

## THE SELF AND THE SACRED INTERVIEW

### **Appendix 1: Annotated Interview Schedule (The Self and The Sacred)**

This is a semi-structured interview designed to take 60-90 minutes to complete. During the interview, particular care must be paid to the researcher's use of language, particularly with regard to loaded terms like 'God' or the 'Sacred'. The preferred terms of the participant for these concepts should be elicited and used by the researcher in a sensitive and respectful manner. The interview consists of seven sections, each of which has an initial lead question that can be adapted as necessary. Additional guidance is supplied below for each section. Sample prompt questions are also provided, to indicate possible follow-ups if the participant's initial answer is brief. The participant should be encouraged to answer the questions openly and in a way that makes sense to them and that is true to their experiences. The order of questions is flexible, and the researcher should be responsive to the interview as it unfolds.

#### **A. Can you tell me about yourself?**

This section explores how the participant currently views themselves and their place in the world. The initial question(s) should be open, and not explicitly mention religion/spirituality. If the participant does not bring up religious or spiritual aspects of their current identity, then they can be asked specifically about them after they have provided an initial description of themselves.

- 1. What do you do for a living?**
- 2. What are the most important relationships in your life?**
- 3. Do you belong to any groups or communities?**
- 4. What do you enjoy doing the most? Why?**

**B. Can you tell me about your childhood and growing up?**

This section is intended to elicit information about the participant's background and previous experiences. Aspects of this may be have previously been covered, but if they have not then prompt questions should be asked about their childhood, family and cultural background. Questions should explore the most significant events in their life, though these should be open and not explicitly mention religion/spirituality at this stage.

- 1. What was your family like when you were growing up?**
- 2. What values were important in your family?**
- 3. Can you tell me about your educational background?**
  - a. How did you find school?**
  - b. What did you do after school?**
- 4. What do you think is your greatest accomplishment?**

**C. Can you tell me how you understand the world and your place in it?**

This section begins the transition into deeper topics, after rapport has been built during the previous questions. The questions here are focused on meaning and purpose, seeking to build up a picture of how the individual experiences their wider world. Questions should also be asked, if appropriate, about whether they have always viewed aspects of the world as they currently do and, if not, what they think caused the changes.

- 1. What makes life meaningful for you?**
- 2. Do you think that you have a purpose?**
- 3. What matters the most to you?**
- 4. How do you decide if something is right or wrong?**
- 5. Why do you think 'bad' things happen to people?**
- 6. Is there an overarching plan/guiding force to your life?**
- 7. What do you think will happen after you die?**

**D. Can you describe God, as you know him/her, to me?**

In this section of the interview, questions are explicitly asked about religion/spirituality. The terminology used for these questions should reflect the language used by the participant to answer previous questions, or in the absence of that should be based on the faith tradition with which they identify. These questions are designed to draw out both explicit and implicit theology: what the participant 'thinks' about the sacred and how they 'feel' about it. An explicit description of how the participant views 'the divine' should be sought at this stage. Follow-up questions should ask about the development of this concept. Anthropomorphic questions will only be used if the participant's answers make it appropriate to do so. This section also asks about what religious/spiritual practices the participant partakes in.

- 1. What do you think God is like?**
- 2. How do you feel about God?**
- 3. How do you think God feels about you?**
- 4. How do you think God feels about other people?**

- 5. How do you think God acts?**
- 6. How do you know this/why do you think this?**
  - a. What do you think about people who have very different experiences of God?**
- 7. What religious/spiritual activities do you take part in?**
  - a. How often?**
  - b. Why?**
- 8. Are there benefits from knowing God in the way that you do?**
- 9. Are there downsides or costs to knowing God in the way that you do?**

**E. What experiences of the Sacred have you had?**

In this section, narratives about specific 'spiritual' experiences are sought. Questions should be appropriate to previous disclosures about the participant's beliefs, but the standard format is to seek detailed accounts of at least three spiritual experiences: the first, the most recent, and whichever the participant deems most significant. If the initial accounts do not include them, then prompt questions can be asked about the antecedents and consequences of the experience, in addition to seeking to make explicit the meaning and interpretation that the participant attributes to each experience.

- 1. Can you tell me about the most significant/important spiritual experience of your life?**
  - a. When was it?**
  - b. What had happened previously?**

- c. What was it like?**
- d. How did it make you feel?**
- e. What happened afterwards?**
- f. Did it change anything?**
- g. If so, why do you think it did?**

**2. Can you tell me about the first spiritual experience you had?**

- a. When was it?**
- b. What had happened previously?**
- c. What was it like?**
- d. How did it make you feel?**
- e. What happened afterwards?**
- f. Did it change anything?**
- g. If so, why do you think it did?**

**3. Can you tell me about your most recent spiritual experience?**

- a. When was it?**
- b. What had happened previously?**
- c. What was it like?**
- d. How did it make you feel?**
- e. What happened afterwards?**
- f. Did it change anything?**
- g. If so, why do you think it did?**

**F. Have your beliefs changed during your life? If so, when and why?**

This penultimate section seeks to clarify any issues that have not been adequately covered in previous sections. In particular, it focuses on the developing and dynamic aspects of the participant's beliefs and of their relationship with 'their god(s)'. It also asks about their expectations for the future.

**1. Do you think your beliefs have changed during your life?****2. Have there been any sudden/radical changes?**

**a. What has changed?**

**b. What do you think the reasons are for those changes?**

**3. Have there been gradual changes?**

**a. What has changed?**

**b. What do you think the reasons are for those changes?**

**4. How has your relationship with God changed?****G. Do you have anything else you'd like to say?**

This final section asks the participant if there is anything important about their religious/spiritual beliefs and/or experiences that they would like to either add or clarify. It is a chance for them to resolve anything that they feel has not been covered satisfactorily.

**1. Is there anything else about your religion/spirituality that we haven't spoken about, that you'd like to tell me about?**

**2. Is there anything about yourself or your experiences, that you'd like to say before we finish?**