



# Methods for Change

## Life Histories

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*Life Histories involve talking to people to understand the changes in their lives and how these changes link with broader social and political processes. They aim to get a sense of how participants understand or evaluate these changes in relation to what is happening in the present. Life Histories are used to understand people's subjective experiences of change and how the past is interpreted to intervene in and make decisions about the present.*

In doing so, this method offers a means to understand how the present has been shaped historically, both through participants' histories and collective memory. Life Histories often involve spending several months in a place, engaging in observation and informal conversations. Spending time with participants allows the researcher to situate individual life histories in a place and to form relationships with a community. Building a rapport over time enables the researcher to foster a more embedded and sensitive approach to researching. Life Histories are not used to unearth a comprehensive or accurate picture of an individual's life but are rather there to highlight related webs of themes and events that are important to an individual from the vantage point of the present. Because of their subjective nature, each Life History will only ever present a partial picture of something, but a multiplicity of partial pictures can give a better sense of the processes of change in any given context.



## How do Life Histories create or contribute to change?

Life Histories are primarily concerned with understanding change, how it happens, how it affects peoples' lives and how it is made sense of in the present. With Life Histories, change happens throughout the process of researching. Participating in a Life History might involve participants actively making connections between their own lives and the structural contexts (economic, political, cultural, material etc) and places in which they live, that might then be a catalyst for transforming relationships and feelings. The presence of a researcher might help to break down hierarchies within communities, helping to bring different people together who may not otherwise converse. Life Histories provide space for participants to understand their lives in situ, connecting their histories to a broader set of contexts and issues which might change perceptions of the self. Often, Life Histories allow participants to see that their story matters and participants can derive a sense of worth by understanding their perspective as a form of knowledge. Change also happens to the researcher. Often, it is necessary and fair for the researcher to share something about their own lives as the participants will share personal reflections to build a dialogue. This can help the research process to feel less extractive. Life History narratives can show how the same policy can affect individual lives differently depending on multiple intersecting factors and their cumulative effect over time. An understanding of such intersections that become visible through individual life stories can inform contextual adaptation of policies to meet the needs of particular groups and to map how different policies interact with each other in people's lives.

## What ideas or concepts influence Life Histories?

Life Histories are used across the social sciences and are concerned with trying to understand social, political and environmental processes of change over time. History is not understood as just context but is an active and present force which actually shapes change in people's lives. Life Histories are aligned with the Oral History tradition and both often use interviewing techniques to record, document and preserve marginalised experiences. While Oral Histories often unfold around specific themes to foreground overlooked voices and experiences, Life Histories can be more focused on the narratives of an individual life including their understandings of relationships with society and the meanings they attribute to social and political processes. The emphasis is not on uncovering particular themes that are important from the point of view of the research, but the events that individuals consider to be the most significant in shaping their life and their surroundings. Life Histories are part of broader family of ethnographic approaches, often involving immersive research over a long time period. Embeddedness means the research unfolds iteratively and the researcher can respond to what the participants deem to be important as the research unfolds, rather than staying with a set of predetermined questions. It also means the researcher can understand the lives of participants in situ and build the rapport necessary for participants to feel comfortable sharing in-depth reflections on their lives.



## Why might I want to use Life Histories?

- Life Histories move beyond providing a snapshot understanding into a life or place and allow the researcher to really understand how that life or place came to be. That is how individual lives were shaped by their relations and interactions with others in their environment. These include relations with institutions, material landscapes and other human and non-human elements.
- This method is particularly good at providing insight on how people understand how change occurs in their lives. They provide a space for participants to reflect on their past and the important determining factors in shaping outcomes that include their own actions, events, processes and relations in their environment.
- Life Histories do not just produce data but are a way of understanding how agency is enacted and constrained as people recall and process their own experiences as memories.
- This method allows for narratives to unfold organically. Participants often narrate their lives in a non-linear and chaotic way, jumping from one point in life to another. This enables the researcher to get a sense of what matters to that particular participant by listening to what they choose to talk about first and how long they spend discussing different themes. Through multiple accounts it can also direct attention to the structural processes that are deemed important by different actors and groups.
- Life Histories are often understood to be a political method and can be used to foreground marginalised perspectives. The word perspective is used in a considered way here, because Life Histories are not a means of collecting data about people's experiences and practices but emphasise the meanings participants attribute to what has happened and how they evaluate change. The political element comes in thinking about whose perspective on change gets captured and informs the making of the present and the future.

## Step by step guide to using Life Histories:

- 1. Begin with background research.** This background research might involve using archival sources or reading secondary literature. Better understanding the situation or community you have chosen to research will allow you to develop an understanding of the context you are entering, of what stories and voices are already documented, and of what is missing.
- 2. Take time to familiarise yourself with the context you are working in.** During this stage, it would be useful to have a series of very open conversations with a range of different people you might be interested in talking with in greater depth at a later date. These conversations are not to probe or understand individual lives in any depth, but rather to get a sense of the shared memories of a place from multiple standpoints, and the social, political, and economic context. You can use this understanding to shape the questions you ask in the more in-depth interviews.



