LIFE STORY RESEARCH
Contents

VOLUME I

Appendix of Sources ix
Editors’ Introduction: Researching Lives and the Lived Experience Harrison 00

PART I: HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND TRAJECTORIES

1. The Life History and the Scientific Mosaic H. Becker 3
2. Herbert Blumer and the Life History Tradition Ken Plummer 14
3. Pioneering the Life Story Method Paul Thompson 38
4. The Life Story Approach: A Continental View Daniel Bertaux and Martin Kohli 42
5. Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History Alistair Thomson 66
6. Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History Joan Sangster 85
7. Stories Carolyn Steedman 109
8. Writing Autobiography Bell hooks 125
9. The Problem of Other Lives: Social Perspectives on Written Biography Michael Erben 130
10. “Narrative Analysis” Thirty Years Later Emanuel A. Schegloff 142
11. Reflections on the Biographical Turn in Social Science Michael Rustin 153
12. Reflections on the Role of Personal Narratives in Social Science Camilla Stivers 173
PART II: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES IN LIFE STORY RESEARCH

15. Situating Auto/Biography: Biography and Narrative in the Times and Places of Everyday Life Ian Burkitt 224
16. Why Study People’s Stories? The Dialogical Ethics of Narrative Analysis Arthur W. Frank 242
17. Narrative Research and the Challenge of Accumulating Knowledge Ruthellen Josselson 254
18. Who’s Talking/Who’s Talking Back? The Subject of Personal Narrative Sidonie Smith 263
19. What Is the Subject? Shelley Day Sclater 279
21. Rescuing Narrative from Qualitative Research Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont 309
22. Life Histories and the Perspective of the Present Margaretha Jarvinen 319
24. Autobiographical Time Jens Brockmeier 346

VOLUME II

25. A Suitable Time and Place: Speakers’ Use of ‘Time’ to Do Discursive Work in Narratives of Nation and Personal Life Stephanie Taylor and Margaret Wetherell 3
26. Individual Remembering and ‘Collective Memory’: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates Anna Green 23
27. Creative Memories: Genre, Gender and Language in Latina Autobiographies Sobeira Latorre 37
28. Reading Narratives Corinne Squire 53
29. The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences Liz Stanley 68
31. Personal Narratives, Relational Selves: Residential Histories in the Living and Telling Jennifer Mason 115
PART III: TYPES OF LIFE STORY RESEARCH – TRADITIONAL AND NEW SOURCES OF LIFE STORY DATA

32. The Ethnographic Autobiography  
   *Harry F. Wolcott*  
   137

33. Analytic Autoethnography  
   *Leon Anderson*  
   149

34. Called to Account: The CV as an Autobiographical Practice  
   *Nod Miller and David Morgan*  
   171

35. The Personal or ‘Lonely Hearts’ Advertisement as an Autobiographical Practice  
   *Helen Pearce*  
   183

36. Writing to the Archive: Mass Observation as Autobiography  
   *Dorothy Sheridan*  
   198

37. Tattoo Narratives: The Intersection of the Body, Self-Identity and Society  
   *Mary Kosut*  
   212

38. Reconsidering Performative Autobiography: Life Writing and the Beatles  
   *Kenneth Womack*  
   243

39. Glimpses of Street Life: Representing Lived Experience through Short Stories  
   *Marcelo Diversi*  
   262

40. Photographic Visions and Narrative Inquiry  
   *Barbara Harrison*  
   280

41. Articulate Image, Painted Diary: Frida Kahlo’s Autobiographical Interface  
   *Mimi Y. Yang*  
   303

42. Venues of Storytelling: The Circulation of Testimony in Human Rights Campaigns  
   *Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith*  
   323

43. Generic Subjects: Reading Canadian Death notices as Life Writing  
   *Laurie McNeill*  
   342

44. Narrative Practice and the Coherence of Personal Stories  
   *Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein*  
   355

VOLUME III

45. Life “on holiday”? In Defense of Big Stories  
   *Mark Freeman*  
   3

46. Psychoanalytic Narratives: Writing the Self into Contemporary Cultural Phenomena  
   *Ian Parker*  
   12

47. Writing the Self versus Writing the Other: Comparing Autobiographical and Life History Data  
   *David R. Maines*  
   24

48. Reminiscence and Oral History: Parallel Universes or Shared Endeavour?  
   *Joanna Bornat*  
   31
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Confidantes, Co-Workers and Correspondents: Feminist Discourses of Letter Writing from 1970 to the Present</td>
<td>Margaretta Jolly</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>The Makings of Mother in Diary Narratives</td>
<td>Eeva Jokinen</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Biography as Microscope or Kaleidoscope: The Case of Power in Hannah Cullwick’s Relationship with Arthur Munby</td>
<td>Liz Stanley</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Narratives of the Night: The Use of Audio Diaries in Researching Sleep</td>
<td>Jenny Hislop, Sara Arber, Rob Meadows and Sue Venn</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Careful What You Ask For: Reconsidering Feminist Epistemology and Autobiographical Narrative in Research on Sexual Identity Development</td>
<td>Lisa M. Diamond</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>The Biographical-Interpretative Method – Principles and Procedures</td>
<td>Roswitha Breckner</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Eliciting Narrative through the In-Depth Interview</td>
<td>Wendy Holloway and Tony Jefferson</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Questioning the Subject in Biographical Interviewing</td>
<td>Jennifer Harding</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Constructing Meaningful Lives: Biographical Methods in Research on Migrant Women</td>
<td>Umut Erel</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>Researching Chinese Women’s Lives: ‘Insider’ Research and Life History Interviewing</td>
<td>Jieyu Lui</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Telling Lesbian Stories: Interviewing and the Class Dynamics of ‘Talk’</td>
<td>Elizabeth McDermott</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>But Sometimes But Sometimes You’re Not Part of the Story: Oral Histories and Ways of Remembering and Telling</td>
<td>Antoinette Errante</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Listen to Their Voices: Two Case Studies in the Interpretation of Oral History Interviews</td>
<td>Ron Grele</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>Loss, Collective Memory and Transcripted Oral Histories</td>
<td>Barry S. Godfrey and Jane C. Richardson</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>Photographs in the Cultural Account: Contested Narratives and Collective Memory in the Scottish Islands</td>
<td>Andrew Blaikie</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>Imaginary Pictures, Real Life Stories: The FotoDialogo Method</td>
<td>Flavia S. Ramos</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
66. Researching Identities with Multi-Method Autobiographies  Anna Bagnoli 422
67. Showing and Telling Asthma: Children Teaching Physicians with Visual Narrative  Michael Rich and Richard Chalfen 444
68. A Story behind a Story: Developing Strategies for Making Sense of Teacher Narratives  Tansy S. Jessop and Allen J. Penny 475

VOLUME IV

69. Content, Context, Reflexivity and the Qualitative Research Encounter: Telling Stories in the Virtual Realm  Nicola Illingworth 3
70. Technobiography: Researching Lives Online and Off  Helen Kennedy 23
71. The Use of Biographical Material in Intellectual History: Writing about Alva and Gunnar Myrdal’s contribution to Sociology  E. Stina Lyon 42
72. Tracing Heterotopias: Writing Women Educators in Greece  Maria Tamboukou 66
73. Swapping Stories: Comparing Plots: Triangulating Individual Narratives within Families  Jo Warin, Yvette Solomon and Charlie Lewis 90

PART V: RESEARCH CONTEXTS AND LIFE STORIES

75. Narratives of Challenging Research: Stirring tales of Politics and practice  Erica Burman 120
76. Ethics and Institutions in Biographical Writing on Indonesian Subjects  David T. Hill 142
77. A Note on the Ethical Issues in the Use of Autobiography in Sociological Research  Barbara Harrison and E. Stina Lyon 158
78. Exporting Ethics: A Narrative about Narrative Research in South India  Catherine Kohler Riessman 167
79. Snippets and Silences: Ethics and Reflexivity in Narratives of Sistering  Melanie Mauthner 186
80. Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others  Carolyn Ellis 208
81. Collaboration and Censorship in the Oral History Interview  
   Annmarie Turnbull  
   233

82. Mythical Moments in National and Other Family Histories  
   Stephan Feuchtwang  
   256

83. Re/Membering (to) Shifting Alignments: Korean Women’s Transnational Narratives in US Higher Education  
   Jeong-eun Rhee  
   272

84. Generational Shifts in Post-Holocaust Australian Jewish Autobiography  
   Richard Freadman  
   296

85. From Interview to Story: Writing Abbie’s Life  
   Christine Elizabeth Kiesinger  
   314

86. Distressing Histories and Unhappy Interviewing  
   David W. Jones  
   340

87. Inviting Intimacy: The interview as therapeutic opportunity  
   Maxine Birch and Tina Miller  
   356

88. The Healing Effects of Storytelling: On the Conditions of Curative Storytelling in the Context of Research and Counseling  
   Gabriele Rosenthal  
   372

89. Autoethnography and Narratives of the Self: Reflections on Criteria in Action  
   Andrew C. Sparkes  
   392

90. Fidelity as a Criterion for Practicing and Evaluating Narrative Inquiry  
   Donald Blumenfeld-Jones  
   419

91. Validity Issues in Narrative Research  
   Donald E. Polkinghorne  
   434
Appendix of Sources

All articles and chapters have been reproduced exactly as they were first published. All cross-references can be found in the original source of publication. Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce material in this book.

1. “The Life History and the Scientific Mosaic”, H. Becker

2. “Herbert Blumer and the Life History Tradition”, Ken Plummer

3. “Pioneering the Life Story Method”, Paul Thompson


5. “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History”, Alistair Thomson

   Joan Sangster

7. “Stories”, Carolyn Steedman

8. “Writing Autobiography”, Bell hooks
xii APPENDIX OF SOURCES

   Sociology, vol. 27, no. 1, 1993, pp. 15–25. ©

10. “Narrative Analysis” Thirty Years Later”, Emanuel A. Schegloff

11. “Reflections on the Biographical Turn in Social Science”, Michael Rustin

12. “Reflections on the Role of Personal Narratives in Social Science”,
    Camilla Stivers

    Michael Hardey


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    Arthur W. Frank

17. “Narrative Research and the Challenge of Accumulating Knowledge”,
    Ruthellen Josselson

18. “Who’s Talking/Who’s Talking Back? The Subject of Personal Narrative”,
    Sidonie Smith

19. “What Is the Subject?”, Shelley Day Sclater

21. “Rescuing Narrative from Qualitative Research”, Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont

22. “Life Histories and the Perspective of the Present”, Margaretha Järvinen

   Elliot G. Mishler

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   Work in Narratives of Nation and Personal Life”, Stephanie Taylor and
   Margaret Wetherell

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   Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates”, Anna Green

27. “Creative Memories: Genre, Gender and Language in Latina Autobiographies”,
   Sobeira Latorre

28. “Reading Narratives”, Corinne Squire

   Liz Stanley

    Autobiography”, Nellie Y. McKay
    Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds), Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader, University

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    and Telling”, Jennifer Mason

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34. “Called to Account: The CV as an Autobiographical Practice”,
   Nod Miller and David Morgan
   *Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1993, pp. 133–143. ©

35. “The Personal or ‘Lonely Hearts’ Advertisement as an Autobiographical Practice”,
   Helen Pearce

36. “Writing to the Archive: Mass Observation as Autobiography”,
   Dorothy Sheridan
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   Mary Kosut
   *Visual Sociology*, vol. 15, 2000, pp. 79–100. ©

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   Kenneth Womack

39. “Glimpses of Street Life: Representing Lived Experience through Short Stories”,
   Marcelo Diversi

40. “Photographic Visions and Narrative Inquiry”,
   Barbara Harrison
   *Narrative Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2002, pp. 87–111. ©

41. “Articulate Image, Painted Diary: Frida Kahlo’s Autobiographical Interface”,
   Mimi Y. Yang

42. “Venues of Storytelling: The Circulation of Testimony in Human Rights Campaigns”,
   Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith
APPENDIX OF SOURCES

43. “Generic Subjects: Reading Canadian Death notices as Life Writing”, Laurie McNeill

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64. “Photographs in the Cultural Account: Contested Narratives and Collective Memory in the Scottish Islands”, Andrew Blaikie
APPENDIX OF SOURCES


66. “Researching Identities with Multi-Method Autobiographies”, Anna Bagnoli  


69. “Content, Context, Reflexivity and the Qualitative Research Encounter: Telling Stories in the Virtual Realm”, Nicola Illingworth  

70. “Technobiography: Researching Lives Online and Off”, Helen Kennedy  
   *Biography*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2003, pp. 120–139. ©

71. “The Use of Biographical Material in Intellectual History: Writing about Alva and Gunnar Myrdal’s contribution to Sociology”, E. Stina Lyon  

72. “Tracing Heterotopias: Writing Women Educators in Greece”, Maria Tamboukou  

73. “Swapping Stories: Comparing Plots: Triangulating Individual Narratives within Families”, Jo Warin, Yvette Solomon and Charlie Lewis  


75. “Narratives of Challenging Research: Stirring Tales of Politics and Practice”, Erica Burman  
76. “Ethics and Institutions in Biographical Writing on Indonesian Subjects”, *David T. Hill*

77. “A Note on the Ethical Issues in the Use of Autobiography in Sociological Research”, *Barbara Harrison and E. Stina Lyon*

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84. “Generational Shifts in Post-Holocaust Australian Jewish Autobiography”, *Richard Freadman*

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86. Distressing Histories and Unhappy Interviewing *David W. Jones*
APPENDIX OF SOURCES

87. “Inviting Intimacy: The Interview as Therapeutic Opportunity”, Maxine Birch and Tina Miller


89. “Autoethnography and Narratives of the Self: Reflections on Criteria in Action”, Andrew C. Sparkes

90. “Fidelity as a Criterion for Practicing and Evaluating Narrative Inquiry”, Donald Blumenfeld-Jones

91. “Validity Issues in Narrative Research”, Donald E. Polkinghorne
Editors’ Introduction: Researching Lives and the Lived Experience

Harrison

These volumes of collected articles cover a broad field of research endeavour in the social sciences in which people’s lives as a whole, or in part, are data for understanding the complex two way relationship between self and social context. As such, while here we stress the roots of such approaches in sociology and social psychology, life story work reflects the increasingly multi-disciplinary nature of much of contemporary social science. I take a broad view of what constitutes life story research. This generally encompasses a number of methodological approaches which put individuals, their lives, their experiences and the contexts in which they are situated, to the forefront of both theoretical and substantive concerns and foci for investigation. While each of these approaches may have distinct characteristics and epistemological roots, with different ways of achieving their ends, including what they consider as data, ultimately their aims are to reveal lives or segments of lives of people. Such revealing is at the core of many of the methodological approaches examined.

The idea that individual lives and lived experience has a major contribution to make to the understanding of the social world is not a particularly new one. In the interwar period the now classic study by W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, conducted in the 1920s, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (republished in 1958), established an interest in life experience data, in this case what can be described as autobiographical accounts of polish peasants migration experiences as revealed in letters, including a detailed life history of one of these. For Thomas and Znaniecki both the individual and the social were crucial elements in any study of social life, in this case understanding migration and social/cultural change. In addition, in this period, there were evaluations of both the life history method (Gottschalk, 1923) and the use of personal documents in social science research (Allport, 1942 and Gottschalk, Kluckholn and Angell 1942), which included assessments of Thomas and Znaniecki’s work followed by a further assessment by Herbert Blumer in 1939. (See Plummer, 2001, Chapter 5 for full discussion)
The work of Thomas and Znaniecki was an important precursor to another interwar development—the work of ‘The Chicago School’. Under the tutelage of Robert Park and Edward Burgess in the Sociology Department at Chicago (along with scholars in related institutes and departments) there was a commitment not only to understanding the broad character of the urban condition, by using the more traditional quantitative demographic and survey methods, but also to more microanalyses of the culture or perhaps more correctly urban subcultures, through detailed ethnographic fieldwork, and to a detailed exposition of individual lives and case studies as providing insight into those who are part of that urban landscape. Howard Becker [1] has described this use of the life history approach, in particular Clifford Shaw’s study of *The Jack Roller* (1931) as part of a ‘scientific mosaic’ a metaphor for seeing how different parts combine to form whole patterns within urban life. Moreover, this kind of commitment to a methodological plurality and for micro-analyses in particular was associated with a major new theoretical development in sociology and social psychology; that of symbolic interactionism, in which Herbert Blumer was an important figure (see Plummer [2]) whose concerns with identity, action and interaction have been seen to lie at the core of life story work in European social theory also (Kohli, 1981).

In the post-war period there were further developments in the idea that lives formed an important aspect of sociological work in particular. C. Wright Mills in his classic work first published in 1959, *The Sociological Imagination*, stressed that the intellectual craftsmanship (sic) of social scientists, required attention to the ways in which this necessitated attention to biography, history and society. For Mills, understanding humankind must be both historically and sociologically grounded. Thus to possess a ‘sociological imagination’ involves understanding the relationship between biography and history. It is, at its core, an argument for attention to the personal, the individual as a ‘biographical entity’- including their social environment, and the structures and institutions of the historical society- as constituting the practice of social analysis.

We have come to see that the biographies of men and women, the kinds of individuals they variously become, cannot be understood without reference to the historical structures in which the milieux of their everyday life are organised’ (p175)

Second, the influence of the Chicago School tradition of life story and detailed case studies continued post-war, from the 1960s on, with what some would describe as a more populist tradition of in-depth case studies such as Oscar Lewis’ *Children of Sanchez* (1961) on poverty and family life in Mexico; in the many works of Studs Terkel in the USA (see, for
example, *Hard Times*, 1970 and *Working*, 1974) involving reportage (with little analysis or comment) of extensive recorded conversations with people about aspects of their lives: and by Tony Parker in the UK who similarly published a number of individual life stories of what might be described as the ‘underclass’in the 1960s and 70s (e.g. *The Courage of his Convictions*, 1962, *The Twisting Lane*, 1965)

Despite these early exhortations to put lives to the forefront of sociology and the social sciences more generally, there were only piecemeal attempts to utilise approaches that might do so; and the life history or life story methods developed slowly until the 1980s when interest in lives and in personal experience began to be taken seriously and practiced more widely, although there remained some concern that individuals are not ‘the real stuff’ of sociology in particular. A number of factors, I suggest, were important in this increasing attention to lives, and these were also precursors for the multi-disciplinary development of life story research.

The first of these was the growth within history of oral history. Oral history was viewed as an important antidote to both broad narratives of historical chronology, historical change and events, and their essentially macro-nature, conditioned by historians traditional reliance on archival documentary evidence. Individual lives featured as agents/participants in these historical processes and events, only in so far as they also featured in the documentary evidence. Such individuals thus tended to be representative of certain classes and groups. There was increasing concern about the selective nature of traditional historical sources, and the ‘invisibility’ and exclusion of everyday lives, and people’s perceptions and experiences in economic, political and cultural life, from them. A greater inclusivity would result in opportunities for participation and self expression of many constituencies, that were ‘hidden from history’ to borrow Rowbothom’s (1977) and later Dubenay et al’s (1991) term. The late 1960s saw the development of this approach, witnessed by the publication of oral history journals on both sides of the Atlantic, and the development of alternative archives of sound recording as a corrective to traditional sources. Proponents would begin to develop the case for its wider use in other countries (e.g. Africa – see Roberts, 1974). As with other influences on life story research, the political radicalism of the time provided a context and rationale for a different approach to historical knowledge.

The new concern, which oral history encompassed, was with remembering the past; whatever the particular topic that was of interest to the researcher. It was to explore how people experienced or connected with the past, how they viewed themselves as actors within particular historical and social contexts, and how the past was part of individual lives in the present. At this stage there was little theorising of the concept of
memory. Indeed the activity of remembering and its consequences for data, was to come later when most of the approaches to life story research began to explore what was a fundamental aspect of the data produced by their research participants (See, Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003; Green [26]).

