ltd).

Differences in communicative style were also used to reinforce a perception of different ‘cultural’ behaviours among ethnic minority junior management (and see Section 3.9). White senior managers perceived some of this group as being ‘too brusque in their orders’ as illustration that they did not have an understanding of leadership and were too hierarchical in their managing of people, assuming that authority came with the post rather than having to be earned through relational skills. However, there was no awareness that these differences in communicative style may be just that and not fundamental differences in values.

3.11 Other barriers to promotion: location and place perception

Linked to notions of belonging and security were location and perceptions of place. The particular location of the workplace and feelings and anxieties invested in this workplace, and possible workplaces elsewhere, could act as a barrier to promotional aspirations. In Factory Foods, whereas both white and ethnic minority workers cited ‘wanting to stay’ as a reason for not looking elsewhere for possible promotion, the reasons were different. For white staff, ties to the local area and to the workplace were strong. For ethnic minority groups who were relatively recent arrivals, the area and the workplace represented stability and the option of moving to another place was unsettling to them.

In Services Ltd, the anxiety about ‘selling out’ if promoted led to comments that staff would only consider promotion if relocated to another site where they could make a fresh start:

‘If you’re gonna do this [apply for promotion] better to go to another location and manage new people, people you have not worked alongside before.’

(Junior manager, Services Ltd)

Since relocation was actively considered as a condition for going for promotion, respondents had clear perceptions of place, particularly of those areas of low diversity or where the British National Party (BNP) was active. As one manager from Services Ltd. commented:

‘I was a bit nervous about coming to the offices in [North London] as they were previously used by the BNP. So I was worried about the area being racist and of the people in the area being unforgiving of people like me’. 
Although her fears had been largely unfounded, they reflect worries about being ‘out of place’ or isolated, as a trade union representative from Services Ltd commented:

‘They [ethnic minority staff] may face additional problems when relocating in another part of the country and this is because the places they move to have a low diversity and ethnic minority staff will often feel very isolated. They will not have people they can identify with and will often feel like they don’t belong.’

So, questions around place perception, stability, belonging and acceptance play a role in ethnic minority staff’s chances of promotion.

3.12 Workers’ accounts of discrimination

Generally, responses to questions about experiencing discrimination were muted. Either workers were reluctant to speak about it, said that they were aware of it but had either not been affected themselves or ‘could not allow it to bother’ them. The fact that several informants did not wish their interviews to be recorded or avoided answering questions about their own personal experience, suggest that they may have been anxious about the security of their position in the company and did not wish to be ‘outed’ (Davidson, 1997) as individuals overly concerned with issues of race and discrimination. (This could possibly reflect an awareness that raising issues of race and discrimination might also feed into the negative stereotypes of being over-emotional – see Section 3.9). Indeed many respondents who were not from ‘established’ ethnic minority groups were at pains to stress that they were happy in their job and revealed nothing negative: ‘I happy in this job, this work here, because you know it’s my first job, I’ve never been in any [other], never no working nowhere’ (Factory worker).

We have termed this the ‘immigrant story’. It refers to when job and personal insecurities, as the result of international conflict and other global pressures, mean that relative newcomers do not feel they have the right to project anything other than a positive interpretation of their experiences in Britain (See Chapter 8 and Roberts and Campbell, 2006). For example, a union Equal Opportunities adviser described an incident in one branch in Glasgow where Kurdish workers had experienced racial taunts from white Scottish workers. However, the Kurdish workers did not feel they could speak out and if other white workers had not taken up their case, the incident would have remained unreported.

Some staff from ‘established’ ethnic minority groups were more willing to talk openly about discrimination in their organisations and saw there was still an ‘ethnic penalty’ that worked against promotion prospects. One successful Afro-Caribbean candidate for a junior management position considered that while the company (Services Ltd) had done a lot recently to tackle discrimination, it could never be completely eradicated: ‘Some of my colleagues blatantly don’t try for promotion because they almost know they can’t get it’. There was also a perception that
you had to be ‘outstanding’ to be promoted if you were black, whereas white candidates were promoted more easily and by being ‘ordinary’.

### 3.13 Managers’ accounts of racism

A common position among managers interviewed was that racism was practically non-existent and largely unverifiable but could happen:

> ‘I’ve got a very comfortable existence, so it’s hard for me to know…I mean I’ve watched it but never been overtly conscious of it to the point where I’ve thought that is wrong and unfair and I’m going to do something about it even as a local manager I never actually saw it happening…not overtly, I can believe though in a big organisation that it does happen.’

(Senior manager, Services Ltd)

Other managers displayed a positive image of ethnic relations in their department, downplaying the plurality of the office and asserting a common humanity:

> ‘To be quite honest with you I don’t look at people if they’re Hindus or Muslims – to me they’re people, yeah, and I don’t put a tag to them and I don’t think we do that here which is why we get on so well – we are very very mixed and we treat everyone as human beings without having a label’.

(Office manager, Services Ltd)

This positive gloss on inter-ethnic relations reflects management perceptions of ‘no problem here’ but was challenged by some staff’s views that there were tensions both within the staff group and between managers and staff.

Where it was acknowledged, racism was generally perceived as relating to the past or as a shopfloor or frontline issue and not a management issue. Examples were given of racist bullying and harassment (although this had been substantially dealt with). The most commonly elicited accounts of racism and discrimination were of conflicts between ethnic minorities, specifically those who were visibly different:

> ‘There are problems of minority against minority, segregated communities’ (Middle manager, Services Ltd).

These accounts draw attention to the fact that more recently arrived migrant groups, and minorities within minorities, may face racism from other ethnic minority groups. And this was supported by some ethnic minority employees who spoke of negotiating tensions on a daily basis with both colleagues and managers. Problems or tensions between Afro-Caribbean and Somali groups were cited as a current example. However, the tendency of managers to foreground such conflicts, rather than focusing on discrimination that all minorities might potentially face in an organisation, suggests that diversity itself is seen as the problem. So the differences between various ethnic minority groups tend to be highlighted at the expense of acknowledging the potential disadvantage that all ethnic minority groups may experience.
Similarly, the low levels of promotion for ethnic minority women were linked by some managers to discrimination by male managers: ‘Some of them [Asian staff] have old-fashioned values, they’re probably the worst in terms of racial issues’ (Middle manager, Services Ltd); ‘[Asian managers] can’t relate to an Asian woman working here…I’ve told them they need to treat women with respect’ (Middle manager, Services Ltd).

So the issue of racism tended to be ‘pushed down’ to shopfloor level and to ethnic minority groups (Gaudio and Bialostock, 2005) as a ‘working class’ problem and one that more senior management felt distant from. The general and stereotyped ways in which these issues were discussed suggest a distancing from the complex inter-ethnic politics at local level. Some senior management ethnic minority respondents also distanced themselves from issues of race, although this may reflect their own minority position in the organisation and the need to align themselves with their white peers (Davidson, 1997).

It was often left to ethnic minority junior management to resolve a problem which more senior managers implied they themselves could not fully appreciate. There were different views among management about the usefulness of bringing local community leaders in to solve what were seen as ethnic tensions. The influence of external social hierarchies in some communities was identified as a problem on the shopfloor, while bringing in ‘respected members’ from such communities was offered as a possible solution by other managers. The practice of giving extra responsibility to relatively isolated ethnic minority team leaders or very junior managers to sort out these issues, puts an additional burden on this group and could be a factor in reducing motivation to apply for promotion.

3.14 Perceptions of the formal procedures to tackle discrimination

There were strongly contrasting positions from the two case study organisations on the role and effectiveness of formal procedures, depending on their overall position on HR issues. For example, Factory Foods has no ethnic monitoring and only the standard grievance procedures. There was a more traditional and informal approach to promotion and progression based on bringing individuals forward:

‘I suppose at the end of the day I don’t care [about ethnic monitoring] if you see what I mean…my concerns would be how then those individuals then have the opportunity both from the point of view of their ethnicity and their gender to move up through the organisation.’

(Senior manager, Factory Foods)

Services Ltd has a robust set of procedures and full ethnic monitoring programme. There was a perception among most managers that the company had ‘so many processes that everything’s covered’. Gender rather than ethnicity was often the first topic raised by managers when issues of discrimination were raised.
3.14.1 Management perceptions

Managers commented that there were few cases of discrimination brought by workers against management and that complaints taken to industrial tribunals were usually ones where the complainant was cynically ‘playing the discrimination card’. The low level of reported cases may indeed reflect the success in tackling discrimination. However, this low level may be, at least partly, because of the barriers to reporting discrimination in the very processes in place to tackle it. In order to go through formal procedures, individuals not only have to put themselves ‘on the line’ and so may ‘make more problems for themselves’ (particularly where there is no independent manager brought in on the case) but also use formal self-presentation skills in writing and face-to-face meetings which are not required for the job and in which they may lack confidence. Lack of institutional knowledge and linguistic capital may deter them from taking a case or contribute to its failure (Roberts and Campbell, 2006). So, low levels of reported discrimination, as well as reflecting good practice, may, in part, result from a reluctance to take up the procedures or lack of clear evidence.

Where ethnic monitoring was in place, management and unions were aware of the under-representation of staff in middle and senior management positions: ‘There’s a certain level that you can get through and that’s where it stops’ (Union representative, Services Ltd).

While the statistics derived from ethnic monitoring provide the opportunity to highlight possible inequalities, investigate their underlying causes and remove unfairness or disadvantage, they were not obviously mainstreamed and most middle managers interviewed were not familiar with the monitoring data. One manager commented that diversity was ‘tacked on’ and dealt with by the diversity manager. Figures were ‘pulled out’ and passed over to diversity colleagues and the overall statistical monitoring did not find its way back from HR to operational departments.

3.14.2 Formal procedures and the selection interview

The relationship between under-representation at senior levels and the potential for indirect discrimination in interviews remained invisible. A senior operational manager confirmed that ‘it’s very rare to get complaints about discrimination at interviews’. Another manager gave the example of a claimant who considered he had been discriminated against but there was ‘no substance’ to his claim as he could not prove that he had been treated differently procedurally. The understandable focus on formal procedures and structured interviews means that interactional differences between different interviewers and candidates would be impossible for a claimant to prove since there is no audio record of the interviews (see Chapters 5 to 8). The subtle and fleeting biases in job interview interaction are not recorded and so any complainant cannot use details of talk in interaction to substantiate their claim.
So the reliance on formalisation and structured interviews while a necessary condition of managing equality is not a sufficient one. Even the apparent ‘objectivity’ of competency-based interviews masks the subjective judgements and evaluations that are produced in face to face interaction (see Chapters 5 and 6 and Roberts and Campbell, 2006). And this is illustrated in informal views and some personal research by managers with an interest in diversity which indicated a perception that white male senior managers tended to recruit ‘in their own likeness’ and that ethnic minority staff were, therefore, less likely to apply, echoing the perceptions of shopfloor staff (see above).

3.14.3 The task of implementing formal policies

In Services Ltd, the official organisational discourses and equality statements show a clear commitment to tackling discrimination and promoting equal opportunities. The extent to which these are implemented affect the staff’s confidence in the organisation and in turn could affect their promotion aspirations and decision to apply, as one union policy adviser commented:

‘If someone has been discriminated against or been a victim of bullying then there is an issue of confidence, not necessarily the individual’s confidence in themselves but their confidence in the employer to be a fair employer and vigorously investigate the complaint. If this is not done then the prospects of promotion are problematic in terms of the individual’s belief, I’d be surprised if that individual would want to go for promotion.’

(Trade union adviser, Services Ltd)

However, as is widely reflected elsewhere (Jewson and Mason, 1994, Noon and Hoque, 2001), there is a ‘space’ between rhetoric and reality (Sanglin-Grant, 2005) in some aspects of workplace practice. Whereas at the most senior level, one response was: ‘It [promotion] has nothing to do with colour; we are not promoting white people either because they haven’t got the skills’; further down the organisation, there were widespread views that the ‘business is very white male dominated’. Organisations such as Services Ltd had made considerable efforts in the form of initiatives to bring equality issues to the fore (see below). But in large, complex organisations, production pressure at shopfloor level means that there are tensions between local production decisions and equality statements and initiatives put in place by HR departments and senior management (Sanglin-Grant, 2005). Entrenched views, the relative remoteness of HR departments, competing production priorities, informal procedures and structures can prevent organisations from fulfilling altruistic obligations.

3.15 Identified good practice

Both Services Ltd and Factory Foods were aware of the complex issues in promoting ethnic minority staff and both had strategies in place that had the potential for encouraging and supporting them. Services Ltd had been ‘grappling with these issues for many years’ in London and other ethnically diverse areas. In Services Ltd
these related to practices that would increase staff’s confidence in the fairness of the organisation generally. Most notable, were the attempts to create a system of open communication in which concerns, ideas and solutions could be aired through regular employee opinion surveys aimed at the shopfloor staff. There were also ‘dignity and respect’ helplines to deal with issues of harassment or bullying and strategies to deal with matters of religious observances. In matters of discrimination, independent adjudicators were brought in and senior management were regularly updated on cases which had to be processed within a strict timetable. The assessment centre which, apart from the interviews, was not the subject of this study, allows all candidates to display strengths which do not rely on the communicative resources required in the job interview. (However, without close scrutiny of all assessment processes, it is not possible to state that these are fair).

Factory Foods, although it did not have formal systems in place, had organised the language training described above and there was evidence in the recorded promotion interviews that managers wanted to minimise the communicative demands of the job interview. However, both the language training and the interview process also had the effect of disadvantaging those who did not have English as their expert language (see above and Chapter 8). To help counter this, Factory Foods also had some testing/training for new team leaders over and above the interview: ‘the training involved doing a score card on their changeovers on a line, metal checks, right first time, legal/technical side. Look at the score every month, and help them if they need to get to a certain score, once they’ve got to a certain score they can go up to the team leader standard’ (Senior manager). This allows for the technical aspect of the work to be assessed over time but does not deal with the ‘people skills’ aspects which are only assessed in the interview.

3.16 Conclusions

A complex picture of opportunities for promotion emerges with a mix of conditions which promote opportunities and some persistent barriers to it. The history, environment and size of the two case study companies meant that practices and perceptions contrasted in many ways. While Factory Foods relied on goodwill at the senior level and many informal practices, Services Ltd had a clear equal opportunities policy and diversity agenda. While formal procedures ensure transparency, they cannot be relied on to ‘cover’ all aspects of fair practice.

The human environment within which promotion decisions are made is even more complex. Here there is a mosaic of tensions and affiliations – of belonging and ‘otherness’ between management and staff, white and ethnic minority groups and within different ethnic minority groups. On the positive side, there were accounts of mentoring, individual support, training opportunities, the development of open communication systems to tackle local problems and independent adjudication in formal complaints.
However, there was a series of factors that produces a number of subtle and not so subtle barriers to ethnic minority promotion. These were: the interrelationship of organisational structures and changes, racialised discourses and the paradoxical effects of ‘community’, negative stereotyping and perceptions of discrimination both locally and systemically, informal practices and an overreliance on formal procedures to ‘cover’ everything. While some of these are top-down and relate to practices and discourses that rationalise or unwittingly lead to indirect discrimination, others are bottom-up and relate to factors that demotivate ethnic minority staff from applying because of lack of confidence in the fairness of the organisation or local affiliations. For example, being part of a shopfloor community can act as a double barrier to promotion for ethnic minority staff who have to manage accusations of ‘selling out’ from both the larger shopfloor community and from their ‘cultural’ community.

Good practice in the form of open communication systems and equal opportunities procedures and other formal practices had begun to close the gap between official discourses and perceptions of discrimination. However, reliance on formalisation is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for dismantling barriers to ethnic minority promotion.

Although interviews were still seen as the most important aspect of the assessment process (see Chapter 4), both organisations also put emphasis on procedures which do not carry the cultural and language weight of the interview. The range of activities in the assessment centre and the technical tests on the shopfloor in Factory Foods are more work-related and direct than the interview, as the proceeding chapters show.
4 The selection interview: outcomes, decision-making criteria and judgements

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter we discuss the relative success of candidates and relate this to their ethnicity. We then outline the interviewers’ decision-making criteria and how they are used to make judgements. As we have indicated in Chapter 2, we cannot quantify the interview outcomes along ethno-linguistic lines as we did in the earlier study because of the small number of recorded interviews. However, of this small number, those who were judged as clear failures were more likely to be ethnic minority candidates born abroad than either candidates from the white majority group or those from ethnic minority groups born in the UK. The interviewer criteria described in Section 4.5 assumes that candidates are aware of the requirements to present the self as a project; in other words to show awareness of their own self-development through their career progression. This project of the self has to be in tune with the organisation’s values and at ease with the more abstract management formulations of interviewers’ questions. Candidates from the white majority group as well as ethnic minority candidates faced difficulties in presenting themselves in preferred ways and interpreting the hidden assumptions of the job interview but those born abroad faced the greatest difficulties.

4.2 The candidates: ethnicity and success rates

Of the 17 candidates, six were white British, five were from ethnic minority groups born in the UK and six were from ethnic minority groups born abroad. Within the ethnic minority group, nine were from well established groups: Afro-Caribbean, South Asian and African and two were from white minority groups.
Only three were successful: Emma, white British, who had applied for a senior operative post; Gladston who was born in Jamaica but a long-term resident in the UK and Junior, a black British candidate. Junior was a borderline candidate, the last to be interviewed in the assessment process and was offered the post as the interviewers were under pressure to appoint another candidate.

The small number makes generalisations impossible. The three successful candidates came from the three different categories: white British, ethnic minority British and ethnic minority born abroad. However, a closer look at the judgements of candidates in the decision-making process (the wash up), suggests a similar finding to the earlier research, with candidates who were born abroad being the least successful of the three groups of candidates.

The 14 candidates who were not offered posts can be categorised as either borderline or clearly unsuccessful on the basis of the comments made about them in the ‘wash-up’ sessions. Of the five borderline candidates, only two were from ethnic minority groups. Whereas of the nine who were failed outright, six were from ethnic minority groups and four of these were born abroad. This suggests that whereas candidates from all groups were challenged by the interview process, those from ethnic minority groups who were born abroad were more likely to be the least successful and have the most negative comments made about them.

Table 4.1 Success at interview by ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity/history</th>
<th>White British</th>
<th>Ethnic minority British</th>
<th>Ethnic minority born abroad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borderline unsuccessful</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly unsuccessful</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Competency frameworks, judgements of personality and claimed objectivity

The interviews had a competency-based structure broadly similar to that used with low-paid job interviews in the authors’ earlier study (Roberts and Campbell, 2006) and in line with the 12 most cited examples of competencies (Mathewman, 1996). This structure reflects the fact that personality, values and behavioural traits are valued over technical skills (Halford and Leonard, 1999) and that the focus is on attitude and overall approach rather than specific abilities.

The focus on personality and ability to fit in reflected the wider discourses and practices of organisational culture in which staff are expected to identify their interests in terms of those of the organisation (Gee et al., 1996). In effect, the interviewers are looking for a synthetic personality in which the individual’s persona is synthesised with the core values of the organisation. In the junior management interviews, the over-riding orientation is to the self as a project, always self-aware,
self-reflecting and learning for the benefit of the organisation that they aspire to manage in.

This notion of the self accords with that which dominates Western culture and, in particular, occupational psychology. The self is viewed as a continuous, coherent whole which can be objectively revealed and measured in selection interviews. This notion is challenged by social and cultural theories of identity in which the self is conceived of as having multiple aspects and as being constructed in particular situations (in this case the selection interview) (Holland et al., 1998). The claimed objectivity of the interview is, thus, brought into question, as Chapters 5 to 8 illustrate. And this notion of the self allows no room for the experience of being a minority or having to refashion one’s identity after migrating to the UK.

Candidates who have not been socialised into the dominant organisational culture are also disadvantaged since the style of interview questions and expected answers is relatively distant from the everyday talk on the shopfloor (Iedema, 2003). Interviews are structured around themes whose meanings are taken for granted by the interviewers and which tend to be either abstract formulations of competencies such as ‘focuses action’ or metaphorical such as ‘Going the extra mile’. However, as interviewers frequently commented in ‘wash-up’ sessions, candidates often failed to make appropriate inferences from these questions. The gap between what were seen as standardised, and so obvious, questions by the interviewers and the candidates’ struggles with these questions reflects the extent to which there are hidden assumptions in the interviews. Only candidates who are ‘in the know’ can interpret the unspoken meanings behind these culturally distant formulations. They are culturally distant in two ways: Firstly, the metaphors used to formulate questions (in the case of one of the organisations these were all sporting metaphors) may not be familiar, as used in an interview context, to some groups of candidates. Secondly, the abstract, synthesised language of competencies is both distant from most everyday shopfloor language and is particularly associated with Western discourses of management.

The wash-up sessions were either carried out by the panel members of the interview or, where candidates were interviewed twice by a single interviewer, with both interviewers and a more senior manager chairing the session. Of the 17 sets of judgements, only four showed consistency between interviewers. In some instances, the comments were starkly polarised. For example, of a borderline but unsuccessful candidate, one interviewer said: ‘He happened to say the right thing; too soft, not a spark’ while the other interviewer commented that he was: ‘steady, strong and gave perfect answers’. Given that judgements are being made on personality and how people come across, it is not surprising that there should be inconsistency and clearly group decision-making is designed to iron out some of this. However, the degree of difference between interviewers is an indicator of how highly subjective the interview process is.

In two of the organisations, diversity policies and training were in place aimed at making the interview as objective as possible and to meet equal opportunity
legislation. Candidates were given information about the posts and how the interview would be structured and in one organisation asked to fill out a questionnaire about their careers which was used to structure the interview. There was also a focus on gathering objective evidence only. So, formal procedures were in place aimed at equality and the encouragement of ethnic minority advancement. However, as our data show, formal processes are a necessary but not sufficient condition of fairness.

4.4 Themes covered in interviewers’ questions

The themes, which summarise the main questions and assume that candidates have had management or similar work experience, fall into four overlapping categories:

- **Building relationships, teamwork and developing others:** building relationships within a team, developing a team, establishing yourself in a new team; inspiring, communicating and influencing people; keeping people motivated; giving appropriate help, development and training; managing resistance from groups and individuals and challenging unacceptable behaviour.

- **Problem solving:** (often in relation to customer service or resource management) identifying a problem and solving it; prioritising; implementing unpopular decisions or those which have a negative effect on some or all of the team; disciplining; challenging decisions made by more senior managers.

- **Achievement/results orientation:** (particularly in the face of difficulties) ‘going the extra mile’ and ‘pushing yourself to the limit’; overcoming setbacks; making risky decisions and challenging wrong ones; introducing new practices and innovations.

- **Learning/taking responsibility** (not in the top 12 competencies, Matthewman, 1996, but links with the competencies of adaptability/flexibility and developing others which are in the top 12): self-development; learning from past experiences, particularly failure; willing to take responsibility for mistakes; willing to seek out help and advice; knowing what you still have to prove about yourself.

