

# Sample Life-Story Interview Questions

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## Biographical Information

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- a. When/where were you born?
- b. What was your father/mother's full name?
- c. Do you have any siblings?
  - i. What are their names?
  - ii. What are their ages?
- d. Are you/have you been married?
  - i. What is/was the name of your husband/wife?
  - ii. When/where were you married?
- e. Do you have any children?
  - i. What are their names?
  - ii. When/where were they born?

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## Family Heritage

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- a. Can we talk about your mother's parents? Do you remember your grandmother? And your grandfather?
  - i. Were your grandparents from the same town/city/region as you?
  - ii. How did your grandparents earn a living?
  - iii. Did they help to bring you up? Were you close to them?
  - iv. Was either of them a strong influence on you?
  - v. [Repeat for father's parents]
- b. Do you remember any other relatives of the older generations in your family?
- c. Were there any other old people who were especially important to you as a child?
- d. Can you tell me about the relationship between your father/mother and your grandparents?
- e. Can we talk about your parents? Let's start with your mother?
  - i. Can you describe her character to me?
  - ii. Did she show affection? What about anger?
  - iii. Were you close to her? Was she easy to talk to?
  - iv. What kind of work did she do? Did she always do that kind of work? Did she continue working after she had her children?
  - v. Who looked after you while she worked? Was she ever out of work?
  - vi. How did you manage then?
  - vii. [Repeat for father]
- f. How would you compare your mother and your father as influences in your life?
- g. What do you remember your parents/grandparents telling you about their childhoods, about growing up?
- h. How do you think your parents were seen by others?
- i. What were your parents' ethnicities/religions?
- j. Can we talk about your brothers and sisters?
- i. Growing up as children, how did you get along?
  - ii. Do you have a favourite brother or sister? Can you tell me more about him/her? Was he/she an important influence on you?
  - iii. What are your brothers and sisters doing now? Are they married?

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## Childhood

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- a. What do you remember about your first home?
  - i. Who lived in your house?
  - ii. Who made the decisions in your house?
  - iii. What were your responsibilities as a child?
- b. What do you think of when you hear the name of your home town?
- c. Can you describe your childhood neighbourhood to me?
  - i. Did you have neighbours living close by?
  - ii. Did neighbours help each other? In what ways?
- d. Can you tell me about your closest friends?
  - i. What sort of games did you play?
  - ii. Were you free to play with whom you liked?
- e. When your parents were not working, what kind of things did they do to enjoy themselves?
  - i. Where they part of any club or associations?
  - ii. Where did they go in their leisure time?
- f. How did your childhood differ from those of the opposite sex?

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## Youth/Schooling

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- a. When did you start school?
  - i. What schools did you go to?
  - ii. What did you think of these schools?
- b. Who do you remember running the school?
- c. Can you tell me about your teachers?
  - i. Did they emphasize certain things as important in life?
  - ii. Did they encourage discussion?
  - iii. Did they treat children from different social backgrounds or races differently?
  - iv. Was any teacher an important influence on you?
- d. What did you most enjoy studying?
- e. Did you do any special training or apprenticeship?
  - i. While you were at school, did you have any part-time jobs?
- f. When you left school, what did you want to do?

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## Work/Community

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- a. When did you leave home?
  - i. Did you live by yourself?
  - ii. Did you move to another town?
- b. Can you tell me about the community you lived in?
  - i. Can you describe the neighbourhood to me?
  - ii. Did you have neighbours living close by?
  - iii. Did neighbours help each other? In what ways?
- c. Where you part of any clubs or associations?
- d. Can you tell me about festivals?
- e. Where did people go to socialise?
  - i. Did you have a favourite place to meet with your friends?
  - ii. Were there differences between these and other gathering places?
  - iii. Were there gathering place that you avoided? Why?

- f. In your neighbourhood, were you considered better off or worse off than your neighbours?
  - i. What was your relationship with others in the community?
  - ii. Who did you mix most easily with?
  - iii. Did one group feel itself superior to the others?
- g. How did you make your living?
  - i. How did you get your first full-time job?
  - ii. Was it through family/friends/other connections?
- h. Can you tell me about a normal day at work?
- i. Can you tell me about the people you worked with?
  - i. Did you have friends at work?
  - ii. Did you work with members of your family?
  - iii. Did men and women work together?
  - iv. Could you talk or relax or have fun together at all at the workplace?
- j. Did you feel you were reasonably paid or not?
- k. What do you remember about your bosses?
  - i. How did you feel about them?

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## **Marriage and Children**

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- a. Can you tell me how you and your partner first met?
  - i. Can you tell me about him/her (country of origin, social background, job, personality)?
- b. Do you still live with your husband/wife?
  - i. How would you describe your relationship now?
- c. Can we talk about your children?
  - i. When you were bringing them up, what did you think was most important to give them?
  - ii. How much did you talk to them?
  - iii. Who did you talk to if you were worried about them?
  - iv. Did you believe that girls and boys should be treated the same or differently?
  - v. Did you bring them up to believe that certain things are important in life?
  - vi. If they did something you disapproved of, what would you do?
- d. How do you think that your attitudes towards your children were different from your parents' attitudes towards you when you were growing up?
- e. What are your hopes, dreams, and aspirations for your children?

