Field Notes

The interview was conducted at our home in Huntington Beach, in the work room for the purpose of privacy. All consent forms and related material were signed well before the interview as Tu Vu wanted to ensure his full commitment to this project. A photo of the narrator was taken right before beginning the interview. We were situated face-to-face with the microphone on a desk to the side between us.

As this done at home, Tu Vu was dressed for sleep as he leaves for work at 4am and would be heading to sleep right after the interview. As he began the interview, his face expressed eagerness to talk about his childhood. However, when talking about his siblings, he seemed hurried to skip over the matter. I could not determine if this was because he did not find it of interest or a more personal reason. Despite his eagerness, he seemed to dodge around some questions and try to push the interview forward. Knowing he is the type of person who always tries to prepare ahead of time, he had some script in mind using some notes based around a short interview I had conducted with him early in the week. Unfortunately, I could not completely recall the structure of that interview and failed to try and recreate that structure.

There were points where he came close to turning the interview into a lecture, such as his subtle emphasis on the fact that he is Catholic. Given that there was a smaller interview prior to this one, I was aware of the specific examples he had to give. However, during the interview, he actively tried to broaden his answers to an impersonal level. I attempted to physically engage him eye-to-eye several times, but he adamantly focused on facing and speaking directly into the microphone.

It should be mentioned that he was constantly referring to a sheet of keywords he had written for himself prior to the interview. I believe this may be why much of his answers to
follow-up questions just continue to reiterate or continue with his previous answer with little connection to the current question. Several times during the interview, I motioned for him to give more details, as my experience with him during our previous interview had yielded very colorful stories. In return, he pointed to keywords on his sheet when he felt it was time to move on.

I believe that the previous interview had created the opposite effect I had intended. Since the previous interview was not recorded, he met my expectations by speaking more freely and with more detail as he wanted me to understand his experiences on a personal level. However, by having the interview, I may have given him the opportunity to filter out points he did not want to mention or felt I (and as a result, the audience) already knew, creating those repetitive answers when I attempted to press him further. What was produced appeared reminiscent of his lectures in Bible study in which he tried to impart the concept of being Vietnamese American rather than the experience of an individual Vietnamese American.

From this experience, I should have been more cautious about understanding my narrator’s character before even getting into anything related to the topic at hand. Although the structure of Tu Vu’s story is now clear to me, the details became lost as he created his story for his son to hear. A scripted dialogue may have helped maintain consistency in the direction and content of the interview for both sides. However, I believe that by doing so would take away the emotional aspect I, as the interviewer, am able to observe. At most, I would conduct a more general, yes-or-no type interview to get an idea of the narrator’s background and provide a short list of questions to allow the narrator to focus on those questions when preparing for the interview.