As part of their good practice in terms of equality, two of the three companies produced materials for candidates to prepare themselves, outlining the competencies or categories that questions would be structured around. In one organisation, candidates were required to write out responses to these questions in advance and these were used by interviewers as prompts, rather than any reference to CVs.
4.5 Interviewers’ and middle and senior managers’ criteria

The personality features and dispositions which interviewers look for in candidates were cited in decision-making or wash-up sessions, in feedback sessions to researchers, where possible in the context of re-watching the recorded interviews and in research interviews with middle and senior managers.

The four main areas listed above were all drawn upon in making decisions about candidates but certain topics were emphasised much more than others. Also, many criteria fell outside the four themes and yet were routinely used to characterise what a junior manager should be and in judging candidates.

4.5.1 Criteria based on the four themes

Building relationships and team work: the emphasis here was on motivating people to manage change, inspiring them and dealing with resistance, ‘not just telling people what to do’. As one senior manager put it ‘we are looking for an ability to lead, engage, involve people – asking people to come along on a journey, not standing behind them with a cattle prod’. Although building relations was mentioned by senior management in research interviews, in the wash-up sessions there was less emphasis on team building or on developing people.

Problem solving: the focus here was on being ‘tough’ and ‘firm’, to see if candidates could bear up to stress; ‘it was not good to be liked too much’ by staff as the candidate could be then be construed as ‘an easy ride’. Junior, who was a successful candidate had interviewed poorly but he ‘was dealing with hard people’ in his acting manager role and this contributed to the final decision to appoint him. Others who were not successful were seen as ‘not tough enough’ or ‘too soft on staff’.

Achievement/results orientation: although getting results and being creative and innovative were perceived as core values by the organisations, they were rarely mentioned explicitly in the decision-making process. However, more general characteristics were cited such as ‘seeing the bigger picture’. Forward thinking and independent thinking were cited by managers as important but in wash-ups were linked to notions of honesty and trustworthiness (see below).

Learning/taking responsibility: this was rarely given as a criterion, except in the context of self-awareness which was seen as a key characteristic of successful candidates (see below).

4.5.2 Criteria outside those used in main questions

Personality: the most frequently mentioned reasons for selecting a candidate, or not, related to personality judgements, reflecting widely held views of the self discussed already. Managerial characteristics cited by senior management included courage, maturity, resilience, being open and honest, drive, enthusiasm and self-
sufficiency. The positive personality traits mentioned in judging candidates were likeable, engaging, upbeat, enthusiastic, straightforward, confident, ‘prepared to muck in’, humorous, open and honest, ‘a sticker’ and someone not easily ‘thrown into a panic’.

The negative characteristics included: cocky, patronising, defensive, blinkered, garrulous, ‘laid back’, ‘overly positive’, ‘arrogant’, ‘over-confident’. Evidence to support these negative characteristics often conflated candidates’ interactional behaviour (see below) or experiences with personality. For example, one candidate who had been a reserve manager, which meant filling in as and when the permanent manager was not available, was criticised for ‘not seeing things through’ although it was the experience of the job rather than attributes of the self that was the basis of the assessment.

Self-awareness: Although not the subject of main questions, follow-up questions routinely asked candidates about their evaluation of an experience. This was translated into a capacity to be self-aware, which was commonly used in judging candidates. Again, the underlying assumption of the self as a coherent and consistent whole drives this focus. The ability to analyse and reflect on a range of past experiences was taken as an indicator of self-development, as were responses to learning from mistakes (see also Adelsward, 1988). Interviewers focused on the self as a project, searching for individual agency and the continuously reflective self. For example, candidates were frequently criticised for speaking of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’.

Honesty: although ‘being honest’ was a core value of the organisations and an important factor in judging candidates, for example ‘I am interested in real personal areas’, it was not thematised in interview questions. The extent to which a candidate was considered honest or trustworthy depended on general impressions of the candidates’ style of talking and interactive behaviour (see Chapter 7). Common criticisms were that candidates were ‘not being themselves’, used ‘buzzwords’, they were ‘blaggers’, there was ‘no substance’, not ‘real’, they were not original, just producing recipe answers or recycling what was in interview preparation packs, ‘just saying what the interviewer wanted to hear’. A telling example of how important honesty was as a criterion is in the contrast between Paul and Junior. Paul was assessed as articulate, ‘eloquent even’ but was not considered honest or self-aware. He had not faced up to his own deficiencies and was over-confident. Junior, in contrast, did not interview well, he was judged as ‘vulnerable’, needing to be ‘weaned on easier positions first’ but there was no questioning of his honesty and, although borderline, was offered the job. Weaknesses in terms of readiness for managerial positions are less negative indicators than assumed lack of honesty.

Interactive behaviour: perceived attributes of candidates were often based on how they interacted with interviewers. Those who talked too much or were perceived as interrupting the interviewer were seen as dominating or cocky, difficult to control and the interviewers felt ‘lectured at’; those who went off the
interviewer’s script in their answer were criticised for irrelevance; and hesitations or pausing were given as evidence that candidates ‘could not think on their feet’. Candidates whose intonation was ‘flat’ were viewed as lacking dynamism. One candidate whose delivery was described as ‘robotic’ and who did not maintain eye contact was judged as being ‘on the edge of a nervous breakdown’.

Communications: Although not an explicit key competency, communicative ability underwrites the four main competency areas used. It was mentioned by senior managers in terms of ‘listening’ and by one as ‘warmth’. However, it was only used as an explicit category to judge candidates born abroad. Some of this group failed, in part, because they ‘lacked basic communication skills’ or had problems of understanding so that misinterpretations of the questions led to irrelevant answers. On one or two occasions, their productive skills were criticised, they ‘misdelivered answers’. In Factory Foods where the promotion interviews were for more senior operative posts rather than for management ones, ‘language problems’ was the main reason for lack of success among candidates born abroad (see Roberts and Campbell, 2006 on the interview as a covert English test).

Commercial/business awareness: competency-based frameworks allow candidates to illustrate their answers from their own experiences, so commercial/business topics were the focus of some follow-up questions. However, they were only occasionally mentioned by middle and senior managers and such awareness was not used as an explicit criterion in the decision-making.

4.5.3 Meta criteria

Meta criteria are about understanding the interview process and mainly revolve around understanding what counts as valid evidence or the role of the interviewer. A contrast was often made between good candidates who gave specific examples and did not rely on generalisations and those whose answers were considered superficial and ‘half-baked’. Candidates were criticised for describing general processes and what should happen or for making claims, particularly about their capabilities and achievements, without giving detailed examples to back up claims. The contrast between general claims of what should happen as opposed to specific examples of what candidates could do, showed that those less familiar with the British job interview, tended to take a more academic or idealised view of experience and skills in which individual action is subsumed. This group underplayed their individual agency, hiding the self behind general claims or appeals to authority. So, the underlying Western construct of the self assumed in the interviews is at odds with culturally different notions of self and identity as part of a collective or deferring to some greater authority (see Chapters 5 and 6). However, the picture is more complex than this. Some candidates were also criticised for over-claiming, talking of themselves too positively without softening these claims. In some cases, candidates mixed an underplaying of their individual actions with overclaiming about other aspects of themselves. In both cases, the display of self did not count as valid evidence.
Similarly, more successful candidates were attuned to the role of the interviewers and the interactional climate they produced. They managed the tension between formality and friendliness, understood the interviewer’s role as prompter of preferred answers and were less likely to misread the grim business of sorting and labelling people which underlies a superficially relaxed environment (see also Chapter 7).

The more similar the candidate’s previous work experience was to the position on offer, the easier to glide from one to the other. The concrete experience could stand for the competency being assessed without the hard communicative work required to link examples to competencies. So experiences distant in time, geographically or culturally, tended to have less validity. African candidates were sometimes stereotyped as relying on ‘their homeland experiences’ which often came with a ‘religious flavour’. An example to illustrate how ethnic minority experiences displayed in interview were not always relevant was of work in a mosque where it was difficult to ‘pull out the leadership qualities’.

As well as the preferred interactional behaviour from candidates (see above), the different types or modes of talk expected in the interview also function as meta criteria. Candidates were expected to be ‘analytical’ but also ‘conversational’ and ‘engaging’, to give detailed descriptions of experience but also be abstract and strategic. In particular, interviewers were interested in what candidates had said when dealing with ‘people situations’ – how they reported talk and interaction. The ability to blend these different modes of talking or discourses and to report on talk was crucial to the success, or not, of candidates (see Chapters 5 and 6).

4.6 Contradictions in the selection interview

Although the procedures are in place to present the interview as an objective process, there is an on-going tension between the interview as a ‘human’ encounter, where people relate together as people and its institutional defensibility. Part of this paradox are the contradictions in the explicit and implicit criteria of the interview:

- Candidates should be well prepared (and written guidance is available) and their degree of preparation is a factor in judging them but they must also be their ‘authentic’ selves, not recycling what they have read in job and personal specifications, even though this is taken by some candidates, not surprisingly, as what interviewers expect to hear.
Candidates have to ‘walk a tightrope’ between extremes: they should display involvement but should not be ‘too personally involved’; they are expected to motivate and inspire, rather than tell but also to be tough and firm; interviewers look for independent and forward thinkers but within organisational cultures which still have a ‘command and control’ system so that candidates are expected to work within policies and procedures; candidates who are humorous and confident are liked but they must not be garrulous and cocky. These contradictions also illustrate some of the irreconcilable differences in competency frameworks since the personal qualities required in one may conflict with another (Fletcher, 1996). So guidance to interviewers is not to expect candidates to score uniformly well across all competencies (Wood and Payne, 2007). However, such guidance does not deal with how candidates can manage these contradictions in performance.

Competency frameworks are designed to open the gate to varied experiences but candidates are expected to make specific links to the competencies and the more similar their work experiences are to the ideal manager characteristics, the easier it is to appear relevant.

While the assessment of candidates is demonstrably seen as objective and based solely on ‘what happens on the day’, in the case of internal promotions, familiarity with candidates and their past experience was routinely used in making final judgements. For example, at the end of one assessment week in which 12 candidates had been assessed for six vacancies, four offers were made. Of the four successful candidates, three were known to the interviewers and were considered ‘sound’, even though they interviewed less well than the one successful candidate who was not known to the interviewers and was considered to have given the best interview performance. On another site, a candidate who was highly rated for his work, was unsuccessful because he was viewed as not being his ‘real self’ in the interview.

4.7 Perceptions of the interview process

4.7.1 Interviewers’ perceptions

Interviewers’ intense participation in interview modes of talking meant that the delicate bundle of understandings required to perform well was taken for granted. These understandings include: relating abstract and metaphorical formulations of main questions to concrete ways of doing and saying, understanding the funnelling processes for drilling down into candidates’ experiences and recognising the interpretive work required to make answers relevant and interactionally appropriate. As ‘insiders’ to the interview process, interviewers were unaware of the social and cultural knowledge assumed in its conduct. Standard competency type questions and written guidance were considered to make the interview straightforward.
Some interviewers commented that they were surprised at how poorly candidates did, in general, given that there were standard questions and that questions often had to be ‘rephrased in children’s terms.’ One interviewer remarked that candidates should be relaxed in the interview ‘since all they had to do was talk about themselves’. One of the three case study organisations used situational or ‘forward-looking’ interviews, although most research suggests that experience-based, behavioural or ‘backward looking’ interviews are fairer for ethnic minority groups (Huffcutt and Roth 1998). When asked if there were problems in using scenario type questions, a senior manager responded that candidates ‘were expected to use their imagination’. So, there was no acknowledgement that candidates with little access to staff in higher grade or team leader roles would struggle in imagining the responsibilities and challenges of an unfamiliar job.

### 4.7.2 Candidates’ perceptions

Most candidates, whether they were successful or not, considered that the interview had been what they expected. The fact that it had been ‘relaxed’ or ‘friendly’ and that they had anticipated the questions about competencies resulted in many unsuccessful candidates overestimating their chance of being offered the post. This suggests that they were unaware of the preferred responses expected by interviewers and took a ‘relaxed’ environment as an indicator of a highly rated performance. But a minority of candidates were aware that the guidance offered beforehand could only partially induct them into the hidden assumptions of the interview.

Candidates born abroad were the least likely to be aligned to interviewers’ expectations. They mentioned ‘qualifications’, ‘working hard’ and ‘good manners’ as criteria by which they would be judged. And as with the earlier study of low-paid job interviews, they expected interviewers to be more interested in their background and achievements generally and not limit the interview to standard questions. Other misunderstandings about the purpose and conduct of the job interview included: ‘I enjoy talking and was able to give examples’ (no realisation that talking too much is assessed negatively) and, ‘the purpose of the interview is to prove that what you said on the application was true’ (although honesty is a criterion, this candidate did not appreciate that the application form was just the starting point in the interview).

### 4.8 Conclusions

It is not possible to conclude from the outcomes of the recorded interviews that ethnic minority candidates in general face systematic disadvantage. However, ethnic minority candidates born abroad were over-represented among candidates judged as clear failures. This suggests that this group of candidates are more likely to be categorically unsuccessful than any other group and that the interview produces conditions for their likely failure.
Although formal procedures contributed to making the interviews more fair, the differences in individual interviewers’ assessment of candidates and the gap between formal criteria and the actual criteria used in these assessments were evidence of how subjective the interview process is. It is also a culturally and linguistically demanding event since the competency framework assumes an understanding of relatively abstract or metaphorical formulations distant from the routine work of the shopfloor and often demands contradictory strengths and skills which require considerable communicative finesse to manage. In addition, the interview requires implicit knowledge of the interview process, most notably related to self-presentation, which is more difficult for those candidates born abroad to access.
5 Candidates’ contributions – 1: talking about work experience

‘Seventy per cent of it is all style and behaviour...because those – those are the intangibles that it’s difficult to put your finger on.’

(Manager, Services Ltd)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter and Chapter 6 use discourse analysis to look at the detailed ways in which candidates talk in promotion/junior management interviews. The core data for both chapters are the transcriptions from the 22 video (or audio) recorded management/promotion interviews. Additional data drawn on are the semi-structured research interviews with managers, notes from the decision-making sessions and video-prompted feedback from some of the participant interviewers.

As Chapter 4 has shown, there is a ‘narrow gate’ of acceptable responses for this type of selection interview. The candidates who are assessed positively (either they are successful or are borderline) are those who convey a ‘management persona’. This is a version of the self which comes across as highly self-reflective, authentic, action oriented and with business awareness. Above all, they manage the social relations of the interview, attuned to the asymmetry of the situation but able to ‘talk like a manager’ with the interviewer, who are themselves a manager.

As with low-paid selection interviews (Roberts and Campbell, 2006), the production of a successful persona depends upon alignment to the different discourses called up by the interviewer and the blending of these discourses into a consistent and appropriately managed ‘self’. This blending of different styles from different aspects of one’s life has also been identified as a marker of success in a similar
but smaller scale study in Denmark (Scheuer, 2001). The resources to call up and blend these different discourses, we have called ‘linguistic capital’. In the earlier study, the focus was on listenable-to stories and some evidence that candidates were willing and flexible. Provided there was some coherent evidence of these, candidates tended to be offered the job. However, in promotion and management interviews, there is a much greater focus on the ‘management persona’ – the personal qualities, the ‘style and behaviour’ of, for example, ‘being innovative’ or being a ‘people person’. This manager’s comment on appraisal interviews holds good for selection interviews:

‘Every manager in the company is appraised now every year and it didn’t always be the case but…we talk about the technical side of the business but in terms of the weighting it’s probably about thirty percent…on what you’d achieve in terms of what the company asks you to achieve 70 per cent of it is all style and behaviour…because…those are the intangibles that it’s difficult to put your finger on.’

(HR manager, Services Ltd)

Candidates have to present themselves convincingly as embodying the management competencies focused on in the interview. The categories used by interviewers in the wash-up sessions (see Chapter 4) assume that these are inner qualities or traits, unproblematically demonstrated through talk, as in the impression-management psychology literature. This focus on the individual and ‘inner essences’ downplays the significance of social interaction in the development of such qualities. In particular, the role of socialisation – of being part of a group through which you learn to act and talk like a manager – is invisible. The dominance of psychological models of behaviour also renders invisible the role of social interaction in the interview itself in attempts to make it objective.

In this chapter we discuss the ways in which candidates must align their modes of talk to the interviewer’s expectations and then focus on one particular set of discourses: occupational/professional discourses used to narrate work experience. With each example, we summarise whether the candidate was successful, borderline (but unsuccessful) or clearly unsuccessful. However, several of the individual examples are categorised as ‘successful’ even when, overall, the candidate has not been, or vice versa. Many of the borderline candidates demonstrated the blended discourses of successful interviews and were not offered the post for other reasons: they were already on a higher salary than was being offered; were known already and this outweighed interview performance; produced a mix of highly rated and lower rated responses but not enough of the former to be offered the post. The labelling of an example as ‘successful’ is based on the interviewer’s orientation to that answer, the wash-up sessions and, where available, interviewer playback sessions with the video-recorded interview. A successful example is used because it well illustrated the phenomenon being discussed. It does not mean that the candidate was necessarily successful overall.
5.2 Alignment to different discourses

5.2.1 Candidate discourses

Alignment refers to the ways in which individual conduct accords with what is ‘culturally normal’ in a particular setting or with particular social groups (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976:843). In the selection interview, candidates have to tailor their responses to the underlying assumptions of the questions and follow-ups and to align themselves to the particular social relationship expected by the interviewers.

The notion of discourse encompasses both the kinds of knowledge that regulate our thinking and the communicative and linguistic resources of oral and written communication. So, a discourse correlates particular topics with particular ways of talking. There are no set features which define a way of speaking as one kind of discourse. Meaning is always context dependent. However, there is a tendency for certain features to cluster together in the different discourses of the interview genre. Three types of discourses were identified in the study of low-paid job interviews (Roberts and Campbell, 2006) and the same three discourse types were identified in this study. Given that both sets of interviews were largely based on competency frameworks and that current practice is to look for core values in applicants, whatever the level of the job (Wood and Payne, 2007), it is not surprising that similar types of questions anticipate broadly similar answers. The difference is in the type of experience, the length of the answers and the level of personal qualities that needs to be evidenced in promotion/management interviews.

5.2.2 Three types of discourses

The three types of discourses identified are:

1 **Occupational/professional discourses** are the narratives of working life which are usually easy to listen to and take a record of. These represent most of the content of the interview. They are the experiences from which the ‘management persona’ is drawn but depend upon how candidates engage with interviewers (personal discourses) and can take an analytic stance (organisational discourses). These professional discourses are discussed and illustrated in this chapter.

2 **Personal discourses** are the modes of talk which explicitly display the self and implicitly invoke the social relationship with the interviewer.

3 **Organisational discourses** are the analytic and more abstract modes of talk to account for, measure and rationalise experiences and attitude. Junior management interviews assume some level of analysis which goes beyond the simple evaluation of an action or a list of advantages or personal characteristics expected in the low-paid job interviews.

Personal and organisational discourses are the subject of Chapter 6.
5.3 The management ‘persona’ and linguistic capital

Although candidates are expected to use all three discourse types, the post-interview discussion of candidates clearly shows that it is the management persona and how this is talked about which is the key criterion (see Chapter 4). The occupational/professional discourses are central to its construction. However, the identity of the candidate as a manager has to permeate the whole interview and the more successful candidates achieve this by blending all three discourses together. Indeed, the more highly rated the candidate’s interview performance, the harder it is to identify the three different discourses since they are so seamlessly blended together.

This seamless blending of appropriate discourses is a kind of ‘linguistic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1991), an acquired knowledge of how to talk in ways which make the speaker sound legitimate – in this context as a potential manager. This management fluency is acquired through social interaction with other managers and candidates who were rated more positively were well aware of the expected performance in the interview. For example, Tim, a white British candidate who was borderline unsuccessful but rated highly on the interview, when asked what interviewers were looking for said ‘a people person’ [personal discourses], ‘someone with firm foundations’ [personal or professional discourses], ‘a fire-fighter [professional discourse], ‘someone who’s got commercial knowledge and an understanding of budgets’ [organisational discourses]. This knowledge is linked to Tim’s mentoring relationships with managers and possibly to cultural membership, where as white British, his networks are more likely to have brought him into contact with middle managers and so helped him to be socialised into how managers talk.

This gradual process of socialisation into talking like a manager is less available to those whose social networks do not include managers. Ethnic work units are an extreme case of limited exposure but even in more integrated workplaces, informal ties of solidarity may be with one’s own ethnic group. And since, ethnic minority groups are still under-represented in management, their informal ties are less likely to include managers and so they are less likely to be gradually socialised into the linguistic capital required to talk like a manager (see Chapter 3).

5.4 Alignment to occupational/professional discourses

These are the narratives of work experience which structure the majority of the interview. They either relate to an explicit set of competencies outlined by interviewers or, less frequently, to a more autobiographical structuring of the interview. These are not just descriptions but are accounts that reflect on, evaluate and justify the story teller and which can be easily recorded on the appropriate forms. There are three aspects to these narratives which are crucial to the outcome of the interview:
• how the manager identity is managed;
• the structure and vividness of the account;
• reporting their own and others’ talk.

5.5 Managing the manager identity.

Most of the main questions in interviews are about managing people. They fall into five categories:

1. Acknowledging difficulties and weaknesses but overcoming them.
2. Being firm and decisive.
3. Taking responsibility.
4. Being innovative.
5. Building relationships with teams.

More time is spent on the first three categories and these are illustrated below. Cutting across these themes are a set of assumptions about an ideal manager identity: one who is action oriented but not overly positive or unrealistic; who is honest about weaknesses but who has learnt through self-reflection; dynamic (not soft), but not overly aggressive; empathetic, inspirational and not too distant but not emotional; and who positions themselves with the management rather than with staff/workers. It is assumed that all these aspects of an ideal manager identity will be displayed in, and through, candidates’ narratives.

5.5.1 Acknowledging weaknesses and difficulties

Most frequently used transcription conventions
(NB See the Appendix for detailed transcription conventions)

| ( ) | Untimed brief pauses |
| (0.5) | Timed pauses approx. seconds and tenths of a second e.g. (0.5)/(0.1)/(2.0) |
| : | Sounds stretch e.g. I guess you must be right |
| - | Cut-off prior word or sound e.g. ‘I thou- well I thought’ |
| **Yes** | Emphasis ie. Perceived stress indicated by volume and pitch change |
| ( ) | Unclear talk |
| ((bell sounds)) | Description of conversational scene |

Continued
Successful example

Tim, a white British candidate was judged to have had quite a good interview, although one interviewer rated him more highly than the other. One said that he was steady, strong and gave ‘perfect answers’; the other that he ‘happened to say the right thing’, that he was not going to innovate and would be too soft on staff. In the following example he manages the tightrope task of acknowledging difficulties but putting himself in a positive light.

Example 1 – Tim: white British – borderline unsuccessful.

