

Ask Like an Anthropologist: Questions That Reveal Surprising Details and Stories About Childhood and Teenage Years

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This article describes a unique approach to collecting reminiscences and stories from older family members, particularly about their early life. What makes the approach unique is that it is an anthropological approach, that is, interviews with older family members focus on topics an anthropologist would be interested in when studying another culture. An anthropologist focuses on topics such as experiences of space and time, how social interaction was conducted, socialization practices, valued items of material culture, beliefs, fears, rites of passage, identity, body adornment, and kinship and marriage. Although it might seem counterintuitive to approach a family member as a person of another culture, doing so leads to discovering details and anecdotes that people thought they had forgotten and that many in the family have never heard. Such an approach recognizes the enormous cultural changes that have taken place over even one generation. It also recognizes the importance of understanding another person's unique points of view.

Keywords: anthropology; culture change; family stories

In this article, I describe a unique approach to collecting reminiscences and stories from older family members, particularly about their early life. The approach is based on interviews I conducted with people whose early lives were spent in several different parts of the world (Ireland, the U.K., Japan, Hong Kong, Norway, Iceland, the U.S., and the Isle of Man) as well as my experience as an anthropology professor and researcher. It is an approach to uncover stories and descriptions of childhood and teenaged years that not only preserves family history but creates new connections between family members. What sets the approach apart from other approaches is that it is an anthropological approach; that is, interviews with older family members focus on topics an anthropologist would be interested in when studying another culture. Asking older people about their early lives by taking an anthropologist's approach is developed more fully in the book *The Essential Questions: Interview Your Family to Uncover Stories and Bridge Generations* (Keating, 2022). Below, I describe the approach and how it works.

The importance of older family members' reminiscences is, sadly, often not realized until it's too late. As this person says,

I wish I had asked [my parents] questions...there was so much they knew that's gone now that can never be recovered and it was

valuable, and I would so love to know because in doing so I think I'd know more about myself. But that's not the only reason I'd want to know. I would like my kids to have the opportunity to know more about me for their sake (age 71, raised in the UK)

Asking questions of older family members not only reveals their unique personal journeys but also uncovers an extraordinary amount about a culture and ways of life that have now disappeared, yet influenced who these family members are (see also Johnston, 2022).

I began researching how to elicit family stories and descriptions of individual lives after my mother died, an experience many have sadly shared for how it triggers what is lost. After my mother's death, as I was organizing her affairs and going through her things, I realized how much I didn't know about her, especially her early life and the experiences that had formed her as a person. Ironically, I had interviewed her several years before she died but realized only later I had asked the wrong questions. The questions I had asked her then focused on relatives in order to understand the family tree. This is a common way to approach family history. In my case, I knew very little about my relatives because my father's job had taken us away from where most of them lived.

It was only after my mother died that I realized how much I didn't know about her – especially what her childhood and teenaged years were like. I wish now I had a fuller sense of her as a person, not just as “Mom,” especially her experiences before she became a wife and mother. I know nothing of the experiences that made her who she was and in turn influenced who I am. It became apparent to me that I had pigeon-holed her exclusively in

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the role of mother. I got glimpses of her childhood as I was sorting through her photographs after her death. But I never asked my mother the kinds of questions that would have invited her to describe everyday life in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, descriptions that would have enabled me to step out of my own frame of reference in order to take her perspective and thus to better understand how she came to see things the way she did. I wish I'd asked my mother about the cultural surroundings that formed her different generational beliefs. What kinds of questions would have revealed that?

In order to find out, I began a research project to develop questions that would both capture parents' and grandparents' memories as well as make it possible to understand the cultural forces that influenced what happened to them. I interviewed older people, using the criteria "of grandparent age" to get a broad selection of people. My method was snowball sampling, where contacts recommend other contacts (Parker et al., 2019), a common method in qualitative research. Interviews ranged from 2 hours to 4 hours in length, depending on the enthusiasm of the interviewee. In several cases, interviews were conducted over two different days. It soon became clear to me that culture change, even in a matter of a generation or two, was more significant than I had imagined.

