

The Life Story Interview

Dan P. McAdams, Northwestern University
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Introductory Comments

This is an interview about the story of your life. We are asking you to play the role of storyteller about your own life -- to construct for us the story of your own past, present, and what you see as your own future. People's lives vary tremendously, and people make sense of their own lives in a tremendous variety of ways. As social scientists, our goal is to collect as many different life stories as we can in order to begin the process of making sense of how people make sense of their own lives. Therefore, we are collecting and analyzing life stories of "normal" adults from all walks of life, and we are looking for significant commonalities and significant differences in those life stories that people tell us.

In telling us a story about your own life, you do not need to tell us everything that has ever happened to you. A story is selective. It may focus on a few key events, a few key relationships, a few key themes which recur in the narrative. In telling your own life story, you should concentrate on material in your own life that you believe to be important in some fundamental way -- information about yourself and your life which says something significant about you and how you have come to be who you are. Your story should tell how you are similar to other people as well as how you are unique. Our purpose in these interviews is to catalogue people's life stories so that we may eventually arrive at some fundamental principles of life-storytelling as well as ways of categorizing and making sense of life stories constructed by healthy adults living at this time in history and in this place. We are not interested, therefore, in pathology, abnormal psychology, neurosis and psychosis. We are not trying to figure out what is wrong with you. Nor are we trying to help you figure out what is wrong with you. The interview should not be seen as a "therapy session." This interview is for research purposes only, and its sole purpose is the collection of data concerning people's life stories.

The interview is divided into a number of sections. In order to complete the interview within, say, an hour and a half or so, it is important that we not get bogged down in the early sections, especially the first one in which I will ask you to provide an overall outline of your story. The interview starts with general things and moves to the particular. Therefore, do not feel compelled to provide a lot of detail in the first section in which I ask for this outline. The detail will come later. I will guide you through the interview so that we can finish it in good time. I think that you will enjoy the interview. Most people do.

Questions?

I. Life Chapters

We would like you to begin by thinking about your life as a story. All stories have characters, scenes, plots, and so forth. There are high points and low points in the story, good times and bad times, heroes and villains, and so on. A long story may even have chapters. Think about your life story as having at least a few different chapters. What might those chapters be? I would like you to describe for me each of the main chapters of your life story. You may have as many or as few chapters as you like, but I would suggest dividing your story into at least 2 or 3 chapters and at most about 7. If you can, give each chapter a name and describe briefly the overall contents in each chapter. As a storyteller here, think of yourself as giving a plot summary for each chapter. This first part of the interview can expand forever, so I would like you to keep it relatively brief, say, within 20-25 minutes. Therefore, you don't want to tell me "the whole story" now. Just give me a sense of the story's outline -- the major chapters in your life.

[The interviewer may wish to ask for clarifications and elaborations at any point in this section, though there is a significant danger of interrupting too much. If the subject finishes in under 10 minutes, then he/she has not said enough, and the interviewer should probe for more detail. If the subject looks as if he/she is going to continue beyond half an hour, then the interviewer should try (gently) to speed things along somewhat. Yet, you don't want

the subject to feel "rushed." (It is inevitable, therefore, that some subjects will run on too long.) This is the most open-ended part of the interview. It has the most projective potential. Thus, we are quite interested in how the subject organizes the response on his or her own. Be careful not to organize it for the subject.]

II. Critical Events

Now that you have given us an outline of the chapters in your story, we would like you to concentrate on a few key events that may stand out in bold print in the story. A key event should be a specific happening, a critical incident, a significant episode in your past set in a particular time and place. It is helpful to think of such an event as constituting a specific moment in your life story which stands out for some reason. Thus, a particular conversation you may have had with your mother when you were 12-years-old or a particular decision you made one afternoon last summer might qualify as a key event in your life story. These are particular moments set in a particular time and place, complete with particular characters, actions, thoughts, and feelings. An entire summer vacation -- be it very happy or very sad or very important in some way -- or a very difficult year in high school, on the other hand, would not qualify as key events because these take place over an extended period of time. (They are more like life chapters.)

