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Interview Paper

Part 1: How did it go?

On April 14th, I conducted an interview with my parents about their upbringing for nearly two hours. As their most intimate person, I realized that I had rarely taken the initiative to actively learn about my parents' past lives. After this interview, they became more complete in my eyes, both as parents, and as individuals. 

I used all 167 of Elizabeth Keating's questions, but I informed my parents that they could selectively skip any uncomfortable or unwanted questions, so I received effective responses to approximately 150 questions.  Based on the different categories of Elizabeth Keating's questions, such as basic background, family history, daily activities, and self-awareness, I prepared guiding questions for each category and emphasized the connections between each category to help my parents understand the general direction of their responses. In addition, before the formal interview began, based on my understanding of my parents, I roughly categorized the questions as either ones that could be discussed in-depth or those that could be answered relatively quickly, in order to maximize the efficiency of the interview time. During the interview, my parents were very cooperative. They sat together and took turns answering the questions, and sometimes responded to each other's points, such as when they talked about their high school life (they were high school classmates). Although the two-hour interview was relatively long, they did not show any impatience. On the contrary, they seemed to want to take this opportunity to share their stories from their youth with me. Even after the interview ended, they sent me a written version of their responses to the 167 questions I translated into Chinese, which I can use in the future. 

This interview allowed me to learn about my parents' past and gave me a new way of understanding them beyond just as my "parents". I had previously heard about their experiences during their university years in Beijing, but through this interview, I learned about their teenage years as well. Similar to the order of the interview questions, the first thing I learned about was their family background, which had significant differences between them. When asked about their family stories, my mother's response was "our family was always associated with poverty when we were young, and we didn't escape from this state even after I went to university in Beijing." My mother had eight siblings while my father only had four, both of them were the youngest in their respective families. The difference in the number of family members and the different occupations and social status of their parents led to a significant difference in the economic conditions and cultural level of their families, which was one of the main reasons for their different upbringing experiences. However, in their written responses to me, they did not emphasize too much on the differences in their family's economic situation but rather focused on their communication with their parents, daily interactions with friends, and memories of their family. This also reflected their thoughts on money, which is that the amount of money is not important, but rather having good health is important. I will discuss other new insights about my parents later in the next section.

In the list of questions, some asked whether the interviewees had any photos or letters from their childhood. Thanks to a relatively good family financial situation, my father had a few childhood photos, but unfortunately, my mother had none, which means that I will never know what she looked like when she was young. As someone living in a different era from them, I deeply appreciate the changes that technology has brought to our lives. Photos are already the most basic things, including videos, audios, and even this paper that I am writing right now can

be saved electronically, allowing future generations to establish a more solid connection with history. By recording this interview, I have obtained a memory that can be shown to future generations, which will not be lost forever in the long river of history like my mother's teenage photos.

Considering the different atmospheres in each family, conducting an interview that abandons the inherent identity of family members can be beneficial. Whether it's with parents, grandparents, or other family members, one of the purposes of this interview is to pass down old memories, thereby further closing the gap between family members. There are indeed ways to improve the interviewing process, especially for international students like me who cannot communicate face-to-face with the interviewee. Even with the help of video calls, the final result will still be affected to some extent. Since it is necessary to ensure that the submission date does not affect the final evaluation time, my suggestion is to categorize the questions and conduct the interview in small amounts but multiple times. Perhaps spending 20 minutes every day within a week is a reasonable progress. This can encourage the interviewee to maintain their optimal state without being affected by long periods of talking. In addition, although Keating raised 167 questions, these questions are relatively general. Students should adjust the direction and content of the coming interview based on the former interview content, making it more relevant to their own family situation.

Overall, this interview was a great experience. Not only did it provide an opportunity to communicate with my parents in a heartfelt manner, but it also allowed me to better understand them to some extent, comprehend their thoughts, and even helped me resolve some misunderstandings I had with them by hearing about their life experiences. Future students should also try it and continuously improve the interviewing process.

Part 2: What did you learn about your interview partner's life and development?

After conducting interviews, I found that my parents roughly divided their growing-up experiences into three different stages: life in their hometown, life after moving to Beijing, and life after getting married. I was amazed to discover how different their trajectories were, yet how they ultimately connected to each other.

