

# The American Dream Class Research Project

## Interview Research, Part I

This assignment is the first of four parts of the “American Dream Interview Research” class project. In the first part of this assignment (under “A”) you will consider your formative experiences and how they may bias your selection of people to interview and how you perceive and react to what you hear during interviews. In the second part of this assignment (under “B”), you will select and then describe **5** people you would like to interview. In the next part of this research project, you will interview 4 of these people.

### A. Identifying & Managing Effects of Formative Experiences

Everyone goes through life within the context of their formative experiences. The following definition of formative experiences is written by a social worker interested in stopping the cycle of child abuse, so it focuses on childhood formative experiences.

**A formative experience** is the everyday life we lived growing up and the know-how we develop as a result. More often than not, the know-how develops beyond our awareness. We simply react or do the things we do, based on a familiarity, having seen or experienced something like it before.<sup>1</sup>

Formative experiences continue into and throughout adulthood. A research study undertaken in New Zealand looked at leadership formative experiences (LFEs), which are defined as “*those experiences that make a high impact on leaders resulting in learning relevant to their leadership.*” The authors found that the **seventy-six percent** of formative experiences affecting leadership learning and development occurred in adulthood. Efforts at self-improvement (40%), coping with adversity (33%), and personal relationships (13%) were the primary adulthood formative experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Formative experiences during childhood and adulthood are important for researchers, because they create a context for our work. *Where we’ve been* and *what we’ve experienced* creates a frame of reference through which we:

- (a) Filter and make sense of what others say.
- (b) Place meaning on what others say.

As we interact with others and broaden our understanding of human and social conditions, we learn and change our viewpoints. Reading and reflecting on classmates’ posts to

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Direnfeld (MSW, RSW), The Impact of Formative Experiences.  
[http://www.yoursocialworker.com/p-articles/formative\\_experiences.htm](http://www.yoursocialworker.com/p-articles/formative_experiences.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Jansen, Anik. 2008. Extracting Leadership Knowledge from Formative Experiences. *Leadership*: 4, 73-94.

the American Dream discussion board is part of a valuable process that makes us more aware of and open-minded about what we may learn.

To do ethical, high quality research, we must be mindful of how our own experiences may color our reactions, especially if we find ourselves having strong reactions to interviewees' perspectives or making judgments about their life choices or circumstances. For example, the author Dennis Lehane has a series of mystery books that feature a private detective named Patrick Kenzie.<sup>3</sup> (The movie "Gone Baby Gone" is based on the Lehane book of the same name.) In the book series, Patrick often thinks about how his Irish-Catholic background affects his view of the world. He sometimes expresses a distaste for the privileged, but notes that his reaction probably "reflects his working class bias." And he talks about how experiences seeing the seamier side of life predispose him to make assumptions about peoples' motives and likely actions. *These are great examples of frames of reference created by childhood and adult formative experiences color what we hear and see.* Before becoming a full-time writer, Dennis Lehane worked as a counselor for children who had been abused. The insights Patrick Kenzie has into his formative experiences reflect Lehane's training and experience as a counselor.

To do research of value, we must avoid treating our own experiences, opportunities, and views as being universal or "normative", which means informing us how things are and should be for everyone. A good example of this kind of bias is when someone who never has suffered from depression gives "just suck it up" or "tomorrow will be better" advice to someone feeling the pain of a depressive episode.

This assignment asks you to think about how your own experiences may make you more or less sympathetic towards people who are from a background similar to your own. And it asks you to think about how your formative experiences may interfere with objective collection of information from someone who is from a different background than yours, has a different lifestyle, values different experiences, and so forth. To help you maintain your objectivity while selecting people to interview and during interviews:

✓ **Prepare a one-page (approximately 3 paragraphs) summary that briefly explains your formative experiences and how they create a frame of reference for you as a researcher, and how you will maintain neutrality while doing your interviews.**

So what am I looking for? You already have posted about your views and experiences on Blackboard. For this writing exercise, you will summarize the most important formative elements and explain how they influence how you take in information about others, and how they may affect your ability to maintain a neutral perspective during interviews. Let's use Lehane's private detective character Patrick Kenzie as an example. I will provide the basics of what he would say in a single paragraph; the full write up would elaborate on relevant points and require about three paragraphs.

