

# Conducting Life History Interviews With Older Adults With Lived Experiences of Poverty: Reflections From Millennial and Gen Z Researchers

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## Abstract

The life history approach, a common interviewing method within the social sciences, involves collecting longitudinal data retrospectively by seeking an individual's account of their life over different periods of time. The exploratory, in-depth and narrative nature of life history interviews make it a compelling narrative method that can illicit rich and in-depth data and understanding (of the “other” and self). At the same time, this attribute raises various ethical complexities that must be considered. This paper documents the personal and professional reflections of a research team conducting life history interviews for a specific research project. It highlights the value of life history interview as a narrative method, and discusses the ethical complexities that can arise.

## Keywords

historical narrative, narrative, oral histories, community based research, narrative inquiry

## Introduction

The life history approach, a common interviewing method within the social sciences, involves collecting longitudinal data retrospectively by seeking an individual's account of their life over different periods of time (Jessee, 2019). The life course perspective (Hutchison, 2015) is the theoretical model that informs life history interviews, and its foci is on the “life course as a whole, how what happens in one period of a person's life is connected to what happens in other periods of that person's life” (p. 9). Within gerontology, the life course perspective has been used to examine how earlier life experiences have influenced life in old age.

Life history interviews are a narrative inquiry approach whereby the participants take the lead in telling their own narratives. The stories that the participant chooses to share is, from their perspective, what is most real and most important (Atkinson, 2007). These chosen stories are what brings us, the readers and researchers, closest to understanding the person's lived experiences. Atkinson (2007) posits that

it is impossible to anticipate what a life story interview will be like, not so much for how to do it but for the power of the experience itself. Just witnessing – really hearing, understanding and accepting, without judgment – another's life story can be transforming. (p. 235)

The life history can be shared chronologically or thematically, and the individual stories that are told within the life course stand alone as key aspects of the participant's life. At the same time the stories fit together to give the whole story of that person's life.

Life history interviews also reveal a representation of history that provides insights into the social and cultural milieu

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of an individual's past (Jackson & Russell, 2019). Individuals relay their stories as a member of a historically specific generation; that is, their stories are "constitutive of a generational consciousness" (Andrews et al., 2013, p. 84).

Life history interviews not only give access to a person's unique lived experience and help the researcher and reader gain a deeper understanding of that person, but it can highlight how such life experiences are similar to others, or even universal (Atkinson, 2007). Even the most personal life experiences can carry with it "archetypal experiences that are common to all human beings ... [these are the] timeless elements, enduring values, and lessons about life lived deeply" (p. 232). The exploratory, in-depth and narrative nature of life history interviews make it a compelling narrative method that can illicit rich and in-depth data and understanding (of the "other" and self). At the same time, this attribute raises various ethical complexities that must be considered.

## Ethical Complexities in Conducting Life History Interviews

In life history interviews, the participant chooses the stories to share and these stories are an expression of their self-identity and/or disseminate a personal, political, religious, or other agenda (Rothe, 2022). The interview encounter can be an empowering space for participants to co-construct meaning and knowledge with the researcher (Andrews et al., 2013). Albeit, Rothe (2022) warns against this "utopian notion" arguing that power may be evenly distributed in the interview encounter, but in the analysis process it is clear that researchers hold the interpretive power (p. 2054). During the analysis process, it is the researcher who will decide what quotations (and in what length and context) to select, and employ academic frameworks and languages to re-interpret the meaning of the personal narratives.

Smythe and Murray (2000) posit that "the most pervasive risk for participants in narrative research has to do with the emotional impact of having one's story reinterpreted and filtered through the lenses of social-scientific categories" (p. 321). When our analyses are not aligned with the participants self-perception, an ethical complexity arises (Rothe, 2022). On one hand, we have an obligation to our participants in building trust and rapport with them and bearing witness to their life stories. On the other hand, we have a responsibility to the academic field and our research, to conduct critical analyses and transform the primary source, the narratives of the participants, into academic knowledge that broadens our understanding of important social phenomenon. This dual obligation can lead to what Rothe (2022) describes as "analytical paralysis," whereby we as researchers question the ethics of not taking the participants' stories at face value but critically analyzing them for implicit meaning.