The second of these influences was the development of second wave feminism from the 1970s and along with it feminist scholarship which sought to provide a corrective to what was viewed as male-dominated modes of practice and ways of thinking. An important aspect of early feminist scholarship, as with oral historians, was a project to make the ‘invisible’ visible. Defining what this project involved epistemologically and in practice occupied numerous feminist scholars over the next decades, (for example, Harding (1986), Smith, (1987) Roberts, (1981) and Stanley and Wise (1993) ) A key element of this reworking of feminist methodologies was the emphasis on ‘first-hand’ experiences; on personal understanding and on situating women’s lives within an oppressive social system. Within this context women scholars also began to look at constructing ‘stories’ of their own lives and personal histories (see, for example, Steedman, [7], hooks, [8] and Lorde, (1984)). Swindells (1995) has drawn attention to the autobiographical tradition within the British feminist movement from the 1970s, emphasising the extent that these were political statements based on personal testimony revealing collective conditions of oppression, where the writing and the reading were forms of consciousness raising offering the possibility for change. Similarly others at this time, and later, used photographic projects to explore personal experience (Spence,1986; and Martin and Spence,1987) and to use photographic mediums as an element of auto/biographical projects (Walkerdine,1985; Kuhn, 1995) Undoubtedly, many feminist scholars also found autobiographical approaches to research and writing more rewarding personally, and to be more in sympathy with political commitments to non-hierarchical ways of being and doing. In addition, as feminist scholarship developed the genre of life writing, across a number of disciplines, it became a genre that could be studied its own right, and feminists began to analyse the variety of ways in which the lives of women could be revealed and analysed in the past and present. Increasingly, feminist scholars studied letters Jolly [49] Stanley [29], diaries, Cooper, (1987) Stanley [52] and biographies of other women, and constructed new biographies Lyon, (2000) and [72 ]. For feminists, the ‘I’ of the self was indicative of their own reflexivity and the possibility of writing not just about others but also themselves. Stanley (1993), a leading exponent of auto/biography in the UK, has stressed the importance of these elements in feminist scholarship as defining the set of practices and methodological procedures that is auto/biography. Subsequently feminists have taken auto/biographical research and writing to further develop
the relationship of feminist epistemology and feminist politics to forms of autobiographical or life writing (see, for example, Smith [18] Stivers [12]; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Smith and Watson, 1999; Cossett et al., 2000).

The third influence was also to be found as part of the concerns of the first two, and similarly had its roots in political struggle around racism, discrimination and oppression, in many cases linked with colonialism and/or imperialism. Early on in the feminist movement and then in scholarship the category ‘woman’ itself became contested and difference emerged as a major corrective in the aim to understand the diversity of lives. Class, ‘race’, nationhood, sexuality and able-bodiedness were explored, and seen to be as integral as gender in individual identity formation and the sense of self, as well as systems of oppression on a global scale. The position of different women was problematised, both within ‘western’ cultures and their disadvantaged position within less developed countries began to be explored. Civil rights and anti-racist movements also fed into scholarship that challenged traditional categories and modes of practice within numerous disciplines, transversing the social sciences and humanities. Just as the feminist movement had given rise to ‘women’s studies’ and then ‘gender studies’ as distinct interdisciplinary fields, so too did ‘black studies’, particularly in the USA, with a growth in autobiographical accounts of lives historically situated and in the present, such as the work of Maya Angelou, Zora Neal Thurston and b.hooks. Critical attention was increasingly given to concepts of ‘colour, ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ in relation to identities in general and within autobiographical writing specifically (Perkins, 2005). Within this third influence, I would also include the development and increasing number of life stories and research on genocide, particularly the Holocaust. This has occurred globally, since survivors of the Holocaust and post-holocaust generations are to be found in a number of countries (See Freadman [85]), with German scholars also addressing this aspect of their own history (Rosenthal, 1991). Later we would see this tradition of revealing the consequences of extreme forms of violence and oppression in new venues for similar story-telling; the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in East Germany and South Africa for example,(Andrews, 2007: Chapter 5 & 6 )genocide in Rwanda, (Dona, 2007) and generally in human rights campaigns (Schaffer and Smith [42]).

Outside of these three general influences on the growth of interdisciplinary life story research, there is one other important historical social science tradition that developed in the interwar period that needs brief mention here. The Mass-Observation project in the UK, under the leadership of Tom Harrison, began collecting accounts from a panel around people’s everyday lives several times over a year. They would be free to provide open-ended answers to a number of ‘directives’ or topics. It was
to provide an archive (now based at the University of Sussex) of contemporaneously generated autobiographical accounts. While there have been critics of the archive’s material (similar to those who generally treat non probability sampled individual cases and selected life stories with some scepticism) those who have worked closely with the archive as well as the more recent openness to and theorisation around life story work, have generated an interest in such collections of personal documents. (for a discussion of M-O see Sheridan, [36 ] and Thomson, 1995). Furthermore, this tradition of proactive collection of life story data has continued under the leadership of Paul Thompson and others, providing sound recordings of both present and past life experiences in the British Sound Archive.

From tracing this brief history in life story research, I now move to more recent trends from the 1980s on. In 1983 Ken Plummer published his *Documents of Life*, the purpose of which, as he saw it then, was to develop and make prominent life stories. Life story research he suggested was a humanistic method, which, as he was to define it later, was

‘getting close to living human beings, accurately yet imaginatively picking up the way they express their understandings of the world about them, perhaps providing an analysis of such expressions, presenting them in interesting ways, and being critically aware of the immense difficulties such tasks bring’. (Plummer 2001:2)

In the UK, at least, this was a ground-breaking text: one that traced the roots of life story work, and provided a basis for a research practice, in the sense of how it might be done, while also raising issues about how this telling of stories was achieved and the meaning of lives established.

From this time the growth of life story research was evident; although different modes of this research achieved higher prominence at different points. This change was sometimes characterised as the ‘biographical turn’ associated with other such ‘turns’ in the social sciences – the ‘post-modern turn’, the ‘cultural’ and ‘linguistic turn’, and more recently the ‘narrative turn’. Some have argued (Rustin, 2000 [11] ) that a biographical turn does not necessarily accompany the other ‘turns’ while others have suggested that these are not necessarily ‘new’ and, hence, not necessarily a ‘turn’ either (Smith, 2007). We have seen there is a historical tradition, and hence it maybe correct to question whether or not we have something new or a turn at this point. My view is that the amount work and its variety as well as rapid development from this time; does justify the description of ‘turn’, and that this reflects new sets of questions about individuals and the social that began to characterise contemporary theoretical developments as well as research inquiry. I would argue that these ‘turns’ are less important in terms of whether or not they are
distinct, but more because together they indicate the importance hereon of language, accounts and narratives, self and subjectivity, and individual lives and their cultural contexts as revealed by life story research.

**Recent Developments and Trends**

In developing auto/biographical research to the present, it has been common to distinguish between a ‘life produced by oneself’ (autobiography) and ‘a life produced by another person’ (biography) and within these there are differences in whether these are about the private world of the writer or take on a more ‘public’ character (Stanley, 1993: 47). Stanley also distinguishes between those forms of life writing which are written contemporaneously with the time and events described, and those which are written often many years after the event. Oral historians, for instance, are mainly concerned with the latter, whereas many auto/biographical researchers utilise a greater range across the two types, although it is probably the case that there are few kinds of auto/biographical data that do not rely on some kind of retrospection. Only some kinds of personal documents, and some kinds of data produced at the instigation of the researcher, are forms of direct reportage of the here and now.

One particular strand of more recent auto/biographical approaches has been auto-ethnography. As with pioneering feminist research, which sought to put the researcher’s self into both knowledge production and data; so too does auto-ethnography. Here again we see the post-modern emphasis on ‘constructed’ accounts and ‘constructed’ realities in which the boundaries of the social science researcher and the research participant(s) become blurred so that research texts are a mixture of personal self-analysis with academic work. Essentially, auto-ethnography took the ethnographer’s ‘insider’ status and knowledge a step further than the traditional exhortations that involvement was a necessary condition of long-term naturalistic field work; to the development of more reflexive accounts. By the late 1980s reflexivity took a more systematic approach to the exploration of self-knowledge and experience as part of the analysis and writing up of field work experiences and to a consideration that this should also be part of the data to be analysed. These constitute personal narratives in their own right. Reed-Danahay (1997) posits that auto-ethnography features variable emphases on the research process, culture and the self, but the researcher/authors own experience, self/other interactions in culture are always present. Many auto-ethnographers have also used this technique to ethnographically explore aspects of their own experience, such as bullying (Vickers, 2007) racism and discrimination (Miller, 2007) and illness (Ettore, 2005).
More recently, some developments within psychoanalytic research, based on detailed analysis of the single case, or a very small numbers of cases, with this case material also presenting a narrative quality, shares something with traditions of life story research, and some life story researchers have equally begun to draw on psychoanalytic conceptual and theoretical tools, to help in the interpretation of both lived experience and the nature of narrative itself (for example, Holloway and Jefferson, [56]). Narrative researchers have also been interested in the unwritten and untold stories that have been lived, but remain at the level of the unconscious or memory, but in this sense it is cultural memory and cultural history that is of interest (Freeman, 2002). Doing this kind of narrative work requires moving beyond personal experiences to those shared with others in time and place. At this time narrative research, encompassing personal narratives, is developing apace, but as Smith (2007) has argued, whilst there are commonalities in the view that narratives are personal and also social, produced in social interaction, and have important social function in that they do things, ‘narrative inquiry is a field characterised by tensions and connections, differences and similarities and contrast and disparity’ (p392). He, like Becker [1] uses the metaphor of a mosaic, to characterise the many different kinds of empirical enquiry, methods and theoretical preoccupations of researchers who are interested in narrative.

Finally, in this section, it is recognised that there are possibilities for life story researchers to study lives using new sources of data as well as new technologies, expanding the sites for where we can find evidence of storied lives. In these volumes I have included a number of examples of such sources, such as tattoos [37], lonely hearts columns [35], CVs [34], alongside more traditional written and visual resources. New mediums of communication such as video [53] digital media, [13] and internet sites, along with homepages (Kennedy, 1999) and blogging, also offer ways of studying lives with new challenges that accompany the different mediums, audiences, and contexts of production. Artistic productions and performance are now also viewed as a rich source of autobiographical work as the text edited by Smith and Watson, (2002) exemplifies. Thus the means by which lives become accessible to the researcher offers at this point in time endless possibilities and potential.

**What is Life Story Research?**

Above I alluded to the broad definition of life story research taken in these volumes. There are some who argue for the distinctiveness of each of these, and while there may be particular features of these different approaches, arguably their distinctiveness is less when we examine actual
practice. The use of life stories in social science research, takes as a starting point that story-telling and self-presentation is something which occurs as part of everyday social practices in any case, and these may be both private or public (perhaps more often semi-public) in nature. This has led life story researchers to consider the way that experience is ‘narratively and dialogically organised’ (Coslett et al., 2000:3). Thus all research approaches which orient themselves to such stories and self-revelation share at least an epistemological orientation to individual lives and experiences and the subjectivity elicited through these methods of enquiry. That said, there are of course some differences in definition or practice and this section will explore some of these differences as well as similarities.

The life history and oral history method were pioneers in developing the idea that in-depth interviews with single individuals were to be standard practice. Stanley (1994: 89) has suggested it is this reliance on a single method, that is one of the distinguishing features of oral history compared to autobiography, while the latter is also less ‘programmatically based’ and multi-disciplinary. On the other hand both are concerned with ‘the political ramifications of the shifting boundaries between self and other, past and present, writing and reading, fact and fiction, and with an analytic attention to these within the oral, visual and written texts that are ‘biographies and ‘autobiographies’ (ibid.). Taking up these points Bornat [14;48] has discussed some of the similarities and differences between oral history, reminiscence and auto/biographical approaches. She argues that there is a difference which lies in how each is used, in that theorising is a means in oral history, a goal in autobiography [14 p19]; and the research relationship in oral history is more interrogative shaped by interview traditions, and their more short-term nature, as distinguishable from textual interrogation in autobiography. Finally, she argues they each have different aims and while both can claim their aims are political there is a greater instrumentality and concern for outcomes within oral history. Bornat sees oral history as a self aware practice that is committed to explanation and change (p.25). It is in telling about life experiences that forms of personal and social transformation are possible. Autobiographical and narrative researchers, however, would not always accept that instrumentality. Some proponents of autobiographical approaches who would want to make the same claim, that their work too goes beyond the boundaries of the text and speaks to wider audiences than academic social scientists and literary theorists, and that this work still retains a position which aims at inclusivity. Most feminist practitioners would do so for example. Others, such as Atkinson and Delamont [21] however, caution that political/moral evaluations can undermine academic credibility, if that is the principal audience for this work.
There is another view of how such differences in approach work: that is between oral texts and written texts. It can be argued that the many autobiographical texts researchers utilise in their work have already been through a number of ‘creative’ processes in their making, and that written texts in general are more manipulated and controlled compared to an oral performance which emerges as unedited and sometimes unprocessed (Etter-Lewis, 1993). But equally oral accounts or stories can be seen as active reconstructions of lives, experiences and sense of self, constituted in the telling and the re-telling. The interactive nature of oral discourse may mean that it is possible to interrogate meaning in the immediate context of the telling; but interrogation by researchers and a relationship between the researcher’s self and the other is essential to both.

In a sense life story research has always worked with narrative since it is a tool by which apprehension of the world and its communication to others occurs, and it is narrative accounts which are present in life history or oral history interview transcripts and in personal documents of all kinds. I have argued elsewhere, there is still a debate about the extent to which images or things narrate (despite being able to read stories in them). However, there is now a distinct body of narrative work, so it seems important to consider here what its distinguishing features might be. For some, (e.g. Plummer, 2001: 186) it is narrative’s link with literary theory directing attention to ‘structural matters of genre, plot, character and trope’ that is distinctive. As with other types of life story work, narrative researchers have also identified narrative as offering the possibility for telling stories which do not fit with dominant cultural narratives, or ‘master’ narratives, providing counter-narratives as expressions of alternative definitions, meanings and forms of political challenge and/or resistance (Andrews, 2002).

There have been a number of other writers who have variously addressed the differences and similarities of those approaches included in this volume which I am not going to discuss any further here (see Portelli, A. 1998, Mains [47] ).

*Theorising Lives*

There has been some criticism levelled at life story approaches in the social sciences for what has been viewed as an excessive individualism, an emphasis that suggests it is in understanding how individuals construct meaning that then provides us with knowledge of how social reality is itself constructed. This focus on individual subjects might be argued to move us far away from concerns with social context; societal structures and institutions which have traditionally been seen as crucial determinants of individual actions and outcomes. Theoretically a focus on the
agency of individuals has been important to life story researchers, but this has not necessarily excluded contextual features. We have already seen above that the roots of oral history retained a concern with historical and social contexts, while also providing a corrective to a more traditional focus on structures, institutions and processes at the societal and global level. There have been a number of researchers, committed to the use of different kinds of auto/biographical methodologies, who have set out to argue, both theoretically and practically, for this human agency, but also that individual biographies, which initially might be seen as providing distinctive trajectories, strategies and forms of identification, are the starting point to understanding how these are also contingent on time, space and social structures in which they are located (see Rustin, [11];2002). Equally, European biographical researchers, (Apitzsch & Inowlocki, 2000) have stressed the embeddedness of the human case in macro-social structures and processes, and it was this, rather than interest in individuals per se, that directed their substantive investigations and ensuing theoretical models. This relationship was exemplified by the large-scale European-wide SOSTRIS (Social Strategies in Risk Societies) project, where the use of biographical methods enabled an analysis of the way in which individual cases can at the level of structure and within their social contexts be representative of how particular groups develop different strategic solutions and directions while sharing forms of social exclusion. Furthermore, it is often at the level of these important structural and institutional contexts that the differences across cultures can be theorised and seen as providing important policy dimensions (Chamberlayne, Rustin and Wengraf, 2002). In a sense, this example takes us back to Becker’s [1] original argument about the life history method, where the parts are studied in order to arrive at a greater comprehension of the whole. It is as Rustin [11:p48] argues, the ‘individual case becomes the point of discovery and the starting point for inference about social structure’.

A second major theoretical focus for life story research has been a concern not so much with structure but with process, consistent with giving primacy to human agency and forms of reflexivity and self-identity construction within the time-dimensions of individual life-spans. It is the construction of biography; what Fischer-Rosenthal (2004) calls ‘biographical work’ that one conception of process occurs, and it is made available through the life story or narration. By these means the individual orients themselves to social and historical situations by means of recalling the past, interpreting past and present, within the self and other relational contexts. In this way, life stories reveal processes of temporal ordering and differentiation; individual and social actions within and without the social networks of which s/he is a part. Fischer-Rosenthal (ibid) also considers that this dialogical and interactive work of biographi-
cal structuring, lies at the heart of the individual society relationship in modernity; one that avoids the macro-micro distinction or that of ‘inner’ versus ‘outer’ lives, and consists, necessarily, of communicative storytelling that is interpretative, contingent, flexible, and transformative. It is how social order is achieved. A further aspect of this attention to process in context lies in the cultural locus from which the story derives its meaning. Cultural norms will also influence what Andrews (2007:33) refers to as the ‘tellability’ and ‘hearability’ of the participants’ accounts: establishing boundaries that determine what is, and what is not, told.

The next strand I wish to discuss here, takes a different set of theoretical or conceptual questions in that while those above concern the relationship of the individual to the social structure or society; others are interested in theoretical questions around the nature of the individual as a social being; about how we can understand identities and subjectivities as they relate to experience, and to the stories and narratives that people tell. In this view, identities are always in flux, produced through processes that define who we are and are not; and how we view ourselves in relation to others. Stories are one of the means through which we constitute ourselves. Identities are constructed within a temporal framework, but not always in chronological sequence; rather processes of interpretation and re-interpretation take place within shifting temporal events. For some life story researchers, it is the story-telling and the ensuing narratives which are these identities. Neither we nor the teller can know these phenomena outside of this act of telling and our analysis of it. (See, for example, Andrews (2000, 2007) and Yuval- Davis (2001)). One of the important theoretical debates here is the extent to which there is this synergy of storying and selves. Selves are certainly expressed in stories, but they may also be viewed as going beyond them, and indeed aspects of the self may be purposefully concealed or remain hidden. Those who are sympathetic to psychoanalytic or narrative psychology perspectives, for example, would assert that there is a psychic self that requires a different set of skills and insights in order to access and understand this self, and these lie beyond what we may ascertain through language based accounts (Sclater, [19])

Since much of life story research involves retrospective accounts constructed in the present, two other facets have received theoretical attention more recently: memory and time. Both phenomena have in the past often been taken at face value, or subject to evaluations that reflect the traditional dominant criteria of accuracy or ‘truth telling’; the ability to recall or remember with associations of their selective nature. It is not possible to engage in all the debates or discussions about memory and time in this introduction but a few points are important to note, and the two are, in any case, integral to one another in the processes of life story work whether by researchers or their research participants.
For life story researchers both memory and time are taken as part of the programmatic of the process of constructing life story data. It is accepted that since life stories are constructed in the present; that they will always be selective, partial, and subject to reinterpretation.

As Kuhn (1995:2) argues:

Telling stories about our past, our past is a key moment in the making of ourselves. To the extent that memory provides the raw material, such narratives of identity are shaped as much by what is left out of the account – whether forgotten or repressed- as by what is actually told.

