

Interviews: Possible topics and questions

Walter vom Saal

This handout provides a list of possible topics and questions for interviews with the elderly. It was developed over a period of years and includes suggestions from class discussions. It is offered as a source of ideas. Each student is responsible for selecting specific topics to discuss based on the interests of the student, the interests of the person being interviewed, and the relationship between the student and interviewee. Each student should prepare a written plan in advance of each interview for the topics to be discussed and possible discussion questions. However, students should be flexible and willing to modify original plans depending on how each interview develops.

See the main list of handouts for additional suggestions on interviews on specific topics.

A. General topics and possible questions.

1. Introduction and overview.

- discussion of ground rules (voluntary participation; confidentiality)
- discussion of practical details (when, where, etc.)
- overview of interviews.
- any questions?

2. Life overview.

- basic information:
 - Name (NOT GIVEN IN REPORT)
 - address.
 - phone number.
 - age.
 - sex.
 - marriage status.
 - number of children.
 - primary relationships.
 - current living situation.
- lifeline chart (chart of life events):
 - vertical axis from plus (good) to minus (bad) with 0 in middle.
 - horizontal axis shows age from 0 to current age and also 10 years beyond
 - draw line going up and down showing happiness/quality of life.
 - label line with key events. (Example: line goes up at age 10 when met a friend, down at age 12 when family moved to new city, etc.)
 - question for analysis: importance of achievements vs. relationships.
- describe the concept of "defining" events that have significant impact on life direction, life satisfaction, values, attitudes, or self-image. Did you have "defining events" in your life?
 - were there significant changes in life direction, life satisfaction, values, attitudes, or self-image across your life span?
 - describe the concept of life as a series of "chapters" and "transitions." What were the major life transitions in your life?
 - describe the concept of "life crises" that can be "transforming" or cause major "transformations." Did you have any crises or transformations?

3. Possible framework for obtaining life history:

pre-school	grade school	high school	early adult	middle adult	late adult
family	family	family	family	family	family
---	school	school	school?	school?	school?
---	---	---	career?	career?	career?
friends	friends	friends	-----	friends and social life	-----
love/sex	love/sex	love/sex	love/sex	love/sex	love/sex
primary	primary	primary	primary	primary	primary
relationships	relationships	relationships	relationships	relationships	relationships
anything	anything	anything	anything	anything	anything
else?	else?	else?	else?	else?	else?

4. Families. (SEE ALSO SEPARATE HANDOUT ON FAMILIES.)

- family diagram.
- family structure.
- family communication patterns.
- family roles; family rules; family secrets.
- describe holidays.
- family importance; family influence.

For all of this:

- do for family of origin.
- do for current family.
- any conclusions about guidelines for successful families?

5. Physical changes and challenges.

- begin by getting a "health history"?
- have you had major health problems in your life?
- physical challenges: physical changes; sensory deterioration; physical health.
- intrinsic vs. extrinsic changes.
- "normal" changes of aging; other changes due to environment.
- lifestyle choices (alcohol, smoking, diet, exercise, healthy/unhealthy).

6. Mental changes and challenges.

- mental health.
- changes in intellectual and memory abilities.
- coping with tension and stress. (Refer to class handouts for ways people show tension and stress, causes of tension and stress, and ways people handle tension and stress.)
- how do you cope with tension and stress?

7. Relationships. (SEE ALSO SEPARATE HANDOUT ON RELATIONSHIPS.)

- begin by getting a "relationship history."
- loving, dating, sex, marriage. Were these important for you? Describe.
- friendships. Were these important for you? Describe.
- guidelines for successful / unsuccessful relationships.
- guidelines for successful / unsuccessful marriage.

8. Personality.

- personality self-evaluations.
- use personality questionnaires (some may be available from professor).
- use values questionnaires (some may be available from professor).

9. Discuss your major attitudes, feelings, values.

10. Describe "A Typical Day in My Life."

- now
- at other significant times in your life.
- also cover hobbies, interests, activities.
- use this to lead into:
 - What is Important to Me.

11. Describe yourself:

- as others see you.
- as you see yourself.
- any differences between the way you see yourself and how others see you?
- possible questions depending on relationship: tell me one thing about yourself that others don't know.

12. Career.

- include education if relevant.
- career plans, directions.
- changes across the life span.
- importance of career. Is it a "career" vs. "just a job"
- differences between men, women.
- values, priorities (as compared with home, family, etc.)
- retirement: description; impact.

13. Sex roles.

- "male" vs. "female"; "masculine" vs. "feminine."
- "proper" roles.
- review list of adjectives shown on handout on sex differences.
- how well did they fit the "proper" roles?
- any changes for them across the life span?

- happiness; quality of life; life satisfaction.
- use happiness questionnaires (some may be available from professor).

14. Wisdom and "what I have learned from life."

- what have you learned from life?
- if you had your life to live over again, what would you do the same?
- if you had your life to live over again, what would you do differently?
- if asked for words of wisdom or advice, what might you say?

15. Final session wrap -up.

- summary of what you have learned.
- comments?
- questions?
- Say Thanks.
- Avoid saying "I'll call you " or "I'll see you again unless you are absolutely 100% confident you will do it.

[See next page for possible five-session interview sequence.]

B. Possible five-session interview sequence. The following interview sequence is offered as a suggestion for students who are conducting five interviews over a period of five weeks. This possible sequence of interviews is offered as a suggestion for those students who prefer a structured framework. It may be adjusted to suit individual circumstances. Students who wish may design an alternative structure. All students should be willing to modify original plans depending on how the interviews develop, what seems to be important for the individual being interviewed, and the strengths, weaknesses, interests, and preferences of the student conducting the interviews.

1. Introduction, overview.

- discussion of ground rules (voluntary participation; confidentiality)
- discussion of practical details (when, where, etc.)
- overview of interviews.
- general life overview (lifeline chart or other activity).

2. Families.

- family diagram.
- family structure.
- family communication patterns.
- family roles; family rules; family secrets.
- family importance; family influence.

For all of this:

- do for family of origin.
- do for current family.
- any conclusions about guidelines for successful families?

3. Facing challenges.

- physical challenges: physical changes; sensory deterioration; physical health.
- intrinsic vs. extrinsic changes; lifestyle choices.
- mental health.
- changes in intellectual and memory abilities.
- coping with tension and stress.

4. Relationships.

- loving, dating, sex, marriage.
- friendships.
- guidelines for successful / unsuccessful relationships.

5. Personality and quality of life.

- personality self-evaluations.
- happiness and quality of life.
- wisdom and "what I have learned from life."
- wrap -up: questions, comments. Thanks. Avoid "I'll call you " or "I'll see you again unless you are absolutely 100% confident you will do it.