



Life history interviewing: practical exercise

Aim

This briefing note introduces a practical exercise which should allow users of this Life History Resource Pack to develop confidence in conducting life history interviews.

Having worked through the practical exercise, read this briefing note, and reflected on the issues raised you should have a good understanding of the following issues:

- Greater insights into the challenges in undertaking (and recording) a useful life history interview
- Developed greater personal sensitivity in probing difficult personal issues
- Developed greater awareness of the need for useful and effective follow-up questions
- Understood the need for on-the-spot analysis (in order to decide the direction of the interview)
- Begun to develop your preferred style for note-taking and begun to develop insights into the challenges in analysing and writing up life history interviews
- Begun to identify the optimal skills/ personal attributes of a good life history interviewer
 - excellent skills at building trust and rapport (how important is this?)
 - excellent research skills (how important is an understanding of chronic poverty/ poverty dynamics plus excellent interviewing skills? Does



a life history researcher need more/ different skills than an enumerator for a household survey?)

- local knowledge (how important is this? Can it be compensated for, by other members of the team?)
- speaker of local mother-tongue (how important is this? Can it be compensated for, by simultaneous translation)

You might also be considering the following questions:

- To what extent can life history interviews generate *empirical evidence*?
- To what extent is the quality of the evidence (if it is *evidence*) influenced by the quality of the interview?
- To what extent is the quality of the interview influenced by the research skills and personal attributes of the interviewer?
- Can poor skills in interviewing or in building trust/ rapport be compensated before hand, by good sample design or afterwards by good quality data analysis?

Introduction:

In a workshop setting this Briefing Note guides participants through conducting a short life history interview and reporting its key points to a larger group. It also gives each participant the opportunity to be interviewed. For people working through the Life History Resource Pack on their own it would be really useful at this point to find a volunteer to interview (and be interviewed by). This could be a colleague, friend, neighbour or family member.

To conduct the interview, see the text box below, for a fuller interview checklist refer back to Box 3, Briefing Note 1.

Sample Life History Checklist

The questions asked during a life history will depend on the research questions you are trying to answer, the approach you are taking, the age of the person you are interviewing and the time you have for each interview. The box in the note for Module 3 provides an example.



A few practical lessons from conducting life history interviews:

Being a self aware and reflective researcher:

- The need to *be sensitive* when conducting life history interviews. What do we as interviewers and chronic poverty researchers need to be *sensitive about*, when conducting life history interviews?
- How does this (or perhaps how should this) influence our approach to life history interviewing?

Achieving high quality results:

- Collecting high quality life history interviews about poverty dynamics requires both *high quality interviewing skills* and also *substantive knowledge* (e.g. about poverty dynamics and the drivers, maintainers and interrupters of poverty)
- To what extent do you think your experience as a researcher affects the quality of the information you gathered?
- To what extent does your disciplinary background and world view influence what you notice during the interview, what you consider to be a fact and what you consider to be an important or unimportant disclosure – on the part of the interviewee?

Epistemological questions:

A life history is arguably a narrative *constructed* by the interviewer and the interviewee. If you agree with the idea that the narrative is, in some way, constructed, it raises a number of epistemological questions. For example:

- Is the narrative recorded during a life history interview ‘my story’ (the interviewer), ‘their story’ (the interviewee) or ‘the truth’?
 - Is there ‘a truth’ or ‘many truths’?
 - To what extent do my interests and research questions distort the direction of the interview and ‘the truth’ that is uncovered and recorded?
 - What methodological devices and approaches are necessary to be able to use life history interviewing to get close to ‘the truth’ about poverty trajectories and the drivers, maintainers and interrupters of chronic poverty?
 - To what extent does the approach to collecting life histories determine the extent to which they can be used to generate robust *evidence*? Two very different views co-exist:
 - Life histories can be viewed as a narrative, *an* interpretation of events, their causes and their consequences. They cannot be taken at face value. In-depth and repeated interviewing of the same individual (and if possible,



members of their household) is needed. Interpretation of the 'many stranded narrative' that this is likely to deliver relies on a deep training in social science research and a profound knowledge of context.

- Life histories can be viewed as an oral record, a history. Experienced researchers can use an approach to questioning to reconstruct in-depth information about the past. This can deliver surprisingly reliable information about household and individual assets and their livelihood options, strategies and portfolios. Such interviews can be used to identify key moments in an individual's life (shocks, pivotal moments, transition points) and how they responded (agency, coping strategies). They can also be used to track changes in well-being at various points in the individual's past and to understand what has driven these changes.

