

# Job Talk Basics

SWS Career Development Committee workshop, Denver, CO, Aug 2012

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(Thanks also to former chair, Joya Misra, and her colleagues at UMass for sharing helpful comments and Betsy Lucal for her insights on teaching-specific types of jobs.)

## Context of a Job Talk within an Interview

- *The Job Talk is the centerpiece.* The Job Talk is only part of an interview but demonstrates the focus and substance of the interviewee's *recent scholarship* and *ongoing research agenda*. It is often the central focus of the interview. If this is a teaching-focused job, then the teaching demonstration/discussion of pedagogy is as important as the job talk in terms of interview components--maybe even more important, depending on the school. The teaching demo must be taken seriously and candidates need to get as much information about it in advance and prepare for it just like they would the job talk.
- *Consider and prepare for the entire interview.* Every moment of contact with the interviewing department, not just the job talk, is part of the interview. From the time you are picked up at the airport until you are back on your flight home, you are on the interview. Dinner, chatting on the ride to campus, making arrangements on the phone, making small talk with individuals, and talking to department staff are all parts of the interview. Interviews may also include teaching demonstrations or discussions of pedagogy as well as meetings with individuals or small groups including deans, faculty inside the department or from other departments, graduate students, and/or undergraduate students. Prepare for each part of the interview.
- *Be smart on the phone and nice in person.* Colleagues are looking for good scholars who are nice to sit next to (potentially for many, many years). Being smart gets you the interview but being nice makes you a valued colleague.
- *Be respectful of departments' time and travel resources* as well as their geographic region. Interview only if you would consider taking that place or school seriously. (For example, one colleague notes that "coastal snobs" often speak disparagingly of places in the center of US. This is rude and is unlikely to get you the job. If you won't consider moving there, don't interview there.)
- *Do your homework before arriving.* Learn the department members' names and their basic research areas (keeping notes on index cards or on your phone can help). Learn general information about the major, department, program, or campus. Read the website.
- *It is completely appropriate to ask questions before you come.* Who should I expect to meet with? How many students might be at my teaching demonstration? Are they majors? What year will they likely be?

## Structure of a Job Talk

- *Length of talk:* The standard talk is a 40-45 minute talk with 15-20 minutes for question and answer. Most departments set aside one hour from arrival to clearing the room, although this can vary. Plan for a clear and in-depth talk with plenty of time for engagement with faculty and students. This is standard but be sure to ask for specifics. Some universities have 50 minute class sessions and need to accommodate faculty schedules so ask about the expectations of your talk.
- *Make the talk data-driven:* Sociology is an empirical discipline. You should expect to present original data or original uses of secondary data. Purely theoretical talks or talks about work in development are rare. Departments are looking for your ability as a scholar to produce completed original research.
- *A good talk is clear and concise.* Have a clear research question, outline it at the beginning of the talk, return to it at the end of the talk, and frame your comments throughout with reference to the research question. Offer a clear thesis (preferably in one sentence).
- *Do not try to summarize the entire dissertation in one talk.* It is better to show your intellectual depth in a specific issue than to say a little about a lot. It is ok to have one slide near the beginning that summarizes your dissertation but offer to discuss other chapters in the Q&A only if requested.
- *There are many fine approaches to crafting a job talk.* One option is to choose one chapter of your dissertation to present. Choose a chapter that you like and know well. Another strategy is to ask yourself “what story do I want to tell in this talk?” Give data or cases that answer the question and organize the talk to make the argument or provide the analysis you want.
- *Make the talk relevant to the job ad.* What literature matches the job ad? What courses will they ask you to teach and does this talk speak to that area?
- *Question/Answer is part of the job talk, not ancillary to it.* Leave plenty of time to engage a scholarly discussion and prepare for this component as well. Anyone can give a monologue. Colleagues, deans, provosts and graduate students value someone who can engage (respectful) public, scholarly conversation. (See tips below)

