11 A life of sad, but justified, choices

Interviewing across (too) many divides

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My book *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigrant* (Lamont 2000) draws on 150 interviews conducted with people who are very much unlike myself. All (or a large fraction) of my respondents were (1) male (I am female); (2) working-class people (I am a professional); (3) people of color (I am white); (4) from developing nations (I am a North American); (5) Muslims (I am Christian); (6) members of former colonial empires (I am French Canadian); (7) older (I was in my thirties when I conducted the interviews). The book analyzed how black and white working-class men living in the New York suburbs, and white and North African men living in the Paris suburbs, define 'us' and 'them.' To get at this question, I asked them to describe in concrete and abstract terms whom they feel similar to and different from, inferior and superior to, close to and distant from, at work, in their neighborhood, and in their communities. I found that perceived moral comparisons largely drove their responses, and that they mobilized moral criteria of evaluation to draw boundaries against various categories of people (for instance, against immigrants and members of other classes and racial groups).

The book revealed that the various populations I studied perceived different groups as most 'other:' Euro-American workers drew the strongest boundaries toward blacks and the poor, but they were relatively accepting of immigrants who were perceived as pursuing the American dream. Although they envied the money and resources of the middle and upper-middle class, they were on average quite critical of their values, and particularly of their perceived weak interpersonal morality. The African-American workers I talked to shared these orientations, although they were less critical of the poor. In France, in contrast, the poor and blacks were considered 'part of us' by French workers, in the name of the republican and socialist ideals, whereas immigrants, subsumed under 'North African immigrants,' were often presumed to be fundamentally different and immoral. French workers also drew stronger boundaries between themselves and members of the middle and upper-middle class, associating them with exploitation and domination. For their part, the North African immigrants also used morality as a key principle for making distinctions, but they emphasized aspects of morality different from those of the other groups of respondents. Particularly crucial to them were taking responsibility for one's family members and showing warmth toward other human beings. In this respect, they resembled African-Americans who, in defining who is worthy, put more emphasis on the 'caring self' than on the 'disciplined self' most valued by white workers. In fact, much of the book consists in comparing the kinds of moral arguments that the four groups of men I interviewed mobilize to draw boundaries against other groups.

The Dignity of Working Men was preceded by *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class* (Lamont 1992), in which I used a similar approach to get 160 American and French professionals and managers to describe their own categorization system and their definitions of 'us' and 'them.' The book compared residents of 'cultural centers' (Paris and New York) and those of 'cultural periphery' (Indianapolis and Clermont-Ferrand) to assess the centrality of cultural capital, as opposed to that of moral and socio economic status, in upper-middle class culture.

In the methodological appendix of *MMM* (as it came to be known), I described my research strategy as follows: I considered the interview situation as an experiment of sorts, where the participants are presented with the same stimulus (myself) and asked to describe how they recognize a worthy person, and what they define as high-status signals (or signals of moral/cultural/socio economic worth). I had no illusion that the artificiality of the interview situation would get them to offer a specific 'presentation of self' that would reflect only one of their potentially numerous putative 'authentic selves' – I was convinced, as I still am, that recognizing the artificiality of the conditions under which social science data are collected (even in naturalistic experiments) is an essential dimension of the production of sound research in the social sciences. In *The Dignity of Working Men* (or *DWM*), I pursued a similar strategy, while recognizing that my own identity would be 'read' very differently by the four populations of working men whom I was interviewing, in part because their own social position, socio-demographic characteristics, and social origins gave them greater distance from me than the white professionals and managers I had interviewed for *MMM*.

In *MMM* as in *DWM*, I attempted to present myself as having a blurred identity to the extent that it was possible. I could not 'fudge' my gender identity very much, and indeed, in many cases, their responses expressed clear gender norms in relation to which the men were hoping that I would take a position. My national identity and professional status, however, were somewhat fungible.

