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The topicalization of culture in Cambridge undergraduate admissions interviews

Abstract: This article explores how candidates discuss cultural topics that overlap with their sociocultural background during the Cambridge undergraduate admissions interviews, an academic gatekeeping encounter. On the one hand, discussion of this kind can be a source of epistemic authority for these candidates. On the other hand, such an affordance does not insulate them from the intercultural phenomena we see attested in other encounters, such as job interviews. Candidates may attempt to signal likeminded sociocultural values to their interviewers, typically by disassociating themselves from the stigmatic aspects of their sociocultural background. Less commonly, interviewers may also engage in foreignizing behaviour. Interactional data from three interviews are used to exemplify how the imbrication of interculturality and institutional power patterns out in different ways, and how this impacts the evaluative outcomes of the candidates in question.

Keywords: gatekeeping; admissions interviews; University of Cambridge; sociocultural background

摘要: 本文探討考生如何在劍橋大學本科生入學面試這個學術把關環節 (gatekeeping encounter) 中討論與自身社會文化背景相關的文化議題。一方面,相關討論可作考生認知權威 (epistemic authority) 的來源。另一方面,此權威的可供性並不將考生與在其他把關情節(如工作面試)中發生的跨文化現象隔離。考生可嘗試向面試官表達志同道合的社會文化價值,如將自己從其文化背景被污名化的一面分離。在不常見的情況下,面試官亦有可能參與異化 (foreignizing) 的行爲。本文將通過三個面試中的互動數據舉例説明跨文化性 (interculturality) 和機構權力的重疊如何以多種方式發生並影響考生的評核結果。

關鍵字: 把關; 入學面試; 劍橋大學; 社會文化背景

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1 Introduction: gatekeeping cultural difference

Social scientists have been keen to demonstrate how political, legal and economic headwinds converge and inhibit migrants' ability to access work, achieve career progression, and live a fruitful life in their new country of residence (Mezzadra and Nunes 2010). A rich tradition of applied and sociolinguistic scholarship has offered its own contribution to this research by demonstrating that the success of these endeavours is dependent on the outcomes of key interactional events, most notably high stakes gatekeeping encounters. Classic studies of such encounters, including job interviews (Adelswärd 1988; Akinnaso and Seabrook Ajirotutu 1982; Kerekes 2006, 2007; Roberts 2021; Roberts and Campbell 2005; Scheuer 2001), permanent residency assessments (Johnston 2008), and asylum seeker interviews (Maryns 2014), have all demonstrated how implicit cultural, social and linguistic norms work in concert to sanction and penalize participants who fail to act in accordance with the predominant preferences and expectations of their gatekeepers. What these studies show is that the "interview game" (Roberts 2013) is "rigged" (Erickson and Shultz 1982) because its rules are defined by the majority and not made explicit to minority players, thereby preventing them from playing well and winning the game (Angouri et al. 2017; Roberts 2013).

A key question in this research tradition is how to operationalize the notion of culture as an explanatory factor in these unequal outcomes. In what would become key concepts for Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS), John J. Gumperz and colleagues famously argued that speakers both deploy and draw (or fail to draw) inferences from specific microinteractional contextualization cues, a process which is deeply influenced by cultural norms, assumptions and experiences (Gumperz et al. 1979, 1982). Implicit discrimination consequently emerges as "crosstalk" (ibid.), when speakers from diverse sociocultural backgrounds demonstrate culturally specific communicative styles and interpretative assumptions that are not shared by their gatekeepers (cf. Sarangi 1994; Shea 1994).

Roberts and Campbell (2005, 2006) shift attention away from ethnic communicative styles, and towards the linguistic and discursive requirements of the job interview itself. Drawing on Bourdieu (1991), they note that the interview is governed by institutional discourses, which both idealize and implicitly enforce homogenized and replicable interviewing procedures. Yet, as Roberts (2021: 238) has shown, the institutional nature of the interview is also concealed behind processes of synthetic personalization (Fairclough 1989; see also Scheuer 2001). Candidates can misrecognize such processes, and so voluntarily engage in a discussion of their own ethnic identity, which in turn makes interviewers feel uncomfortable as it frustrates their efforts to render candidates bureaucratically processable (Iedema 1999).

Such interactional moves may also incorporate what Goffman (1963) calls "passing", whereby candidates minimize stigmatized aspects of their sociocultural background, and align instead with the perceived values of the host society, as embodied in the figure of the interviewer. Kirilova and Angouri (2017, 2018) describe, for example, the case of a migrant Muslim job seeker, who explicitly voices support for gender equality and distances himself from the Islamic prohibition on alcohol consumption. Yet this proves to be a double bind, as the interviewer finds these claims to be both unconvincing and incommensurate with the professional discourses of the interview.

Without an awareness of the rules of the interview game, and fearful of ethnic stereotyping and discrimination, migrants often fall back on what Roberts and Campbell (2006) call "the immigrant story" (see also Roberts 2021: 241–243). This is when their attempts to "fit in" (Kirilova and Angouri 2018) to company culture leads these candidates to present themselves in unambiguously positive terms: always hardworking and willing to perform any task, no matter how difficult or onerous. Moves of this kind are likewise seen as trying too hard, and thus lacking in sincerity, just as they foreclose the opportunity to demonstrate the preferred narrative of "resilience in the face of difficulties" (Roberts and Campbell 2006: 149). Thus, candidates "must not align themselves too superlatively with the British workplace, nor must they identify too clearly with their own ethnic background" (Roberts 2021: 243).

Candidates who make it past the gate may be subject to what Day (1998, 2006) calls 'ethnification', which describes how the ethnicity of born-abroad employees is continually made relevant in workplace settings in ways that cast doubt on their competence or qualifications. While Day is concerned with ethnicity, Tranekjær (2015) notes in her exploration of internship interviews that it is analytically diffi-cult, if not futile, to disentangle this from an individual's sociocultural or national background, as these are all subject to overarching and ubiquitous processes of othering, which are accentuated by gatekeeping practice.

This study explores these themes in the context of undergraduate admissions interviews at the University of Cambridge, a gatekeeping encounter in which academic faculty members question prospective undergraduates on their chosen field of study (Weston 2021, 2022; Weston and Tranekjær 2023). The interview is an obligatory, integral and highly consequential part of the University's admissions process, and the only point when 17 and 18 year old candidates come face-to-face with their gatekeepers. Much of the public discussion of this event – and likewise of admissions interviews at the University of Oxford – is motivated by social concern that privately educated candidates have an unfair advantage over their state school peers (Stenhouse and Ingram 2024). Yet, as in other gatekeeping encounters, admissions statistics for undergraduate applications suggest that the greatest

division is actually between English and non-English candidates: the average acceptance rate for international candidates (9.8 %) – and indeed candidates from Scotland (9.4 %) and Wales (12.6 %) – is markedly lower than that for England (17.8 %) (University of Cambridge Application Statistics 2023), where the University is located.

