

## **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 practice cultural relativism. To exercise some anthropological ideas, such as any of Middleton's suggested approaches, Harris's cultural materialism, Benedict's cultural configurations, Geertz's notion of culture as text, concepts about language and language use, or others, as you try to explain both cultures. 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 to the United States from another country after the age of 15 and 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 and has not been interviewed for this assignment in a previous semester. 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 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 150 points, of the 1000 possible in the course.

**Due date:** Tuesday, October 30, in class.

**Submitting the paper:** The paper must be submitted BOTH on paper, AND as a computer file, either attached to an email to me (there is an "email me" button on the class website) or on a floppy disk, CD, or USB drive. I will return the paper copy with comments and a grade, along with your disk or drive, if you gave me one. The paper copy is due in class. The computer file OF THE IDENTICAL PAPER is due by midnight of that day. I must have BOTH versions to give you credit. If you email the file, I will reply. If you do not get a reply within 48 hours, I have probably not received it. Try again. While I will be forgiving about the deadline for the file, it is your responsibility to ensure that it reaches me. Please name the file in this format:

203-07f-interview-LastFirst

replacing "Last" with your last name, and "First" with your first name, both capitalized. Your word processor may add a 3-letter file extension. Example:

203-07f-interview-SimpsonHomer.doc

If you send me a preliminary draft to comment on, use the same format but add -draft after your name.

**Subjects to cover in the interviews:** 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 never would have thought to ask about. You needn't cover all the suggestions below; they are just ideas to get you started. Try to get enough material for your paper, but don't force the conversation into a checklist of questions and answers. Often, asking follow-up questions like "how do you feel about that?", "why do you think it happened that way?", or "would that have happened in your home country?" can bring up interesting responses.

The idea is learn enough to briefly outline your interviewee's story, and more importantly, his or her observations about life in the country he or she came from and here, and your interpretations, explanations, and reactions, using anthropological approaches you learn in this course.

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*. You might try very open-ended questions, like

- What was your life there like?
- How was it different from here?

You could also try more specific questions. The course readings might give you ideas to pursue. For example:

- What language did your informant speak?
- How many people lived together in the immediate family, how were they related, and how did they get along?
- What did they do for a living?
- How did they divide up responsibilities? Who did what?
- What was their home and neighborhood like – physically and socially?
- What special events did they celebrate, how did they celebrate them, and why?
- Did your informant experience any weddings, funerals, coming-of-age ceremonies, or other life-cycle events? If so, what were they like? How do they differ from what we do here? Any guesses about why, or what these differences might mean?
- Were there multiple ethnic or racial groups? If so, how did they differ? 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?
- Does he or she have any particularly good memories of home, or bad ones?
- Does she or he have any interesting stories, or funny or sad ones, from home?

Next, ask your informant about *immigrating* 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 match those expectations, or was it different? If so, how?

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?
- Did your informant experience anything like culture shock on first arriving here? If so, what was it like? (You may first have to explain what culture shock is.)
- Was there anything that seemed particularly strange, confusing, funny, or hard to get used to about Americans?
- Has he or she had 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?
- What are some things that she or he notices about American culture that Americans don't seem to notice themselves?
- How would he or she describe America to people in his or her home country?

All along, try to get your informant to provide 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 the interviewee seems to find interesting or important!

**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. Which explanations are emic (in terms of your informant's own culture), and which are etic (from an outsider's or scientist's point of view)?
- Suggest your own etic explanations of the same and/or other subjects. A good method would be to apply one or more of Middleton's approaches to understanding cultures. That is, try to explain why things happened or why things are as they are in outsiders' "objective" terms.
- Throughout, emphasize aspects that seem interesting from an anthropological point of view. These might be things that relate to course readings, things that give you an insight into your informant's home culture or American culture, or things that you or your informant can explain or interpret.
- Try to synthesize and interpret what you learn of both cultures. For example:
  - Suggest general themes or characteristics of either culture ("Filipinos 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?"
- Suggest some general conclusions about both cultures (of course they will be tentative, but try!) These might be generalizations about what the culture is like, what they value, how they handle certain kinds of issues, etc. Show how you came to these 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 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. So:

- Try to make some generalizations about your informant's home culture
- Note recurring themes
- Or ways in which different aspects of the culture fit together into a coherent pattern.
- 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, offer some explanations of events and cultural traits.
- Identify which of these explanations are emic, and which are etic. (Note that the immigrant might give you either kind of explanation, or both, because he or she now may be able to take an outsider's point of view or his or her original culture, and an insider's view of her or his adopted US culture.)

It is OK not to cover everything that you discussed in the interview. It won't fit in 7 pages. Select what seems most interesting, most telling about the cultures, and things for which you can suggest interesting interpretations or explanations.