To begin with my national identity: I had lived in the USA for almost 10 years at the time I did the interviews for *DWM* (and four years for *MMM*). I had also lived for 4 years in France and spent considerable time in and around Paris over the years. I had a great deal of familiarity with these two societies, although I am French Canadian and can still claim the status of

outsider to the two national contexts. This status allowed me to ask the simplest questions of both professionals and workers, as they were unclear about how much I knew and did not know about their societies. Moreover, my accent (in English and in French) could signal clearly to respondents that I was an outsider to the social fabric in which these men lived. I believe my outsider status was particularly crucial in interviews with North African immigrants to France and African-Americans, because I was able (to some extent) to position myself as a foreigner with a sympathetic ear, as opposed to a guilty member of the national polity. I can think of a number of instances where this 'definition of self' on my part facilitated openness on their part. Because they could not be entirely sure whom they were talking to (i.e. how much I knew about their world), I also like to think that they could not offer as tightly controlled a presentation of self as they would have to a French or an American interviewer. To sustain this blurring, I tried to maintain a certain vagueness in my responses to their questions concerning my own life, adopting a kind of psychoanalytical non-interventionist pose throughout the interviews, and I resisted opening up until after the interview/experiment had ended, to the extent that it was possible.

Blurring surrounded my professional identity as well. For both *MMM* and *DWM*, respondents were contacted by letter, written on Princeton University stationery and signed by me. Their names had been found through phone books, after we had identified towns located within census tracts that included individuals presenting the class or racial characteristics that we were looking for. The letter described me as an assistant professor (for *MMM*) and associate professor (for *DWM*) of sociology, and explained that I wanted to interview them about how they select their friends at work and in their community, and about their leisure activities, with the purpose of writing a book on the topic. A research assistant would follow up with a short phone interview to explore whether they were willing to participate in the study, and to verify that their age and occupation qualified them for the study. If they agreed to participate, I would meet them at a place and time they chose, most often in a restaurant or in a public place, but sometimes at home.

Upon meeting me, they were often confused about whether I was the assistant to whom they had talked over the phone, or 'the professor' (I was perhaps too young and too female to fit the bill). Although many of the professionals were attuned to the status categories within the academic system, and would ask me questions about my position in it (including questions about Princeton University), the workers were often much vaguer and frequently had only the faintest idea of what the interview was for (although it was spelled out in my letter). I would clarify the situation if asked, but I would also do what I could to downplay my occupational status. Indeed, my intended presentation of self was that of the 'girl next door' who demonstrated an uncomplicated and straightforward demeanor and made people comfortable (by avoiding academic jargon, for instance). In the inter-

views, my goal was to make participants forget who I was, and to lead them to talk to me without taking into consideration my own identity.

I am not naïve concerning the extent to which it is possible to have a participant bracket the interviewer's identity. Too much has been written about, for instance, the race-of-interviewer effect to allow me to revel in this illusion (Sanders 1995). Nevertheless, I am convinced that the craft of interviewing involves the ability to put oneself into parentheses, at least to some extent. The interview is not about oneself. It is about the other, and about presenting oneself as a template against which the other can bounce his identity and world view. The interviewee will of course respond to the identity of the interviewer, but first and foremost, she or he should be entering into an exchange where she or he becomes intimately engaged with a stranger, even if it is to respond to the stimuli presented by the stranger's identity.

The fact that the participant knows that she or he will never see the stranger again can facilitate this process: it provides reassurance that the interview is not the beginning of a relationship, but a micro-episode unnaturally isolated from everyday life. The hope is that what would be gained through multiple interactions and repeated interviews, or from doing intensive fieldwork, is in the interview situation compensated for, and replaced by, an artificial intimacy created by the possibility of opening oneself to a stranger for a short but intense period of time, with the certainty that the person will not be part of one's life. The intimacy emerges as the questions move from the most general and innocuous to the most personal and challenging – for instance, ones having to do with racial and class identity, and feelings of lack of adequacy, recognition, or honor. The tone of the questions and their pace can signal to the participant that this is an experiment of sorts, which authorizes them to think aloud and try various scenarios or responses for the interviewer's benefit. For the interviewer, thinking of the interviewee as providing an instantiation of working- or upper-middle-class discourse (without denying their humanity and singularity) is certainly helpful in generating the appropriately conducive experimental mood.

