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## **INSTRUCTIONS for the LIFE STORY INTERVIEW ASSIGNMENT**

For this project you are going to interview someone about his or her life, and write a report. I think you will find that doing the interview is fairly easy and enjoyable. The written paper will be more difficult, because you have to go beyond reporting the facts of the life: you have to analyze what you have heard.

### **What To Read Before You Begin:**

These instructions: Tells you how to do the interview and write the paper

Grading Rubric: Tells you how I will grade your paper

Two examples:

“An Abusive Marriage”: A great paper, written by a former student, with my comments

“Linda’s story”: An example that I wrote

### **Who to interview:**

Someone who is at least 40, preferably older

Someone you know reasonably well, and like

Someone who seems likely to speak openly with you

### **Where, when, how long?**

Find a comfortable, quiet, private place, where you can talk without interruptions.

Give yourself at least a 2-hour block of time. If needed, go back for a second interview.

Tape-record the interview, if possible. If not, take careful notes.

Take a break to write notes at the end of each “chapter” of the life story

**Planning the interview:** Before you begin, make some notes for yourself about what you may hear. Most people’s lives follow a reasonably predictable pattern (they leave home, go to college, spend a few years figuring out what they want to do with their lives, get started in a serious job, get married, have children, and so on.) Think about what the main events and main issues are likely to be at each of those stages. If you don’t hear about these, ask. For example, if your informant talks at length about his job, but says nothing about getting married or having children, you should ask. In addition, you probably already know some things about your informant’s life; think about whatever is likely to be most interesting—and also, whatever may be most difficult for your informant to discuss. For example, you may know that your informant went through a divorce, or is estranged from a child. How are you going to ask about this? If you do this preliminary thinking, it will make the interview easier.

**Explaining the project and getting permission:** Before you start, you have to explain what this project is about, and get your informant’s permission. Your explanation should include these points:

This is a research project that you are doing for school.

You are going to write up a report, based on your conversation.  
The only people who will see this report are you and your instructor (me).  
No one will hear the tape recording except you.  
Your informant can stop the interview at any time.  
Your informant can choose not to discuss anything that is too personal.  
You will disguise the informant as much as possible.

**Getting the interview started:** I asked Linda, the woman I interviewed, to divide her life into chapters, starting around the time that she was getting ready to leave home. Within each chapter, I asked, “What was the main thing that was going on for you?” This made sense to her, and made interviewing easier. It is easy to spend a lot of time on a single chapter; try not to do this. Keep track of time, and keep the interview moving. If you are spending too long on any particular period of time, remind your informant (politely) of how much you have to cover.

**Tips for interviewing:** The best advice I can give you is to regard the interview as a conversation between friends. Keep it casual, and make sure your informant knows that you are interested. Don’t be too worried about covering everything—that is impossible. Above all, don’t ask your informant a series of questions that you have written down beforehand—that makes the interview very stiff and artificial.

**Let your informant talk:** Your informant has already set the agenda by dividing his / her life into chapters of life. Usually, all you need to do is ask, “So what was going on during this period of your life?”  
As a rule, you should talk very little. You can go a surprisingly long way saying little more than, “Huh!” “Really!” “That’s interesting!” and so on.

**Ask for more details about anything that seems particularly interesting**

Often, an informant will mention something briefly that seems important to you. Ask for a longer description of what happened, why it happened, how the informant felt, and so on.  
Of course, you don’t interrupt if your informant is in the middle of a story, but feel free to return to an earlier point when there is a natural pause in the conversation.

**Ask for descriptions of anything (or anyone) that seems important**

People: “Tell me about her; what was she like? What was it like dealing with her?”  
Places: “What kind of place was that? What was it like being there?”  
Action (work and other things): “So what exactly did that involve doing?”

**Ask for examples and incidents that illustrate whatever your informant is describing**

“Can you give me an example of that?”  
“Can you tell me about a particular time when something like that happened?”

**Ask about sequences of events**

“How did that get started? Then what did you do?” “So how did it all end?”

**Focus on the negative:**

What was difficult about a situation / job / relationship?  
What was unfair, or unjust?  
What did the informant end up doing about it?