As for their earliest memories, they mostly revolved around their homes and family members. During their early development stage (ages 3-11), they spent most of their time at home. Due to my mother's family's unfavorable financial situation and having five daughters already, her parents had considered giving her away, but eventually, they gave up this idea. Perhaps out of guilt for having had such thoughts, or maybe because my mother is the youngest child in the family, she felt collectively nurtured and cared for by her family members. Her older siblings took good care of her, and her parents worked hard for the family. This gave her a relatively happy childhood. Many members of my father's family were educators, including his mother, which had the most direct impact on him receiving education at an early age. Compared to my mother, my father received relatively less attention during his childhood.

As time passed, during their adolescence stage (ages 12-18), their bodies, cognitive abilities, emotions, and language had developed drastically. Our hometown was relatively underdeveloped at the time, which meant that people's thoughts were not very open-minded. When they entered puberty and their bodies began to develop, the sex education they received was traditional and conservative. The saying "男女授受不亲" meant that men and women should not have intimate contact until they got married. They also noticed changes in their cognitive abilities after entering puberty. My mother's family lived in the countryside, and they did not have any items that accurately represented time, such as clocks or watches. So, the way they perceived time was by looking at the position of the sun. The setting of the sun meant the

end of the day. On the other hand, my father's family had better economic conditions, so he could feel time more intuitively through clocks. This way of perceiving time was passive, and they could only know the specific time through the sun or clock. However, after entering puberty, they gradually broke away from their dependence on specific objects to perceive time. They could arrange activities for corresponding time periods by themselves and even set up plans for the next week or even month.

As high school came to an end, what my parents saw as the first major turning point in their life followed closely: leaving their hometown to study in Beijing. This event marked the independence for them. The differences between life in Inner Mongolia and Beijing were significant, with improvements in both education and living standards. Initially, it was difficult for my mother to integrate into her university life, being a student from a rural area who had made it to Beijing. Despite having a talent for academics, she did not know how to adapt to the city's pace of life. She would often leave an hour earlier than normal to walk to school in order to save just a few cents on bus fare. This highlights how the "poverty" mentality was deeply ingrained in my mother's mind, which continues to this day, even though the financial pressure has eased. She still insists on buying only what is necessary and not spending money on unnecessary items. After a year of adaptation, she successfully integrated into university life. Socially, she made many friends, some of whom she is still in touch with. According to her, the friendships at that time were very beautiful, and everyone had high hopes for the future, living in the capital of China, feeling that the future was bright. From this point on, her thoughts gradually moved beyond the rural context, and she began to contemplate issues that would be considered "meaningless" at home, such as the meaning of life and the definition of love.

At the same time, she began to study Mandarin. Regarding to language, my mother subjectively believes that this was her biggest change after coming to Beijing. Not only during this interview, but also during the eighteen years I have spent with her, I can feel that there are some differences between her in Beijing and her in her hometown, the most obvious being language. Whenever we visit our hometown during holidays, my mother will code-switch, speaking dialect with her family. Of course, I can understand their conversation, but I cannot speak it. As the only person in the family to leave the countryside, my mother's contact with her siblings naturally decreased, resulting in a somewhat "polite" communication with her family whenever we visit our hometown, because the knowledge and ideas she has acquired in Beijing made her thinking evolved to a different level than the rest of her family. She is tired of this torment caused by knowledge and family affection because both are important to her. My father's situation after coming to Beijing was slightly different. He made very few friends during university and had little contact with these friends after graduation. Although he was relatively more prosperous in terms of living, he was very lonely in the early years in Beijing. However, this also allowed him to focus more on his studies and career, and he entered a company to accumulate experience after graduation. My parents' past experiences explain their current personalities well. My mother is relatively easy-going and kind to others, while my father is silent and does not express his emotions too often.

In the year my parents graduated from university, the policy at the time was for the government to allocate jobs to students, so they quickly entered the palace of marriage and rented their first apartment in Beijing. Marriage was the second important turning point in their lives, indicating loyalty, trust, mutual assistance, and responsibility. When I interviewed them about their lives after marriage, I clearly felt that they still had the influence of their rural

background. Rural culture was also an important part of their identity. My mother never wore new clothes while growing up, as she wore second handed clothes from her older sisters, which was a way to save money for the family. This habit was deeply ingrained, to the point where after marriage, her expensive items such as mobile phones were only used if my father had used them before, not because they couldn't afford the latest models, but because my mother saw no need for a new phone.


