

Assignment: Interview with an immigrant

Purposes: To delve into a different culture, and your own, by eliciting information from an informant about his or her home culture and his or her experience of our culture. To look at global processes of immigration, labor, consumption, and so on from the viewpoint of someone from another culture and place. To see some similarities and differences in the culture of capitalism as it is somewhere outside of the US. To practice cultural relativism. To make personal contact with someone from another culture. To learn how someone from another culture looks at us, and to learn about our culture by comparing it to another.

What you do: Find someone who immigrated (or otherwise came) to the United States from another country when he or she was at least 16 years old, and who is willing to talk with you for at least an hour. Your informant may be a friend, a relative, someone you meet standing in line for a movie... as long as he or she is not being interviewed by someone else in this class. You will use a pseudonym (false name) for your informant, to reduce any possible embarrassment or concerns about privacy.

Interview your informant for at least an hour. You may consult your informant again later if you want to, and he or she is willing. You may want to record the interview, so you can focus on the conversation without having to write extensive notes. If so, ask beforehand if your informant is comfortable with being recorded, and comply with his or her wishes. Do not pressure anyone to be recorded. Offer to give your informant a copy of the final paper. More details about what themes you might cover are provided below.

Write a 5 to 7 page (double-spaced) paper based on the interview(s), covering themes indicated below.

Grading: The paper is worth up to 200 points, of the 1000 possible in the course. The grading rubric is attached, to give you an idea of what I will be looking for.

Submitting the paper: Submit the paper by email to bruce.owen@sonoma.edu, as an attachment. No paper copy is involved. A good way to send it is to click "Email me!" on the class website. Being able to email files as attachments is a useful skill.

File format: Save the paper in Word 95 (.doc), Word 2000 (.doc), or Rich Text (.rtf) format. These are nearly universal formats that any word processor should be able to make and open. The command to save in these formats is often under a "Save As" menu item. Being able to share files in these formats is another useful skill.

File name: Name the file in this format:

a340-09f-1-Interview-LastnameFirstname

Replace "LastnameFirstname" with your name, last name first, capitalizing the first letter of each name. The first part identifies the class, semester, and section. Most word processors will add a 3-letter file extension like ".doc" or ".rtf".

Drafts: You are welcome to discuss your assignment with me or give me a draft to review before the assignment is due. My comments and suggestions may help you write a better essay and get a better grade. Please send your draft at least a few days before the

deadline, so I will have time to respond and you will have time to revise. If you email a draft, please name the file as above, but add "-draft", like

a340-09f-1-Interview-SmithJohn-draft.doc

Subjects to cover in the interview: Try to guide the conversation along interesting lines, without discouraging your informant from bringing up things that are important or interesting to him or her. Often the best information concerns things you would never have asked about. You needn't (and can't) cover all the suggestions below; they are just ideas to get you started in directions relevant to this class. Try to get enough material for your paper, but don't force the conversation into a list of questions and answers. Often, asking follow-up questions like "did that seem strange to you?", "why do you think it happened that way?", or "how would someone have handled that in your home country?" can bring up interesting responses that shed light on one or both cultures.

If your informant generalizes about what people in their culture do, or what Americans do, try to get specific examples or stories from their personal experience.

The idea is learn enough to briefly outline your informant's story, and more importantly, his or her observations about life in the country he or she came from, his or her impressions about the US, and how they are related. You are particularly looking for things that relate to globalization and the culture of capitalism. You are also looking for things about your informant's culture that are different from your own. These may give you insights into both your informant's culture, and ours, by contrast. Try to explain some of those differences, using concepts from this course where appropriate.

Get some *background* about your informant's personal story.

- Where did your informant grow up?
- When did he or she come to the US, and how old was he or she at the time?

Then, find out about your informant's *original culture*. Try open-ended questions, like

- What was your life there like?
- What did you or your family do for a living?
- How did you spend your time?
- How was it different from here?
- What funny stories about home do you tell to relatives or friends? Or typical ones?

Next, ask your informant about *immigrating* (or coming to visit, etc.) to the United States.

- Why did he or she come to the United States? How?
- What did he or she expect of the United States?
- Did the United States meet those expectations, or was it different? If so, how?

This may already get you into issues related to the course. Other themes to try:

- kinds of work he/she did there and here, or knew about through parents or others
- compare her/his home culture and ours here in terms of:
 - Consumption: amounts and kinds of stuff that people have, buy, and show off; similarities or differences in advertising; attitudes about shopping, fashion and style, being rich or poor, buying on credit, savings, etc.

- Labor: kinds of work available, working conditions, pay, time off, attitudes about work, bosses, shop owners, work ethic, unions, strikes, etc.
- Nations and nationalism: who are the dominant people (by language, ethnicity, etc.) at home, and here? who are indigenous people, minorities, outsiders, competitors, or enemies; racial or ethnic issues (construction of "the other"); attitudes (if any) about foreign investors, free trade, domestic and international corporations, etc.
- Population: norms and attitudes about families and family size, marriage, children, inheritance, the size and role of networks of relatives, etc.
- Gender: roles of men and women in social life, families, work, and politics; power and status of men vs. women; women's work vs. men's work; etc.
- Poverty: how widespread is it, how visible, what do people think about it? What causes it? Attitudes towards charity, beggars, etc.
- Pollution: worse than here? better? attitudes about it? Litter, polluting cars, smoke, garbage, sewage, attitudes about global warming or toxic waste from industry, etc.
- Health: health care, attitudes and practices around disease, hospitals, doctors, sick people, old people, etc.
- have these things changed (or are they changing) over there or here? how? why?
- how do the US or other countries affect what happens in her/his home country?
- attitudes and ideas about the US in his/her home culture, and about his/her home culture among people he/she meets in the US. Are we, or they, misinformed or wrong?