Such outcomes can be explored from various perspectives, including (but not limited to) differences across national educational curricula; processes of self-selection among international candidates (particularly whether, as in the UK, only top candidates are encouraged to apply to Cambridge, or whether overseas schools adopt a more facilitative attitude to applications); as well as the distribution and impact of extra-curricular Oxbridge interview tutoring on admissions figures. This study focuses on the interactional topicalization of culture, and cultural expression (such as architecture and literature), and their relationship to a candidate's socio-cultural background and/or identity. In this latter respect, it is closely aligned with previous studies of interactional gatekeeping encounters, such as job interviews (Kirilova and Angouri 2018; Roberts and Campbell 2005, 2006), even though there are important and consequential differences between these activity types (Levinson 1979).

2 Culture and knowledge in the Cambridge undergraduate admissions interview

Like other institutional encounters, the admissions interview is marked by a classic power differential (Akinnaso and Seabrook Ajirotutu 1982; cf. De Dijn and Van De Mieroop 2024). This is manifest through the asymmetric distribution of rights and turns and the unequal access participants respectively have towards the interview's analytic procedures (Drew and Heritage 1992: 49–53), which may need to be explained for novices (see Section 3, below). It differs markedly, however, from other institutional encounters in the shifting manner it distributes the third feature of institutional power (ibid.), namely rights to knowledge (Weston 2021: 141).

Approximately one half, or 'phase' (Table 1), of the interviews within Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines typically involves the discussion of stimulus material which is (re)used with every candidate in a given interview cohort (Weston 2021; Weston and Tranekjær 2023). Depending on the discipline in question, this stimulus might be a poem, a historical gobbet, an architectural design or an Economics problem set (see Section 3, below). In all cases, the interview participants jointly accomplish this phase by orienting to a teacher-student, mentor-mentee or expert-novice role relationship (Reissner-Roubicek 2017; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Tranekjær 2015).

Table 1: Schematic of the phases of Cambridge admissions interviews within the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

Phase	Description of phase	Approximate length of phase
1	Introduction/meet and greet & (optional) structural mapping of interview	1–2 min
2	Discussion of stimulus material (stimulus phase)	8–15 min
3	Discussion of a candidate's personal statement (PS phase)	8–15 min
4	Candidate's opportunity to ask questions	0–2 min

The other half or 'phase' of the interview – which is the focus of this study – is when candidates are questioned on aspects of their personal statement, which they have submitted to the university in advance, and which details their interest in the discipline for which they have applied (Weston 2021; Weston and Tranekjær 2023). The personal statement ("PS") phase is particularly interesting as the asymmetries of the classic teacher-student role relationship are purposefully mitigated. That is to say, candidates are (re)positioned at this point as experts on the topics to which they refer in their personal statements (Weston 2021; Weston and Tranekjær 2023).

This elevation of the novice to an expert role resembles the *rtsod pa* debate between Tibetan monks described by Lempert (2008). A novice monk is invited to sit in the most senior "majestic" seat of the monastic college, where he is then tested on his knowledge of Buddhist doctrine by senior monks. In this manner, the novice is lent what Lempert (ibid.) calls "the presumption of knowledgeability". Although the PS phase of the interview is designed to establish precisely this presumption, the *rtsod pa* debate follows Buddhist philosophy by effacing the self, and basing the test on a fixed body of doctrinal knowledge. By contrast, in the Cambridge undergraduate admissions interview, such a presumption is often established through the invocation of cultural topics that may overlap, in various ways and to varying degrees, with a candidate's own sociocultural background. In this paper, for example, we explore how a Greek candidate draws on his schooling in Ancient Greek to discuss Ancient Greek literature; how a Saudi candidate reflects on architectural practice in Saudi Arabia; and how a Scottish candidate discusses the psychology of the Scottish people.

Such an affordance enables candidates to claim "epistemic authority" (Heritage and Raymond 2005) over these topics. This is markedly different from job interviews where, as we have seen, any such discussion is typically discouraged and/or penalized. Nevertheless, discussion of this kind also tends to foreground the sociocultural differences between candidates and interviewers. As such, it may still be subject to phenomena we see attested in other intercultural contexts, including processes of

foreignization (Day 1998, 2006; Tranekjær 2015) and/or candidates' attempts to "fit in" (Kirilova and Angouri 2018) by disassociating themselves from aspects of their sociocultural background they perceive to be stigmatized (Goffman 1963). How these processes unfold and how they influence the evaluations of the relevant candidates are the specific focus of this study.

3 Data & participants

This study is part of a broader project pitched by the author to the University of Cambridge in 2011 and finally agreed in 2014. Each party wanted to demystify the interview process, and so make it fairer for candidates from a range of sociocultural backgrounds. Thus, the analytic goals of the project were collaboratively determined, and involve the following questions. What are the interactional requirements of the admissions interview? How do candidates from different sociocultural backgrounds benefit from, or are disadvantaged by, such requirements, and how do processes of miscommunication occur between interview participants?

With these collaborative goals in mind, the University provided a corpus of 60 admissions interviews – known as the 'Cambridge University Interview' (CUI) corpus – which was recorded and collated between 2014 and 2019, across the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects. All interviews were transcribed using conventions adapted from Jefferson (1984). A limiting factor in this study and the wider project is that these interviews were audio- rather than video-recorded. This means that it has not been possible to analyse candidates' embodied self-presentation or paralinguistic behaviour, thereby limiting the richness of the analysis (for a successful example of this, see De Dijn and Van De Mieroop 2024).

Exactly half of the interviews in this corpus are STEM, but as none of these involves the topicalization of culture, nor indeed any discussion of a candidate's personal statement (Table 1), they are not considered further here (see Weston 2022). Of the remaining 30 interviews within Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines, all begin with a meet-and-greet, often followed by a mapping exercise where the structure of the interview is explained to the candidate (Table 1). After this, there is a discussion of stimulus material (such as a poem, graph, or architectural plan) which is presented to each candidate in a given discipline cohort ("Stimulus Phase", Table 1), followed by a discussion of specific aspects of the candidate's personal statement ("PS phase", Table 1). The candidate then has the opportunity to ask questions related to the study programme, college or University before the interview concludes.

In Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences interviews, 13/30 (44 %) candidates in the CUI corpus were from England and 17/30 (56 %) were from other countries, including the British home nations of Wales and Scotland, as well as countries from within Europe, North America, the Middle East, and East Asia. In 11/17 (65 %) of these cases – including the candidates discussed below (see 4. Analysis) – there is an overlap between the topicalization of culture and society, and the candidate's own socio-cultural background. Thus, a Polish candidate reflects on the quality of university education in Poland; an Irish candidate discusses sexual consent laws in Ireland; a candidate from Cyprus discusses the Cypriot economy; Chinese candidates discuss China's traditional architecture, sociopolitical economy, and anticolonial struggle.

As the analysis will show, the data extracts used in this study have been selected to exemplify the various ways in which the topicalization of culture serves (or fails) to bring about the presumption of knowledgeability, and if/how such an aim may be influenced by the interview's interculturality. This has led to an analytic focus on interviews in English Literature, Architecture and the Psychological & Behavioural Sciences (PBS).

In addition to providing a corpus of interview data, the University of Cambridge also granted the author access to candidates' personal statements and to their UCAS application forms, the latter of which detail their place of origin and the grades they received in public examinations. It also provided access to the interviewers' written comments (known internally as the "Interviewer's Report") on each candidate, though no permission was given for a systematic analysis, nor was it possible to quote extensively from these comments. In each Interviewer's Report, candidates were given an overall interview score from 1-10, where 10 is exceptional; 9 is very strong; 8 is strong; 7 is reasonably strong; 6 is reasonable; 5 is mediocre; 4 is weak; and 3-1 are all degrees of inadequate. Interviewer's Reports also include a box to tick if the candidate is "reasonably proficient" in English; this box was ticked for all of the candidates analysed below (GM1, SAF1 and ScF1).

4 Analysis

4.1 English Literature interview, Greek candidate (GM1), interview score 8/10

The first extract involves a Greek candidate applying for English literature. He delivers a strong overall interview performance (8/10), which is exemplified by Extract #1, below, where he compares Ancient Greek tragedy with Shakespearean tragedy.

It is not *prima facie* apparent how a modern Greek speaker's sociocultural background might confer on him the epistemic authority to speak about Ancient Greek literature, any more than being English entails an authority to speak about *Beowulf* (or, indeed, Shakespeare). Yet GM1's personal statement makes it clear he has received advanced high school linguistic and literary training that has given him "a sound knowledge of Ancient Greek", allowing him to read "parts of" Aristotle and Plato "in their original form". In this respect, his sociocultural background forms the basis of skills that lend themselves to establishing the "presumption of knowledge-ability" that is characteristic of the PS phase. Indeed, it is difficult to read the interviewer's topicalization of Ancient Greek literature as random selection, given the candidate's personal statement mentions a wide range of non-Greek authors (T.S Eliot, Jane Austen, Jules Verne, Henrik Ibsen etc.) from which the interviewer might otherwise have chosen. Conversely, the distance between Ancient Greek literature and the candidate's modern sociocultural identity can also be understood as benefitting the candidate, as – unlike the subsequent candidates (SAF1 & ScF1) – it limits the scope for intercultural phenomena to come into play.

The candidate capitalizes on these propitious conditions by framing his argument in the objective, analytic and dispassionate style favoured by admissions interviewers, and institutional gatekeepers more generally (Roberts and Campbell 2005, 2006; Scheuer 2001). This is exemplified by Extract #1, which is taken from the start of the PS phase, and which draws on a comment in the candidate's personal statement, where he describes Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as "being reminiscent of Greek tragedy":

Extract #1

1.	INT	a few things you said in the personal statement I was quite
2.		interested in ehm you mentioned sort of en passant you said
3.		"my first contact with English drama was through
4.		Shakespeare's Macbeth" and you say it's reminiscent of
5.		ancient Greek tragedy I was just wondering if you
6.		could expand on that a bit?
7.	CAN	yes Aristotle formulated a:: definition of trage-g-y
8.	INT	uh huh
9.	CAN	tragedy and when I read Macbeth what I was mainly
10.		trying to discover was 'does this still apply?'
11.	INT	uh huh
12.	CAN	and ehm I saw to my surprise that even after all these
13.		years this this definition still holds I mean hhh. ehm
14.		it is a tragedy which is ehm separated in acts
15.	INT	uh huh
16.	CAN	CLEAR structure=

17. INT   =uh [huh]
18. CAN   [so] the language is poetic
19. INT   uh huh=
20. CAN   =ehm which also brings back to Aristotle's definition=
21. INT   =uh huh
22. CAN   also it uses elements ehm of a m- th- m- the elements of
23.   mercy and fear
24. INT   uh huh
25. CAN   creating the reader or the in this case the spectator
26. INT   uh huh
27. CAN   so that to:: see through the eyes of the protagonists
28.   of ehm live their [fears] their joys their their desires
29. INT   [uh huh]
30. CAN   in a sense
31. INT   uh huh
32. CAN   ehm and it leads to what I sort of call <u>catharsis</u>
33. INT   okay and and in terms of the unities? the classical
34.   unities?
35. CAN   the unities? you mean acts?
36. INT   ehm well I mean unities I mean sort of as vaguely
37.   <adumbrated> ehm by Aristotle and then later developed
38.   you know in terms of plot and subplots and things like
39.   that=
40. CAN   =oh yes yes I see what you mean yes the plot is
41.   much more complex than [anything] in Greek tragedy
42. INT   [uh huh]
43. CAN   and this is an indication that err tr- tragedy and drama
44.   in general developed through the course of years=
45. INT   =uh huh=
46. CAN   =centuries I mean the Romans err contribute contribute
47.   to that quite a lot=
48. INT   =uh huh=
49. CAN   =through arts poetica ( )

The interviewer's initial question confers epistemic authority on the candidate in two ways, and in so doing, both indexes and establishes the presumption of knowledgeability (Lempert 2008) characteristic of the PS phase. First, unlike the Stimulus phase where direct questions index the student-teacher role relationship, here the tone is leisured and incidental ("a few things you said…I was quite interested in"), as well as indirect and hedged ("I was just wondering if you could expand

on that a bit?"). Second, the choice of topic, Greek tragedy, further helps to position the candidate as an academic peer as it allows him to draw on his stated knowledge of Aristotle, whose *Poetics* is principally concerned with that literary genre.