I am going to ask you about **8** specific life events. For each event, describe in detail what happened, where you were, who was involved, what you did, and what you were thinking and feeling in the event. Also, try to convey what impact this key event has had in your life story and what this event says about who you are or were as a person. Please be very specific here.

Questions?

Event #1: Peak Experience

A peak experience would be a high point in your life story -- perhaps the high point. It would be a moment or episode in the story in which you experienced extremely positive emotions, like joy, excitement, great happiness, uplifting, or even deep inner peace. Today, the episode would stand out in your memory as one of the best, highest, most wonderful scenes or moments in your life story. Please describe in some detail a peak experience, or something like it, that you have experienced some time in your past. Tell me exactly what happened, where it happened, who was involved, what you did, what you were thinking and feeling, what impact this experience may have had upon you, and what this experience says about who you were or who you are. [Interviewer should make sure that the subject addresses all of these questions, especially ones about impact and what the experience says about the person. Do not interrupt the description of the event. Rather ask for extra detail, if necessary, after the subject has finished initial description of the event.]

Event #2: Nadir Experience

A "nadir" is a low point. A nadir experience, therefore, is the opposite of a peak experience. It is a low point in your life story. Thinking back over your life, try to remember a specific experience in which you felt extremely negative emotions, such as despair, disillusionment, terror, guilt, etc. You should consider this experience to represent one of the "low points" in your life story. Even though this memory is unpleasant, I would still appreciate an attempt on your part to be as honest and detailed as you can be. Please remember to be specific. What happened? When? Who was involved? What did you do? What were you thinking and feeling? What impact has the event had on you? What does the event say about who you are or who you were?

Event #3: Turning Point

In looking back on one's life, it is often possible to identify certain key "turning points" -- episodes through which a person undergoes substantial change. Turning points can occur in many different spheres of a person's life - in relationships with other people, in work and school, in outside interests, etc. I am especially interested in a turning point in your understanding of yourself. Please identify a particular episode in your life story that you now see as a turning point. If you feel that your life story contains no turning points, then describe a particular episode in your life that comes closer than any other to qualifying as a turning point. [Note: If subject repeats an earlier

event (e.g., peak experience, nadir) ask him or her to choose another one. Each of the 8 critical events in this section should be independent. We want 8 separate events. If the subject already mentioned an event under the section of "Life Chapters," it may be necessary to go over it again here. This kind of redundancy is inevitable.]

Event #4: Earliest Memory

Think back now to your childhood, as far back as you can go. Please choose a relatively clear memory from your earliest years and describe it in some detail. The memory need not seem especially significant in your life today. Rather what makes it significant is that it is the first or one of the first memories you have, one of the first scenes in your life story. The memory should be detailed enough to qualify as an "event." This is to say that you should choose the earliest (childhood) memory for which you are able to identify what happened, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Give us the best guess of your age at the time of the event.

Event #5: Important Childhood Scene

Now describe another memory from childhood, from later childhood, that stands out in your mind as especially important or significant. It may be a positive or negative memory. What happened? Who was involved? What did you do? What were you thinking and feeling? What impact has the event had on you? What does it say about who you are or who you were? Why is it important?

Event #6: Important Adolescent Scene

Describe a specific event from your teen-aged years that stands out as being especially important or significant.

Event #7: Important Adult Scene

Describe a specific event from your adult years (age 21 and beyond) that stands out as being especially important or significant.

Event #8: One Other Important Scene

Describe one more event, from any point in your life, that stands out in your memory as being especially important or significant.

III. Life Challenge

Looking back over the various chapters and scenes in your life story, please describe the single greatest challenge that you have faced in your life. How have you faced, handled, or dealt with this challenge? Have other people assisted you in dealing with this challenge? How has this challenge had an impact on your life story?