My father's family had a higher cultural level, which meant stricter family education, and this often led to him being scolded by his father for not having proper table manners or being late. My father said he used to think these things were unimportant, but when I was a child, he would also scold me for the same reasons, they are more similar to their own parents than they realize. At this stage, their language is fixed; however, their emotions and values have undergone significant changes as they have aged. When asked about socializing, their answers changed from enjoying lively activities to enjoying solitude and quietness. Their hobbies also became more elegant, such as drinking tea and strolling in the park, instead of pursuing novelty and excitement.

After the interview, I found that my parents' responses to questions about their self-identity are not affected by the changes in their living environment. To some extent, the idea of favoring sons over daughters still influenced them. A clear example is that every year during the Chinese New Year, we tend to celebrate at my father's home and only visit my mother's family a few days later, and my mother prepares breakfast for my father and me most of the time. It is not difficult to infer that this was also the case in their childhood homes, and the results of the interview confirmed my speculation. Compared to my parents, I have broader knowledge and a more open mind, which is reflected in our understanding of going to university and getting

married. In their points of view, going to university is a necessary foundation for education. If a person has not gone to university, then their life has no future. However, I believe that university is just an option, and not going to university to enter society earlier does not mean failure, the value of life should not be determined by whether one has gone to university. Regarding to marriage, they believed that getting married and having children was the natural process of continuing the family blood line, but I believe that getting married should respect both parties' opinions, and having children should respect the woman's opinion.

In fact, when I was in elementary school, my parents' thinking was even more conservative. When I want to buy new shoes to wear, they think that my old shoes can still be worn if they are repaired. When I want to buy new toys, they say it's a waste of money and there's no need to buy them. Especially my father cannot understand my desire for these items. However, as my mother began to study Buddhist scriptures, she gradually became aware of the problem of instilling thoughts in me and convinced my father to change together. Until recently, when I proposed the idea of not cutting my hair anymore and saving it to donate to sick children, they did not oppose it, and even encouraged me. Considering that they said in an interview that when they were young, they always cut their hair when it got too long, and they could not accept people wearing strange clothes or having weird hairstyles, their support for my idea surprised me.

This interview was the first time I truly got to know my parents' lives before I was born. By listening to their stories, I imagined my parents in different roles, such as a curious child fascinated by beekeepers in the south, a young boy who fell in love with a girl at first sight, a young couple who worked hard to pass the exam and move to Beijing for love, and adults who went through numerous trials and eventually succeeded. It seems that for a long time, my parents

only had the identity of being my parents in my eyes. I am very grateful for this interview for showing me another side of my parents' lives. 

Part 3: What would lifespan researchers have to say about your interview partner's life?


After learning about my parents' upbringing, I discovered many interesting areas for further study. The knowledge I have gained in class can help to explain my parents' behavior and thinking during specific stages of their lives.


Firstly, my parents were raised with different parenting styles. My mother, due to having too many family members and not being able to receive 100% attention from her parents, was raised with an Uninvolved Parenting Style. Compared to other children at her age, she displayed more mature thinking and was able to take on responsibilities. Despite her parents not being heavily involved in her upbringing, she did not have difficulty with socializing or controlling her emotions. This can be attributed to her seven siblings supporting and encouraging each other throughout their upbringing, taking on a parental role to some extent. On the other hand, my father was raised with an Authoritative Parenting Style from a young age. Since both of his parents were teachers, they knew what their children needed in terms of upbringing. However, due to their busy careers, they didn't have much time to spend with my father and could only set clear goals and rules for him, occasionally providing guidance. When comparing the written reports my father and mother gave me, I found that my father, who was raised with an Authoritative Parenting Style, almost did not answer any questions related to "self-awareness and identity", choosing to skip them instead. Meanwhile, my mother, who was raised with an Uninvolved Parenting Style, was able to objectively describe her identity. This result does not match the expected outcome of the four parenting styles.


