

Preparatory hints for conducting biographical interviews

General considerations

- ◆ What is a biographical interview?

To guide a biographical interview means to encourage another person to get into telling her or his life story. This type of interview differs from asking questions for data and facts.

- ◆ What might be the benefit for the interviewee?

Telling the story of one's life is a comprehensive reflecting process. Phases of reflection enable the narrator to embed her or his own life in a larger social context.

- ◆ Biographical narratives are always changing

When telling stories, you try to create a red thread through your own life that connects the breaks and contradictions that make up every biography. You take stock of yourself by establishing connections and making adjustments – depending on the situation in which you are telling, also depending on the interviewing person (her or his gender, age, position etc.).

That is why biographical narratives are always changing. Sometimes you emphasize one thing more, sometimes the other, by constantly reorganising your life experiences. It always depends on the social context.

- ◆ There exist different perspectives

As listening interviewers, we hear of “realities” from the perspective of the narrator. These realities can contradict our own experiences or historical knowledge. Conducting a biographical interview is not about learning about the historical “truth”. Rather, it is about how the narrator experienced moments in her or his life and what conclusions she or he draws from them. There is no *right* or *wrong* in a biographical narrative.

Methodological aspects

Before conducting the interview

- ◆ When contacting the interviewee clarify the context of the interview, the content and target of the project.
- ◆ Explain the focus/historic topic of the interview, clarify that you plan to record the interview and who – besides you – will be present. If possible, work with a small team, an interviewer, a camera/wo/man.

- ◆ Explain that excerpts from the interview will be published on the project's online platform for learning methods.
- ◆ Clarify the timeframe: 45-60 minutes, max. 90 minutes, as the attention of both decreases.
- ◆ Together with the interview partner, chose a quiet, undisturbed location for the interview. If possible, visit the interviewee at home, as there is too much background noise in a coffee shop and the sound recordings could suffer as a result.

The interview

- ◆ At the beginning, clarify the timeframe again. Initiate the interview with a brief summary of the project objective and describe your chosen national topic. Then invite the interviewee with an open question to tell about the origin of the family, childhood etc. and his or her involvement in the events.
- ◆ Signal your attention as a listener through eye contact, nods, and silent approval signals.
- ◆ Do not interrupt the narrative flow until the first phase of the narration has ended. Then you can ask immanent questions that arise from what is being told: "You mentioned earlier that ... Would you like to elaborate on that?"
- ◆ Make sure that the interviewee continues with a full sentence so that the interview can be cut sensibly.
- ◆ Accept breaks in the flow of speech and do not interrupt them, the narrator must have time to sort her or his thoughts.
- ◆ Only when the interviewee has finished her or his story, ask further questions on topics that have not yet been addressed in order to receive additional information.
- ◆ Avoid to start narrating yourself, stay in the role of a listener.

After the interview

- ◆ Explain that passages from the narrative will be selected and transcribed for publication.
- ◆ Inform the interviewee that selected passages will be translated into English and that short video clips of the interview will be published on the website as object lessons.
- ◆ Ask the interviewee to sign the prepared statement to release the publication rights.
- ◆ If requested, you can forward the transcription to the interviewee for review.