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## **Reasons for Leaving/Migration**

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- a. What were the events that led to your leaving?
  - i. What was the first news of violence in your country?
  - ii. How did you and your community react to this news?
  - iii. Did it create divisions within the community?
  - iv. How did you perceive of the policies of the government at the time?
- b. When did you first begin to feel unsafe?
  - i. Why did you feel unsafe?
  - ii. By whom did you feel threatened?
  - iii. Did you feel unsafe in your community?
  - iv. Did you feel as though you had the support of the people around you?
- c. What were your own experiences with violence?
  - i. How did you respond?
  - ii. How did others in the community respond?

- d. How do you think your experiences of these events differed from those of men/women?
- e. Did you ever make efforts to hide or to mask your identity because you felt threatened?
- f. Can you tell me about the weeks and days leading up to your leaving?
- g. Who do you feel you left behind?

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## Montreal

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- a. When did you first think about coming to Canada? Why?
  - i. Had anyone in your family gone abroad before you? Where?
  - ii. Why did you settle in Montréal?
  - iii. What did you know about Canada/Montréal? Who from?
  - iv. How did you imagine Canada/Montréal?
- b. Can you tell me about your experiences with Canadian immigration?
- c. What were your first impressions of Montréal?
- d. What was the most difficult thing about settling in Montréal?
  - i. Would you say that people were generally friendly or hostile towards you?
  - ii. What do you think helped the most?
  - iii. What did you most need and didn't have?
- e. Did you get support from the [Rwandan, Haitian, Cambodian, etc.] community?
  - i. Have you met new people in the [Rwandan, Haitian, Cambodian, etc.] community since moving here?
  - ii. Do you have a "network" for meeting people, or finding work/housing? Who belongs to your "network"?
  - iii. Are there divisions in the community related to the violence at home?
  - iv. How are memories related to these divisions?
  - v. How do survivors/refugees organise themselves?
- f. Do you celebrate holidays or traditions from your home country?
- g. How have you made your living since moving to Canada?
  - i. Have you had difficulty finding work?
- h. Can you tell me about the different waves of immigration from your home country?
  - i. How has this affected the community?
  - ii. What are the differences/commonalities between the experiences of these different groups?
- i. How do you think your feelings of home have changed since moving to Canada? Since you were a child?
  - i. How do you think your feelings of community have changed?
- j. What do you think about the divisions between people here in Montréal? Between Anglophones and Francophones, for example?
- k. How have you been treated by other Montrealers from outside your community?
  - i. Do you have Anglophone/Francophone friends?
- l. When/where do you feel most out of place in Canada?
  - i. Where do you feel most comfortable?
- m. Do your children like it here?
  - i. Do you think your children feel more comfortable here than you do?

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## Going Back

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- a. Have you been back to your home country?
  - i. If no, why not?
  - ii. If yes, what did you do while you were there?

- iii. How did you feel about being back?
- iv. What were your feeling about the changes in you home country?
- b. Have you thought about moving back permanently?
  - i. What are some of the reasons you would like to?
  - ii. What are some of the reasons you would prefer to stay in Canada/not go back?
- c. Have others from the community in Montréal moved back?
  - i. What have you heard from/about them?

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## **Memories/Looking Back**

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- a. How/where/when do you talk about your home country since moving to Montréal?
  - i. Who do you talk to about it with?
- b. How/when/where do you talk about your experiences with violence?
  - i. Who do you talk to about these experiences with?
  - ii. What stories of violence do you tell? Why?
- c. How do acknowledged storytellers in your community talk about the past?
  - i. How/where/when/why are particular stories told?
  - ii. How do these stories relate to your own?
  - iii. What are the silences in these stories? What isn't being said?
- d. What do you tell your children about your home country?
  - i. Do you talk about your reasons for leaving?
  - ii. How do you talk about violence with your children? How do you put it into words?
- e. Do you think of yourself as a survivor?
  - i. What do you think it means to be a survivor?
  - ii. What do you think of media portrayals of survivors? Do you think they are accurate?
  - iii. Do you feel that you share common ground with survivors from other communities?
- f. Do you sometimes try to avoid thinking about the past? In what ways?
- g. What do you think of recent developments in your home country?
  - i. What are your feelings about the Truth Commissions?
  - ii. Do you think the causes of the violence in your home country have been explained?
- h. Have you seen your community's experience expressed in artistic media or performance?
  - i. How did you respond to this?
  - ii. How did the community respond to this?
  - iii. How would you feel about participating in such a performance?
- i. How do you think your stories and those of your community can be expressed through museum exhibitions, theatre performances and in the classroom?
- j. What would you most like others outside of your community to know about your experiences?
  - i. What would you most like others within your community to know about your experiences?