Soc223. Sociology of Aging Life History Project

Guidelines
The Life History Project provides a way for you to connect an individual’s life with our collective history. Life history is the recording of first hand accounts about the past from people who can give eye-witness information, using interviews, tape-recordings, pictures, diaries, and other research methods. Life histories give us an opportunity to recognize and understand the significant but often ignored contributions of individuals to their families, workplaces, and communities. Since this course focuses on aging and the life course, your interviews should focus on issues like the person’s background, significant social events and relationships in the person’s life, the person’s changing role within the family, the changing network of their social supports, experience with work and retirement, and how this person views the aging experience. We are also interested in learning from this person’s experience with social inequalities and diversity. You need to develop a list of probing questions that will prompt the older person you interview to share insights related to the themes, concepts, and issues we are exploring in class. Below, I have provided you a list of suggested questions that you should adapt to your interviewee and how your interview process progresses.

Select an older person (65+ years of age) for the interview. You will find that these individuals have a vast amount of experience and will reflect upon changes they have encountered in terms of their statuses and roles in their family, their work, in their local communities, and in society in general. You may select someone you know, if you wish, but be careful about selecting someone you know “too well” who may be tempted to say “you already know about that” when you ask a question. A family member who is too close to you may also find it difficult to be fully open about some of their experiences and attitudes. They may feel shy about telling you certain things. On the other hand, if you think you can conduct a thorough and probing interview with such a person, the process may open a new and exciting chapter in your relationship. You need to decide what works for you. In addition to using the life history for this class, you might consider giving your paper, or the tape or transcript of the interviews, to the family, or to the person you interviewed. Often older people have a lot to say but may not be able to write it down, and your paper or interviews can be a real gift.

Basic Principles to Keep in Mind
1. Be very careful about the ethical issues that arise when you are studying other human beings. Respect the privacy of the person you interview. Use a fake name or a first name only when writing your Life History Paper, unless the person has given you permission.
2. Explain honestly what you are doing and why, and to what use your work will be put. Explain that the life history is part of a class project in the sociology of aging that is aimed at gaining insight into the lives of older people and the aging process.
3. Select a person who seems interesting to you and with whom you can feel comfortable.
4. We can learn from every older person we meet, but how much we learn depends on how well we listen.

Technical Guidelines for the Interview Process
1. Set up specific appointments for the interview, preferably at times when no one else is around. Their presence may be distracting or inhibiting.
2. Do the interviews in three to four sessions. In general, you should expect the focused interviews not to exceed one hour, but allow time for informal interaction to establish a comfortable atmosphere.

3. If your interviewee agrees, it is a good idea to tape the interviews so you can listen to them between sessions, and plan your subsequent interviews. If the person does not agree to be recorded, take quick notes during the interview, using where you can the words of the interviewee, and then write up your notes about the interview as soon as possible after your meeting.

4. When you write up your notes, include both the responses of the interviewee and your thoughts and interpretations, including comparisons and contrasts with concepts and themes we have discussed in class. Be sure, however, that you distinguish these comments and reflections from what your interviewee has actually told you. These notes will help you when you construct your paper.

5. Review your notes carefully after each session and jot down any discrepancies, linkages, or additional questions. This can provide an excellent basis for subsequent interview sessions and for the organization of your life history paper.

6. Being nervous, tense, and excited are normal feelings for both you and the person you interview. Try to relax and enjoy the process. Your feelings and reactions during the interview process are also an important source of information. Sharing these reactions with the interviewee, when you feel it appropriate, may also move the interview in interesting directions. Give the person time to think about a question without too quickly jumping in with another question. Allow comfortable silences to exist in the interview. Don’t exhaust your interviewee. Take a break when you feel it is needed.

7. In your first interview, try to concentrate on getting to know more about the person you are interviewing as an individual. Feel free to discuss a variety of issues and try to understand the impact of social and historical events on the individual’s life. It is often easier to get such information through a series of broad, non-directive questions [see suggested questions, below].

