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 By popular demand, Woody Beck's classic article on interviewing for an academic job is reprinted below.

THE JOB INTERVIEW: A STUDY IN TERROR

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(Revised February 2003. Reprinted with permission.)

So you got an interview. Terrific! This means you've zapped 50 or more other applicants. Your target school's recruitment committee has decided that you appear to be one of the best qualified for their position. Now they want to see you in person, to examine for warts, to see if you have any gross and disgusting personal habits. You're under their collective microscope, being scrutinized like a trapped bug. But don't panic just yet.

The Competition. *In the past it was common for departments to select three candidates to interview for the same position, with an additional two being held-off stage in case the three interviewees were zombies. Because of today's tight budgets, some departments interview only two candidates, and sometimes invite the second only if the interview with the first candidate does not go well. This means that if you get an interview, there's a 50-50 chance you'll get an offer, all other things being equal. That's good news.*

It's important to realize that they're **expecting** their good judgment to be verified in the interview. They have chosen **you**, and they're expecting a winner — give them one. I believe that most candidates come to the job interview with a score of 100, then as the interview progresses, points are deducted. After all candidates have been scrutinized, the faculty offers the job to the candidate with the *fewest negative points*. This has led me to formulate:

1. The First Principle of Who's Hired. The candidate about whom the faculty possesses the **least negative information** is the most likely to be hired.

Given this principle, there's a strategy for becoming the hired candidate:

1a. Strategy of Active Self-Defense. It is critical to minimize the opportunity to blurt out something profoundly dumb. Every minute they're answering your questions is a minute that you aren't answering their questions, thus minimizing your opportunity to gobble your foot.

We academics often have fairly elevated opinions of our abilities, and vigorously avoid any data that might invalidate these self-images. This observation has led to the Second Principle of Who's Hired:

2. The Second Principle of Who's Hired. Given the First Principle above, the candidate who **least threatens the self-images** of the existing faculty is the most likely to be hired.

This, in turn, leads to another interviewing tactic:

2a. Strategy of Modest Competency. Always act as if you have something to learn from each and every person you meet.

All departments have unfulfilled needs. The vacancy you're interviewing for is one explicit manifestation of those, but in addition to that public need, the department has many latent (implicit, unadvertised) needs. This leads to my Third Principle of Who's Hired:

3. Third Principle of Who's Hired. Given the First and Second principles, the candidate who best fulfills the department's **latent needs** is the most likely to be hired, all other things being equal.

The appropriate strategy during the interview is, then:

3a. Strategy of Bounded Versatility. Never say you can't do something until you fail at it.

Keeping these three principles and their corresponding strategies in mind, let's dissect a "typical" interview. But before doing that, there are some things you should do in **preparation for the interview**.

Before the Interview

After you've been invited for an interview, ask the department chair/head (you *do* know the difference between a "chair" and a "head", don't you? If not, see below) to send copies of the faculty's *curriculum vitae* or *présis*, and/or a copy of the department's annual report, and outlines of both the graduate (if any) and undergraduate programs. **Study these documents carefully!** The department chair will be impressed by your professionalism. As importantly, by studying the *vitae* you'll know who's active and who's "deadwood", and when you're interviewing with the faculty, you'll know their specialization and academic background....they will be pleased, I guarantee.

Before leaving for the interview, jot on a 3x5 card the names of the faculty and their areas of teaching and research interest, and any other pertinent data you can glean from the *vitae* and/or web page. **Keep with card with you at all times...it is your trusty friend.**

*Hint: If the chair can't provide copies of the vitae or précis for whatever reason, borrow the department's copy of the ASA Membership Directory and look-up each faculty member. The Directory will tell you where the person got the Ph.D., when, and the person's specialization. This source is not as good as having the current vitae, but it's better than nothing. If you find that some of the faculty aren't listed in the Directory, you'll have some rough indication of the level of professional involvement in the department. Another source of information about schools, those with advanced degree programs, is the ASA's Guide to Graduate Departments (available in most Sociology Department offices) which publishes basic data on each department's graduate program. Check this source too. Further, almost all departments now have **pages on the web** – this is an excellent place to start your information gathering. Use your favorite web browser and search the name of the college or university, then follow the links to the sociology department. No matter how you obtain the information, do your homework!*

If you need help during your interview, excuse yourself to the privacy of a restroom to refresh your memory (you brought that 3x5 card with you) and enjoy a few seconds of badly needed "quiet" time. While there, refresh your bladder and take 4 very deep breaths – it really does help.