In this context, the interview situation is understood (at least by me) as the meeting of two subjectivities with the goal of producing a somewhat original narrative on the subjectivity of one of the two parties. This narrative cannot be equated with the interviewee's 'authentic subjectivity' (which, in any case, would be the addition of all of the aspects of the person's subjectivities in real life and in the interview situation, and which therefore cannot be captured by social science research and is outside the relational process through which subjectivity is defined (Somers 1994; Jenkins 1996) – hence the necessity of resigning ourselves to working on 'snippets' or samples of subjectivity, and hence the title of this paper). Given my understanding of the nature of the data, it makes sense to collect information on participants' responses to a comparable stimulus (myself), even if they come from very different national and social backgrounds, beyond their similar occupations

and age brackets (as is the case for the populations studied in *MMM* and *DWM*).

The data consist of four samples of discourses produced by respondents in similar situations, collected for the sake of comparing them with one another. Again, these four samples (of professionals in the case of *MMM* and of workers in the case of *DWM*) respond to a similar stimulus if the interviewer remains the same across populations. In this context, it is crucial *not* to match interviewees and respondents by race, ethnicity, gender, etc.: That different respondents read the stimuli represented by an interviewer differently is part of the data on the 'us/them' boundary and should not be edited out of the interview situation. Undoubtedly, a woman talks differently about womanhood to a woman and to a man. But one discourse is not necessarily less real than the other. They are different aspects of the woman's narrative about her identity.

Of course, again, 'it' does not always work. But in my view, the art and science of interviewing consists in having the ability to create a delicate balance between setting the agenda for an interview, and bracketing one's identity. The bracketing works only if the participant perceives the interviewer as having a sympathetic ear, even if the interviewee is describing the most horrific racist, ethnocentric, Darwinist representations of the world. When it works, trust, and a great interview, are the outcome.

Against this backdrop, I can easily point to a number of instances where in the interview, where participants responded directly to what they perceived to be my own identity. They made me part of their script, and used my identity as a prop to define who they are, by opposition or otherwise. More specifically:

Interviewing across gender

The professionals and the workers I talked to often live in a world that is much more gendered than the one I live in. Whereas my husband (who is also an academic) and I have a minimally gendered division of labor, many of these men have wives who are homemakers, and they themselves take very seriously their responsibilities as providers (a central element in their definition of what makes a moral person). This aspect of their identity was made salient in the differences they imputed between me and their spouses, knowing that I was a professional woman. Several workers, in particular, made sly comments about the importance of raising one's children oneself. Their own ability to 'keep their wives at home' is a source of pride, and they made clear that they believe their choice was better than mine. I interpreted their pointing to my working-mom status as an attempt to increase their control of the situation by making our gender status salient (on the basis of which they came out on top) while downplaying the class dimension (on which I came out on top). I certainly did nothing to weaken their

control of the situation and suffered in silence, for the greater good of scientific progress!

A few participants also made my gender salient by making veiled (and not so veiled) sexual advances. In the case of workers, their attempts could be viewed as another strategy for empowering themselves, by making my sexuality relevant to our exchange, while downplaying our unequal occupational status and inverting the power dynamic. Of course, one cannot exclude the possibility that their intent was much more straightforward (i.e. getting laid). Advances also occurred when I was interviewing professionals, but they did not, at least in my view, carry the same intent of inversion. In all cases, I dealt with advances by playing dumb, i.e. by pretending not to understand what they meant (there again, being a non-native English speaker came in very handy).

Interviewing across and within classes

Several workers tried to explain to me what the life of working-class people is like, perhaps presuming that I had had little exposure to other classes than my own. They described with pride the meaning they attach to their struggle for survival and the resilience that it requires, contrasting these to my imputed easier life. The numerous boundaries they drew between themselves and the upper-middle class were perhaps sometimes implicitly directed at me as, for instance, when one of them told me that middle-class people are not very street smart. This interviewee, who works in a recycling plant, also chastised me for interviewing Paterson residents in their homes, pointing to the many dangers that lurk in this town (Paterson neighbors the infamous Newark (New Jersey)), the site of notorious racial riots and a city known for its high crime rate). This was undoubtedly an occasion for performing (as opposed to describing) boundary work, as he signified to me that I was naïve and lacked common sense (a profound failing in the working-class world view).

