

Marriage 101

Instructions & Questions for Conducting and Writing Up the Parent Interviews

A personal challenge for self-understanding: We anticipate that this will be considerably more emotionally challenging for you than the interview with your Mentor Couple. These interviews are also likely to be more rewarding. Almost all students find talking openly with their parents about such intimate subjects difficult. If there have been especially troubling events in your family life, this may be even more challenging for you and for your parents. Nevertheless, while the interviews may open some wounds, they also offer opportunities for connecting in new ways.

Self-understanding is one of the pillars of healthy relationships and marriages, and sometimes acquiring such important self-understanding is emotionally stressful. Students almost invariably report learning things about their past family life which previously had not been known or fully discussed. Partly this is because some events happened at ages when your understanding was limited, and partly this is because families tend not to talk openly or abstractly about the general flow of family life. We think the opportunity to interview your parents so as to assess better your own past and baseline assumptions about relationships and marriage will prove extremely valuable for your future. In the past, even students who have balked because their parents were currently undergoing painful divorces, found that persevering with this assignment proved one of the most valuable parts of the class.

If you encounter difficulties in pursuing this assignment or if you are uncertain whom to interview, you should consult with your TA Breakout Group Leader.

Introductory letter(s) to your parents: To give your parents a heads up and an explanation of this assignment, we would like to send them letters telling them the rationale for the interview (but not the specific questions which we are leaving up to you). To do this, you need to return the initial information form that we will email to you.

Similarities to Mentor Couple interviews. Read the instructions for interviewing your Mentor Couple since the interviews of your parents are essentially the same—an attempt to get an honest, in depth view of an actual marriage. Before you begin the interview, tell your parents a bit about the course, explain that the interview is important to you, and assure them that they don't have to answer any questions that seem too upsetting or personal.

Modifications of the Parent Interview: Differences from the Mentor Couple Interview. What follows are some modifications based on the different circumstance of interviewing your parents.

Interview each person separately. The main difference from the Mentor Couple interviews is that we suggest that you interview your parents separately. This will probably make it easier for them to talk honestly with you and will probably be more comfortable for you.

Whom to interview. If your parents are divorced, separated, or deceased or if you have step-parents or other important adults who helped raise you, we are leaving it up to you how to modify the basic assignment. In some circumstances a student whose parents are divorced and remarried might find it instructive to interview both parents and step-parents.

Students raised from an early age by a single parent or relative should try to interview another married couple. This is only because this course is about marriage and not specifically about the challenges of single parenthood. So if you were mainly raised by a single parent, you will need to interview someone else. We would suggest a couple who were influential in your life (grandparents, aunt and uncle, or family friends).

If you are in doubt about any of this this, consult with your Breakout Group leader.

Method of the “interview”. While in-person interviews are still the best, they may not be possible because of geographical separation. The next best option is interviews over the phone. Another possibility is to send questions via e-mail or snail mail and ask for either written or phone answers.

Excluded questions. If they make you embarrassed, you are free to omit certain questions, say the ones about your parents’ sex lives. Whatever you choose to do, spend a few minutes reflecting on what it means that children frequently do not want to know certain things about their parents’ experiences.

Culturally relevant questions. Some students have reported that the interview protocol didn’t quite fit their parents’ marital experience, cultural background, or sociocultural expectations. Feel free to tailor the questions to fit your parents, and to ask questions of your own creation.

Additional questions to ask. In addition to the questions we provided for your Mentor Couple interviews, you should consider adding the following areas of exploration when you talk with your parents:

Grandparental marriages:

How do you think *your* parents’ (my grandparents’) marriages influenced how you entered into and conducted your marriage?

Impact of marriage on me as child:

- How do you think your marriage affected my growing up?
- Given what you know about me and my relationships so far, what do you think I should watch out for in selecting a partner, and in being a marriage partner? What sort of person would be the best person for me to marry? Why?
- Do you think that if you had strong reservations about someone I was involved with or planning to marry that you could talk this over with me?

Good luck and have fun if possible, this should be very instructive and almost

certainly very useful for you.

Write-up and grading:

See the sections in the Mentor Couple Interview Instructions; these are identical.