Guided Autobiography

Revised 1997

The purpose of this exercise is to sample certain key events in your life. We will be asking you to construct your own autobiography -- the story of your life as you understand it, past, present, and anticipated future. However, the autobiography will be highly selective. We will be asking you to focus on 8 particular "episodes" or "scenes" in your life story and to describe each of these in some detail. Therefore, you will not have the opportunity to tell your entire story, to relate the many different events, characters, happenings, and themes that would doubtlessly go into a full-length autobiography -- as you might do if you were writing a book about yourself. In this brief written exercise a lot of important information about you and your life will be left out. Nevertheless, we believe that focusing on only 8 episodes will provide an interesting and useful perspective from which we may view your own life story.

People's lives vary tremendously, and people make sense of their lives in a tremendous variety of ways. As social scientists, we wish 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 autobiographies of "normal" people from all walks of life, and we are looking for significant commonalities and significant differences in those life stories that people tell us. Essentially, we wish to catalogue people's life stories so that we may eventually learn more about how American adults make sense of their lives. 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 aiming to pass judgment on the "goodness" of your life. Instead, we want to "read" your life story as if it were a book, seeing what kinds of characters, scenes, and themes you identify.

This life-story exercise is organized around the idea of critical events or episodes. An event or episode is a specific happening that occurs in a particular time and place. It is most helpful to think of such an event as constituting a specific moment in your life which stands out for some reason. Examples might be a surprise birthday party that your friends threw for you on your 18th birthday, a particular conversation with your spouse or friend in November of last year, or your reactions to learning that someone close to you died one summer day in 1986. Your last summer's vacation and a difficult week at work, by contrast, are not events because they occur over an extended period of time, even though they may be very important to you. Thus, your vacation would be more like a series of events than an event per se. We want you to concentrate on single events, rather than on a series of events or an extended period of time.

On the following pages, we will describe 8 different kinds of events. For each one, we ask that you write a description that is at least a paragraph or two in length. Think about the event carefully and then include all of the following in your written description of the event:

1. When did the event occur? (How old were you?)
2. What exactly happened in the event?
3. Who was involved in the event?
4. What were you thinking, feeling, and wanting in the event?
5. Why do you think that this is an important event in your life story? What does this event say about who you are, who you were, who you might be, and how you have developed over time?

1. PEAK EXPERIENCE (HIGH POINT)

Many people report occasional "peak experiences." These are generally moments or episodes in a person's life in which he or she feels a sense of great uplifting, joy, excitement, contentment, or some other highly positive emotional experience. Indeed, these experiences vary widely. Some people report them to be associated with religious or mystical experience. Others find great joy or excitement in vigorous athletics, reading a good novel, artistic expression, or in love or friendship. A peak experience may be seen as a "high point" in your life story -- a particular experience that stands out in your memory as something that is extremely positive. Please describe below in some detail a peak experience that you have experienced sometime in your life. Make sure that this is a particular and specific incident (e.g., happened at a particular time and in a particular place) rather than a general "time" or "period" in your life. Please write about exactly what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, why this event is significant, and what this event says about you and your personality.

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2. NADIR EXPERIENCE (LOW POINT)

A "nadir" is a low point. A nadir experience, therefore, is the opposite of a peak experience. Please think about your entire life. Try to remember a specific experience in which you felt extremely negative emotions, such as despair, disillusionment, terror, profound guilt, shame, etc. You should consider this experience to represent one of the “low points” in your life story. Even though this memory is unpleasant, we would still appreciate an attempt on your part to be honest and straightforward and to provide us with as much detail as possible. Please remember to be specific. We would like to know what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, why the event is significant, and what the event says about you and your personality.
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. We are especially interested in a turning point in your understanding of yourself. Please identify a particular episode in your life story in which you underwent an important transition or change with respect to your understanding of yourself. It is not necessary that you consciously saw the event as a turning point when it actually happened. Rather, what is important is that you now see this particular event as a turning point in your life. If you feel that you have experienced no dramatic turning points in your life, then describe a particular episode in your life that comes closer than any other to qualifying as a turning point. Please describe what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, why this experience is significant, and what it may say about you and your personality.
4. CONTINUITY