Taking his cue from the interviewer, GM1 accentuates his claims to knowledge in an analytically appropriate fashion. He frames his response with a problem-solution structure, which comprises an initial question, "does [Aristotle's definition of tragedy] still apply?" (l. 10), followed by a systematic historicization and theorization of tragedy (l. 9–l3), and then a delineation of its dramaturgical characteristics (l. 14–32). Such claims are, moreover, couched in an appropriate register of literary scholarship ("this definition still holds," "the elements of mercy and fear," "through the eyes of the protagonists"). In l. 32, GM1 then positions himself as an authority on Greek literary scholarship by relating the intense emotions of Greek tragedy to "what I sort of call catharsis". The term 'catharsis' is common currency in literary scholarship, yet GM1 personalizes this claim with the qualification "what *I* sort of" (my emphasis). While it is possible GM1 has never encountered the aural English stress on this word's penultimate syllable, the Greek manner of stressing the first syllable nonetheless also reasserts the word's Greek origins, thereby marking it as within his epistemic territory (Heritage 2012a, 2012b).

In this manner, the participants co-construct the candidate's rights to knowledge over the topic at hand. In l. 33–34, however, the interviewer then pivots from facilitating (Holmes 2007) the display of the candidate's knowledge claims, to initiating their critique. Specifically, INT invokes the notion of the "classical unities", which are attested in Greek tragedy but not in *Macbeth*, thereby challenging the candidate's central claim that the two are structurally similar (l. 12–16). In Lempert's (2008) terms, this is the point at which the presumption of knowledgeability is put to the test. In more conventional academic terms, such a pivot also embeds the two nested phases of an academic talk, where a speaker presents on a specific topic before being questioned on their presentation. Indeed, this comparison is compelling as, like academic talks, a failure to establish analytic rigour in the initial exposition can generate compensatory critique in the subsequent discussion. In this case, the critique is relatively muted as GM1 presents himself as objective and analytic from the start of the PS phase. In contrast to the subsequent example, this self-presentation is also aided by the distance between the topicalization of Ancient Greek literature and the candidate's own sociocultural identity. Nevertheless, it is still a potentially humbling moment for GM1 as it has the potential to strip him, abruptly, of his epistemic authority. Indeed, this appears to be exactly what might happen when GM1 does not recognize the term "classical unities", and/or possibly the concept itself (l. 35). In an apparent effort to maintain the peer-peer role relationship, INT's attempts at assistive repair are, moreover, cast in a recondite register of language

("as adumbrated by…") (Weston 2021: 143) that is simultaneously dismissive of the need to gloss, explain or elaborate further ("in terms of plot and subplots and things like that.")

Humbling moments such as these are attested across admissions interviews, as the gap between a candidate's attributed knowledge status and their actual epistemic resources becomes apparent. In this example, the candidate's efforts at repair are successful. In. l. 40–41, GM1 does not interpret INT's challenge as a critique of his own line of reasoning, but instead infers that Ancient Greek tragedy comprises less complex plotting than Shakespearean tragedy ("yes the plot (.) is much more complex than [anything] in Greek tragedy"). Such a move is also indirectly hearable as GM1's attempt to fit in (Kirilova and Angouri 2018) in this Cambridge context, where the ultimate prize is to be a student of English literature. GM1 then continues to outline the historical development of tragedy in l. 40–49, using an appropriate register of literary language ("ars poetica"). The Interviewer's Report notes, correspondingly, that GM1 wrestles effectively with problems, while sometimes "deflecting questions". He is, nevertheless, awarded a high number score for the interview (8/10), which speaks to his ability to live up to the "presumption of knowledgeability" conferred on him by the interviewer in the PS phase of the interview.

4.2 Architecture interview, Saudi Arabian candidate (SAF1), interview score 5/10

Extracts #2–4 involve a Saudi Arabian candidate who has applied for a position in Architecture. Unlike the previous (and subsequent) example, this interview exemplifies a case where the candidate voluntarily topicalizes culture in ways that overlap with her own sociocultural background. As we shall see, such a strategy also becomes enmeshed with her attempts to fit in (Kirilova and Angouri 2018; Roberts and Campbell 2006) with the values she implicitly attributes to a liberal, Western university, as embodied in the figure of the interviewer.

In the candidate's personal statement, she claims that architects are drivers of social change. When questioned on this at the start of the PS phase, she topicalizes, and then draws on knowledge of, her own Saudi background to illustrate and justify such a claim. She establishes a contrast between the introduction of "new [architectural] ideas" (#2 l. 17) from Western countries, which are described as having "the best architects", and the Islamic architecture she associates with Saudi's conservative past. Such positioning work recalls migrant candidates in job interviews who also attempt to fit in (Kirilova and Angouri 2018) with the target company by aligning themselves with the perceived values of the host culture, and by distancing themselves from the stigmatized aspects of their own culture (Goffman

1963). This interpretation is further strengthened by the candidate's own subsequent sociocultural self-positioning (#4), where she also expresses an individual (and familial) openness to "new ideas" (#4 l. 19) which, in her view, contrast with the "close minded" practice of Islam in Saudi Arabia (#4 l. 12–14). Counterpoint to this is the behaviour of the interviewer, who is ultimately concerned with debating the academic claim that architects can be drivers of social change (#2 l. 4–7) rather than with the candidate's attempted construction of a likeminded sociocultural identity.

Extract #2 occurs at the very beginning of the PS phase, when the interviewer has the candidate's personal statement literally in hand:

Extract #2

1.	INT	SO ehm you talk about your background and your interests
2.		in Architecture ehm and you talk about the work of ehm
3.		Alastair Parvin who's a co-founder of Wikihouse ehm
4.		you say "Parvin describes how architects are becom- are
5.		becoming increasingly responsible as drivers of social
6.		change" so perhaps can you tell me how you believe
7.		that architects can be drivers of social change?
8.	CAN	well ehm I think that in a sense architecture does
9.		reflect like the society that it surrounds itself in
10.		ehm in terms of I think especially like back home in ( )
11.		in back home in in Saudi Arabia ehm you see a lot of
12.		buildings are becoming are being more influenced by
13.		western ideals and everything and you kind of feel
14.		especially in my city I mean if you went back to [name of
15.		town] thirty years ago then it would be comp- it was very
16.		conservative but now I think a- especially with
17.		architecture it's a way of introducing new ideas like this
18.		whole it's introducing these new western ideas this
19.		new western architecture's it's not just about Islamic
20.		architecture anymore
21.	INT	uh huh
22.	CAN	and there <u>was</u> a bit of conflict in the beginning because
23.		they wanted to build a new one mile high building to beat
24.		Burj Khalifa as the tallest building in the world and there
25.		was this huge outcry especially by the religious police
26.		because there is a prophesy about the end of time when
27.		a building can reach the sky and ( ) you won't be able
28.		to see the ceiling and they thought this one mile high
29.		building was in a sense fulfilling that prophesy and they
30.		just thought it was in-intruding upon culture and it