In contemporary analyses memory is considered to be both about the past and the present. It is also a product of inter subjective and dialogical relationships. Memories are considered not just to be personal, but products of social, cultural and political positioning, and in this context some memories are of things to which we personally were not witnesses, but which nevertheless we are obliged to incorporate into our own sense of who we are, since we are hearers of the stories and narratives around them. Marianna Hirsch (1997) has described such memories as ‘post-memory’ and uses the Holocaust as her main example. For many African American writers ‘slavery’ works in same way. As such, as Kuhn (1995:5) argues, memories in one way belong to the individual, but are not solely theirs; rather they are part of the collective nature of remembering. Memory shapes not just the inner world, but through public expression wider worlds, and as such the work of bringing memories into being, by whatever devices, sources and practices, is itself a crucial link between the personal, the collective, and politics. For this reason memory can be described as both ‘cultural’ and ‘collective’. Recent theorisations of memory have emphasised that it is essentially an interpretation and representation of events which is provisional and personal or subjective [see, e.g. Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003; Radstone, 2000] and Plummer (2004:234-5) has also drawn attention to the possibilities that memory can also lead to a reification of life, that is something it is not, and that our ‘best’ memories become encapsulated into habitual story telling that can be viewed as structuring experience.

Theorists of time have emphasised that what is of interest to social scientists are the social meanings of time, or what Ricoeur referred to as ‘human time’. It is not time as chronology, or in its calendric form that life story researchers find significant in their work, but rather time as a non-linear construction, often of moments, or fragments, which is how memory itself works with time. Time is therefore not fixed but interpreted; constructed through stories and narratives. For Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988) human time is time revealed in narration. Thus, like identities,
narrativity and temporality are closely related. Such time will in this way be ‘experienced time’. Biographical interviews, for example, that set out to collect a ‘told story’ do not require the life to begin or end at any particular point (see Breckner [55]). As with place, particular narratives will be elaborated and framed within time. Time, as Taylor and Wetherall [25] argue, is a resource which people use in order to construct the ‘times’ of their life; and equally, as in their research, time provides a resource to be drawn upon in constructing narratives of a nation (in this case New Zealand) in which personal narratives and individual lives can be situated. Time orientations in life story research are frequently to the past – in oral history in particular, but they can equally be to the present and the future. As Brockmeier [24] suggests, ‘temporally distinct events and places become related in the back and forth movement between past, present and a future to which it is directed’ (p54). In this sense, he argues, ‘autobiographical time’ is not about time but about times where forms, ordering and modalities constantly change. As a consequence he identifies linear, circular, cyclical, spiral, static and fragmentary times as models individuals use in their autobiographical narratives.

The Practice of Life Story Research

In thinking about the ways in which we as researchers use life stories as research, it is useful to think firstly about whether we approach them as topic or resource. I have always found this distinction useful when thinking about different ways of doing research. Plummer (2001) also makes this distinction in his discussion of the diversity of life stories. Essentially, any method of enquiry can be used either as a resource, that is where it is a means of accessing data about a topic of enquiry, or it can be a topic, where the means is itself the focus of enquiry. For example, within oral or life history interviews, we may on the one hand use them to obtain data about all kinds of diverse topics in history, life and culture, where the participants own experiences, interpretations and constructions of events, are combined with those of other individuals to build up a broader analysis. In this sense, the letters solicited by Thomas and Znaniecki (1934) were to provide the authors with experiences of Polish village life and social change from migration to a large American city. They can be a resource for studying ‘subjectivity’ and ‘meaning’ as Plummer (2001:39) asserts. If we were to treat these as topic then we could, for example, use the data to examine biographical trajectories, or to analyse how people go about the task of constructing the past; or why they ‘tell their story’ in the way they do. The topic of lived time has also demonstrated how such research can open up more theoretical debates also, such as the ‘meaning of biographical time (See Freeman, 2004 and Brockmeier [24 ]). In all of the approaches to life story research discussed here and in these
Narrative researchers have been concerned to analyse genres of story telling especially in the context of understanding the role these stories have in the lives or particular experiences of respondents, where topic and resource interplay in illuminating ways (See, for example, Squire, 2007, in relation to HIV in Africa); or as Sclater [19:328] argues, we can distinguish between ‘narrative as product’ and the ‘act of narration’, a distinction which enables the researcher to consider both the storied construction of the self, as well as ‘selves’ or significant aspects of them, which will not be revealed by narratives alone.

There are a wide variety of methods we can deploy in order to research lives and life experiences. These may be divided broadly into those in which lives are revealed through techniques or methods directed at eliciting ‘stories’ and narratives of lives; and existing materials, often created with a different purpose, which can give us access to similar kinds of data. In practice most data sources can both exist or they can be created at the instigation of the researcher. Diaries, letters and autobiographical accounts/journals and photographs and artworks are good examples of what I mean here. In this next part of this section I look briefly at the three main methods of data collected and/or analysed in life story work.

**Interviews**

The in-depth, qualitative interview remains the most common means by which researchers conduct life story research, especially within oral history; narrative inquiry and life history work. While there are many common features of the in-depth interview across the variety of forms of life story research; there are also some differences. In part, these centre around the degree to which the researcher directs the interview or story telling around particular topics of interest, or leaves the narration undirected. In the approach known as BIM (biographical interpretative method.) interviews are conducted in the first instance to obtain a ‘life history’ in the literal sense of this term- a chronology (although the participant can commence at whatever point they choose, with a single question “please tell us your life story”. This can be followed by a second and sometimes further interviews, where the researcher both takes up particular aspects of the life to pursue in more detail, and where the interview can be directed to a particular topic, theme or phase of this history in order to pursue particular research questions or aspects of the narrative. In the analysis too, there is an interest in the lived life and the told story distinguishing between the life history and the life story, as well as thematic analysis. In each case how events have been experienced in the past is
related to their presentation in the present. (For a discussion of this method see Wengraf, 2001; Breckner [55]).

Early theorists of narrative such as Labov and Waletsky (1967) have similarly drawn attention to the functions of different elements in interview data, which arise from both descriptions of past events, i.e. referential functions and to a reconstruction of the meaning of such events in the present—the evaluative function. In almost any life story or biographical interview, therefore, there is seldom a strict chronology adhered to. There is a constant interchange between past and present and future, and it is how experience is reworked in this way that challenges the analyst. Thus many researchers are as interested in how and why certain events or experiences are related in the interview context as they are to the actual nature of these. The identification of particular types of story, e.g. ‘coming out’ and ‘atrocity’ stories or narrative genres e.g. the ‘intimate disclosure genre’ are examples of such interests, where over and above the story itself actions are performed.

Within writing on interviewing in both the context of autobiographical work, and the indepth unstructured interview in general, there is also considerable discussion around both relationships between interviewer-interviewee, and about how we analyse and write up such data, particularly as in the life story context, retaining a measure of authenticity to the lives under scrutiny is considered important. I discuss some aspects of these later in this introduction.

**Personal Documents**

Following in the historical tradition of Thomas and Znaniecki, life story researchers have recognised the value of a variety of personal documents that reveal aspects of people’s lives, drawing on the idea that these can be a means by which participants can freely express and construct meaningful aspects of their lives. Included here, are letters, diaries, journals, auto/biographies, memoirs (and photographs and paintings which are discussed below) existing or elicited. Important aspects to be considered in relation to existing documents are access, and the conditions of their existence. Such documents are products of a number of social and cultural factors and changing historical contexts in which both the social practices of their production, available technologies, levels of literacy and whether they are retained and archived and thence survive, are all significant. Feminist researchers in particular have pointed to power structures which have determined the production of material by and about women, and others (Erben, [9]) have noted how individual biographies reveal status and power hierarchies not just of the life itself, but of the general experience of groups across the spectrum. Over and above these
determining factors, life story researchers have to consider particular genres of writing, particularly those associated with autobiographical and biographical writing, and as Thomas and Znaniecki discovered, in letter writing, and which Stanley [29] and Jolly, 2002 [49] have drawn our attention to more recently. Literary genres are an important interpretative context and these include what it is possible to write about, thus directly influencing content as well as style. As Lyon (2000) points out in her biographical work on Alva Myrdal, in using biographical material as socially located interpretations ‘there is no place for adjudication between different versions of events’ (p. 411).

Traditional evaluations of personal documents have been concerned with the criteria for establishing their worth to researchers, such as those discussed by Scott (1990) of authenticity, credibility, representativeness and literal meaning, similar to the evaluations undertaken under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council in the US by Gottshalk et al (1942) much earlier. More recently these kind of criteria have been seen as less important, as researchers emphasise the constructed nature of accounts and texts. As mentioned above, in more recent times, new kinds of personal documents have come into being, and researchers have begun to explore the variety of other ways in which life story or autobiographical work is undertaken and which can then also be a resource for life story researchers.

**Visual Forms of Life Story**

The last decade has seen a growth in the use of visual methodologies and these now form part of both the teaching of research in the social sciences and research programmes. While there are no limits as to what subjects can be studied via these means, in that anything that can be seen and thence drawn, painted, photographed or filmed, can be researched and analysed. Contemporary concerns with identities in the context of lives and experiences has led to a view that visual methods may offer either on their own, or as part of other methods, particular insights over and above other data. There are a number of reasons for this, some of which relate the ways in which visual technologies and visual mediums are themselves used by people in their lives. We can take two examples by way of illustration here. Painting has had a long tradition of artists engaged in forms of self-portraiture. These need to be seen as more than an artist using themselves to test out technique, or utilising a ready-made subject. For many artists, self-portraiture was a means of chronicling their physical transformation through time (Rembrandt and Van Gogh for example). For others, such self portraits were a means of communicating a variety of aspects of their lives, their
environment, circles and experiences. The Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (See Yang, [41]) exemplifies the artist’s use of painting alongside a diary to chronicle her life, a life that was dominated by pain after a childhood illness and serious accident when she was eighteen.

The second example is photography. The interest in ‘domestic’ photography and family albums has been prompted in part because of their status as documentary material of people, lives and relationships over time (Spence and Holland, 1991). An early theorist of the social significance of these photographic productions, Pierre Bourdieu, (1990) argued that photography was practiced and organised in socially regulated ways, and served important social functions of social integration and social exchange. As anyone who looks at their own or their family albums would find, there are particular events and/or occasions for which there is a perceived need for photographs. For Bourdieu, family events, ceremonial occasions and holidays are the basis for most photographic productions in everyday life. As such, while potentially everything can be photographed, not everything is, and this may pose some limitations on existing collections in terms of their value to the researcher. However, the potential for even limited and selective photographs to generate stories and narratives beyond the given image; and the possibility that new topics can be introduced at the instigation of researchers, then this limitation is not a serious one (Harrison, 1996). It has been my argument (Harrison [40]) that in the context of video diaries, life story interviews or the eliciting of personal narratives using visual images, that images rarely ‘speak’ on their own. Verbal narration ultimately becomes the means by which the visual content before us becomes part of the story. Video diaries, and other photographic-based methods, for example, are nearly always accompanied by the diarist speaking, either on their own account or as directed by the researcher (Rich and Chalfen, [68 ] Ramos [66]) although Langford (2001) has demonstrated how readings and interpretations of albums whose provenance is unknown, in that no-one is left to tell the tale, can be achieved through what she describes as an oral consciousness.

There are many other aspects of the practice of life story research that could be discussed here, but the reader will find examples of such practices in the articles within the volumes, and some aspects of this practice are now explored in this final section.

Research Contexts for Life Stories

Here I explore some aspects of ‘doing’ life story research that are important research contexts within this tradition and which have been matters for debate. Many of these are ethical and political concerns that arise because of what might be seen as the deeply personal nature of the lives
the researcher is interested in, and because of the relationships which are seen as characteristic of this type of research. Some have arisen because of commitments to a different kind of social science knowledge that arose as a consequence of the relationship of knowledge production to the kind of social movements discussed earlier in this chapter.

Life story research requires the same adherence to ethical codes as any research does. It is not this per se that is the subject of debate. Generally speaking, life story research is overt, so it escapes the controversies surrounding covert approaches. However, while informed consent, at the core of covert approaches, is present, in many contexts of life story research the idea that privacy should be respected can be difficult to achieve in practice. This is in part because of whom it is that we wish to have data about, people whose status and activities are well-known and identifiable, where anonymity can be compromised. Equally, persons who are not directly the ‘subjects’ of the research will be unknowingly brought into the data. In some cases lack of anonymity might not be an issue, as in Andrews (2007) work on political activists in East Germany and the UK, where at the outset it was recognised that the public nature of this activism was prescient. In other situations anonymity is not an issue, because it can be achieved in the same way as any other research that is not necessarily autobiographical in orientation. The use of visual images provides additional issues of anonymity, although again it is possible to anonymise images. It can be the relational issues involved in doing life story work that cause researchers extensive reflection, including whether or not ‘western’ codes of ethics are applicable in other cultural or national contexts [Reissman [79]]. Significant and intimate others are frequently part of stories, and in other situations participants become so over the course of a project, especially if there is longer-term field work involved. (See, for example Ellis, [81])

The often deeply personal nature of the data that is revealed in narrative, life story and life history interviews itself raises issues of potential trauma and its opposite with claims that such interviews are often therapeutic. Concern with not harming our research participants has been a paramount ethical concern, just as it is for bio and medical scientists. As Plummer (2001:224) points out ‘life story research always means you are playing with another person’s life’. In this the researcher has certain privileges, often closely linked to the feeling that they may be exploiting their research participants. It is not just in the collection that this problem occurs, but in writing and publication, which can impact further on life history participants and others who are part of their story. For those researchers who consider story-telling has ‘therapeutic’, curative or healing effects the opportunities provided to speak about and to share traumatic life events and experiences is emphasised. Rosenthal [89], in a very detailed exposition of this aspect of biographical work, suggests this
effect may depend on whether the trauma was some time past or more recent when there is a potential for re-traumatisation. In general there is an opportunity to have suffering recognised and exclusion lessened, to speak about the previously unspeakable, and even the ability to speak to others beyond the interviewer. (See also Rickards (1998) Jones[87]) This paradox of potential for harm or healing seems to be one which life story researchers have to consider at the outset, and how far they delve in the process; it is part of a ‘moral maze’ of dilemmas and decisions for which there are no real prescriptions, although there are skills and empathetic sensibilities which can assist.

A further area discussed extensively within the literature is the nature of the research relationship. It has been accepted that all the approaches considered here involve two major departures from what traditionally was seen as a relationship of distance, and perhaps a hierarchical one also, between the researcher and the researched. Traditional positivist methodologies required some measure of researcher ‘objectivity’ for data to be valid, that is untainted by context or researcher influence. While this stance has been much criticised, even by some positivist researchers, this did not diminish the importance of detachment. The relationship that is emphasised, at least in research interviews designed to collect life story data, is, of necessity, considered to be a different one. Forming relationships, often claimed as between equals, is viewed as essential to the quality of data which emerges from the interview. Participatory and collaborative projects have emphasised this model of enquiry while also noting that there are compromises and consequences which follow (see, for example Turnbull [82]). One such consequence is that a form of friendship develops, and this might be sustained over time by the researcher (see, Andrews, 2007), sometimes entwined with an ethical commitment that research relationships should not be exploitative with participants treated as a means to an end. Trust and being a confidant, are aspects of this. The extent to which such equality and trust is possible is still under scrutiny and some (Zukas, 1993) have described such relationships as quasi-relationships given the degree to which researchers continue to direct the interviews and put limits on reciprocity.

One further aspect of the research relationship is the emphasis placed on reflexivity. Given the highly ‘subjective’ nature of the data and its collection, continual reflection by the researcher on the ways in which the relationship between researcher and participant(s) may impinge on the validity of the data, is considered important. Thus reflexivity is an important corrective, although it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this will occur almost as a necessary condition of how the research proceeds and the researchers’ commitments at the outset. Reflexivity is also a recognition that the researcher will be affected by what they see and hear. Even in approaches not reliant on an interview relationship, researchers
have suggested that in reading personal documents, for example, the ways in which they are read and interpreted, will involve the researcher forming a relationship with the content of these data, where the researcher’s lives become the basis for how others lives are viewed. (see, for example, Stanley [52]), and the term auto/biography is sometimes used to draw attention to the connections between the researcher’s autobiography and the biographies of those being studied). Cotterill and Letherby (1993) and Letherby and Ramsay (1999) have analysed this interweaving of personal auto biographies, their relationship with each other and research participants, insisting that these are relevant to the work they do as academics. As Sparkes (1994) argues, ethical aspects necessarily arise around the relationships of trust and collaboration between researcher and researched and in the life history context, there are issues of ‘voice’ as a life story transits to the life history. Increasingly the emotional dimension is analysed as an important element in the research process, (see also Holland, 2007) Returning to C Wright Mills (1970:216) view of ‘intellectual craftsmanship’ he stresses that we ‘must learn to use your (our) lives in our intellectual work’, since ‘craftsmanship is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product you work on’, and ‘capturing experience’ is a necessary guide to reflection.

While ethics, politics and relationships are key issues in researcher’s discussions of practice in life story research, these also impinge on the final issue I want to discuss in this section; that of validity. There are critics of life story research who view the method as hopelessly ‘subjective’ and so unable to meet many of what some regard as the canons of ‘sound’ social science. Others are concerned that we should not overstate the claims made for narrative and narrative analysis by an over-enthusiasm for their authenticity, a critique that can extend to much life story data. As Atkinson and Delamont [21] argue, life stories and narratives are just another form of representation. They caution against accepting life story data as some ‘unmediated representations of social realities’ or ‘experience’ and for greater analytic rigour in understanding these stories and narratives as ‘social action with indigenous, socially shared, forms of organisation’ (p.170) In accepting that ‘subjectivity’ is at the core of life story research and indeed its very rationale, and that the telling and writing of stories are constructions bound by historical time, social and physical space dimensions and particular audiences, has led many of its practitioners to also address these questions. It is important to do so in order to ensure that it is an analysis that develops from a different set of presuppositions to those held by many critics on the outside of this form of knowledge production. We would thus expect that theoretical questions surrounding the nature of the ‘self’ and ‘subjectivity’ will be central to questions around how lives are told and written
about, and these are also performances, social phenomena with forms and social and cultural functions that need to be understood in their own right.

Validity has traditionally referred to the extent that our data and analysis of it, remain ‘true’ to some kind of underlying reality, and some forms of validity explicitly concern the degree to which the data may have been contaminated by the research process. From the discussion thus far, it is evident that such a conception of validity would pose considerable problems in the life story context. Life story researchers would want to claim that while accounts are context bound constructions, they enable us to access something other than myth and that they represent something other than fictional accounts. In fact, why would we as social scientists want to engage in something if it has no purchase on the human condition in all its diversity of contexts? Researchers have argued that using auto/biographical approaches are an important corrective to common categories and theorising in social science which traditionally has not been articulated in relation to those ‘active agents’ who occupy different positions and engage in diverse social relationships with people and things (See, for example, Henwood, et.al, 2001). In that sense we return to arguments that life story work can open up the possibility of more adequately understanding lives and contexts in which those lives are lived, including social structures, institutions and broader social processes. As Polkinghorne [92] argues, ‘narrative truths’ are not ‘historical truths’ but provide evidence for personal meaning in response to life events and experiences which occur in context. While he suggests that there needs to be different protocols for assessing validity in what he terms ‘reformist’ social science, these still essentially involve intersubjective judgements and arguments within communities of practitioners that enable an assessment of the plausibility of the knowledge claims.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this introduction has been to sketch out the broad field of life story research, and to discuss developments, concepts and theoretical interests as well as aspects of practice within life story research. As such it is hoped that what life story work can contribute to the social sciences is evident. In writing this introduction, I have endeavoured to cover the same themes, although not in detail, as the collected papers in this volume. There are five main sections within the four volumes: one tracing a history of life story work since the 1920s with developments from the 1980s making a major contribution. Then some of the theoretical and conceptual areas that are central to this kind of methodological
commitment are considered followed by a section on the different types of life story research. This is then followed by two sections on what might be considered the practice and processes, including research contexts, of life story work. The papers were chosen not because of any judgments about whether or not they are ‘the best in the field’ although some no doubt are, but rather to both ensure that readers are given a wide overview of the field, and also a sense of this form of practice as a global form. There are examples of researchers and/or research participants and settings from all the major continents and subcontinents, and it is evident that there is in life story research considerable potential to undertake further comparative work where we can come to understand both the unique as well as the common threads that people’s lives in different contexts and at different times will reveal. For some researcher’s, life story research is ideally suited to some of the common social phenomena of past and present times, such as migration for example (Thomson, 1999; Erel, [58]) returning to the methodology’s own roots in this topic. Where at all possible, therefore, I have tried to include examples of life story research or the spaces for life stories that do justice to its practice world-wide, its application to a variety of topics, and which also reflect the continued commitment to visibility, to voices that over time, and now, in many societies and cultures, which have been marginalised. The limitation to mainly journal articles inevitably has resulted in little reference to many leading book length texts and edited collections that are generally more specialised than these volumes, and researcher’s will pursue these according to their own interests and inclinations.