## Step by step guide to using Life Histories:

- 3. Approach individuals to ask if they are interested in having a more in-depth conversation.** Use the initial open-ended conversations to decide who you would ideally like to get to know a little deeper. It can be useful to begin these interviews in the present and use this as a vantage point to explore pasts. This will allow you to get a sense of what people, institutions or events are important to participants. You can then use this information to get a sense of the broader story these events fit in and use them to structure your next interview with the same participants. Remember to ask participants if it is okay for your conversation to be audio recorded. You can then transcribe the conversation and revisit it later.

*Remember, the in-depth nature of Life Histories might make it difficult to recruit participants. Be honest about the level of commitment and openness that this method requires. Think also about who you are asking to take part and how the project could be framed differently to appeal to different participants – could they get anything out of taking part, for example?*

- 4. Ask the same participants whether they would be willing to speak with you again.** Life Histories are about building up a rich understanding of someone's life and of what is important to them. Talking with the same individuals on different occasions can therefore be useful in building this understanding. In this conversation, try to dig a little deeper into the topics and events that were identified as significant in the first interview to develop a more detailed understanding.

*It can be useful to try to have these interviews in different spaces or while walking with participants. It is often through movement that participants remember things and the researcher can get a sense of how memory works. Changing the space can provoke remembering of different kinds of events.*

- 5. End your interviews appropriately.** Once you are happy with the amount of material you have gathered, try to broaden the conversation again to move away from the specifics of a participant's life to be more general by talking about everyday life. This will signal to the participant that the interview is coming to a close.
- 6. Transcribe your interviews.** Use your audio recorded material to transcribe the interviews. When reading the transcript, try to identify any gaps in understanding or contradictions that might be interesting to explore further. If you can identify topics you would like to explore further, ask the participant if they would be happy to have a further conversation.
- 7. Revisit participants to discuss their narratives.** Work through the transcript with the participant so they can decide which aspects of their narrative they are happy to be shared further. This can be an important part of assembling life histories as participants often reveal intimate material about their lives in the moment that they later decide they wish to keep private.



## An example of using Life Histories in social science research

### Techno-politics, Agrarian Work and Resistance in post-Green Revolution Indian Punjab

Researcher: Dr Divya Sharma, University of Sussex

This research was trying to understand the social, ecological and political changes brought about by the Green Revolution, a project of agricultural modernisation initiated in the 1960s, in Punjab, India. There are extensive scholarly studies of the Green Revolution with diverging and contested narratives. On the one hand there are narratives celebrating the Green Revolution as a success story of increased agricultural productivity in the region that transformed it into a breadbasket for the country. In contrast, a parallel narrative talks about the present-day ecological crisis in the region with depleted soils and groundwater. Furthermore, high levels of toxic contamination and excessive use of synthetic agro-chemicals have led to deteriorating

health outcomes as well as debt and an economic crisis amongst rural households. Life Histories in this context were used to understand these narratives through farmers' and farm workers' perceptions and evaluation of these long-term changes and their present consequences in shaping their lives.

Divya spoke with mostly farmers and farm workers aged between 60 and 80. Life Histories were centred on understanding changes in labouring practices that occurred with the use of synthetic agro-chemicals, hybrid seed varieties and mechanisation. They drew attention to practices that existed prior to the onset of Green Revolution as well as trees, animals and ways of being that have now disappeared. A survey of previous



*Photo 1: A cultivator explaining the shift from manual to mechanised postharvest processing of grain and how it impacted women's lives.*





*Photo 2: A farm worker explaining how his ancestors from a nomadic community migrated to south-west Punjab.*

research showed that landowning farmers and agricultural scientists were seen as main actors in the story, whereas women's voices and those of farm workers who played a significant role in some of these transformations were absent. Overall, the scholarly literature primarily was about the impacts of these processes on these groups, but without a sense of how they actually saw these processes and their own role in the making the so-called Green Revolution happen.

This research wanted to understand the relationship between the people's understanding of how these processes shaped their own lives and outcomes for their

households and communities. Understanding their perspectives of long-term changes also provided insights on why some farmers participated in political and social movements that sought to resist or redefine agricultural and rural development policies associated with the Green Revolution while others could not or did not do so or their participation was intermittent. Life History narratives of people who lived through the period therefore disrupted the narratives of progress attributed to the Green Revolution. They also illustrated the agency of farmers and farm workers that often is erased in narratives of decline and crisis.



## Where else could Life Histories be used?

Life Histories are useful if you would like to understand and explore perspectives on change in any context. They might be useful for researching:

- Shifts in work trajectories particularly among those who are in precarious employment or where people move between various forms of work through their lives.
- Charities or public policy institutions who are working on food policy could use Life Histories to map shifts in diets and their various drivers that are not just limited to access, incomes and tastes but are driven by interaction with other factors such as changing household circumstances or other changes.
- Mapping and understanding the effect of land use changes on individual lives through the lens of long-term inhabitants of a place.
- Movement in and out of poverty.
- Intergenerational mobility in households.

## Top tips when using Life Histories

1. Value the time participants share with you.
2. Be upfront with participants about the time commitment involved in research with Life Histories.
3. Be clear about how collaborative the process of assembling the narratives could be in the final stages of research.





## Further reading

- Contextualising Life Histories in Tamil Nadu
- Oral History Narmada
- What is Revolutionary about the Green Revolution?

**To reference:** Sharma, D. and Barron, A. (2021). 'Life Histories' in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.



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