This exercise should take **1 hour**, in total

Instructions:

Paired work

1. Form pairs (person A and person B)
2. Person A should interview person B for **10 minutes**
3. Swap – Person B interviews Person A for **10 minutes**

In case you're stuck.....a suggested interview guide for a 10 minute life history:

What is your name?

How old are you/ what is your date of birth?

What is your nationality? Where were you born?

What is your job?

How many brothers and sisters do you have?

What was your family home like, when you were a child?

What did your parents do when you were a child?

How does it compare to the house you live in now?

Are you better off now than your family was when you were a small child?

Describe 2 key moments in your life? Did they lead to changes in well-being (if so, describe)?

What are some of the best events you can remember from your life? When did they happen?

How did they affect your well-being/ that of your family?

What are some of the worst things you can remember from your life? When did they happen?

How did they affect your well-being/ that of your family?



Group work

1. Form a group of 4 with another pair
2. Person A from pair 1 has **2 minutes** to report *the highlights* from Person B's life, to the group
3. Repeat around the group (each taking 2 minutes) until everyone has spoken
4. The group should then appoint a *rapporteur* and a *scribe*
5. Discuss these questions:
 - Being interviewed
 - What did it feel like being interviewed about your life?
 - How well did your interviewer re-tell your story?
 - Being a life history interviewer
 - What challenges did you face interviewing someone about their life?
 - Other observations?
6. The scribe should record the key points on flip chart paper
7. The rapporteur will report the highlights back to the whole group in plenary

Key Lessons Learned:

- Our stories are not chaotic, they have a logic.
- You cannot rush a life history interview
- How can you define what is important and what is minor during the discussion?
- Are they telling the truth?
- Why questions (the rationale of the actor) may encourage interpretation by the interviewer. Is this problematic and if so, how?
- The interview process feels more comfortable if your interviewer is socially distant?
- Interviews require a high level of concentration, flexibility and creativity.
- Some questions are very sensitive...they feel invasive and difficult to answer.
- Time constraints! Life history interviews require lots of time.
- Structural consistency of the questionnaire is important. If it is too structured to meet the desires of the researcher this will bias the interview, forcing the interviewee to tell their life history according to somebody else's rules. The best would be to structure the interview as it goes, according to the manner in which the interviewee approaches it.
- Life histories are not necessarily linear; they are more chaotic than that.



- It is important to understand the phase of life that the respondent is in.
- Establishing trust is extremely important!
- Since we are reconstituting a life during the interview(s), we must realize the importance of the choices that are made at a certain point and how they interfere with life...this needs acknowledged during the interview process
- Optimal ignorance: managing time to maximize useful information (how can you best focus your time to get the needed/desired information?).



Annex: Sample Life History Interview Checklist.

INTRODUCTION AND CONSENT

- When you arrive at the household - introduce yourself and the research
 - purpose of the research
 - the interview is about their life - you (and the team) will analyse what has happened in their life, to understand things better – to inform policy makers. Explain – in as much depth as you need to – that you are wanting to understand changes in assets and well-being during their life and to learn more about why such changes happened
 - explain why they were identified for interview

- Obtain *informed consent*
 - the interview will be anonymous – it won't have their name on it.
 - you are going to take notes - these notes will be seen by other members of the research team
 - you will write short stories from the interview – some of these (without their name) will be seen by other people
 - ask permission to take a photograph –
 - you will send them a copy
 - it will help you to remember them
 - other people will see their photograph (without their name)

GETTING STARTED

- Record interviewee's name, age, gender, name of interviewer.
- Note down individual's appearance and demeanour (happy, sad, anxious etc)
- Describe house and compound

FAMILY BACKGROUND:

When and where was the interviewee born?

- Parents: Where were the parents from? (Origins of the family - in the case of migration from another place, when did they move and why?); what level of education did the parents have? Monogamous/ polygamous marriage?
- Siblings (same mother same father) - How many? Birth order? (step-siblings) (education level of all)
- Describe house and compound when the respondent was a small child (e.g. at age 8) (building materials, size - number of rooms; layout and use of different rooms; furnishings; decorations; home garden/ yard; pit latrine/ other; size of



compound, productive and household assets at compound, any other assets owned – or accessed - by household)

- How did it compare with other compounds in your village (place in one of 4 or 5 categories linked to well-being analysis exercise results)?
- How did it compare with the house that you live in now (much better, better, the same, worse, much worse)?