It might now be thought that life story research has ‘come of age’. Certainly, as these volumes reveal, the diversity of approach; the topics of study; the resources that can be found and used, all suggest that we can expect further growth and development. Equally, the theoretical and conceptual issues and the epistemological commitments that underpin the practice of collecting and analysing all forms of life story data should continue to be subject to critical scrutiny. It can then continue to develop and have a central place within social science endeavour, as well as in other fields where storied and narrative texts are the subject of analysis.

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HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND TRAJECTORIES
The Life History
and the Scientific Mosaic

H. Becker

Thomas and Znaniecki published the first sociological life history document to receive wide attention in The Polish Peasant. Clifford Shaw and his associates published several other in the years following: The Jack-Roller, The Natural History of a Delinquent Career, and Brother in Crime. During the same period Edwin Sutherland published the still popular Professional Thief. And similar documents have appeared occasionally since, most recently The Fantastic Lodge and Hustler! When The Jack-Roller was reissued a few years ago, I was asked to write an introduction and made that the occasion for some thoughts on the place of the life history in contemporary sociology.

The life history is not conventional social science “data,” although it has some of the features of that kind of fact, being an attempt to gather material useful in the formulation of general sociological theory. Nor is it a conventional autobiography, although it shares with autobiography its narrative form, its first-person point of view and its frankly subjective stance. It is certainly not fiction, although the best life history documents have a sensitivity and pace, a dramatic urgency, that any novelist would be glad to achieve.

The differences between these forms lie both in the perspective from which the work is undertaken and in the methods used. The writer of fiction is not, of course, concerned with fact at all, but rather with dramatic

and emotional impact, with form and imagery, with the creation of a symbolic and artistically unified world. Fidelity to the world as it exists is only one of many problems for him, and for many authors it is of little importance.

The autobiographer proposes to explain his life to us and thus commits himself to maintaining a close connection between the story he tells and what an objective investigation might discover. When we read autobiography, however, we are always aware that the author is telling us only part of the story, that he has selected his material so as to present us with the picture of himself he would prefer us to have and that he may have ignored what would be trivial or distasteful to him, though of great interest to us.

As opposed to these more imaginative and humanistic forms, the life history is more down to earth, more devoted to our purposes than those of the author, less concerned with artistic values than with a faithful rendering of the subject’s experience and interpretation of the world he lives in. The sociologist who gathers a life history takes steps to ensure that it covers everything we want to know, that no important fact or event is slighted, that what purports to be factual squares with other available evidence and that the subject’s interpretations are honestly given. The sociologist keeps the subject oriented to the questions sociology is interested in, asks him about events that require amplification, tries to make the story told jibe with matters of official record and with material furnished by others familiar with the person, event, or place being described. He keeps the game honest for us.

In so doing, he pursues the job from his own perspective, a perspective which emphasizes the value of the person’s “own story.” This perspective differs from that of some other social scientists in assigning major importance to the interpretations people place on their experience as an explanation for behavior. To understand why someone behaves as he does you must understand how it looked to him, what he thought he had to contend with, what alternatives he saw open to him; you can understand the effects of opportunity structures, delinquent subcultures, social norms, and other commonly invoked explanations of behavior only by seeing them from the actor’s point of view.

The University of Chicago sociology department promoted this perspective vigorously during the 1920’s. Almost every study made some use of personal documents. Theoretically grounded in Mead’s social psychology, its practicality in research attested by *The Polish Peasant*, and its use persuasively urged by Ernest W. Burgess, the life history enjoyed great popularity. It was one of the many research devices that found a place in the research scheme of the department.

The research scheme did not grow out of a well-developed axiomatic theory, but rather from a vision of the character of cities and city life
which permeated much of the research done at Chicago in the exciting period after the arrival of Robert E. Park in 1916. The Ghetto, The Gold Coast and the Slum, The Gang — all these were part of the research scheme. And so were the ecological studies of the succession of ethnic groups in Chicago and of the distribution of juvenile delinquency mental illness and other forms of pathology. Park enunciated the general scheme, as it developed, in occasional papers on the nature of the city and the role of communication in social life, and in introductions to the books his students produced. Everything was material for the developing theory. And studies of all kinds, done by a variety of methods, contributed to its development. The contribution of any study could thus be evaluated in the context of the total enterprise, not as though it stood alone.

When I first went to San Francisco several years ago and began to think about doing research there, I automatically began looking for the Local Community Fact Book, the demographic studies, the analyses of neighborhoods and institutions, and all the other kinds of background material I had come to take for granted when I worked in Chicago. But they were not there; no one had done them. Perhaps it is because no one group of researchers had ever existed there as well organized as the group that got its start under Park during the twenties. That group saw connections among all the various problems they were working on. Above all, they saw that the things they were studying had close and intimate connections with the city, considered in the abstract, and with Chicago itself, the particular city they were working in. For the Chicago group, whatever the particular subject matter under study, the researcher assumed that it took its character in part from the unique character and form of the city it occurred in. He relied, implicitly and explicitly, on the knowledge that had already been gathered, as he contributed his own small piece to the mosaic of the theory of the city and knowledge of Chicago that Park was building.

The image of the mosaic is useful in thinking about such a scientific enterprise. Each piece added to a mosaic adds a little to our understanding of the total picture. When many pieces have been placed we can see, more or less clearly, the objects and the people in the picture and their relation to one another. Different pieces contribute different things to our understanding: some are useful because of their color, others because they make clear the outline of an object. No one piece has any great job to do; if we do not have its contribution, there are still other ways to come to an understanding of the whole.

Individual studies can be like pieces of mosaic and were so in Park’s day. Since the picture in the mosaic was Chicago, the research had an ethnographic, “case history” flavor, even though Chicago itself was seen as somehow representative of all cities. Whether its data were census figures or interviews, questionnaire results or life histories, the research
took into account local peculiarities, exploring those things that were distinctively true of Chicago in the 1920’s. In so doing, they partially completed a mosaic of great complexity and detail, with the city itself the subject, a “case” which could be used to test a great variety of theories and in which the interconnections of a host of seemingly unrelated phenomena could be seen, however imperfectly.

Our attention today is turned away from local ethnography, from the massing of knowledge about a single place, its parts, and their connections. We emphasize abstract theory-building more than we used to. The national survey is frequently used as a basic mode of data collection. Above all, researchers are increasingly mobile, moving from city to city and university to university every few years, building no fund of specialized local knowledge and passing none on to their students. The trend is away from the community study — there will be no more elaborate programs of coordinated study such as those that produced the Yankee City Series or Black Metropolis. And a great loss it will be.

In any case, the scientific contribution of such a life history as The Jack-Roller can be assessed properly only by seeing it in relation to all the studies done under Park’s direction, for it drew on and depended on all of them, just as all the later studies of that Golden Age of Chicago sociology depended, a little, on it. Much of the background that any single study would either have to provide in itself or, even worse, about which it would have to make unchecked assumptions, was already at hand for the reader of The Jack-Roller. When Stanley, its protagonist, speaks of the boyish games of stealing he and his pals engaged in, we know that we can find an extensive and penetrating description of that phenomenon in Thrasher’s The Gang. And when he speaks of the time he spent on West Madison Street, we know that we can turn to Nels Anderson’s The Hobo for an understanding of the milieu Stanley then found himself in. If we are concerned about the representativeness of Stanley’s case, we have only to turn to the ecological studies carried on by Shaw and McKay to see the same story told on a grand scale in mass statistics. And, similarly, if one wanted to understand the maps and correlations contained in ecological studies of delinquency, one could then turn to The Jack-Roller and similar documents for that understanding.

I am not sure what the criteria are by which one judges the contribution of a piece of scientific work considered in its total context, but I know that they are not such currently fashionable criteria as are implied by the model of the controlled experiment. We do not expect, in a large and differentiated program of research, that any one piece of work will give us all the answers or, indeed, all of any one answer. What must be judged is the entire research enterprise in all its parts. (One can, of course, assess life histories by such criteria as those suggested by Kluckhohn, Angell and Dollard). Criteria have yet to be established for determining
how much one piece of a mosaic contributes to the conclusions that are warranted by consideration of the whole, but these are just the kind of criteria that are needed. In their place, we can temporarily install a sympathetic appreciation of some of the functions performed by life history documents, taking *The Jack-Roller* as a representative case.

What are those functions? In the first place, *The Jack-Roller* can serve as a touchstone to evaluate theories that purport to deal with phenomena like those of Stanley’s delinquent career. Whether it is a theory of the psychological origins of delinquent behavior, a theory of the roots of delinquency in juvenile gangs, or an attempt to explain the distribution of delinquency throughout a city, any theory of delinquency must, if it is to be considered valid, explain or at least be consistent with the facts of Stanley’s case as they are reported here. Thus, even though the life history does not in itself provide definitive proof of a proposition, it can be a negative case that forces us to decide a proposed theory is inadequate.

To say this is to take an approach to scientific generalization that deserves some comment. We may decide to accept a theory if it explains, let us say, 95 per cent of the cases that fall in its jurisdiction. Many reputable scientists do. In contrast, one can argue that any theory that does not explain all cases is inadequate, that other factors than those the theory specifies must be operating to produce the result we want to explain. It is primarily a question of strategy. If we assume that exceptions to any rule are a normal occurrence, we will perhaps not search as hard for further explanatory factors as we otherwise might. But if we regard exceptions as potential negations of our theory, we will be spurred to search for them.10

More importantly, the negative case will respond to careful analysis by suggesting the direction the search should take.11 Inspection of its features will reveal attributes which differ from those of otherwise similar cases, or processes at work whose steps have not all been fully understood. If we know the case in some detail, as a life history document allows us to know it, our search is more likely to be successful; it is in this sense that the life history is a useful theoretical touchstone.

The life history also helps us in areas of research that touch on it only tangentially. Every piece of research crosses frontiers into new terrain it does not explore thoroughly, areas important to its main concern in which it proceeds more by assumption than investigation.12 A study of a college, for instance, may make assumptions (indeed, must make them) about the character of the city, state, and region it is located in, about the social class background and experience of its students, and about a host of other matters likely to influence the operation of the school and the way it affects students. A study of a mental hospital or prison will make similarly unchecked assumptions about the character of the families whose members end up in the institution. A life history – although it is not the
only kind of information that can do this — provides a basis on which those assumptions can be realistically made, a rough approximation of the direction in which the truth lies.

In addition to these matters of neighboring fact, so to speak, the life history can be particularly useful in giving us insight into the subjective side of much-studied institutional processes, about which unverified assumptions are also often made. Sociologists have lately been concerned with processes of adult socialization and, to take an instance to which Stanley’s case is directly relevant, with the processes of degradation and “stripping” associated with socialization into rehabilitative institutions such as prisons and mental hospitals. Although the theories concern themselves with institutional action rather than individual experience, they either assume something about the way people experience such processes or at least raise a question about the nature of that experience. Although Stanley’s prison experiences do not, of course, provide fully warranted knowledge of these matters, they give us some basis for making a judgment.

The life history, by virtue again of its wealth of detail, can be important at those times when an area of study has grown stagnant, has pursued the investigation of a few variables with ever-increasing precision but has received dwindling increments of knowledge from the pursuit. When this occurs, investigators might well proceed by gathering personal documents which suggest new variables, new questions, and new processes, using the rich though unsystematic data to provide a needed reorientation of the field.

Beneath these specific contributions which the life history is capable of making lies one more fundamental. The life history, more than any other technique except perhaps participant observation, can give meaning to the overworked notion of process. Sociologists like to speak of “ongoing processes” and the like, but their methods usually prevent them from seeing the processes they talk about so glibly.

George Herbert Mead, if we take him seriously, tells us that the reality of social life is a conversation of significant symbols, in the course of which people make tentative moves and then adjust and reorient their activity in the light of the responses (real and imagined) others make to those moves. The formation of the individual act is a process in which conduct is continually reshaped to take account of the expectations of others, as these are expressed in the immediate situation and as the actor supposes they may come to be expressed. Collective activity, of the kind pointed to by concepts like “organization” or “social structure,” arises out of a continuous process of mutual adjustment of the actions of all the actors involved. Social process, then, is not an imagined interplay of invisible forces or a vector made up of the interaction of multiple social factors, but an observable process of symbolically mediated interaction.
Observable, yes; but not easily observable, at least not for scientific purposes. To observe social process as Mead described it takes a great deal of time. It poses knotty problems of comparability and objectivity in data gathering. It requires an intimate understanding of the lives of others. So social scientists have, most often, settled for less demanding techniques such as the interview and the questionnaire.

These techniques can, I think, tell us much, but only as we are able to relate them to a vision of the underlying Meadian social process we would know had we more adequate data. We can, for instance, give people a questionnaire at two periods in their life and infer an underlying process of change from the differences in their answers. But our interpretation has significance only if our imagery of the underlying process is accurate. And this accuracy of imagery — this congruence of theoretically posited process with what we could observe if we took the necessary time and trouble — can be partially achieved by the use of life history documents. For the life history, if it is done well, will give us the details of that process whose character we would otherwise only be able to speculate about, the process to which our data must ultimately be referred if they are to have theoretical and not just an operational and predictive significance. It will describe those crucial interactive episodes in which new lines of individual and collective activity are forged, in which new aspects of the self are brought into being. It is by thus giving a realistic basis to our imagery of the underlying process that the life history serves the purposes of checking assumptions, illuminating organization, and reorienting stagnant fields.

But perhaps the most important service performed for sociology by a document like *The Jack-Roller* is one that it also performs for those who are not sociologists. David Riesman has described social science as, in part, a “conversation between the classes.” It describes to people the way of life of segments of their society with which they would never otherwise come in contact. The life history, because it is the actor’s “own story,” is a live and vibrant message from “down there,” telling us what it means to be a kind of person we have never met face to face. The United States is fortunate in having fewer barriers, in the form of closed social circles and rules against interaction outside of them, than most societies. Nevertheless, the distances between social classes, between ethnic groups, and between age groups are such that it is hard for most sociologists (let alone others whose work does not push them toward this knowledge) to comprehend what it means to live the life of a Negro junkie or a Polish delinquent.

Johan Galtung suggests the function of this kind of knowledge in the scientific process in his discussion of the causes of the excessive abstractness and formality of Latin American sociology. He argues that Latin American society is more rigidly stratified, both horizontally and
vertically, than the societies of northern Europe and North America. This means that the Latin American, when he comes to sociology, will never have had the informal interaction with members of other classes and social segments that young people in other societies gain through travel, through summer employment, and in similar ways. As a result, Galtung says, preconceived ideas of the character of other members of the society are never put to the test of direct confrontation with social reality:

Sociologists who would never accept the idea that the only thing which has motivated them has been the desire to make money have no difficulty in perceiving the capitalist as interested only in the most money for the least work, or the worker as motivated in a similar manner. A more intimate knowledge of them would invariably reveal shadings, greater identification, greater variety in motives, but the paucity of interaction protects the sociologist from this knowledge. From this comes the great interest in the alienation of the lower classes: without denying its reality, a factor which maintains the image of the alienation of the working class is the alienation of the intellectual himself, with respect to his society in general and certainly with respect to the working class.\textsuperscript{16}

By providing this kind of voice from a culture and situation that are ordinarily not known to intellectuals generally, and to sociologists in particular, \textit{The Jack-Roller} enables us to improve our theories at the most profound level: by putting ourselves in Stanley’s skin, we can feel and become aware of the deep biases about such people that ordinarily permeate our thinking and shape the kinds of problems we investigate. By truly entering into Stanley’s life, we can begin to see what we take for granted (and ought not to) in designing our research — what kinds of assumptions about delinquents, slums, and Poles are embedded in the way we set the questions we study. Stanley’s story allows us, if we want to take advantage of it, to begin to ask questions about delinquency from the point of view of the delinquent. If we take Stanley seriously, as his story must impel us to do, we might well raise a series of questions that have been relatively little studied — questions about the people who deal with delinquents, the tactics they use, their suppositions about the world, and the constraints and pressures they are subject to. Such studies are only now beginning to be done. Close study of \textit{The Jack-Roller} and similar documents might provide us with a wide range of questions to put as we begin to look at the dealings of policemen, judges, and jailers with delinquents.

Given the variety of scientific uses to which the life history may be put, one must wonder at the relative neglect into which it has fallen.
LIFE HISTORY AND THE SCIENTIFIC MOSAIC

Sociologists, it is true, have never given it up altogether. But neither have they made it one of their standard research tools. They read the documents available and assign them for their students to read. But they do not ordinarily think of gathering life history documents themselves or of making the technique part of their research approach.

A number of simultaneous changes probably contributed to the increasing disuse of the life history method. Sociologists became more concerned with the development of abstract theory and correspondingly less interested in full and detailed accounts of specific organizations and communities. They wanted data formulated in the abstract categories of their own theories rather than in the categories that seemed most relevant to the people they studied. The life history was well suited to the latter task, but of little immediately apparent use in the former.

At the same time, sociologists began to separate the field of social psychology from that of sociology proper, creating two specialties in place of two emphases within one field, and focused more on “structural” variables and synchronic functional analyses than on those factors that manifested themselves in the life and experience of the person. Again, the life history made a clear contribution to the latter task but seemed unrelated to studies that emphasized group attributes and their interconnections.

But perhaps the major reason for the relatively infrequent use of the technique is that it does not produce the kind of “findings” that sociologists now expect research to produce. As sociology increasingly rigidifies and “professionizes,” more and more emphasis has come to be placed on what we may, for simplicity’s sake, call the single study. I use the term to refer to research projects that are conceived of as self-sufficient and self-contained, which provide all the evidence one needs to accept or reject the conclusions they proffer, whose findings are to be used as another brick in the growing wall of science—a metaphor quite different than that of the mosaic. The single study is integrated with the main body of knowledge in the following way: it derives its hypotheses from an inspection of what is already known; then, after the research is completed, if those hypotheses have been demonstrated, they are added to the wall of what is already scientifically known and used as the basis for further studies. The important point is that the researcher’s hypothesis is either proved or disproved on the basis of what he has discovered in doing that one piece of research.

The customs, traditions, and organizational practices of contemporary sociology conspire to make us take this view of research. The journal article of standard length, the most common means of scientific communication, is made to order for the presentation of findings that confirm or refute hypotheses. The Ph.D. thesis virtually demands that its author have a set of findings, warranted by his own operations, which yield conclusions he can defend before a faculty committee. The research grant
proposal, another ubiquitous sociological literary form, pushes its author to state what his project will have proved when the money has been spent.