I based the questions I asked on topics an anthropologist would be interested in when studying another culture. I focused on topics such as the cultural organization of space and time, social interaction behaviors, socialization practices, items of material culture, beliefs, fears, rites of passage, identity, body adornment, and kinship and marriage. I asked people to tell me about ordinary things.

When anthropologists set out to understand a different way of life, they focus on the aspects of an ordinary day. The influential sociologists Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1959) and Harold Garfinkel (Garfinkel, 1964) showed how revealing it is to pay attention to the small-scale processes of ordinary experiences, and the significance of everyday life in shaping our identities and understanding of the world (Smith, 2002:13). Ordinary life often doesn't feature in collections of family history; rather, it is the special events that are typically focused on. But ordinary life is what we miss most when it's gone.

Anthropologists describe the kinds of homes people live in in order to understand how domestic spaces are organized, and I asked people to describe the houses or apartments they grew up in. I asked how social interactions were different when they grew up, about courtship, and child rearing practices. I asked what they feared as children. I asked about the material objects that had had special meaning for them. I asked what clothes they wore, since anthropologists are interested in how people adorn their bodies and the symbolism of this.

I found that interviewing people using topics an anthropologist would use revealed surprising and moving descriptions of an individual's life. Here is one description

of a day's work for a person who grew up in the southern U.S.

Pickin' cotton, you have to do it to understand how horrible it is. In the first place you're bendin' over all the time and the new cotton is even worse because it's lower because it's designed to make cotton easy to harvest with the cotton pickers. And when you go out in the morning in October it's cold. And then about 10:30 it starts warming up and the wasps come out and there's snakes out there movin' around. You'd go down one row and come back the other and that's where the water jug was and it could be an hour and a half by the time you got back. It was a horrible job, boring and hard (age 74, grew up in Arkansas, US).

This person's description is vivid, and a listener can imagine that hard work from the interviewee's point of view. Seeing the world through the eyes of an older member of a family enables a deeper connection with the past, as well as a new understanding of family history. As one student commented: "My grandfather is an avid storyteller at family gatherings, but when prompted with those questions, he really started to remember things that were very important to him and reflected aspects of himself that he didn't realize were still there."

Using Anthropology

Anthropology is not an old science. Sometime in the 19th century, scholars began to codify a structured approach to understanding the diversity of human societies. Before that, travelers' reports and government reports had supplied much of the knowledge about different cultures. The early anthropologists established a unique methodology. They studied culture by spending time living in another culture as a member (although a novice member). One strength of this methodology is that it fosters an understanding of culture from the perspective of the society being studied. The goal is for the anthropologist to avoid filtering their description of another society through the anthropologist's own society's habits of interpretation and behaviors. Rather, an anthropologist seeks to, as accurately as possible, represent the worldview and voices of those they are studying. Taking another's point of view is a thrilling challenge that builds cognitive flexibility and stimulates the imagination. As one of the first anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski found, through anthropology, people come to know their own patterns of thinking better, and the experience of seeing the world from another perspective makes them better, intellectually and artistically (Malinowski 2013).

An example of differences in world view from my anthropology fieldwork on a small island north of New Guinea and east of the Philippines, called Pohnpei (Keating, 1998) illustrates the point about the challenge of taking another society's point of view. When I first arrived

in Pohnpei, I enjoyed walking by the ocean at night, enjoying the fragrant warm air. I was awed at the stars and the beauty of the mangrove trees, the mountain and the sea. To me, in the darkness, the brilliance of the stars was revealed. The constellations were strikingly beautiful from this small dot of land in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean. However, my walking at night made my hosts nervous because in their world view, the night exposed me to serious danger. The “same” darkness that was beautiful to me, to them was the time bad spirits came out, the ones who were responsible for every unfortunate thing that ever happened to anyone. Since the islanders felt responsible for my safety, they didn’t want me to go walking around at night among those spirits. At the very least, they wanted me to carry a strong light to protect myself. In interviewing an elder family member, suspending one’s own prejudices and beliefs in order to take the perspective of the other person yields surprising results in building an understanding of a way of life that entails different attitudes towards the “same” world.