The upper-middle-class interviewees, for their part, sometimes engaged in a smug *entre-nous*, presuming that I shared much of their world view concerning the importance of money, or the moral and cultural failings of the non-college-educated, for instance. Some of them were also very taken by my association with Princeton University and wanted to know more about this venerable, if rather conservative, institution. They were very flattered by the opportunity to be interviewed by a Princeton professor, even though my presentation of self did not suggest the level of self-importance that they may have anticipated.

This discrepancy reflects perhaps a distinctively sociological irony, that is, the fact that as interviewers sociologists do not necessarily behave according to expectations. Our knowledge provides us with a distance from social roles that most citizens lack. We can easily be at odds with others, both in the

context of conducting research, and as human beings. But this comes with the territory, especially if one studies subjectivities across social settings.

Interviewing across and within races

As expected, many blacks presumed that I knew little about the lives and cultures of African-Americans, and they took the opportunity of the interview to explain it all to me (in fact, I suspect that black respondents who were willing to be interviewed were in general relatively opened to whites and willing to engage, and that the refusal rate was higher among the angrier, more secessionist types). Their expectations about my low familiarity reflected the generally low level of contacts between whites and blacks, as documented by Massey and Denton (1994). Much of what they did was to explain to me what black people are like, and what racism is like and feels like, which is exactly what I was hoping for. For instance, a short and overweight respondent explained that one of his co-workers believes he looks like Arsenio Hall (who is tall and skinny), simply because he is black. In explaining what racism is like, other respondents presumed that I was on their side and were very candid about how they were dealing with their prejudiced co-workers.

A similar imputed positioning was salient when I was interviewing whites: although some presumed that I shared their racist views on blacks, others presumed that I did not. For instance, a warehouse worker, anticipating that I did not share his views, stated that people who live in rich 'lily-white' communities like Princeton don't know what black people are really like, and that it is much easier to be tolerant when your lawn is an acre wide and you live miles away from blacks. In his view, money is the best buffer in the world, and he is sorry that he does not have more. He would use it to protect himself from 'the element.'

Interviewing across the modern/traditional and Christian/Muslim divides

Interviewing North African immigrants living in Paris was a very intense experience. I had had very little contact with this population before working on *DWM*, although I had lived in Paris for 4 years and spent considerable time there at various points in my life. Discovering their lives, their world views, their families, and their houses was a challenging and a powerful experience for me and, often, for them. A great many of them had had very little experience interacting with European women before our encounter. Indeed, one of them even confessed that our exchange was the first opportunity of this sort he had ever had, although he had been living in France for more than 20 years. Our cultural distance was generally so vast that little mutual adjustment was possible. In general, the Princeton stationery had no meaning for them (if they could read at all), and several of them were very

unclear about whether and how I was connected with the French government or the immigration inspection services. A few even came with their visas in hand to demonstrate that they were legally in the country.

Some of their responses to my questions were shaped by their anticipation that I wanted to know about their possible involvement in Islamic movements or by their reactions to the Le Pen ascendancy of the previous years (I conducted these interviews in 1992–3). That many of them were adamant in describing themselves as apolitical and as following 'the straight path' was reflective of this concern. Their insecurity was obviously accentuated by the fact that they did not have the framework needed to understand what an interview was about. Some asked if and when the interview would be broadcast on the radio. I felt guilty and embarrassed for not having anticipated that being asked to participate in a study would generate anxiety for them. But it was too late and I had to move on, while doing my best to respect the standard protocol of Princeton's Human Subjects Institutional Review Panel.

My own identity as North American was made salient by some of the North African immigrants in the interview situation, in that they often lumped me together with Americans and described me as belonging to a 'civilization without quality.' One of the most intense interviews was conducted with a pro-Islamist Tunisian who described the downside of modernity and what we, of the advanced industrial world, had lost as a result of our technology and cultural blinders. He mostly pointed to the warmth that in his view characterizes North African societies and is absent in modern societies. He also contrasted what he perceived to be the selfishness of the French with the hospitality and generosity of Muslims. These statements were prompted in part by my own presence, as I was lumped together with the other members of the developed societies against which he was vituperating. At the same time, the experience of being given an opportunity to exchange about such emotionally charged issues produced a high level of basic human connectivity (an emotional dimension whose role in the interview should be acknowledged) that was probably as surprising to me as it was to them.