If we take the single study as the model of scientific work, we will then use, when we judge research and make decisions about how to organize our research, criteria designed to assure us that the findings of our single study do indeed provide a sound basis on which to accept or reject hypotheses. The canons of inference and proof now in vogue reflect this emphasis. Such methodologists as Stouffer, and others who followed him, developed techniques for assessing hypotheses based on the model of the controlled experiment. \(^7\) Compare two groups, those who have been exposed to the effects of a variable and those who have not, before and after the exposure. The multiple comparisons made possible by this technique allow you to test not only your original hypothesis, but also some of the likely alternative explanations of the same results, should they be what you have predicted. This is the approved model. If we cannot achieve it, our study is deficient unless we can devise workable substitutes. If we do achieve it, we can say with assurance that we have produced scientific findings strong enough to bear the weight of still further studies.

Criteria drawn from the experimental model and used to evaluate single studies in isolation, however useful they may be in a variety of contexts, have had one bad by-product. They have led people to ignore the other functions of research and, particularly, to ignore the contribution made by one study to an overall research enterprise even when the study, considered in isolation, produced no definitive results of its own. Since, by these criteria, the life history did not produce definitive results, people have been at a loss to make anything of it and by and large have declined to invest the time and effort necessary to acquire life history documents.

We can perhaps hope that a fuller understanding of the complexity of the scientific enterprise will restore sociologists’ sense of the versatility and worth of the life history. A new series of personal documents, like those produced by the Chicago School more than a generation ago, might help us in all the ways I have earlier suggested and in ways, too, that we do not now anticipate.

Notes

2. Clifforod R. Shaw, *The Jack-Roller* (Chicago, 1930), *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career* (Chicago, 1931), and *Brothers in Crime* (Chicago, 1936); Chic Conwell and Edwin H. Sutherland, *The Professional Thief* (Chicago, 1937); Helen MacGill
5. Published in several volumes by W. Lloyd Warner and his collaborators.
Herbert Blumer and The Life History Tradition

Ken Plummer

Prologue

Self-indication is the essence of human life. . . (Blumer in Morrione & Farberman 1981, p. 117)
Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative (Bruner 1987, p. 13).
Identity is a life story (McAdams 1985, p. 29).
The experts are storytellers and the audience are active participants in the meaning formation of the stories. . . Yet today any possible public narrative discourse must be characterized by an awareness of its own impossibility . . . (Brown 1987, p. 170).
We need to become awash in tellings. there should be no standard or correct telling. . . (Mair 1986).
The world is always different. Each morning we open our eyes upon a different universe. Our intelligence is occupied with continued adjustment to these differences. That is what makes the difference in life. We are advancing into a new universe (Mead 1936, p. 291).

A Story: The Fall and Rise of Life Histories

The past decade has witnessed a minor resurgence of interest in life histories. Across academic disciplines and national boundaries scholars have increasingly found value in inspecting ‘a life.’

In psychology’s new concern with ‘narratives’ and ‘story telling’ (Sarbin 1986), in the psychoanalytic concern with ‘narrative truth’ (Spence 1982), in the anthropologists’ interest in ‘lives’ (Langness and Frank 1981), in the growth of oral history even by non-academic groups (Thompson 1978), and in literature’s fascination with the ‘biographical text’ (Olney 1980), a concern with life histories is enjoying something of a renaissance.¹ In sociology too the value of life history research is, once again, being recognized. I say once again, because there was clearly a lime (the 1920s) and a place (Chicago) where the merits of looking at life histories were at least seriously considered.

Symbolically, the life history emerged in sociological discourse in 1918 with the celebrated publication of Thomas and Znaniecki’s The Polish Peasant in Europe and America. The 2,250 pages harbor many illustrations of personal documents, including the 300 pages of a life—Wladek; and make the famous claim that life histories “constitute the perfect type of sociological material.” (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958, pp. 1832–1833).² Twenty years on, and after much experimentation and discussion of the method (e.g. Lundberg 1926; Shaw 1927), the study was selected by the SSRC for appraisal “as the finest exhibit of advanced sociological research and theoretical analysis” (Blumer 1979, p. vi). Herbert Blumer was honored with this task and it is clear that he is very sympathetic both to its standpoint and method, both of which highlighted the need for the subjective to be matched with the objective. Blumer’s voice was just one of a number raised in praise of this approach at this time, although curiously within a few years it was to vanish from the sociological scene. Indeed, one commentator has remarked that it “had been waning for some time” and Blumer’s evaluation “constituted a post-mortem examination of the personal document approach and its apparent weaknesses” (Thomas 1978, p. 128). Despite Blumer’s evaluation being generally positive, just ten years on Shils could note the neglect of The Polish Peasant with alarm (Shils 1948, p. 26). Blumer himself writes little of the method for the next forty years, and only returns to it for his added commentary in the 1979 republication of his Critique. In this new discussion, Blumer bemoans the lack of interest by contemporary sociologists and suggests that:

the main stream of contemporary sociological thought is not merely indifferent to Thomas and Znaniecki’s basic premise but seems to be vigorously opposed to the premise. (Blumer 1979, p. xi).³

Blumer was certainly correct about the orthodox main stream, but he seemed unaware of newer developments that were increasingly highlighting the value of life stories.
My aim in this article is to review briefly what Blumer has said about life histories both directly and indirectly. There are substantial problems in interpreting the ‘real’ meaning of sociological classics (Fine and Kleinman 1986), and my own organizing focus for re-reading Blumer is the renewed interest in life history research today. Some of these new directions have taken off in ways that Blumer may neither have anticipated nor approved. The post modernist language of deconstruction, with its ‘death of the author,’ litters much of this new writing in ways that are strikingly at odds with Blumer’s concern with ‘empirical science’ (though not his concern with interpretive theory). It is, perhaps unfortunately, the fate of earlier thinkers to be reinterpreted and reincorporated into more contemporary concerns; but this will be a part of my project here.

I will suggest that Blumer has made two lasting contributions to the understanding of life histories. One is most apparent: it is grounded in the ‘case study versus statistics’ debate of early century Chicago sociology; is manifested in Blumer’s sturdy defence of Thomas and Znaniecki’s “monumental” classic The Polish Peasant for the SSRC evaluation panel in 1938; and has continuing implications some fifty years on for theoretical and methodological strategy. It sees life stories as essentially a resource for understanding and critique. The other is less obvious: it is grounded in symbolic interactionist idea of self reflexivity; is manifested in the view that life histories are themselves a topic for investigation as social objects and joint actions; and connects most illuminatingly to a whole series of linked ‘discourse-narratological’ concerns of late twentieth century social theory. It sees life stories as essentially a topic to be investigated. Blumer’s work today hence lies at the crossroads of traditional critique and the emergence of new theoretical insights. Since Blumer’s ideas on the former are relatively well known, I deal with the latter more extensively.

The Blumerian Inheritance: (1) An Unorthodox Science?

On one hand, it is absolutely necessary to include the relevant subjective elements in a sociological analysis of human society, yet, on the other hand, the instruments (human documents) for getting such objective elements do not allow us to meet the customary criteria for scientific data (Blumer 1979, p. xii–xiii).

When, as a relatively young man of 38, Blumer was honored by the SSRC with the task of evaluating Thomas and Znaniecki’s Polish Peasant, both he and the methods it espoused were at critical points in their careers. By some accounts Blumer was not entirely at ease in the Chicago
department of this period – for one commentator he was “out on a limb,” he was “quite remote and distant, and not too friendly with anybody” (Harvey 1987, p. 138). His own emerging theoretical perspective, based on his interpretation of Mead, was then, as now, at odds with more mainstream ideas. But likewise the methods of ‘case study’ – hotly debated in the twenties and thirties (Plummer 1983, pp. 42–50) – now seemed to be falling into decline. It is hence possible that Blumer’s review was pervaded by a sense of marginality.

Blumer’s prime contribution to the study of life histories is to be found in his appraisals of The Polish Peasant. Lie is clearly a champion of the method and its role in understanding the subjective, but in effect he has written remarkably little about it and always indirectly. In 1938 he devotes only eight pages to life histories during the course of a much broader evaluation; and, some forty years on, he returns to a further evaluation for the ‘Transaction Reprint’ of the Critique (Blumer 1979). Here he reviews the need to study subjective factors, considers the appropriateness of human documents in this task, and discusses whether they meet the criteria of science. That, essentially, is it. The method can be read into his wider methodological statements where he urges naturalistic ‘exploitation’ and ‘inspection’ of the empirical world (Blumer 1969). But life histories are not mentioned explicitly. It is a small contribution to the debate, and possibly not that influential either. Yet it cuts straight to the heart of the problem.

Put simply, Blumer is simultaneously full of praise for Thomas and Znaniecki’s concern with “studying the subjective factor in social life” and for “introducing . . . the life history technique” (Blumer 1979, p. 81) while being mildly critical about their ability to match basic “scientific” requirements. Thomas himself recognized the problem and put it bluntly in the discussion which followed Blumer’s analysis: “It is true,” he said, “that the concrete materials of the volume are not adequately correlated with the methodological scheme” (Blumer 1979, p. 83). Now this very issue of matching proper scientific protocol with life history research still haunts us today, so it is interesting to see what Blumer said. Broadly there are two issues: technique and theory, though they are connected.

On technique, Blumer asks in both evaluations whether such documents meet the more general requirements of scientific method and suggests a similar four-fold criteria. As he says,

1) do human documents provide representative data. (2) are the data adequate, (3) are the data reliable, and (4) do the data allow decisive validation of proposed theoretical interpretations? (Blumer 1979: xxix, his italics).

This is a most orthodox view of scientific method – any undergraduate text these days would recommend much the same. Yet what is curious
about Blumer’s approach is that while he claims “Thomas and Znaniecki did not meet the test of each of these four criteria,” he nevertheless argues that the documents are of “unquestionably great value.” Herein then lies a paradox which suggests Blumer was happy to go beyond the canons of ‘orthodox science.’ The negative evaluation is very clear and it is worth citing in full:

The letters and the life histories were not drawn from an established representative sample; there was no way of telling whether the letters included all of the important subjective experiences of their writers bearing on their given actions; we do not know if the separate accounts given in the documents were honest and trueful; and it is evident that, in many instances, the documentary accounts allowed equally well for diverse and sometimes contradictory interpretations. These negative findings would seem on their face to explode any claim that human documents should be used in the sociological study of human group life. Indeed the negative findings should have demolished the creditability and scientific standing of *The Polish Peasant* (Blumer 1979, p. xxix).

Despite this seemingly damning evaluation, his fuller analysis makes it clear that “to hold documentary data rigidly to these criteria as conventionally conceived would be equivalent to robbing the data of their value” (Blumer 1979, p. xxxi). Indeed this broader discussion can be read as undermining the orthodox criteria. Consider the following:

- **On representativeness**, he suggests that six well chosen key informants are much better than a sample of a thousand who are only minimally involved (Blumer 1979, p. xxxii)
- **On adequacy**, he calls for a less rigid ‘variable’ approach and a more “broad, flexible and redirecting inquiry” (Blumer 1979, p. xxxiv)
- **On reliability**, he cites an instance where some life histories were found to be “manufactured,” yet “rang true,” and ponders: “what difference does it make whether the accounts are fictitious or actual happenings.” He goes on to reply that fiction may be very valuable data. (Blumer 1979, p. xxxv)
- **On testability**, he suggests the need to gain materials from “informants who are knowledgeable about the given type of action” and to subject it to a panel of similar ‘experts’ (Blumer 1979, p. xxxvii)

Now these suggestions are not those of a man who holds to a rigidly orthodox view of science. Indeed, elsewhere it is very clear that Blumer
is very critical of orthodox methodology – operational procedures, definitive concepts, research replication, testing hypotheses, scientific protocol – although it is equally clear that he never swerved from the pursuit of the objective. (Blumer 1969; Morrione and Farberman 1981b).

While he saw many life histories as “essentially useless,” he claimed that “in the hands of an informed and sensitive scholar” they were a prime tool of naturalistic inquiry, of observing the “here and now,” of intimate familiarity (Blumer 1969, p. xxxvi). But there are no ‘recipe’ answers to the standard problems of representativeness, adequacy, reliability and testability. Indeed, elsewhere Blumer is at his most scathing in discussing the orthodoxies of science — “the protocol of ‘proper’ research procedure,” “the replication of studies using an established research protocol,” the endless “testing of hypotheses,” and the employment of “so-called operational procedures.” (Blumer 1969, pp. 27–33). All these ideas still dominate the social sciences today but Blumer is extremely and unswervingly critical of them; he most surely did not want them to be applied as criteria for the study of life histories. Instead he simply wanted a creative, critical intelligence that can be brought to bear on a first hand immersion in the empirical world. He must have agreed with Mead’s simple injunction that science “is a technique which is simply doing consciously what takes place naturally in the evolution of (life) forms” (Mead 1936, p. 371). At their core, life histories had a naturalistic value and could not be appraised by orthodox canons of science.

The second issue is theory, and here Blumer claims that the supreme value of life histories and personal documents is their ability to take seriously the ‘subjective in social life’ (Blumer 1979, p. 81). As he says:

To renounce their use in scientific investigation of human life would be to commit a fatal blunder, for theoretically, they are indispensable and actually they may be of enormous value. The effective use which has been made of them by Thomas and Znaniecki is ample demonstration of this value. (Blumer 1979, p. 80).

Yet, scratch the surface, and it is clear that Blumer thinks these very authors have taken liberties with their data, theorising way beyond what the data may warrant:

In interpreting the letters, the authors have brought to bear upon them a framework of knowledge, information and perspective that far transcends the letters themselves . . . (Blumer 1979, p. 33).

In a later discussion of Wladek, the same point is made:

. . . we are forced to use our judgement as to whether the given experience is an instance of the attitude or value that the authors
claim it to be. Relying merely on one’s judgement, one must say that frequently the experience does seem to represent the attitude that the authors propose; in other instances that the designation is likely; in others that it is uncertain; and in still others that it is forced . . . (Blumer 1979, p. 44 my underlining).

No orthodox social scientist could possibly be content with such a haphazard approach to theorising where the data may be simply “likely” to fit, or “uncertain,” or worst “forced.” But every contemporary life history must face similar problems and is hence open to charges of theoretical inadequacy. Blumer clearly identifies the problem however; it is a matter of understanding “the act of interpretation”:

To interpret is to apply concepts or categories, and it seems that such interpretation in the instance of the human document, as in that of any human experience, is so much a matter of judgement that categories that are congenial and self-evident to one, readily fit the experience. Perhaps this need not always be true; it does seem, however, to represent the present status of the interpretation of human experience, especially so, on the more abstract levels (Blumer 1979, p. 79).

He proceeds to discuss minor ways to resolve this problem of interpretation, but the core problem has been identified: theorising is an ‘act of interpretation.’ Unfortunately he does not follow up this insight, and it is a point that connects to his wider work. I will hence return to this in the next section.

On all of this I think Blumer is walking an intellectual tight-rope. He desperately wants to challenge orthodox science while simultaneously seeking to establish a value-free, scientifically neutral, science of sociology – as so many of his generation did. As he says in a late interview:

I’d rather have a genuine scientific study, subject to thorough investigation, corroborated and done by a fascist (and I’m deadly opposed to fascism) than to have a purported scientific study done by someone democratically minded but who doesn’t do an effective job. In the latter case you have possibilities of having the opposite achieved of what you want to achieve because the account is not an adequate scientific analysis of what is being dealt with. You need a good, thorough, honest, unbiased analysis. Before you try to change things make sure that you’ve got a thorough understanding of the thing (Morrione and Farberman 1981b, p. 275).

I have to agree with him. And it is clear he is no subjectivist relativist despite some claims that he is. (e.g. Lewis and Smith 1980, p. 174).
Nevertheless, life history research does totter on the brink of this all the time. Even the fullest, richest, densest account possible of a life can only give one person’s ‘thorough understanding of the thing.’ How can we get beyond the subjectivity of one voice and its implied relativism? Blumer never answers this directly but, once again, it is implied in his more general statements on symbolic interactionism. What it requires is a thorough recognition that the whole process of life story telling — each setting, each participant, each moment, each word, each trope — is a social act. To adopt the kind of empirical familiarity and to clarify the roots of the ‘interpretive process’ that Blumer advocated over The Polish Peasant requires a locating of the life in a wider social process. It requires seeing the story of Wladek not simply as a topic to gain understanding, but also as a resource to be explored and inspected in its own right. It is to this I now turn.

**The Blumerian Inheritance: (2) An Emergent Perspective**

Group life consists always of the action of human actors: such action always takes place as an adjustment of human actors to social situations; action in situations is always in the form of actors expressing their dispositions. (Blumer 1979, p. xiii)

Most of Blumer’s ideas were formed by 1938 — the subsequent 1979 commentary is largely a repetition and expansion. What seems to have eluded Blumer in the late 1970s — not surprisingly perhaps as he entered his eighties — was the fact that “a multiple ‘renaissance’ in the use of life stories” was taking place. (Bertaux and Kohll 1984, p. 233). This ‘renaissance’ was cutting across disciplinary boundaries, and was also radically rethinking its problematic. Instead of a focus on life histories as ‘resources,’ there has been an increasing interest in such stories as ‘topics.’ Traditionally, life stories — from analytic cases to life histories to cumulative survey interviews — are taken to represent ‘the life’: discussions of validity and reliability appear because in some way the story simply reflects and minors the objective characteristics of the life. What someone says about their life somehow approximates ‘the truth’ (Plummer 1983, pp. 102–104). Yet the past decade has witnessed, from many disciplines, a questioning of this orthodox view of biographies as unproblematic, objectivist data. Instead these “narratologists” examine biographies as topics of investigation in their own right. They see human beings as story tellers — sifting and selecting, organizing and orchestrating, planning and projecting their narratives. Gone are the root metaphors of mechanism and objectivism which have dominated the social sciences in the past; and in their place comes the new metaphor of narrative: “that human
beings think, perceive, imagine and make moral choices according to narrative structures” (Sarbin 1986, p. 8).

Concern with ‘narrative’ poses problems for much conventional analysis. In psychodynamic work, for instance, Spence has distinguished the traditional archaeological approach of Freud from the role of narration in the psychoanalytic dialogue, and argues that ‘the model of the patient as unbiased reporter and the analyst as unbiased listener suggests a kind of naïve realism that is hard to imagine, harder to practice, and runs counter to everything we have learned about the way we come to understand the world’ (Spence 1982, p. 25). There is for Spence a truth lodged in the narrative that is quite different from the purported ‘historical truth.’ As he says:

Once we have chosen a particular construction, we have fixed, in language, the form of the event we are seeking; the words define the object (and frequently the outcome) of our search. Once we have decided on a particular construction, we see the past in a particular manner. The construction not only shapes the past — it becomes the past in many cases because many critical early experiences are preverbal and, therefore, have no proper designation until we put them into words (Spence 1982, 175).

There is a shift here from discovery to creation, from reconstruction to construction. Similar movements can be found with psychology’s interest in story telling, sociology’s concern with biography, anthropology’s concern with life stories, literature’s concern with texts, history’s concern with narrative, and the general interest in discourses. 10

The distinction I am making can be simply illustrated. Some time ago, as a so-called gay academic, I was invited to present a paper on lesbian and gay youth in England, and not having time to conduct any original empirical work, I turned to several compendiums of first hand accounts of young gay people. These accounts had been solicited through questionnaires and letters. I teased them through analytic themes to suggest common problems and processes involved in ‘coming out.’

It was secondary material for me; my concerns, here, were not with ‘lives’ but ‘gay youth’; and I became the interpreter. I ‘read’ the accounts and organized them into my text: they were no longer their story, but my story. Life histories here — as nearly everywhere — are resources drawn upon to assemble yet another story. They become stories of stories. Most oral history is of this order as are most sociological ‘lives’ or psychological ‘developmental models.’ While writing this article, I realized what I had done: this was not the gay youths’ stories of themselves but my story of gay youth (Plummer 1987; Plummer 1989).