1. C: s:o I knew that there was going to be a lot of animosity er:m a lot of ill feeling.
2. er:m when that was actually [delivered
3. I: (okay)] so how did you deal with that (. ) what did you do to
4. C: well what we did is er:m we held erm a a work time learning
5. (was the) learning sessions a:nd (. ) to give support there erm
6. I actually went into those sessions with the work area managers
7. a:nd what we did is er:m (. ) we had sort of our our (cards) on the table
8. and discussed it openly with the staff (1)

Tim first acknowledges the difficulty, then identifies with the managers (line 4) but also speaks of his individual action (line 5), implying his dynamism and to show that he was supporting his staff as well as identifying with management.

Some less successful candidates admit to very serious weaknesses as Terence does:

Unsuccessful example

Terence generally received a lot of negative comments. He was seen as a ‘blagger’, not taking responsibility and ‘no substance’. But in the following example it is not his possible dishonesty but being too honest and open which led to a negative evaluation.
Example 2 – Terence: white Irish. Clearly unsuccessful.

1. I: so is there part of your capabilities your personal capabilities
2. that you have had to work hard to address
3. because you know you needed to be better in a certain area
4. C: just to give you an example of that specifically er ((name)) er:m
5. and ((names an area in London)) recently er:m the guys because they’ve actually
6. I believe come to (.) kind of like the way I work (.)
7. because I am quite friendly with the staff but I get the results
8. er they decided that that er it was quite funny that er
everyday they’d put stickers on my back
9. I: right
10. C: so I told them you know look leave it alone (.) they didn’t so e:r
11. so on the next work time listening and learning session
12. I made it quite clear that that was the end of it (.) e:r
13. that I’m a nice bloke but you know there are standards minimum standards
14. and there is also you know a harassment and bullying procedure
15. which needs to be (.) you know adhered to

Terence claims that he has good relationships with his staff (lines 6-8) but the evidence he gives for this makes him appear weak as he becomes the butt of their jokes (lines 8-9). So being too open and honest can call into doubt a candidate’s authority/credibility as a manager. ‘Honesty’ has to be stylised. In the post-interview comments, Terence was criticised for complaining too much and being too personal and this example might be used to justify these judgements. His failure in the eyes of the interviewer is in choosing an example which appears to align him too closely with his staff and then give too much revealing detail. There is a fine line between self-disclosure which is socially appropriate, as in a show of solidarity with interviewers (a humorous take on weakness which interviewers can empathise with), and that which is socially inappropriate, when the narrative of weakness outstrips the measures used to deal with it.

A contrasting but similarly unsuccessful strategy is not to admit to any weaknesses at all which leads to doubts about credibility (see also Chapter 6). This is an example of the ‘immigrant story’ (see Chapter 8) where candidates who have not been brought up in the UK describe themselves as able to ‘do anything’. As Nanak says in his upgrade interview: ‘I’m ready to everywhere work’.
**Unsuccessful example**

Michael was seen as lacking direction and lacking basic communication skills, although he was ‘a hands on doer’. Doubts about him arose at the beginning of the interview because he presented his career as being on a consistently upward trajectory.


1. let me lets start off first of all so talk me through
2. C: yeah
3. I: your time-lines (.) this is quite an unusual one ((laugh))
4. C: ((laugh))
5. I: it just goes up and up and up

One of the organisations structured their interviews around time-lines, an autobiographical form filled in before the interview in which they had to summarise their working lives. The interviewer’s comments at line 3 and 5 imply some incredulity and this is further reinforced later in the interview when Michael initially declares that he has not had any negative feedback:

Example 4 – Michael.

1. I: what] wha-what’s the worst feedback you’ve had from that (.)
2. the worst bit that you thought oh that’s terrible
3. C: I I know what so far I’ve actually (to be very frank with you)
4. so far I’ve no-I’ve not had yeah so far I’ve never had [anything
5. I: there] must be something someone wasn’t happy with
6. C: er:m
7. I: have you taken anything from here that that you’ve had for example er:m (.)
8. I remember I had feedback that I wasn’t very approachable
9. and I was really surprised because I thought oh I I’m no- open here
10. I’ll always listen er:m and I went away
11. and I specifically made an effort then (.)
12. to try and do things to (.) increase my [approachability
13. C: yeah but I
14. I: because it’s important that you learn from that feedback
15. C: yeah we- well what I will have said was so far right (what I can then really say)
16. was where one of the staff told me that oh ((name)) you are too firm

Continued
Michael initially denies any negative feedback (lines 2-3). When he finally offers an example at (lines 14-20), he describes a criticism a member of staff has given him, but says that this was invalid – she recognises that he is ‘fair’. So he does not show that he is able to take on feedback and take action as a result of this to change himself nor does he match the interviewer’s self-display (lines 8-12) of his own weaknesses and how he dealt with them. So Michael is marked down on two counts, he does not interpret the underlying assumption of the question that he is to admit some weakness and then show how he overcame it and he also fails to learn from the model answer supplied by the interviewer to help him. So he misses both the competency requirement (learning from mistakes) and the meta criteria (see Chapter 4) of this type of interview that interviewers will provide models from their own experience as a nudge to the expected inferential process. Michael is operating within a different cultural model from the interviewers, one in which only the positive can be displayed.

### 5.5.2 Being firm and decisive

Unsuccessful candidates are seen as too firm or ‘harsh’ or, less frequently, too soft.

**Unsuccessful example**

Sara is seen as lacking self-awareness and verbose. Interestingly, in the next example, she comments on her own style in getting things done which does show self-awareness. So this raises the question of why the interviewer judges her negatively. The data indicate that she is not aware of how to present herself in relation to the interviewer; that categorical statements have to be mitigated and that by re-enacting verbatim how she talks, she is implicitly involving the interviewer in her ‘abrupt’ and ‘stroppy’ manner, making him the recipient of this talk. And so like Terence, she is too honest and not aware of how she should manage the social relationship with the interviewer.
Example 5 – Sara: Maltese. Clearly unsuccessful.

1. C: I mean I can be very abrupt when I want something to be done.
2. Look I’ve asked you to do zone three will you go and do zone three please.
3. [you know]
4. I: mhm
5. C: er we are not taking a vote on this [I’ve]
6. I: mm
7. C: asked you to do s- erm I’ve given you reasonable request could you go and do it please
8. I: mhm
9. C: so I l c- I know I can be quite intimidating
10. I: mhm
11. C: stroppy direct
12. I: mhm
13. C: you know I don’t I don’t truck fools gladly or whatever the saying is [you know]
14. I: mhm
15. C: and and yeah it can and I know that people don’t like it
16. I: mhm
17. C: you know but I’m not one of these sort of hhh
18. I: mm
19. C: if you if you rub me up the wrong way it’s erm
20. I believe I’ve asked you to do something
21. I: mhm
22. C: that is that isn’t my style [you know]
23. I: mm
24. C: if you if you rub me up the wrong way it’s erm
25. I believe I’ve asked you to do something
26. I: mhm
27. C: er:m are we going to do it tonight
28. I: mhm
29. C: so I can I know I can be sarcastic

Sara is considered ‘overly aggressive’ and emotional, disclosing too much of her feelings both in how she characterises herself ‘intimidating’, stroppy’ and in directly quoting how she speaks to people (see reporting below). This self-stereotyping (see personal discourses in Chapter 6) is not moderated by any softening language and
so, like Michael, her communicative style implicates her in negative evaluations of her personality. The style she both articulates (line 22) and displays of command and control is in conflict with the current ideologies about inspiring people and team building.

Alternatively, candidates are seen as ‘too soft’. For example, Ravi speaks of building rapport with the sales reps which the interviewer challenges, saying that the reps should be bending over backwards to supply them, since the supermarket is the customer in this context.

5.5.3 Taking responsibility

Successful example

Peter was not taken on because he had a high salary and was thought to have inappropriate role expectations but he interviewed well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 6 – Peter: black British. Borderline unsuccessful.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. C: so you know I do like being hands on you know, if there's (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. well again when I was at (Supermarket Y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. if there was a-a counter which was short or an aisle which needed filling (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. you know (.) I'll happily muck in (.) get that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I:: mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: filled up, that was part- part of what I enjoyed about retail really</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I: mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. P: you know seeing a finished result at the end of it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Peter is asked to ‘talk through’ why he enjoys being a ‘hands-on manager’ and presents himself as action-oriented, someone who does not like to be distant from his staff and is focused on getting the job done. Ravi is less successful in answering a question about dealing with problematic staff.

Unsuccessful example

Ravi was judged as misunderstanding the question, being overly positive and using buzzwords and generalisations. The implication was that he lacked authenticity, speaking words he did not own, and showing deference to a hierarchy that suggested insincerity. In the next example, he does not interpret the question as about what specific action he would take without some prompting and talks in generalities about ‘putting it up to management’ and having ‘a discussion’.

1. C: but some- some- some [problematic staff] you just can’t change.
2. you have to accept that some some=
3. I: =what do you do in them situations
4. C: well I put it up to the high management and we have a discussion together
5. I: right
6. C: yeah
7. I: do you take any action
8. C: eh not really eh well how we do is ok er
9. we reduce the number of hours
10. I: you do that yeah
11. C: we do and make him feel a bit and see how he goes from that point
12. and when he starts improving ok back to normal.
13. yeah but I try to avoid that as much as possible.
14. C: you try to talk to the person=
15. I: =yeah
16. C: =once twice three times
17. I: then sure
18. C: if it doesn’t happen you know I put it up to management you know
19. I: right=

Ravi positions himself as relatively low in the hierarchy, at a level where he does not take action (line 8). Instead of positioning himself in partnership with higher management to resolve the situation, he describes going through a process (warning three times) and then ‘putting it up’. So he projects an identity of someone who is overly oriented to hierarchy and does not come across as action-oriented or dynamic. This partly accounts for the criticism that ‘he gave no examples’ since he does not narrate a strong personal self through his activities (and see Chapter 8). The assumed socio-cultural knowledge for this question is based on ideas of individual agency and action within the flattened hierarchies of new capitalist structures.

5.6 Structure and vividness of accounts

As in the Talk on Trial study, a particular narrative structure is favoured by interviewers which corresponds to the ‘standard’ Anglo model of story telling (Labov and Waletzsky 1967). This consists of a brief abstract and/or orientation, context setting, complicating action and then some form of resolution and evaluation.
Because this structure is either explicitly elicited by interviewers or is implicitly expected, answers in this form are more readily ‘bureaucratically processable’, can be more easily fitted into the categories on the interviewer’s form.

**Successful example**

Peter is asked about innovations he has made and how he solves the problem of losing business.

### Example 8 – Peter: black British. Borderline unsuccessful.

1. C: I do like to know where I’m losing business though
2. I: mm
3. C: and I like to know why I’m losing business
4. I: mm
5. C: so the only way to do that is by (.) taking a lot of information
6. and going through a lot of information
7. because we currently haven’t got the system that would like erm (.)
8. bore down into that information for us [so
9. I: mm]
10. C: It means manually going through a lot of records
11. I: right
12. C: looking at things but it- its areas to improve .hhh erm
13. I: so what do you do when you do come across (.) [erm
14. C: well] I have to come up (.)
15. first off I’ll try and think of something myself you know like
16. what can I do (.) how can I make that difference
17. I: mm mm
18. C: you know, if I was a customer, how would I change (.)
19. how would I feel about that
20. I: mm
21. C: erm (.) usually I do come up (.) I’ll bring my team in then (.)
22. see if they’ve got any suggestions hh
23. and then I’ll go on er with any of the other managers(.)
24. I’ll you know bring it up (.) do a conference call have a chat
25. I: mm
26. C: about things (.) find out if anyone else has got this problem

Continued
Peter is giving an account of how he sets about finding out where he is losing business. He starts with an orientation (lines 1-3) and context setting (lines 5-12), then at lines 15-28 describes the complicating action and then at line 30 the result or the evaluation – ‘looking outside of retail’ (in effect ‘looking outside the box’). This Labovian structure is implicitly familiar to interviewers. It allows them to process easily the candidate’s response and calls up shared conditions for mutual interpretation from which frequently heard comments such as ‘feeling comfortable with a candidate’ stem. The interviewer commented that Peter had convinced her he could do this.

A convincing candidate is also one who recounts a vivid story, as the previous study also illustrated. ‘Experientially grounded accounts’ (Edwards, 1991) make use of vivid and detailed description, direct speech quotation (see below) and depiction of bodily and sensory experience. Specific details, metaphors and other images are particularly persuasive as psychological studies of witness statements have shown (Drew and Holt 1989). Some of this detail is routinely recorded by interviewers in their notes. For example, Gladston tells a story about how when he ran a garage, one of his apprentices accidentally damaged a customer’s Mercedes car. The fact that it was a Mercedes is noted by the interviewer as evidence of the high stakes accident that Gladston had to deal with.

However, vivid detail is distinct from some of the features of emotional talk which candidates are criticised for. Too much depiction of feelings, direct speech quotations and expressive language are rated very negatively.
Unsuccessful example

Example 9 – Sara: Maltese. Clearly unsuccessful.

1. C: I said but I need somebody sorting it please (.)
2. oh and he went off on one that
3. I was picking on him (.) erm this guy was as I said Sikh
4. I: mhm
5. C: erm and he said e:r (.) in the middle of the floor he said
6. oh there's no point in talking to you (.) you're a racist (.)
7. I personally found that extremely upsetting
8. I: mm
9. C: er:m (.) as I said I am of mixed race origin myself
10. I: mhm
11. C: er:m and I ((whispered)) hhh (.) how dare you you know
12. I've bent over backwards not to be you know somebody s (.)
13. and I and I really really took it to heart
14. because I thought (.) oh my god am I racist
15. I: mm
16. C: er:m (.) because it's the first time that that had been thrown at me
17. I: mhm
18. C: er:m and I was really shocked and I was getting really really upset
19. I actually dashed over to the mail centre and I was ((makes sound)) er:m
20. and I sort of went through this all with I think all three managers (.).hhh
21. and the the chap himself the post man he he got (.) very very annoyed
22. I: mm
23. C: erm because I insisted that he do it (.)
24. I said look (.) you can call me whatever you like I said it's fine (.)
25. I said by rights I should be taking you to the office
26. and be having words with you but (.) hhh
27. never mind I said (.) are you gonna do what I've asked you

Sara describes an example of someone who it was hard to build a relationship with. He was a Sikh and had called her a racist, which she found ‘extremely upsetting’ because ‘I am of mixed race origin myself’. She recounts how she ‘dashed over to the mail centre’ to talk to three of the managers. In the conclusion she talks again about being called a racist:
Although this is a vivid display of what she perceives as shocking, it is perceived as too much revelation of feelings and too childish – an outpouring of feeling rather than a managed response. The interviewer, on viewing the tape, thought this was an over-reaction (see Chapter 6 on organisational discourses and the euphemisation of strong feelings and the criticisms of ethnic minority staff as over-emotional in Chapter 3).

5.7 Reporting own and others’ talk

Given that the candidate has to display reflectiveness when they give an account and that most of the themes in the interview are about people management, a frequent aspect of responses is the reporting of either the candidate’s own or others’ talk.

This last example illustrates a common feature of some candidates’ answers – the direct quotation. But accounts of own and others’ talk may also be descriptions of facts or internal states, eg ‘they were concerned about the new regulations’ where the speaker can put a particular perspective on the past event. This reporting on talk can give the speaker more opportunity to position themselves in subtle ways in relation to the past event; for example the choice of the word ‘concerned’ suggests a speaker perspective that is reasonably understanding of a view without necessarily agreeing with it. This reporting can give candidates’ account different layers and so give them more ‘fluidity’ in how they present themselves (Goffman, 1982) and, in turn, a richer account of their ‘persona’ to the interviewer.

Successful candidates were able to mix both kinds of talk so that they could be both vivid and detailed, and so engaging the interviewers, but also able to give a nuanced perspective through more reported talk. A candidate who was successful despite not greatly impressing the interviewers, ‘sound if not exceptional’, manages
to mix these two ways of presenting talk in some of his contributions. Here he talks about how he dealt with a member of staff who was frequently absent.

**Successful example**


1. C: .. other manager (.) (had her pull u- had her pulled up before)
2. so what was I got that (.) wasn’t my problem (.)
3. I said well (it is) all the other guys are all sorting
4. and they’re (.) it’s affec- it’s affecting the work
5. because (.) they’re saying why should they be working and you’re not working (.)
6. so just (2) (please) make sure you’re at your point of duty (.)
7. it worked to some extent but then it started (1) er:m (2)
8. going back (.) slowly into the old routine (.)
9. where soon as I disappeared(1) into the office
10. (you had) this member of staff would (.) also disappear (1)

At lines 1 and 7-8 he describes the facts and sandwiched between them is a direct quotation of what he said. This shows the blend of more summarising analytic talk (lines 1 and 7-8) and more vivid, personal experience talk. The metaphor of ‘pulling up’ summarises the mastery and control of the previous manager which spills over into Junior’s verbatim quoting of what he said to her. However, elsewhere, Junior fails to integrate the two ways, tending to give quotations only or occasionally rather vague descriptions when the interviewer wants a specific example:

**Unsuccessful example**

Example 12 – Junior.

1. I: how were you able to encourage him
2. because it looks like there was some sort of
3. sometimes you were down and sometimes you were up (.) yeah
4. C: yeah
5. I: so you tell me how you were able to encourage him to to stay up
6. and and continue acting
7. C: ( I mean it’s) just general talk
8. I: okay

Continued
Here, Junior fails to give an analytic account of what he said, ‘just general talk’ and so does not impress either through vivid examples or with an account of the conversations which would display his stance and how he aligned to the staff member.

The only other successful candidate for a management post, Gladston, consistently blends direct quotes with speech descriptions, thus, conveying vividness with a more summary and analytic stance and presenting a more insightful picture of himself through the perspective he gives in his speech descriptions. The fluent movement between quoted speech and descriptions of internal states represents, at a micro level, an overall phenomenon of combining a more vivid, grounded and concrete display of experience with a more evaluative, synthesised and distanced mode of talk. These latter features are typical of organisational discourses (see Chapter 6).

5.8 Conclusion

Candidates have to constantly find the middle ground between extremes and contradictions, which puts subtle and sophisticated demands on their ability to communicate in this unique genre of talk.

The ‘intangibles’ of style and behaviour are central to the assessment of candidates. Yet there is a ‘narrow gate’ through which only socially and culturally acceptable styles can enter. The qualities that make up the ideal management persona are assumed to be unproblematically displayed in their talk as their essential character, rather than the result of socialisation and the product of the interactional demands of the interview. This persona is realised through three types of discourses: occupational, personal and organisational. Professional discourses, which are the focus of this chapter, are the narratives of working life which form the major content of the promotion interview and through which, if successfully used, give a linguistic flexibility and subtlety that allows the candidate’s management persona to be revealed in a variety of contexts.
6 Candidates’ contributions – 2: personal and organisational discourses

‘When you’ve got a team that’s bonded together everyone gets the benefits.’

(Candidate who was judged as interviewing well)

6.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the other two discourses: personal and organisational which, together with occupational/professional discourses, constitute the discourses which, if effectively blended, can produce a successful performance. It draws on the same data sets as Chapter 5. The ‘management persona’ is a version of the self which is narrated through stories of work experience (see Chapter 5) but also through more personal discourses and the analytic, more objective, organisational discourses.

6.2 Aligning to personal discourses

Since candidates have to create a manager identity through talk, personal discourses are central to the selection interview. Interviewers often preface the interview with comments such as ‘we want to get the best out of you’, ‘we want to get to know you’, but as the post-interview comments show the ‘you’ is a synthetic self, not too over-bearing or emotional but not too impersonal or rehearsed. Enough of the individual has to be displayed to seem authentic but too much of the personal comes across as indiscreet. There is a constant tension between display and discretion. The manager identity is evident in personal discourses but is also woven into the fabric of the narratives about work experience in professional discourses.
We have identified three versions of the ‘self’ in personal discourses:

1. The analytic, self-reflective, self-aware self.

2. The self that is ‘given off’ in the social relations of the interview.

3. The domestic self.

6.2.1 The analytic, self-reflective, self-aware self

This is a conscious display of personality features described in habitual, ritualised, sometimes clichéd and stereotyped ways. The speaker takes a view from outside and reflects on how distant they want to be from the self they describe (Linde 1993, 105). Such distance gives apparent objectivity and credibility. These statements about the self are conventionally ‘hedged’ with uncertainty indicators such as ‘I think..’, ‘probably’, etc and yet the candidate is expected to come across as firm and ultimately successful. So displays of the self have to be delicately managed if the candidate is to come across as authentic, not over-claiming but actively engaged. Candidates who were born/educated overseas are often perceived as over-claiming since these nuanced claims of the self are culturally specific.

Successful example


1. I: erm how did you (2) how did you initially feel about that
2. did you in- did you have that mapped out in your mind
3. or did y- was your ini- initial focus about well
4. this is conduct issue and this (you know an important issue or)
5. C: m- er I mean er (1) I I think probably
6. one of the things that I’ve I’ve learned now across time
7. is probably not to jump in feet first (.) er:m
8. and I I think on a situation more like that
9. you could have immediately thought well
10. this is a conduct issue and gone in all guns blazing erm
11. you wouldn’t have actually got the true story
12. of where this person’s
13. been wrongly advised =
14. I: = mhm
15. C: er:m so it definitely would have caused more harm than good [had
16. I: right]
17. C: I taken that approach (.) erm

Continued
Tim backs up his general claim about what he has learnt, ‘not to jump in feet first’ with a further explanation of why this would be dangerous, to show his involvement and so authenticity. He talks about ‘I’ but also, impersonally, about what ‘you’ should and should not do so that he does not come across as over-claiming. He also does this with ‘hedges’: ‘probably’ and ‘I think’, which euphemises (Bourdieu, 1991) his claims and shows a tact and adroitness in keeping some distance from his own statements about the self.

Unsuccessful example

By contrast, Tokunbo finds it more difficult to manage the synthetic self of the interview. Although he was borderline overall, he received many more negative comments than Tim in the interview ‘wash-up’. Earlier he has been asked about what he would do if his team had made a mistake.


