

LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEWING

LESSON FIVE



CASCADING LIVES
DIGITAL TOOLKIT





Lesson 5: Life History Interviewing

This section describes life history interviews as a way of collecting data about economic struggle and success. Students read life history interview questions, compare and contrast the answers, and begin to develop the ability to ask in-depth and empathetic questions of peers and adults. They learn to see those around them as having complex lives, full of lessons about struggle, possibility, and support.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand what makes life history interviewing different from other kinds of interviews, particularly for understanding economic lives
- Compare a range of answers to the same question in order to look for surprising statements, draw connections, and develop hypotheses
- Consider what makes a good question about someone's life and develop a set of questions to ask

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How are life history interviews different from other ways of finding out about a person?
- Have you ever asked older people about their lives? What have you learned? If not, why haven't you asked? What would you like to know?

MATERIALS

- Interview questions and answers
- Interview question worksheet

CONCEPTS

- Methodology: A way of finding out information from individuals in order to draw larger conclusions.
- Life history interview: A series of questions one can ask to find out about the unfolding of someone's life course.



ACTIVITY: UNDERSTANDING LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEWING

Interviews take a wide range of forms. Job interviews may ask you to speak about your skills and work experiences in a very positive light. Opinion polls might ask for your attitudes about a particular issue. Life history interviews involve asking people about all the parts of their lives, including childhood, young adulthood, and old age. Unlike interview questions that ask directly about income, hours worked, or debt, life histories can tell us a lot about how people made the choices they made and how they weathered ups and downs.

Have students read over the attached interview questions and imagine how a member of their family might answer them.

In small groups, have students read over the answers from various participants in the life history research project. Then, compare and contrast their statements. What answers stood out? What did students expect? What surprised them? How were the answers different or similar? What else would students like to know?

In small groups, develop a list of three questions one could ask about someone's life. As a class, share the questions and work together to refine and pick the ones most likely to lead to interesting and useful answers.

Now, students will do some interviewing of their own. Break the class up into pairs. In each pair, one person should be the interviewer - the one asking the questions just prepared - and one person should be the interviewee.

Once students are done, talk about what it was like to be in each of their roles. What was challenging? Surprising? Awkward? Then, as a class, discuss what makes a good interviewer and interviewee.



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

- How to conduct an interview: <https://yr.media/diy/diy-the-art-of-the-interview/>
- Life history interviewing: <https://www.storii.com/blog/10-great-tips-for-a-life-story-interview>

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We invite you to visit our website, www.brandeis.edu/cascading-lives, to access the full Cascading Lives Digital Toolkit. There, you can also find additional resources produced by the Cascading Lives Project.

The correct citation for the Cascading Lives Digital Toolkit is:
Cascading Lives Project 2021. "Cascading Lives Digital Toolkit." Brandeis University.
www.brandeis.edu/cascading-lives.

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Lesson 5: Life History Interview Questions & Answers

QUESTIONS:

- As a high school student, looking to your future, what did life success mean to you?
- How has COVID changed the work you do?
- Over the course of one's life, there are moments that change your direction, or that challenge you, or during which you go through a period of decline and maybe of recovery. Have you ever experienced something like that?

QUESTION 1: As a high school student looking to your future, what did life success mean to you?

- **TIM**, performer: Two of the teachers that I had were either professional actors or worked in professional theaters in Philadelphia. I had friends of mine through the theater program that were older and so graduated well ahead of me. And they went off to like work for a touring show, being the spotlight operator for some cool show. And I was like, Oh man, like, that's cool being the lighting designer for some band as they do their concerts across the country. That's where you go. It's not going to be high school theater forever. So that looked like a path to success through a thing that I was passionate about. I think from my family, I got the message that success was a steady income, responsible use and spending of money, smart investments. And I kinda knew by the time I was graduating high school, I knew that my dad was not in love with his work, like "I love radiology and everything that it stands for." It was: "I got into it because I knew that there was money in it and it's not my passion, but I think I'm good at."
- **LIZ**, performer: At that point, I was thinking about my future a lot because I hadn't gotten sick yet, so I didn't really know what that was going to be for me. I was just very narrowly focused on getting into a good school. I didn't have specific career goals in high school. I felt like I need to get into the best school and then, you know, keep on getting the best grades. And then it's just like more of the same. I didn't have much imagination and creativity. I was just like, okay, I'm just gonna keep doing this. It was weird cause it was like so much of it was pressure that I placed on myself.
- **AGUSTÍN**, line cook: From the point of view of a 16-year-old, a successful life was living in the big city, having your own house, your own car, but we are talking about more than 25 years ago. How to help my parents, my brothers, my family. To be successful was to be able to help my family. Also, I have to add that when I was 16, since I read so much, my dreams were always dreams of, you always associate success with money, right? ...Yeah, so it was oh, I'm going to study hard so that I'll have so much money and then I'll be happy, and always when I was young, I associated happiness with wealth. But I was already happy, I just didn't know it, right?
- **JENNEKE**, event coordinator: No, I don't think I really was that forward looking. I mean, I kind of had an assumption that I would get married and have kids, you know, I used to write down Mrs. So and so but I think I wasn't an original thinker in how things were going to go. I figured I would get married in my mid to late twenties have kids. Yeah. It wasn't very original.