31.   was put on hold for about two years and now they're
32.   building it again
33. INT   (laughter)
34. CAN   because (laughter) I think the rest of the world's
35.   a bit like ( )

Although the interviewer's initial question does not explicitly invoke SAF1's cultural background, it is nonetheless broad enough to facilitate (Holmes 2007) its topicalization. Like GM1, SAF1 starts by framing her response in analytical terms: she describes how architecture reflects the society that surrounds it (l. 8–9). Saudi Arabia is then voluntarily invoked as an example of how Western architecture has introduced "new western ideas" (l. 18) into an otherwise "conservative" (l. 16), Islamic society. SAF1 then provides the example of a mile high city (l. 23–35), which exemplifies the social tensions arising from the introduction of Western architecture into this society. Importantly, however, this is cast in the form of a joke, which contrasts religiously motivated attempts to stop the construction of a building that might fulfil apocalyptic prophecy with a bathetic coda ("now they're building it again"). Thus, SAF1 skilfully uses humour to establish "co-membership" (Erickson and Shultz 1982; Van De Mieroop and Schnurr 2018) with her interviewer. In so doing, she also aligns with the "rest of the world" (l. 34–35) in its (attributed) evaluation of Saudi's conservative religious beliefs, thereby also distancing herself from this stigmatized aspect of her sociocultural background (Goffman 1963).

While this might appear to be a promising beginning for the candidate, the interviewer subsequently responds – like the previous interviewer (#1 l. 33–34) – with a critique of the candidate's academic claim. The presumption of knowledge-ability is thus put to the test. Unlike the previous interview, however, this critique is more pointed, as it indexes a juxtaposition between the candidate's attempt to establish a likeminded sociocultural identity with the academic point and purpose of the encounter. In this respect, it also reveals the interactional tensions that can emerge when the topicalization of culture overlaps with the candidate's own sociocultural background:

Extract #3

1. INT   I mean y- you mention Saudi now clearly there've
2.   been one of that word *Western* buildings in Saudi
3.   for quite a some considerable time certainly since the
4.   nineteen seventies with the development of oil and
5.   ehm the discovery of oil and oil wealth there why
6.   does w- given that it's ehm in some ways it's quite a
7.   traditional society and there's very strong sort of
8.   religious beliefs and what have you why *are* there

9.		Western buildings in Saudi why is there not just a
10.		a a different form of y'know twenty-first century version
11.		of *Islamic* architecture?
12.	CAN	because the architects that they bring have been
13.		Western educated

In Extract #2, as we have seen, the candidate associates the sociocultural category "Western" with the introduction of "new ideas", with which she aligns via the establishment of co-membership (see also #2, l. 31–32, #4 l. 18–19, #5 l. 21–23). Yet the very category that is the basis of this strategy also reveals the interviewer's divergent discursive priorities. While the candidate might use the term "Western" to index progressive architectural and social change in Saudi Arabia, the interviewer flags it instead as theoretically problematic. In Extract #3 l. 2, for example, INT appears to critique the cultural reification and homogenization implicit in the term "Western", via the use of flagging and exaggerated intonation. The consequences of SAF1's use of this term are also apparent in the Interviewer's Report, where the word "Western" appears in scare quotes, alongside a summary of the candidate's claims. This situation recalls the example in Kirilova and Angouri (2017, 2018), where the discursive strategies a migrant jobseeker uses to impress his interviewer on an interpersonal level actually contribute to "widening the gap" (Kirilova and Angouri 2018: 349) between them on a professional level.

SAF1's response in #3 l. 12–13 does not help to narrow the gap between herself and the interviewer. The interviewer critiques the idea that architects are drivers of social change, given there have been Western buildings in Saudi Arabia since the 1970s (l. 2–5), and the country continues to be a "traditional" society with "very strong… religious beliefs" (l. 7–8). He then poses a counterfactual question in an attempt to draw out why an Islamic tradition of modern architecture has not emerged. Although this question can be interpreted and answered in a number of ways, the candidate fails to infer the interviewer's dissatisfaction with the term "Western", and so continues to use this in her response ("because the architects that they bring in have been Western educated"). This move is then repeated later in the same turn, when she describes how "the best architects are in the West".

On the one hand, such moves are comparable to the way in which GM1 demonstrates his admiration for English literature by unfavourably comparing specific aspects of Ancient Greek literature (Extract #1 l. 40–41). On the other hand, this is only a fleeting comment in GM1's case, and one which he contextualizes in the service of a greater analytic point. In SAF1's case, however, it is a central feature of her self-presentation; one whose centrality is shared with candidates from other gatekeeping encounters (Kirilova and Angouri 2018; Roberts and Campbell 2006) whose efforts to pass (Goffman 1963) as socio-culturally acceptable candidates are

likewise counterproductive. Such efforts are acutely apparent in the final part of the PS phase, when the candidate engages in an explicit form of sociocultural self-positioning.

This final sequence begins when, having failed to elicit his preferred type of discussion, the interviewer spells out his critique; namely, that if architects really were drivers of social change, why would Saudi Arabia use architects and architectural styles that were antithetical to its conservative, religious sensibilities:

Extract #4

1.	INT	it would seem to me that if you wanted to maintain
2.		a certain moral or spiritual or social order you would
3.		perhaps be very resistant to introducing a type of
4.		architecture which is essentially atheist you know is
5.		all about democracy and social inclusion and social
6.		equality and all of these different things
7.	CAN	I think it depends on the mindset of those that
8.		bring in that Western architecture if you're coming in
9.		to say 'No I'm bringing in democracy'=
10.	INT	=uh huh=
11.	CAN	=because your country doesn't *have* democracy
12.		then I think you will face resistance but if you're
13.		open-minded and you're saying 'here this is
14.		another route ( ) here this is what we have over
15.		here'
16.	INT	uh huh
17.	CAN	they're sort of introducing it because the thing about
18.		Saudi Arabia and Islam is I don't always agree
19.		with their version of Islam I think some of them are
20.		very close minded
21.	INT	[uh huh]
22.	CAN	[and I] think in Islam especially I think we're taught
23.		°my parents always taught me to be° open minded
24.		I wouldn't say I'm a bad Muslim but I'm still open
25.		minded to like new ideas so I think that
26.		yo- Saudi Arabia I think it's in a sense <u>good</u>
27.		for them that they have this balance of Islamic
28.		architecture and Western architecture
29.	INT	uh huh
30.	CAN	because in a sense it provides that kind of harmony
31.		and it introduces new ideas to a country that

32.		I think tends to live in its own little world
33.	INT	uh huh
34.	CAN	we're in a kind of our own bubble ( )

SAF1 attempts to reassert her epistemic authority by positioning herself as a guide to the sociocultural context of Saudi Arabia, offering advice as to how Western architects in the country should proceed if they wish to be successful (l. 7–15). In l. 17, she also begins to articulate a response to the interviewer's critique ("they're sort of introducing it because"). Yet, while the subsequent response is structured as if it were a Hegelian dialectic, comprising a thesis ("I think some of them are very closeminded"), antithesis ("my parents always taught me to be open minded") and a synthesis ("it's in a sense good for them that they have this balance"), it does not serve to establish truth through rational argument so much as it plays out SAF1's own sociocultural self-positioning.

