The Hardest Science

The academic job interview: a mishmash of small but important things

PUBLISHED ON *July 14, 2010 by Sanjay Srivastava*

It's the time of year when academic job-seekers are getting ready for the fall interview season. When I was first on the job market some years ago, I was the fortunate recipient of lots of very good advice on the big things — how to write a research statement, how to prepare a job talk, etc. A lot of these issues are discussed in organized guides and publications, and it also tends to be the main focus of most mentors' guidance (as it should be).

But I also discovered that there are a lot of smaller things that were passed along to me from mentors and peers in more piecemeal fashion, or in some cases that I figured out for myself. So on the way home from one of my interviews, I sat down and compiled a list that I could pass along to my friends. My goal wasn't to be complete or organized, but rather to fill in the gaps with some smaller but still-important things a first-time interviewee would need to know.

I wrote the list in a light tone, and didn't figure it would go very far. So last year I was amused and a little surprised to discover, as we were interviewing for a position in our department, that one of our interviewees had gotten his hands on my list. He fessed up right away, and we laughed about it. But I realized that maybe my list could help other people. (He got the job, by the way.)

So here is my mishmash of small but hopefully helpful advice. These notes reflect my experiences interviewing for R1-type (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Research_I_university) jobs in psychology departments — other kinds of institutions and other fields may vary. I've added a bit to it since I first wrote it (having been on 5 search committees now) and made some minor changes. Feel free to add to it — or disagree — in the comments.

Before the interview

Get in the right mindset. Although the whole process is overtly about evaluating you, that's not the only thing it's about. You are being flown out to meet a bunch of people who are interested and excited about you and your work. You are going to meet some new colleagues in your field. You will get to talk about the work that you've made the focus of your blood, sweat, and tears, and you will hear the ideas and reactions of a bunch of very smart people. You will learn about what people in your field are doing somewhere else. In short: the interview may sometimes be nerve-wracking, but it can also be a lot of fun. Try to roll with it.

You will have a contact person on the faculty — probably the search committee chair or a member of the committee. Use that person as a resource. Some good things to ask in advance:

- How long is the job talk (talk itself and time for questions)?
- Are there any other talks besides the main job talk? (like a brownbag, chalk talk, etc.)
- What are the norms for talks? Do people usually hold questions to the end, or should I expect to be interrupted? If there is a second talk, what is its purpose?
- What kinds of items will be on my itinerary? Besides the job talk and one-on-one meetings, there might be a second talk, a lunch or group meeting with grad students, group meetings with the search committee or some other group, etc.
- What is the search committee or department looking for from this search (besides the obvious)? Was there anything particular about my record that made me a good match?
- Bring up any special tech needs for your talk. (You may be referred to a tech support person.)

Attire: the summer before I applied for jobs I realized I had no idea how to dress myself for an interview. Fortunately, I had some more style-conscious friends who helped me. **Men**: First, start shopping now. It might take a while, and you won't have time after you get called for the interview. This is all clothing that you will need again and again as a grown-up, so when figuring out your budget, try to stretch yourself if you can — think of this as an investment. As far as specifics, your best bet is to wear a solid-color navy or dark gray suit for the day you give your main job talk. If it's a two-day interview, wear a relatively muted sportcoat and slacks on the other day. On both days wear a white or blue dress shirt. Reasonable tie. Black lace-up dress shoes and a black belt. (BTW, there is a lot more tolerance for breaking these rules in academia than if, say, you were a banker. I certainly wouldn't say that you need to dress this way to get a job. What I'm describing is safe and traditional, which means that your attire won't get in the way of the other messages you are trying to send.) **Women**: the rules are more fickle and variable, and I know better than to try to help you with clothing advice. If someone has some good links or advice that I can pass along, let me know.