Attuning to transparency as much as possible is one way to address this ethical complexity. Rothe (2022) recommends to view life history interviews as first and second order

discourses. The first order discourse is the interview (along with the comments and questions by the interviewer) which sets out to "create a coherent and credible narrative in sync with [the participant's] self-identity and sometimes to further disseminate their political, religious, and other agenda" (p. 2056). The second order discourse is the scholarly analyses—exploring how the first order narratives reflect wider socio-cultural, economic and political structures and processes. Showing both discourses in the findings in a research article is one of the suggestions she offers to be fully transparent.

## Positive Impacts of Life History Interviews

There are also positive impacts of conducting life history interviews (Atkinson, 2007; Johnson, 2009; Ross, 2017). Positive impacts relate to opportunities for enhanced self-reflexivity and self-understanding. Johnson (2009) suggests that through "accessing stories of others' struggles it is possible for the researcher to think more carefully, and feel more deeply, about their own struggles, deepening and expanding not only their comprehension of their participants' stories, but also their own" (p. 201). The potential impacts of life history interviews on researchers have received little attention, despite how they might affect the data analysis, findings, and rigor of the research, and the worldview and self-concept of the researcher. Connolly (2007) argued that:

We must give permission to researchers to confess – without fear of judgement by their peers – their own emotional reactions to the narratives that they gather, particularly when they are likely to experience role conflicts, ethical dilemmas, and their own emotional, compassionate reactions. (p. 452)

This paper is a response to this invitation, and documents the personal and professional reflections of a research team conducting life history interviews for a specific research project. Our intention is to continue the methodological conversation regarding life history interviews and encourage "reflexive interruptions" by placing a central rather than tangential emphasis on reflexivity in the research process (Downe, 2007).

## Background of Our Research Project

We are a team of young (Millennial and Gen X) and novice researchers. The principal investigator and first author is an early career researcher and the researchers are graduate students. All of us are from the social sciences, including social work, sociology, psychology, health sciences, and literary cultural studies. This paper stems from our responses to completing 60 life history interviews during a qualitative research project with older adults with lived experiences of poverty, which the WHO (2003) posits as the single most social determinant of health. Each of us was either involved in data collection (conducting the interviews), transcribing the

interviews, and/or data analysis. The aim of the study was to explore and describe poverty dynamics across the lifespans of low income older adult-headed households in Hong Kong. Our study was approved by the Human Subjects Ethics Committee at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Reference Number: 25600220). Informed written consent was obtained with all participants of the study.

During data collection and analysis, the life history interviews began to take us into “something” that needed to be recognized, attuned to, and examined (Lippke & Tanggaard, 2014). Conducting the interviews face-to-face with the participants, (re)playing the audio files, carefully listening to every word and detail during transcription, and (re)analyzing in detail the sentences and paragraphs drew us into complex stories of “growing up,” family, work, love, loss, grief, survival, pain, suffering, joy, resilience, adversity, loneliness, and “growing old”—powerful stories that evoked strong emotions and ethical complexities that needed to be addressed. We entered what Lippke and Tanggaard (2014) poignantly termed “muddy interviews,” “those leaving you with a feeling that the research interview slid into something else—for example, coaching counselling, therapy, or just a really interesting professional conversation” (p. 136).

To lean into the muddy interviews, each of us independently wrote reflections and came together to co-author this paper. Each of us was given the same reflective prompts, but we were also free to describe any thoughts and feelings that remained unsettled. The reflective prompts included: (i) a description of our individual roles in the project; (ii) a description of our previous experience with older adults and research; and (iii) the most significant insights and/or thoughts and feelings from our experiences with the life history interviews during this project. Attuning to Rothe’s (2022) suggestion of first and second order discourses, what follows is the full reflections written by each researcher, and the subsequent critical analyses and interpretation of the reflections.

## Reflections

### *Crystal*

I am the PI for the research project. My primary contact with the participants was through data analysis. I (re)read 60 transcripts, conducting line-by-line coding (Glaser, 1978), and gained nuanced and detailed understandings of their individual stories. I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to review the coded data (extracted quotations) in detail. I am a 37-year-old ethnically Chinese female, raised and educated in Canada, and currently work as an academic in Hong Kong.