When I first began interviewing people of grandparent age, I was surprised at the amount of culture change their descriptions made evident. This included everything from schooling to housing to courtship and marriage practices, and even the ways people interacted with each other—significant cultural differences. It is common to think of culture as relatively stable, but interviews with older generations makes it clear how dynamic culture is.

Culture has always been difficult to define because of its scope, which includes interactional behavior, knowledge, beliefs, objects, dress, rites of passage, kinship, values, and anything that is socially learned. Culture encompasses small material things as well as large scale society-wide processes and rules. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary made “culture” their Word of the Year in 2014 (it was the word with the biggest spike in look-ups on their Web site), which attests to the fact that people have been questioning what culture means (Rothman, 2014). In a time when globalization affects nearly everyone, boundaries of culture that once seemed plausible to draw between groups sharing a language or a location are becoming more complex. With globalization, it is more difficult than ever to generalize about culture, which doesn’t seem to “cluster like it used to,” as anthropologist Michael Agar put it (Agar, 2015).

The significance of culture comes partly from the fact that people are both highly influenced by culture and typically unaware of its influence. The well-known anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu famously described culture as a set of practices that train our bodies in cultural ways and provide us with “dispositions” that structure everything we perceive (Bourdieu, 2007). By dispositions he meant a sense of “how the game is played.” His definition captures the lively and communal way that people continue to do things they learned as children, and also the active roles each person “plays.” A useful way to look at culture is to compare it to a pair of glasses that we are given at birth and keep wearing without being

conscious of the way the glasses change what we see (Duranti, 1997).

Research By My Students at the University of Texas

While doing research with older people in several countries about their pasts, I found their reminiscences about the world as they knew it as children and teens so fascinating that I thought my students at the University of Texas could benefit from doing a similar research project, especially if it included one of their older family members. I didn’t want them to find out too late that they had questions they had never asked. I gave the students as one of their class assignments the project to interview one of their grandparents (or an elderly family member), using the questions I had developed and used in my research. The students were just as fascinated as I was at what they discovered, and many said the project had lasting value for them. One student wrote that though he had lived ten minutes from his grandparents, he didn’t know most of what he found out by interviewing them using an anthropological approach:

While I would consider myself very close with my grandparents (as they live a mere 10 minutes from my house), I do not think I have ever had such a candid, in-depth conversation with them as I did from this interview. I learned things about them, their lives, and their relationship that I had never heard before. I was lucky to be able to do this and succeed at it as my grandfather has somewhat early-stage dementia. It has definitely started to affect his memory and cognition, though he still clearly remembers his childhood and adult life. I do not know how much longer he would be able to conduct an interview such as this one, so for that I want to thank you as I will always have this interview to hold on to as he progresses in his old age.

As each student presented some of their findings in class, the entire class learned firsthand details about a past they had known almost nothing about, or only known about in the generalized way of history books. Since some of the students’ grandparents had been raised in different parts of the world, their childhoods had been much different from their grandchildren in Texas, and they had never talked about it. As one grandparent said, “Thank you for helping me remember, I had forgotten a lot of this until I had time to think about it.”

With the right questions, interviewers can help interviewees recreate a world that is now forgotten, guided by the goal of describing their ordinary life, providing as many details as possible. In the example of the backbreaking work of harvesting cotton by hand, the interviewee supplied evocative and sensory details that enable a firsthand understanding of his world at that time, in that season. The resulting account of life in the past preserves an important part of a family legacy (Thompson

et al, 2009). The personal account removes the older person from the constraints of having a single identity in the family, the identity of grandparent or parent, and can establish a new relationship with them as a person. It results in increased empathy and compassion as well as new channels of communication between generations that differ widely in their experiences and concerns. As one former student wrote, "Because of this interview I feel closer with my grandmother and more willing to share with her what is going on in my life."

What Makes an Anthropological Approach Work So Well?