Thus, before leaving for the interview you should:

1. Know the name of the department head/chair, and head of the graduate program, if applicable.
2. Know whether the department is a headship or chairship.
3. Know if the department offers advanced degrees, and which ones.
4. Know the names and specializations of the faculty (on your trusty 3x5 card, of course).
5. Know what plans have been made for travel and lodging (see the section on "Odds & Ends").

A Head or Chair? Under a headship arrangement, the university administration appoints someone as the department head to represent the interests of the administration to the faculty. Under a chairship, the department elects someone to represent their interests to the administration. Obviously, a department "head" may be significantly more powerful (even dictatorial) than a department "chair", and some "heads" may retain their positions more-or-less indefinitely, at the discretion of the university administration.

Now, let's get to the long anticipated event, the interview itself.

A Typical Interview: The First Encounter

The typical interview will run something like this. You arrive by plane or car in the university town on, say, Sunday night. You may

or may not be met by the chair of the department, or a departmental representative. (Note: if you are arriving by plane and you've never seen the person sent to meet you, try to be the *last* person off the plane...now it's easy – just look for the anxious person expectantly pacing the gate area.) If you are being met, **the interview has begun**. "Be prepared" is good advice, even if you were never a scout.

The "official" interviewing session may start at breakfast the next morning. **For God's sake, don't be late!** If you are late, apologize profusely. If you are met for breakfast, this is **not** the time for heavy questioning – but don't forget that you are always "on stage", even in seemingly casual situations.

Interviewing with the Department Chair

After breakfast you may meet with the department chair for about an hour. This is the time to ask about the department, it's past and especially it's future. Here are some questions that you could ask the chair:

1. Where do you see the department headed in the next five years?
2. How actively does the university administration support the department?
3. What do you see as the major challenges facing the department?
4. Are undergraduate enrollments holding steady? How about sociology majors?
5. Do you foresee the department having any vacancies in the near future?
6. Where does the department recruit most of its graduate students? Their quality?
7. Where do most of your graduate students find jobs?

Here are examples of questions **not to ask**:

1. Who are the other candidates for this job?
2. What are the major factions within the department?
3. How would my salary rank with others?
4. How much "deadwood" is in the department?
5. Does your "significant other" sleep around?
6. I have a fondness for small, furry mammals – will I fit in the department?
7. Are you afraid of flying AirTrans?

You'll also discuss the courses you would be teaching.

Teaching. The department chair will want to know the courses you'd like to teach. What you teach is a balance between your preferences and departmental needs, so now's the time to find out how much discretion you'll have in selecting your courses, and your teaching load. But you might as well mention "Intro" along with the courses you'd really like to teach, because you'll likely teach "Intro", like it or not. If the department has an advanced degree program, show interest in the graduate courses, but **do not ignore the undergraduate program!** It's the "bread-and-butter" in most departments.

But what happens if the chair says something like this, "Could you teach Complex Organizations? We really need to have that taught next year." Now suppose your specialization is the Sociology of 14th Century Illuminated Manuscripts, and you wouldn't know a "complex organization" if you tripped over it. What do you do?

You could say that you have no competency in Complex Organizations, and wouldn't feel comfortable teaching it. That's honest although not necessarily wise. Another version of the truth could be, "As you know, Complex Organizations is not my area of specialization, but if my teaching schedule wasn't too heavy I could prepare a course in organizations." Remember the Third Principle of Who's Hired, and the concept of *Bounded Versatility*.

Besides discussing what you'll teach, always inquire about the mechanical details of teaching, for example, teaching assistance,

teaching aids (videos/films), class sizes, and how textbooks are selected (by individual faculty, committees, by the department head, etc.). Now is the time to find out these things – not after you’ve accepted their offer and arrived on campus!