- **JENIFER**, cake baker: For me, it meant earning good grades, getting good marks. At that time, being able to go to university and have a career. For me, that was what success looked like. Arriving here, it changed my life, but then I didn't just sit around. I went to school to learn English, for three years, four years in a school, learning English. I can bake, I can make you a five-tier wedding cake or a classic birthday cake. I am a doctor and I know how to make a bed, I know how to clean a house and a bathroom, and I learned all of that because I was taught to work since I was little. It's true, I don't have a job right now, I'm not practicing my profession, and it was difficult to process since I've been trained. My dream was to be a professional doctor, to buy a house for my parents, to buy a new car and to travel all over the world. All of that at one time was my dream. Now I understand that this is nothing, that is, education is important, I won't deny that, and the most important thing about that experience remains with you, in you, the experience of it. Those experiences that stay with you from different periods of life, the friendships, the experiences. Those are what is most beautiful about that, but that itself is not the most important thing in life. I know people who have important degrees and they are not successful. I know people who are mechanics, carpenters, who are great and successful. I know bakers who are more successful and more famous than any neurosurgeon. Do you understand what I'm trying to say? It is not the title that gives you success and now I understand that. It is your essence, it is what you bring from yourself.

QUESTION 2: How has COVID changed the work you do?

- **STEVE**, restaurant owner: So, in March, 2020, when it became really obvious that it was going to hit we closed that [restaurant] and pretty quickly our overall sales dropped 85%, you know, we closed altogether. We furloughed a ton of staff. We did our best to make sure they were taken care of, as best we could, you know. With the original \$600 kicker on unemployment and then \$300 kicker unemployment, they were, they were doing okay. Our landlord had been kind to us, but you still have to take costs like heat and lights and you know, maintenance fees and insurance, and all these costs that remain even though you're closed. So we have to pay those, but that's still much cheaper than trying to run the restaurant with a staff. We were losing money.
- **RICARDO**, bartender: Due to my age, I'm 52 years old. I decided, because I work on Broadway, which is a very heavily touristed area that since we're so close to getting the vaccines, I don't want to be the last guy that dies during World War II. So I've taken up sabbatical until I can get my vaccine because I've been fortunate enough to make it so far. When I explained the situation to them, they said, "Oh yeah, absolutely not a problem. Take all the time you need. As soon as you're ready to come back, please come back. We'll be happy to have you."
- **JAI**, bartender: Before COVID hit, I was doing like two shifts a day, you know, and I was making pretty decent money. I mean, I was averaging probably about maybe 60 to \$70,000 a year. And that was primarily from bartending because I got tips, but also, you know, I got hourly pay. The type of jobs that are available right now, it's different. I had to downgrade my skillset and then just put those away, take any job that was available. Before I had a wider selection, I often just focused on bartending, but now it's just, whatever comes up. It'll be security shifts, service shifts, whatever was available



- **MARGARITA**, restaurant worker: For me, for everyone, I think the changes have been difficult, because we were not, or I was not used to being locked up, or to feeling constantly like suddenly I am going to catch the virus, afraid all the time. With unemployment, I have received some money, not what I normally received with my wage. With this help, it is okay, I haven't been so bad, but the changes, yeah, they are a lot really. A lot. There's all the suspense of "Will I get a job? What's going to happen? Will this or that happen? Will it end? What regulations are coming?" All of that...I believe that we are all feeling dread because we do not know what will happen. I can't know with certainty what will be coming for me, in my case, personally. If I go out, doing many things, and I would like to do many things, I would like to visit my family, to do one thing or the other, but the fear is always there that you cannot meet up with people, you cannot be visiting stores, you shouldn't be out on the street. It's that expectation. With work, there are not many people back at work yet, so it's "When will they call us again?" The airports have already opened, but no, the club members have not come back yet, and no one knows if the members will come back, so perhaps the clubs, the VIP Lounge, will close. That creates some fear or, let's say, insecurity.

QUESTION 3: Over the course of one's life, there are moments that change your direction, or challenge you, or where you go through a period of decline and maybe of recovery. Have you ever experienced something like that?

- **JANET**, publicity: My younger brother died in 2017. It was rough and I was not doing well emotionally and it was becoming hard to work and figure out all of the bills and stuff. And so we just decided that I would move home so that I could recover emotionally, but then also it would just sort of have the dual impact of paying down debt. I had thousands of dollars in credit card debt.
- **PATRICIA**, hotel staff: It was when my son got diagnosed with autism. I had to continue working and with everything that I had to do, I didn't know what to do. They told me they were going to do ABA services that it was going to be up to 32 hours at home and I had to be there. And I didn't see that I could manage it. That was the hardest time.
- **JENNEKE**, event coordinator: My parents separated when I was in fourth grade and then they got divorced. The judge decided my sister would stay with my dad and my brother and I would live with my mom in California. So that was wacky. And that was by far the hardest thing, but I was a pretty resilient seventh grader. It's hard to say looking back because I've defined myself and defined the experience since then. But I was resilient and optimistic and being a teenager, I would get wrapped up. I got very wrapped up in my own life. So I think it was harder at first. And then it got easier as time went on. That was six years that we should have been together that we weren't.
- **JENIFER**, cake baker: Yes, when I came to this country and had to leave everything behind, I had to drop everything that I'd been trained to do [laughter]. I had to leave my dreams, I had to change them, change my mind, change my surroundings, leave my friendships. All of that was really challenging.



Lesson 5: Life History Interview Worksheet

INTERVIEWER'S NAME:

QUESTIONS:

Where were your parents or guardians born?

What do your parents or guardians do for work?

How has the pandemic impacted you?

Where would you like to be in 5 years?

What do you want to be when you grow up?

What is your idea of success?