



Preparation for interviews

The more we prescribe our questions, the more we structure our enquiries before the interview, the less we will learn.

In life history work, the aim is to get the subject talking and above all to listen closely. Always remember, if questions that are crucial are not answered in their own time by the life storyteller, they can always be asked later (just keep a running note of them on your pad as questions emerge and return to them later). This is not to say that a well-timed question will not help – it often will – but the point is to help the life storyteller to tell their story, not to get them to help you tell your story or answer your questions.

Human beings are storytelling animals. All the time we are relearning our own stories, trying them out with others and ourselves. Our story is a practised part of ourselves. The task of the interviewer is to tap into this ongoing narrative flow that is part of the living condition, not to keep interrupting it with our own questions and stories.

Lawrence Stenhouse, an early English ethnographer, once argued that the best way to conduct interviews was driving in a car. This way, the interviewer again is looking out of the window ahead and only occasionally turns to make eye contact with the interviewee – likewise, the interviewee is freed from the immediate, interrogative eye of the interviewer. But the setting of the scene for the interviewer is a highly personal decision that has great impact on the subsequent interview. It relates to the next stage of the process.

Building trust with each other

Building trust with the interviewee is an incredibly complicated process and has to be established fairly quickly if the interview is to be successfully conducted. That is the problem: you have got to quickly come to a bonding with each other; quickly come to some kind of agreement; quickly develop some sense of intimacy and trust, before there is going to be any proper exchange of views. It is not going to happen if you do not build up intimacy and trust. There is no programmatic way for establishing intimacy and trust: it is a question of human chemistry and, as such, there is no procedural formula.

What is clear, however, is that the more one explains the process and use of the life history interview, the better this is in building early trust. I always make a point of explaining what is going to happen to the interview when it is completed, and explaining what it is for. Often this transaction can be conducted around the signing of an 'informed consent' protocol. The explanation of this protocol can be part of the process of building up trust and intimacy.

Using a recorder, video or notes

I am a very strong believer in recorder for the reason that I think if you do not use a tape recorder, you are constantly breaking eye contact, and if you have worked hard to establish intimacy and trust, this puts you back to the starting point each time.

This does not, however, mean I only use the tape recorder. I also jot down notes as the interview proceeds. For instance, when bigger ideas begin to emerge, it is important to note them down, for



they may not come back to you when you do the subsequent transcriptions. So I tend to keep a few quick notes about big ideas as they emerge, and return to them immediately after the interview and fill out my reflections. The negotiation around the use and location of the tape recorder is itself a further part of the process of building up intimacy and trust and setting a personalised scene for the interview to take place.

Video adds new dimensions – showing so many other responses. But it can be more intrusive and there is the problem of a wider range of data that can make analysis more complex. Sometimes the image can tell more than the discourse.

The interviewer should not rush to fill the silences and spaces that emerge in an interview but should record and respect them before possibly, in due course, seeking to understand them and ask questions about them.