Interviewing with Individual Faculty Members

After the visit with the department chair, you’ll be led through a seemingly endless parade of interviews with individual faculty members. This phase is tedious (and actually very grinding, mentally and physically) because you’ll be asked the same questions repeatedly, “Tell me about your dissertation?”, “What courses would you like to teach?”, “What about your research plans for the future?” etc. It would be nice if you had ready answers for such questions.

Rule: *Never assume that the person you are talking with has read your curriculum vitae.*

To break the monotony, and put yourself in the very best light, punctuate each interview with **your** questions. Remember there are two reasons why you are asking questions: (a) so you won’t be answering their questions, and (b) to determine whether the person will make a reasonable colleague. Here are some questions to ask the individual faculty:

1. What do you see as the major challenges facing the department? Where is the department headed?
2. Is this a good place to get your work done?
3. Are the library holdings adequate? How about the computer facilities?
4. What do you think of the undergraduate students here? The graduate students?

Rule: *Always ask each and every person some questions about the department and its programs...even if you have heard the same answers over-and-over again. Not asking about the department is invariably interpreted as a lack of serious interest on your part. This mistake could cost you the job offer. I have seen it happen.*

If you are being asked questions which seem tangential and unrelated to your professional competency, you’re being interviewed by a moron (most departments have at least one). But fear not, such twits are childishly simple to handle, as long as you keep your cool. Just reverse the situation at the earliest possible time. Most persons, especially featherbrains, love to talk about themselves...once you’ve succeeded in getting it started, just sit back and try to appear interested. (You know, put on that “Gee whiz, I’m-Really-Interested-In-What-You-Are-Saying” gaze that got you through many graduate seminars.)

After spending the morning with your potential colleagues, you’ll have to go to lunch with a small group of faculty, and perhaps some students. Don’t let your guard down at these “social” events; the interview continues only the setting changes. At lunch do **not drink any alcoholic** regardless of what others do. You’ll need all your wits for the afternoon’s interviewing and your oral presentation.

Note on Nervousness. *Interviewing is scary, even if you’ve done it before, and for the first-timer, it may be paralyzing. When anxious, most of us display little behavioral weirdnesses, like twitching, profuse sweating, or going “blank”. Try not to worry excessively about these things because you are expected to be nervous. It’s your right! When under stress many of us tend toward one of two extremes: (a) we crawl into ourselves dreading the interaction and become fossilized, or (b) we babble incoherently, the “flapping-jaw” syndrome. Before going on the interview, try to figure out which tendency you have then concentrate on reducing that behavior. Don’t over-compensate, however. That could be worse.*

The “Talk”

This is often a terrifying ordeal for the neophyte. At some point you’ll have to give your “talk” to any faculty and students that can be rounded-up. This delightful custom is designed presumably to see how you think on your feet and to get some impression of what kind of teacher you’ll make.

Actually it’s just a degradation ceremony that we all go through, so don’t get unreasonably upset about it. My experience is that the vast majority of job talks are pretty dismal. But most faculty are forgiving of all but the grossest errors...at least for assistant professors. Here are the most common mistakes that “cost” points (list unordered):

1. Being overly technical and complex...confusing and fogging the audience
2. Presenting too many graphs and tables...swamping the audience
3. Not distributing graphs and tables when they could clarify...losing the audience
4. Talking too fast...trying to tell the audience too much
5. Assuming the audience cares as much about your dissertation project as you do...not making it interesting
6. Not giving enough background...the “big picture” is missing
7. Giving too much background...never getting to the point
8. Talking too long...exhausting the audience
9. Reading a paper...boring the audience
10. Trying to “wing-it”...you’ll come off as a unprepared, rambling jerk
11. Needless and repetitive “name dropping”...trying to impress without substance

Here are some suggestions that will help avoid those pitfalls:

1. Design the talk as if you were presenting your material to a sophomore-level sociology class (but, for god’s sake, don’t be sophomoric!)
2. Use visual aids, such as slides and/or overheads
3. Even the best of audience will retain only a very small portion of information, so choose the **one or two points** that are really important and hit those over and over again
4. **Start and end** the talk by telling the audience what the research is all about
5. Keep telling yourself that your technical competency is **not** on the line, but **your ability to explain is**
6. Keep it **short**...35-40 minutes, even for what’s nominally called an “hour” presentation
7. **Practice, practice, practice**...(see below)

Memorize this rule:

Rule: *Keep it simple, and never inflict yourself on your audience.*

In preparation for your “talk”, write a draft a couple of weeks ahead of time. For the entire week preceding the interview, read your draft several times **aloud every day** (in the privacy of your bathroom is an excellent choice). A day before the interview, draft a set of notes to work from. Now, when you get to the interview, put the draft paper in your briefcase and **leave it there** until you return home. Use only your notes. Even though you’ve made no attempt to memorize the paper (in fact, you should **not** try to memorize it), it will be tucked away in your brain just waiting to be jogged by your notes. If time permits, give a trial presentation to some of your fellow graduate students, or anyone else who will listen. Beg for honest criticism of style and content. Do settle for the politically correct “You did a good job.” They may not be very helpful, but the experience will be a confidence builder.

The most anxiety is produced out of fear of embarrassment if someone asks a question that you can’t answer. Well, let’s consider that possibility.

The Exception. If you feel that you'll die if you don't have a copy of your presentation nearby, jerk it out of the briefcase and take it with you, but avoid reading it. On second thought, if you are so frightened that you can't remember your name, perhaps you should read it after all. You'll look goofy standing in front of the audience in some kind of muddled trance...that would not leave a favorable impression, I fear – although you would probably become a departmental legend... the Case of the Catatonic Candidate.

Answering Questions. Basically there are five kinds of questions that you're likely to encounter: (1) the "Point-of-information" question, (2) the "I-want-to-show-off" question, (3) the "I've-been-asleep-but-I'd-better-say-something" question, (4) the "I'll-get-him" question – this breed is cousin to the "I-want-to-show-off" type, and (5) the "Bozo" question. In the examples below, see if you can pick-out the best answer to the question.

1. The "Point-of-information" Question – by far the most common
Q: "I didn't understand how your sample was drawn?"
A₁: "Where have you been, Mars?"
A₂: "Certainly. The sample...."
2. The "I-want-to-show-off" Question – the second most common
Q: "In my previous work, along with AAAA of Harvard, we found that..."
A₁: "That's not a question. Why are you trying to show off?"
A₂: "That's interesting. I'd like to hear more about your work later."

Q: "Didn't ZZZZ do a similar piece of work a couple of years ago?"
A₁: "Who???"
A₂: "I'm not familiar with his work, but if you'll give me the citation, I'll look it up as soon as I get home. Thanks for mentioning it."

Q: "XXXX has many ideas that are applicable to your research problem."
A₁: "XXXX can't tell the difference between chocolate mousse and a cow patty"
A₂: "Yes, XXXX does have many excellent ideas. Which ones were you thinking of?"

Q: "Don't you think that your research would have been better if you had..."
A₁: "If I had thought so, I would have done it, dummy."
A₂: "You may be right. I'll have to spend some time thinking about that."
3. The "I've-been-asleep" Question
Q: "Aren't you worried about the quality of your data?"
A₁: "Not really. My committee has already approved the dissertation."
A₂: "Yes, I am. We must pay more attention to questions of data quality."
4. The "I'll-get-him" Question
Q: "How you could make *those* conclusions based on *those* data!"
A₁: "I don't understand how you could be so criminally stupid. Is it genetic or environmental?"
A₂: "Could you clarify your objections?"

Q: "Isn't the problem you're working on quite trivial?"
A₁: "My committee bought it. What's your problem?"
A₂: "No, I don't believe that it is."

Q: "This is the worst piece of social science research I've ever seen!"
A₁: "You haven't read much, have you?"
A₂: "Moving right along, are there any other questions?"