Following Goffman (1963), SAF1 distances herself from a stigmatic "version of Islam" (l. 19–20), which she identifies using the othering pronouns "their" and "them". She then presents herself and her upbringing as a contrastive example of a Muslim who is "open minded" to "new ideas," here with the corresponding pronouns "I" and "me". The reference to open-mindedness recalls SAF1's previous positive assessment of the influence of Western architecture, which consequently becomes the focus of the synthesis, where SAF1 suggests that Western and Saudi architecture together can achieve "balance" (l. 27) and "harmony" (l. 30). This also recalls her personal statement, where she invokes the "standardized relational pair" (Sacks 1972) of "the East and West", which she sees architecture as a means of "bridging".

In other gatekeeping encounters, as we have seen, the overt discussion of ethnic or sociocultural background can make interviewers feel uncomfortable, as candidates are expected to present a dispassionate, analytic and euphemized self (Roberts 2021: 241). This is also true of the admissions interview, though with the added specificity that its point and purpose is to test a candidate's analytic mettle. Such expectations are, however, not always made apparent frontstage (Weston and Tranekjær 2023), nor is deviation from them interactionally marked. As Goffman (1956) notes, it is backstage where candidates are judged on their behaviour, where sorting processes quietly take place, and final decisions are made. This is also the case in Extract #4, where, on the one hand, the interviewer confines his responses to continuers, yet, on the other hand, describes in his Interviewer's Report how SAF1 provides "no great insight" on architecture in Saudi Arabia. As such, she receives only a mediocre (5/10) mark for her interview performance.

4.3 Psychological and Behavioural Sciences, Scottish candidate (ScF1), interview score 8/10

The final example (Extracts #7-#8) involves a Scottish candidate (ScF1) applying for the Psychological and Behavioural Sciences (PBS). This interview is different from the previous interviews in revealing and consequential ways. Unlike the previous candidates, ScF1 is explicitly questioned on aspects of her sociocultural background, even though she does not, herself, voluntarily topicalize them. She is also subject to more acute processes of discursive foreignizing (Day 1998, 2006; Tranekjær 2015) than any other candidate in the CUI corpus. While this might seem unusual given ScF1 is – like her English interviewers – from the United Kingdom, such sociocultural proximity appears to license interviewer behaviour that might otherwise be (regarded as) risky or unacceptable.

Following Day (1998, 2006), we might expect such foreignization to be accompanied by the devaluation of this candidate's skills and competencies, and for her consequently to receive a lower interview score. Yet this does not appear to be the case for two interrelated reasons. First, Extract #5 shows that ScF1 is able to fit in (Kirilova and Angouri 2018) with her interviewers by establishing co-membership, through shared jokes and memories, in ways that play along with their sociocultural assumptions. Second, the analytic demands made of other candidates are less pronounced in this case precisely because the discussion is centred on a book about Scotland (*Trainspotting*) which the candidate has neither read nor referred to in her personal statement. As such, the presumption of knowledgeability characteristic of the PS phase gives way to a resumption of the teacher driven role relationship we see in the Stimulus phase. Thus, the task facing the candidate is to be shepherded to the interviewers' preferred responses, which in this case reflect stereotypical associations of Scotland. ScF1's "strong" mark for this interview (8/10) is, in part, attributable both to her ability to infer what this task is, and her willingness to accomplish it, despite its foreignizing effects.

The relevant sequence begins when the interviewer introduces the topic of *Trainspotting*, which he mentions with reference to a newspaper opinion poll:

Extract #5
1. INT ehm I (.) was reading last week ehm I think there
2. was a poll in which Trainspotting was voted by Scottish
3. people as their favourite novel did you see (.) [that (.) poll]
4. CAN [no ( )]
5. INT it was in the newspaper
6. CAN I've never actually seen Trainspotting either
7. INT you've not read or seen Trainspotting?

8.	CAN	no
9.	INT	okay it's a very good book
10.	CAN	( ) Braveheart ( ) in Scotland but it's not really
11.	INT	well I guess it was just about ninety four wasn't it so
12.		I guess it feels it's probably almost a historic arti@fact
13.		[now]
14.	INT2	[some] are vintage though 'cos err Braveheart's what ninety
15.		five wasn't it
16.	INT	right
17.	INT2	it won err best film in ninety four which is staggering
18.	CAN	([ ])
19.	INT2	[it is] a genuinely terrible film=
20.	CAN	=in first and second ( )
21.		let's watch Braveheart ( ) [(laughter)]
22.	INT2	[(laughter)]
23.	CAN	( ) awful (laughter)
24.	INT2	but I mean it's- but y'know y- y- y- you have a sense of
25.		what Trainspotting's about? ( ) it's about? and what it
26.		covers? [Okay]
27.	CAN	[not really] I've not
28.	INT2	<u>right</u> okay well it paints a picture quite a bleak picture of
29.		Scotland it's very much to do with heroin ehm in the
30.		sort of eighties and nineties and ehm the sort of and
31.		sort of deprivation around ehm an area of Edinburgh
32.		and it's quite violent it's quite dark it's very bleak it's an
33.		outstanding novel
34.	CAN	it sounds like [name of town] where I'm from (laughter)
35.	INT2	(laughter) but but I think my question was when it's show-
36.		so ehm ( ) <u>given</u> what I've just <u>said</u> (lip smacking) what
37.		do you think that <u>says</u> about (.) psychology and p-
38.		perhaps self-perception of Scottish people if if if
39.		a novel of that type is felt to be something that is that
40.		is actually the best the greatest ever Scottish
41.		novel what do you think that tells us?
42.	CAN	that Scottish people are quite negative and pessimistic
43.		ehm I would say that's probably true actually 'cos ehm
44.		even when it comes to like personal statements in school
45.		people are like ehm 'I don't know how to like big
46.		myself up and how to sell myself'

As with Extract #1 l. 1–6 (Ancient Greek literature), INT2's reference to reading the newspaper opinion poll (#5 1–3) is leisured, thereby helping to co-construct the peer-peer role relationship characteristic of the PS phase of the interview. Moreover, the choice of topic, the Scottish reception of the novel *Trainspotting*, appears to be a further attempt to position the candidate as an epistemic authority, based on the fact she is from Scotland. This strategy differs from that of the previous interviewers, who either refer to the candidate's personal statements (GM1), or who allow the candidates themselves to do so (SAF1).