## Handling the Q&A

- *Allow the event organizer to acknowledge audience members* if she or he attempts to do so. Someone local is more likely to know everyone’s name. However, aim to learn department members’ names and basic research area (see above). *Anticipate and prepare for common types of questions* and likely questions within subfield debates. If this is a teaching-focused job, expect to get questions during the Q&A about how your research relates to your teaching. Could you develop a course around your dissertation topic? (Perhaps a senior seminar?) How do you incorporate your research interests into your teaching?
- *Be gracious in your responses, even for hostile, ungracious, or self-serving questions.* You are walking into a set of imbedded social relations within the department. Often people are trying to impress their peers or promote their own research interests. Don’t be baited. There may be a

curmudgeon who asks only about his research or how he would have done yours. Don't apologize for your project. Keep focused on your work and be respectful and professional. Don't take it personally and don't get rattled.

- *Conversation among department members is a good sign.* Let a department member field questions if they start to. Allow crosstalk. If your research invites discussion, you should feel reassured that your work is interesting and thought-provoking.
- *Don't lie about what you know or have read, and don't stretch your data.* Comment only on what you studied. If asked, you can offer to "SPECULATE" beyond what your data will allow you to comment on, discuss plans for future research, or thank an audience member for an idea for new directions.
- *Provide short answers* (no more than a few minutes on a question) and allow short volleys with audience members, but do not allow one or two questions to take up the entire Q&A.
- *Compliment a good question.* ("That's a great question. I find this really interesting because....") Ask for clarification if you need it. Rephrase a question if it helps. Take notes if that helps you remember a long question. This also allows you to take a short moment to reflect on an answer.
- *It is fine to disagree.* In fact, some faculty will respect you more for sparing with them. But do so respectfully.
- *Be ready for questions.* Consider creating extra slides of data that you are not presenting, but that can help you in the Q&A.
- *Be smart and confident in your work but not arrogant.* Everyone in the room is smart but no one likes a smarty pants. Be willing to engage conversations with others about their work. Never be dismissive even if you think you have already answered a question.

### **Elements of a Good Job Talk**

- *Foreground the research question.* Offer one or two contributions to theory, not several.
- *Deliver your main argument within the first two minutes* of the talk in a simple, concise manner. Spend the rest of the talk unpacking the issues.
- *Address the "So what?" question in your talk.* Focus on how your work is interesting to a broad range of sociologists in a variety of subfields, not just your own subfield. Demonstrate how your narrow, focused topic has broad relevance.
- *Show how this talk is part of a broader intellectual trajectory.* Consider including a slide at the end of your talk to address your future research plans or interests. Use the Job Talk to present your accomplishments but also your future potential and research agenda.
- *If there is an obvious connection between your research and teaching, then work that into your job talk* somehow, even if just to say that you'd be happy to talk more about the relationship to teaching during your Q&A.
- *Consider your entire potential audience.* Ask who may be in the room at the time before you come. Undergraduates? Graduate students? Faculty outside the department? Deans? The person whom you cite frequently in your dissertation? Focus your talk on a scholarly level appropriate to the audience. Avoid jargon and define all terms clearly.

- *Carefully plan how much time you will spend on each section of your talk*—lit review, research question/mandate, data, conclusion. Give each the appropriate ratios of time and space to each. (Hint: Look at the flow of a journal article.)
- *This presentation also demonstrates how you will teach.* They are likely assessing whether you can organize information succinctly and speak in a clear and engaging manner.
- *Be strategic in how you use technology.* It is common to use a Powerpoint presentation but be sure that *you are the show*, not the screen. Present and discuss more than what the audience can see on the screen. Don't make them read your entire presentation on screen. Use no more than 12-15 slides with no more than 4-5 bullets on each slide. Make sure text (for example, tables or qualitative quotes) are legible in the back of the room. Personalize the introductory slide for each specific talk (e.g., "A Presentation Given to the Faculty of University of ....."). Consider using images that give context to your subject, especially if you have a specialized topic about which audience members may know little, but do not use generic Powerpoint images or silly animations.
- *Finish on time.* Being concise and directed in your comments should allow you to fit the timing of the Job Talk. Do not talk fast just to fit everything in.
- *Be enthusiastic about your topic*, even as you continue to present yourself in a professional manner. People will find your topic interesting if you show your enthusiasm for it.
- *Know that someone in the audience is always disengaged at any talk* and that is not because of you. Focus on those who are attentive to your presentation and ignore the rest.