There are several reasons that anthropology provides a very successful approach to collecting family history. Though it may seem counterintuitive to approach a family member as a person of another culture, doing so leads to eliciting details and anecdotes that many in the family have never heard. This is due not only to the fact that anthropologists focus on description and details but, as mentioned previously, they focus on ordinary life. Though rite-of-passage rituals are important in anthropological accounts, ordinary life is what is happening the vast majority of the time, and is what constitutes the majority of cultural life. Unfortunately, ordinary life is often thought too uninteresting and is rarely recorded in traditional family histories and genealogies. This undervaluing of the ordinary is attested by reactions when I approached people about an interview. Several told me, "My life was too ordinary to be of interest." Yet ordinary life reveals much about what it meant to be a person in a particular place and time.

Another reason an anthropological approach succeeds well with older family members, as mentioned above, is its emphasis on suspending judgements and suspending the interviewer's own interpretive habits. The idea of "standing in the shoes of the other" is captured by the two anthropology terms, the etic point of view and the emic point of view. The etic point of view is the outsider's view (standing in one's own shoes) and the emic the insider's view (standing in another's shoes). An etic view is that of the tourist in a foreign country, filtering and judging what they see through their familiar cultural practices back home. An emic or insider's view is that of the person who wants to live life as the foreigners live it. This emic point of view can be achieved through the imagination, too, by reading or listening to first-person descriptions of those who have lived a different life, the sort of descriptions my students and I elicited from our interviews with older people. When one grandparent said to me, "I remember the weight of the blankets in the bed, you were almost flattened," those details enabled sharing an insider's view. As people tell stories of everyday life, even the small details of what it felt like to be in bed trying to sleep on a cold night with no heating, an interviewer can see the world from another person's perspective. This can create compassion and understanding as well as a good story.

As an example of how a question about clothing

revealed a young person's point of view, one of my students collected the following story from his grandfather:

When [my grandfather] was younger, in early high school, he really wanted a pair of Levi jeans. He said he always got the cheap jeans for school when they went school shopping, but he really wanted a pair of nice Levis for Christmas. He begged and mentioned he wanted them for Christmas, and that year he finally got them. He suddenly started laughing so hard. He said "I wore those jeans one glorious time and then put them in the wash. When my mom washed them, she cut off the little red Levi brand tag. I was so mad at the time because that little tag was the whole point!" His mom did not see what the big deal was and just thought it was a new jean tag like a price sticker, but Levi jeans were really in at the time and my grandpa was crushed. I thought this story was really funny when he was telling me because it is something so relatable. The idea that kids put so much work into their image and parents just don't understand ("you wouldn't get it, mom") is timeless.

This example shows how aspects of everyday clothing reveal a universal practice—using clothes to elevate a person's status or do identity work—but also family life and a teenager's concerns at the time.

What Questions Constitute an Anthropological Approach?

A topic of great interest to anthropologists is the organization of space in a society. In interviewing older people, I always began with a question about space. I had focused on the cultural organization of space when doing my previous anthropological research (Keating, 1998, 2015, Keating and Mirus 2003). In my interviews with people of grandparent age, asking them to describe their domestic spaces (their childhood house or apartment) turned out to be one of the most compelling and interesting questions for them, and triggered many forgotten memories of what life was like back then.

As interviewees described rooms and furnishings of their childhood homes, they remembered what they and others did in those rooms, and what their parents were doing when they were at home. A wonderful picture of childhood in a former time emerged. One interviewee said:

The first house I can remember is during the war. We shared a house with another family because my father and their father had gone, had been called up, gone to fight. We shared the house with them until the end of the war. I think it was necessity on both sides, because things were very difficult. I don't think it was very great for Mum, but for me and the two girls, the daughters, it was

fine, and there were loads of children around, and we all got on very, very well. We were there seven years. Mr. Dunaid, he was away for the whole entire time of the war (age 84, Isle of Man).