**Acknowledge whatever is emotionally powerful in your informant's account**

"That must have been hard."  
"It is tough talking about this."

**Dealing with problems in the interview**

Informant has little to say, gives short, vague answers

Ask for examples  
Ask for chronologies

Informant talks too much – long, rambling answers

Sum up what the informant has said – then move on  
Remind the informant of limited time – "I want to hear about all this other stuff too"

Informant gets upset

Acknowledge their emotion  
Offer to pause – and the resume if possible  
Offer to talk about other areas of life  
If necessary, stop

## WRITING THE FINAL REPORT

The final report should be about 8-10 pages long, and include these sections:

- a biography of the person you interviewed (5-6 pages)
- an analysis of the interview, which may include several sub-sections (3-4 pages)
- a brief description of what it was like doing the interview (1 page)

**THE BIOGRAPHY:** This part of your report should be divided into whatever “chapters” seem meaningful to you and the person you interviewed. Select whatever seems important; you won’t have room to include everything. It is hard to predict what will be important to any individual informant; however, it is likely that in each chapter you will want to say something about:

- this person’s significant relationships: with his / her parents; friends, spouse, children;
- this person’s work (including unpaid work, school, military service, and so on)

Your description of each chapter will be best if you can do the following:

- Summarize, in a sentence or two, the main theme of this chapter.
- Give examples. A good example can be fairly brief: a few sentences is usually enough. It does not have to be an extraordinary event, but it should help a reader understand, more clearly, what your informant’s life was like during this time.
- Use quotes. Your report will be livelier if you can occasionally quote directly something your informant said—especially if what they said was unusual or particularly emotional. Don’t worry too much about getting the quote exactly right; just do the best you can.
- You can usually describe things from an external or internal point of view. Both are important, but the internal point of view is often more interesting.
  - External point of view: What were the main things your informant did during this period? [go to college, start a family, try out half-a-dozen jobs, deal with her juvenile delinquent son, etc.]
  - Internal point of view: What was the main way that your informant made sense of whatever she was doing? [Living a carefree life with no thought of the future; figuring out what she was really good at and cared about; re-establishing some self-esteem after a rough divorce, etc.]
- Describe whatever stayed the same from one chapter to another, and whatever changed. Among other things, you might discuss changes in your informant’s important relationships, job—and sense of self.

## THE ANALYSIS

There are two ways to analyze the interview you did—and I urge you to do both, if you can.

- 1) Treat the account as a factual report, and discuss how it relates to theories of adulthood
- 2) Treat the account as a story, and discuss how that story is constructed, and why.

**Treating the interview as a factual report.** When you treat the interview as a factual report, you assume that your informant has told you, more-or-less accurately, what really happened. Your job is to show a reader the larger patterns in these experiences. Here are some things you may want to consider:

**Change: For better or worse:** Try to describe what *changed* from one chapter of the life to another. These may include changing jobs, getting married, having children, and so on. You may also notice changes that are more psychological: your informant got braver, more forgiving, less impetuous, and so on. Please note: not all changes are improvements; your informant's life or personality may have gotten worse: she got increasingly depressed; he got increasingly selfish. (When discuss this, you don't need to repeat what you have already said in the Biography, but you may want to refer back, briefly, to certain key points.)

Relationship with parents and siblings: You may feel that this relationship has improved: This person spends more time with his/ her parents; they talk more openly; they feel that their parents are more supportive or more proud of them, and so on. On the other hand, you may feel that little has changed, or that the relationship has actually gotten worse (angrier, sadder, more distant).

Marriage or love life: Over the years, does this seem to have gotten better, stayed the same, gotten worse? For example: the marriage started well, but now seems to have little passion. Or, the couple went through some rocky years, but now they seem more comfortable with each other. Or, it was never good, but it took years to acknowledge that before getting divorced.

School and career: Has this person's career become steadily better (more interesting, more money, more authority?) Has it been a series of disconnected jobs, with no long-term progress? Have they become stuck in a rut, with little hope of things improving?

Sense of self: Your informant became more confident, independent, effective, sure of what he or she really wanted. Or perhaps your informant grew more bitter, disappointed, depressed, timid, and so on.