In the last response, you described an experience in which you underwent an important change in your understanding of yourself. Now we would like you to focus on an opposite kind of experience. In this case, we are interested in a particular experience that affirms some way in which you have remained the same over time. In other words, rather than focus on an experience of change, we want you to consider a moment in your life story in which in some way you demonstrated a sameness or continuity in your life. Think back on your life in the recent past (e.g., the last two years or so) and choose a single event or experience that you believe illustrates something within you that is stable and unchanging. This event should reveal a pattern in your life that occurs again and again. For instance, you may find that over the course of your life you tend to react to a threat from authority by getting angry at someone you love. This was most recently evidenced, say, in an event in which your boss at work criticized your performance and you subsequently went home and yelled at your spouse for a minor oversight. Or more positively, say, a recent conversation with a new friend may have been very similar, in content or form, to many previous conversations you have had when making friends, even as a child. Thus, this conversation would illustrate a thread of continuity or sameness in your autobiography. Therefore, please choose a recent event in your life that illustrates a pattern of sameness and continuity. Please describe the event in detail. Tell us what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, why the event is significant, and what the experience may say about you and your personality.
4. EARLIEST MEMORY

Every life story begins somewhere. Your earliest memory might be considered the beginning of your life story. Please think back on your life, as far back as you can. Choose from your distant memory what you now consider to be your earliest (childhood) memory for which you are able to identify what happened, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Give us your best guess of your age at the time of the event. In addition, please speculate as to why this event is significant in your life story, what it may say about who you are or were and/or about your personality.
5. CHILDHOOD EVENT

Now we would like you to move forward from your earliest memory and consider a later event in your childhood. Please describe a particular event from your childhood years (before the age of 13) that stands out in your memory. The event may be positive or negative, important or seemingly trivial. The point here is that this memory stands out -- it is something that you recall clearly and something that, when you think about your past, seems to have a certain prominence or specialness. Please describe this particular event in detail. Remember to tell us what happened, when, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, why this event is significant in your life story, and what the event may say about you and your personality.
6. ADOLESCENT EVENT

We would like you to move forward in time again, to your teen-aged years (ages 13-19). This period in one's life is generally considered to be "adolescence." Please choose a single event from your adolescent years that stands out clearly in your mind as a particularly prominent or significant personal experience. Once again, the event may be positive or negative. Please describe the event in some detail. Tell what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, why the event is significant, and what the event may say about you and your personality.
7. MORALITY

Throughout life we learn lessons about what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. As children, we are taught about morality at home, in schools, in churches, and so on. As we get older, we may struggle with questions of right and wrong. We may worry about the extent to which our lives are good and the extent to which we do the right thing. We may experience guilt or shame when we do something that violates our own or others’ standards. We would like you to consider a particular episode in your life in which you faced a moral issue in some way. This could be an episode in which you engaged in an immoral act of some kind, were taught a moral lesson, wrestled with a moral dilemma, or made a decision to behave according to new moral standards -- or any other life episode that connects to morality in some way. Please describe the event in detail, tell us what moral issue was involved, and say a word or two about what impact this event has had on you.
8. DECISION

Our lives are punctuated by events in which we must make an important choice or decision. You have probably made at least one or two important decisions in your life. Indeed, every day we are faced with many minor decisions -- we have to decide what to wear in the morning, what to have for lunch, etc. Important decisions, on the other hand, may affect the course of our lives, as in deciding whether or not to marry a particular person, what occupation to pursue, what to believe in, etc. Please consider the most important decisions or choices you have made in your life. Describe in detail a particular event in your life in which you made an important decision. Please tell us what the decision was and why it was an important one. As usual, tell us what happened in the event, when the event occurred, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, and what the event says about you and your personality.
At different points in our lives, we set different goals for the future. Goals may be short-term as when we plan to save up enough money to buy a car. And they may be long-term -- the goal of completing medical school, raising a family, becoming President of the United States. Please consider your current goals -- goals towards which you are currently striving in one way or another. Choose the single goal that is most important to you right now. Describe a specific event from your recent past in which you did something that was aimed at this goal. For instance, if your goal is to become an Olympic skater, then you might want to describe a particular practice session in which you worked hard on perfecting the routine. If your goal is to mend your relationship with your daughter, then you might want to describe a recent conversation that you had with her in which you aimed at this goal. Please be specific in your description of this particular event and of the goal. Begin your account by telling us what the goal is and why it is important to you. Then, tell us what happened in the event, when the event happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, and what the event may say about you and your personality.
Thank you for your cooperation.