Such a strategy is also consequential as it fails to set up the conditions for the presumption of knowledgeability, given the candidate has neither read the book *Trainspotting* nor seen the film adaptation (l. 6). Although this might seem an un-promising beginning to this interactional sequence, it nevertheless tees up the establishment of co-membership, even if this is played out with reference to for-eignizing archetypes of the Scottish. After ScF1 states she has not read *Trainspotting*, she then makes a counter reference to *Braveheart* (l. 10). On the one hand, this might represent an implicit attempt to renegotiate the indexicalities of Scotland, away from the violent, bleak, and drug-fuelled country in *Trainspotting*, and towards one where noble rebels bravely resist English overlordship. Yet this specific renegotiation fails when INT2 describes it in l. 19 as "a genuinely terrible film", which contrasts with INT's description of *Trainspotting* as "a very good book" (l. 9). On the other hand, the discussion of *Braveheart* also leads to the establishment of co-membership, as the participants share laughter over their memories of watching the film (l. 21–23).

INT's persistence in returning to *Trainspotting* (l. 24–26) is unusual, as the PS phase typically affords the candidate time to establish their epistemic authority over a topic before their claims are discursively interrogated. In this case, however, it is the interviewer who must supply the background to this topic (l. 28–33), given the candidate's apparent lack of familiarity with it and/or her reluctance to discuss it. Although this lack of knowledge might feasibly count against the candidate, it appears in fact to work in her favour. It firstly allows her to make a joke (l. 34) about how the Scotland of *Trainspotting* resembles her hometown. As in Extract #2 (l. 31–32), this again leads to the establishment of co-membership through laughter. Secondly, it leads to the re-establishment of the teacher-student relationship in l. 35–41, when INT2 asks a leading question on the question of Scottish national character. That the preferred answer is obvious and easily deliverable is clear from ScF1's use of a sentence-initial fronting of the subordinate clause ("that Scottish people are quite…"), which indexes the co-construction of this question-answer sequence (Button 1987).

The cost, of course, is that the candidate is required to distance herself from the stigmatized (Goffman 1963) image of Scotland invoked by INT2, and align with the interviewer's archetype of the 'dour' Scottish. Such behaviour is also apparent in

Extract #6, which reprises ScF1's assessment of her hometown as "bleak" (Extract #5, l. 34). In answer to INT2's question as to why that is the case, ScF1 describes the impoverished look of the town centre, at which point the extract begins:

Extract #6

1.	INT	is it economic conditions you're really talking about?
2.	CAN	there's really bad economic conditions but like I think
3.		that's affected them <u>socially</u> as well because there's
4.		not much to- because there's not any shops ehm
5.	INT	uh huh
6.	CAN	everything's just really run down and it's quite bleak
7.		yes
8.	INT	so there's economics what about climate do you think
9.		that's a factor?
10.	CAN	ehm I'm not really sure I don't think [so]
11.	INT	[uh huh]
12.	CAN	it's just the economical (sic) climate obviously
13.	INT	[uh huh]
14.	CAN	[but ehm] yeah it's just rundown it's horrible it's
15.		not somewhere I'd choose to live

Just as SAF1 distances herself from a stigmatized version of Islam (#4, l. 19) through the othering use of pronouns, so too does ScF1 refer to how the "bad economic conditions" (l. 2) have affected the residents – "them" – socially. In SAF1's case, however, such sociocultural self-positioning is voluntarily introduced, and appears at odds with the interviewer's line of questioning about architects as drivers of social change. By contrast, ScF1's self-positioning is made relevant by the interviewer's explicit focus on Scotland's supposedly depressing character, and by the teacher-student role relationship through which it is mediated. Such a role relationship is again apparent in Extract #6 through the use of leading questions ("is it economic conditions you're really talking about?", "what about climate do you think that's a factor?") and the formulation (Heritage and Watson 1979) of the candidate's responses ("so there's economics"). Interestingly, ScF1 fleetingly pushes back against this role relationship at the high (or low) point of INT's foreignizing questioning, in this case the influence of the Scottish climate. She refutes such a suggestion ("ehm I'm not really sure I don't think [so]"), before emphasizing instead universal grounds for deprivation ("it's just the economical (sic) climate"). Finally, however, she continues to fit in with her interviewers' opinions and assumptions by distancing herself from her sociocultural background: she would not "choose to live" (l. 15) in her hometown. She is awarded a high mark (8/10) for the interview.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This paper has explored the personal statement (PS) phase of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences undergraduate admissions interviews at the University of Cambridge. In particular, it has analysed an affordance of this phase that allows participants to discuss topics of sociocultural interest. In various ways and to different degrees, there is often an overlap between the topic under discussion and a candidate's own sociocultural background and/or identity. On the one hand, such an affordance confers an "epistemic authority" (Heritage and Raymond 2005) on candidates that is not generally available to participants in other comparable events. In the Buddhist *rtsod pa* debate described by Lempert (2008), for example, novice monks are also lent the "presumption of knowledgeability", yet the exclusive basis for that test is knowledge of Buddhist doctrine. In job interviews, candidates are typically discouraged from drawing on their ethnic and/or sociocultural background, as such moves are perceived to hinder their bureaucratic processability (Iedema 1999; Roberts and Campbell 2005). On the other hand, a candidate's ability to leverage knowledge of their sociocultural background during the Cambridge admissions interview does not necessarily insulate them from the intercultural phenomena we see attested in other gatekeeping encounters. Three examples have been used to exemplify how these factors interact and play out.