Travel

For the plane ride, resist the urge to wear sweatpants and sneakers. Even if you are carrying your luggage on board and taking a taxi straight to your hotel without meeting with anybody, you never know – the plane could be crowded, and they could make you check your luggage. And then lose it. Or you could get delayed and then have to go straight from the plane to your first meeting. Don't wear your interview clothes on the plane unless you are scheduled to be interviewing the same day you arrive, but do wear something that won't make you look like a jackass if it ends up being the only thing you've got.

If you're crossing time zones, plan ahead. I found that depriving myself of sleep the day before I left California, on the hopes that I'd be tired enough to fall asleep at a normal East Coast time, was counterproductive. I did better just grabbing as much sleep as I could whenever I could. Your body may work differently, but whatever the case is, know yourself and be planful.

Meetings

The meetings, and in fact the whole interview ordeal, are a two-way street. Your interviewers know there's a chance that they'll end up offering you the job, so if they're smart they want to make a good impression and be in a position to recruit you if things go that way. Be humble — if you act like you've already got the job, you probably won't get it. But definitely use the opportunity to gather information and learn about the people and place you're interviewing with.

Just because a question is uncomfortable, inappropriate, or even illegal, doesn't mean it won't be asked. Be prepared. It's very hard to read the intent behind inappropriate questions: for example, "Do you have kids?" could be because they think parents are less productive (bad), more stable (good), or because they want to know if they should tell you how awesome the local school system is (innocuous). As best as you can, anticipate which questions you'll answer and which ones you'll try to avoid, and plan ahead. If you don't want to talk about your partner status, family plans, political affiliations, other interviews you've been on, or your real opinion of that notorious asshole in your home department, have a tactful, neutral, and well-rehearsed answer at your fingertips so you won't hem and haw.

The above notwithstanding, if you introduce personal information — talking about your kids or your partner or whatever — it becomes fair game. And it will get spread around.

Go to the bathroom every chance you get. You might fall behind and get rushed from meeting to meeting, and you never know when you'll get another opportunity.

You may be surprised how much of your time is spent being asked to ask questions. In my experience, people wanting to grill me about my research were in a small minority (though there were always some of them). Most people opened with, "So, what can I tell you about the department/university/city?" Have lots of questions ready. These serve multiple purposes. Most obviously, your interviewers want to help recruit you by providing whatever information you need. Less obviously, people will read into your questions and try to infer what you are interested in, what your motivations are, whether you're really enthusiastic about the job, etc.

It's okay to ask the same questions of multiple people, because (a) they aren't going to compare notes, (b) they wouldn't care if they did, and (c) it can be very informative to see whether you get the same or different answers.

I always asked for a preliminary itinerary a couple of days before I went. I then went to the department website, and after reading up about everybody I was going to meet with, I cut the shortish descriptions of everybody's research interests and pasted them in to create my own annotated itinerary. (I also printed an original that I kept on top, so if someone wanted to look at my schedule to see where my next meeting was, they wouldn't see the copy with my notes.) This was very valuable as a reminder for starting conversations with people outside my area whose research I wasn't intimately familiar with. "So, you do work on reading comprehension. What are you working on these days?" Most people like to talk about their research, and since publications lag a few years behind what people are working on you've usually got a good pretext to be asking. So it's an easy way to strike up a conversation. Plus, if you relax a little and show genuine interest, you may actually learn some things and have some fun conversations. (If you *don't* have any genuine interest, why are you applying for a job in academia?)

Aside from asking about people's research, good questions are…

- What are the students like here?
- (Older faculty) How has the department changed since you've been here?
- (Younger and mid-career faculty) What was the tenure process like for you?

- How much do people collaborate here?
- How is the [insert resource you need for your research — subject pool, fMRI facility, whatever]?
- What new directions or initiatives is the area/department/university moving toward right now?
- What's your favorite thing about living in this town? What do people do for fun around here?