1. C: we we we we we would be affected the erm (.) the our
2. they complain the customer complained as well
3. we can (end up paying) compensation for making (misdelivery) and
4. (not making an attempt to retrieve the mail (.)and we should
5. (.) because I I I think my job
6. is to commit myself and dedicate myself to my task
7. if I’m (I- I- I- if I’m given) a task I’m
8. very dedicated and committed to make sure that it is done properly
9. I: yeah
10. C: if I make any mistakes I I re- I rectify it (.)
11. I I do not I do not have (that mistakes)
12. I always go to rectify it
13. I: right right and you so I mean have you ever found you d- (.) I mean (.)
Tokunbo was criticised for his style of talking, ‘misdelivered’ and for lacking examples and this shift to rather clichéd claims and self-stereotyping (lines 6-13) illustrates the lack of concreteness in his responses. His generalisations at this stage are treated with some suspicion by the interviewer who interprets them as masking difficulties (lines 15-17). He is perceived as over-claiming about his dedication and commitment. Similarly, he does not hedge his confession to being ‘prone to make mistakes’ (line 20) despite the fact that the interviewer has cued a more euphemised response with his question at line 16 ‘do you find that quite difficult’. Although Tim uses some more general, deontic expressions (‘should’.. ‘have to’ indicating what you ought to do) he blends them with tactful statements about himself and what he actually did. Tokunbo both relies too much on these general deontic expressions (lines 6-7) ‘I think my job is to commit myself’ but also fails to hedge his remarks. He was perceived as giving irrelevant answers and the job he was applying for as ‘a step too far’. Tokunbo’s cultural model of the positive self in gatekeeping settings, based on explicit but general affirmations, is at odds with that of the interviewer. And, as we discussed in Chapter 5, the meta criteria of success, in which candidates have to pick up cues and hints from the interviewer about how to attune their responses, are also more elusive for those not socialised into the interaction of formal British settings.

6.2.2 The self that is ‘given off’ in the social relations of the interview

This self is the more informal one that relates to the interviewer. The fact that most of the statements in the wash-up sessions are about a candidate’s personality indicates that how the candidate relates to the interviewer is a proxy for how they will manage social relations in the workplace. Unlike in most of the low-paid job
interviews, the interviewer is a manager looking to relate to the candidate as a manager too. The basis on which this relationship is established and changes over the course of the interview, the ‘footing’ (Goffman, 1981, 128) will determine whether the candidate has established affiliation with the interviewer/manager. The use of humour in (in)appropriate moments displays this informal self. Gladston manages his footing with the manager adroitly:

**Successful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 15 – Gladston: Jamaican. Successful.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: okay thank you very much. erm going to my next question. erm (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. can you give me an example.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. of when you’ve helped someone. to get appropriate development or training. I’m talking about inspiring people here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. C: yeah yeah yeah erm (2) appropriate development. er:m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I: yeah or training or you know (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: erm (2) development erm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I: coaching. (that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. C: coaching) coaching erm l- if (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. if you could if I could to refer back to er gymnastics time again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I: yeah yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. C: in my life. yeah like I mean I know there’s other things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. but at the moment that’s what’s in my mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. so I’ll tell you that [ (I was)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I: let let’s) explore it [let’s see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. C: erm we can) explore it okay I’ll [see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I: yeah]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. C: if it’s appropriate if it [fits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I: yeah]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. C: er:m basically as when I started as as a erm a gymnast erm trainer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I: yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. C: erm I noticed that. (.) …..</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, the candidate manages both a deferential and an authoritative footing, aligning to the power of the interviewer but also to him as a potential manager and colleague with whom things can be negotiated. He establishes a convention of negotiating allowable topics as a joint enterprise, ‘we can explore it’, thus affiliating to the manager without claiming too much solidarity. In the next example,
the interview has reached its final stages and Gladston comments humorously on the experience.

**Successful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 16 – Gladston.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: okay (.) alright (.) er:m moving onto the next and final question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. C: amen ((slight laugh))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I: ((slight laugh)) moving onto the next and final er:m (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. can you give me an example of a time when you’ve had to implement (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. a course of action which was unpopular</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gladston’s humorous comment and laugh is echoed by the interviewer (line 3). The candidate may also be drawing on a shared cultural reference. The interviewer (in this example) is of African origin so the ‘amen’ could be a joking reference to the call-and-response sermons of evangelical preachers. So, as with the example above, Gladston puts himself on an informal footing and yet implicitly acknowledges who is in charge. This is one of the many overt and covert ways in which more successful candidates claim membership with interviewers. This ‘co-membership’ (Erickson and Shultz, 1982) is also used, with relative degrees of success, in occupational/professional discourses (see Chapter 5).

**Unsuccessful example**

By contrast, Sara puts herself on the wrong footing at the opening of her interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 17 – Sara: Maltese. Clearly unsuccessful.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: right well you’ve been interviewed by me quite recently if I remember</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. C: yes that’s right [was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I: about two]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. C: couple of weeks ago wasn’t [it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I: twice] in two weeks probably [a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: yes]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I: world record (.) um [ bu-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. C: some] people are just born lucky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I: okay what I’m gonna do (.) probably quite similar to the other interview=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. C: = mhm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I: there’s two parts to this interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sara’s joke at line 8 ‘some people are just born lucky’ is ignored by the interviewer who takes back control by saying how he is going to run the interview. This joke, right at the start of the interview, could be interpreted as a put down with the interviewer cast as the ‘lucky one’ to be interviewing her again. Although he set up the humorous tone with the ‘world record’ remark, his lack of reciprocity in acknowledging her humour suggests that her conversational ploy to cap his joke is not deemed appropriate at this juncture and may be claiming too much informality and intimacy at a moment of high regulation, the start of the interview. Sara was judged as ‘too personally involved’ and ‘too cocky’.

6.2.3 The domestic self

The discourses of the domestic self are usually glancing insights into the candidate’s home life and experiences outside work. Their location within the interview and the amount of such discourses affect how these contributions are judged. Too much domesticity, particularly in the early stages, is usually treated negatively.

Unsuccessful example

Lucy’s answers were seen as lacking innovation and clarity but she was considered upbeat and confident and ‘prepared to muck in’. This example is from the start of the interview.

Example 18 – Lucy: white British. Borderline unsuccessful.

1. I. (.) ahm talk me through the period
2. of nineteen ninety two to two thousand and three (.)
3. what have been the highs and lows during this time
4. C: erm 1992 (. ) ten years ago (.)
5. would b:e just before I decided probably to come to London
6. I: mm=
7. C: =because [my family are
8. I: what made] you come to London?
9. C: er- well my- well we were all originally from Essex=
10. I: =right
11. C: Clackton-on-Sea (.) and my- we came on holiday in Yorkshire
12. and my mum instead of buying a postcard or a stick of rock bought a house
13. I: ((laughs))
14. C: and decided that we were all moving up there (.)
15. so we ended up living up there (.)
16. went to secondary school up there (.)

Continued
17. found a lot of my friends and that from school were leaving school
18. and not really doing that much constructive
19. other than getting boring jobs in factories and (.)
20. it just didn’t seem like a very promising future for me
21. at that time up there
22. I mm
23. C: so (. ) I thought if I can pack my bags and go to London
24. and I can survive there and be okay
25. then I can do that anywhere in the world (. )
26. it was my quest for independence more than anything

Although Lucy raises a laugh with her narrative about her mother, the criticism that ‘she lacked clarity of thinking’ and was ‘blinker’ may stem from this early, detailed domestic account, where a personal story takes up time at the interview. The interviewer’s open ‘time-line’ question produces a self-revelatory, amusing and somewhat romantic account ‘my quest for independence’ rather than a contribution that is more carefully crafted to align with a future management persona or more succinct so that the interviewer can get on with the main questions about work experience. As with the different strands of the professional discourses outlined in Chapter 5, these three versions of the self have to be blended so that candidates come across as both engaged and yet self-reflective, claiming some solidarity but lacing it with a degree of deference.

6.3 Aligning to organisational discourses

Organisational discourses are more abstract modes of talking to take account of and rationalise experiences and attitudes. The topics which produce these discourses usually concern business awareness concerning profits and efficiency or procedural matters. However, since the focus of the interview is on personality and how far the candidate is a ‘people person’, questions which elicit more personal discourses (see Section 6.2.1) are also expected to include features of organisational discourse.

The stylistic features of organisational discourse that we identified are those of impartiality, discretion, a more impersonal and analytic stance and one that creates a sense of distance. These are features of more formal language conventionally used institutional settings (Bourdieu, 1991). More successful candidates are those who stand outside their work experience and present themselves in ways which are bureaucratically processable (Iedema, 1999, 63) and are able to ‘euphemise’ or soften overly direct claims (Contrast Tim and Tokunbo).
Organisational discourses are more distant from active doing/saying and so become timeless and taken for granted. These more abstract forms become a shorthand for those ‘in the know’ since they refer to layers of meanings and associations acquired over time. In the data, the most unsuccessful candidates were often criticised for ‘saying buzzwords’ or ‘what they thought they should say’. They used more abstract formulations but were not perceived as owning them, as understanding their implications or working them seamlessly into their overall self-presentation. As ledema suggests (2003), more abstract formulation requires more intense participation, more socialisation over time into these organisational modes of talking. So, those socialised into management talk are able to use these more abstract terms comfortably, understanding their implications and moving fluently between abstract forms and more concrete realisations.

Management selection interviews often explicitly use more abstract formulations in the questions; for example: ‘focusing action’, ‘driving results’, ‘taking ownership’, ‘being innovative’ or ‘commercially aware’ which need ‘unpacking’ in the interview if candidates have not absorbed their hidden meanings and the type of examples from their work which would well illustrate such formulations. For example, Michael, in speaking about commercial awareness, talks about the product he had brought in, in response to customer demands, rather than general market trends, the preferred response.

6.3.1 Analytic stance and euphemisation

Successful example

Example 19 – Peter: black British. Borderline unsuccessful.

1. I: okay (.) erm give a recent example of how you spotted an opportunity
2. and exploited it .hhh and you’ve written, after recent conversation with a
3. company buyer, I found out that the GPM [Gross Profit Margin] on some
4. products, which I then asked my area to focus on selling (.) talk me through
5. that
6. C: .hhh right again we were coming in blind (.) it just- it was little things
7. that em- not knowing what was your best mark-up product
8. I: right
9. C: erm because you know obviously we are selling(.) we’re there to make
10. money
11. I: mm
12. C: erm m-my bonus is related to the gross profit margin as well
13. I: right

Continued
Here, Peter shows his fluency with corporate terms when talking about ‘exploiting an opportunity’. He does not claim too much when talking about how he increased his own knowledge but euphemises his report – ‘had a little conversation’. He also peppers his answer with general, taken for granted maxims ‘we’re there to make money’, ‘these are the looks you go for’, showing he can see the wider picture. But these maxims are always attached to concrete practices, rather than left to float and be criticised as examples of ‘just saying what we wanted to hear’.

**Successful example**

**Example 20 – Tim: white British. Borderline unsuccessful.**

1. I: how did you feel about that in terms of that initial reaction
2. where you know we’ve got a team
3. and also and you r- recognised quite quickly
4. that actually they’re not working as a team
5. and actually they’ve not even taken account of ( ) things
6. you know that they’ve
7. C: yeah
8. I: they they’re clearly looking for you to almost be a floor manager you know
9. how did you feel about that

Continued
10. C: er:m (1) I felt probably previously
11. they hadn’t had the direction maybe that they should have had (.) and er:m (.)
12. it’s very easy to (.) drop into the role of actually managing the floor
13. and taking control er:m (1)
14. its more difficult probably to give up control er:m a- and trust people
15. I: mmm
16. C: er:m (1) a a and I felt that (.) er:m to move the shift forward
17. there’s no way that I could afford to let them er:m
18. allow me to make all the decisions for them (.) er:m (.)
19. the- they’ve got a job to do a- and they’re paid to manage that [area
20. I: yeah]
21. C: (.) er:m if they’ve got problems
22. where they need somebody (to phone up and) etcetera
23. then that’s what we need to talk about
24. and that’s where we need (to be informed) er:m (1)
25. but a- at the end of the day er:m (2)
26. you’ve got to give them the responsibility the accountability
27. and the tools to actually manage it at the correct level
28. I: mhm
29. C: er:m (1) and I I think (.) certainly when you’ve got a team (.) er:m
30. that that’s bonded together (.) er:m
31. everybody gets the benefits of that
32. because you’re going to not you you’re not going to move anywhere
33. if you’ve not got stable=
34. I: = yeah=
35. C: = foundations to start from
36. so it was very very much about being a little bit alarmed about what I saw
37. and realizing immediately
38. that we need some firm foundations here

Although asked about his feelings, Tim (unlike less successful candidates) knows the code and talks from a more analytical stance. The ‘feelings’ he expresses translate into organisationally expectable actions, for example ‘alarm’ and ‘having to give up control’ through balanced, impersonal and analytical modes of talking: ‘its very easy to..’, ‘its more difficult to’. In this way he euphemises the perceived
difficulty of giving up control. He also describes more rational, listed, inner thought processes and strategising: ‘give them the responsibility, the accountability and the tools’. He uses the same type of general maxims and deontic (should-type) expressions as Peter: ‘when you’ve got a team that’s bonded together everyone gets the benefits’ and persuasive metaphors such as ‘bonding’, ‘foundations’ but these are textured in with a more action-oriented stance.

### 6.3.2 Organisational discourses and affiliation

Successful organisational discourses often elicit agreement from interviewers, affiliating the candidate and the interviewer to common assumptions about, for example, ‘what staff are like’ or the difficulties of the job as with Lucy (and see Chapter 7 on the positive dynamic).

**Successful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. C: so I got to know my way around other departments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I: mhm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C: and how (...) what I do on nights actually affects the whole day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. mm mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. C: because there can be a bit of a night shift day shift divide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I: mm yes there is (...)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. yeah us and [them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. C: yeah I’ve noticed that and that’s [not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I: its in] every company I think=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. C: =yeah yeah that probably is typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I: yeah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At line 5, Lucy gives an analytical statement about the day and night shift divide which is taken up by the interviewer and then corroborated by Lucy.

The most unsuccessful candidates either overuse organisational discourses or underuse them. So, the blending of different discourses is crucial to success.

### 6.4 Blending of personal, occupational and organisational discourses

The candidates who are rated positively produce a smooth blending of these three discourses to convey a management persona. As with the low-paid job interviews, it is the personal which has to be most carefully blended. But the stakes are much higher in the management interview, where the organisational and personal have
to be adequately synthesised, as in the example of Peter. This is particularly true when candidates are expected to admit to weaknesses or failings and how they overcame them or learnt from them (see also Chapter 5).

**Successful example**

**Example 22 – Tim: white British. Borderline unsuccessful.**

1. I held a meeting erm with the ((work area managers)) er:m (2)
2. I just said look you know we sort of tried our best
3. I hold my hands up er:m (.) a lot of it probably is down to me er:m
4. I've got some stuff (.) wrong er:m (1)
5. however er:m we've simply got to move forward you know
6. it's no good dwelling on what's gone wrong (.)
7. however what I've actually done is kept a log of that
8. because I know that if I was in that position (.) er:m this year (.)
9. that that is definitely a risk area that I need to learn from

Here Tim, in talking about how they had failed to meet work targets, gives a narrative account (professional discourses) in which he subtly manages his identity as a manager (personal and professional discourses) and concludes with an analytic statement (organisational discourses).

A rather different, but also successful, example occurs towards the end of Gladston’s interview when he has responded to a question about dealing with a personal mistake.

**Successful Example**

Gladston narrates the time when a documentary was made of his organisation and he was filmed apparently not following procedures. The way in which the film was edited exaggerated what was a minor error.

**Example 23 – Gladston: Jamaican. Successful.**

1. I: have you got an example of a: s- (.) a er mi-
2. mistake that you have personally made (.) on an individual basis
3. C: on an individual basis er:m
4. I: yeah
5. C: e:r (4) yeah er:m (.) I I t- we we had a a situation within ((Services Ltd)) which which is er
6. er:m (1) it it is a mistake but in in the sense that it was er:m
7. kind of taken out of context
(Two and a half minutes omitted)

8. I: what have you learned from that
9. C: well now I mean for example now I'm (.)
10. I was working in the same office again in ((name of place)) last week
11. and we have casuals there and e:r what I did this time was that erm
12. before the casual went out I gave him er:m (.) er:m (.) the the
13. I gave him an envelope I gave him put my phone number (.) onto the (.) er:m
14. back of the envelope
15. I I gave him a bit of paper to write down any information (there over the) trolley
16. and if they are back and the gates are closed
17. I I've asked one of the (.) local (man)
18. if he will come down and open the gates
19. to make to make sure that that the ((trolleys)) are secure
20. (.) er:m to let them in so so no-
21. so therefore they don't have to leave anything on the outside
22. or anywhere else you know…
23. I: okay=
24. C: = so I learned from that
25. I: fine
26. C: that way
27. I: thanks for that (.) I think I recognise you from the vid- I'm only joking
28. C: ((laugh)) superstar my fifteen minutes of fame [ ((laugh))]
29. I: ((laugh))]
30. C: what do they say no publicity is bad publicity [((laugh)) that is
31. I: ((laugh)) well yeah not all [of it is true
32. C: not (always] bad don't believe that
33. I: okay [e:r
34. C: I got] a lot of stick so I know

Gladston frames the account by simultaneously admitting the error and distancing himself ‘it is a mistake but in the sense that it was taken out of context’. He then tells the story and concludes in a self-reflexive way, narrating what action he has taken to illustrate how he learnt from that mistake.

The interviewer creates a ‘jokey’ footing, pretending he actually saw the footage. Gladston responds in a way which is simultaneously self-deprecating and ironical,
playing down the problematic situation ‘superstar, fifteen minutes of fame’. He also acknowledges the ‘stick’ which the interviewer gives him as characteristic of the organisation, thus aligning to his membership of it ‘I got a lot of stick so I know’. So the candidate uses the flexibilities of talk to be both informal and yet sensitive to the institutional nature of the interview, self-aware but not distanced from the social relations of the encounter. Unsurprisingly, he is judged as ‘engaging’, ‘relevant’, ‘ready to make changes’ and with ‘good experience’.

6.5 Conclusion

As well as professional/occupational discourses, candidates have to produce a mix of personal and organisational discourses. So, the institutional requirements of the interview demand a certain kind of ‘linguistic capital’ from candidates. These are the communicative resources that purchase an easy alignment to interviewer discourses and social relationships. The blending of the three discourses: professional, personal and organisational produce a successful outcome. But this blended ‘management persona’ is hard to achieve. The great majority of candidates, from a range of ethnic backgrounds, have some negative evaluations that refer to their personalities such as untrustworthy, lacking initiative, too personal or are dismissed as having poor communication skills, although several borderline candidates are rated positively in some areas.

The balance between display and discretion expected of the self-managing manager assumes there is a consistent, unified self who is both attuned to the institutional view of the reflective, action-oriented manager and who comes across as a complete, engaging person. Where discourses are not blended, the candidate is seen as lacking consistency and credibility and untrustworthy – not authentic. Access to the informal ties and social networks where staff can gradually acquire this ‘linguistic capital’, as Chapter 3 illustrates, is less likely for ethnic minority staff.
7 Interviewer-candidate interaction

‘The big question “will they fit in?” is always there, but is always unmentioned. You always ask yourself this and always instantly know.’

(Participant at one of the DVD workshops)

7.1 Introduction

Despite competency frameworks and other attempts to design the interview around objective criteria, interviews are still dependent on the ‘will they fit in?’ question, which in turn depends upon how candidates got on with interviewers. This chapter is based on the same data set as Chapters 5 and 6. It examines the extent to which the interviewer-candidate interaction, and in particular the interviewers’ conduct accounts for the eventual outcome. It looks at the way in which misalignments between interviewer and candidate, relatively early on, lead to a positive or negative dynamic. Similar effects were identified in the low-paid job interviews (Roberts and Campbell, 2006) but in the promotion data there is more contrast between the way in which topics are handled and more critical comments and questions within the negative dynamic. The chapter also documents the effects of writing on the positive and negative dynamic.

7.2 Joint production in the semi-structured job interview

7.2.1 Joint productions

Each interview has its own dynamic, depending on the style of the interviewers’ questions and responses to candidates as well as the candidates’ contributions. So interviews are joint productions. Although each interview is unique, there are clear patterns across the data which show how some candidates receive more or less favourable treatment. From the early stages, interviewers will either tighten or loosen control of the interaction, depending on how well candidates align to
the discourses required by the questions. The interview becomes either more of a social opportunity or more of a social threat.

In the management interviews, there are fewer main questions than for low paid jobs and each one is explored in more detail. So there is more opportunity for both sides to improvise more, expand with more context, detail or evaluative stance or probe and seek more relevance. These improvisations are usually quite subtle deviations from the conventional and whether they help or disadvantage the candidate, may go largely unnoticed. If candidates do not meet the very tight criteria for an appropriate ‘management persona’ (see Chapters 5 and 6), then a negative interactional dynamic begins which serves to construct and reinforce the initial doubts about them. These are then transformed into harsh judgements in the post-interview decision-making stage.

In the act of deciding during the interview, the interviewers are developing a rationalisation for their final decision (Jenkins 1986). But our data show they also display this rationalisation in the way they conduct the interview, for example by more or less open questions, more or less restrictions on allowable contributions and generally more or less conversational or institutional social relations. So a candidate’s success depends substantially on the interviewers’ performance (Gumperz 1992, Adelsward, 1988).

### 7.2.2 Semi-structured job interviews

All the data, except for the two Factory Foods interviews, consisted of semi-structured job interviews with one interviewer, lasting between half an hour and an hour. In Factory Foods two interviewers were present and the interviews were shorter. Five of the 17 candidates were interviewed twice, with a different interviewer on the second occasion and the scores and comments from both interviews were considered in the final decisions.

Between three and seven main questions/areas were asked across the three sites. Occasionally, not all set questions were asked or candidates were asked extra questions. These extra questions could either be an opportunity or a threat, depending on the content of the question and the dynamic established. As with all semi-structured job interviews, the main questions were set in advance. In the supermarket management interviews candidates submitted brief answers, in writing before the interview, to the main topic areas to be covered. These were then used to prompt expanded contributions from the candidates.

The length of the interviews and the relatively small number of questions gave plenty of space for more improvisation than set question and answer sequences and there were a range of follow-up questions and comments which feed into a positive or negative dynamic.
7.3 Positive and negative dynamics, misalignments and misunderstandings

7.3.1 Positive and negative dynamics

The features of a positive dynamic can be characterised as relatively ‘conversational’. Those of a negative dynamic as ‘institutional’. The overall conversational tone stems from a relaxing of institutional requirements, more shared knowledge offered, more opportunities for candidates to take topic control and more informality. In sum, there is more joint construction and more flow. The overall institutional tone stems from a tightening of institutional requirements, more control over topic and tighter relevance demands and more formality. Here there is more disruption, so less easy conversational flow, and more social distancing. So candidates who are less familiar and comfortable with the assumptions and expected conduct of the job interview face additional interactional demands during its course.

Table 7.1 sums up the ways in which main question types and follow-up questions are used to make the interaction relatively more conversational or institutional. Each of the different features is discussed below.