Here we can understand how sharing a home would be hard for adults but easy for children. It is telling that this former child knew it was “not very great for Mum.” The hardships of a husband and father being away for seven years in life-threatening conditions is presented in an understated but powerful way as “everyday life” for seven long years. In one interviewee’s case, she started to describe her bedroom which led to a memory of drawing back the curtain on the window, ice-crusted on the inside, then grabbing clothes and running downstairs on “impossibly cold” floors to get dressed in front of the thin flame of a fire just being lit in the fireplace by her mother.

Describing the layout of the childhood home gives interviewees an opportunity to place themselves into specific moments of their childhood, and to describe what they see. Imagining a familiar physical space helps them remember the details that are essential to creating a different world for a listener. One interviewee who grew up in South Dakota, when describing the kitchen, mentioned the wood stove didn’t have a thermometer on the oven door, so her mother would stick her hand in the oven to see if it was hot enough to put the raised loaves of bread in. Another interviewee, when describing the kitchen, mentioned she had to drop out of school in the fourth grade to help care for her younger siblings, which meant doing a lot of the cooking. She learned to cook at a young age. Another person was describing the basement of the house she grew up in and then remembered coming home from school on Wednesdays, which were wash days, and immediately going to the basement where her mother was doing the laundry. She said it was her job to put the clothes through the wringer part of the washing machine, and she would help her mother hang the clothes on the line.

Why is space so revealing? Homes are repositories of cultural history. People told me again and again, “I haven’t thought about these things in years,” or “I thought I’d forgotten all about that,” as memories sprang to mind triggered by questions about their childhood home.

In addition to space, I asked about time: How did you perceive time as a child? Time is a concept my students assumed was shared by all people in the same way. Yet people around the world have very different ideas about time influenced by their cultures. The early anthropologist, Evans Pritchard found that the Nuer group he studied didn’t have a way of talking about time as a reference point for events, rather events unfolded in a habitual sequence: “Though I have spoken of time and units of time, it must be pointed out that, strictly speaking, the Nuer have no concept of time, and consequently no developed abstract system of time-reckoning” (1939, p. 208). They marked time by what was happening with the cattle, or how activities related to one another. Time is a unique cultural phenomenon. When interviewing people in the US about their experiences of time when children, many said time

seemed fast on weekends and slow during the week. This observation then often led to descriptions of what activities filled different parts of their week, and how children used their free time back then.

I also asked people about body adornment by asking them how styles of dress have changed since they were children. Follow up questions included where their parents bought their clothes, which elicited many details about what shopping for clothes was like, or that their mother made all their clothes, or that they subsisted on hand-me-downs from siblings or relatives. My students and I were surprised by the poverty described by those who grew up in Texas decades ago. Students’ grandparents described having only one pair of shoes, two shirts and two pairs of pants. Many also said—remembering their perspective as children—that they didn’t feel poor. Taking an anthropologist’s approach to interviewing meant not expressing surprise that they did not feel poor, but instead asking what it was that made life happy and comfortable despite having few material possessions.

Another question that is part of the anthropological approach is about belief. I asked people whether their beliefs had changed over their lifetime. This question is meant to focus on beliefs relating to marriage, politics, gender, wealth, education, etc. I followed some philosophers and anthropologists to divide the concept of belief into two categories, “belief in” and “belief that” (Robbins, 2007). *Belief in* is what people believe that’s relatively unshakable, like belief in God, for example. *Belief that* are the many beliefs that change over time, for example, the belief that it is immoral to borrow money (a common belief in earlier times, attested by some people I interviewed) or believing space travel to be impossible. In answering a question on belief, interviewees talked about events and experiences that had had an effect on their beliefs, and these descriptions were fascinating insights into culture change. One grandparent described being unable to go to college because her father, who rented the farm he worked, had strong beliefs about not borrowing money. With her own savings she was only able to afford one year of college. After she married, she was able to afford another year and got her associates degree. With that degree, she became a professional librarian to remain close to books, which she valued highly.