The first example (GM1 – Ancient Greek literature) analysed here demonstrates a case where the presumption of knowledgeability is implicitly established via the candidate's training in Ancient Greek; a skill that is remote from his broader sociocultural identity. Although such conditions do not guarantee a successful response, they are favourable insofar as they minimize the scope for a consequential intercultural subjectivity to emerge. As we have seen, the candidate is able to capitalize on these conditions by delivering a response formatted in the analytic style favoured both in these admissions interviews and more widely in institutional gatekeeping encounters (Roberts 2021; Scheuer 2001). GM1 contrasts with SAF1, who attempts to fit in (Kirilova and Angouri 2018) with her interviewer by signalling likeminded sociocultural values, and by disavowing the stigmatized (Goffman 1963) aspects of a conservative Saudi background. As is also true of other gatekeeping encounters (Kirilova and Angouri 2018; Roberts and Campbell 2006), however, such moves actually serve to widen the gap between the participants, as they are at odds with the dispassionate analytic style and behaviour the interviewer is seeking. The final case, ScF1 (Scottish psychology) is interesting in that it also appears, superficially, to bear many of the hallmarks of an unsuccessful interview. The candidate is overtly foreignized in ways which, following Day (1998, 2006), might call into question her analytic competencies, perhaps especially so given ScF1 is also

unable to discuss the topic in question, and so fails to live up to the presumption of knowledgeability. Yet, this foreignizing interviewer behaviour paradoxically serves to index the participants' sociocultural proximity, which ScF1 capitalizes on via (stereotypically British acts of) self-deprecation and humour that sustain co-membership (Van De Mieroop and Schnurr 2018).

Key questions arising from such an analysis are to what extent it can be generalized, and how might it problematize our understanding of this encounter? The admission interview's reputation, fuelled on a near annual basis by unfavourable media coverage, is one where overbearing interviewers belittle terrified British state school candidates. In fact, the CUI corpus shows that candidates from England never have to negotiate the intercultural phenomena we see attested here, as they typically share a sociocultural identity with their interviewers. While this is only one piece of a much larger jigsaw, it is perhaps no coincidence that English candidates also tend to have higher admissions rates than their non-English peers. This might suggest, in turn, that media coverage would be more accurate if it paid greater attention to this latter group. Yet, at least in the CUI corpus, the overtly foreignizing interviewer behaviour that aligns with the stereotype of Cambridge interviewers is limited to ScF1, and does not entail – *contra* Day (1998, 2006) – a devaluation of the candidate's skills or abilities. This suggests, in turn, that there is no neat correspondence between such behaviour and the evaluative outcomes for a given candidate.

A far more prominent pattern in the corpus is when overseas candidates routinely distance themselves from stigmatized aspects of their own sociocultural background (Goffman 1963). This is exemplified in this study by SAF1's interview, yet is also attested more broadly across interviews in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Thus, an Irish candidate favourably compares UK secondary school sex education with that of Ireland, where she is critical of the influence of the Catholic church. A Cypriot candidate discusses the poor performance of public sector workers, drawing on stereotypes of southern Europeans in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis as feckless and lazy. An Italian candidate raised abroad expresses incomprehension at various Italian cultural norms. In job interviews, such behaviour is often seen as a form of insincerity designed to curry favour with the interviewer (Goffman 1963; Roberts 2021; Roberts and Campbell 2006). In the absence of the shared sociocultural background which benefits ScF1, however, such acts of self-deprecation appear to be interpreted as too sincere, particularly in the way they crowd out the analytic style and behaviour the admissions interviewer is seeking. A frequent adjective used in Interviewer's Reports, including SAF1's, is that the candidate in question is "naïve".

The candidates who are evaluated most highly tend to be those who are able to establish and maintain an analytic objectivity towards the topic in question, irrespective of how it overlaps with their own sociocultural background and identity (ScF1's interview, as noted, is the exception that proves the rule). Such an endeavour is difficult to accomplish, however, due to the intercultural phenomena that so often come into play, but also because the interviewer's behaviour during the PS phase comprises sequentially divergent kinds of gatekeeping behaviour that can wrongfoot candidates. As exemplified by SAF1, candidates tend initially to be given freer rein to invoke their own interests and ideas, only for these to be subsequently interrogated as the interviewer begins their critique. In this respect, the "facilitative" and "repressive" gatekeeping behaviours which Holmes (2007) identifies are shown to be sequentially integrated into the admissions interview, with the critique acting as the pivot.

The fact that candidates so often fail to understand the significance of the critique, and correspondingly do not adapt their behaviour accordingly, points to a lack of awareness as to what the admissions interview involves and demands. In this particular respect, it resembles other gatekeeping encounters such as job interviews, where migrant candidates are also particularly disadvantaged by not knowing the rules of the game, especially with regards to the treatment of the sociocultural self (Roberts 2021). Conversely, admissions interviews differ markedly in this respect from the Buddhist *rtsod pa*, where the sociocultural self is never attested, and where novice monks have observed the ritual debate many times before. Lempert (2008) notes that the "discrepancy between the status of the seat and the status of the occupant creates dramatic tension: Will the monk-defendant live up to the presumption of knowledgeability, or will he falter?" In admissions interviews, there is no audience beyond the immediate participants, candidates typically do not know what to expect or how to behave, and they are evaluated on criteria which are not made clear to them. While these conditions reduce the scope for dramatic tension, they nevertheless point to the gulf between participants' frontstage interactional behaviour and interviewers' backstage evaluations.

To bridge this divide and increase transparency, targeted interviewer intervention might therefore be appropriate and effective. Instead of leaving candidates to infer the preferred analytic behaviour, interviewers could offer candidates the opportunity to rethink and revise inadequate responses, and provide sensitive instruction on how to do this. Overseas candidates could be asked to discuss cultural topics that overlap with their own sociocultural background from the perspective, for example, of a disinterested literature scholar, architect or psychologist. Nested roleplay of this kind would not negate the candidate's sociocultural knowledge of the

topic in question, but it might help to frame the discussion in more objective and analytic terms, while also reducing the scope for foreignizing interviewer behaviour. In effect, then, the PS phase could re-integrate some of the pedagogical guardrails or stabilizers we see in the Stimulus phase, where communication between interview participants is generally more effective and successful. Such a move would also shift attention away from the candidate's faltering moves, and towards their capacity to learn and improve, which is also the skill that will be most consequential for the candidate's academic career at Cambridge.

Transcription conventions

Symbol	Gloss	Denotation
INT		Interviewer speaking
INT2		Interviewer 2 speaking
CAN		Candidate speaking
d-	letter or partial word with hyphen	word cut off
=	equals sign	latching
—	em-dash	interruption
[ ]	square brackets	overlapping talk
( )	space between parentheses	unintelligible utterance
::	colons	lengthens previous sound
and	underlining	emphasis
AND	word in capitals	increased volume
hh.	hh then fullstop	speaker out-breath
hhh.	hhh then fullstop	speaker in-breath
>and<	>word in inward chevrons<	spoken more quickly
<and>	<word in outward chevrons>	spoken more slowly
(laughter)	'laughter' in parentheses	laughter
fun@ny	at sign enclosed by word	laugh pulse
° °	°degree signs enclosing speech°	spoken more quietly
*	*asterisk enclosing speech*	exaggerated intonation

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