Prior to this project, my professional experience in gerontology was relatively expansive. I have conducted multiple qualitative studies with older adults (e.g., Kwan, 2020; Kwan & Tam, 2021; Kwan & Walsh, 2013), in which qualitative

interviews were a primary method. Prior to my academic career, I was a social worker practicing community development with marginalized older adults. A strengths-based approach (Saleebey, 1996) was my dominant practice approach. This approach encourages the practitioner and researcher to view individuals, families, and communities “in the light of their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes, however dashed and distorted these may have become through circumstance, oppression and trauma” (p. 297).

My professional experiences and interactions with older adults encourage me to adopt a comprehensive view of aging. On a personal level, my exposure to older adults is limited. I was not close to my grandparents, and all of them have passed away. Currently, I am experiencing my parents entering “old age”. Their perspectives on aging are not generally positive and avoidance is their preferred coping strategy. Perhaps it was my limited personal experiences with aging that led me to seek a greater understanding. Engaging in gerontology professionally may help me understand my parents’ experiences, and my own.

On a professional level, a significant insight gained from my exposure to the interviews concerns troubling questions regarding the limits of data analysis and interpretation. Working with the transcripts, I read about individuals living through tremendous times (e.g., the Cultural Revolution and World War II) with radically different social, cultural, political, economic, and physical/environmental contexts than those that have shaped mine, as a Canadian-born ethnically Chinese Millennial. This is not my first time learning about these times, but the details of the participants’ lived experiences in such tumultuous periods left a huge impression on me. In particular, I became cynical of how it was possible to use my mental model to make sense of their stories. My generation is one of extreme abundance, technological advancements, and relative peace and safety compared to my participants’ generation. The interviews left me feeling “othered” from the participants. I share a similar identity with the participants in that I grew up in a low-income family and as a recipient of social assistance. Still, the experiences of deep poverty they shared is something I can never fathom. Even the stories shared about family, love, loss, and grief, which are common human experiences, were seemingly different from my own. It made me question my (and our research team’s) capacity and right to interpret their stories. Surely, there was a high risk of misinterpretation?

Scholars have acknowledged that qualitative findings are a form of co-produced knowledge between the researcher and the participants, and the former’s own worldview will undoubtedly impact the interpretation of the findings (Beuthin, 2014; Mann, 2016). Rigorous strategies have been adopted within this project, including an audit trail (Wolf, 2003) throughout the data collection and analysis, to ensure the researchers’ worldviews are consciously reflected on and managed. We have attuned to the checklist of rigor like “good” qualitative researchers. Still, the unsettling feeling that our

findings will always be partially inaccurate and, at worst, misrepresentative has made me question whether this re-storying process from such a different generational perspective is helpful. This process made me realize how important it is to recognize the implications of generational differences between the researcher and participants. Further, as researchers, we must be mindful to keep our generational mental models “in check” while conducting and analyzing interviews. For me, this was easier said than done.

Personally, I was not close to my grandparents and most of my experiences concerned negative aspects of aging. I held ageist perspectives, which came to light during my social work educational journey and eventually led me to conduct a research project (Kwan & Walsh, 2013) that opened my mind to the dynamic, complex, and multiple stories of aging, old age, and older adults. Since then, I have explored and advocated for stories that would reject the myopic view of older adults as “vulnerable.” I began to adopt a strengths-based perspective to practice and research. However, it was late in this project that I realized how arrogant I was to assume that my ageist beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives were of the past.

I found myself early in the analysis “pitying” the participants. I had one dominant agenda, which was to figure out how to support this particular group of older people. With this myopia, my analysis became narrow, and coding was reflective of this. The codes were a partial truth. After a process of re-analyzing and “cleaning” the codes (Saldaña, 2016), I realized I was caught in what Adichie (2009) cautions against in her TED Talk, *The Dangers of a Single Story*. She posits that “a single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” I was a gerontological social work researcher, so how could I harbor ageist attitudes? These attitudes are deep, and addressing them needs to be recognized as a continuous and intentional process. I had been complacent in this journey, and arrogant to believe that such work could be “done.” As a gerontological researcher, I should be hyperaware and reflective of my biases, perspectives, and attitudes toward aging, old age, and older adults, and keep them in check.