8. Your own willingness to share some information about yourself may encourage the older person to be more open with you. Do not probe into issues that the person obviously does not want to pursue. On the other hand, don’t avoid topics that you are uncomfortable asking about or that may provoke strong reactions in the person you interview. If you think the discussion is making your interviewee uncomfortable, ask the person if he or she would rather not discuss the topic.

9. Take down the life history in the words of the person you are interviewing. Remember that you can always follow up on issues you neglected in earlier interviews, which is why you should write your notes and reflect on the process between each interview session.

**Themes, Transitions, and Trajectories**

The main task of the life history process is to become familiar with how the individual understands his or her life. In the effort to interpret or understand their lives, people develop “themes” or a framework through which to put their lives in perspective. These themes will indicate and interpret the transitions in their life and the overall trajectory of their life project.

Sharon Kaufmann, in her book, *The Ageless Self*, defined a **theme** as:
“[T]he means by which [people] interpret and evaluate their life experience and attempt to integrate these experiences to form a self-concept. As people interpret the events, experiences, conditions, and priorities of their lives—making connections and drawing conclusions as they proceed—they formulate themes. In this way, individuals know themselves and explain who they are to others.”

It may help to think of a theme as a current running through a person’s life that gives it meaning and direction. It may also help to think about your own life and identify one or two themes that help you to “explain who you are to others.” If you are having trouble identifying a theme or themes, it might help to talk with me and with other students in the class. As outsiders, we may be able to see themes in a way that you cannot.

The Written Report

Your report should be approximately 10 pages, typed, and double-spaced. Inevitably, you will have a vast quantity of information and will not be able to integrate all of it into the paper, but will have to select excerpts from the interviews to illustrate points of interest. The paper should consist of the following sections:

1. An **Introduction** to the paper in which you discuss briefly what you see as your central findings or the most interesting issues about aging and the life course that emerged from your interviews. The introduction should include a brief description of the older person to give an idea of who this person is. Like any introduction, yours should provide an overview of what you intend to discuss in the paper.

2. **Presentation and Analysis** of the data will form most of this paper. You should describe and discuss your understanding of the person’s life using examples from your notes to illustrate the general finding or themes. Suggested areas include: childhood experiences; adult family life and changing family roles over the life course; intimacy, friends, religion, and other social supports; gender roles and gender-role socialization; experience with social inequality and cultural diversity; work experiences and retirement; change and continuity of values over the life course. Weave the theme you identified in the life course, transitions, and trajectory of the interviewee throughout the body of the paper. Integrate your thoughts on themes, concepts, and issues from the readings and class discussions to enhance your presentation and to highlight the insights you have gained about life experience and the aging process.

3. The **Conclusion** should very briefly summarize your interview experience. You might focus this summary around evaluative questions, such as: Do you feel this person is aging successfully? Why or why not? How has the life history experience affected your ideas and attitudes about aging?

Remember that this life history project is not a library research paper. You are not expected to read all sorts of scholarly articles, but you are expected to make connections with the course themes, concepts, and issues.

Since it is impossible to do a complete life history in three or four short sessions, look at your project as a “working paper.” Try to tie up loose ends, but also recognize issues and questions that cannot be answered. Enjoy the experience for its own sake and as an opportunity to demonstrate your working knowledge of the course content and of the person you interview.
Interview Guide—Suggested Questions

These are simply some suggested questions. Choose what you think will work for you, adding and deleting as appropriate. These questions are simply lead-in questions to get a conversation going. Be prepared to probe and explore further, based on the responses from your interviewee and your own curiosity and interest. You should begin the process with what you feel will be a comprehensive set of questions, but you will undoubtedly modify this list as the process progresses.

