

## **Assignment: Interview with an immigrant**

**Purposes:** To delve into a different culture, and your own, by eliciting information from an informant. To get a taste of one part of doing ethnography. To practice cultural relativism. To apply anthropological ways of understanding and explaining aspects of cultures. To make personal contact with someone from another culture.

**What you do:** Find someone who 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 or legal immigration status.

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 take 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.

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 250 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](mailto: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:

a230-10s-Interview-LastnameFirstname

Replace "LastnameFirstname" with your name, last name first, capitalizing the first letter of each name. The first part identifies the class and semester. 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 paper and get a better grade. Please send your draft by the date indicated on the class web page (currently Sunday, May 2), so there is time for me to respond and you to revise. If you email a draft, please name the file as above, but add "-draft", like

a230-10s-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. The example questions below are just ideas to get you started. 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 that invite explanations or comparisons can bring up interesting responses that shed light on one or both cultures. Typical follow-up questions include "did that seem strange to you?", "why would he/she have done that?", "would that have happened differently in your home country?", "is that is typical of Americans (or 'of people from your home in Argentina', etc.)?"

If your informant generalizes about people in their culture or Americans, try to get specific examples or stories from their personal experience. These are usually much richer with details that can be useful in your paper.

The idea is learn enough to briefly outline your informant's life history, and more importantly, to discuss his or her home culture and his or her impressions of US culture. You are looking for cultural (as opposed to individual) practices, beliefs, values, outlooks, and so on, to understand or explain. These are usually things that differ from what we are used to here in the US. They may give you insights into both your informant's culture, and ours, by contrast.

In your paper, you will try to interpret or explain some of those differences, using concepts from this course.

Get some *background* about your informant's personal story, including

- 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 *home culture*. Try open-ended questions, like

- What did you or your family do for a living?
- What did you do in school? With your family? In your free time?
- What was different about life there, compared to here?
- Ask about a typical joke from your home country. (Then get him/her to explain what is typical about it, or what it shows about people in that culture.)
- Tell me about something funny/hard/exciting/frightening/good/bad/etc. that happened to you in your home country... (Then get some explanation if needed.)
- Keep conversing about your informant's home culture. Just be interested, and ask the questions that naturally come up about experiences, practices, beliefs, etc.

Next, discuss *immigrating* (or coming to visit, etc.) to the United States. This will often bring up interesting stories and impressions of US culture. You might ask

- 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?

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

- 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?
- How would he or she describe America to people in his or her home country?

All along, try to get your informant to provide specific examples or stories.

Throughout the interview, try to elicit some *explanations* of events, behavior, values, etc. in his or her home culture and in ours.

- Why do people in your country do it that way, feel that way, etc.?
- If Americans do something differently, think differently, etc., what is your theory about why they do that?

There are many other questions you could ask, and subjects you could discuss. Be creative, and follow up on things that your informant finds interesting or important. They often 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, but remember that that your paper is really about your informant's culture and insights into our culture. His or her life history is only the background or context.
- Describe important or interesting aspects of your informant's home culture, illustrating with specific stories, observations, etc.
- Discuss some of her or his experiences here and impressions of US culture, illustrating with specific stories and observations.
- Describe some of your informant's explanations of events or features of her or his home culture, and of the culture here. Discuss them, using concepts from this course, such as emic vs. etic viewpoints, cultural constructs, and so on.
  - Do you agree with these explanations?
  - Do they reveal anything about your informant's own culture, values, assumptions, beliefs, etc.?
  - Do they reveal anything about US culture?
- Suggest your own explanations or interpretations of these and/or other subjects, using anthropological concepts from this course, such as
  - emic vs. etic viewpoints
  - cultural constructs, especially those that are different from ours
  - culture as adaptation, meaning, or system
  - cultural materialism
  - culture as text
  - ideologies
  - ways of naturalizing inequality
  - cognitive dissonance
  - construction of identity
  - ways that beliefs are created and maintained
  - and many other possibilities... don't try to jam these all in, just use concepts that are appropriate for the subjects that come up in the interview.

- Try to point out things that give you insight into your informant's home culture or American culture, and explain how or why.
- Try to synthesize or generalize and interpret what you learn of both cultures. That is, suggest some conclusions about one or 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, etc. Usually, these will be things that differ between the two cultures, because that is usually what highlights something as distinctive. Support your ideas by summarizing or quoting things your informant said, and explaining how they point to your conclusions. You may want to use one or more synthetic statements of this kind as a thesis or overall organizing principle for the whole paper. 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... which suggests that...")
  - Ask yourself "Is this part of a larger pattern?" "What does this imply about the culture?" The answer may be an interesting generalization 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?" The answer may be a clue to a general feature of the culture.

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

See the attached rubric for the specific areas for which I will assign points.

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

### Interview with an Immigrant – Grading rubric

Points	Possible	Item
	20	Background on the informant's origins and story
	20	<i>Informant's home culture</i> : Description and insights, illustrated with specific stories, observations, quotations, etc.
	20	<i>Informant's home culture</i> : Describes his/her interpretations or explanations of events, practices, values, etc.
	20	<i>Informant's home culture</i> : Discusses his/her interpretations or explanations of events, practices, values, etc., using concepts from this course.
	20	<i>Informant's home culture</i> : Suggests other interpretations or explanations of events, practices, values, etc., using concepts from this course.
	20	<i>US culture</i> : Description and insights, based on the informant's stories, observations, quotations, etc.
	20	<i>US culture</i> : Describes the informant's interpretations or explanations of events, practices, values, etc.
	20	<i>US culture</i> : Discusses the informant's interpretations or explanations of events, practices, values, etc., using concepts from this course.
	20	<i>US culture</i> : Suggests other interpretations or explanations of events, practices, values, etc., using concepts from this course.
	20	Synthesizes or generalizes about one or both cultures.
	25	Cultural relativist approach, not ethnocentric.
	25	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.
		Up to one week late (-10%)
	250	Total