IV. Influences on the Life Story: Positive and Negative

Positive

Looking back over your life story, please identify the single person, group of persons, or organization/institution that has or have had the greatest positive influence on your story. Please describe this person, group, or organization and the way in which he, she, it, or they have had a positive impact on your story.

Negative

Looking back over your life story, please identify the single person, group of persons, or organization/institution that has or have had the greatest negative influence on your story. Please describe this person, group, or organization and the way in which he, she, it, or they have had a negative impact on your story.

V. Stories and the Life Story

You have been telling me about the story of your life. In so doing, you have been trying to make your life into a story for me. I would like you now to think a little bit more about stories and how some particular stories might have influenced your own life story. From an early age, we all hear and watch stories. Our parents may read us stories when we are little; we hear people tell stories about everyday events; we watch stories on television and hear them on the radio; we see movies or plays; we learn about stories in schools, churches, synagogues, on the playground, in the neighborhood, with friends, family; we tell stories to each other in everyday life; some of us even write stories. I am interested in knowing what some of your favorite stories are and how they may have influenced how you think about your own life and your life story. I am going to ask you about three kinds of stories. In each case, try to identify a story you have heard in your life that fits the description, describe the story very briefly, and tell me if and how that story has had an effect on you.

Television, Movie, Performance: Stories Watched

Think back on TV shows you have seen, movies, or other forms of entertainment or stories from the media that you have experienced. Please identify one of your favorite stories from this domain -- for example, a favorite TV show or series, a favorite movie, play, etc. In a couple of sentences, tell me what the story is about. Tell me why you like the story so much. And tell me if and how the story has had an impact on your life.

Books, Magazines: Stories Read

Now think back over things you have read -- stories in books, magazines, newspapers, and so on. Please identify one of your favorite stories from this domain. Again, tell me a little bit about the story, why you like it, and what impact, if any, it has had on your life.

Family Stories, Friends: Stories Heard

Growing up, many of us hear stories in our families or from our friends that stick with us, stories that we remember. Family stories include things parents tell their children about "the old days," their family heritage, family legends, and so on. Children tell each other stories on the playground, in school, on the phone, and so on. Part of what makes life fun, even in adulthood, involves friends and family telling stories about themselves and about others. Try to identify one story like this that you remember, one that has stayed with you. Again, tell me a little bit about the story, why you like it or why you remember it, and what impact, if any, it has had on your life.

VI. Alternative Futures for the Life Story

Now that you have told me a little bit about your past, I would like you to consider the future. I would like you to imagine two different futures for your life story.

Positive Future

First, please describe a positive future. That is, please describe what you would like to happen in the future for your life story, including what goals and dreams you might accomplish or realize in the future. Please try to be realistic in doing this. In other words, I would like you to give me a picture of what you would realistically like to see happen in the future chapters and scenes of your life story.

Negative Future

Now, please describe a negative future. That is, please describe a highly undesirable future for yourself, one that you fear could happen to you but that you hope does not happen. Again, try to be pretty realistic. In other words, I would like you to give me a picture of a negative future for your life story that could possibly happen but that you hope will not happen.

[Note to interviewers: Try to get as much concrete detail as possible.]

VII. Personal Ideology

Now I would like to ask a few questions about your fundamental beliefs and values and about questions of meaning and spirituality in your life. Please give some thought to each of these questions.

1. Consider for a moment the religious or spiritual dimensions of your life. Please describe in a nutshell your religious beliefs or the ways in which you approach life in a spiritual sense.
2. Please describe how your religious or spiritual life, values, or beliefs have changed over time.
3. How do you approach political and social issues? Do you have a particular political point of view? Are there particular issues or causes about which you feel strongly? Describe them.
4. What is the most important value in human living? Explain.
5. What else can you tell me that would help me understand your most fundamental beliefs and values about life and the world, the spiritual dimensions of your life, or your philosophy of life?

VIII. Life Theme

Looking back over your entire life story as a story with chapters and scenes, extending into the past as well as the imagined future, can you discern a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the story? What is the major theme of your life story? Explain.

IX. Other

What else should I know to understand your life story?