Finally, ask about your informant's experiences and views of *our culture* as an immigrant here. For example:

- How did your informant learn English (if he or she did)?
- How does American culture differ from the culture that he or she came from?
- What seemed strange, confusing, funny, or hard to get used to about Americans?
- Any particularly good, bad, or interesting experiences as an immigrant?
- Is there anything that she or he particularly likes, or does not like, about Americans?
- Does your informant still feel connected to his or her original culture?
- If so, what does he or she do that maintains that connection or identity?
- How would he or she describe America to people in his or her home country?
- If he or she could tell Americans something about themselves, or give them advice, what would it be?

All along, try to get your informant to provide specific examples or stories. Also try to elicit some *explanations* of events, behavior, etc. in his or her home culture and in ours. Basically, ask *why* things happened, or why things are as they are.

There are many other subjects you could discuss. Be creative, and follow up on things that your informant seems to find interesting or important. They probably are.

Subjects to cover in the paper:

- Use a pseudonym rather than your informant's real name.
- Cover enough background about your informant's personal history to orient the reader.
- Describe important or interesting aspects of your informant's culture of origin.
- Explain why and how he or she immigrated.
- Discuss some of her or his experiences here.

- Describe some of your informant's explanations of events or features of her or his home culture, or of the culture here. Do you agree with these explanations? Do they reveal anything about your informant's values, assumptions, beliefs, etc.?
- Suggest your own explanations of the same and/or other subjects. Do they suggest anything about your own values, assumptions, beliefs, etc.?
- Where possible, try to notice subjects that are relevant to globalization and the culture of capitalism. How do values and ideas reflect, justify, avoid, hide, resist, or otherwise relate to capitalist or globalizing realities?
- Where possible, try to notice things that give you insight into your informant's home culture or American culture.
- Try to synthesize and interpret what you learn of both cultures. For example:
 - Suggest general themes or characteristics of either culture ("Peruvians tend to value such-and-such, which affects many aspects of their lives, such as...")
 - Note repeating themes or parallels in different stories or aspects of the culture ("A common thread in these stories is that...")
 - Ask yourself "Is this part of a larger pattern?" "Does this repeat some theme from another part in the interview?" "What does this imply about the culture?"
 - Ask yourself "Why did my informant react to X in this way?" "Why did he/she think it was interesting or informative to bring up Y subject?"
 - Ask yourself "How does this relate to globalization or the culture of capitalism?"
- Suggest some conclusions about both cultures. Of course they will be tentative, but try! These might be generalizations about the culture, what they value, how they handle certain issues, how globalization or the culture of capitalism is expressed there or affects them, etc. Support your ideas by summarizing or quoting (briefly!) things your informant said, and explaining how they point to your conclusions.

To summarize the previous points: Please do not just write a life history. Some life history is necessary background, but the focus here is on *understanding* a little about both cultures, and about how they fit into globalization and the culture of capitalism. So:

- Try to make some generalizations about your informant's home culture.
- Try to do the same for your own US culture, in contrast to your informant's.
- Consider *why* each culture is as it is. What function or purpose do features of each culture serve for members of that culture? What historical or other factors help to explain the cultures? That is, suggest some explanations of events and cultural traits.

I do not expect you to cover all of the suggested themes in your interview; your interview is too short for that. I also do not expect your paper to cover everything in the interview; it would not fit in 7 pages. Select what seems most interesting, most telling about the cultures, most relevant to the course, and things for which you can suggest interesting interpretations or explanations.

Prepare for the next assignment: The next paper in this class involves writing up library and online research about an issue in your informant's country that relates to globalization. So, during your interview, be thinking about globalization, and look out for a theme for your next paper. Get some inspiration and information from your informant that will help you pick and discuss an aspect of globalization in his or her country.

Good luck, be observant and creative, think carefully, and have fun with this!

Interview with an Immigrant

Points	Possible	Item
	20	Background on the informant's origins and story
	40	Insights into the informant's home culture, illustrated with specific stories, observations, quotations, etc.
	40	Insights into US culture, illustrated with specific stories, observations, quotations, etc.
	40	Themes related to globalization and/or the culture of capitalism clearly pointed out, and interpretations or explanations suggested
	20	Explanations, analysis, generalizations, interpretations and/or conclusions about the issues discussed, not just a description or report of the interview.
	20	Cultural relativist approach, not ethnocentric.
	20	Complies with instructions about the informant's age when he/she immigrated, length and depth of interview, using a pseudonym, file name and file format, etc.
		Late (-10%) or Rewrite (-20%)
	200	Total