An interesting anthropologically focused topic is kinship and marriage. Asking about courtship practices of the past is a favorite among students and elicits many stories. Asking older people about social interaction practices when they were children was also interesting. How a child is taught to interact with others reveals insights about the “theory of the person” that was held at the time, meaning what behavior defined a person as moral and honorable. In my research, I was surprised at the differences between how different generations defined a moral person, which influenced how they taught their children to interact with each other. Grandparents’ ideas about how a moral person should behave were sometimes so different from their own grandchildren as to be almost opposite. Some grandparents had been raised that children

were to be seen and not heard, while their grandchildren had been raised to advocate for themselves assertively. Generations even within the same culture had different ideas about the moral uses of power, or how a person should balance the need for independence with responsibilities to other people. My students told me that after interviewing their grandparents, they started to perceive them differently. Behaviors that used to seem old fashioned to my students, now seemed an understandable consequence of certain parenting styles, gender roles, kinship arrangements, economic struggles, constraints on mobility, schooling, and the forms of knowledge that were part of culture in that era.

The Use of Broad Questions

In approaching the interview using anthropologically focused topics, I found success by using a very broadly focused question to introduce each topic, and then if necessary, using follow up questions to elicit more details. With the space question, for example, using a broad question at first—"Can you describe your childhood house or apartment?"—ensured the question was broad enough that the interviewee could choose what to talk about and control the narrative. Some interviewees easily talked for thirty minutes as they remembered and described aspects of their home and the kinds of day-to-day activities that took place there. Other interviewees were helped by follow up questions, such as: Where did you eat your meals? Did everyone eat together? What did you hear when you woke up in the morning? and What did you see when you looked out the bedroom window?

A small number of interviewees asked me to rephrase a broad opening topic question into a smaller-scope question. I replied by rephrasing the question, but resisted narrowing the scope, assuring them they could answer however they wanted. A broad question maintains a balance between the one asking the questions and the one answering them, since the questioner wields the power in an interview and constrains to a degree what is talked about. With a broad question, an interviewee has more autonomy in answering. As one older person's memory leads to another, a life takes shape in a way that captures what is significant to them.

If interviewees provide only short answers without much detail to the broad opening question about a topic, using follow up questions is effective. Some other follow up questions about space I have used include: "How many bedrooms were there, and where did you sleep?"; "What was your favorite part of your home?"; "How was your home different from neighbors' homes?"; "How did you get from home to school, and what did you see on the way?"; and "How would you compare your childhood home to the home you live in today?"

The follow-up questions are designed to bring out more details in order to elicit more of the rich, sensory details that can bring to life another place and time. One technique to elicit more details is to repeat part of the interviewee's description. For example, one person who

grew up in Iceland told me that she and her brother slept in a bedroom with her parents. I wanted to hear more, so I said, "So you slept in the bedroom with your parents." Then she added the wonderful details that her mother was always knitting in the bedroom in the evening, making sweaters, and she and her brother went to sleep to the rhythmic sound of the knitting machine. Then she made the sound of the knitting machine for me 65 years later.

Some interviewees had to be nudged away from recalling their childhoods from a retrospective, "20/20 hindsight" view (that is, judging their past behavior by what they could only know now) or critiquing their past life by saying, "I should have . . ." This kind of hindsight overlooks the confusion a young person can feel at the time. Asking follow-up questions that focus on context leading up to a decision that they are now reevaluating helped to keep focus on describing the past.

While reminiscing, people's thoughts often follow a random sequence determined by what they happen to think of. One person I was interviewing told me, "Oh, I'm way off track." Or after talking for some time about many interesting aspects of daily life in their childhood home, one person asked me, "what was the question again?" It worked well to reassure them that everything they can remember is important and it's important to follow their own path.

Though people will not have been asked anthropological types of questions before and will not be used to describing their lives in an interview setting, and likely have never described in much detail their ordinary, everyday life when they were growing up, this is an advantage, since the questions are intended to reveal things they have forgotten about or never thought anyone would be interested in knowing. The very unfamiliarity with an anthropological approach can lead people to remember things about their early years that will surprise them.