Patrick Kenzie would begin by saying he is the son of Irish immigrants who came to the US to better themselves and with the dream of creating opportunities for their children.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis\\_Lehane](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis_Lehane)

He would say he grew up white, Irish, and Catholic in Dorchester Massachusetts, in a part of Dorchester that historically has been an Irish-Catholic stronghold. He might describe what it meant to be Irish in Dorchester from both good and bad perspectives. He would explain briefly that his parents were working class and didn't make a lot of money, so he never had the privileges that many of his peers in Boston suburbs take for granted. He might note that this makes him less tolerant of people from affluent backgrounds, so he will need to be careful not to over-react or judge an interviewee who has a higher income, rich parents, or other marks of affluence. He would say that his family circumstances, and his parents' expectation that he would go further in life than they were able to do, gave him a strong work-ethic that he admires in others. He would remind himself that he will respond positively to people who have had to work for what they have, which creates a bias toward selecting them for an interview. So he knows he will have to broaden his thinking about who to interview. He also would acknowledge that shared "working class" experiences create a sympathetic bias in his interview note-taking and are likely to color his sense-making of what they say.

Don't approach this in terms of "right" and "wrong" answers. Instead, use a critical eye to examine your beliefs and biases, and recognize that you will need to step outside the chamber they create if you are going to be a good interviewer.

## B. Selecting People to Interview

During this part of the project, you will decide whom you would like to interview. Interviewees must be people you know who will be willing to talk with you and comfortable doing so. You must select a group of interviewees who have backgrounds and experiences that differ from each other. So don't interview a friend who is 25 years old, his or her partner who is about the same age, and your sibling who also is about the same age. On the next page I've included a list of traits to consider to help you select a diverse group of interviewees. If each of you works hard to select a diverse set of interviewees, across the class we will have quite a diverse group of interviews.

✓ Prepare a listing of 5 people you would like to interview. (You will only interview only 4 of these people.) Do not give me last names, only first names. For each person you are considering, provide information about key characteristics that you can observe and which helped you select this person. For example:

→ Keisha: black woman in mid-40s, born in Hawaii but lived in Limestone Maine for high school years. Military family background, attended college. Joined the Army in 1990, and then in 1991 served in Desert Storm. Left the Army, returned to school to pursue law degree, now a practicing attorney.

**NOTE: It is fine to interview one family member, and you may interview one friend or partner whose age is similar to your own.**

## SELECTING A DIVERSE GROUP OF INTERVIEWEES: SOME TRAITS TO CONSIDER

**GENDER/SEXUAL ORIENTATION:** For the 4 interviews, plan on interviewing 1 person who is like you and 3 people who are different from you.

**AGE:** For example, perhaps you might interview a college student who is under 35, someone who is between 35 and 50, someone over 50, and/or someone over 70 years old.

**RACE:** I am hoping that some of you will be able to interview people of color. I realize this may not be possible for everyone, given Maine's demographics.

Note: Experiences of people of color who come from other nations and those of American Blacks often differ, so I have broken these out on the questionnaire.

**LOCATION WHERE PERSON "GREW UP"** - It will be very helpful if some students to interview some people who are "from away", which is to say outside Maine but not necessarily outside the US (see next item). You may or may not be able to do so yourself.

**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN** - I am hoping most class members will be able to interview someone who was not born in the USA.

**ECONOMIC CLASS.** Broad economic classes include:

- Affluent
- Middle class
- Working poor
- Unemployed and poor.

Note: If someone previously was in the middle or affluent group, but now is underemployed or unemployed, they may be an especially good choice because the change will have affecting their viewpoints and decisions.

**EDUCATION BACKGROUND.** Think about the range of possibilities, which include some of the following:

- Attended or graduated from an elite college
- Attended or graduated from a public university
- Attended or graduated from a good *but not elite* private institution
- Received high school diploma but no college
- Received equivalency high school diploma (GED or similar)
- Dropped out of high school

Notes: Many people attend more than one college, so make notes about this is the respondent's situation. Also, your interviewee may have dropped out of high school but later earned a GED and/or went on to college.

## C. Submitting Your Work

The file you prepare will have two sections (A and B) and will be about 2 pages long.

1) Include your name and the assignment name in your file name, for example:

[LaPlante\\_ADInterviews\\_Pt1.docx](#)

2) Save your work in Word (doc, docx) or Rich Text Format (rtf). If you are using a program that has a different file extension, use "Save as" and select Word or Rich Text as the file type.

3) By 9 PM on Monday 10/24, email your file to me at: [josie.laplante@myfairpoint.net](mailto:josie.laplante@myfairpoint.net)