Oral History/Interview
History 1302/Historically Speaking

Qualitative research is defined as “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting.” (Creswell, 1994, pp. 1-2)

Qualitative research is most concerned with:

✓ Process - instead of specific outcomes.
✓ Meaning - the ways people attempt to make sense of their daily lives and experiences.
✓ The researcher - the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data. As the primary instrument of data collection, all information will be filtered through you, not through questionnaires or computer programs.
✓ Descriptiveness - meaning and understanding are gained through words or pictures, not numbers from surveys
✓ Inductive – researcher will build theories or meaning from the details of the research

For this project, you will be practicing the skills of formulating questions, interviewing, thinking critically and reflectively, analyzing, writing, observing, reading for themes and experiences, and speaking.

Initial Interviewee Choice

This project involves qualitative research through interviewing and observation. Your interviewee will be in one of the following categories:

1. a first generation immigrant to this country (corresponding chapters: Gorn 4 and Hollitz 6)

2. a war veteran who has served in WW II, Korea, Vietnam, Gulf War, Afghanistan, or Iraq (corresponding chapters: Gorn 7, 10, and Hollitz 11) or

3. a woman who in some ways serves as a model for the redefinition of women’s roles (corresponding chapters: Gorn 6, Hollitz 12)

This initial interviewee choice is crucial to the success of this project. Choose someone who will make the time to really talk to you (at least an hour), who feels comfortable enough to open up to you, and who does not mind sharing his/her phone number with you or being taped. Be careful about choosing someone you know very well. Interviewers have a tendency to not ask many pertinent questions because they already know the interviewee quite well.
Progress Check #1, due by _______, will consist of a typed paragraph naming:

✓ Interviewer: _________________
✓ Interviewee: _________________
✓ Phone # of Interviewee: ___________
✓ Reasons why you chose this interviewee: _________________

Background Reading

Now that you’ve chosen your interviewee, it’s time to read the corresponding chapters in Hollitz and Gorn. Not every source in every chapter will apply to your interviewee, but there is much in these chapters that can be used. What are these chapters’ main themes? For example, Gorn 7 concerns WW I propaganda; do we still have propaganda today as we fight wars abroad? In what ways has propaganda stayed the same and changed since 1917? Asking the war veteran you interview about propaganda and what he/she experienced is a relevant, pertinent question. Be sure to include some questions in your interview that address the themes you have chosen from the chapters.

Writing Questions

The questions you compose for your interviewee will, to a large extent, determine the quality of your interview. These questions should have the following characteristics:

1. Open-ended – these questions are wide-ranging ones that allow interviewees to discuss whatever information they desire; the bulk of your questions will be open-ended. Ex: “What was it like…” Or “Tell me about…”

2. Closed-ended - once in a while, it is permissible and even desirable to ask closed questions which requires a very brief answer, even a “yes” or “no”. These narrowly focused questions should make up no more than 20% of your questions. Ex: “How old were you when…” or “Did you ever…”

3. Combination—You may start with open-ended questions if the interviewee feels comfortable talking and then narrow the focus as the interview progresses. Or, you may start with closed-ended questions if the interview doesn’t feel comfortable sharing at first, and then, as they start talking, you can open up the questions.

4. Neutral – these questions are phrased in a way that allow the interviewee to answer without specific direction from the interviewer; if you phrase the question in a way that suggests you want a certain answer, then the question is called a leading question and will bias your research. We want neutral questions, not leading questions.

5. Primary questions— these are the questions that are planned ahead by the interviewer. You’ve typed up these questions and placed them in the order you plan to ask them.
6. Secondary or follow-up questions – these questions are often spontaneous ones that are asked to clarify or in some way, pursue the answers to primary questions. Some interviewees will not adequately answer a question, prove evasive in their answers, or not understand the interviewer’s question. This is the time for a secondary question.

Check for accuracy of understanding the entire message of the interviewee. Paraphrase what they say and ask them to verify if you understood them correctly. This may give you an opportunity to ask secondary or follow-up questions. Finally, ask them if there is anything you did not ask, but that they would like to share about their experience.

You should have 15 to 20 well-thought out primary questions ready for your interview. Arrange them in the order you think will give your interview a natural flow, but don’t be afraid to change that order if necessary.

**Preparation for Conducting the Interview**

Before you actually begin the interview:

- ✓ Taping your interview will be mandatory. When you ask your potential interviewee to do the interview, make sure he/she gives permission to tape the interview and share a phone number. **The permission must be given on the tape.** The tape and phone number will remain confidential as will all names for final presentation purposes.
- ✓ Check the batteries in your recorder; if you are in doubt as to their effectiveness, change them immediately. Test your tape recorder by beginning the tape with your name as interviewer, the date and time of the interview, and your interviewee’s name and category.
- ✓ Choose a quiet place to conduct your interview. The food court at the mall has already been unsuccessfully tried! Think about noise, temperature, and distractions as you decide on a setting for your interview.
- ✓ 4 mini-cassette recorders are available from the instructor. You will need to sign a contract, and check-out is for one week only.