Table 7.1 Interviewer question types and follow-ups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive: ‘Conversational’</th>
<th>Negative: ‘Institutional’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Follow on questions, cues and prompts</td>
<td>Reformulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded questions/helpful context</td>
<td>Unembedded questions/negative context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-authoring</td>
<td>Translating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic choice – opening up</td>
<td>Topic control – closing down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise</td>
<td>Critical comments and questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A positive dynamic is characterised by the conversational features and the negative dynamic by the institutional ones. Although some positive features can appear where a negative dynamic develops and vice versa, the frequency of either positive or negative features, their particular location in the interview and their combination with similar features all lead to a relatively helpful or less helpful interview. This outcome is similar to the findings with low-paid jobs. However, there is much less tolerance of perceived inadequate or inappropriate performance in the management interviews. So, the interviewer’s role in producing this performance is even more significant.

7.3.2 Misalignment

Alignment refers to ‘culturally normal’ conduct where ‘cultural’ refers to the underlying assumptions of the selection interview and conventional social relationships expected. In this context, the cultural norms are those of Anglo social behaviour. Chapters 5 and 6 have shown how candidate contributions align, or not, to the different discourses of the interview and Chapter 8 details how
these misalignments tend to be more intense with ethnic minority candidates born abroad. Misalignments occur because of the hidden lines of questioning and indirect means of conveying interviewer intention, even though interview structures and the competency framework have wiped out some of the most arcane features of the twentieth century job interview (See Roberts and Campbell, 2006). Nevertheless, the interview still requires special institutional methods of reason and inferencing. For example, feedback such as ‘good’ may not be praise but a cue that the interviewer is going to move on. Frequent misalignments lead to a more negative dynamic and a shift away from conversational to more institutional means of interaction.

### 7.3.3 Discourse misalignments

Misalignments occur most frequently when the candidate has misread what discourse mode they should respond in, and specifically how to blend different discourses (see Chapters 5, 6 and 8). Frequently, this is because the question apparently cues for one type of discourse when another is expected. A frequent example is ‘What are your feelings about…?’ which are rated low if the candidate talks about their emotions rather than a more blended response, combining organisational, professional and personal discourses in a more analytic account about their thoughts and actions. Misalignments also occur when candidates misjudge what is appropriate conduct for particular phases of the interview. For example, Sara takes a humorous stance early in the interview which is not reciprocated (see Chapter 6, Example 17). Also, Michael, when asked if he has questions at the end of the interview, takes on the role of the interviewer in questioning why the interviewer decided to work for Supermarkets Ltd.

Early misalignments can lead, even in the opening stages of the interview, to interviewers taking a subtly different stance towards the candidate. This can lead, cumulatively, over the course of the interview, to fewer opportunities for candidates and more reinforcement of negative judgements of them. For example, early on, both Sara and Iqbal are reminded that the questions will be on topics that are ‘key to managers’. However, this is presented to them differently, although it is the same interviewer.

In Sara’s case, the interviewer says:

‘...You’ll find very similar to the previous interview format that we’ve done because these are things that [Services Ltd] is saying are key to managers succeeding so again the focus is on things that you’ve done rather than hypothetical situations...’

With Iqbal he says:

‘...what I’m looking at is a general area of improving things seeking improvement which obviously is a key things that we want managers to do can you give me an example where you had to learn a new working practice or procedure ...’
In Sara’s example, the interviewer reinforces his institutional authority in presenting what Services Ltd want, whereas with Iqbal, he assumes shared knowledge, ‘obviously’ and talks of ‘we’ as if Iqbal could be included as a possible manager. And whereas he then immediately asks Iqbal a question, with Sara this is delayed while he talks about the conduct of the interview, implying her lack of expertise in managing it.

7.3.4 Misunderstandings as opposed to misalignments

In the low-paid job interview, misunderstandings are common, although less common than misalignments. In the promotion interview data, clear misunderstandings occur only in the Factory Food interviews, which are for internal promotion to a higher shopfloor grade and not management interviews. In the latter type of interview, misalignments are frequent in the clearly unsuccessful and borderline unsuccessful candidates and even in the low graded, but successful, candidate. However, although they produce a negative dynamic and a high failure rate, the institutional character of the encounter means that criticism is only subtly conveyed. Candidates may feel they have done well and the gap between perceived and rated performance can lead to feelings and accusations of discrimination (see Chapter 3).

7.3.5 Contrastive case studies

The positive and negative dynamics are illustrated through three contrastive pairs of interviews, two pairs of management interviews and one pair of interviews for shopfloor upgrading. Two of the candidates were successful and one was borderline, rated quite highly but ultimately not offered the post. The other three candidates were rated low with many harsh comments made about them. Each pair had the same interviewer to highlight the fact that the interview dynamic created by the interviewer and candidate together, over-rides idiosyncratic differences between interviewers, although such differences are also evident throughout the data set.

Table 7.2 Case study pairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successful (S) or borderline (B)</th>
<th>Unsuccessful (U)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gladston – management – black ethnic minority (S)</td>
<td>Terence – management – white ethnic minority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iqbal (B) – management – South Asian ethnic minority</td>
<td>Sara – management – white ethnic minority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma (S) – upgrade – white British</td>
<td>Nanak – upgrade – South Asian ethnic minority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The only other successful candidate (Junior who identified himself as British Jamaican) was rated quite low on his interview performance and so has not been used as an illustrative example. Of the three successful and borderline candidates, only Gladston was born abroad. Of the unsuccessful, all three were born abroad.
but only Nanak was a relative newcomer to the UK. Issues of language and ethnicity were made relevant in the interviews and interviewer feedback for both Sara and Nanak.

Some examples are also used from the rest of the corpus to indicate that these are patterns across the data. As in Chapters 5 and 6, even though a candidate may not have been offered the job (as in Iqbal’s case), there are many successful moments in their interviews which are used to illustrate a particular feature.

A positive dynamic

A positive dynamic is established when candidates align to the interviewer, who, in turn, responds to them in helpful ways. The overall tone and interactional features of a positive dynamic are ‘conversational’. The interviews are more conversation-like, although they remain laminated over by the broader institutional frame of the interview in which indirectness, discretion, etc dominate. Sections 7.4 to 7.8 are from the ‘conversational’ mode of interviews in Table 7.1.

7.4 Follow-on questions, cues and prompts

7.4.1 Follow-ons

In follow-on questions, the interviewer builds on what the candidate has already said, and asks for more information to get a complete answer. They acknowledge what is positive in what they’ve already said, and ask them to develop this. This is contrasted with reformulations (see below). The more successful candidate in each pair receives more follow-on and far fewer reformulations.

Table 7.3 Follow ons compared to reformulations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of follow-ons</th>
<th>Number of reformulations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iqbal (B)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma (S)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladston (S)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara (U)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanak (U)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terence (U)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. C: Basically er as soon as I've become aware of it
2. I: you know decided that was (.) that was a really our priority (.) erm
3. and we had to make it safe (.) erm you know
4. er also we have to stop people working around there
5. because it really was in a bad condition (2)
6. I: so what did you do about it
7. C: w-wh-what we er initially did was to actually cordon off the area (.)
8. by actually (.) putting some [[containers]] round it
9. that's the only solution we could find [slight laugh] (.) erm
10. you know once we you know blocked off that area (.)
11. it was a quite big area an:d you know
12. I: mm
13. C: made sure that people still were able to go past it
15. C: ahm] but ahm ah felt that that was a (dozen and a half) really
16. because of all the [[containers]] that we decided to put round it
17. I: mm
18. C: people would want to use those
19. I: sure no people are going to take the [[containers]] away aren't they
20. C: so-so-so what I said to ((Jonah)) because it actually affected ((Jonah)) mainly
21. I said to him that you need to you know erm brief his team immediately

In line 6 above, the interviewer keeps pace with the flow of Iqbal’s story and asks him a follow-on question to develop it in a way which will be useful for processing his response (by providing the ‘action’ component of the requisite narrative structure) and grading it positively – by showing what he personally has done to resolve a problem. At line 19 the interviewer confirms his approval of Iqbal’s answer by agreeing with his decision. Overall, this response was highly-rated by the interviewer who, himself, contributed to it by his encouragement and pertinent questioning.

7.4.2 Cues and prompts

Where a positive dynamic is established, candidates are more frequently helped with follow-on questions which cue or prompt how they can make their answers more relevant or more aligned to the expected response structure. Less successful
candidates are given fewer of these, although some interviewers work hard at
cueing a more acceptable answer from candidates (see Chapters 5, 6 and 8). These
cues or prompts are to guide candidates to produce more blended discourses,
for example, to give a more personal account if their response has been more
organisational or vice versa. And the ability to interpret the interviewer’s role in
giving these cues is itself a metacriterion, as we have illustrated in Chapters 5
and 6.

Table 7.4  Prompts and cues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of prompts and cues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iqbal (B)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma (S)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladston (S)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara (U)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanak (U)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terence (U)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the next examples the interviewer cues for a vivid embodied narrative.

Example 25 – Iqbal: Panjabi British. Borderline unsuccessful (with
interviewer Paul).

1. I: okay erm h-how do you respond when you get negative feedback
2. you know when s- when your line manager says to you
3. look you know (Joe) you didn’t do that very well [or
4. C: yeah]
5. I: h-how do you respond to that
6. C: no I-I actually thrive I think on that sort of er feedback
7. because I don’t look at it as- as a sort of er someone putting me down (.)
8. I look at it as s-s-someone actually giving me the opportunity t:o er
9. improve on things (.)
10. I: so can you] where y- your manager has sort of you know sat down with (.)
11. you know (.)( ) sort of said well you know
12. brought something to your attention
13. C: yeah
14. I: you know can you give me an example of that
15. where you’ve had to change
16. and how you- how you accepted that
Initially, the interviewer asks for a more general evaluative response at line 5 which Iqbal gives him. Then, at lines 10-16 the interviewer cues what kind of response he now wants by giving a detailed example himself which the candidate can then model his response on. Like other types of cues in conversation, the candidate’s success depends upon interpreting the question as a prompt to model. Unsuccessful candidates may not pick up this prompt because they do not expect interviewers to take on this role (see Chapter 8).

7.4.3 Cues for more personal discourses

In the next contrastive example, Emma, who is successful, is given much more opportunity to use her personal voice than Nanak.

Example 26 – Emma: white British. Successful (with interviewer Amanda).

1. I: on the sauce gantry we would be looking at (.)
2. to you for account[ability]
3. C: [that’s right]
4. 11: how do you f- do you think that’s fair do you think that’s unfair

The interviewer in asking ‘do you think that’s fair do you think that’s unfair’, gives Emma the opportunity to use her personal voice to talk about accountability. By contrast Nanak is asked ‘are you comfortable with that?’, not engaging with him on the same level ‘do you think that’s fair?’ but rather ‘can you manage that?’. He is ‘talked down’ to and also expected to interpret the metaphor of ‘being comfortable’ which is less explicit than the question to Emma.

7.5 Embedded questions and more shared context

Embedded questions use information about the candidate or the context of the workplace to construct a question (Roberts and Campbell, 2006). Like prompts and cues, they usually advantage candidates by providing more information and context for a relevant answer. As in the example above with Iqbal: ‘where y-your manager has sort of you know sat down with you know (.)(xxxx) sort of said well you know brought something to your attention’. Given that data from two sites are for internal promotion, calling up shared experiences or contexts occurs often. Overall, embedded questions occur more frequently and in a helpful way in the positive dynamic of more successful candidates. However, with less successful candidates there is some negative embedding where more context giving is used against candidates (see Section 7.10).
Table 7.5 Embedded and unembedded questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of embedded helpful questions</th>
<th>Number of unembedded and unhelpful embedded questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iqbal (B)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma (S)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladston (S)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara (U)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanak (U)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terence (U)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More embedding is mutually reinforcing where there is a positive dynamic. There are more shared examples which help the candidate to establish management affiliation with the interviewer as a potential fellow manager which, in turn, creates a more ‘conversational’ environment. Only Nanak receives a high level of helpful embedding as the interviewers attempt to give more context and examples to try to repair the frequent misunderstandings that occur.

In the next example, the interviewer expands on and provides more context for Gladston’s unfolding story:

Example 27 – Gladston: Jamaican. Successful (with interviewer Ian).

1. C: so what I did was that all my reserve staff
2. I-I-I attached another bit to the (. ) part to the ((name of form)) where that (. )
3. as you look at the ((name of form))
4. you know exactly where they are as you look at the rota
5. you know exactly what they’re doing at any point [and
6. I: right]
7. C: when they’re not there who’s covering their [duty
8. I: okay]
9. C: what as opposed as opposed to us looking it down on a daily basis I (. ) I- so
10. it it improved that er:m [I mean
11. I: so] what(.) okay so you you amended the ((name of form)) basically [which
12. C: yeah]
13. I: sort of then told you
14. exactly where everybody was supposed to be [including
15. C: or or] when’s my rest day if another manager comes in
16. he could just look at it =

Continued
At line 11, after Gladston’s evaluation of his story, the interviewer echoes Gladston’s story and evaluation format and then presents a mini-story himself at lines 19-21, signalling his imaginative investment in the story and co-authoring it with him. The interviewer at line 21 then cues for further analysis. (He seems to start this cue at line 11 and then delays it in order to confirm and endorse what Gladston has told him so far.) So the cue for more analysis helps the topic to develop or glide (Adelsward, 1988) or move ‘stepwise’ (Sacks, 1972) rather than be an abrupt switch of topic. In other words it is more conversational.

7.6 Co-authoring

Co-authoring occurs when interviewers and candidates establish together and jointly agree on what are the salient parts of the story, how it will be recorded (see note-taking in Section 7.14.2) and through embedded questions and statements shared knowledge is called up (as in Example 27). Both sides echo or repeat each other’s words and co-ordinate talk and feedback in a rhythmic way. Co-authoring is contrasted with translating where the interviewer draws a unilateral conclusion from the candidate’s contribution and contributes to the negative dynamic (see overleaf). Both co-authoring and translating are ‘formulations’ used to summarise, gloss or develop the gist of the previous speaker (Heritage and Watson, 1979) but in job interviews these are not neutral turns but actively promote either a more positive or negative dynamic.
Table 7.6 Co-authoring versus translation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of incidences of co-authoring</th>
<th>Number of incidences of translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iqbal (B)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma (S)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladston (S)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara (U)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanak (U)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terence (U)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the next example, the interviewer and Emma co-author a response on being flexible:

Example 28 – Emma: white British successful (with interviewer Amanda).

1. I: We then ask people to be flexible you know
2. you could cook noodles today (.) we could put you on batching today
3. C: yeah [that's not a problem]
4. I: ( .) there's no issue with you being flexible
5. C: no ‘cause that comes with (Factory) Foods though doesn’t it
6. [wherever you work you have to be flexible]
7. I: [yeah we- we- we’d like everybody to be flexible yeah yeah]
8. C: that's always been [(something)]
9. I: [but] obviously some people also quote
10. once I’m a sauce cook
11. C: (((I’m a sauce cook no)) [(it's]
   ((mimics the voice of a ‘rigid’ worker))
12. I: I'm a sauce cook yeah exactly
13. C: no
14. I: but we expect flex- sort of flexibility
15. do you know what I mean (.) it just helps the company
16. C: of course

The interviewer co-authors Emma’s self-presentation as a flexible person and as someone who understands the priorities of the organisation. In lines 4-6 and 10-12 they each echo the other’s words ‘be flexible’ and ‘I’m a sauce cook’. Emma takes up the scenario set up by the interviewer in line 9 and then picks up her ‘quote’ to role-play this. So her agreement with the interviewer at line 16 is more
than just a compliant response as she has already acted out and distanced herself from the inflexible worker she has mimicked.

7.7 Topic choice – opening up and negotiating questions/topics

More open questions and more negotiating of how the question can be answered are features of more successful interviews. Candidates have more opportunity to talk on their own terms and as the co-authoring section indicates, there is more opportunity to develop topics together. So there is more of the ‘topic-gliding’ (Adelsward, 1988) or ‘stepwise movement’ (Sacks, 1967) also encouraged by embedding (see Section 7.5), rather than strict question and answer sequences with abrupt topic shifts.

It is the use rather than the form of open or closed questions that affect the dynamic. Although in most contexts, open questions give more opportunity, the function and placing of some closed questions can help the candidate in the long run, for example when they are simple clarificatory sequences which do not affect the candidate’s flow.

Although candidates take opportunities to talk, there are relevance requirements in all interviews and the extent to which candidates give relevant answers was an important criterion in their evaluation. So negotiation of questions allows candidates to negotiate how relevant their preferred answer is likely to be.

Table 7.7 Negotiation of questions/topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of negotiation of questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iqbal (B)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma (S)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladston (S)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara (U)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanak (U)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terence (U)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the unsuccessful candidates, only Sara attempts to negotiate the question or topic while all three more successful candidates do. This suggests that the more conversational dynamic that is developing with the latter group, allows more interactional space which in turn offers more opportunity for them to negotiate a relevant response. The clearest example of candidates successfully negotiating the topic is in Gladston’s interview, Example 15. This example shows candidate and interviewer not only negotiating on whether Gladston’s topic is relevant but on the grounds for this negotiation (lines 14-18). Gladston and the interviewer treat this moment as if it was a discussion among colleagues in which the candidate also has rights in deciding what is appropriate.
7.8 Praise

Interestingly, both successful and unsuccessful candidates receive overt praise or at least positive confirmatory statements, e.g. ‘yes that’s how it works’, ‘that’s good’. Positive statements do not seem to be an indicator that the whole interview is going well and therefore, may give a wrong impression and feed into candidates’ conclusion that they have done well. This, in turn, may fuel perceived discrimination from ethnic minority candidates when they subsequently hear they have not been successful. Paradoxically, it is the implicit praise and positive confirmation in more successful interviews through co-authoring, sharing of contexts and general loosening of institutional requirements which is a much stronger indicator of a felicitous interview. Explicit praise, as in the case of Sara’s interview, may be a condition of her failure. The interviewer judged her as emotional and reactive and this may at least partly be caused by the high level of praise and criticism given by the interviewer and to which she subsequently reacts.

7.8.1 The negative dynamic

The negative dynamic produces a more ‘institutional’ tone and interactional features, with candidates’ responses more controlled or merely tolerated, and a tightening of relevancy requirements. More misalignments and fewer cues about how to align with interviewers’ expectations lead to more interruptions and challenges of the candidates’ accounts. They are repeatedly expected to change tack so it becomes increasingly difficult to build up a whole and coherent story of themselves. This, in turn, ruptures their attempts to produce a consistent self-characterisation – a coherent ‘management persona’ – essential to a positive evaluation. Sections 7.9 to 7.13 are from the ‘institutional’ mode of interviews in Table 7.1.

7.9 Reformulations

Reformulations are rewordings of earlier interview questions which seek to elicit a more relevant, or acceptable response which aligns with the interviewers’ expected discourses. So, they are usually implicitly critical and in some cases overtly so. Unsuccessful candidates receive more reformulations than follow-ons (see Table 7.3).

In the next example, the interviewer reformulates his question because he is not satisfied with the answer, despite the fact that it is not dissimilar to Iqbal’s (see Example 24) where the same interviewer gives him a positive, prompting response:
Here, rather than inviting Sara to give a concrete example, the interviewer sets her up to fail by pointing out that she has said earlier in the day that she ‘hadn’t particularly had much negative feedback’. This comment makes it difficult for Sara to answer the question without appearing to contradict herself and does not cue her to answer the question in any particular way or even to stay on-topic. She has to produce a general defensive answer rather than a specific relevant one.

When there have been several misalignments, interviewer reformulations become more frequent and more controlling. The criterion for a relevant and acceptable answer becomes very narrow. In the following example, the interviewer narrows down his questioning to elicit one answer: ‘How aware were you of company policy?’ whereas the candidate is presenting the problem as more complex, with more than one policy being relevant.

### 7.9.1 Persistent reformulations around a theme

In the following example, a misalignment develops between interviewer and candidate which leads to persistent interruptions and reformulations:
Example 30 – Terence: white Irish. Clearly unsuccessful (with interviewer lan).

1. I: so you was in so in a sense then
2. you were aware of the policy (the area policy)
3. you then () took a decision
4. that you knew was outside of the area policy
5. C: well this this is one of the interesting points ((name))
6. because in my understand-
7. I've studied at [length
8. I: (so what I)] what I want to make clear
9. I'm not () making of you as to you've
10. [(why did you)
11. C: no no no]
12. I: I'm just seeking to understand if that's [(the way it was)
13. C: yeah well] the question is you know what have I done er
14. to correct the mistake that I've made essentially
15. or what have I acknowledged as a mistake if if I'm correct in
16. my analysis=
17. I: = well I guess in a sense [it's
18. C: it it]
19. I: part of me is trying to understand ()
20. to what extent that you knew about the
21. area policy before making the decision =
22. C: =before making the decision
23. I: yeah
24. C: right that no that's fine I know I'm on track here because (2)
25. my my knowledge of company polic- company policy and procedure
26. I I in terms of in terms of er:m e:r e:r
27. conduct is is fairly detailed
28. I mean I've I've done at least two separate () e:r
29. training courses [on on on
30. I: no this is I I I'm interested in specific
31. in relation to ((the service)) integrity
The question ‘To what extent was you aware of this company policy?’ is reformulated six times (see questions in bold). Although Terence begins to answer this in lines 6-7, albeit somewhat indirectly, he then goes on to start to explain that the context was more complicated, lines 13-16 and to haul the interaction back to the overall topic ‘What have I done to correct the mistake?’. The interviewer then interrupts at line 17 and continues to reformulate around the same question. These reformulations confirm the misalignment, with the interviewer pursuing a more professional/personal discourse about personal responsibility, while Terence uses a variety of organisational discourses to explain the wider context and defend himself. This tightening of the relevance requirements with reformulations and interruptions in which only one answer is allowable is in stark contrast to the interviews where candidates can negotiate what is relevant and are given space to present their management persona.

The interviewer writes in the notes at this point ‘Decision took outside area policy’ whereas Terence is trying to explain that there was more than one policy which was relevant. And a little later the interviewer writes: ‘Very unclear as to what he understood to be the position’ – a conclusion that was at least partly constructed by the interviewer’s conduct at this point.

7.9.2 Role-play as reformulation

Another, much less explicit type of reformulation is where the interviewer switches into role-play, usually without any cues that there is a change in the ‘footing’. This occurs in Sara’s interview and with other unsuccessful candidates.
The next example is taken from Ravi’s interview. He is not one of the contrastive case studies but this interaction is a particularly good illustration of the role play strategy and why it contributes to, rather than solves, the problem. Ravi has been asked what is the first action he would take, after all his training, when he first takes on the role of manager of a department.