This insight also enabled me to remain attuned to the emotional reaction of “pity” toward the participants, and how I should be cautious and reflective of this emotional reaction. Do I find myself constantly pitying the participants? If so, why? Is this reaction stemming from a place of empathy or from an ageist perspective? The implication of pity is that it is based on differential statuses between groups; it is not helpful in bridging intergroup understanding, which relies on an equal status between groups (Seeger et al., 2017). Viewing older adults through a lens of pity is not helpful in combating ageism, nor in the research process.

### Ho Chung

I co-conducted all and led most of the interviews. I was also involved in completing 13 transcriptions. I have worked with

older adults in two other research projects with the PI. As a social anthropology master’s graduate, my research interests lie in social and cultural phenomena regarding younger generations. Prior to these projects, I have no experience of working within gerontology. I am a 26-year-old Chinese-Hongkonger male. Growing up and living with my grandparents, I was a reserved and introverted child raised in a traditional Chinese family, whereby authoritarian filial piety (Li et al., 2018) was the norm. As such, I never had the chance to communicate with my grandparents on a deeply emotional level. This research project enabled me to interact with older adults in more meaningful ways.

The most significant insight I gained from this exposure concerns death; it is much closer than I think. I learned to cherish the moment and not hesitate to express my feelings to people I care about. I was invited by a participant to her home for dinner with the social worker and volunteers I met during the research project. Unfortunately, the participant’s husband passed away and the dinner never happened. I remember going to this participant’s home twice only a month before. I talked to her husband, who seemed healthy. He even jokingly complained that the food the participant made for him was tasteless. Death is inevitable but sometimes it comes suddenly. Talking to these older adults showed me that death is not to be feared. Most participants mentioned they do not fear death because they have no regrets.

Reciprocity exists in every relationship. From working with social workers and volunteers in this project, I learned that people are eager to provide what older adults need, but they never question what older adults can give back. This perspective creates an unequal relationship with older people. As the interviews progressed, my professional approach with the older adult participants became more personal and based on mutuality. Often, I was invited to dinner after the interviews, and accepting these invitations was a way to practice mutuality. For me, sometimes crossing the boundaries of the researcher-participant relationship is a way of addressing unequal relationships in the research context (Råheim et al., 2016).

My experience in this project also made me re-think the goal(s) of qualitative research, which does not only concerns collecting and analyzing data, writing academic papers, and advocating for changes at the macro level. Qualitative research can also bring about changes at the micro level. I came to realize that the sharing of stories was also a way for the participants to emotionally release their past experiences and trauma. The participants come from a generation and a culture that does not talk about emotions, yet I found myself often hearing emotionally charged stories and experiences. The participants would say, “I have never told this to anyone before,” and, after the interviews were over, I felt their sense of relief as a result of sharing. I realized that listening to their stories was not simply data collection but also an opportunity to provide support to the participants.

### Xin Yu (Syngy)

I am a 23-year-old female who was born in mainland China. My background is in psychology. Prior to this research, I volunteered in a community center, accompanying older adults during group activities. With both of my parents working full time, I was raised by my grandparents throughout my early childhood. Despite so much time spent with older adults, I cannot regard myself as a person who knows them well. It was not until participating in this research that I realized how older adults are diversified by their personal histories, and their hope to be understood from their own narratives. I co-interviewed over 40 older adults and completed 15 transcriptions. Throughout the 6 months of the interview and transcription process, my previous assumptions about “them” faded away.

For the first few interviews I led, I asked the same set of questions to all of the participants. Then, I found myself starting to enable the participants to take more control by giving empathetic responses (sometimes non-verbal, which are not reflected in the transcriptions), and providing active listening, or even silence. When I felt participants wanted to be heard and understood, I used communication skills learned from my counselling courses. Sometimes, the participants even talked more when we only gave empathetic responses, instead of asking from the set of questions. This is how I was influenced by people in the flesh, and how a dual role emerged for me: I was a researcher asking questions but, at the same time, we were two human beings trying to understand each other.

