

Assignment: Interview with an immigrant

Purpose: To try your hand at being an ethnographer yourself, by eliciting information from an informant about another culture, and about his or her experience of immersion in our culture. To exercise some anthropological ideas by guiding the conversation towards areas from the reading that interest you, or by noting these issues as they come up spontaneously, and then writing up what you learn in an anthropologically informed way. To make personal contact with someone from another culture, and to learn a little about how someone from another culture looks at the dominant culture here.

What you do: Find someone who immigrated to the United States from another country after the age of 15 and is willing to talk with you about her or his experiences. Your informant may be a friend, an acquaintance, a relative, or anyone who 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, in one sitting or more, as you both prefer. You may want to record the interview(s), so you can focus on the conversation without taking many 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. More details about what you might cover in the interview(s) are provided below.

Finally, write a 6 to 8 page (double-spaced) paper based on the interview(s). Cover enough background about your informant's personal history to orient the reader, using a pseudonym rather than her or his real name. Describe a bit about your informant's culture of origin, why and how he or she immigrated, and some of his or her experiences here. Emphasize aspects that seem interesting and relevant from an anthropological point of view. Provide some anthropologically-informed "emic" interpretations or explanations of the "etic" accounts provided by your informant. That is, how do these accounts fit into (or differ from) patterns known from other cultures, or general categories or theories used by anthropologists? What would a reasonable anthropologist say was going on? Draw some general conclusions about both cultures from what your informant tells you. Show how you came to your interpretations and conclusions by using specific things your informant said, either as quotations (not too many) or summaries of her or his comments, and explaining how they support your claims.

Grading: This assignment is worth up to 200 points, of the 1000 possible in the course.

Due: December 8, on paper in class. Also submit a computer copy online or by email.

Subjects to cover: After establishing some basic background, try to guide the discussion along interesting anthropological 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 never would have asked about. Don't feel obliged to cover all the questions below. They are just suggestions. Try to get enough material for your paper, but don't force the conversation into a checklist of questions and answers.

First, get a little background. Where did your informant grow up, how old was your informant when she or he immigrated, and approximately what year was that?

Then, find out a bit about your informant's original culture, as an ethnographer might. There are many questions you might ask to get this started; look through both class books for themes you might want to pursue. For example:

What language did your informant speak, and does he or she think it differs from American English in any particular or interesting ways?
How many people lived together in the immediate family, how were they related, and how did they get along and interact?
What did they do for a living?
How did they divide up responsibilities at home?
What was their home and neighborhood like?
What did they eat on special occasions, and for normal meals?
How did men dress, how did women dress, and how did children dress?
What were typical roles, responsibilities, and limitations of men, and of women?
Did your informant experience any weddings, funerals, coming-of-age ceremonies, or other life-cycle events, and if so, what were they like?
Were there multiple ethnic or racial groups, and if so, how did they differ, and how did race and/or ethnicity affect life?
If she or he is willing to talk about it, what were their religious beliefs and practices?
How did the government operate, and how did it affect their lives?
Were there local organizations, anything from clubs to congregations to city councils, that your informant or his or her family participated in, and what were they like?

Next, get some idea about why your informant came to the United States, and how. What did he or she expect of the United States? Did the United States match those expectations, or was it different, and if so, how?

Finally, find out 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)?
Did your informant experience anything like culture shock on first arriving here, and if so, what was it like? (You may first have to explain what culture shock is.)
Was there anything that seemed particularly strange about Americans, or confusing, or that she or he liked, or did not like?
Did your informant encounter any particularly positive or negative experiences as an immigrant?
Does your informant still feel connected to his or her original culture, and if so, what does he or she do that maintains that connection or identity?
What are some things that an immigrant notices about American culture that Americans don't seem to notice themselves?

There are many other subjects you could pursue. Be creative!