5. The "Bozo" Question

Q: "Now what, again, there happens if when it does, or does not, occur the same way, or in a different way?"

A₁: "Your question is nonsensical gibberish. Did you find your Ph.D. in the back seat of a taxi?"

A₂: "I'm sorry, but I don't understand the question. Could you rephrase it?"

How did you do on this little test? If you answer all of them correctly, you're ready for anything!

Last word of advice. When answering questions during the presentation, it's far **better not to bluff**. Often the questioner knows, or at least thinks he knows, the answer. An honest "I don't know" or "I'll have to think about that" will do. Don't be too self-defensive.

In addition to the interview sessions with the individual members of the faculty, and giving your oral presentation, you may have to suffer two other categories of interviewers: graduate and/or undergraduate students and university administrators.

Interviewing with Students and Administrators

Students. In some departments it's a tradition that job candidates interview with graduate students, or if there's no advanced degree offered, sociology majors. These are usually rather tame affairs because students are even less likely to ask insightful questions than are the faculty. If you're squared-off with students and no one seems to know what to do next – a common situation – take the leadership role and ask **them** questions. They'll love you for it. For starters, you can always ask such intellectually probing questions as:

1. How's the training in sociology in the department?
2. How could the training be improved? (This one is always a winner.)
3. How well are graduate students funded in the department?
4. What kind of job will you be looking for after you finish your degree?
5. Do you like where the department's headed? (this can be very revealing)

These questions aren't titillating, yet they work amazingly well.

Administrators. In some schools job applicants, even for assistant professor slots, interview with administrative higher-ups, usually the Dean of Arts and Sciences (or whatever college sociology happens to be in) and the Dean of the Graduate School (if there is one), or their representatives ...one of the hordes of administrative assistants that lurk in closets and dim hallways fondling memos.

The important thing to remember here is that college administrators are likely to have **no** knowledge of substantive sociology. (**Hint:** you might ask the department chair about the Dean's academic background...all information helps.) They care little about your intellectual capabilities...they leave that evaluation to the department. They want to find out if you're going to be a pain-in-the-ass. Deans like smoothly running departments that do their job and don't cause hassles. Don't be one. In other words, this is **not** the best time to float your pet theory of "Those who can't research, teach. Those who can't teach, administer."

Here are some questions for the Dean:

1. How actively does the State support higher education? (For God's sake, don't ask this question if you're interviewing in Georgia. You should know the answer.)
2. Is the university in a period of entrenchment? If so, how does this affect sociology?
3. Do you foresee any major changes in the department in the near future?

As long as you are reasonably civilized, don't drool, attack the Dean's ancestry, fall asleep, or belch excessively, the interview will go well...they don't like it any better than you do.

Drinks and Dinner

After spending the day interviewing and giving your presentation, you'll be exhausted yet it's not over. You'll be scheduled to have dinner with the chair or some of the faculty, afterwards there may be a small cocktail party... schools vary considerably in regard to these "social" events. There are three **key** things to keep in mind if you're forced into these kinds of situations:

1. The interviewing that goes on during these social events is just as real and consequential as the sessions during the day. But in these settings you are supposed to appear "relaxed"...so **act** relaxed and be charming.
2. **Don't drink too much.** Limit yourself to one alcoholic drink, after that fill-up with non-alcoholic beverages. One drink may help soothe the anxieties but more than one will deaden the brain and liberate the lips. Loose lips not only sink ships, they also scuttle job interviews.
3. **Don't gossip** about either the day's events, or about life at Georgia. It's just too damn easy to make a fatal error. You will be physically and mentally exhausted, and possibly somewhat loosened by alcohol...just the perfect combination to lethally impair your judgment.

During these social activities is an excellent time to ask those all-important, but nonprofession-related questions, like what's that cost-of-living, availability of local housing, the social and cultural life at the university and in town, etc.

If the chair is merciful, you'll be excused to the safety of your motel room before collapsing from nervous exhaustion. It's almost over!

The Terminal Interview

The next morning you'll have a final interview with the chair of the department. The chair will ask if you have any further questions and/or observations about the departments. Have some. If you don't, you'll appear a dullard.