#### **After the job talk, tips to consider for the interview**

- *You are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you.* What quality of life do you want? Can you picture yourself in this department?
- *Asking good questions is always attractive.* Ask others about their own work.
- *Be gracious to the administrative staffperson who arranged your visit.* Thank him/her for handling details. Ask to meet the admin staff and take the time to really engage them about their thoughts about the department. You may even choose to bring a small gift or token of your appreciation.
- *Remember they are searching for a colleague, not an advanced graduate student.* Consider yourself a potential colleague. Consider them potential colleagues. Carry yourself accordingly.
- *Although these people will eventually be your colleague, they are not yet.* Choose what information to disclose carefully. Revealing too much information can make departments uncomfortable too. This is especially true during dinner and other informal parts of the interview.
- *Your audience for the most part will be supportive and friendly.* Many faculty hours went into getting you to the interview. In this era of stretched-thin resources, you may be one of two or three finalists. The department would like to be able to offer you the job, not see you fail. If you're from an R<sub>1</sub> university keep in mind that your job talk experience may be different than the ones you've experienced at your university. Not all departments have regular colloquia or a

structure that allows all (or even most) of the faculty to show up for your job talk. Don't take a small audience personally.

- *Do well at the things you can control, but know many are beyond you.* Decisions about who gets the job are based on fit and committees sometimes do unpredictable things. Don't take decisions personally.

### Practical Tips

- *Prepare and practice the talk.* Ask your graduate department to host a practice talk with faculty and graduate students and ask them to grill you with difficult questions and give constructive feedback. Practice until you know it thoroughly. Prepare each segment of the talk including your introduction and the question/answer session.
- *Ask for time to prepare.* You can ask for 20-30 minutes to set up and prepare in the presentation space before the talk, if possible. Set up the equipment to ensure that everything works and you know how to use it. Consider lights and sound, use of podium space, distance from the computer, where and how you place your notes, bottle of water, etc. (There are exceptions to this. Sometimes the space is occupied for classes until your talk. Some schools can't spare the time. Depending on the length of the visit, departments often pack a lot into the day and candidates' prep time has to be shortened because of it. Hence, some departments may start early and zoom through the day. Be sure to ask what can be accommodated.)
- *Prepare for every potential technology failure.* Bring your own laptop *and* an extra copy of the presentation on a spare USB drive. Email a copy to yourself. Bring a copy of the presentation on overheads in case all other technology fails. Print your entire presentation on hard copy in case all technology fails and you have no ability to project any images. Be prepared to talk without technology if all of it fails.
- *Prepare to shorten your talk on the fly if necessary.* Think ahead of time about what parts could be dropped if necessary.
- *Bring what you might need.* Prepare your body for the event so you feel confident and not distracted during the talk. Bring a snack, water, or Tylenol in your briefcase to avoid tummy rumbles and to handle headaches.
- *Feel confident.* Plan to go to the restroom prior to your talk. Look yourself over in the mirror to feel confident about your clothes and appearance. If you have some physical anomaly (apparent pregnancy, broken arm, abrasion on your face, etc) at the time of the talk, consider acknowledging it to the crowd and move on to the talk. This can diffuse the issue and refocus on what you are saying rather than how you look.
- *Enjoy!* Perhaps counter-intuitively, try to enjoy this opportunity to have the center of attention on the topic you find interesting (rather than thinking this is akin to being placed before a firing squad). Thinking about it in this way can help you focus and relax. Use humor if you can do so in a way that is not forced. It is important to be scholarly and knowledgeable but also to be nice and personable. You want to appear to be someone who is interesting for colleagues to chat with in the hallway.