Prompt for Oral History Interview

Assignment

You are to interview a migrant on his/her experience of childhood in her/his country of origin and the migration process. This person can be a fellow student, a family member, a neighbor, or some other person with the approval of the teacher. While some leeway is given to the interviewer as to questions asked and kind of information gathered from the interviewees, the focus should be on childhood experiences, how childhood is expressed/understood in the society from which they came, and then what the migration (and/or refugee) experience was like as a young person. This assignment is not a journalistic interview, per se, wherein you must gather and verify “facts,” rather it is creating a biography of the interviewees through their own relating of their personal history. As the interviewer, your job should be to ask questions that will then enable you to attempt to create a narrative of particular aspects of childhood in their cultural setting(s), how they are expressed/understood/taught, and, if/when the interviewees arrived to the United States, their personal observations on the contrast/differences/similarities of childhood between their country of origin and the US.

Teachers will be organized into groups of six (6) for this assignment. They should share/distribute responsibilities.

Each group will present (orally with PowerPoint) their project (person) on July 29.

Parameters

You will create a structured narrative biography of your interviewee that is 7-10 pages in length. While you can certainly include many quotes (large or small) from the interview, there should be an overarching narrative written by you that tells the story, that is, creates a biography, and may make additional points of information (historical, linguistic, cultural or other kinds of info). Part of the page length is due to the assumed inclusion of at least one or two maps or images.

As an introduction, or for information purposes, you should insert a number of maps of locations (that came up in the interview) or pictures of some places/practices mentioned by the interviewee. If the interviewee is amenable, perhaps you can also include a photograph of the person as a child and/or adult, as appropriate.

In advance of the interview, you (your team?) must strategize as to who will be interviewed and why, and present that to the teacher for approval. You must also ensure that the person is willing to do the interview and is accessible, either in-person or via Zoom.

Interviewing someone in another language is certainly acceptable but of course the assignment is to be written in English. Particular terms that have resonance in the other language can be explained if necessary. Please see some recommendations below if you decide to interview someone in another language.

[Depending on the team, you should share responsibilities (such as all writing questions together), but perhaps you will distribute duties more or less along the lines of: Whose grandma/classmate/neighbor will be interviewed (who provides the “connection” to the person), who (can be multiple people) will conduct
the interview, who might record/edit the interview, who might translate, who will write and format the assignment, who will find/provide/format images/maps, and so forth…]

As mentioned above, you/your team should design questions that are specifically tailored to the person and his/her circumstances, but some general “baseline” questions are required, as provided below. These questions (plus your own) should structure the 10 pages into six sections:

1. Introduction; who is this person in relation to the interviewer(s); what was the setting in which you interviewed him/her; if you interviewed in a language other than English explain how that was conducted and translated.

2. Earliest memories of youth; family structure, activities (cultural, religious, social, or otherwise).

3. As the person grew older, what kinds of observations/experiences did he/she have within that particular society/country? What kinds of things does he/she remember learning in school, or doing with other children? Were there larger historical events/processes that the interviewee remembers experiencing at the time? How did he/she feel about all that?

4. If appropriate, a section on this person’s experience as a child migrating from the country of origin to another country and/or the US. For what reason (why) did this person leave, and what was the migration experience like? Any memorable experiences (difficulties or not) during the migration? How was being a child during this experience scary/exciting/confusing/demanding/all of the above?

5. Having arrived in a new location (the US) how did the interviewee experience/understand this new location and life in it? What kinds of cultural/social differences were noticeable as a child? You can revisit some of the questions from #3 above. How had/has the interviewee, as a child, navigated/balanced the cultural differences?

6. Conclusion; what does this person’s narrative tell us, as a kind of oral “microhistory,” about the larger issues within his/her country, region, culture..? What is important in this narrative for the readers to understand the migration experience? What/how does this story/this person enrichen the readers’ understanding (appreciation?), and the cultural fabric, of the complexity of the US as a society of migrants?