The question of salary will probably be discussed here. Generally, there is little latitude to negotiate assistant professor starting salary but you might ask if the university would help with moving costs. Most don't these days but it won't hurt to ask. You can also ask about a having a reduced teaching load your first year — time to get your feet on the ground and your research program started. Many departments do this for their junior faculty, and it's an excellent sign that you're in a thoughtful department.

This is also an appropriate time to find out about such nitty-gritty (but definitely critical) details such as whether the department has travel funds for professional meetings, and what about office space and secretarial assistance? Also, don't forget to ask about personal computers. Its becoming standard to include some sort of personal computer in the offer package (DOS or Macintosh based machine, basic software, laser printer, etc.).

After the chair is finished, you'll be handed-over to an administrative secretary to fill-out the travel expense forms and take care of any other bureaucratic details. Now you are free to escape to the relative normalcy of [your university community].

The Wait

Even though it's been only 36 hours, it will seem like a week, at least. After you've left the university, you'll think of all kinds of neat questions that you should have asked but didn't. That's okay — if they are really critical, just give the chair a phone call when you get back to Athens. Otherwise, save them for the next interview.

During the terminal interview the department chair will tell you that it will be a few days (or a few weeks) before you hear anything. This means, "Don't call us, we'll call you." After you've returned to Athens, you begin one of the most difficult parts of the interviewing process...the waiting. My experience has been that when a candidate is told that he'll hear something in a week, it usually turns out to be at least a fortnight. Academic bureaucracies operate on a truly geologic time scale. Just try to be patient, and **don't call**.

Some Odds & Ends

Dress. You'll want to project a "professional" demeanor in every instance. Lean toward the "preppie", rather than the "punk", if in doubt. Academics, and sociologists in particular, tend to disparage the trendy. Don't wear jeans, black leather and chains, or anything that you would wear to a theme party. For males, leave your white shoes, patent belt, and red string-tie at home...the "Bible salesman" motif isn't "in" this year. On the other hand, many find the somber, corporate three-piece suit a little too much to the other extreme...unless you are interviewing in the Business School. A simple suit, or well-matched jacket-slack combo with a non-garish tie (avoid sporting miniature bulldogs) is acceptable to all.

For women, the same general rules apply. A skirt-jacket, skirt-suit, or pants-suit are appropriate in all cases. Some tailored dresses would be suitable also. In any regard, keep the colors business-like. (I have less to say on this topic because most women seem to do a better job of projecting the "professional" image than do some men.)

Travel and Lodging Costs. Most places expect the job candidate to pay for travel, lodging and food, then submit a travel expense form for reimbursement after the interview. This can add to a formidable stack of shekels and take several weeks, so be prepared. If in doubt about the arrangements, do not fear to ask the department chair; they understand how tight funds can be for a graduate student.

Very Last advice. Periodically we invite candidates to interview for vacancies in our department. Each time an applicant visits UGA, graduates are invited to interview the candidate and attend the oral presentation. I'm forever amazed that so few students take this opportunity. You should **always attend** these affairs, even if you're a first-year student because they provide a role model — good or otherwise. Watch and listen to the candidate. What did she/he do that impressed you? Turned you off? Talk to the faculty later and get their reactions. Use these experiences to learn from the candidate's mistakes...at your first job interview, you'll wish you had.

So You Got an Offer

Terrific! Do you want to buy my lunch?

So You Didn't Get an Offer

Being rejected is always painful, so you have every right to feed discouraged and hurt. But it's important to know that a multitude of factors enter into faculty decisions on hiring, and not getting the offer is not necessarily a reflection on your self-worth or your promise as a professional sociologist, although it will certainly feel that way.

I've seen excellent candidates rejected by the faculty (at the Universities of Georgia, Michigan, and Colorado) on the basis of very small, seemingly insignificant, differences among candidates. Also, sometimes political considerations or personal rivalries within the department have sway. After you get over the disappointment, try to make a **realistic** assessment of your performance in the interview, then work on your weakest points so you'll be ready for the next interview.