Interviewing across and within the colonial divide

As I am a French Canadian sociologist teaching in one of the most prestigious universities, my relationship with respondents was pulled in many different directions. As I stated above, my association with Princeton University was appealing to some of the professionals, and probably prompted them to agree to participate in the study. This association did not impress French professionals as much, because many of them did not know of the university or of its position in the Great Academic Pecking Order of America. In any case, my occupation and employer certainly served as a signal of high status for professionals and, although perhaps more ambiguously, for workers.

This high-status signal may have been complicated by my status as a Québecoise. Indeed, I saw that some French respondents were torn (and in a few cases not so torn) between their understanding of my professional status and an impulse to approach me as a '*cousine du Québec*,' which I perceived both as friendly and as reflecting an over-familiar, and slightly paternalistic, colonial stance. Americans may not have as clear a view of the scripts guiding their relationship with Québecois as the French, but a few of them alluded to what they perceived as my Québec accent, presuming that they were in a position to distinguish between 'real French' and the 'non-French' spoken by Québecois. I was surprised to discover how easily, as Americans, they bought into a logic that would have classified them as non-English speakers, if applied to a British English/American English contrast. In any event, very few Québecois are university professors in the USA, and some were unclear about how these two statuses go together, which should trump the other, and how to navigate the confusion.

I believe my subjective identification with anti-colonial movements and my identity as a Québecoise (and as a Québecoise who grew up in an inde-pendentist, anti-imperialist family) facilitated conducting interviews with African-Americans and North African immigrants. The narratives on Québec national identity are replete with tales of domination that resemble in many ways those found in the progressive discourse about the identity of these two groups. Although I did not share their historical experiences or their lives, I did share their identity as a member of a group that has been discriminated against and is fighting for recognition. This kinship, I believe, encouraged blacks to talk to me about their experience with racism, and encouraged North Africans to talk to me about the cultural imperialism and the 'arrogance of the French.' The facts that I am not a native English speaker and that I have a (controllable) Québec accent in French also encour-aged their openness. This is not to say that in interviews they spoke to me the way they would have spoken to members of their own group, or that the cultural colonialism that the French exercise toward Morocco or Algeria compares to the one they exercise toward Québec. In any case, stressing that I was not French, and not American, certainly generated a bond, which I believe was conducive to better interviews.

To bring this chapter to a close, it could be useful to draw conclusions from *MMM* and *DWM* for some of the intense debates that have animated the social sciences in the USA, and anthropology in particular, over the last 20 years. Clifford and Marcus's now classic *Writing Culture* (1986) (re)opened a lasting dialogue about the relationship between the social scientist and the 'object,' about how the scholar's identity defines his or her understanding of the object, and about whether his or her description of the object is in fact an extension of the scholar's narrative about his or her own subjectivity (see for instance Fox 1991; Parkin *et al.* 2000; and Willis and Trondman 2000). This debate has been hailed as a high point in anthropological discourse, and

has also been damned as the ultimate expression of its self-absorbing and self-destructive propensity.

I purposefully avoided opening this Pandora's box in the preceding pages, choosing instead to frame my contribution to this volume as a reflection on the many sad but justifiable choices I have made in my own scholarship. I did so because I am not sure that the debate has been a productive one, or that I have anything to add to it. If asked to take a position, I would agree with Paul Rabinow (1991) that the whole 'writing culture' moment was ultimately about cohort replacement within anthropology, i.e. a '*querelle des anciens et des modernes*' about the proper way of doing the craft of anthro-pology (and of marginalizing the Geertzian legacy).

I feel somewhat fortunate that my own discipline, sociology, has not been taken over by this hand-wringing tidal wave *qua* collective experiment. My position is that social life cannot be studied 'whole,' and that knowledge production requires cutting into it with a scalpel that often does violence to it. But I personally, and unfashionably, must confess that I have no qualm doing so. The hermeneutic circle is here to stay, and we cannot escape our own subjectivity and that of our respondents any more than they can theirs and ours. Our respective awareness has to be managed and is necessarily factored into our conclusions, *coûte que coûte*!

Acknowledgement