In my interviews, I heard stories of grandparents who were children when bombs were being dropped in World War II England, and about life on a farm with no electricity in South Dakota. Grandparents told me about going barefoot all summer and the struggle of having to put shoes on for church on Sunday. I heard about attending a one-room schoolhouse in the US and riding a horse to school. The people I interviewed had lived with immense changes. I found as my students did that people are happy to talk about what it was like when they grew up. They are pleased to find someone who is interested and are appreciative of an opportunity to talk about what they know. Psychologists have found that loneliness in seniors is an epidemic. Not "being seen" or feeling seen is correlated with loneliness. An opportunity to capture their life stories has been shown to reduce depression in older people (Chrisman, 2020).

A Few Tips on Interviewing

Before interviewing, it is helpful to build common ground by doing brief research about the period and the place in which your interviewee grew up. It's important to audio record the interview for a number of reasons.

Recording frees the interviewer to be a good listener as well as to write down follow-up questions that might occur to them. In my experience, asking to record demonstrates to the person being interviewed that the interviewer wants to be as accurate as possible and the importance of their contribution. Many people will benefit from having a copy of the interview. People enjoy having a keen listener who wants all the details.

In the role of interviewer from an anthropological point of view, there are three positions an interviewer has to inhabit simultaneously. First, the interviewer takes the role of a conversationalist facilitating a comfortable dialogue with the person they are interviewing; second, they are a regulator of conversation, managing which topics are covered and asking certain questions; third, the interviewer takes the position of an anthropologist, suspending opinions and judgements. It is important to avoid showing bias in any responses. Usually, a comfortable conversation doesn't mean holding back opinions and reactions, but in this case, it is your interviewee's opinions and reactions that are central. Interviewees will withhold the very accounts family members are keen to hear if they feel they may be judged for their actions in the past by today's standards. People who have taken the anthropologist's approach to interviewing their parents and grandparents have described their satisfaction at creating an atmosphere in which their interviewee revealed opinions that surprised them. One student said he hadn't expected his grandfather to speak with as much candor as he did; "I was surprised at how vulnerable and honest my grandfather was with me."

To begin the interview, I recommend starting with some warmup questions that are easy to answer and allow the interviewee to get used to the question/answer format. Even simple questions like "How many brothers and sisters do/ did you have?" and "Where are you in the birth order?" can elicit fascinating stories and anecdotes. Some examples of warmup questions are: "When and where were you born?"; "Is there a story behind your name?"; and "What's your favorite pastime?"

A key to a successful interview about someone's growing-up years is the interviewer's ability to tolerate silence from the interviewee. People will need time to recall the details that will make their accounts rich. Being able to hold as much as a seven second silence will pay off in added information that otherwise would be lost. Other aspects of a successful interview include not interrupting in order to create a trusting atmosphere, showing compassion for experiences and attitudes, and appreciation (there are more interviewing tips in Keating, 2022).

Conclusion

The rapid pace of change is a familiar cliché, but it means that elder members of a family have experienced a different culture—ways of experiencing time and place shaped by a different era. Rather than try to erase differences or pretend that the differences between generations and cultures are minimal, the anthropological

approach treats these differences with respect and curiosity. Getting to know elder family members on anthropological terms enriches a younger person's understanding of their own beliefs and cultural habits as well as the forces that have shaped their family history and, in turn, their own identity. Giving older members of a family a chance to talk about themselves can offer what one student called "a brand-new perspective on them" and on history. As writer and educator Diane Wilson wrote, our elders provide context so we can see "the invisible legacy that follows us, that tells us who we are" (Wilson, 2008).

Whether an elder family member grew up in a town called Riverside, Oakland, Swansea, Kolkata, Ålesund, Húsavík, an island off the coast of China, or a small town in Texas with no paved roads, the way they describe these settings can connect their younger family members with their unique family history. Firsthand accounts from "ordinary" people transmit emotional and intellectual contexts missing from official histories. Just as the precious oral literatures and histories of whole communities are being lost the world over through rapid change, migration, language death, and a failure to ask about them, there is a risk that older people's personal stories, too, will be lost forever. They have unique stories and memories of the world they knew. It is important to help to preserve them and create lasting meaning and connection in the process.

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