1. When and where were you born? What are your earliest memories?
2. Tell me about your childhood: How big was your family? Did you have brothers and sisters? What was your relationship like with your siblings? What was your relationship like with your parents? What was your relationship like with your grandparents?
3. Can you remember your grandparents very well? Were they treated the same way then in the family as you are treated today?
4. What chores were you expected to do around the house? Were tasks divided on the basis of gender? Were there certain expectations in your family because you were male or female? Were people generally expected to do certain things or behave in certain ways because they were male or female? Explain.
5. What was the community like in which you grew up? How did family life fit into community life? Has the general sense of community or connection among people changed since the time you grew up? Explain.
6. Tell me about your adolescence and young adulthood? What were you doing then? What were your concerns then?
7. Tell me about your religious background and experience. Has this had a lasting impact on you and the way you see life?
8. Tell me about your educational experience? How much education were you expected to get? Was this different for men and for women? Was education valued in your family?
9. Were you ever married? What did you expect marriage to be like? Was your marriage as you expected it to be?
10. Did you have any children? How many? What was it like for you being a parent? What were your concerns then? Did becoming a parent give you a different sense of family?
11. Are you a grandparent? What did it feel like to become a grandparent?
12. Tell me about your work life? Did you consider your paid work life a “career”? If so, how important was your career to you? Can you describe aspects of your working life that were not in the paid labor force? What were your concerns then?
13. How do you feel about retirement?
14. What do you feel have been the important successes in your life? The important frustrations?
15. I’m interested in what people see as important turning points, or transitions, in their lives. Could you describe any? What were you doing then? What were you like then?
16. What have been the most influential experiences in your life?
17. If you were writing the story of your life, how would you divide it into chapters?
18. What historical events do you feel had a major impact on your life and the choices you made?
19. How would you describe your social class? Has your social class stayed the same throughout your life, or have you experienced major changes in your social and economic status? Explain.
20. How do you describe your racial or ethnic identity? Has race or ethnicity been a major factor in your life experience? What kind of relations have you had with people of other races or ethnicities?

21. If you could live your whole life over, what would you do differently?

22. If a young person came to you to ask what is the most important thing in living a good life, what would you say?

23. What do you think has stayed the same about you throughout life? What do you think has changed?

24. Considering all the changes you have been through in your life, what are a few of the things you have learned?

25. Do you rely on your family a lot now for support? Explain.

26. How would you describe your health now? Has your health been a major factor in your life experience?

27. What does the word “old” or “aging” bring to mind? Do you consider yourself “old”?

28. How can one prepare for old age?

29. Did you have any expectations at various points in your life about what growing older would be like for you?

30. How do you feel about growing old now?

31. What is the hardest thing about growing older? What is the best thing?

32. What are your concerns for the future?

33. What do you look forward to now?

34. What do you feel is necessary for someone to age successfully? Do you feel you have aged successfully? Why or why not?

35. What do you feel are the most important things that someone should know about you and your life?

Life History Project Assessment

You should complete your interviews if possible by November 14th and complete your paper by the November 21st class, when we will share your papers and discuss what we have learned from this experience. You will then have the opportunity to turn in a final copy of your paper, integrating any new ideas or insights, no later than the December 5th class.

Your papers will be assessed according to the following criteria:

A Excellent (306-340 points): This paper provides a good description of this person’s life course with a thorough integration of life experience with themes, concepts, and issues explored in this course. It clearly develops a unifying theme in the person’s life course, and relates the life course to the aging process and relevant social and historical influences.

B Good (272-305 points): This paper provides a good description of the person’s life course with limited or implied reference to the themes, concepts, and issues explored in this course. The unifying theme and relation to the aging process and relevant social and historical influences are also limited.

C Satisfactory (238-271 points): This paper provides an adequate description of various aspects of the person’s life, but with little reference to the concepts, themes, and issues explored in this course. It also does not organize the presentation and analysis with respect to a clear unifying theme, and develops very little relation to the aging process and relevant social and historical influences.