1. C: =ok the first thing of what I would do is er
2. I: right
3. C: the whole of the department the products (.)
4. I: right
5. C: what I am selling and the merchandising
6. I: right
7. C: and the type of customers we getting into the store (.)
8. and the staff who are working with me (.)
9. then I would take one by one
10. I: right
11. C: step by step
12. I: mhm
13. C: improving on the various aspect I just mentioned to you
14. I: so (Ravi) I- I want 130,000 from your produce department this week (.) I know it’s your first week but that’s what I want
15. C: ((nodding)) ok (.) the first thing of what I’ve seen through my own eyes
16. going through the produce (.)
17. I: = yeah but I’m not concerned with that (Ravi)
18. I’m only- I’m only concerned with sales (.)
19. that’s by and by (.)
20. what (.),what do (.),you gonna do
21. to get me 130,000 this week
22. C: I will look at the er items which are selling most (.)most and fast (.)
23. the fastest percentage wise (.) and I will concentrate on that

At line 14, the interviewer switches to role play but this produces a treble misalignment: firstly, the topic, as Ravi talks about quality and not sales; secondly, there is a discourse misalignment since Ravi starts off in more organisational mode:
‘the first thing’, ‘percentage wise’ and while the interviewer wants a narrative account; and, thirdly, interactionally, because he does not go into role play head to head with the interviewer.

### 7.9.3 Misunderstandings and reformulations

There are very few examples, in the promotion interview data, of the type of misunderstandings identified in the low-paid job interviews (Roberts and Campbell, 2006) except in the promotion interview for an upgrading in Factory Foods.

**Unsuccessful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 32 – Nanak: Indian. Clearly unsuccessful (with interviewer Amanda).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: do you understand what sauce cooking involves (.) do you know [obviously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C: yeah] yeah I know about that every sauce-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I: uhu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. C: Madras sauce ( ) sauce mmm Hurti masala Parthi masala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I: right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. C: Moona sauce Mint sauce=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I: = okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. C: many sauces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I: so you cooked all these sauces [at ( )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. C: nmm] just like Jalfrezi sauce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I: uhu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. C: I can cook easily no problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I: okay so what what type of cooking vessels did they have at ( . )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. what was (xxx) factory kitchen like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. C: yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I: what was it like (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. C: mmm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I: how [many sauces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. C: many] sauces has been cooked there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I: yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. C: mmm like I work in on the ( )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. and there was cooking e (.) has been cooked er Jalfrezi sauce</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued
Nanak misunderstands the first question ‘Do you understand what sauce cooking involves?’ He responds by listing sauces he can make, whereas the interviewer is looking for a more grounded description of the different activities ‘involved’ in cooking sauces: measuring ingredients, following a specification, controlling the ovens and checking food quality. However, the five reformulations (between lines 14-30) do not cue the kind of answer she needs. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that none of these questions are embedded – she does not take up from the contribution Nanak has already given. The interviewer rewords because she assumes that the problem is ‘poor English’ rather than a more profound misunderstanding about how to answer questions of this type. The interviewer ‘talks down’ to him, in increasingly more low level questions, which may feed into an existing stereotype of some ethnic minority groups as ‘childish’.

7.10 Unembedded questions

Unsuccessful candidates are much more likely to have to answer unembedded questions. As in the example just given, unembedded questions fail to take up information or shared knowledge and ‘embed’ it in the question. So candidates are given less help in aligning to the interviewer and making answers relevant. Once a negative dynamic has set in, there is less conversational sharedness overall and this leads to more unembedded questions and rapid topic shifts. For example, in the interview extract with Iqbal, the interviewer is happy to use a named colleague to discuss a point, whereas with Sara he is not.

7.11 Translating

Whereas a positive dynamic both creates and reinforces co-authoring (see Section 7.6), translations close down opportunities. These tend to be negative confirmatory formulations where interviewers draw conclusions from the candidate’s response in a negative way. These translations, when inaccurate, are difficult to contradict. They feed into the construction of the failing candidate and accusations that the candidate would need ‘spoon-feeding’. So, again, interactional moves by the interviewer are used to make general judgements about a candidate’s character.
**Unsuccessful example**

**Example 33 – Terence: white Irish. Clearly unsuccessful (with interviewer Ian).**

1. C: trying to getting people to understand that
2. you know these things need to be done er
3. and that we do sometimes have to look at reappraising how we do things
4. I: okay so some were reluctant to embrace it
5. is that what you’re saying
6. C: some were reluctant to embrace it er:m

Here, Terence is describing his role in introducing a new piece of software to offices. The interviewer rephrases his comments negatively ‘some were reluctant to embrace it’. From then on, the interaction becomes the discussion of a problem in something that Terence did. The candidate does not have the power to disagree with Ian’s version and therefore, goes along with it.

### 7.12 Topic-control and closing down

The features described so far in the negative dynamic can all serve to close down candidate opportunity to select and extend topics. Instead of gliding or side-stepping to new topics, the institutional control exercised by the interviewer maintains the interview as a strictly question and answer sequence with either rapid topic shifts or, as previous, drilling down to an increasingly narrow focus.

Closed questions (although they can be simple clarificatory ones and not disruptive of the flow – see Gladston) usually close down talk. The contrastive studies show that unsuccessful candidates are usually asked more closed questions.

### Table 7.8 Closed questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of closed questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iqbal (B)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma (S)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladston (S)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara (U)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanak (U)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terence (U)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the next two examples there is a difference between the clarificatory question asked to Gladston and the way the flow is disrupted in the closed question asked to Ravi:
Example 34 – Gladston: Jamaican. Successful (with interviewer Ian).
1. C: what I’ve recently been criticism I’m having is
2. people who who is saying that ( ) customers
3. that they’re they’re complaining too much and er:m
4. they haven’t got no right to be complaining [e:r
5. I: okay] so is this people in the office
6. C: yeah this is people in the office now er:m say saying to me about ((Services
7. Ltd)) () about customers complaining er:m about ((Services Ltd.))

1. C: () and if I find it genuine ()
2. I would make a refund or exchange depending on the circumstances
3. if you have a genuine damage () yes you do ()
4. but if it comes to the younger generation
5. you have to be a bit cautious () and talk to them
6. I: and wh- what would you regard
7. the percentage of customers that are dishonest ()
8. if I asked you what the percentage was ()
9. what in your view would be the percentage of customers who are dishonest
10. C: that’s a very difficult question weren’t it ()
11. I would put it in to age groups (1)
12. I: yeah () go on () yeah that’s fine
13. C: er in the UK I would say the younger generation yes ()
14. I: percentage
15. C: (0.5)
16. I: say (our fruit bowl of customers) say average customer em ()
17. no no we’ll do it as a group ()
18. say an average customer for this store would pay ()
19. perhaps 50,000 customers per week ()
20. how many of those do you feel are dishonest in your eyes ()
21. this isn’t a trick question by the way
At line 6, the interviewer switches topic without acknowledging or developing Ravi’s previous answer and poses a ‘difficult question’ which Ravi begins to answer and then at lines 11, 13 and 15 pauses. The interviewer warms to his theme and presses Ravi further for an answer, with a hypothetical situation, far removed from customer skills and interaction. This topic switch indicates that he is not satisfied with the more organisational, general response that Ravi gives and so switches to occupational discourses, looking for precise figures. In his evaluation, Ravi is criticised for ‘no examples’ and ‘irrelevant answers’ and speaking in ‘generalisations’. But, as this example shows, it is the interviewer’s questions which contribute to these negative evaluations.

7.13 Critical comments and questions

Criticisms of failing candidates are built up cumulatively through reformulations, unembedded and closed questions and interruptions. Sara, for example, is asked nine negative embedded questions (where embedded questions, as shown already are usually helpful) and nine critical reformulations as compared with Iqbal’s one. It is difficult for candidates to deal with critical questions and comments. They may either appear arrogant and ‘unable to accept criticism’ or if they fail to defend themselves because of the power asymmetry of the interview, they may be seen as lacking awareness of their own weaknesses.

In the next example, Sara is criticised by Paul for her timing:

**Example 36 – Sara: Maltese. Clearly unsuccessful (with interviewer Paul).**

1. I: did you not have any involvement with ((the new process)) then
2. before when (.) when the planners before- before it was put in
3. did you did somebody not sit did the
4. did they not sit down with you and go through the changes
5. C: not with me personally
6. I: no right so it just wasn’t done [erm cos
7. C: no]
8. I: that would have been a better time [ to pick it up
9. C: yeah]
10. I: wouldn’t it
11. C: er:m a some of (.) they did speak to some of the night staff
12. but it was very few
13. I: right
Here, towards the end of a question about taking up suggestions from staff, in which Sara has described how she took on staff’s suggestions to deal with teething problems arising from the introduction of a new process, Paul offers a negative reformulation (lines 8-10). This reformulation suggests a problem with Sara’s response – that it suggests a lack of planning – and is closed in that it asks for a yes or no answer concerning whether someone had gone through the changes with her beforehand.

Similarly, in the next example, Sara is positioned by the interviewer’s question to defend her action:

**Example 37 – Sara.**

1. I: is there not a bit of a danger there that (.) er what you’re actually doing is
2. is a manager doing ((delivery )) work
3. C: certainly [but
4. I: which] is not really what you’re [paid to
5. C: no it’s]
6. I: to do
7. C: not what you’re paid to do but (.) er:m
8. if you have an option of failing the duty completely
9. I: mmm
10. C: or covering it (.) er:m you have to make a decision
11. and when the duty (.) is priorities (.) you know it’s priorities
12. [that’s why it’s called priorities
13. I: yeah yeah yeah]
14. C: you know er:m that’s why I made the decision I did

This is the beginning of a 36-line defence by Sara. This long defence feeds into his judgement that she is ‘garrulous, patronizing, cocky, too reactive’ and ‘always wants control’. So Sara’s attempts to cope with criticism are seen as taking over too much and this interview behaviour is then used to judge how she would interact with staff. The interviewer judges that she will be too controlling and not able to delegate. He also considers that she could not deal with being pushed on questions. But again, it is the interviewer’s behaviour which contributes to this judgement. In contrast, Iqbal is not ‘pushed’ with critical questions of the kind which are repeatedly given to Sara.
7.14 Managing writing

7.14.1 The purpose of writing

The requirements of equal opportunities legislation and the trend towards increasing accountability and record keeping mean that, as with low paid jobs, interviewers write up candidates’ answers. This often required negotiation as in all but two of the management/promotion interviews, a single interviewer had to interact and write about the candidate during the interview.

7.14.2 The note-taking process

The note-taking process affects both the decision-making and the interaction itself. The notes are a selective reproduction (of varying accuracy) of extracts from the stories candidates tell. It is not an explicit evaluation of whether responses are judged as good or bad. What is chosen to be written down is either an on-going log of how the interviewer is assessing the candidate or is a minimalist record of facts from the candidate. In the former case, the distinction between a positive and negative dynamic is clear. With more successful interviews, candidates’ own self-evaluations are captured. There is more joint authoring (see previous). In less successful interviews, the record is more impersonal and there is more translating into interviewers’ own words. In these less successful interviews, there tend to be quite long periods when no record is taken and by contrast intense periods when the interviewer attempts to keep a detailed log. These attempts often mean that the interviewer is focused on writing rather than attending to the candidate’s current response. This puts additional interactional demands on the candidate.

As with low-paid job interviews, there is a gap between the official purpose of the note taking and its actual use. The official management view was to ‘demonstrate how you arrived at a decision’ with a secondary consideration that the writing provided evidence if there was an appeal. However, the notes were never seen to be used in the final decision-making process. The note-taking was used by some interviewers to structure the interview and to act as a ‘kind of point of reference... where am I, what do I need to do, what have I got to get’. For example, an extended version of the STAR format (Situation, Task, Action, Result) (see Roberts and Campbell, 2006 and Chapter 5) is used by Services Ltd to structure candidates’ responses both through questions and in structuring the note-taking. When candidates do not follow this format, a lot of interactional time is taken up trying to elicit and record answers that fit the structure written on the page.
### 7.14.3 Writing and the positive and negative dynamic

#### Table 7.9 How note taking contributes to a more positive or negative dynamic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive dynamic</th>
<th>Negative dynamic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More use of candidates’ own evaluations (joint authoring)</td>
<td>More impersonal and organisational language of the interviewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No negative statements recorded</td>
<td>Negative statements and interpretations recorded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaps and contradictions not recorded</td>
<td>Contradictions foregrounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherent story told</td>
<td>Just facts and large sections of candidate talk not recorded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smooth synchronisation of talk and writing, with candidate recycling writeable fragments</td>
<td>Asynchronisation in talk and writing with candidate hesitation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The contrasting use of note taking in a positive or negative dynamic is illustrated in the different ways in which Gladston’s and Terence’s contributions are recorded. In Gladston’s interview, the interviewer takes down a considerable amount of what the candidate says either verbatim or in paraphrased form, reproducing Gladston’s positive self-evaluation. What Gladston foregrounds, the interviewer foregrounds in his notes, whereas with Terence (below), background comments are foregrounded in the notes. The notes on Gladston blend the interviewer’s voice with the candidate’s, using the word ‘I’ which the interview never does with Terence (see below). Also the selected record fits together into an account with its own internal logic.

The note taking at Terence’s interview contrasts with Gladston’s in three different ways: Firstly, Terence often positions himself as making reasonable decisions in complex situations. But these are often recorded in the notes in an unequivocal and negative way. For example, Terence talks of his decision being ‘out of step with [X manager’s] notion of tolerance’ and this is translated in the notes as Terence going outside area policy. So while Terence saw this as a matter of debate, the interviewer recorded it as challenging fixed policy (see Example 29, where this extract is also discussed). Secondly, there are long sections where no notes are taken. The interviewer’s time is taken up with persistent questioning, no verbatim reports are made and only a general negative comment is recorded at the end. Finally, the overall set of notes, unlike Gladston’s, does not appear coherent. The rather fragmented nature of the last section of the notes may contribute to the impression of Terence as ‘unclear’ and ‘inconsistent’. Incoherent notes can construct an incoherent candidate.
7.15 Conclusion

The interview is a joint production, with interviewers’ conduct a major contributor to its overall tone and outcomes. It is framed by the values, norms and interactional styles of the organisational culture, itself based on Anglo styles and assumptions and so can never be a culture-free zone. So, there is a gap between the rhetoric of diversity with its focus on respecting difference and the reality of the culturally-specific interview.

The interactional components of the interviewers’ performance play an important role in developing a positive or negative dynamic with the candidates. They not only develop a rationalisation for their decision during the interview, they also display it in the ways in which they respond to candidates. A negative dynamic makes the interview more institutional, with more control by the interview and fewer opportunities for candidates to work in conversational ways with interviewers. Those who are least knowledgeable about the British job interview have more difficulty aligning themselves to the interviewers and so face additional interactional demands during its course. Misalignments tend to be dealt with indirectly so that this group often consider the interview has gone well, even when they are rated low by interviewers. This gap between perceived and rated performance can lead to perceptions of racial discrimination.
8  Issues of language and diversity

8.1  Introduction

The decisions made by interviewers based on the 22 recorded interviews show that ethnic minority candidates born abroad were likely to experience the negative dynamic of the interview more intensely than others and to receive more consistently negative assessments of performance than their white or British ethnic minority counterparts. Although less clear-cut than the previous research on low-paid job interviews, these judgements show that a ‘linguistic penalty’ continues to operate in the promotion interview. This chapter looks in more detail at this ‘penalty’ and how it is constructed out of three inter-connecting factors: candidates’ communicative style, lack of shared assumptions about the selection interview and factors related to living and working abroad. The data used here are the interview recordings, semi-structured research interviews and interviewer feedback and post-interview discussions with candidates.

8.2  Communicative style

How a candidate ‘comes across’ to the interviewer, can be summed up as their ‘communicative style’. Some aspects are individual, for example, we each have our own ‘acoustic signature’. But most aspects associate the individual with a social group. This style is crucially about how one presents oneself, for example, how much you display of your own feelings or how direct you are, and this relates to rhetorical strategies and more micro aspects concerned with grammar and vocabulary and the largely hidden and automatic ways of conveying meaning through intonation, tone of voice, rhythm and tempo. Communicative style affects how speakers design their talk and how they interpret others’. It is what gives candidates’ contributions and the whole interaction its particular character.

No one style is intrinsically better than another (Auer and Kern, 2000, Chafe, 1980). However, in the context of the job interview, interviewers often unconsciously
value certain styles of speaking over others. And many of the judgements of candidates (see Chapter 4) are based on implicitly comparing and judging the normative communicative style of the interviewers with those of the candidates. These conventional styles are linked either to current organisational cultures, for example, being a ‘people person’ and so expectations of relative tactfulness and indirectness, or to a more sceptical interpretation of current rhetorics. For example, the rhetoric of valuing ‘individuality’ does not allow for too idiosyncratic presentation of self in the interview (see below). So differences in communicative style between interviewer and candidate affect both how the candidate comes across as a person and how are they are judged as ‘fitting in’, aligning to the organisational culture.

One of the main criticisms of unsuccessful candidates was their failure to present themselves as a synthesised whole, blending persona, professional and organisational discourses in their alignment to the interviewer. They were criticised for being overly personal and intimate and so unprofessional or too impersonal and not personally engaged or of producing a jarring juxtaposition of the two. Where these discourses were not blended, candidates were seen as lacking credibility, taking on words which were rehearsed and not their own and by implication, untrustworthy (see also Kerekes, 2006). Ethnic minority candidates born abroad were more likely than other candidates to be both judged negatively in this area in the wash-ups and for this judgement to be displayed in the interview with more reformulations and attempts to model a preferred answer from interviewers (see Chapter 7). Aspects of the communicative style which proved most problematic were: directness and indirectness, rhetorical strategies and footing.

8.3 Directness and indirectness

8.3.1 Managing people

The new capitalism requires a close identification between the individual’s self-construction and the culture or ideology of the organisation, particularly around the topic of ‘managing people’. But although corporate discourses speak of valuing ‘individuality’ this is tightly circumscribed and does not allow for unconventionality. So candidates have to balance their self-presentation, including personal viewpoints and their inner thought processes with the organisational discourses of discretion, distancing and symmetry. As Chapter 6 has shown, there has to be a balance, or symmetry, in candidates’ talk so that no one type of discourse is over-weighted. Similarly, narrative accounts, self-characterisation and tellings of weaknesses and difficulties must all be euphemised and mediated through distancing techniques, to give a balance of display and discretion. (See Tim’s successful example in Chapter 5 under aligning to organisational discourses.)
Issues of language and diversity

Unsuccessful example

Example 38 – Michael: Liberian. Clearly unsuccessful.

1. I: e- it could be either but you you’ve had to sort it out
2. what’s been the hardest thing
3. (.) that you’ve had to e- a colleague conflict
4. C: yeah colleague conflict er:m (.) yeah
5. that why I say well this particular lady (.)
6. yeah at first it was she she went up you know she went up the first day
7. I talk to her like that she went (.) upstairs she wept
8. I: right
9. C: and then came and said no ((name))
10. I’m going to call employ employment relations blah blah [blah

The new work order values of inspiring and listening to people, of engaging them and helping to develop potential in them – the ‘people person’ manager – mean that candidates are marked down if they appear over-controlling or arrogant. Here, Michael talks about how he made a worker cry without any attempt to soften what he did. Later he says ‘I made her go on training’ and of another employee that if ‘I can get this guy in my hand’ he would be able to change him. The interviewer judged Michael as ‘too harsh’ and overall he was evaluated as lacking team working and communication skills.

Unsuccessful example

In the second part of her interview, Sara switches from an almost entirely organisational discourse mode to a personal one when discussing her own role and experiences with staff. Commenting on the first part of the interview, the interviewer criticised her for ‘lecturing’ him and ‘saying what she had been told to say’. He found her ‘unspecific’ and ‘waffling’. But in the second part she uses more emotional language about how ‘[x] really upsets me’, ‘I liked [y]’ and ‘[z] annoyed me’:

1. C: so you’re you’re not going to please all the people all the time
2. but I found the trick is (.) find out who ye- the trouble makers are
3. ge- get rid of them somehow
4. I: mm
5. C: politely (.) and then you can carry on with what you want to do
6. I: mhm
7. C: but you’re not saying to the guy oh shut up
8. I’m not talking to you you’re an idiot
9. I: mm
10. C: na:a [you’d
11. I: mm]
12. C: probably get smacked in the face for that [not a wise idea

The necessary tension between discretion and display is lost here as Sara describes in direct, and what is perceived as ‘aggressive’, language what she would and would not do. She uses informality, direct speech quotation and expressivity and this ‘high-involvement’ style (Tannen, 1984) is resisted throughout by the interviewer (see Chapter 7). Her style is taken as a revelation of her ‘true feelings’ which the interviewer said made him feel uncomfortable, and she is frequently interrupted to prevent too much disclosure.

8.3.2 Individual motivation

Equally problematic are candidate contributions which do not display enough of the self, where the discourse is unremittingly organisational and inner thought processes, points of view and individual action are cloaked by impersonal features of talk. This misalignment is particularly evident when candidates are asked about their personal motivation.
Unsuccessful example

Example 40 – Michael: Liberian. Clearly unsuccessful.

1. I: okay so first of all ((name)) what made you apply to ((xxx company))
2. C: we- in reality (. ) yeah er:m I was ( ) surfing on the net
3. I: right
4. C: y:eah and I went to your website and I saw g:od there's a job (no well)
5. one is I mean the potential of the company
6. I: yes
7. C: y:eah if you look at the the rate of growth here=
8. I: = mmm
9. C: e:r for instance I was reading your erm the company ( )
10. it was saying that (.) e:r for three consecutive times
11. you've been the best erm I mean er employer in the UK

Michael’s failure to read the hidden cue to speak about himself, his career progression and skills reflects a general tendency to use organisational discourses. Repeatedly, the interviewer prompts him to ‘talk about himself actually’ and interrogates his thought processes and motivations but Michael responds with the organisational discourse of figures and procedures.