Below are some questions that you/the team must use, in addition to any other relevant questions you develop, in order to facilitate some “basic” info for the oral history as well as to structure the assignment (along the lines of #1-6 above). These baseline questions will lend a sense of consistency (patterns) between all of the oral history projects submitted by the students. Notice that some of the questions have “follow up” questions, depending on whether these are needed, and you should think along similar lines as you/your team prepare in advance what/how to ask your interviewee. As a matter of fact, as the interviewee answers one of these questions, based on his/her response/information an unexpected new question or direction for the interview may arise, so both preparation (of alternatives) and flexibility during the interview process should be expected.

As a final strong suggestion, we recommend that you look at and use parts of Oral History Curriculum Guide provided by Professor Heidi Morrison (she mentions it at the very end of her presentation):

Baseline Questions

1. What is your name?
   a. Does this name have a meaning?
   b. Has it changed, and how/why?
2. Where (and when?) were you born?
   a. Where did you live/in what circumstances?
3. Tell us briefly about your family and/or family structure at that time (guardian, mother, father, siblings, other family members).
4. What kinds of activities within the family were you engaged in as a young person? For example, were you taught to behave a certain way, did you help a parent in certain activities, were you taught other languages/cultural/religious practices..?
5. What is your most memorable experience from your youth?
   a. Why is this memorable/important?
   b. How/why (did it?) shape you and your subsequent life?
6. If you attended school, what was school like (where was it, who was in it, how long did you go)?
   a. What kinds of things did you learn/not learn in school?
   b. What was your impression of your society, and the larger world, as taught through your school?
   i. Has this changed since you were young?
7. What kinds of events, or larger processes, were occurring in your country/region as you were growing up?
   a. How did you hear about/experience them?
   b. How did they affect your family and/or you?
   i. How were they discussed/explained by your family or friends to you?
8. At what point did you/your family decide to leave/migrate from your country?
   a. What was the reason(s)?
   i. Do these reasons connect to wider historical, social, economic, cultural, religious, or personal factors?
   b. What were the conditions in which you left? (simple bureaucratic experience, under conditions of difficult circumstances/war)
   i. What do you remember of this process as a child (not just what you learned later when you got older)?
   c. How and here did you go?
   i. Did you walk, go by car, train, boat, plane..?
   ii. Were there multiple locations you went to/transited through?
      1. If you stayed in an intermediary location, explain what life was like there.
9. What was the migrant experience like?
   a. You might want to leave this question “broad” in order to elicit a wide range of possible answers, or you may want to narrow down in these questions, depending on (perhaps) #7 and #8 above.
10. What do you remember when/as you arrived to the US? What notable/interesting experiences happened during that process?
11. What struck you as interesting/weird/scary/fun in US society?
12. How were you able to adapt?
   a. Was (how) learning English difficult?
   b. How/where did you live, and why?
   c. What kinds of (new?) activities did you engage in now that you were in the US?
   d. What was school like in the US? What kinds of difficulties did you have to overcome?
      i. What/how did you learn in school in the US that was different/similar to schooling in your own country?
   e. What is your relationship/role in your family now that you are in the US (and older)?
13. At what point—do you?—feel you had become more adjusted to life in the US?
   a. Do you consider yourself an “American”? Why/why not?

Food for Thought!

Finally, you should try using some of the information, theories, and/or methods outlined by the summer institute presenters and/or the readings they provided. However, as some further advice, provided below are some recommendations as to conducting interviews and writing oral history as found in: Donald A. Ritchie, ed., The Oxford Handbook of Oral History. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

A. Don’t think of an interview as a solo project—especially if a team is conducting this interview. In any case, an interview is a project, and interaction, creating a narrative between the interviewer and interviewee. Your questions, and your reactions, as an interviewer impact/influence how/what/in what way the interviewee will respond and give information. You as the interviewer will edit, rearrange, and write up the narrative of the interviewee. So view this as a “joint project.”
B. Can you think of specific examples of how your “culture” (writ large and generally) could impact/influence how you think and frame/ask questions, and later (mis)understand?
C. Don’t forget that language (both in terms of English vocabulary as well as the native languages of the speakers) is very important. Word choice—including slang, cultural/religious references, coding terms as good/bad—will impact how an interviewee will understand and respond.
D. Be careful about imparting your own cultural values/assumptions/preferences when writing up the narrative biography of your interviewee.
   a. This is the benefit of a team project—team members can ask each other how/why they wrote or interpreted a certain way, and this may cause a reassessment.