Re-traumatization was something I worried about occurring when conducting these interviews, because many participants had lived through the Cultural Revolution and/or Japanese occupation. Some had experienced war, others had experienced interpersonal betrayal, loss, or serious illness. However, their ability to recover from the traumatic past is amazing. They shared feelings of sadness, resentment, and victimization, but were able to talk about it, and this requires courage. It reminded me of my grandfather, who was a soldier. He often had nightmares. Our family saw him as a stubborn old man, but I can remember the way he talked about the war. He lived with nightmares of war, but he also felt alive because of these memories. I used to think my grandpa had undiagnosed PTSD. My thought of “try not to trigger him” became my excuse to avoid having conversations with him about his past. Hearing so many stories from older adults has given me the chance to rediscover the value of their and my grandpa’s personal histories. Is re-telling stories re-traumatization or relief? The emotions that emerge from telling one’s stories does not automatically make one vulnerable; instead, the re-storying process can be enriching for the participant. Through storytelling, the participants’ personal histories are heard, which contributes to older adults’ (and any individual’s) hope to be understood.

Transcription is a lengthy but subtle process. Despite being instructed to translate verbatim, I struggled between

translating the participants’ exact words and conveying the tone and meaning behind their words. Most of the time, I prefer the latter approach because the emotional change within the interviews conveys important messages about participants’ attitudes, beliefs, and values. Transcription is also an opportunity to re-organize information missed during the interviews. Many older adults have pet phrases, such as “there’s no other way”, “it was hard”, or “I am really thankful to the government”. Listening to the audio, it is possible to understand how their lives have reinforced these phrases. This realization had never occurred to me before, as I only saw phrases such as these as a personal habit.

### Yan

My role in this project involved completing 16 transcriptions and co-interviewing. I am a 29-year-old ethnically Chinese woman with 5 years of experience participating in public health education research. My roles in these projects involved participant recruitment and close-ended interviews with older adults. I had never conducted narrative interviews that deeply explore older adults’ personal stories before. My grandmother is still alive and she often shares stories with me, but I was seldom motivated to inquire further about the details of her history.

Before conducting the interview and transcriptions for this project, I had a narrow view of the participants, assuming they were mostly frail and not well-educated. However, through the transcripts, I realized that this image was not the reality. For example, one of the participants was an engineer from the People’s Liberation Army Navy. As a science student, I am not familiar with the history of China and Hong Kong, and I have learned a lot from the participants’ stories. I realized older generations are strong, and frailty does not wholly capture how I view them anymore. They have overcome many challenges and difficulties. If I had been in the same situation, I would have given up immediately.

Most participants were satisfied with their living conditions, despite living in poverty. One older adult said she did not want to ask for too much because she enjoyed the stability she already had. I was initially puzzled by this attitude of being easily satisfied. However, as I heard the participants’ stories, I realized “easily satisfied” can be clearly understood in the context of the adversities they lived through. Through hearing their stories, I understood why most older adults prefer to have simple, stable, and peaceful lives, avoiding conflict regarding social issues. I considered the privileges we (the younger generation) have and how we request a lot and are constantly dissatisfied with our lives, despite having overall better incomes and living conditions. Is it a kind of social norm to have this “culture of complaint” in our younger generation? But what causes this culture? It makes me question whether we have “developed or progressed” in society and why most of us can’t be “easily satisfied.”

Before joining this project, I had no transcription experience. The language barrier is one of the biggest challenges for



me, such as in regard to the interviewee's accent, clarifying content, and the transcription of historical and colloquial language. I am also not familiar with history, so it is hard to understand the contexts of the stories being told. I have to spend time checking and clarifying terms and major events that participants have brought up. Despite these challenges, I have learned a lot. The participants' stories make me think about how my life and my parents' lives would have been during these times. I have grown curious and motivated to learn more about my parents' life histories and narratives.