My parents' earliest memories began during the Childhood stage. During the Early Childhood stage, my mother's biggest impression was the love and affection shown by her older siblings, which created a loving environment for her. This environment formed a Secure Attachment Style, which laid the foundation for my mother's kind and approachable personality

in the future. When it came to the Middle Childhood stage, my father started training in table tennis as a hobby, which he continues to this day. This was due to his Motor Development, which enabled him to control his limbs' muscles to achieve his sports goals. A shared memory of my parents is being able to use chopsticks proficiently, although they have slightly different techniques. Proficient use of chopsticks indicates that they could control their muscles more delicately, which was also attributed to Fine Motor Development. A heart-breaking example is my mother's emotional control. During the Middle Childhood stage, she would act strong when her parents were concerned about her, so that they wouldn't have to focus too much attention on her emotional needs, for the sake of the whole family. Even though this would sometimes make her sad, she felt happy knowing that she could make her parents worry less. This situation of deliberately hiding emotions and experiencing two emotions simultaneously supports Piaget's theory of Concrete Operational Emotions.

Soon my parents entered their teenage years. During this period, their cognitive level, physical, emotional, and social development all improved, with cognitive development being the most notable as they entered the Formal Operational Stage. My mother became very curious at this stage, for example, she wondered why the rooster crowed every morning, so one day she deliberately got up earlier than the rooster and used a flashlight to simulate the sun shining on the rooster to confirm whether the rooster crowed due to changes in light. Her thinking gradually became more logical, and she systematically verified her own conjectures. During this time, they also entered Erikson's Identity vs. Role Confusion stage. When asked about their memories with classmates, my mother's response was that she enjoyed discussing profound questions with her peers and in the process, constantly improving her thinking, identifying her preferred career as soon as possible, and working hard to achieve it. However, my father seemed more lost, unable

to see his future clearly, and only focused on studying the content of textbooks diligently. This resulted in further highlighting the difference in self-awareness levels between my parent 

My parents' life in their hometown stopped at the teenage stage. During these 18 years, the culture, customs, communication methods, language, etc. in the countryside became important components of their identity, and invisibly influenced their future lifestyle and thinking mode. In that era, mobile phones were not popular, and the main way of information dissemination was through radio and letters, which led to their teenage years being relatively boring (at least in my opinion). Their daily activities were almost the same every day, from getting up and going to school in the morning to sleeping at night, and the things that happened in between were basically the same every day, repeating year after year. This kind of plain life may have led to fuzzy memories, which is also why my parents find it difficult to recall some small details of their lives when asked about their childhood, while their memories after coming to Beijing are relatively vivid because life in Beijing is more interesting and fulfilling. 

As my parents arrived in Beijing and entered university, they also entered the stage of adulthood. Fortunately, my mother made many close friends during her time at university and was very willing to share her life with them.  On the other hand, my father did not have a smooth social life during his university years. The difference in their social experiences directly affected their personalities. I have several good friends whom I have played with since elementary school, and our parents are also very familiar with each other. We have countless experiences of traveling together over the past twelve years. However, even with this group of friends who are as close as family, my father and mother's behavior at family gatherings is significantly different. While my mother often chats and interacts with other parents, my father is relatively silent and only occasionally responds when someone speaks to him. This is a case of success and failure in

the intimacy vs. isolation stage. As I mentioned earlier, my mother will code-switch, which is a manifestation of developing a bicultural identity where rural and urban cultures coexist within her. After graduating from university and getting married, my parents entered the stage of young adulthood. There were relatively few changes during this stage. Physically, my father gradually gained weight and his BMI increased, while my mother's knees had some problems due to a lack of adequate nutrition in childhood and long-term walking to school, causing frequent pain. My parents' values changed again at the moment of my birth. They were very excited about my arrival, but they also felt a greater responsibility as parents. In terms of parenting, I feel that my parents' approach to raising me is different from what they experienced before, obviously due to the popularization of knowledge and the improvement of culture. They are now more "sophisticated and scientific" in their parenting.

The above is the analysis of the different life stages of my parents up to now, and we can clearly see how early family environment shapes their future personalities. However, some real-life cases cannot directly be explained by general conclusions, and individualized analysis is still needed based on different samples. In addition, we should continue to explore what to do after knowing someone's past experiences to help them overcome the shadow brought by their parents' neglect or psychological trauma.