

Living Religions Fieldwork Project

Wise Person Interview Report

1,000 word minimum (12 point, double-spaced)

Submit as a Word attachment via email to your instructor

Name your file with your last name, followed by a space, followed by “wise person”
(e.g., Maaia wise person)

Due:

This is a narrative descriptive paper based on qualitative research, in this case, a face-to-face interview with the wisest person you know about the nature of religion.

Your informant: A wise person is someone whose judgment you value. A wise person is not the same as a smart, talented, or creative person (although the same individual might be all of those). The interview should be face-to-face. Ask to speak with this individual for about 30 minutes although most people will give you at least 45 minutes. You generally do not want to take more than an hour and fifteen minutes. This individual must be at least 30 years old, and ideally, much older. Your informant cannot be anyone who works for NCS, STA, or Beauvoir.

You need to explain to your informant that you are going to use this information for a paper in a course for school. You also need to tell the person the general topic of the interview but it is your choice whether or not you want to give the person the specific questions before the interview. Explain that while aspects of the research might be disclosed to others, the identity of the interviewee will be protected.

Best practices: In an email to your instructor, send the name and contact information of your informant (email address, mailing address, or telephone number) and your relationship to the person (cousin, parent, neighbor, etc.) We are not planning to contact your informant but all research needs to have transparency between the researcher and the supervisor of research. You must do this before you conduct the interview. If you interview someone outside of your immediate family, you need to inform your parents when and where you are conducting the interview; you should not conduct an interview without someone knowing the circumstances of your interview. Unless this is a close relative or close family friend and your parents approve, plan to meet your informant in a public place or in an open environment at his/her workplace.

Your Fundamental Research Question: What is religion?

Your Audience: Imagine that this course was part of a larger online course and the other students were at peer schools in in L.A., New York, London, Shanghai, and Mumbai. Your tone and style ought to be professional and publishable, i.e., friendly, but formal.

You may include your reflections and reactions to what is said, but these shouldn't be included in the word count.

Your Protocol: There are four groups of questions to ask in order to get a full understanding of the informant's position on this research question. You may decide to have as many as a total of 20 questions, including an ice-breaking and a wrapping-up question to gain depth and clarity in your understanding of the responses of your informant.

- Ice-Breaking Question to establish rapport
- Group 1: Demographic Questions that you think are important for this research question
- Group 2: General Questions that expand the main research question. Here are some examples:
 - What is religion? What does “religion” mean to you? Is there a difference between religion and spirituality?
 - What are the functions of religion? How does it function in your life? What are some reasons you practice/believe in your religion? What is the role of religion in the lives of individuals? What is the role of religion in society?
 - What religion are you? Are you a different religion than you were raised?
 - What are the unifying and diversifying elements of your religion? In other words: What does your community share with the rest of the greater tradition? What makes your community unique and different from other expressions of this religion? Is there anything you think people misunderstand about your religion?
 - What is your view of other religions? If you had to choose a different religion, which one would you choose? How would you feel if your children decided someday to convert to a different religion from yours?
 - How serious are you about the practices? (In other words, how exactly must you practice your religious rituals and customs?) How serious are you about the beliefs? (In other words, how closely must you adhere to the official beliefs of your religion (if there are any)?)
 - Why do we suffer? Is there a way out of suffering? What happens when I die? How should I live?
- Group 3: Common Class Research Questions: In class, we may decide on one or more questions that each class member will ask during their interview, such as “Have you ever had a religious experience?”
- Group 4: Personal Research Questions: Questions that reflect your own special interests to help you better understand the informant, e.g. What is the role of art in religion? How do you view science in relationship to religion? What should be the role of prayer? How is religion different from culture? Can you be religious without being part of a group or community? What is the effect of a religious community that creates a formal institution or organization for itself? What rituals are helpful? What sacred texts are important enough that everyone should know them?
- Sample Wrapping Up Questions –
 - What haven't I asked you that you think that I should have?
 - Who else do you think would be a good person to interview about this topic?

Some notes about questions -

- Ask as many open-ended questions as possible instead of closed-ended questions. When the informant finishes, you can encourage the informant to continue by giving a non-leading response such as “I see” or “For example?” or “Could you say more about that?”
- Brainstorm ways to ask a question in more than one way, in case you need to elicit a better response.)
- Pay attention to the difference between normative questions and descriptive questions, e.g. the difference between asking someone “What is the role of religion in politics?” as opposed to “What should the role of religion be in politics?”
- Note that there are two kinds of research projects. In some kinds of traditional social science research it is vital to get through all the questions completely and in a specific order. That is the kind of research where you are trying to prove some hypothesis and you want data to back up your theory. That is not this kind of research. In this type of research, based on something called grounded theory, you are not trying to prove an intellectual claim but, rather, are trying to get enough information, i.e., data that you could use to propose an intellectual claim or hypothesis that you might later on want to try to prove.

Recommended Report Organization (See Below)

Recommended Report Organization

- Title – Give your paper a descriptive title that is informative and catchy.
- Paragraph 1 – Tell your reader 1) the *general* research topic and why it is important, i.e., interviewing the wisest person you know about the nature of religion. Tell your reader the most important 3 to 6 *specific* questions that you asked and 2) the thesis statement, a single declarative statement that answers the question: what did you learn.
- Paragraph 2 – Describe the person you chose with important demographic information (education, occupation, age, in what city they live, marital status, children, race, religion, ethnicity ... your choice about what you think is important to mention) about your informant. Explain why you chose this person. You should give your informant a pseudonym and use this and other considerations to disguise their identity. Refer to this individual by the **pseudonym**. Include a footnote that identifies this as a pseudonym. Do not refer to this individual as “my mother” or “my grandfather,” thus, giving away the identity of your informant.
- Paragraph 3 - Give a description of the interview itself: where, when, etc. What was the atmosphere like? Give a rich description of the time and the space. Explain the mood of the experience (tense, friendly, warm, rushed . . .)
- Paragraph 4 and additional paragraphs – Write a narrative description, not a transcript, of your interview. Give concrete details. Do not, however, give your own personal, running commentary about what you think of what your informant said. N.B. Report as accurately and as sympathetically as you can what your informant said, regardless of whether or not you agree with your informant. Ideally, you ought to be able to finish the interview without your informant having any clue what you think of what she/he has said. Your job as a researcher and as a reporter of your research is to blend into the background as much as you can; neither your informant nor your reader ought to know your personal opinion about the subjects being described. Your task is to document an accurate and sympathetic voice to your informant about these questions.
- Concluding Paragraph – Do not repeat the thesis; tell your readers what follow-up you think would be worthwhile research, e.g. what other questions would you like to ask this informant in another interview or what other informant would you like to ask these same questions. Tell your reader what other future researchers might do next as a result of this initial work. For example, you might suggest new questions for a second round of interviews with this individual. On the other hand, you might suggest asking the same questions of other individuals with different demographic backgrounds.

Required Supplementary Personal Reflection

Put this on a separate page and labeled “Supplementary Personal Response.” Although this is required, it is not assessed and is not included in the word count requirement. You don’t need to answer all the following guiding questions. Choose as many as you think appropriate to explain what you learned in doing the assignment. This is the time for you to sit back, think about the entire process, and figure out what you’ve gained from the experience. Reread your notes and your report. Which question was the most interesting, the most difficult, the most important, or the most intractable? What was easiest or hardest: choosing your informant? Doing the interview? Writing up your notes? Writing the report? The bottom line here is to ask yourself what the key feature of the entire process was that best gives insight into what is fundamental to the experience of being a living human being. What did you learn from this process of analysis about yourself?