### *Tak Shuen (Sylvia)*

I am a 24-year-old ethnically Chinese female. One side of my family is from Hong Kong and the other is from Taiwan. I grew up going between the two shores, but was primarily raised and educated in Hong Kong. I hold a bachelor's degree in psychology and am currently a graduate student in literary and cultural studies. I grew up living with my paternal grandparents; direct exchanges with my maternal grandparents were irregular and inconsistent. There were also several older adults in my extended family I had contact with regularly, but I was not close to any of them and they have all since passed away. I grew up in a relatively poor neighborhood, akin to the living situations of the participants in this project. Throughout the project, I co-conducted seven interviews and transcribed 12 interviews.

It was strange how the participants' stories became monolithic the more I listened to them, as was the lack of non-heterosexual people within the pool of participants; statistically, should there not have been at least one queer person? Other than the fact that same-sex relationships were not widely accepted in that generation, I thought perhaps it was the way we recruited the participants, as many of the participants were referred to us by faith-based NGOs (which is common, as some of the largest social service providers are faith-based). Is it that queer people just do not live so long? Are they more likely to be reclusive and therefore we are less able to find them through service organizations? Or perhaps I did interview some LGBTQ older adults but they remained in the closet.

I also found the way participants dealt with trauma interesting. It seems like a lot of trauma is left unresolved, and the idea of processing or even talking about traumatic incidents is seen as "useless" or "meaningless", as life goes on and it was important for them to work and earn a living. From my perspective, they were not allowed the time and space to properly deal with the collective trauma they went through (e.g., the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution). They were encouraged to dismiss their experiences, to not talk about any of it, to not even think about it; as a result, they live with the remnants of trauma without being allowed to acknowledge they were hurt. I wondered, is there a collective narrative or collective healing for them? Is this cultural? Is it political? Is it generational and age-related? What is the cause

of this silence and unwillingness to even acknowledge their pain?

One of the big challenges was actually trying to understand the participants' heavily accented Cantonese, which reminded me of the time I spent with older people around me as a kid—it is as if we speak in different cadences, their utterances being in my native tongue yet sounding completely foreign, which is indicative of the distance I feel from them. I do not wish to view them with pity, as I imagine it would be unwelcome and unproductive, nor do I think I am somehow superior to them just because I may be more educated or hold more universally "moralistic" or "humanitarian" views. It just so happens that they had the misfortune of being born during a time of intense upheaval, socially and culturally, and, through circumstances out of their control, they were not afforded the opportunities, stability, and wealth that my generation is lucky enough to have during our key developmental stages. I think this is important for us to remember when interacting with the older population or, in general, populations that may not see eye-to-eye with us. We are all shaped by how we grew up and, a lot of time, the environment we grew up in is down to luck, and not necessarily reflective of our natures as individuals. When we are given the opportunity to listen to stories from older generations, we are given insight into why they are the way they are, and the distance and discrepancies between us and them can ultimately be explained and explored.

## **Discussion**

When critically analyzing our collective reflections for core and unique insights, there are several important discussion points regarding life history interviews that arise.

### *Life History Interviews and Generational Consciousness*

The life history interview can illuminate generational consciousness (Andrews et al., 2013). The personal stories shared by the participants were unique and personal, but at the same time they embodied similar narratives, values and messages. Our reflections highlighted the importance of historical context and seeing generations as an important identity marker organizing our social worlds just as profoundly as gender, class or ethnicity (Edmunds & Turner, 2002). Life history interview presses us to not only understand the personal narratives and self-identity of the participants but also to generational consciousness. To gain better understanding of our participants' stories, we have to recognize that we as researchers hear and read stories through a specific generational consciousness – which may be similar and/or different to that of our participants. Reflecting on our generational consciousness and that of our participants, and its implications on the research process becomes an important reflexive point in life history interviews.

## *Life History Interviews and Understanding the “Other” and Self*

The reflective accounts of our team document experiences of engaging and being “with the other”—in this case, older adults with lived generational experiences that are vastly different from our own as Millennials and Gen Xers. An unintended intergenerational project emerged. Our individual and collective reflections are a glimpse of how varied the trajectory of intergenerational understanding can be—at least from the perspective of the younger cohort, as we did not engage with the older adult participants about their feelings and thoughts related to this intergenerational exchange.