To rectify this I would need to go back to the original accounts and consider how ‘the life’ was socially produced. Here the production of a
life account is the very *topic* to be investigated, the object of inquiry. I would need to know how the story came to be told, how it got shaped, what consequences it had for that person’s life, how it got into a ‘text,’ the role of that text, the diverse readers it has, and my own part in selecting the texts. The production of a gay life story is clearly the substantive topic here; but the more formal goal is to understand the process of life story telling. The life story is a topic, as well as a resource. And it is precisely here that I think Blumer’s more general theory has much to offer, perhaps more than his specific critique.

*The Life Story as Social Object*

While it is clear that Blumer saw the value of life stories as residing in their exploration of the subjective and while it is clear too that he saw the self as crucial to being human, it is not as clear that he articulated the connection. He tended to see life histories as resource rather than topic, and to keep his Meadian analysis distinct from his Thomas and Znaniecki critique. Yet surely the self embraces the subjective centrality of life stories:

The human being is an object to himself (sic). The human being may perceive himself (sic), have conceptions of himself, communicate with himself, and act toward himself . . . the human being may become the object of his own action. This gives him the means of interacting with himself – addressing himself, responding to the address, and addressing himself anew. Such self-interaction takes the form of making indications to himself and meeting these indications by making further indications. The human being can designate/things to himself – his wants, his pains, goals, objects around him, the presence of others . . . he may judge, analyze and evaluate the things he has designated to himself . . . he may plan and organize his action with regard to what he has designated/evaluated . . . In short, the possession of a self provides the human being with a mechanism of self interaction with which to meet the world . . . (Blumer 1969, p. 62).

I wish to suggest that one central component of this ‘self interaction’ is the life history itself, and, although Blumer never said this, it follows from his arguments that the life history is itself a *social object*. Hence life histories are: (a) human constructs and not the intrinsic meaning of a life; (b) variable in their meaning; (c) formed through interaction; (d) meanings through which lives are activated; and (e) meanings which one can inspect, think about and plan actions around (Blumer 1969, pp. 68–69). Now many life histories fudge this point. If life histories are indicated as social objects, then there is a close affinity to those scholars who view
lives as ‘stories,’ ‘narratives’ or texts: they clearly do not, and cannot, simply display the life. Rather they are representations of it. In this image, people move through lives constantly constructing a shifting web of meanings about the nature of their biographies, the motives behind their actions, their pasts and futures, about their changes, consistencies and commitments. They are constantly assembling themselves through their life stories which are always social objects. They are myth makers, story tellers, dreamers, definers of situations, scriptwriters, world makers, producers of ‘programs’ (Perinbanayagam 1985): whichever metaphor is adopted the root image is that of folk turning themselves into social objects. Within this process, the self is omnipresent. Indeed in modern experiences this indicating to oneself ‘the life,’ this ‘story telling,’ may be the clue to understanding identity. It may be at the very core of our current ‘identity crisis’ (Baumeister 1986). As McAdams has recently argued:

An individual’s story has the power to tie together past, present and future in his or her life. It is a story which is able to provide unity and purpose . . . individual identities may be classified in the manner or stories. Identity stability is longitudinal consistency in the life story. Identity transformation – identity crisis, identity change – is story revision. Story revision may change from minor editing in an obscure chapter to a complete rewriting of the text, embodying an altered plot, a different cast of characters a transformed setting, new scenes and new themes . . . identity is a life story (McAdams 1985, p. 18, 29).

The key questions thus become: how does a person come to indicate to themselves their life story? How is it constituted; how is it organized; and what is the link between the life itself and its story? Such questions seem to flow from Blumer’s wider work, though he did not seem to suggest them himself.

In looking at the constitution of a life story, at least five sources can be suggested: ‘personal documents,’ ‘generalized others,’ ‘significant others,’ ‘memories’ and ‘self- work.’ Each of these provides the raw elements for conceiving a self.

Personal documents, in all their various forms, are deposited in a trail behind one as a life is lived. Diaries which highlight dates, people known, things done and felt; address books which list friends long since forgotten; letters which freeze suspected intimate feelings; photograph albums which display family rituals. None of this can be the life but they can all be taken as signs of it. Only the most ardent biographer would search these sources in detail but many a life can raid them intermittently to establish a truth. Generalized others are the most abstract sets of expressions and images around a life. In modern language they are ‘texts,’ ‘narratives,’ ‘grammars of the self.’ (cf. Brown 1987) Thus fiction may
provide ways for imagining the self, as indeed may all ‘artistic objects’ from film to video and from opera to pop music. Likewise the philosophers, and even the social scientists, may hurl into the world metaphors, images and rhetoric through which lives can subsequently be organized. And for many – more so in the past than today – theological tales provide a web to weave around a whole biography. Significant others are the folk whose stories can be drawn upon in building your own. Parents tell you what you were like as a ‘baby,’ peers rehearse significant events of your school days, a spouse reminds you what you were really like before marriage. Again, none of this is the life but it is the very stuff for assembling biographies. Fourthly, we have our ‘memories’ – which in this approach can be seen as our best stories. They are the people, events, feelings, ideas that we have ‘indicated’ to ourselves so often before that they ring very true. They are the repetitive and ritualized tales that we ‘indicate’ to ourselves about ourselves. As Bruner has remarked in a wider context:

I believe that the ways of telling stories and the ways of conceptualising that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future. (Burner 1987, p. 31, my underlining).

Finally, and perhaps most centrally, there is self-work through which the person constantly re-adjusts, re-interprets, re-fashions the story through a ceaseless stream of interaction. A ‘story’ told at one time is always in process and open to dramatic revisions. All five of these sources of life story construction need much further consideration.

Another question concerns the organization of biographical work. At the core of indicating a life lies imagery and narrative. This is the dense linguistic nature of our selves and our life histories, and yet Blumer curiously bypasses such a discussion. What are the metaphors a life is lived by? (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). What are the characters, themes, plots and style through which our narratives emerge? What are the genres that organize our story telling – the folk tales and the Epics, the picaresque and the satire, the romance and the realism, the melodrama and the comedy? (Rabkin 1973).

Some suggest that there are really only a limited number of generic plots through which tales can get organized – ‘establishing a home, engaging in a contest, taking a journey, enduring suffering, pursuing consummation.’ (cf. Elsbree 1982) Others suggest the main elements of life stories: thematic lines (like power and intimacy), complexity (structures vary from the simple to complex), nuclear episodes (critical scenes in the
life), imagoes, (dominant characters), ideological setting, and generativity script. (See McAdams 1985, pp. 56, 60–66). There are stories that can be told in the classical, modernist or even post-modernist modes (Brown 1987; Kearny 1988) and others that come from ‘the depths before they stir the surface’ in the Aeolian mode (Cox and Thellgaard 1987). There are linear narratives (“first this, then that”) childhood fix narratives (“it all came from childhood”) and existential drift narratives. (Plummer 1987). These are chronicles, stories, emplotments, arguments, ideologies and tropes (White 1973). And surrounding and engulfing all this are the larger stories—the metanarratives—which define the limits of our imagery. “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.”12 Such issues are paramount in understanding a life story. Barbara Hardy puts it so well that I will quote at length:

We cannot take a step in life or literature without using an image. It is hard to take more than a step without narrating. Before we sleep each night we tell over to ourselves what we may also have told to others, the story of the past day. We mingle truths and falsehoods, not always quite knowing where one blends into the other. As we sleep we dream dreams from which we wake to remember, half-remember, and almost remember, in forms that may be dislocated, dilapidated or deviant but are recognizably narrative. We begin the day by narrating to ourselves and probably to others our expectations, plans, desires, fantasies and intentions. The action in which the day is passed coexists with a reverie composed of the narrative revision and rehearsals of past and future, and in this narrative too it is usually hard to make the distinction between realism and fantasy which we make confidently in our judgements of literary narratives. We meet our colleagues, family, friends, intimates, acquaintances, strangers, and exchange stories, overtly and covertly. We may try to tell all, in true confession, or tell half-truths or lies, or refuse to do more than tell the story of the weather, the car, of the food. We may exchange speaking silences or marvellous jokes. And all the time the environment beckons and assaults with its narratives. Wlls, papers, mass-media, vehicles, entertainments, libraries, talks, slogans, politicians, prophets and job’s comforters persuade, encourage, depress, solicit, comfort and commiserate in narrative forms. Even when we try to escape narrative, as when we listen to music or do mathematics, we tend to lapse. Even logicians tell stories. Humankind cannot bear very much abstraction or discursive reasoning. The stories of our days and the stories in our days are joined in that autobiography we are all engaged in making and remaking, as long as we live, which we never complete, though we all know how it is going to end (Hardy 1975, p. 4).
A key problem that is suggested by this ‘narrative analysis’ concerns the epistemological status of such stories. Clearly the biography is neither the life nor the lie: it cannot capture or represent the ‘real personhood’ per se, but neither is it a fiction – an idealistic construct that is “all in one’s head.” To suggest either of these positions is to falter on the false dualism to which both Mead and Blumer were strongly opposed. To recognize that biography is a social object, however, is to appreciate that self story telling is a ceaseless, empirically grounded, emergent process of shifting truth; never fixed once and for all, the stories we weave into our lives play a hugely important task in reorganizing our pasts, permitting the presents, and anticipating the futures. They can be frozen into ‘texts’ which then may have a life of their own (largely in the hands of the ‘reader’), but the limits of such freezing has to be recognized.

Does any shifting, emergent story count as equal to any other shifting, emergent story? In Blumer’s response, certainly not. Some stories are clearly better than others, otherwise he would not be advocating his use of ‘key informants,’ ‘raising the possibility of using fiction, or debating the canons of empirical science. We need a language, perhaps, to appraise false stories, shallow stories, partial stories and deeper stories (c.f. Kohll 1981).

**Life Story as Joint Action**

A second guiding image which haunts Blumer’s conception of social life is that of *joint action*: society is constituted through a ceaseless stream of interacting people piecing together their separate lines of activity. Such actions can connect quite disparate activities; they can be spontaneous, creative, and have unpredictable outcomes but are more commonly “repetitive and stable”; they are constantly being “formed anew”; they are always anchored in the participants’ histories. “Everywhere we look in a human society we see people engaging in forms of joint action” (Blumer 1969, p. 70).

Just as the individual life story may be seen as an instance of social objects, so the vast collective process of producing life stories may be seen as instances of joint actions. No life story can ever be told in a social vacuum: they emerge in joint actions, are organized through joint actions, become objects for interpretation in joint actions, and can be re-fashioned through joint actions. Indeed, life story telling may be one of the more common instances of joint actions in this society. From the confession to the psychiatrist, from the sociological interview to the job interview, from getting at ones roots to writing biography and autobiography, from ‘accounting’ for oneself to ‘imagining a self,’ from school records to the obituary – everywhere, it seems, people are engaged in life story telling. We have become the ‘life story telling’ society. As Foucault says, in a slightly stronger mode:
We have become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in most solemn rites; one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell (Foucault 1976, p. 59).15

As sociologists, of course, we are all heavily implicated in this process. Most of us spend a lot of our professional lives in coaxing ‘stories’ out of people, synthesising ‘stories’ about people, representing stories of lives for others to reinterpret in their turn. From the meanest questionnaire to the richest life history document, we are engaged in joint actions around life story telling. Blumer never indicated this in his writing, but these are the compelling implications of his analysis.

What, then, do these joint actions look like? Across many areas of social life, people are engaged in fitting together lines of activity around life stories. They are engaged in life story actions. Some of these folk are story tellers: they turn themselves into social objects. They write lengthy autobiographies exploring their inner nature. They produce voluminous correspondence or diaries which display the minutiae of their daily lives. They provide records of other peoples lives for the endless files that are part of bureaucratiac work. They explain ‘who they are,’ to their lawyers and doctors, their psychiatrists and counsellors, their teachers and radio interviewers. They provide life histories for interactionist sociologists, oral histories for oral historians and case studies for psychologists. Others are coaxers: their line of activity is to seduce stories out of people. They become listeners and questioners; they probe, interview, interrogate and sometimes just simply clasp their hands, smile and listen. They are parents demanding where a child has been. Still others are readers: their line of activity is to interpret and make sense of it all. These are the viewers who watch a documentary of a life, the bookworms who consume biography, the control agents who must make crucial decisions on the basis of a record, the student who is compelled for her course to read a sociological life story. Just how these ‘readers’ interpret the story is a crucial process in understanding life stories. Bruner has sweepingly, but usefully, distinguished two modes: the paradigmatic (or top down) versus the imaginative (or bottom up). The one would ready the story to get at the forms, the structures, the logics beneath the narrative. The other leads to good stories, gripping drama, believable (though not necessarily ‘true’) historical accounts. (Bruner 1986, p. 12 et seq). Here is the classic interactionist tension all over again between experience and form (c.f. Rock 1979), and both are needed. All these people — tellers, coaxer, readers, (and the rest!) — are engaged in assembling life story action. At
the center of much of this action often (but not always) emerges the life history products: the objects which harbor the meanings that have to be handled through interaction. These congeal or freeze already preconstituted moments of a life from the storyteller and the coaxer and await the handling of a reader. The meanings of life stories are hence never fixed but emerge out of a ceaselessly changing stream of interaction. They may, as Blumer never failed to stress, become habitualized. But always and everywhere meaning is a problematic emergent that is contextually based. Put simply, in schematic form, to understand life story actions requires looking at the following:

Figure 1: Life Stories as Joint Actions

Once the analysis of life story actions is set out in this fairly commonplace fashion, it is clear that we are moving to an empirically richer way of investigating life stories, and one that has much in common with recent developments in linguistic and literary theory. In interactionist language, the aim is to capture the multiple objective perspectives that emerge in story telling processes, perspectives that are always adapting to shifting contexts.

This approach seems to deconstruct, decenter and destabilize the life. A teller can only select, a coaxer can only sift, a text can only sieve and a reader can only interpret. Each of these processes compounds the other till the link between the life and the story become unknowable: *deconstruction* has occurred. Likewise, if life stories are joint actions, they are collaborative acts over and beyond any unique life: *decentering* has occurred. And if the meaning of a life is an emergent that is context
based, then the meaning of a life is destabilized. In a most curious fashion it is possible to see the broadest tenets of interactionism joining with those of postmodernist theory.17

Blumer would surely have been unhappy at this suggestion and would have replied in his usually robust fashion. The language of deconstruction – with its end of history, its death of the author, its negation of coherence and even the self – is not Blumer’s world. ‘Post modernism’ could of course be studied as a social world in its own right – a world with its own highly problematic set of meanings that actually destroy and maybe transcend conventional narrative. And there may be a postmodernist self which needs empirical investigation (Wood and Zurcher 1988). But as a kind of epistemology, Blumer could never have been a post modernist. He clearly believed in science, progress and truths – not as an orthodox positivist, but as a constant struggle with the empirical world. Blumer is a modernist, not a postmodernist. The plurality of truths, the ambiguity of meaning, the struggle of “I and Me,” the ceaseless flux, the localized context are all omnipresent in Blumer’s work. But he would surely never have taken it to the edge where relativity becomes nihilism, where ambiguity becomes absurdity, where ‘I’ and ‘Me’ are decentered to non-existence, and where flux is mere chaos. He is saved from this terrible postmodernist plight by his analytic tools of self, social object, social action. Confronted with all this, I think Blumer might say that interactionism may deconstruct in order to reconstruct, decenter in order to establish the multiple ‘objective’ perspectives on a life and thereby to broaden the picture, and destabilize the meanings in order to show the concrete meaning of any specific context. The empirical science which Blumer advocates is distinctly at odds with the potential nihilism of much post modernism; but its themes have to be acknowledged.

Much postmodernist theory leaves the reader with no life, no storyteller, no text – only the reader. In the classic formulation, Barthes says:

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity of focuses converge and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author . . . The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author (Barthes 1977, p. 148).

This view carves up reality as if only the reader matters. Thus, how I, or you, or Blumer, or Wladek interpret, decode, ‘read’ the life seems to be all that matters. We bring to it a shifting plurality of meanings and Wladek’s ‘life’ is no more, neither is Thomas and Znaniecki’s ‘text.’ In this view – and it certainly isn’t Blumer’s – the ‘empirical world’ is only the social world of the reader. It negates the social world of the author, the coaxter,
the text and their whole interactive web of negotiated order. Good interactionist narratology must be embroiled in all of this and must listen to the postmodernists whilst not denying the limited worlds of empirical truth.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued how suggestive Herbert Blumer’s ideas are for the continuing renaissance in life story research. Traditionally his views on life histories are seen as being encapsulated in his critique of *The Polish Peasant* in which he puts forward the long running claim for a less than orthodox empirical science (of Becker 1986, 1988). But I have argued that his more general theoretical concerns — especially with ‘social objects’ and ‘joint actions’ — provide valuable tools for making sense of the social processes involved in life story telling. Much of this has a curious affinity with some aspects of post modernist thought without incurring some of its worst excesses.

Notes

An earlier version of this article was originally presented at interactionist Research 1988 A tribute . . . Herbert Blumer and the Study of Social Action, May 1988, University if Windsor, Ontario.

1. On the growth of life history research, see Bertaux (1981), Plummer (1983), Bertaux and Kohli (1984). See also the journals *Life Stories* and *Biographies*. Poland has long been interested in life story research, especially in gathering them from responses to adverts in local papers. In Germany the work of Martin Kohli is especially prominent. In Italy, life story research has been reviewed by Franco Ferrarotti (1981). In France, the significance of Sartre’s early work has most recently been matched by a more structural approach. Bertaux and Kohli (1984) have reviewed all these developments — and also considered the approach in Spain, Latin America and Quebec.

2. *The Polish Peasant* is not appraised for its findings on many substantive problems (from immigration and racial prejudice to crime and happiness), but as an exemplar of a particular *theory* and *method*.

Another evaluation of *The Polish Peasant* at this time was not as favorable as Blumer. John Dollard’s analysis in 1935 found the study only met two of his six “criteria for a life history.” (Dollard 1935).

3. Blumer himself bemoans the loss of interest in life histories and suggests it is in part due to fashion: “new figures, new points of view, new claims, new pretensions, new controversies, new theories, new taste and new preoccupations” (Blumer 1979, p. vii). Ironically, some life history research in the late 1980s is actually becoming “fashionable” again! Undoubtedly, though, the main trend is still towards “quantitative structuralism” (Wells and Picou 1981).
4. These arc similar to Becker’s observation that Blumer “affected sociology conceptually” in two ways: by “being a serious critic” and through offering a “serious axiomatic-deductive theory to a field that didn’t recognize the gift.” (Becker 1988, p. 14).

5. Little seems to have been written so far about Blumer’s life, despite his 87 years. My sole contact with Blumer was in 1981 when I wrote to him from England and asked for a short outline of his life for a brief social science dictionary entry (Plummer 1983). He replied courteously and promptly. Reading Wiseman’s (1987) and Athens (1987) recent personal accounts provided more detail, and confirmed my general feeling of a warm man more influential in what he did and said than ultimately in what he has written.

6. A curious modesty pervades Blumer’s more theoretical writings. For although they are often written in a strident tone, they are usually presented as the ideas of others – as ‘what Mead said.’ He casts himself in the role of interpreter, not original thinker.

   This may, in part, account for his curious neglect overall. The original critique, for instance, seems not to have been reviewed in either the *AJS* (vols. 34 to 41) or in *Social Forces* (vols. 7 to 13). Becker’s (1966) introduction to the reissue of *The Jack Roller* – often seen as reactivating interest in the method – does not refer to it. Nor does the subsequent analysis and reinterview by Snodgrass (1982). Blumer’s re-evaluation in 1979 is not reviewed in *Contemporary Sociology* (at least not the 1980, 81, 82 volumes). All this seems a little odd.

