Some Thoughts on the Academic Job Search in Sociology

By

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Note: add section on cover letters

Initial Remarks: The job search process is harrowing for academics. Unlike other professionals, such as doctors or lawyers, there is little guarantee that a person completing their Ph.D. will land a job teaching and doing research in their area. At a top medical school, the question is if you will get the residency of your choice. At a top graduate program, it’s often doubtful that someone will be offered a job at all. Despite this difficult situation, I believe that you can prepare yourself and greatly improve the chance that you will get an academic job. What follows are my opinions on junior level academic job searches, with an emphasis on sociology.

Question 1: Should I go on the job market?

Answer: You get 1 point for each “yes” to the following questions. The more points you score, the better prepared you will be for the job market.

- Have I finished my dissertation proposal?
- Have I completed the data collection for my dissertation?
- Have I completed at least one polished chapter of my dissertation?
- Do I have more than one chapter of my dissertation completed?
- If I get a job, can I complete the dissertation by the summer before I have to start?
- Do I have a published article in a reputable refereed journal?
- Do I have multiple articles?
- Are any of those articles in the top journals?
- Do I have a book contract? (this often counts for two points)
- Do I have the support of my committee? (counts for multiple points)
- Do I have teaching experience? (counts for more if you want a liberal arts position)

Of course, you should always consult with your committee so that everybody is aware of your progress and you are get feedback on your writing. If you have published an article, make sure your committee knows about it. If you have decent drafts of some dissertation chapters, make sure your committee sees them.
I also note that few people can answer “yes” to the all of the questions. But you need to have *something* going for you.

Question 2: When should I think about the job market?

Answer: In sociology, the job market starts in September. So start thinking and planning the spring or summer before the market. As you will see, there is a bit of paper work, so it behooves you to plan this ahead of time.

Question 3: How does the job market work?

Answer: It goes something like this…

(a) In the spring, summer and fall, department chairs and deans will make decisions about hiring. If they decide they need people, they will advertise in the ASA job bulletin and other forums. Some departments will “scout” at the ASA meetings.

(b) Applications are due in the fall. Many are now due in late August, September and October.

(c) Your application has to have a cover letter, a CV, writing samples and 3 letters of recommendation. Work on these during the summer, so it’s ready to go in the fall. There are books that give great advice on cover letters and the rest of the paperwork. Ask your committee for help as well.

(d) The search committee first weeds applications based on raw criteria by about 50%. This is based on school reputation, research areas and other easy to observe factors. Then applications are weeded by what the department really needs or wants. This produces a “long short list” of 15-20 names. The “short list” is created after close scrutiny and reading. Then people argue over who to invite for a face to face interview. This happens in Fall and early winter.

(e) The candidates are flown out to the campus. Usually, 2-3 candidates per position. You have to give a research talk and meet people so they can see what you are like. It’s very personal at this stage. The visit includes a “job talk” – which is a 30-45 minute presentation of your research in a public forum.

(f) After everybody interviews, the department makes a final choice. Sometimes they don’t get the first choice and will go after second/third choices. This process can take many months. Some departments will choose not to hire people.

Question 4: How do I prepare my self for an interview?
(a) Be prepared. If you are prepared, then you will be relaxed and you will give a better impression.

(b) People will ask you predictable questions. “What will you teach?” “What will you do after your dissertation?” Prepare some answers. These are obvious questions.

(c) Learn about the dept. you will visit. Read the web site, look at some papers published by faculty. I’m always fascinated by what other people are working on.

(d) Be nice. Even if you have an intellectual disagreement with someone’s research, be open and generous when you meet them.

(e) Humor and demeanor: Be “vanilla” – don’t swear or be sarcastic. Your friends may find you funny, but somebody who doesn’t know you might find your jokes raw and wicked humor off-putting.

(f) Never badmouth anybody. If someone asks you a question about a professor you hate, like: “I heard Professor X is awful.” Simply say, “Professor X has always been kind and generous towards me.” Or if you can’t say that without hysterically laughing, say, “Professor X’s research is really admirable.”

(g) Be honest. It’s better to emphasize your good points rather than mislead. If you hate math, don’t say you can teach regression. If you think post-modernism is for the birds, don’t say you’ll teach cultural sociology. Just move the conversation towards your strong points.

(h) Appearance: You don’t need an Armani suit to succeed but wear nice clothes. Have them dry cleaned. Make sure they fit. Guys should wear jacket and tie. Ladies should wear blouses. In our modern age, the ladies can wear slacks. Have your hair and nails cut, brush your teeth, etc. Simple things go a long way. Trust me.

(i) Other etiquette. Use common sense – be nice toward people, don’t get drunk during social events, take a real interest in others.

Question 5: Job talks – see my other handout.

Question 6: Bad situations. Sometimes interviews have awkward moments. For example, in the real world, some people will make sexual advances towards others or engage in some form of harassment. If the behavior is mild, it’s probably best to ignore them. Life has bad moments you have to endure. If it’s more serious, then you should definitely say something like, “I don’t think that’s appropriate.” If the behavior is really off the wall, feel free to contact the department chair or to consult with someone you trust. It’s often
the case that boorish behavior is part of a larger pattern, and others will know how to
handle it, or at least make things tolerable until the end of the interview. The key is to get
help and not let things get out of control.

Question 7: Success. After the interview, the department will decide who will get a job
offer. This is out of your control – once you’ve completed the interview, it depends on
budgets, personalities and factors you can’t control. In some departments, the chair
makes final decisions and in others, committees make the decision. In most cases, the
offer has to be approved by the dean or some other academic manager. The department
chair usually does the work of contacting job candidates and formally offering the job.

An offer consists of:

- A position (assistant professor, associate prof, etc)
- Salary
- equipment (computer, transcriptions devices, etc)
- Research assistance (money or assistants)
- Other goodies (summer support, course releases, research funds, etc.)

Get this in writing! You can negotiate a lot of stuff and ask for more, but you might not
always get it. Ask your committee and other job seekers what the market will bear. Get
everything in writing. You usually have a few weeks to a month for negotiations. When
you are done negotiating, sign the contract and mail it back. Now finish your dissertation!

Question 8: Failure. Sometimes you fail to get a job – and this is a real possibility in the
academic market place. Unlike the other professions, there are relatively few academic
employers and excellence in research does not always translate into success. There are
two possibilities you must consider:

- You have done everything right but suffered bad luck. This is quite common. The
  average academic job seeker only has two or three interviews and gets a single
  offer. This single opportunity could be thwarted by events beyond your control.
  An unexpected budget cut could mean your job was eliminated at the last minute.
  Maybe there is an unexpected conflict over the hire. There are a million other
  reasons you don’t get an offer – and you will never know why!

- You are screwing up. This is also a real possibility. Ask yourself how you might
  have given a bad impression or otherwise made a mistake. Here are some
  common errors: (a) poorly prepared/delivered job talk; (b) you are no where near
  completing your dissertation and everybody knows it; (c) you are rude towards
  people when you visit and they are insulted – this is quite common; (d) your
  research is hard to sell; (e) you are “packaged” incorrectly – for ex, your
  committee thinks you are God’s gift to quantitative research but you barely
  understand regression; (f) you flubbed basic questions such as what you will teach
  and what your future research will be like. Fortunately, most job search mistakes
  can be fixed and you will improve your odds the next time around.
Overall, the academic job search is a dragged out, often arbitrary process. The bright side is that you can still prepare and fix your mistakes if things don’t work out. You do have a great deal of control over what happens to you.