Most of us had conducted qualitative research and interviews prior to this project, but this is the first time the graduate students involved had conducted life history interviews. The older adults’ significant experiences throughout childhood, adulthood, and older adulthood were insightful. Engagement with these interviews (including transcription and analysis) further encourages us to move beyond thinking of older adults as binary, toward conceptualizing them as multi-dimensional beings. If researchers have experience working with older adults or in gerontology, it can be assumed they are generally protected against ageist attitudes and beliefs—that we have “worked it out.” Our reflections highlight that the challenge against ageism and toward enhanced intergenerational understanding is a process. We are not immune to unhelpful stereotypes and generalizations about older adults, despite working in gerontology. [Verhage et al. \(2021\)](#) aptly found in their study that reducing ageism is not a linear process that can be evaluated through a pre-test or post-test design, but rather is a complex and dynamic process based on diverse positive and negative experiences prior to the program and interaction.

As societies around the globe are experiencing rapidly aging populations ([World Health Organization, 2021](#)), gerontological research (including topics related to intergenerational relations) is expanding, along with strategies and funding to encourage students and emerging scholars to choose this area as their main research and practice focus ([Hahn & Kinney, 2021](#)). The PI and first author is an outcome of such efforts, as she initially had no interest in working within the field of gerontology, and is now committed to and wholly interested in the field. As the number of gerontologists continues to grow, especially among younger cohorts, there is a need for continuous “reflexive interruptions” examining the implications of our generational mindsets and worldviews within the research context, and the personal implications of engaging in such research.

Our reflective accounts suggest that, embedded within gerontological research, there can be an unintended intergenerational project, one between researchers and older adult participants. Intergenerational understanding is always a work in progress, no matter how enveloped one is in gerontology. It is necessary to remember that ageist assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes are deeply embedded within our society and culture,

as well as the importance of reflexive interruptions to address their implications for research.

## *Life History Interviews and “Analytical Paralysis”*

The power of interpretation that the researcher holds, and the dual obligations to participant and to the research process and knowledge building, can trigger analytical paralysis ([Rothe, 2022](#)), which is what we had encountered in this study. Indeed, there was a deep questioning of our right and legitimacy as researchers to transform the personal and intricate life stories into academic knowledge. Especially since we were coming from a different generational consciousness from our participants. At the same time, the wary and cautious feelings that came up when analyzing the life story interviews can actually be seen as a positive – as a signpost of reflexivity. Life history interviews invite the researcher into the worldview of another, enabling us a greater understanding of the subjective experiences, perspectives, self-identity, and generational consciousness of another. Intuitively, we know that the interviews (the stories) represent much more than mere data. It is no wonder that we experienced analytical paralysis – as this feeling reminds and humbles us as researchers to tread carefully and intentionally when conducting, transcribing and analyzing life history interviews. Experiencing analytical paralysis should be seen as part of the process and an indicator of reflexivity as a researcher.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to highlight the value of life history interview as a narrative method, and discuss the ethical complexities that can arise. Also, our reflective accounts highlight how our encounters with this approach (whether that be in conducting, transcribing or analyzing the interview) led to a deeper understanding of ourselves (our personal selves), qualitative research (our professional selves), and aging, old age, and older adults (our future selves). The life history interview encounter is not only a space to understand social phenomenon and the “other,” but also the self ([Johnson, 2009](#)). Thus, this approach requires a deep willingness to practice self-reflexivity. [Tracy \(2010\)](#) identifies “sincerity,” which includes “self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s)” and “transparency about the methods and challenges,” as one of eight criteria for excellent qualitative research (p. 840). Self-reflexivity is key to enhancing the rigor or trustworthiness of qualitative research. Yet, this process is not easy to practice and integrate throughout the research process. Our reflective accounts and discussion are a reminder for (novice) researchers to not treat reflexivity in qualitative research as tangential or as a one-off task to be checked off ([Morse, 2020](#)), but to give it central and proper space to be integrated throughout the research process.

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## Ethical Statement

Our study was approved by the Human Subjects Ethics Committee at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Reference Number: HSEARS20200113002). Informed written consent was obtained with all participants of the study.

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