**Continuities in the life:** You may also feel that in some important ways, your informant has not changed. Usually, the easiest thing to notice is that your informant keeps getting into the same sort of difficulty over and over. Yes, he got a new job, but he is the same reckless fool he has always been; yes, she got remarried, but she is just as dependent as ever. In particular, look for continuities in:

Relationships: Your informant keeps getting attached to the same sort of person; these relationships seem to go wrong in the same way over and over again.

Style of action: Your informant behaves in more or less the same way again and again (he gets frustrated and quits; she takes unreasonable chances, and so on).

**RELATING WHAT YOU HEARD TO THEORIES OF LIFE SPAN DEVELOPMENT:** A vast body of research describes some of the standard patterns of life in contemporary American society. Of course, these patterns leave a great deal of room for variation. In particular, men and women, and people from different socioeconomic, ethnic and racial backgrounds live in distinctly different sub-cultures. And of course, social rules and expectations keep changing as time marches on. Here is an absurdly brief summary of some of the main stages of adult life:

**Emerging adulthood:** This is the time of life when one is more or less on one's own, free of both one's parents and obligations to a family of one's own. This may be a time to try out a variety of jobs—including some that are highly unlikely to become a long-term career. This may also be a time to have several fairly serious love relationships, none of which end in marriage. Above all, this is a time for figuring out what you want to do with your life, before settling into the long-term commitments of marriage and career.

**Early Adulthood:** This is the period of life when one settles down and begins building a more stable life; usually this includes a family of one's own, and a career. Most people make these commitments thinking that they will last the rest of their lives—although they are aware, of course, that these expectations may be derailed by misfortunes of various sorts: divorce, unemployment, illness—or by more positive, deliberate decisions.

**Marriage:** Most people enter marriage hoping that it will last forever, and that it will be an unending love affair. However, many marriages change, in predictable ways. Once children are born, nearly all marriages adopt a traditional division of labor: one spouse (usually the husband) takes on primary responsibility for making a living; the other spouse (usually the wife) takes on primary responsibility for maintaining the household and caring for the children. Sometimes both partners are happy with this division of labor; sometimes it is a source of conflict.

Many marriages start out as love affairs; gradually, however, the original passion diminishes. Many couples stay together because divorce seems worse—and of course, some marriages end in divorce. Divorce is a major emotional trauma for both husbands and wives. It is often a major financial disaster for the wives: even those who were previously living comfortable, middle class lives may find themselves struggling with poverty.

**Children:** Children inevitably change one's marriage, and maybe one's sense of oneself. For some people, raising a child becomes the single most important and satisfying thing in their life. For others, children add to their stress, and become a source of conflict and disappointment.

**Work:** Some, fortunate people find their work enjoyable, challenging--an opportunity to make the most of their talents. Furthermore, their talent and hard work is recognized

and rewarded by others: They get promoted, or they move from one job to another, with steadily increasing responsibility and better pay. However, other people are less fortunate: instead, their jobs are boring, and poorly-paid. Sometimes these people stay stuck in the same job for years, with little hope for advancement; sometimes they shift from one job to another, none of which is much better than any of the others.

**Middle adulthood:** In this period of life, one's family and career change. During this period, the last child leaves home. This may allow the husband and wife to have more time for each other—or it may allow them to finally get divorced. During this period many people become grandparents. Grandchildren can be a source of joy, and may even help repair the relationship with one's children. At the same time, one's own parents are now getting much older: Caring for elderly parents is often a major concern, and sometimes a source of strain. As for work: by this time, most middle class people have reached the peak of their earning potential. Many have earned a position of senior authority in their line of work—or have started businesses of their own. However, many less-fortunate people are still struggling to make ends meet, or (especially these days) find themselves out of work, with steadily diminishing hope of getting rehired.

**Late Adulthood:** Once again, work and family change form. Many people retire during this time. For those who have been fortunate in their careers, retirement can offer an opportunity for leisure, or travel; some find new ways of occupying their time and feeling vitally engaged. However, for many people, money becomes very tight; many elderly folks face poverty. During this period many wives become widows (it is rarer for men to become widowers). This is a painful loss; however, most widows eventually find ways of rebuilding their lives. Declining health gradually becomes an issue for almost everyone. For most people, declining health is manageable, at least until the last few years of life. For some, however, declining physical and mental health is much more severe. The options for dealing with declining health vary, of course, with one's financial well-being.

