Timeline interviews: A tool for conducting life history research

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.7146/qs.v3i1.6272

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explain and discuss timeline interviews as a method for doing life history research. It is a ‘how to’ article explaining the strengths and weaknesses of using a timeline when conducting qualitative interviews. The method allows the interviewee to participate in the reporting of the interview which may give raise to ownership and sharing of the analytical power in the interview situation. Exactly for this reason, it may not be the most appropriate method for interviewing elites or for conducting insider interviews where positionality can be at play. The use of the timeline should not lead the interviewer or the interviewee to assume linearity and coherence; it is an organising principle for the events. It provides an opportunity for linking the story with the wider social, political and environmental context during the interview. While the method is very suitable for life story research, it can also be used for other types of studies where interviews are made.
On life history research Life history research has had a long history going ‘in and out of fashion’ since Thomas and Znaniecki published their The Polish peasant in Europe and America some 90 years ago (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918-20). Meanwhile, what constitutes life history and life story has been an issue of debate. How to conduct a timeline interview The tool itself is not complicated to handle, but, as with other interview techniques, it takes time to master. The basic ingredients are a large piece of paper and a number of coloured pens. The interview may be taped (and transcribed); it depends on the type of analysis intended and on how the use of a tape recorder may affect the interviewee. It is a ‘how to’ article explaining the strengths and weaknesses of using a timeline when conducting qualitative interviews. The method allows … The aim of this paper is to explain and discuss timeline interviews as a method for doing life history research. It is a ‘how to’ article explaining the strengths and weaknesses of using a timeline when conducting qualitative interviews. The method allows the interviewee to participate in the reporting of the interview which may give rise to ownership and sharing of the analytical power in the interview situation. Exactly for this reason, it may not be the most appropriate method for interviewing elites or for conducting insider interviews where positionality can be at play. As a qualitative researcher conducting interviews, you should both trust your instincts and be ready for surprises. Creating probes or prompts for each question helps keep you on track. Prompts also help to remind you of your questions while at the same time allowing for unexpected data to emerge. As qualitative researchers who conduct interviews we are privileged to be able to do research by talking to others, and we hope that our tips help you to conduct interviews that are interesting and lead to new insights about the human condition.