

ANTH 025 Human Lifecourse in Context

(exercise developed by C. Darrah and modified by Jennifer Anderson)

This assignment should be a minimum of 1000 words, double spaced in 12 point type. It should be presented in essay format. It will be graded according to the essay grading rubric available on the class web page.

Life History Guidelines

Finding Someone to Interview

A life history allows us to learn about human development by interviewing someone and learning about the variety of experiences that have affected their life. A life history will not tell you how people *generally* change over a lifetime, but it will give you ideas about the complexities of a life, the highs and the lows, and both the normative and non-normative influences on life.

Your objective in this project is to prepare a life history by interviewing another person on several occasions. To get started, think about who you want to interview. It is up to you, but try to find someone who is at a different stage of life than you are. That is, if you are 18-25, choose a grandparent or a parent, or the equivalent. If you are older, choose someone either a generation older or a generation younger. Other guidelines for choosing your subject follow. Part of what makes this assignment valuable is how it allows you to explore difference among people, and generational differences are often quite significant.

Choose an individual:

- who you believe is relatively open, honest and reflective about personal matters;
- who is interesting to you and who think would be interested in the project;
- who is accessible and available for repeated questioning;
- who has passed through several phases of life and has many life experiences; and
- who is a relatively good narrator and is able to talk about him or herself.

An important issue is whether the person should have a prior relationship with you. It can be advantageous to choose someone you know since you already have rapport with them. They may be helpful precisely because you will get to know each other better through the interview process. But interviewing someone close to you also has significant drawbacks. It can be problematic if the person does not feel comfortable about revealing himself or herself within the context of your ongoing relationship. I strongly advise, for example, against interviewing your fiancée! Interviewing can create an asymmetry: You know more about them than they know about you because you have the license to ask questions. This can violate informal rules about building and maintaining relationships. Remember, too, that the purpose of the assignment is to learn about another life, not to judge or celebrate it. If you are repulsed by someone or in awe of him or her it can make it difficult to analyze the life history.

If you do not know anyone you can interview, try asking a friend about older relatives that may be available for interviewing. If you have problems identifying someone, come talk to me.

Interviewing

Your goal in interviewing the person is to get them talking about their life. Do not ask questions that can be answered with a yes or no, since to do so is guaranteed to stop the interview and bore both you and them. Here are some guidelines:

- It is often easiest to begin by collecting concrete, neutral information, although you just never know what is neutral for a person. But asking about places they lived, schools they attended, jobs they held, people they lived with is usually a good way to begin. You can guide them by age, if you desire. For example, “Where did you live when you were nine? What school did you attend? Who you did you live with?” Remember that the ideal is to ask the fewest questions and get them to talk the most.
- After you get the concrete descriptive information you can ask them to elaborate. This is best done in a second or even third interview. I strongly recommend interviewing the person at least twice, because (1) you often miss things in the first interview that need more attention and (2) the person generally starts thinking about their life after being interviewed and elaborates more later. Move to greater descriptive detail in subsequent talks and also ask for judgements about the concrete description. For example, you may first establish that someone moved from Fresno to San Jose during high school. You may then wish to ask them what their life was like in Fresno and how it changed after the move. How did their schools compare and contrast? How did their family life change and remain the same? And you may also ask them how they felt at the time, and how they think the move affected their life.
- Do not interrupt except to ask for clarifications or expansions (“Can you tell me more about that?”). They may well take some detours or go off on what appear to be tangents, but be careful about trying to get them “back on track.” You may inadvertently offend them and ruin the rest of the interview, and you may miss out on crucial data. Be patient. Remember that people often jump around in recounting their life, moving effortlessly from teenage years to their first birthday to getting laid off their job to breaking a neighbor’s window with a baseball. You can always sort the chronology out later, so do not constantly admonish them to put it in the right order.
- Do not judge the person. “Why in God’s name did you take that job?” is not a good way to build rapport. Even a raised eyebrow or a roll of the eyes can be interpreted as criticism, so be careful. This does not mean you have to become a robot, only that your goal is to get them to provide a rich picture of their life and they may not do that if they believe there are right and wrong answers to your questions.
- Do not push people too hard. Ask them to elaborate, but if you see signs of discomfort, hang back. You are neither an investigative journalist trying to find the dirt on someone, nor are you a therapist qualified to handle some of the serious psychological luggage that many people carry. If, despite your best efforts, your interviewing does bring up serious issues for someone then back off and inform your instructor. It is extremely unlikely that you will have such a problem if you allow the interviewee to be in control of the process so they can choose what to tell you and what to keep private.

The Report

Your report should begin by explaining how you found the person to interview and why you chose them. Describe where and when the interviews occurred, as well as anything about the process of interviewing that is relevant to the life history (e.g. “We grew to hate each other” or “The people at the next table kept listening in”). How did you record the information? How did you take the information and arrange it into a life history? In other words, state your research methods.

Then present the person’s life history. It must be based on and faithful to what they told you, but do not just submit your notes. You must turn it into a well-written account of the person’s life.

Finally, analyze the life history by answering these questions:

- What are the major transitions they went through? Were there ruptures in which they were doing one thing and then suddenly had to do something different? Why? Were their interruptions, such as to a career? Why? Were their bridges or gradual transitions to new stages of life (e.g. an apprenticeship is a bridge between school and work)? Why?
- What have been their major “careers,” such as family, career, education, civic involvement, spiritual, etc.?
- What are the distinct or idiosyncratic things that shaped their life?
- How has history and culture shaped their life?
- How are their lives linked to particular other people? What are the major roles they have played in life? How are those roles defined?
- What are their core values and where did they come from?

Be sure to make it clear when you are drawing conclusions from your reading of their life history and when you are simply restating what they say. For example, in answering the last question it is important to know whether these are the continuities and discontinuities according to you (regardless of what the interviewee might think) or according to them (regardless of whether you agree). Both are important and both are relevant, but they are different.

TURN IN: One copy of the report to be graded and returned. Keep one copy for yourself as a backup in case something happens to the one submitted.