### **Additional considerations**

**Financial pressure:** affects the choices people are able to make, the stress they feel, the quality of their marriage, and so on.

**Culture:** People from different cultures may have quite different expectations about how life should be lived. For some, this may be a source of strain. Parents and children may find themselves at odds; the family as a whole may find it difficult to adjust to the expectations of American culture. And of course, "American culture" is itself sub-divided into various sub-cultures: social class, race and ethnicity divide us into separate social worlds.

**History:** Social expectations and opportunities have changed over the decades. Your informant grew up in a different time than you did: The social expectations of that time may have influenced your informant, in ways that would be different today.

**TREATING THE ACCOUNT AS A STORY:** When you analyze an interview as a story, you assume that your informant is not just telling you the facts, they are also making an argument about the kind of person they are. This sort of analysis can be difficult: How do you know that your informant is telling a story and not simply reporting what actually happened? There are two main ways:

- 1) Your informant may describe things in a way that seems unbelievable. For example:
  - Mike said he was afraid that the crowd of people in his store might turn into “a mob.” This seems improbable, no matter how many people came to the sale. Mike’s explanation suggests that he is unusually worried that people who are excited may turn violent.
  - Mike also said that he was bored in school because he was so far ahead of everyone, but he also admitted that he failed his courses in high school. This suggests that he needs to convince himself (and maybe us too) that he was much better than everyone else when in fact he was doing worse.
- 2) Your informant describes several different episodes in strikingly similar terms. For example:
  - Lew described how he rescued himself from one difficult situation after another by *moving on*.

In addition to noticing implausible descriptions and repeated patterns, you may be able to suggest what an informant gains by telling the story in a particular way. For example:

- Mike’s stories make him sound like he is dominating everyone around him. He may need to feel this way about himself because he remembers being dominated by his abusive father.
- Lew’s stories make him sound like a man who refuses to get stuck in a depressing situation. He may need to tell himself this in order to avoid feeling that he will get trapped—like his father and mother.

Every person is different; therefore it is difficult to say what sort of themes you are likely to hear. However, you may find it useful to consider the following distinctions:

- **Stories of redemption versus contamination**
  - Redemption stories describe how a bad situation got better. Most people tell stories of this sort: it is a way of coping with the inevitable frustrations in life.
  - Contamination stories describe how good situations turn bad. This is a less common narrative style; people who tell stories of this sort are often pessimistic and depressed.
- **Stories of adversity versus injustice**



- Adversity stories describe the obstacles and opponents that the informant faced. Some of these obstacles may be overwhelming; however, the informant never suggests that they were in any way unfair or unjust.
- Injustice stories may also describe obstacles and opponents; these stories, however, suggest that the informant was cheated, unfairly criticized, denied help, and so on.

People use these story forms to make all sorts of claims about themselves. For example:

“My life has been one long struggle against adversity; and I had to face all my troubles alone”

“Despite the obstacles, I persevered and triumphed”

“I alone saw what needed to be done – and acted effectively”

“I never listened to what people told me; I did it all my way.”

**Please note:** When you analyze the claims that a life story makes, you have to focus on what is important to your informant—*not* what would have been important to you, had you been in their place.

### **Finally, what was it like doing the interview?**

Where did you do the interview, how long did it take, how did you handle tape recording or taking notes? How did you explain the project, and how did you get started? What problems came up, and how did you handle them? For example, did the person talk too much or too little? Did they get angry, or sad, or embarrassed? Did they avoid talking about some things? Did the story get confusing at times? Did you find yourself not knowing what questions to ask next? What advice would you give anyone else about how to do this?

[A note to NILOA Assignment Library users: this assignment is scaffolded by several other activities and exercises, some but not all of which are included in the Library. For more information, please contact Rick Ochberg at [rochberg@endicott.edu](mailto:rochberg@endicott.edu).]