**Conducting your Interview**

Remember these tips as you conduct your interview:

- ✓ Begin the interview by introducing yourself and telling your interviewee why you are interviewing him/her, i.e., what is your purpose? **Be sure to thank them for allowing you to interview them.** Also, tell them how much time you expect it to take, and that they may take breaks if necessary (this must be on the tape.)
- ✓ If you or the interviewee appears uncomfortable, you might want to begin with some easy questions to “break the ice”. These warm-up questions can be anything from where someone grew up to what they think of the last Spurs game. These questions are not normally part of the interview transcript, but they can prove very helpful in relaxing both interviewee and interviewer.
✓ Turn on your tape recorder! By now, you’re familiar enough with it that you don’t have to worry constantly that it is actually recording the interview.
✓ You are now free to carefully listen to your interviewee. This is essential so that you will know when and if to ask secondary questions. Paraphrase as you go.
✓ Close the interview by explaining to your interviewee how the information will be used. (It will be typed and discussed in class, BUT a pseudonym will be used so the interviewee’s name will not be mentioned in class. This is designed to protect the privacy of the interviewee.) Be sure to thank them for their time. (this must be on the tape).
✓ You might offer to give your interviewee a transcript of the interview. This may be the only recorded story of a war experience that would be treasured by not only the interviewee but also his/her family.
✓ If your interviewee appears unresponsive or gives cursory answers, it might be best to choose someone else. Be polite and excuse yourself from the interview as courteously as possible. This is another good reason to do your interview early.
✓ A good interview will take between 45 minutes and an hour. This does not include all of the getting down to business, joking, catching up on old friends, but instead on your actual interview questions.
✓ Take the time after the interview to take notes on nonverbal communication observed during the interview. This will consist of:
  o Proxemic communication – using interpersonal space to communicate attitudes, thoughts, feelings. How close did you sit to each other? Were you both comfortable? If so, how did you know? If not, why not? What could you have done to make them more comfortable?
  o Chronemics communication – concerns the pacing of speech and the length of silences. Were there pauses or lulls in the conversation? If so, why? Did you ask your questions smoothly or did you stammer? Did you keep to your agreed time limit? Were there any interruptions? If so, how were they handled?
  o Kinesic communication – concerns body movements and postures. Did they gesture during the interview? Did you? What did their body language tell you about them? Did you believe everything they said? Were they credible? If so, why? If not, why not?
  o Paralinguistic communication – variations in volume, pitch, and quality of voice. Could you understand them? Could they understand you? How do you describe their voice? What did their tone of voice tell you about what they were saying?
  o Listening skills—describe their listening skills. What faulty listening behaviors did they have? What faulty listening skills did you have? Were they effective listeners? Were you? Why, or why not? What could you or they have done to improve your listening skills?

Typing your Interview

With your tape in hand, you are now ready to type your interview transcript. You may either:
1. Type a verbatim transcription of your interviewee’s answers. This is a word for word transcript of what your interviewee said during the interview. This can be laborious but it is also, in many ways, the easiest to do since there is no interpretive work to do for the transcript. You may leave out the speech idioms like “um” or “uh,” or
2. Do a mixed write-up that includes some significant quotes from the tape and a paraphrased accounting of the interview. Your responsibility here is huge considering you must rephrase what your interviewee said during the interview. You have an ethical responsibility to accurately reflect your interviewee’s answers. This can be very difficult to do as you don’t want to “put words into their mouths.”

Type your interview in a question-answer format. **Number and boldface** your interview questions. Double space your interview text and use 12 point, Times New Roman font. The interview should run between 6 and 10 pages. For my dissertation, my interview transcriptions ran 20 pages (single space) for a 1-hour interview. Less than 6-10 pages means an uncommunicative interviewee, a cursory interview, or the interviewer’s failure to write out the interview’s discussion.

**Personal Reflections**

In a 3-4 page paper, share your personal reflections on your interview experience. Discuss the following questions:

1. What were your general impressions of the interview? (How did it go for you? Did you have anything funny happen to you, or was it a difficult, awkward experience?)
2. Describe the setting (place and time) of your interview. Describe it so well that I feel like I’m there with you.
3. Discuss the nonverbal communication as they relate to your interview.
4. In what specific ways did your interview tie into the corresponding chapters in Hollitz and Gorn. Use at least 3 sources from the chapters, citing them by book, document number, and pages.
5. What do you wish you had asked and didn’t? If you are a thinking person, there will always be something you wished you had asked and either forgot or felt uncomfortable doing so.
6. What would you change about the interview? No interview is perfect so there will be something that you wish were different.
7. What did you really like about the interview? Discuss at least two things.
8. What conclusions can you draw about history, the interviewee, and yourself from this interview?

Thanks, thanks, and ever thanks. . . (Shakespeare)

Remember, the person you are interviewing is sharing a very important, personal part of his/her life. Always be courteous and kind. Once the interview is completed, write a
thank-you note expressing your appreciation for your interviewee’s time, effort, and expertise. Make a copy of your thank you note. Make sure you send the thank-you note. There will be no thank-you note police to check on you, but the gratitude you feel at a completed interview should prompt a very nice, mailed note. You may also consider giving them some small gift (a bouquet of flowers, plate of cookies, etc).

**Extra Points**

Extra points will be assigned (+3) for an attached picture of your interviewee. This picture along with your interview will be returned to you. If the picture is you and your interviewee, it will be +5 points.

**Folder Specifics**

You will turn in your interview in a pocket folder in the following order:

1. Cover Sheet: 2 copies (CMCY)
   - Interviewer
   - Class # and time
   - Interviewee
   - Phone # of Interviewee
   - Date of interview
   - Length of interview
   - # of category of interview

2. 6-10 page interview – 2 copies (CMCY)
3. 3-4 page reflection – 2 copies (CMCY)
4. Xeroxed copy of thank-you note
5. picture of interviewee for extra points
6. tape in pocket of folder

**Important Dates**

Project assigned: ___________

Progress Check 1: __________ (see page 2 for directions)

Progress Check 2: __________
   (tape, at least 3/4 of interview transcribed or paraphrased)

Interview due: ___________
If you have questions or difficulties with any part of this project, please see me immediately. This is a wonderful, “up close and personal” activity, but it will take time to complete. No one will want to procrastinate on this project. Happy interviewing!

**Bibliography**

**Writing Questions: 5 kinds of questions found in:**

**Nonverbal communication categories found in:**


**Definition of qualitative research and concerns found in:**