Questions you might get asked…

- What was your talk about? (from people who missed it)
- What is your research about? (have a well-rehearsed 2-minute version that's intelligible to people outside your area)
- Where do you see your research going in the next few years?
- What will your first grant application be?
- What traditions or older theories is your research grounded in? (Older faculty often have the impression – perhaps accurately – that lots of new research reinvents the wheel. Know what wheels you are reinventing.)
- I was really interested in your talk on life stories and social identity, because I do work on rodent sexual response cycles and I think there are lots of interesting possibilities for collaboration. What do you think?
- What courses would you teach? What is special about your approach to teaching them?
- What do you do for fun?

If you're a caffeine addict like me, drink some of that awful hotel-room coffee in your room before you head out. Hopefully you'll get coffee at breakfast, but if something goes awry, you may not get another chance before the caffeine headache sets in.

Hopefully they'll schedule a lunch or meeting with grad students. If not, ask for one. You'll want to gauge what the students are like. And grad students are the best source for dirt in the department. You often need to do very little digging – they'll volunteer it. (If the department interviewing you is savvy, they will also pay attention to the grad students' impressions of you. If a candidate sucks up to faculty but is disdainful toward grad students, that can say a lot.)

The job talk

[The content of the job talk itself is one of those "big things" where there's oodles of advice out there, so I won't directly cover it here. Instead I'll mention some related issues…]

If you had any control over it, you'd want to do your talk early in the first day, when you're still fresh and when people can ask you followup questions in meetings. But you won't have any control over it, so never mind.

Be paranoid about your talk. Bring your own laptop if you can; bring a USB drive; burn the talk on a CD; upload it to a hidden link on a Web site or FTP account.

It's hard to sustain energy throughout a 45-minute talk, especially when it's embedded in an interview process that consists of two nonstop 15-hour days. Write "BE ENERGETIC" in big words halfway through your talk notes.

If you are supposed to give two talks and they tell you the second talk is "informal," don't let your guard down. The format may or may not be different, but you need to know your stuff inside and out and prepare just as thoroughly as for your primary talk.

In a more interactive talk format (like a brownbag) or with a department where the norm is to interrupt with questions, it is your job to control the room. The most common mistake I've seen in these situations is the speaker being too accommodating and letting tangential conversations drag on and eat up time. Answer questions and let truly interesting discussions roll for a little bit, but when the time comes to move on, be polite but firm and move on.

During your talk, address every major point to one real, actual person in the audience. Most people make superficial "scanning eye contact" rather than really connecting with people. Just make sure that you switch people regularly so you don't make someone uncomfortable.

The Q&A can be very important. There's an old PR chestnut: "Answer the question you wish you were asked." This is in the ballpark but the real story is more nuanced than that. During a job talk, you need to be responsive to the substance of a question or else you'll look evasive. Where you have wiggle room — where the advice applies — is in how you (re)frame the question, what angle you take on it, which piece of it you pick up and run with.

You gotta know when to hold 'em, and know when to fold 'em. Sometimes, in the face of a critical question or comment, you need to stand up for your research (because your data aren't going to defend themselves). And sometimes you are better off looking for common ground on small- to moderate-sized weaknesses that you have carefully thought about before. When done right (and not too much), this can turn a weakness of the research into a strength of the candidate: "You know, I've worried about that confound myself. So I've been planning a followup study where I…" Look at you! Thoughtful, self-critical, gracious! And old Professor Crank, who thought he nailed you, merely stumbled on something you'd already thought through and written into your next grant application!

That being said, you will bury yourself if you go to either extreme — either to be too defensive or to too-easily agree with all criticisms. Work on this in your practice job talks. Tell your practice audience not to "break character" until they put you through some real questions, and make clear that in addition to the talk itself, you want feedback on how you handle the Q&A.

You know that crackpot in your own department? The one who always asks the bizarre questions and makes everyone roll their eyes and temporarily vow to lobby against the tenure system? During the Q&A, remind yourself that every department has somebody like that. Just don't let it show that you realize this (and never let yourself be too certain that you've identified the local crackpot). You will earn sympathy points merely by being asked The Crackpot Question. You'll earn double points if you earnestly try to answer it. You will earn super magic bonus points if nobody in the room understands the question but the crackpot smiles and nods as if you have satisfied him or her with your answer.