EARLY CHILDHOOD:

- Home Life: relationship with parents and siblings; responsibilities/ chores at home; work; food; leisure activities; health of interviewee and family;
- Looking back over this early part of your life do any difficult events or periods stand out? *(use this question to probe shocks, coping strategies, channels of support [relatives, friends, NGOs, church, moneylender etc], changes in asset levels, changes in livelihood strategies)*
- Looking back over this early part of your life are there any positive events or periods that stand out? *(use this question to probe opportunities, investment, acquisition, aspiration, resilience)*

ADOLESCENCE / BEFORE MARRIAGE

- How did things change as you became a teenager/ before marriage?
- Looking back over your teenage years are there any difficult events or periods that stand out? *(use this question to probe shocks, coping strategies, changes in asset levels, changes in livelihood strategies)*
- Looking back over your teenage years are there any positive events or periods that stand out? *(use this question to probe opportunities, investment, acquisition, aspiration, resilience)*

ADULTHOOD:

- Marriage: Are you married? How did you meet your husband/ wife; relationships before marriage; decision to get married; parent's/ family's views of the match; bride-price/ dowry/ land inheritance; move to your spouse's village – feelings



about that/ problems; setting up home; relationship with in-laws/ extended family/ community; relationship with spouse

- Children: list children (year of birth, gender, education level) Describe issues around the birth of first child; other children; bringing up children; remittances from older children/ kin
- Health: health of interviewee and family; impact on household well-being?
- First job/ enterprise/ livelihood activity? How did you get this job/ start this enterprise/ move into this livelihood activity? Did you get help from anyone? If so, who and how did this work? Describe working conditions/ constraints/ profitability/ shocks/ risks/ coping strategies

ASSETS AND LIVELIHOODS – and change over time.

- Assets owned (or accessed) by respondent's household now
- Livelihood activities (of whole household) now
- Earnings now (individual and household) (including estimates for farm households/ casual labourers etc)
- Estimate relative value of earnings now (e.g. compared to cost of sack of maize meal) – what does this say about the state of local markets and the individual's relationship with key actors in the market?
- Assets owned - at marriage (or point of inheritance or point of setting up their own household)
- Livelihood activities of self and spouse - at marriage (or point of inheritance or point of setting up their own household)
- Earnings then (individual and household) (including estimates for farm households/ casual labourers etc)
- Estimate relative value of earnings then (e.g. compared to cost of sack of maize meal) – what does this say about the state of local markets and the individual's relationship with key actors in the market at this point?
- Looking back over your early adulthood are there any difficult events or periods that stand out? (*use this question to probe shocks, coping strategies, channels of support [relatives, friends, NGOs, church, moneylender etc], changes in asset levels, changes in livelihood strategies*)



- Looking back over your early adulthood are there any positive events or periods that stand out? (*use this question to probe opportunities, investment, acquisition, aspiration, resilience*)

Probe – get detailed stories to explain poverty movements:

- Why have their asset holdings changed between marriage/ point of inheritance and now?
- What allowed them to accumulate and move out of poverty? Get as full a story as possible – opportunities, investments, luck, help from others, policy interventions, help from government/ NGOs.
- What pushed them into poverty? Get as full a story as possible about shocks, coping strategies, barriers to entry and exit etc., relationships with other people – who helped or hindered them.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PEOPLE

- Links with patrons/ 'friends' – how have these affected you?
- Relationships with employers/ richer households – how have these affected you?
- Relationships with employees/ poorer households – how have these affected you?
- Social networks (clubs, church, SACCOs etc.) – how have these affected you?
- Kinship networks – how have these affected you?

EVENTS OUTSIDE THE HOME

- Impact of insecurity/ politics/ crime on interviewee;
- Relationship with government/ local government/ tax authorities/ other
- Policy interventions/ programmes

OLDER AGE:

- Age when stopped being able to work; changes in circumstance; health
- Widowhood: Age when spouse died; implications; feelings; change in status



- Relationships with others: responsibilities; support from children; role in community; status
- Looking back over your older age are there any difficult events or periods that stand out? *(use this question to probe shocks, coping strategies, channels of support [relatives, friends, NGOs, church, moneylender etc], changes in asset levels, changes in livelihood strategies)*
- Looking back over your older age are there any positive events or periods that stand out? *(use this question to probe opportunities, investment, acquisition, aspiration, resilience)*

GRAPHICS

Use timeline chart to record interview (using an absolute measure of changes in well-being over time)