   When turning to England, however, the silence around Blumer becomes deafening. Some sociologists – and nearly all students – ask who he is. I reviewed the index of the leading British sociological journals in Blumer’s hey day (British Journal of Sociology 1950–1969 and Sociological Review 1953–1975) and found no reference to him. Likewise the 1979 Critique passes without review in the *British Journal of Sociology, Sociology and the Sociological Review*. Few ‘texts’ ever mention him except in the most cursory fashion. (e.g. Swingewood 1984; Giddens 1987).

   Nevertheless essays in honor of Blumer have been published by Shibutani (1970). More recently Wiseman (1987) has provided an appreciation of his work and the Spring 1988 edition of *Symbolic Interaction* is devoted to a review of Blumer’s legacy. There is now a rich literature on the work of the so-called Chicago sociologists, but Blumer does not usually figure very prominently in this. See e.g. Bulmer, 1984 and Harvy, 1987. An earlier history caused much controversy in its revisionist account of Mead and Blumer (Lewis and Smith (1980). Blumer (1983) provided a highly critical response to it. A recent review of sociology by Alexander (1987) does have a chapter on Blumer; but see the appropriately stringent comments on this by Maines (1988).

7. This is never to say that the objective factors should not be considered too. This was never a plea for simple minded subjectivism. The centrality of the subjective in life history research has, however, been shared by most recent commentators. See e.g. Watson 1976.

8. Blumer mentions the common places: “logical criticism, relation to other theories and bodies of fact” . . . as well as “the use of statistical procedure” (Blumer 1979). Yet these are hardly adequate. Perplexed, he says “this whole situation suggests something in the nature of a dilemma” (p. 79).

9. This is, of course, the well known distinction culled from ethnomethodological writings. It was first discussed, I think, in Zimmerman and Pollner (1971).
10. Different disciplines do not speak enough to each other, but comparable movements seem underway in many. Common to all is the critique of the externalist, mechanistic, objectivist mode of thinking which dominates the human sciences. Representatives of this shift in psychology include Bruner (1986), Romanyshyn (1982) and Sarbin (1986); in history a major proponent is Hayden White (1973, 1986); in the developing 'cognitive sciences' there is the notable work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1987); In philosophy, Goodman’s ideas on ‘worldmaking’ are central (Goodman 1978). The whole field of literary theory is overflowing with such ideas (e.g. Eagleton 1983; Raval 1987). In psychotherapy the ideas of Cox and Theilgaard (1987) are, at the very least, intriguing. The whole field of discourse theory is reviewed in Potter and Wetherell (1987).

11. Blumer’s work also minors the complex divide suggested by Fisher and Strauss (1978) between a Thomas/Park axis and a Meadian one. Each had different emphases and it is clear that Blumer straddled both. “When he writes of substantive matters such as race or collective behaviour, there seems to be very little of Mead in his thought, for then he is a direct descendant of Park especially; but when he writes of social psychology . . . he explicitly presents an interpretation of the Meadian perspective.” (p. 485).

12. A phrase from Wittgenstein.

13. Narrative theory is constantly generating new ideas and I think could be fruitfully developed in life story research. For a topical review of a number of recent studies, including those of Paul Ricoeur and Hayden White, see Raval (1987).

14. The term “joint action” is Blurter’s reworking of Mead’s “social act.” He discusses the idea in very similar terms in a number of places, but notably Blurrier 1969, pp. 16–20; pp. 70–72, and Blumer 1981, p. 144 et seq.

15. Foucault is not, of course, a symbolic interactionist, although elsewhere I have detailed some overlaps and affinities. The point he makes in this quote is amplified further and critically discussed in Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 1986, Chapter 2.

16. I became aware whilst writing this paper of the immense potential harboured in literary theory for making sense of lives “Reception theory” for instance highlights the mechanisms by which texts are interpreted by readers (e.g. Iser, Barthes, Fish); formalists and linked schools classify and clarify narrative structures; narratologists generalise around models of ‘texts.’

My own chart depicted here is really just another version of the diagram of linguistic communication presented by Roman Jakobson:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addresser</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Addressee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Message</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Code</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which for literary schools can be summed up as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romantic</th>
<th>Marxist</th>
<th>Reader oriented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formalistic</td>
<td>Structuralist</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As Selden says: “Romantic theories emphasise the writer’s mind and life; ‘reader-criticism’ centres itself on the reader’s experience; formalist theories concentrate
on the nature of writing itself in isolation; Marxist criticism regards the social and historical context as fundamental; and structuralist poetics draws attention to the codes we use to construct meaning; (Selden 1985, p. 4). (See also Eagleton 1983 and for wider implications Brown 1987).

17. Nobody I’ve read seems especially clear what post modernism actually is. I find Hassan’s (1985) two main themes of indeterminacy and immanence helpful. The former suggests “openness . . . pluralism . . . electicism . . . deformation . . . disinterestedness, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimation . . .” (p. 125). The latter suggests “the capacity of the mind to generalise itself in the world, to act upon both self and world, and so because more and more, immediately, its own environment” (p. 126). Is that clear? I am no purist post modernist, but I sense an affinity with some interactionist ideas.

The term possibly entered the interactionist writing in an article by Kavolis (1970), and has most recently been used by Wood and Zurcher (1988). They use the term to refer to three current concerns; the “‘new self and ‘new culture’ arguments which emphasise the novel and emergent character of these social changes,” and the “‘overdeveloped modernism’ arguments which emphasise the continuity of change. The term postmodern self is used . . . to refer collectively to all three.” (Wood and Zurcher 1988: p. 18). This is a tighter and clearer definition than that found in the more obscurantist postmodernism of literary theory!

I have also found a new study by Kearney (1988) of value.

References


I want to think back and ask whether some of the issues we faced when first doing oral history, or life story research, are still relevant. The first thing to say is that it was not actually called ‘oral history’ when we started. We didn’t think in terms of ‘oral history’; in fact, I had never heard those words. The origin of that kind of work here in Britain was from social science research. It was one of those very happy, unexpected results of Peter Townsend’s very broad approach to setting up the Sociology Department at Essex, because he brought me in as a social historian. And then fairly early on, I was asked by Eric Hobsbawn to write a volume in a series on *The Social History of Britain*, and my volume was on the early 20th century, and it became my book, *The Edwardians* (1975). Peter had already been surreptitiously showing me clippings from his interviews with older people, saying, ‘You know, it’s not just interesting for what they have to say about now, but also for their earlier experiences. Maybe you could do something on this?’ Peter was particularly interested by the changes in funeral customs. So I was being primed. And then, when the chance came to write this book, Peter and others in the Department started to say, ‘Why don’t you interview the people who are still around from that period?’ And, of course, at that time there were a lot of them still around. So it started in that way. And we then had to face a number of basic issues.

The first one is the whole question of the credibility of retrospective interviewing, and the nature of memory. And the curious thing is, looking back at it, that there was very little in social science literature about this. It wasn’t an issue which had really been thought about very much,
although nearly all social science, to some extent, involves memory, and some of it is entirely based on long-term memory. A good example would be work on social mobility. But if you look at the discussions of methodological problems in social mobility, from that period or even, I would say, up to relatively recently, the fact that their material depends so heavily on memory is really evaded, it’s not discussed at all. So I really had to start from scratch, and I spent a long time writing a whole chapter of *The Voice of the Past* (1978), the book which came out from the project – this is the second edition, and there’s now a third. There’s a great big fat chapter in the middle about the reliability of remembered evidence. That was the preoccupation at that time. The first edition was written, really, from a very positivist point of view: that the whole difficulty was to discover whether or not people were telling ‘the truth’. It was not really until the later 1970s that a different approach started to appear on the horizon, particularly through the influence of Sandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini from Italy, arguing that it is not only what people say and whether it was true, but how they remember it that matters: what they won’t say; what they forget; the silences of memory; the transformations that take place in memory; the inventions. Arguing that life stories have a different kind of credibility. I think that was a really important insight and has tremendously influenced subsequent work. To my mind, sometimes it’s gone a bit too far, to the point where some life story researchers forget that it is also important that memories contain a great deal of ‘reality’, and indeed that you cannot, in fact, measure the way in which memories are refashioned without having some idea about what the ‘truth’ might be. I think the real implication of the new work ought to be a dialogue between the two aspects of memory. But sometimes it goes over to not being bothered at all about the past, and the actual life experiences which generated those autobiographical memories, and simply being interested in the forms of narrative and presentation. So, in this way the issue of credibility has, I think, considerably faded: you don’t find that nearly so much discussed now. Although I think it ought still to be a matter for considerable attention.

The second issue was how to decide who to interview. In my own work, because of coming from this sort of sociological context, I wanted to use a sample. We very quickly realized that you couldn’t use a random sample for a much older age group. All the people were born before 1906, and we were interviewing them in the early 1970s, and by that point the inequalities of death rates between different occupations had had a tremendous impact. It was not so drastic as when you research with still older people: I later did work with people over 90, and you then reach the position when there are four women for every man, and it becomes even more obvious that if you want to understand the past you cannot do random sampling. So we decided to design a quota sample,
based on the Census of 1911, according to gender, occupational groups, place and so on. There were mistakes we made in that, but I still think it was probably a rather good strategy, and it has resulted in a set of interviews – there are 444—which do present a broad range of social experience in Britain in the early 20th century. When the experiences of the people can be measured against earlier documentary information about, for instance, occupational training, they’re remarkably robust. So it was very encouraging in that way.

Again, although it’s partly a question of resources, there has been a tendency to ignore these sampling issues in life story research. I have argued a lot with some of my students over the years that when you just go for a network, this can result in starting with your aunt and going round in a circle. I think a strategic sampling approach is much healthier. You cannot, of course, sample on the large scale that we did, unless you have greater resources. And various other ideas about sampling came in fairly early. For instance, Daniel Bertaux, whom I met in 1976, who is a life story sociologist, introduced the notion of the ‘saturation’ approach, by which you continue recording in one network until you start to hear the same thing again, and then you look for a different group to interview. In the 1980s we began interviewing more than one generation in the same family, with the sample based on the middle generation. So, there are various solutions. But again, it is a very important issue and I still think that qualitative researchers need to think much more about it.

The third issue was interviewing style. Here again, we did end up by constructing something slightly different. We started from the sociology textbooks, with the idea of semi-structured interviewing, and we cribbed all sorts of questions from other people, we wrote to people doing similar work and got all their interview schedules, and tried out the questions. But at the same time, we had an encounter with somebody from a very different kind of research tradition, who lived at that time nearby in Suffolk – George Ewart Evans – whose basic influence was Swedish ethnography. He had a totally different approach. He said, ‘The key thing is learning to listen, and giving people space to talk’. I remember taking our interviews to him, and him listening, and commenting, and from that we learnt a lot. So through George’s influence, we developed a technique which mixed this open interview with the semi-structured, and that is what I have tried to use ever since. You are always prepared to drop your questions, just listen, and in the early stages of the interview, you try never to interrupt, you try to get the person flowing, and only then you introduce your questions. And that was definitely different from what was being advocated in any of the sociology books at the time.

There have been a couple of other approaches, in terms of interviewing, subsequently. There is an interesting technique developed by German
sociologists and historians (e.g. Rosenthal 1991), because they could not empathize with their informants, and they developed a very elaborate narrative technique, by which you first let the person fly uninterrupted, ‘Tell me the story of your life’, and then you come back with some questions based on what they said, and then finally, you can go in really hard with your own nasty questions!

We were very concerned, right from the beginning, about issues of ethics and consent. In this way I think oral history developed interestingly differently from much social research, partly through the influence of the community groups that we linked up with. The idea of giving voice to the informants was always important, giving them the opportunity to be heard under their own names, rather than being automatically cited anonymously. That is, again, a practice that I still maintain. I give informants the choice, ‘Do you want to be anonymous? Or would you like your name to be used?’ I did for *The Edwardians*, for instance; I wrote to all the people who were cited at length. A week or so ago I was looking through all the letters they sent me, and there are some very touching answers, and they were tremendously proud to be quoted by their name. I wish more sociological researchers did that.

Then finally, presentation. I wanted to write a book which was jargon-free, and I tested the text on several non-academics. I completely agree with Michael Young’s insistence that you should try to be literate and cogent. I was tremendously pleased because the paperback of *The Edwardians*, I have a postcard from Australia from Howard Newby, saying, ‘Your book is on a railway bookstall here. You’ve made it!’ And I think we really should aim for that!

My final point is about archiving. The experience of this project was the origin of the idea of creating a national archiving centre for fieldwork data, which led to the setting up of Qualidata in 1994. It was equally the seedbed for my own subsequent belief in the crucial potential of secondary analysis in qualitative research (Thompson 2000). We very quickly realized that our interview material would be valuable for far more people than ourselves, and we were able to use a store cupboard in the Department of Sociology for it. We created the Oral History Archive there. It was incredible how many other researchers came to use it. At least five times as many major publications came out of it as the original research team could have produced. That has been an enormous source of satisfaction to me, as a researcher. I want to encourage anyone here who has not yet deposited, that it will give you great pleasure and pride in the long run, to have your work used in that way too.
The Life Story Approach:
A Continental View

Daniel Bertaux and Martin Kohli

Introduction

Empirical sociology is emerging from a long period when a single method of data collection—the survey—was the focus of scientific effort and legitimacy. Surveys possess unique qualities; so, however, do other techniques, and calls for methodological pluralism have at last been heard. This development is important not only for empirical research but for theory-building as well because the form that sociological thinking takes is not independent of the methods used.

Throughout sociology’s short history, survey research has been closely connected at the epistemological level with a “scientist,” as opposed to an “interpretive,” conception of sociology. Within empirical sociology, however, most interpretive studies so far have not addressed the issues of historical and comparative analysis but have focused instead on specific fields, i.e. on situations that are defined spatially and temporally and that give rise to typical interaction patterns. Conversational analysis and other branches of ethnomethodology, as well as symbolic interactionist studies based on participant observation, are examples of this type of research. It is appropriate to use this approach in those cases where the field itself determines the key features of action. This seems to occur at one of two extremes: on the one hand, fleeting interactions (encounters) where there is no deeper personal involvement; on the other hand, situations with very strong structural configurations (e.g. total

institutions or highly relevant stigmatizations) that level out any individual orientations or channel them into a small number of basic orientations. In both of these cases, it may be sufficient to treat the actor as having a simple instrumental or strategic orientation. But in the wide domains of actively structured everyday life, a biographical frame of reference is more productive.

Our definition of the life story approach is more restricted than that usually given in the American literature on interpretive methodology. The authors of most American texts refer to Thomas & Znaniecki (1958 [1918–1920]) and speak of the “personal documents” composing a life history: letters, diaries, personal records, open interviews, and finally, autobiographies and tape-recorded life stories (Blumer 1939; Angell 1945; Denzin 1970a,b; also Paul 1979; Plummer 1983). Thus, no systematic distinction is drawn between the broader conception of personal documents, on the one hand, and life stories, on the other. Both of these sources give the researcher access to the actor’s perspective: his or her values, definitions of situations, and knowledge of social processes and rules that he or she has acquired through experience. But if one takes the dimension of personal history seriously, it is appropriate to insist on a more specific characterization: the life story approach should be based on narratives about one’s life or relevant parts thereof.

Because the life story refers implicitly to the totality of a person’s experience, because there are many ways to elicit a life story and more than a single way to talk about one’s past, life stories (as oral, autobiographical narratives generated through interaction) potentially lend themselves to a multiplicity of uses. Interest in them is developing quickly in European countries such as Germany, Italy, France, and Britain, but also in Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. It is certainly paradoxical that the two countries – namely the United States and Poland – that had the strongest traditions of biographical research before the war (cf Kohli 1981) have not contributed proportionately to the present revival. This situation should not last long, however (for the United States, see Denzin 1970b and Plummer 1983; for Poland, see Sisyphus – Sociological Studies 1982).

We have been asked to review these developments here. Our paper represents a “continental view” in a double sense: first, it is written by two continental Europeans; and second, its sections are organized by country, cultural-linguistic area, or continent and discuss the research going on within each one. One reason for organizing the paper this way lies in the nature of the basic material of biographical research, i.e. peoples’ lives. While this type of research does have universalistic dimensions, many of its problems and propositions are historically specific and thus have to be treated within their own contexts. One cannot “control for” cultural context, as one usually controls for certain variables in
order to arrive at general propositions; cultural entities have to be the units upon which comparative studies (in the true sense) will be based.

But our choice of presentation also reflects the way research is currently organized. For example, a collaborative effort between a French- and a German-speaking author is hampered by the fact that, until recently, social research in France and in Germany has largely been conducted without any mutual awareness of developments in the other country. In both nations, there has been a stronger orientation toward the United States than toward their respective neighbors – this is clearly due to the structure of relations between center and periphery. Thus, the country-by-country discussion of research projects is more than a handy way of dividing up the field; it is required by the social reality both of the researchers’ object of study and of the research enterprise itself.

The life story approach has been defined above as a method of data collection, More importantly, it is also a specific way of addressing the substantive (i.e. theoretical) questions of sociology. As one of the approaches in the expanding area of interpretive social research, it is not restricted any more – as it was in the United States during the years when the Chicago school predominated – to a single theoretical orientation; rather, it draws from a variety of orientations that range from symbolic interactionism to phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnosociology, structuralism, and cultural variants of Marxism. Accordingly, there is wide variation in the basic questions asked and the methods of data analysis used. Some authors focus on the actors’ subjective points of view; others see their task as the reconstruction of meaning structures; still others try to discern social relationships of which the actors themselves are not wholly or even partially aware.

Variety of Uses

Working with life stories involves a number of difficult methodological questions for which there are no ready-made answers (Blumer 1979). These questions are being clarified, however, as research projects multiply and the exchange of information between sociologists increases.

Given the variation in basic theoretical orientations and substantive issues, the general feeling among researchers is that no standard procedures will be devised in the near future. Therefore, rather than concentrating on general methodological points and setting up standards to be followed (this would be a futile exercise), we will proceed inductively by discussing the ways of dealing with the methodological problems typically encountered in the studies under review.

Let us comment briefly on three dimensions of variation, however. One important dimension is the sheer number of life stories. Some research
projects are based on several hundred, others rely on a single one, and the majority fall somewhere in between. The number depends on whether empirically grounded generalization is being sought or whether one is using a case study approach, where only generalizations based on theoretical plausibility, not statistical induction, are possible. Quite obviously, problems of sampling, analysis, and publication present themselves differently, depending on one’s position along this continuum.

Another dimension is the objective/subjective one. While the sociological community usually associates life story research with an orientation toward subjectivity, many contemporary sociologists use this approach to investigate some set of social relationships (e.g. Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame 1981b, Camargo 1981, Kohli et al 1982, Thompson 1983); the same could also be said for some older sociological studies and for most anthropological studies. Many aspects take on a different meaning when examined along this dimension. For instance, the question of the validity of retrospective data becomes much more important for those sociologists looking for patterns of historically given sociostructural relations than for those studying perceptions, values, definitions of situations, personal goals, and the like. Nevertheless, sociologists with a more subjectivist orientation have to acknowledge the existence of social frames (even if they conceive of them as objectified meaning structures), and those with a more objectivist orientation have to take into account the fact that social structures are the result of sociohistorical processes in which action, and therefore subjectivity, is playing its part. Consequently, advocates of both positions must not only coexist but communicate.

A third dimension may also be identified. An orientation toward academic discourse – implying a constant preoccupation with theoretical abstraction and scientific legitimacy – lies at one end. At the other is a humanistic-literary approach, some of whose advocates place much greater emphasis on the links established during the inquiry between the sociologist and his or her subjects [see for instance Ferrarotti’s (1981a,b) plea for con-ricerca, i.e. searching together]. Others emphasize the sociologist’s role as a “publisher” of life stories aimed at the general public and thus as an advocate of people and groups who would otherwise have no chance to be heard publicly (see Mills 1959; Bertaux 1977; Fuchs 1979; Bennett 1983). For this second group, the issues of rapport, feedback, and readability become crucial.