It seems like a good idea to intentionally leave some issues unaddressed in your talk, so people can ask you about them. But this is hard to do right. Too big of a hole, and you damage your talk. Too small, and you might spend inordinate amounts of time preparing for a question that'll never come. That said, you will be forced to do this, because you will never be able to cover everything in your prepared talk.

For obvious followup issues where a visual aid would be helpful, have extra slides prepared that address major points you can't cover in your talk but that are likely to come up in Q&A. But don't do this too much, or else you'll look too slick.

Starting a response with "That's an excellent question" is an overused strategy. Show, don't tell. If it really is an excellent question, let that come across in the way you enthusiastically respond to the question.

Dinners

Go ahead, order an appetizer *and* an entree. Tonight you are not a starving grad student.

Know how much alcohol you can ordinarily handle while staying in control. (Ask your friends to verify your figures.) Then make sure you drink less than that at dinner. You'll be tired, hungry, dehydrated, and wound up. Your hosts will be well-rested and eager to run up the dean's expense account. Don't feel the need to keep up with them.

Dinner is not time to relax and let your guard down. Dinner is time to *look* like you've relaxed and let your guard down. By all means have fun, but don't forget that you're still on an interview.

After the interview

Writing thank-you notes to everybody you met with is a big effort but important. Before you write a note, pause for a moment and summon up an actual episodic memory of your encounter with the person you are writing to. Your goal is to channel authentic feelings of gratitude, and reflecting on specifics will help. Then, when you're ready, follow the Miss Manners template:

- Part 1: Thank them for meeting with you. ("Thank you for taking the time to meet with you during my visit to the University of Wherever.")
- Part 2: Reference something particular about your meeting with that person, hopefully something that you sincerely appreciate. ("I was very interested to hear about the study you've been running on rodent sexual response cycles.")
- Part 3: Express positive affect and hope for nonspecific future contact. ("I really enjoyed our meeting, and I hope we have a chance to talk again sometime soon.")

If you are thoughtful about it, you'll be surprised at how long it takes you to write twenty of those three-sentence notes per interview (and longer notes should be written for people you had a particular connection with, or for people who put extra time and effort into your visit like the search committee chair). Give yourself at least half a day.

TAGS ACADEMIA, JOB INTERVIEWS, PRESENTATIONS

9 thoughts on "The academic job interview: a mishmash of small but important things"

1. **Laura** says:
   July 14, 2010 at 11:47 am
   nice, helpful, and entertaining summary! i should scan you a copy of the list of interview questions that was used during my "hardcore" group interview. i found that was the area i was most worried about and wasn't sure how to prepare for… there were some idiosyncratic questions v. specific to my department… but otherwise, pretty standard.

2. **Sanjay Srivastava** says:
   July 14, 2010 at 12:35 pm
   Laura, if you want to send along that list I'd be happy to post it. I know a lot less about group interviews — we don't do them in my department, and I think I only did one as an interviewee (and I don't remember much about it apart from being *very* anxious)…

3. **Neuroskeptic** says:
   July 15, 2010 at 12:43 am
   An excellent list. I was a bit puzzled by this though:

   "Be humble — if you act like you've already got the job, you probably won't get it. "

   Surely you want to act like you're thinking on the level of someone who has the job, though. Particularly if you're currently in a junior position, say you've just finished your PhD, you surely want to come across like someone who's already ready to move up, not as a callow youth…? You don't want to act like you've already got the particular job you're applying for, but you want to act like someone who's on that level.

4. **Sanjay Srivastava** says:
   July 15, 2010 at 9:40 am
   Neuroskeptic, that's a helpful distinction to make. I meant that in the sense of not acting like you have the job you're applying for. I've seen that happen, and it completely torpedoed an otherwise strong applicant.

