

## *Role-Playing to Explore Ethical Implications of Empathic Listening*

Journalists take pride in techniques used to pry information out of reluctant sources. Professionals advise young reporters to put sources at ease, and to not let on when a source reveals something of great news value. The craft of interviewing, however, smashes up against ethical duty when reporters use empathy to deceive naïve sources. This role-playing exercise allows students to experience what it feels like to deceive, and to be deceived.

Students naturally identify with conventions of a profession as guides to successful careers, but in doing so they sometimes conflate normative practices with ethical principle. Sandra Borden's (1993) critique of "empathic listening" offers a compelling example of why students should be willing to question the advice of peers, editors, and even their textbook authors. When students adopt the role of a potentially deceived source, they appreciate both cognitively and viscerally what John Rawls (1999) had in mind when advocating the "veil of ignorance" as a thought experiment to take into consideration the interests of individuals who are most vulnerable.

### Implementation

The role-playing scenario includes two student actors. For small courses, the instructor recruits two volunteers and the remaining students observe. For a large course, the instructor could break students up into small groups, each consisting of two actors and the rest observers.

- Begin with a version of these instructions:

*You are a reporter at [campus news organization] and you want to write a story about the increasing popularity of sports betting on college campuses. You have heard that several fraternities at [your college] frequently hold gambling parties centered on the "March Madness" of NCAA basketball games. Your story will describe the excitement and fun generated by these parties, but you will also explore harmful consequences of this trend, including the possibility of increased rates of gambling addiction among college students.*

*A fraternity president has agreed to a sit-down interview. But first you must consider a brief introduction so that you can quickly describe the story angle. You have never met the president, and you really need him to cooperate. How will you articulate your story idea as you arrive at the fraternity house and begin the interview?*

- All of the students—not just the person playing the reporter—take several minutes to write an opening script. You can acknowledge that reporters typically don't script the beginning of interviews, but they certainly do strategize for some interviews.
- Begin the role-playing session.
- Allow the interaction to proceed past the reporter's introduction and the fraternity president's initial replies. End the interview when you can point to one or several exchanges that exemplify empathic listening and how a source might respond.

- Open up the class to a critique of the interview. How effective was the interviewer?
- Finally, ask students to consider if they have ethical concerns.

I have used this exercise about a half-dozen times and have never seen the interview fall flat. The “reporter” and “president” sometimes smile or smirk, realizing that some type of game is afoot. Those observing often laugh at the strategies used to pry out information and at the tactics deployed to dodge questions. This feedback encourages the actors to be spontaneous and creative. The reporter typically uses some of the tactics described by Borden, such as “flattering attentiveness, reassuring gestures, and encouraging responses” (p. 219) when sensing that the president is beginning to bob and weave.

If students bring up concerns about deception, introduce “empathic listening” as a prevalent practice in journalism. If they don’t identify anything about the interview to be problematic, that helps the instructor to make the point that empathic listening occurs regularly without critique. Instructors can conclude with a discussion as to whether new recording technology, which is becoming increasingly unobtrusive, might add to the vulnerability of naïve sources.

### Impact

Students realize that journalistic interviews often require some expression of empathy, conveyed verbally or non-verbally. Empathic listening is a necessary part of the craft, and sophisticated sources can play the game just as well in manipulating reporters. But you can raise the ante by quoting from Janet Malcolm’s infamous claim in *The New Yorker*:

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse (1989, p. 38).

Students are likely to object to Malcolm’s broadside. I respond by quoting from a textbook passage that advocates interviewing tactics students would now recognize as potentially problematic. I use an example from *Beyond the Inverted Pyramid*:

At the end of the interview, take a few minutes to sum up ... Reconfirm—if you’re not afraid of alerting the source to some unwitting admission—your understanding of the central points (Kennedy, Moen, & Ranly, 1993, p. 44).

This exercise reveals that empathic listening is not necessarily an intentionally devious practice, but occurs instinctively in the way that humans engage in interpersonal communication. The subtlety of empathic listening is itself an opportunity for instructors to make an important observation about the nature of journalism ethics. A refined ethical imagination looks beyond worst-case scenarios. Tactics such as empathic listening occur in everyday practice, typically without critique by journalists or media consumers.

## References

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