8.4 Rhetorical strategies

Different cultural and linguistic traditions produce different ways of organising and structuring persuasive talk. The Western ‘teleological style’ is organised around some final outcome or purpose and then uses a ‘cause and effect’ structure to get there (Auer and Kern, 2000, Chafe, 1980). This style is routinely illustrated through action and examples with claims backed up by evidence. By contrast, many of the candidates from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds used a more assertive style in which maxims, proverbs and general, sometimes clichéd, truths, together with repetition, are used to make one’s talk more authoritative and impressive (Günthner and Knoblauch, 1991). Ravi, for example, maintains an impersonal and analytic stance throughout the interview, repeatedly using general maxims, deontic (‘you should’) expressions and, like Michael, clichés such as ‘Customer service is number one’, without blending this discourse with more personal, active-oriented modes of talking.
Unsuccessful example


1. C: eh (.) achieving targets (.) that’s what I was talking about (.)
2. and customer service is number one (.) er (.)
3. I: you mentioned that before didn’t you
4. C: I did (.) I did
5. I: and I was intrigued because I wanted you to-
6. because I didn’t know I’d be interviewing you
7. but one thing I was- I was going to ask you for you to clarify that (.)
8. it seems to be a massive thing for you
9. in terms of the customer number one (.)
10. what do you perceive by the (.) for- for (.)
11. two things that are most important about customer service to you?
12. C: the first thing is your listening skills (.) you listen to the person (.)
13. and then er (.) how you get that service back again (.)
14. and the feedback you have after that (.) over there
15. you (.) try to build the customer to have a base (.)
16. once they get used to it you-
17. they come back to you over and over again
18. I: right
19. C: that’s of a paramount importance
20. I: mhm
21. C: a group of people coming down last year (.)
22. you should be able to retain them
23. rather than going- them going to another store (.) to do that
24. that all comes in
25. I: right
26. C: and er I’ve taken it very very seriously (.)
27. especially on the customer service desk
28. I: so what’s been your golden moment in terms of customer service (.)
29. for you personally
30. C: satisfaction
31. I: ok (.) you satisfied or the customer
32. C: the customer satisfied I’m satisfied (.) if not then there’s something wrong
33. I: right
34. C: that’s the way I look at it
35. I: ok (.) alright (.) we’ll move on

Ravi’s opening statement is both a well known maxim and repetitive, and when
the interviewer at lines 5-11 asks for clarification and his personal view on
customer service, Ravi responds with an analytic list, using ‘you’ rather than ‘I’ or
‘we’, speaking in generalisations and well worn evaluations: ‘that’s of paramount
importance’ and making unmitigated assertions: ‘they come back to you over and
over again’ (lines 12-19). At line 22, instead of following through with a specific
example, he uses the deontic mode ‘You should be able to retain them’ and
a general assertion at line 26. Again at line 28, the ‘golden moment’ question
designed to produce a concrete example is again responded to with a general
assertion: ‘satisfaction’ and with a cliché at line 32. Ravi also uses repetition
with the two connected themes of listening and customer retention/satisfaction
throughout this sequence. Ravi was strongly criticised in the wash-up for having
no examples and using generalisations and buzzwords. And yet this is a rhetorical
style that would be persuasive in other cultural contexts.

This ‘studied’ rather than action talk also shows how candidates position themselves
as somewhat detached, not ‘hands on’ even when, as in the next example, the
interviewer prompts with a vivid scenario:

Unsuccessful example

1. I: you walk into the department and er
2. you’re taken on- on board (.)you’ve had
3. all your weeks of training and you’ve been in a store of learning (.)
4. you’ve had your eight weeks or so here
5. and then you go into the real environment of life in store (.)
6. and you’ve got set preset goals of what you want to achieve
7. and=
8. C: =ok the first thing of what I would do is er
9. I would- I would study my department
10. I: right
11. C: the whole of the department the products (.)

Continued
Despite the goals and achievement cues from the interviewer, made explicit by the words ‘real environment’ contrasted with the ‘store of learning’ and ‘pre-set goals’, Ravi’s talk appears ‘studied’, distancing and academic. This is because of both the impersonal features of his language and because he frames his talk as if it was a presentation or lecture, again using repetition and listing to convey authority. This lecturing mode inhibits any lively, detailed, engaging talk which would give him authenticity in the interviewer’s eyes.

8.5 Footing

8.5.1 Formality or solidarity

The assertive style just described also affects the footing – the social relations and degree of formality or solidarity that the candidate and interviewer create (or not) with each other. In the low-paid job interviews, several candidates were better qualified than the interviewers and tended to put themselves on an equal footing with them (Roberts and Campbell, 2006). Although this was also a problem expressed by interviewers at Factory Foods, in the management interviews in Services Ltd and Supermarket, there was less discrepancy between candidate and interviewer. Nevertheless, there were still problems of footing.

As the examples above indicate, the assertive style can be perceived as ‘lecturing’ with the implication that the candidate is positioning themselves as more knowledgeable than the interviewer. Alternatively, candidates misread the conventional footing in the early stages of the interview and produce uncomfortable moments when they claim a solidarity with the interviewer which the latter has not sanctioned. Sara’s joke in the opening stages of the interview is an example of this (See Example 17).

8.5.2 Positioning the self

Throughout the interview, the choice of modes of discourse that candidates make, or are expected by the interviewer to make, position them in relation to the interviewer. The movement between engagement and solidarity, and distance and formality shape the overall judgement of personality and skills.
Candidates also position themselves vis-a-vis their team, managers, customers etc. Unsuccessful candidates, particularly those born abroad, tend to be judged as too ‘soft’ when negotiating with representatives, too ‘harsh’ with their own staff and to position themselves as too dependent upon higher management or too reliant on procedures rather than taking action. Ravi, again, positions himself as going through procedures rather than as working in partnership with higher management. So, the procedure rather than the aspiring manager is the active agent (see Example 7).

Ravi talks of putting the problem up to higher management, positioning himself as relatively powerless and this, combined with his overuse of organisational discourse, leads to an overall evaluation that he gave ‘no examples’ and ‘irrelevant answers’ and used ‘generalisations’.

8.6 Lack of shared assumptions about the promotion interview

Unsuccessful candidates who were born abroad were more likely to have quite different assumptions about the purpose and expectations of the interview (see Chapter 4) and to misread the effectiveness of their performance. They mentioned ‘qualifications’, ‘working hard’ and ‘good manners’ as criteria they expected to be judged by. And they assumed interviewers would be more interested in their background and achievements generally and not limit the interview to standard questions. They were also unfamiliar with constraints on how much to talk and that the written application and CV would play only a minor role in the interview.

Many felt that the interview had been ‘relaxed’ and this was taken as a marker of success, even when a more negative dynamic set in early and the conduct of the interview became relatively more formal and institutional. So, the perceived relaxed and informal nature of the opening of the interview, itself a product of interview training, appears to give ambiguous messages to those not fully attuned to its cultural practices, as discussed in Chapter 4.

The relatively relaxed environment of the British interview contrasts with expectations of formality and more aggressive questioning in interviews elsewhere. The role of the interviewer as prompter also appears to be misread. The reformulations, prompts and shifts into role-plays used as strategies by interviewers to realign candidates, often fail. This indicates not only difficulty in reading the particular strategy but a lack of shared perspective at a meta level: knowing about the role and positioning of interviewers as prompters.

This group of candidates were also less likely to align to the openings and closings of interviews where interaction is more ritualised (Goffman, 1981). The balance between the more distant and euphemised self and the more engaged and informal is crucial in these opening moments and both Sara and Michael, for example, are perceived as getting off on the wrong footing. Similarly, the ritual
of asking candidates for their questions in the closing stage can be misread. For example, Michael turns the spotlight on the interviewer to find out about his personal motivation.

### 8.7 Foreign work experience

#### 8.7.1 Comparison between low-paid and promotion interviews

Of the four interviews recorded with candidates who had work experience from their countries of origin, three were clearly unsuccessful and one was ‘borderline’ unsuccessful. None of the candidates were given the opportunity to successfully use their foreign work experience (FWE) in the interview. It was only in Ravi’s interview that FWE became a central topic of discussion. In this interview, the interviewer’s reactions to this meant that it was negatively assessed, and seen as a ‘downside’ in the wash-up.

In the low-paid job interviews, the issue of FWE raised four problems: its dismissal as irrelevant; lack of shared knowledge of particular types of FWE; the requirement to give considerable background context and the lack of equivalences (Roberts and Campbell, 2006 and Chapter 7). In the promotion interviews the first two of these were significant. The disparity between job seeker experience/qualifications and the job applied for was much greater in the earlier study and often their interactional resources were more limited. So issues of context and equivalences were more salient. However, in the management interviews the tailoring of specific experience to the post on offer was more crucial. So, the candidates’ capacity to make their FWE relevant and the interviewers’ willingness (or not) to work with this experience, played an important role in final decisions. This was particularly the case with candidates who had not had any management experience in the UK.

Interviewers’ own limited experience in some interviews may also have been a factor in relating to FWE, particularly in internal promotion. In one of the organisations, three of the four interviewers had only worked in the one company and the fourth had been there for 15 years and so they were all much more familiar with, and used to speaking about, work within the company.

#### 8.7.2 Structure and question type limit opportunities

The highly structured nature of the interview, with very specific main questions, means that candidates have few opportunities to talk through their careers or transferable skills. For example, Nanak had been a Maths teacher in India for 12 years and had two degrees (BA and BEd.) and had only been working in the UK for six months. But it was this experience which was repeatedly asked about in the interview. There are seven main questions in Nanak’s interview, each with a sub-theme. Of these 14 questions, 12 offer Nanak no option but to speak about his experience of factory work in the UK. They are either questions which are heavily embedded in his current work such as:
‘Okay bu- but at the minute my next question is can you tell me what you’re doing currently (.) so what’s your job now so which line do you work on now?’

Or, they are hypothetical questions which only allow for answers related to the scenario of cooking sauces in a factory: ‘If you was cooking a sauce and the machine stopped it’s broken what would you do?’ By contrast, Emma (a white British candidate) is asked a very open question ‘just tell us a bit about your past’.

Similarly, Tokunbo, from Nigeria, is cued to speak explicitly about his work in Services Ltd, although he has had no management experience there, but never asked about his FWE, despite the fact that this would be known to the interviewers from the job application. Ironically, his FWE only comes up in the final stage of questioning when he is asked a more traditional question, outside the competency framework:

Unsuccessful example


1. I: so- so- re- tell me why you’ve applied for the job
2. C: about six month::s six months eight months ago
3. I finished my u- university degree
4. and erm when I finished I erm I I had to assess my career path
5. where I should go next
6. I: yeah
7. C: er:m cos I currently work work for the police for special constable
8. and that was option for me to be a (regular police officer)
9. but (.) because I have a background in management
10. my dad owns a company back in Nigeria which (. ) I did help out a bit
11. before I came to United Kingdom
12. about eight years ago I decided to I need- I decided I need to (.)
13. obviously that management path
14. will be my right my right career path (.)
15. and erm (.) because I have the erm the obviously skills of the
16. this kind of the erm the skills and the erm (.) how can I say (.) er:m
17. the skills necessary to be a manager obviously
18. I: yeah
19. C: because I I’ve managed about ten fifteen people before I came down here (.)
20. I think it will be the right [er:m
21. I: okay]
Tokunbo’s answer here seems to flow more easily than the rest of his interview. He is able to speak more freely about all the skills/experience he has, including FWE, and able to explain his career path and rationale. Tokunbo brings up relevant experience here as a special constable and manager, but the interviewer does not follow this up with embedded questions to get more details about this work experience and changes the subject entirely back to Tokunbo’s experience at Services Ltd soon after this extract. Interestingly, the interviewer could not see how he discouraged Tokunbo from speaking about this experience implicitly and said to the researcher after the interview that he did not know why Tokunbo did not speak about his police experience more. As well as being unaware of his interactional role in shaping the candidate’s displayed experience, he also did not mention Tokunbo’s highly relevant management experience overseas.

8.7.3 Dismissal of FWE

When candidates do bring up their FWE, it tends to be dismissed or closed down. Nanak attempted to bring his FWE up towards the end of the interview:

Unsuccessful example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 44 – Nanak: Indian. Clearly unsuccessful.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: this is an A grade job okay with A grade jobs now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. everybody will be put forward for a for a literacy and a numeracy test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. so English and maths test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. C: yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I: okay if you shouldn’t shouldn’t-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: I was a mathematician in the India [maths master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I: oh was you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. C: yeah=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I: = okay good (.) good so everybody will be put forward for this test if you if you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. don’t pass this test then unfortunately we won’t be able to offer you the job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nanak’s interviewers did not appear to take his work experience abroad, as a Maths teacher, seriously. They said that they did not think that he would pass the Maths test which he needed to do in order to become a supervisor. This view is hinted at in the comment ‘if you don’t pass the test’. This is not said to Emma, she is just told: ‘so you may be asked to do a – a literacy and a numeracy test before you- reach the next stage of the interview process’. After the interview, Nanak told the researcher that one of the transferable skills he thinks he has from teaching is communication. He said that he had never had a problem communicating with anyone in the factory because, as a teacher, he found it easy to understand and help people with their language. However, neither his Maths skills nor any transferable skills are elicited or discussed in the interview.
Michael, who was originally from Liberia, worked in Korea in retail management for ten years before moving to the UK. He had been in the UK for six years, working first in a newsagents then a clothing shop, then in a large retail organisation. During the time-line phase of the interview, his experience in Korea is raised. Michael makes several good points related to his skill in working in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual environment (similar to London) and adaptability to different situations. However, these are not noted as positives by the interviewer. Instead, he closes down Michael’s account (albeit in a tactful way):

*Unsuccessful example*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: ‘I’m just going to d- let me just talk you through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I’ll I’ll come onto some details [later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C: yeah yeah yeah] ((laugh))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I: I know you want to tell me everything but er:m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, Michael is not given the opportunity to return to this later, as the rest of the interview covers only his UK experience.

One of the main reasons for this dismissal is that FWE is generally regarded as ‘long ago’ or ‘distant’. For example, Tokunbo’s interviewer commented that some of the examples he used from university were ‘long ago’ and therefore weak. In fact, Tokunbo only finished studying for his degree six months before the interview. It is rather the unfamiliarity than actually distance in time which leads to dismissal or, as in the next case, negative assessments of FWE.

**8.7.4 Interviewer’s negative assessment of FWE**

FWE is constructed as less relevant because of its differences from the UK cultural ethos, even when candidates assert the rigorous business standards of companies where they have worked abroad. Ravi’s experience in Australia, although the focus of quite a long phase in the interview, does not count to his advantage. Ravi has been working for the past 15 years in retail in the UK, then Oman and Australia. He went to Australia 11 years ago, and worked for a large supermarket there before recently returning to the UK.

*Unsuccessful example*

He contrasts the business success of the Australian supermarket with the more ‘easy going’ atmosphere in the British workplaces. The interviewer is quick to comment that Supermarket X is itself going that way:
The interviewer does not reciprocate with a laugh but instead reinforces his comment ‘believe me’. And later, when discussing a recent takeover of Supermarket X is keen to re-emphasise the British cultural values of the company: ‘[this] hasn’t changed our culture and I don’t think it will change our culture because that’s one thing that they are very impressed with actually taking away from us’. Later, the interviewer stresses the difference between Ravi’s Australian company and Supermarket X: ‘that’s a different sort of environment, employment law is different there’, and so questions the validity/relevance of Ravi’s organisational knowledge/experience for dealing with situations in the UK.

In feedback to researchers, the interviewer mentioned that Ravi ‘kept speaking about Australia, which didn’t interest me’. He made explicit at the start that he was less interested in the past and more interested in what came out in the interview:

‘What I never do is er – look at the application form prior to you coming in… so if you hadn’t gone through this stage you wouldn’t have got here today so- so I’m not terribly interested in that (. ) I’m interested in what – what we get from here.’

However, ‘what we get from here’ is dependent on the interviewer’s level of understanding of the candidate’s work experience and so ability to cue for relevant information, resolve misunderstandings, etc. Interviewers may not recognise that they already have a lot of background of UK companies and roles which they draw on implicitly and that to give foreign-born candidates the same chance, they need to be prepared to take in additional contextual information.

8.8 The ‘immigrant story’

8.8.1 ‘No problems here’

For those who have experienced being an immigrant to Britain, anxieties about possible discrimination and failure, negative ethnic stereotyping and concerns about having the appropriate work documents may all affect how they present themselves. The ‘immigrant story’ as we have called it (see Roberts and Campbell, 2006 for how it is played out in low-paid job interviews) leads this group of candidates to present themselves as never having experienced failure or difficulties,
always working hard with total commitment and with no weak link in their career. Michael’s interviewer comments that his time-line has ‘just gone up and up’ (see Chapter 5). But this is problematic since a key competence in promotion interviews is about learning from failure and difficulties. Paradoxically, although they have clearly demonstrated resilience in the face of difficulties in coming to the UK and often having to make significant adaptions, they do not orient to this experience when responding to questions about their work experience in case any problems or difficulties are used against them as members of a group who know they are vulnerable to discrimination.

### 8.8.2 Making ethnicity explicit

Just as FWE tends to be ignored or treated negatively, the explicit raising of a candidate’s own ethnicity tends to feed into a negative dynamic. For example, Sara made several references to her ethnicity in the interview, commenting that she had to be careful not to wave her arms about too much in meetings, a tendency she had from her Maltese origins. However, this kind of metacommentary on the ethnicised self is judged as too overt. The interviewer remarked in the video feedback that he felt ‘uncomfortable’ at this point. He commented on her perceived weak points and prefaced these remarks with: ‘I know she’s Maltese but…’. This suggests that he linked her personal characteristics to her ethnicity and that this provided some of the basis for her failure. Elsewhere, Sara, like some other candidates, uses her ethnicity as capital, highlighting her intercultural competence. However, no interviewer mentioned this aspect of social and linguistic capital in any wash-up sessions on feedbacks.

### 8.9 Conclusion

Ethnic minority candidates born abroad experience the demands of the job interview more intensely than other groups. The penalty they face is made up of differences in communicative style, different assumptions about the job interview and difficulties in having their experiences of living and working abroad acknowledged. Put together, these produce a ‘linguistic penalty’. Of these three factors, it is the differences in style that penalise them the most since the communicative requirements of the interview put a magnifying glass on just those linguistic and cultural resources which are most difficult for them to acquire and ignores the many other skills they may have.
9 Conclusions and recommendations

9.1 Conclusions

9.1.1 Key themes

There are persistent but intangible barriers to ethnic minority groups progressing into management positions. While some of these relate to specific practices, most notably the interview itself, others are only overcome if organisations address the more general issues of race equality that affect satisfaction and morale. There were many good practices, both informal and formal, that were closing the gap between official statements and the reality of some persistent disadvantage. However, there were still institutional norms and local attitudes that had the potential to negatively affect ethnic minority progression.

The cultural and linguistic demands that are peculiar to the selection interview produce a ‘linguistic penalty’ which is likely to affect ethnic minority candidates born abroad more than other groups. While the requirements of the interview produce challenges for most candidates, its linguistic and cultural demands disadvantage this group disproportionately.

While formal procedures in place in organisations are a necessary element in overcoming or preventing barriers to progression for ethnic minority groups, they are not a sufficient one. Many of the factors that demotivate staff from applying for promotion, or inhibit their access to social networks and social capital, such as the processes of socialisation with managers that would help them to ‘talk like a manager’, relate to informal practices and ethnically-based affiliations. Similarly, formal procedures for selection interviewing and training in diversity and interviewing skills, although pre-requisites for establishing racial equality and giving the appearance of objectivity, do not engage with the detailed processes of the job interview or scrutinise them for the potential they have for indirect discrimination.
While issues of ‘culture’ in diversity discourses tend to be over-ethnicised, the culture of job interviews is under-ethnicised. Ethnic minority groups are often talked about stereotypically and in terms of general cultural differences. By contrast the interview is not perceived as a cultural event at all. However, the competency frameworks of the interviews, the criteria (many of them hidden) and the inherent contradictions of the interview process, together, are characteristic of a certain, and widely recognised, organisational culture. However, the social and cultural aspects of the selection process are underestimated and not defined in terms of the white (Anglo) majority ethnic culture. In terms of a diversity and equality agenda, the selection interview remains a paradox. The rhetoric of respecting difference cannot be easily reconciled with its culturally-specific criteria.

These socio-cultural aspects stem from the interview as a highly subjective encounter in which personality and competence are judged by the style in which candidates present themselves. This, in turn, depends on interpreting the very specific but not articulated criteria hidden in the design and practices of the interaction itself. So life chances are determined through an implicit weighting of complex evidence where many of the considerations in the decision-making are masked by a set of categorical rationalisations. These include judging personality on the basis of style of talking; assuming that the knowledge required to perform well is based on common-sense knowledge and rationalising candidate performance as if the interviewer had no role to play in it.

The largely hidden demands on candidates to talk in an institutionally credible style are similar in both low-paid and management interviews. The competency frameworks are similar in both levels of interviews as are the expectations to align to the interviewers and to the particular blend of work talk, analytic talk and more personal talk which comprises the ‘linguistic capital’ expected in job interviews. However, in the promotion and management interviews, there is a much greater focus on displaying a management persona, much tighter relevance requirements and tougher implicit criteria in terms of authenticity.

While many aspects of workplace life have been reviewed for their potential for creating or preventing fair practice and outcomes, including the general design of interviews and the assessment process overall, the detailed interactional processes of the interview remain largely unscrutinised. Its cultural power remains intact as a persistent barrier to those who have less access to, and experience of, the communicative style and knowledge of the interview required to succeed at it.

9.1.2 Organisational practices and workplace discourses

Main conclusions

A complex picture of opportunities for promotion emerges with a mix of conditions which promote opportunities and some persistent barriers to it. The history, environment and size of the two case study companies meant that practices and perceptions contrasted in many ways. While Factory Foods relied on
goodwill at the senior level and many informal practices, Services Ltd had a clear equal opportunities policy and diversity agenda. While formal procedures ensure transparency, they cannot be relied on to ‘cover’ all aspects of fair practice.

The human environment within which promotion decisions are made is even more complex. Here there is a mosaic of tensions and affiliations – of belonging and ‘otherness’ between management and staff, white and ethnic minority groups and within different ethnic minority groups. On the positive side, there were accounts of mentoring, individual support, training opportunities, the development of open communication systems to tackle local problems and independent adjudication in formal complaints.

However, there are a number of subtle and not so subtle barriers to ethnic minority promotion. At an organisational level, structures, work changes and procedures can have an indirect negative impact on promotional opportunities. Reliance on informal procedures can create the grounds for perceived discrimination but an over-reliance on formal procedures to ‘cover’ everything means that more hidden and indirect processes, where unwitting indirect discrimination can take place, are left unchallenged. Similarly, negative ethnic stereotyping and the paradoxical effects of being part of a ‘community’ can create environments which do not encourage ethnic minorities to apply for promotion.

While some of these barriers are top-down and relate to practices and discourses that rationalise or unwittingly lead to indirect discrimination, others are bottom-up and relate to factors that demotivate ethnic minority staff from applying because of local affiliations or lack of confidence in the fairness of the organisation. Good practice in the form of open communication systems and equal opportunities procedures and other formal practices had begun to close the gap between official discourses and perceptions of discrimination. However, reliance on formalisation is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for dismantling barriers to ethnic minority promotion.

Detailed conclusions
The experience of mentoring was positive. However, it was informal, transient and often depended on individual initiatives. Where management were primarily from the white majority group and staff considering promotion from ethnic minority groups, there were fewer opportunities to make informal mentoring contacts.

Training was on offer to shopfloor staff but not in the ‘people skills’ necessary for passing the interview. English language training was not tailored to workplace needs.

Structural and operational changes had the potential for creating barriers. Junior management roles were perceived as both having less status and being more demanding, particularly in relation to people problems, which could be additionally demotivating for ethnic minority workers aspiring to this level. Restructuring had also led to higher standards of language/communication being required and so
presented another form of ‘linguistic penalty’ for those who did not speak English as their expert language. Age structuring was also a factor as the preference for younger managers could potentially discriminate against ethnic minorities. There was also a tension, widely recognised in organisations, between operational changes and production pressures, on the one hand, and equality initiatives from HR and senior management, on the other.