   But you're right that you do want to come across as ready to be a faculty colleague. I think that's the root behind some of the issues with handling questions and criticisms that I talk about. If you think it's not your place to disagree with faculty (maybe because that's the kind of atmosphere you've been trained in), that can come across as intellectual shallowness when people are challenging your research.

5. **Future Doc** says:
   August 5, 2010 at 1:14 pm
   Great post Sanjay. As a fifth year student about to embark on the job hunt it couldn't be more appropriately timed. Do you think you could do another follow-up post on good resources for finding jobs specifically related to personality psychology?

6. **Sanjay Srivastava** says:
   August 5, 2010 at 1:52 pm
   For tenure-track research-intensive professor jobs, the short answer is: comb through the APA's PsycCareers website once every week or so. 98% of everything will be there. To fill in the gaps, also check the APS Observer listings, and join SPSP and ARP and get on their email lists.

   I'll try to pull together a longer post. Meanwhile, anybody reading this have other suggestions (especially for other kinds of jobs)?

7. **Cara Bohon** says:
   August 19, 2010 at 11:57 am
   I find job postings on APA's site, but also through professional email lists. I'm in clinical psychology, so I find job postings very frequently through the ABCT email list. Also, I think that everything that goes into the APA Monitor ends up on PsycCareers, but I feel like occasionally I've seen something in the back of the Monitor that had slipped through the online searches.

   On a related note, after you find the job posting, and tips for writing research/teaching statements, etc?

8. **Sanjay Srivastava** says:
   August 19, 2010 at 4:49 pm
   Cara, the first thing I'd say is, no exaggeration, the research statement for my first job search was one of the hardest things I've ever written. That's not intended to be scary; rather, my hope is that when you're in the depths of writing it, if you feel half as disjointed as I did, you'll know you're not the only one.

   Anyway, here are a few suggestions…
   * Get copies of statements from people who have the kinds of jobs you'd like to have. Read them and, if possible, discuss them with somebody (the writers or someone else experienced) to go over the different approaches and figure out why they work.
   * Like with all writing, you need to know your audience and what you are trying to do for them. Some writing can be put into a single rhetorical category, but a research statement has to do several things simultaneously, which is part of what makes it hard. It is a piece of expository scientific writing that tells about your research, in a way that doesn't talk down to people in your sub-sub-field but also is readable by a broad range of other psychologists. It is a persuasive document that excites and convinces readers (pretty much entirely by showing but not telling) that your past record and future trajectory make you a good prospect to hire. And it ideally should have a small dollop of personal expression — it should feel like your voice — though that's probably less important than the first two.
   * For me the hardest part of writing it was making the different things I do seem coherent and programmatic and sussing out my professional identity. This was emotionally draining because it felt completely backward. You might think that you are supposed to go through an academic career having a core set of interests and goals, and then systematically build out a research program from that. For me, though, what actually happened was that through grad school and my postdoc I did a bunch of research that I found interesting, and then I had to figure out how to write a coherent statement (rather than a list of "and then I did this…" bullets). It turned out that there really was a there there, but figuring it out was hard. If you're in the same boat that I was, ask the people who know you and your work well. They might have better insight than you do, because they're more likely to see the forest rather than the trees.

9. **Laura Too** says:
   September 2, 2010 at 10:24 am
   The Psychology job Wiki (http://psychjobsearch.wikidot.com/) is an excellent resource for finding jobs (not to mention figuring out whether the schools you've applied to have already started interviewing).

   And I'll add a bit of advice for before the interview: put together a first-aid package with tylenol, antacids, etc. for the trip. I even got a small prescription for sleeping pills from my doctor about a month before interview season started, tested them out a few weeks before the first interview, and subsequently got a solid (and much appreciated) eight hours of sleep the night before every job talk I gave.

Comments are closed.

Blog at WordPress.com.