Additionally, as per the chapter “The Dynamics of Interviewing” by Mary Kay Quinlan, remember that:
A. Every aspect of an oral history interview is relevant, including before the interview (page 26).
   a. Background research/preparation for interview will help greatly.
      i. This will help the interviewer(s) understand historical, cultural, social references made by the interviewee.
      ii. So before the interview, look up the country in question; have a little background on the history/culture/religion.
         1. This kind of research may also help you in preparing your questions, such as:
            a. “In country X there was a big earthquake in 1968 that destroyed this region; did that affect your town at all.?”
B. Setting (room, place) is important to create a good interview; additional individuals in the room will affect the interview.
C. The interviewer’s status and knowledge of the topic/experience of the interviewee will dramatically affect the interview.
   a. If you are interviewing grandma this will be different than if you interview your neighbor.
D. Think about nomenclature. What labels will you use? Interviewee, informant, narrator?

E. Don’t ask leading questions, such as “your favorite president was President Z, right?” You can simply ask “who was your favorite president?”

F. Don’t worry about details that can be confirmed in other ways if an interviewee can’t remember…Move on.
   a. Anyway, historical dates, names of presidents, cities, and so forth can be looked up later by the interviewer.

G. On page 27 Quinlan cautions that the interviewee often likes to hear his/her interview more than the interviewer…in other words, expect some embellishment.

H. Some questions are not really questions; some have cultural not literal meaning. Some questions give us answers that are literal and some through inference.
   a. To help students, see these videos: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_g7Nq-sTIA and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eesM2u7GEA8
      i. For example, if you ask your interviewee “what did you think about that cultural practice?” and she responds curtly “I have nothing to say about that,” she may not literally have nothing to say and, instead, prefers to remain quiet on the topic. We may infer that this indicates some ambivalent feelings…

I. Oral historians, interviewers in general, are never neutral. There are always value judgements, but it does/should allow for personal perspective to be represented.

J. As Quinlan cautions on pages 56-57, do not assume, or write/speak, as if the reader or interviewer is “American” or “western” or “normal.”
   a. Avoid using the word “we” when you write your narrative. “We” includes and excludes.

And in the chapter “Interviewing in Cross-cultural Settings” by William Schneider, he reminds us that:

A. Cross-cultural here means an interviewer and interviewee are from different cultures/experiences. This can also mean different education, literacy, values, expectations, life experiences, and so forth.

B. Silence is ok in an interview; it gives time for interviewer and interviewee to formulate a response. Don’t rush an interview.

C. People learn in their society both through texts and orally, and thus information and values/knowledge can be passed through an “oral information system.”
   a. Heritage (traditions, folkstories, values) is expressed in stories, usually orally related...
   b. As per page 55, metaphor (and analogy) is also very important to use and understand in interviews.
   c. For an interviewer, there are keys to understanding the “oral information system,” such as being aware of, or asking more questions about, cultural attitudes about the role of ancestors, or why a certain food is not consumed, or women’s role in society, the symbolism of water and wood, the importance of certain clothing, and so forth (as per pages 52-53).

D. Schneider wonders on page 54, “but when do we ever really get it?” Ultimately there is no one story that is the end-all be-all; they are not fixed, that is, there is no one correct version. Stories create new meanings in new contexts. Later on page 56—not all can be proven, and furthermore “factuality” does not necessarily make a story important/useful, whereas value may come from the story itself and how this expresses a perspective and informs the readers as to those perspectives…and hopefully appreciate various perspectives and differences.