There were several more intangible blocks to promotion. One of these stemmed from ethnic minorities’ sense of position and identity within the organisation. For many, being a minority and going for promotion made them doubly visible. ‘Standing out’ improves promotion chances but ethnic minorities were concerned about ‘selling out’ both to the larger shopfloor community and to their own ethnically-based community. Perceptions of place and concerns about moving to areas where they were more likely to face discrimination were also a demotivating factor.

The social capital acquired from being part of a community on the shopfloor was not easily translated into a bridge into management positions. As well as concerns about ‘selling out’, where social networks were largely ethnically-based and the majority of management were white British, there was less opportunity to develop any informal networks and gradual socialisation into the style of management talk required in the interview.

Another set of barriers stemmed from management discourses. Some of the traditional stereotypes of ethnic minority staff voiced in the 1970s and 80s were still in place. ‘Cultural behaviour’ was used to describe perceived unacceptable actions or values on the part of ethnic minority staff and junior managers. Differences in language and communicative style were used as evidence of more generally questionable conduct. ‘People skills’ were not usually associated with ethnic minority staff.

There were few accounts of discrimination, although long-established ethnic minority staff and management considered it could never be eradicated completely. The problem of racism was ‘pushed down’ to the shopfloor level and the positioning of senior managers meant that they remained distant from the complex inter-ethnic micro-politics at the lower levels of the organisation. The formal procedures in place were seen to cover all possible discriminatory practices but a gap remained between official discourses of equal opportunities and perceptions of organisations as still white and male at the top.

There was an understandable focus on formal procedures, statistics and structured interviews but few management comments on unwitting or indirect discrimination. Although two senior managers talked of a tendency to recruit ‘in their own likeness’, the fact that there could be indirect discrimination in the interactional conduct of interviews or that the interview as a procedure could unwittingly disadvantage ethnic minority groups, was not raised. And given the reliance on formal procedures and evidence in any cases of discrimination, the fact

Conclusions and recommendations
that interviews are not recorded means that there is little hard evidence that could be used in a complaint.

Although interviews were still seen as the most important aspect of the assessment process, both organisations also put emphasis on procedures which do not carry the cultural and language weight of the interview. The range of activities in the assessment centre and the technical tests on the shopfloor are more work-related and direct and less culturally loaded than the interview.

9.1.3 The selection interview experience

Main conclusions

It is not possible to conclude from the outcomes of the recorded interviews that ethnic minority candidates, in general, face systematic disadvantage. However, ethnic minority candidates born abroad were over-represented among candidates judged as clear failures. This suggests that this group of candidates are more likely to be categorically unsuccessful than any other group and that the interview produces conditions for their likely failure.

Although formal procedures contributed to making the interviews more fair, the differences in individual interviewers’ assessment of candidates and the gap between formal criteria and the actual criteria used in these assessments were evidence of how subjective the interview process is. It is also a culturally and linguistically demanding event since the competency framework assumes an understanding of relatively abstract or metaphorical formulations distant from the routine work of the shopfloor and often demands contradictory strengths and skills which require considerable communicative finesse to manage. In addition, the interview requires implicit knowledge of the interview process, most notably related to self-presentation, which is more difficult for those candidates born abroad to access.

Detailed conclusions

In two of the organisations, formal procedures were in place aimed at equality of opportunity and encouraging diversity. In these organisations diversity and interview training was a requirement. Efforts were made to help candidates prepare for the interview so that they all started from a similar knowledge base. These procedures are important in establishing conventional good practice, however, they underestimate the selection interview as a subjective and cultural encounter. The wide differences in individual interviewers’ assessments of candidates are evidence of how subjective the interview process is.

Outcomes for candidates were generally asserted to be based on ‘what happens on the day’. However, the fact that judgements of known candidates in internal promotions was used to make decisions about them also questions the objectivity of interviews. But since this information was clearly seen as important, it raises questions about whether the interview is the most effective way of making
decisions. There is a case for more emphasis on current workplace performance in the assessment of candidates for internal promotion.

While the competency framework provides a measure of clarity and structure, it also produces cultural barriers, and criteria derived from it are only partially used in decision-making. The four main competency themes routinely used were: Building relations and teamwork; problem solving; achievement/results-oriented; learning, self-development and taking responsibility. Interviewers assumed that these themes were self-evident, under-estimated the hard interpretive work candidates had to do to make sense of them and were surprised at the difficulties candidates faced. Labels for these themes and the questions themselves were often couched in abstract formulations or metaphors which were culturally distant for any candidates who were not familiar with management talk.

There is a gap between the formal assessment of competencies and the informal criteria used for judging candidates. Many of the criteria used in the wash-up sessions were only partially based on the four main competency themes. General personality traits, self-awareness and honesty were routinely used as criteria to make categorical judgements of candidates but were not asked about in the interviews or the focus of any interview preparation for candidates. In addition, there is a set of meta criteria, which involves understanding the interview process, which is not explicitly addressed. This relates to culturally-specific notions of self-presentation and norms of dealing with people in hierarchical relationships, such as job interviews. These implicit criteria, played out both in the interview and in the decision-making process, reflect and reproduce the management culture of organisations and unwittingly produce cultural barriers for those not familiar with management norms and practices.

Competency frameworks also produce irreconcilable differences which candidates have to cope with: ‘engage with people’ but ‘be tough’; be an ‘independent thinker’ but conform to policies and rules. Positioning oneself to manage these contradictions strategically requires communicative and cultural knowledge which again is only acquired through networks of relationships where management talk is commonplace.

Many candidates overestimated how their performance was assessed in interviews. Candidates born abroad were least aware of the hidden cultural presuppositions of the interview and misjudged the degree to which they were aligned to the interviewer. The gap between perceived performance and outcome may lead to perceived discrimination which can be as damaging as real discrimination.

9.1.4 Candidate contributions: professional/occupational discourse

Main conclusions

Candidates have to walk along a tightrope, constantly finding the middle ground between extremes and contradictions, which puts subtle and sophisticated
demands on their ability to communicate in this unique genre of talk. They are expected to be authentic and lively but not come across as emotional; reflective and analytical but not impersonal or over-controlling.

The ‘intangibles’ of style and behaviour are central to the assessment of candidates. Yet there is a narrow gate through which only the socially and culturally acceptable styles can enter. The qualities that make up the ideal management persona are assumed to be unproblematically displayed by candidates in their talk. Furthermore, these qualities are considered to reflect candidates’ essential character rather than as qualities that are developed as a result of socialisation and the product of the interactional demands of the interview.

This persona is realised through three types of discourses: professional/occupational, personal and organisational. Occupational discourses are the narratives of working life which form the major content of the promotion interview and through which, if successfully used, a linguistic flexibility and subtlety that allows a management persona to be revealed in a variety of contexts is given.

**Detailed conclusions**

Professional/occupational discourses are important in displaying how candidates manage the management persona; how narratives are made familiar and engaging to interviewers and how variety in reporting others’ talk can show fluency and flexibility in candidates’ attitude and perspective. The conveying of a management persona is the most important. All these require socio-cultural knowledge for the specific situation of the selection interview and this knowledge is revealed through the inferences made by both sides and the choices made in presenting the self.

Three examples of competency questions were used in analysis: acknowledging and dealing with difficulties, being firm and decisive and taking responsibility. All of these competencies assume shared socio-cultural knowledge among candidates. Less highly rated interview responses were either too honest and self-disclosing and emotional or used models of self-presentation which appear too gilded and implausibly good. Underpinning many preferred responses is a notion of the self as a strong independent individual agent working within flattened hierarchies. Any other mode of self-presentation was often seen as overly deferential or inauthentic, hiding behind generalisations.

Most of the professional discourse of selection interviews consists of narratives of work experience. Successful candidates use familiar persuasive techniques such as the standard Anglo story structure and engage interviewers with lively detail without appearing overly emotional. At junior management level, candidates are frequently asked to report on talk that has taken place with staff or managers. Candidates who can combine verbatim reporting with summarised descriptions of these conversations convey authenticity and a range of perspectives which show they can ‘think like managers’.
9.1.5 **Blending occupational, personal and organisational discourses**

**Main conclusions**

As well as professional/occupational discourses, candidates have to produce a mix of personal and organisational discourses. So, the institutional requirements of the interview demand a certain kind of ‘linguistic capital’ from candidates. These are the communicative resources that purchase an easy alignment to interviewer discourses and social relationships. The blending of the three discourses: professional, personal and organisational, produce a successful outcome. But this blended ‘management persona’ is hard to achieve. The great majority of candidates, from a range of ethnic backgrounds, have some negative evaluations that refer to their personalities such as untrustworthy, lacking initiative, too personal or are dismissed as having poor communication skills, although borderline candidates are rated positively in some areas.

The balance between display and discretion expected of the self-managing manager assumes there is a consistent, unified self who is both attuned to the institutional view of the reflective, action-oriented manager and who comes across as a complete, engaging person. Where discourses are not blended, the candidate is seen as lacking consistency and credibility and untrustworthy, in other words, as inauthentic. Access to the informal ties and social networks where staff can gradually acquire this ‘linguistic capital’, as Chapter 3 illustrates, is less likely for ethnic minority staff.

**Detailed conclusions**

Personal discourses reveal aspects of the self and how the individual relates to the interviewer. We identified three versions of the self: the analytic, self-reflective self, the one that is ‘given off’ in social relations and the ‘domestic’ self. The first of these allows the candidate to be knowing and objective about themselves but successful candidates also moderate these claims. Secondly, the social relations candidates develop with the interviewer are a proxy for how they will get on as a manager among managers. Showing solidarity with a hint of deference, finding aspects of life in common and humour are all strategies used by successful candidates. Thirdly, like humour, the location and extent of revelations about the domestic self are crucial in deciding its effectiveness. So candidates are expected to be authentic and lively, reflective and analytical. But they must not come across as emotional, impersonal or over-controlling.

Organisational discourses convey impersonality and a more analytic and discreet stance. These are more frequently used with organisational topics concerning business and awareness or procedures but they also permeate other topics as the seamless blending of successful candidates’ contributions shows. Organisational discourses consist of more abstract formulations and are frequently used in competency questions such as ‘taking ownership’. Such abstractions require more intense participation with those who regularly use such discourses, so that they can
fully interpret them. Otherwise they are criticised for using them as ‘buzzwords’ and their authenticity is questioned.

The organisational discourses of analysis, impartiality and discretion assume a familiarity with the more abstract formulations of both questions and preferred answers. Such familiarity is displayed by more successful candidates in the way they show ownership of these formulations by successfully contextualising them in their narratives of work experience. Thus, they blend organisational and occupational discourses.

9.1.6 Interviewer-candidate interaction

Main conclusions

The interview is a joint production, with the conduct of interviewers a major contributor to its overall tone and outcomes. It is framed by the values, norms and interactional styles of the organisational culture, itself based on Anglo styles and assumptions and so can never be a culture-free zone. So, there is a gap between the rhetoric of diversity with its focus on respecting difference and the reality of the culturally-specific interview.

The interactional components of the interviewers’ performance play an important role in developing a positive or negative dynamic with the candidates. They not only develop a rationalisation for their decision during the interview, they also display it in the ways in which they respond to candidates. A negative dynamic makes the interview more institutional with more control by the interview and fewer opportunities for candidates to work in conversational ways with interviewers. Those who are least knowledgeable about the British job interview have more difficulty aligning themselves to the interviewers and so face additional interactional demands during its course. Misalignments tend to be dealt with indirectly so that this group often consider the interview has gone well, even when they are rated low by interviewers.

Detailed conclusions

Interviewers not only develop a rationalisation for later decision-making but also display it in the course of the encounter. Candidates who do not align early on to the discourse requirements of the interview and find themselves on the wrong ‘footing’ with the interviewer, face a negative dynamic and a more institutionally controlled event. Misalignments occur more frequently within the negative dynamic and it is these, rather than misunderstandings, which lead to a tight institutional environment. This dynamic is reinforced throughout the interview through a series of interactional adjustments which display the interviewer’s negative evaluations. These adjustments relate to the type of questions asked and the control of allowable contributions. In the negative dynamic there are more reformulations of questions, more unembedded questions, more topic control and more implicit and explicit criticism.
In the minority of cases where the candidate is relatively successful, the interview is more conversational and a wider range of candidate contributions is encouraged and allowed. Here there are more follow-on and embedded questions, more topic choice and co-authoring between candidate and interviewer and more implicit praise. The positive dynamic is mutually reinforcing, relaxing relevance requirements and negotiating more opportunities for shared understanding. So the interviewer’s performance plays a significant role in the outcome of the interview as the impression of the candidate is created within its interactional constraints.

The record of the interview, in the notes taken by interviewers, as well as contributing to these constraints provides the written rationalisation for the decision-making (even though it is rarely referred to). Interviewers’ notes are selective and reflect the positive or negative dynamic of the interview, rather than being a neutral record.

More successful candidates’ positive evaluations are captured in the notes and the inter-relationship between interacting and writing is smoother than with less successful candidates. Here the candidate’s story is more unevenly captured and there is more asynchrony – i.e. less smooth rhythmic transference between speaking and writing.

The interview is hard, interactional work for both sides. And although in two of the organisations interview and diversity training is a requirement for all interviewers, the demands on them have been underestimated. They are required to ask orthodox competence-based questions and follow them up in several ways, to process the answers bureaucratically and keep notes that may be used later as records. They also have to sustain a face-to-face social encounter where some level of involvement and interpersonal exchange is both inevitable and crucial in judging the candidate. Unlike any assessment of the validity and reliability of selection tests, some of which have been shown to be unfair, the job interview gives no opportunity for such assessment. It is a fleeting encounter with no fixed record of how the interaction unfolds moment by moment and only general procedures are available to defend its fairness.

9.1.7 Issues of language and diversity

Main conclusions

Ethnic minority candidates born abroad experience the demands of the job interview more intensely than other groups. The penalty they face is made up of differences in communicative style, different assumptions about the job interview and difficulties in having their experiences of living and working abroad acknowledged. Put together, these produce a ‘linguistic penalty’. Of these three factors, it is the differences in style that penalise them the most since the communicative requirements of the interview put a magnifying glass on just those linguistic and cultural resources which are most difficult for them to acquire and ignores the many other skills they may have.
Detailed conclusions

Differences in communicative style mean that this group of candidates are judged either as too ‘harsh’ or ‘emotional’ because they do not euphemise their self-presentation or, in contrast, they come across as ‘lecturing’ and using generalisations because they do not give accounts of themselves as active agents. They do not blend the discourses of the job interview into a synthesised whole and either over-emphasise one set of discourses at the expense of the other or set up a jarring juxtaposition of the two.

Differences in rhetorical style also feed into these judgements. While western styles tend to be linear, working towards a goal through a series of claims and evidence, some candidates used an assertive style based on general claims and maxims which are seen to have intrinsic authority. This assertive style feeds into criticisms of generalisations, lack of dynamism and an overly positive view of the self.

Most candidates in this group were judged as not finding a middle way between two extremes. This criticism was based on how they presented their experiences and how they related to the interviewer. They either showed too much informality, closeness and emotion or were too distant, aware of hierarchies, assertive and impersonal. The subtle communicative demands of this middle way illustrate how narrow the gate is in this type of gatekeeping encounter.

These judgements of candidates highlight the particular cultural norms of the interview and their embeddedness in organisational culture. The extent to which this organisational culture is ethnically specific is rarely mentioned. It is assumed to be normative and representing the way things are done generally. When ‘culture’ is a topic, it usually refers to the cultural practices of ethnic minorities rather than to the white majority group’s ideologies and behaviours. So the fact that the communicative style expected in the job interview is an ethnicised style is not acknowledged.

As well as differences in communicative style, there is a lack of shared understanding about the purpose and conduct of the interview and the roles and responsibilities of the interviewers. Ethnic minority candidates born abroad expect to describe their life experiences as a way of giving an holistic picture of themselves, while interviewers want to see the candidate as a synthesised whole through answers tailored to organisational competencies. The candidates’ personality and acceptability is displayed and summed up through these tailored answers. Since these competencies are assumed to be familiar and easy to answer, it is the style of their response that is the basis for interviewers’ judgements of them.

In management interviews there are much higher relevance requirements relating to foreign work experience (FWE) than in the low-paid job interviews. FWE is often ignored or dismissed or the interview structure gives few, or no, opportunities to talk about it. But even where it is relevant, it is often not seen as relevant enough and gets negatively evaluated.
The experience of being an immigrant and any explicit reference to ethnicity contributed to the penalty this group faced. What we have called ‘the immigrant story’ means that anxiety about failure and perceptions of discrimination make candidates reluctant to admit to any failure, even though a key interview competency is to show resilience and capacity to learn from weaknesses and failings. Again, this feeds into criticisms of being overly positive, inauthentic and by implication, untrustworthy. Where ethnicity is made into a topic by candidates, it can lead to interactional discomfort and its potential social capital is dismissed.

So candidates born abroad are at a particular disadvantage in the interview. They have different notions about the purpose of the interview. Their experiences abroad, and as members of an ethnic minority, do not fit with this purpose and the concentration on a particular cultural style, on the blending of particular discourses, puts the magnifying glass on just those linguistic and cultural resources which are most difficult for them to acquire and ignores the many other skills they may have.

9.2 Recommendations

9.2.1 Recommendations on organisational practices

Organisations which still rely on goodwill and informal procedures need to adapt more formal procedures, including ethnic monitoring and formal procedures for recruitment and selection.

Many of the identified good practices such as shopfloor language training, mentoring, preparation and support for the interview and open systems of communication, are transferable to any organisation where ethnic minority groups are not progressing into management posts.

However, formal procedures are a necessary, but not sufficient condition for creating fairness in promotion. Organisations need to consider the gaps between formal procedures and local practices and recognise that formalisation does not cover all aspects of racial equality and fairness.

More formal and wide-ranging systems for mentoring those who are considering, or might consider, promotion should be introduced. Once these are in place, the mentors need to develop extensive and informal relations with mentees so that the latter can be given the opportunity to be socialised into ways of talking like a manager and into the specific linguistic/cultural demands of the competence based interview.

Staff with the potential for promotion but who are identified as needing to improve their communication skills in English should be offered training tailored to their needs. In-company language training which integrates English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) expertise with the company’s communicative requirements should be made available.
Staff with the potential for promotion should also be offered training in ‘people skills’.

Restructuring and operational changes can have a negative impact on ethnic minorities’ opportunities and motivation for applying for promotion. Organisations need to consider whether ethnic and linguistic penalties are increased by these changes and what action needs to be taken.

Some of the barriers that ethnic minorities face are discursive and cultural or stem from ethnic minorities’ sense of position and identity. An organisational culture which is committed to countering racism needs to make racialised discourses and stereotyping unacceptable.

9.2.2 Policy recommendations on the management selection/promotion interview

Organisations need to recognise that the management selection interview is a highly culturally-specific event, reflecting the normative values and styles of the majority ethnic organisational culture. It transforms ordinary workplace talk into an intense regime of display and judgement where acceptability is narrowly and implicitly defined.

Consideration should be given to dispensing with the interview completely or at least reweighting the interviews in relation to other assessment centre activities which are more likely to simulate the presentation of self in the usual settings of the workplace. The selection interview is a unique encounter which is not replicated in any other aspect of working life and is open to criticism that it can be indirectly and unwittingly discriminatory.

Organisations need to scrutinise their own practices in the interview. A habit of video/audio-recording a sample of interviews and using these data in the design and training for interviews would contribute to an understanding of the culturally-specific nature of interviews and the need to support both interviewers and candidates in managing it.

In the case of internal promotions, organisations need to consider the role of information on candidates not elicited in the interview. Since this information is clearly salient to decisions, organisations need to come clean about its use and decide how to factor it into the overall assessment.

Training and professional development for interviewers should include: more detailed awareness raising on the difficulties that a competency-based framework presented to candidates, particularly those born abroad; more awareness of the gap between formally assessed competencies and the criteria used in decision-making; more understanding on the cultural pre-suppositions on which this framework is based and the particular cultural style that is expected with a blending of professional, personal and organisational discourses.
Training and professional development in interviewing skills and diversity should also include an understanding of the significant role that interviewers play in creating a positive or negative dynamic for the candidate. Misalignments between interviewer and candidate are the responsibility of the interviewer as well as the candidate.

Any training for interviewers should recognise how demanding the role is and should design the selection process so that interviewers do not have to ask questions, actively listen, interact with follow-up questions, clarifications, and keep notes of the interview.

Training and preparation for candidates should draw on the analysis presented in this report, including providing support on how to: interpret the abstract formulations used in asking competency questions; use and blend the three different discourses that successful candidates have control of; produce well structured stories which subtly convey the speaker's perspective.

9.2.3 Specific recommendations related to ethnic minority candidates born abroad

The training and support recommended for all interviewers and candidates is particularly important in relation to candidates born abroad. The focus should be on differences in communicative style and the implicit expectations of the interview: finding a middle way between discretion and display, supporting claims with evidence and managing the social relationships of the interview.

This group also need more advice on the purpose and conduct of the interview. While interviewers look for a holistic picture of the candidate through the style in which they answer (mainly competency based) questions. Candidates born abroad expect more opportunity to talk explicitly about their different life experiences.

Some flexibility within the competency framework would allow candidates with foreign work experience to have this accounted for more systematically. Interviewers could also be given more training in how to negotiate FWE with candidates.

Interviewer training should also include some understanding of why this group of candidates often present themselves in ways which are judged as overly positive and of the social capital they have acquired as a member of an ethnic minority group.
Appendix

Transcription conventions

Throughout this report, the transcripts use ‘C’ to refer to the candidate, and ‘I’ to refer to the interviewer. Where there is more than one interviewer, the interviewers are labelled I1 and I2.

The report uses the transcription conventions shown below, which are adapted from Psathas 1995:

[ ] **Beginning of overlap** e.g.
T: I used to smoke [a lot]
B: [he thinks he’s real tough

] **End of overlap** e.g.
T: I used to smoke [a lot]
B: he th[j]inks he’s real tough

= **Latching** ie. Where the next speakers turn follows on without any pause
A: I used to smoke a lot=
B: =He thinks he’s real tough

(·) **Untimed brief pauses**

(0.5) **Timed pauses** approx. seconds & tenths of a second e.g. (0.5)/(0.1)/(2.0)

: **Sounds stretch** e.g. I gue:ss you must be right

::: **More prolonged sound stretch** (using multiple colons) e.g. I’m re:::ally sorry

- **Cut-off** prior word or sound e.g. ‘I thou- well I thought

**Yes** **Emphasis** ie. Perceived stress indicated by volume and pitch change
Unclear talk

Description of conversational scene
e.g. ((telephone rings))

Description of characterisations of talk e.g. ((snarled))

Substitution of name or term to protect anonymity
e.g. ((patient’s name))

N.B. This list is not definitive. It has been simplified for the purpose at hand. Reference to intonation and pitch is marked in transcripts only where it has particular significance.
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