**Major Trends**

In view of both limitations on the length of this paper and the breadth of the life story revival, our treatment cannot be anything but selective and sketchy. We shall start with the United States; however, given that two
excellent books have recently been published on the history and current status of Anglo-American research in this field (Bennett 1981, Plummer 1983), we shall focus primarily on what is happening in other parts of the world.

The United States

Although the spirit of the Chicago school of the 1920s remains alive in symbolic interactionism, the latter’s focus on specific situations and organizational contexts has led to a preference for direct observation (and the associated interviews); little attention has been paid to the life story approach. Some recent exceptions to this overall pattern are Garfinkel’s (1967) and Bogdan’s (1974) studies of transsexuals; Rettig et al’s (1977) research on a hard-core heroin addict; Klockars’s (1975) examination of a professional fence; Heyl’s (1979) study of a madam; Snodgrass’s (1982) follow-up of a once famous young delinquent, Clifford Shaw’s Jack-Roller; and Strauss & Glaser’s (1977) case history of Mrs. Abel, a woman dying of cancer.

But these are exceptions, and they all concentrate, in the Chicago tradition, on forms of deviancy. Bennett’s (1981) and Plummer’s (1983) books, which present a detailed picture of the American scene, confirm this point. It is only in women’s studies, which are not reviewed here, and in Denzin’s (1984) recent work that the lives of “ordinary” (i.e. in this context, norm-abiding) people are taken as entities deserving sociological study. Methodologically, the main emphasis in American qualitative sociology is still on direct observation, be it within the theoretical frameworks of symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, or urban anthropology (Emerson 1981).

Some of the most interesting American uses of life stories are presently being generated on the border of sociology – for instance, Tamara Hareven’s work on the large textile mill of Amoskeag, which closed its doors in 1936. Hareven has used demographic data and archives, as well as the life stories of people who worked in the factory in the 1920s and 1930s, to reconstruct the workers’ ways of working and living, and their migratory and familial patterns. [See her two books: Amoskeag (with R. Langenbach, 1978), a collection of workers’ life stories, and Family Time and industrial Time (1982), an important contribution to family history and social history.] One of Hareven’s main findings is that life trajectories cannot be understood without taking into account the inner economies of families whose necessities, as opposed to their members’ individual preferences, dictate whether a youngster should go on studying or start working, get married or stay single to help at home, move away or stay in his or her hometown.
Elmer Luchterhand’s research – American because of the author’s affiliation but concerned with German history – also reaches into the recent past. He is working on a case study of a work camp in Nazi Germany with a high death rate. He has interviewed, despite great difficulties, the people who manned it and the inhabitants of the nearby village who could see columns of prisoners marching between the camp and the worksite everyday. A particularly interesting case is that of a former minister who served as a secretary for three of the commanders of the camp in turn in the midst of extreme role conflicts and who agreed to tell his life story (Luchterhand & Wieland 1981).

Glen Elder’s cohort studies should be mentioned here, even though they are not based on life stories as such. The author, a sociologist, artfully mingles sociology, psychology, and history in his research on the long-term effects of the Depression on those who lived through it as children (Elder 1974, 1975, 1981, 1984). He shows how lives are thoroughly shaped by history and how some generations carry the scars of their youth with them throughout their whole lives. He also points out that if, in the same country, adolescence was so different in the 1930s and in the 1960s, a “sociology of adolescence” must take the historical context into account.

Last, but not least, is the work of Norman K. Denzin and the yearbook he edits, Studies in Symbolic Interaction. Denzin, himself a longtime defender of the biographical approach, is moving toward a resolutely interpretive standpoint and is developing the links between it and a philosophical background. This effort constitutes a “strategic task,” for the lack of such links has always been symptomatic of sociology’s epistemological naïveté (Denzin 1984).

Poland

Two Polish sociologists of the interwar period – the culturalist Znaniecki and the Marxist Krzywicki – developed an original form of data collection, namely, public competitions soliciting pamietniki (memoirs) as rather topical autobiographies. These competitions were advertised in the local newspapers and their topics varied, from “life as a young peasant” or as “an industrial worker,” for instance, to “the experience of unemployment.” Thousands of written autobiographies were collected in this way. The best were published in the form of books, and some of their authors (often uneducated workers) for a time became the cultural heroes of the Polish intelligentsia (Markiewicz-Lagneau 1976, 1981). It seems that insightful sociological analyses were based on these sets of autobiographies, particularly those by Jozef Chalasiński (1981; see also Szczepanński 1962 and Sisyphus – Sociological Studies 1982); most of this work, however, has never been translated.
After the war, this tradition of organizing public competitions was revived; it is still going on, and the documents are archived in an institute in Warsaw. But sociological interest in this kind of data seems to have died down during the last 20 years. The recent special issue of *Sisyphus* that focuses on “Polish Memoir Sociology” could, however, be a first sign of a revival.

**Germany**

In Germany – or, more precisely, in the German-speaking areas of Western Europe – interest in the life story approach has been growing especially fast and has almost taken the form of a “biographical movement.” This development may be due to some distinct features of German social reality and social science. German history has been particularly marked during this century – i.e. during the lifetime of today’s older cohorts – by massive disruptions and crises. They include a series of basic changes in political regimes; massive economic deprivation, including food shortages; participation in war, with a high mortality rate for several segments of the population and extensive material destruction; and large-scale migration. The German social sciences, in turn, have a closer affinity than research traditions in other Western cultures to historical and interpretive-hermeneutical conceptions. Works by Dilthey, Freud, Weber, and Schütz have been among the most important resources for the development of present approaches in interpretive sociology.

The growing interest in life stories has developed along two lines. The first consists of a cultural or life-world approach to Marxism, especially in studies of class consciousness (Bahrdt 1975, Osterland 1978; also Alheit 1983, Brose 1983). The second stems from interpretive research and particularly from the phenomenological tradition (cf Matthes et al 1980), stimulated by an interest in the structure and function of narratives (cf Schütze 1976, 1980; Fischer 1982), and in the life course and socialization (cf Kohli 1978, Rosenmayr 1981).

The two lines of development seem to be moving closer now. On the one hand, the interest in culture and life-worlds found in materialist sociology makes its proponents attentive to the possible contributions of interpretive sociology. On the other hand, attempts have been made to place life-world processes within their structural contexts and to spell out the relations between the two levels, e.g. to conceive of individual interpretations and actions in terms of a selection between structurally given alternatives and an emergent actualization of structurally given patterns. To illustrate, we shall briefly sketch four research programs (for a broader overview, cf Fuchs 1984, Kohli & Robert 1984).

The first is the study by Wolfram Fischer (1982) on time structures and perspectives. Although Fischer’s empirical data represent a very special
case, i.e. they are biographies of chronically ill patients, he uses them to analyze the social constitution of time within the life-world in general. For biographical research, one key differentiation is between everyday time and life-time. In phenomenological theory, life-time perspectives have been assumed to be mere extensions and summations of short-term (i.e. everyday) perspectives. Fischer argues, however, that it is more appropriate to conceive of them as two structurally distinct time categories. In the social ordering of events and actions within a person’s life-time, some features are socially given (heteronomous production), e.g. in the form of institutionalized career sequences, while others are autonomously constituted by the individual. Biographies are global constructions by which individuals constitute a defined present within the specific horizons of the past (retentions) and the future (protentions). Fischer’s detailed analysis of these processes reveals some of the intricate structures of the life-world perspective with which any adult deals competently in the course of normal action and which he or she takes for granted – a stance analogous to that found in ethnomethodology.

The second study, which is by Fritz Schütze (1980), is part of the methodological effort to develop the “narrative interview” (see below) and attempts to describe a wide range of structural properties of life-course processes. The emphasis is not so much on the actor’s biographical perspectives at the present moment as on historical sequences. While Schütze acknowledges that the global biographical interpretation of the actor continually changes as he or she moves through his or her life – this change is the focus of Fischer’s study – he is confident that it is possible to reconstruct the sequence of life-course processes if one uses an appropriate methodology. Among the issues that Schütze addresses are: the structure of biographical designs and initiatives; the processes whereby episodes that are not originally schematized in a life-time dimension later gain biographical relevance; and the configuration of actions of marked biographical irrelevance (i.e. time off). Special attention is given to the sequential interplay of action and (often painful) compliance with structural constraints – i.e. of autonomous constitution and heteronomous production in Fischer’s terms.

The third study, by Wilfried Deppe and Martin Osterland (Deppe 1982, Osterland 1978), should be mentioned here because it was the first instance of biographical research in the Marxist tradition of industrial sociology. The study is based on roughly structured interviews with 161 male German workers from 5 large factories and aims at analyzing their life paths and experiences. The workers were grouped into 3 generations (prewar: year of birth up to 1929; war: born 1930 – 1939; and postwar: born 1940 – 1950) and 3 qualification groups (skilled factory workers, skilled craftsmen, and unskilled workers). A third dimension considered was whether they were of urban or rural origin. These groups were essentially
treated as single types, without any internal differentiation. The publications based on these data (especially Deppe’s dissertation) are rich in life-world information and show that both workers’ present situations and their outlooks can only be understood in the context of their biographies.

The fourth study, by Martin Kohli, Joachim Rosenow, and Jürgen Wolf (1983; Kohli 1984), is concerned with aging in the industrial workplace. It addresses two interrelated questions: (a) How is the workers’ aging process in the second half of their careers “organized” by the age-specificity of personnel allocation in industrial enterprises? and (b) How do aging workers cope with the problems, risks, and possibilities resulting from this organization? The data are narrative interviews with 54 male German workers in 3 age-groups and 3 qualification groups from 3 large Berlin factories, as well as interviews with various staff members in these firms. Here, age is not an external criterion introduced by the researcher for the purpose of grouping the data; rather, it is the focus of the analysis itself. In contrast to studies of dramatic downward trajectories (Fischer 1982), the topic is “normality” – i.e. the more or less eventful careers of people who are neither particularly underprivileged nor overly successful. The study’s theoretical focus is on the impact of the social structure of work on the life-course and on the central role played by socially structured careers and perspectives in the socialization process. Methodologically, it includes both the workers’ perspectives and actions, and the context in which they act, thereby minimizing the risk of adopting a subjectivist stance.

The methodological issues involved in life story research have been the focus of much discussion. Data collection is the area where the greatest advances have been made so far. For instance, Schütze has proposed a new form of interviewing about life-world processes that he calls the narrative interview (Schütze 1980). It is based on linguistic analyses of the structure and efficiency of narration as a specific scheme for referring to events (the other schemes are description and argumentation) (Schütze 1976). Narrations are characterized, among other things, by their temporal ordering of events (i.e. sequences), by their inclusion of references to the past sequence of events as well as a current evaluation of the story, and by an internal structure centering around specific themes, their complication, and their solution.

The narrative interview consists of: (a) a preferably extensive narration by the interviewee/narrator, during which the interviewer restricts his interventions to the minimal hearer utterances required to keep the narration going; and (b) a period of questioning when the interviewer tries to elaborate on the issues presented in the narration and introduces additional topics. There is a standard interview technique, e.g. for finding an adequate stimulus to elicit the primary narration and for presenting
the subsequent questions. The interviewer should not ask for arguments (e.g. “Why did you do that?”) but for more narrative detail (e.g. “What happened then?” or “Can you remember . . . ?”). If implemented successfully, the narration technique has specific effects, e.g. it evokes more detail than the narrator originally intended or thought he or she would be able to give. Schütze’s key thesis is that, given the necessary structural conditions, the narration allows the researcher to reconstruct the real sequence of past events. Although an empirical (as opposed to a theoretical) validation of this thesis is still lacking, most biographical researchers are convinced of the practical usefulness of the narrative method and are trying it out in their studies.

Data analysis, on the other hand, is a more difficult issue. Discussions often center on the question of whether “routines” for analysis comparable to those used in quantitative research may be found – or should be sought. Two approaches aimed at achieving some degree of routinization should be mentioned. First, in narrative interviewing, the analysis starts with a detailed formal analysis of the text structure (somewhat similar to a simplified conversational analysis). Then, there is a step-by-step process of identifying typical cases and relevant theoretical categories that is based on Glaser & Strauss’s (1967) propositions.

A second, rather different conception is that of “objective hermeneutics” (Oevermann et al 1979). It is used to explicate the latent or objective meaning structure that ideally motivates an action system, i.e. the ideal rules (or deep structure) that produce an empirically observable set of actions and interpretations. This interesting form of structuralism is as complex theoretically as the methodological procedure that follows from it. Let us point merely to two of its methodological principles: 1. The interpretation must be extensive, identifying all possible meanings of a text, even if they are unlikely. This procedure requires going beyond the text and systematically including any relevant knowledge about the context. 2. The sociological researcher should look for the motive or generating rule for an action in sociological terms (i.e. assuming a rational orientation to social goals) as long as possible before invoking any specific psychological disposition of the actor.

**Italy and France**

In Italy life stories have been used repeatedly in connection with an underlying political objective: to attest publicly how the poor are forced to live [e.g. Revelli’s work on poor peasants (1977)], But shortly after World War II, Franco Ferrarotti, the outstanding figure in life story research in Italy, used life stories as one means of getting to know what was happening to a small, hitherto traditional town where large industrial projects were being developed (Ferrarotti 1973 [1959]). Whenever people
voiced complaints about the negative consequences of industrialization (i.e. 20 years before they became commonplace), however, he tended to ignore them, as he himself was carried along by the postwar belief in economic growth. Self-critical reflection on this personal experience has since made him extremely sensitive to whatever sociological truths may be found under the guise of common speech.

Ferrarotti’s present work is on *baraccati*, i.e. people (usually migrants from villages) living in precarious conditions on the outskirts of Rome (Ferrarotti 1974, Ferrarotti et al 1981). He has attempted to merge his role of scholar and his radical political position by proposing, in a short but important volume (Ferrarotti 1981b), *con-ricerca* – i.e. research with the people. Some of his main points are taken from Sartre’s *Search for a Method* [1960; a French classic somehow comparable to C. W. Mills’s *The Sociological Imagination* (1959)] and elaborated further. They include: (a) society is thoroughly historical; (b) each person is both unique and universal, he or she is a “singular universal”; (c) there are layers of mediations between macrosocial processes and personal lives, e.g. local institutions, families, peer groups; and (d) the simplest unit of social life might not be the individual but the small group (including the family), and therefore, “life histories” of such small groups might be both simpler to grasp and more useful than those of individual people (Ferrarotti 1981a,b).

Other outstanding Italian contributions include Montaldi’s studies of marginal people (1961) and of rank and file activists (1971); Luisa Passerini’s (1980) analysis of automobile workers’ historical consciousness; Tentori & Guidicini’s (1974) examination of an old and poor district in the historical center of Bologna; and Capecchi et al.’s yet unpublished portrayal of the changing patterns of family and work in Bologna. Generally speaking, the many forms that Italian civil society invents to cope with the economic crisis make it a rich ground for developing qualitative studies of this kind. Italian sociologists’ uses of life stories have been reviewed by Campelli (1977), Macioti (1978), and Ferrarotti (1981b:Appendix).

While Italian intellectual culture is heavily historicist, French culture has been deeply influenced by the huge wave of structuralism that swept through all the social sciences during the 1960s – the most influential works being those by Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Foucault, Lacan, Poulantzas, and Bourdieu. It was not easy for scholars to develop an interest in life stories in such a context. Indeed, one of the first texts published on this subject puts forward the idea that most life lines are broken, i.e. that they do not obey some inner logic but rather are determined from the outside by “the historical movements of sociostructural relationships” (Bertaux 1976:206). According to this author, however, it is precisely for this reason that lives are interesting: By their very forms, life trajectories reveal the constraining effects of the sociostructural relationships that constitute the very object of sociological inquiry for structuralism.
A life story approach has been derived from this structuralist standpoint. Topical life stories, it is argued, should be collected in a single milieu with a focus on “practices,” not on perceptions or feelings. The sociologist’s task is to infer from recurrent practices the pattern of sociostructural relationships that are generating or constraining them. For instance, given a set of life courses within a certain profession, one should be able to infer information about the workings of its internal labor markets; or one should be able to learn about the detailed relations of production within a trade from collecting data about the work lives of the people within it. Key informants who know the milieu from the inside may be able to accelerate the process of gaining sociological understanding. This “ethnosociological” approach has been put to work in an inquiry on artisanal bakeries, which still produce and sell about 90% of the bread eaten in France—a rather unique case in a developed industrial country (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame 1981a,b; Bertaux-Wiame 1982).

The key methodological point of this research is the rediscovery of the process of saturation by which the members of a research team move from case to case, modifying their questions along the way and enriching and correcting their mental picture of the social processes under study. They eventually reach a point beyond which every new case merely confirms the validity of the sociological interpretation. This process of saturation, which not only requires a search for “negative cases” (Lindesmith 1947) but also a good deal of sociological thinking, is therefore the key to generalization. As such, it stands in the same relation to ethnosociological research as random sampling does to survey research. Glaser & Strauss (1967) described this process long ago, but its central importance has usually been overlooked (as in Blumer 1979 or Plummer 1983).

Other studies following an ethnosociological approach, but not reaching the point of saturation, have been done on migrants to the cities (Barbichon et al. 1974, Bertaux-Wiame 1979); working-class families (Destray 1971, Pitrou 1978) and activists (Peneff 1979); Algerian migrants’ families (Sayad 1979); and single mothers (Lefaucheur & Le Drian 1980). Two groups of scholars are working independently on an ethnosociology of Jewish communities in France, with a historical dimension added (Bensimon 1980; Schnapper 1980). In Nice the anthropologist J. Poirier and the social psychologist S. Clapier-Valladon (1980, 1983) are developing the concept of ethnobiography.

In Geneva, C. Lalive d’Epinay and his team (1983) have extensively studied the problem of coping with retirement and aging in various social milieux, using both survey data and narrative interviews. Career questionnaires and life stories have also been combined in a study on retired Parisians (Cribier 1983, Rhein 1980).
The work of Maurizio Catani follows another line of thought. He is interested in values, and especially in the values of migrants, whether they are foreign-born like himself or urban people from peasant origins. He works with one person at a time, collecting his or her life story through repeated interviews. His method of analysis consists of looking for the meanings hidden in the narratives – not only in their content, but also in their very form (see Catani 1981 and Catani & Mazé 1982, a book about the life and world view of an old woman of rural origins). The interviews, complete with the questions used and information about the context, are given in extenso.

Martine Burgos’s work is another example of a sociolinguistic approach. Her starting point is Mikhail Bakhtine’s distinction between epic and “romanesque” forms of narration. In the epic form, the world and personages are taken as given and basically do not change; life, as in the Odyssey, is an adventure. In the romanesque form – whose ideal type is the Bildungsroman that describes a process of self-discovery, e.g. Crime and Punishment – the world is problematic, the self is unstable, life (and the life story) takes the shape of a search for meaning and identity. Burgos examines how these forms coexist with, interfere in, or dominate the life narratives of old peasant women (Burgos 1980). Lastly, the work on autobiographies by P. Lejeune (1980), a professor of literature, has stimulated interest not only among his colleagues, but also among sociologists and linguists (Delhez-Sarlet & Catani 1983).

Britain

Owing to a shortage of space, the reader is referred to the recent, excellent, and quite exhaustive book by Kenneth Plummer (1983) on the use of life stories in the Anglo-Saxon world. We shall only mention here two works using an ethnosociological orientation, namely Raphael Samuel’s (1981) study of a former criminal in London and Paul Thompson’s (1983) examination of fishing communities.

It took Samuel years to extract from Mr. Arthur Harding memories about his youth in the Iago, a district of London once famous for its high density of criminal activity. In fact, Harding had sent it publisher a poorly written autobiography intended to convince the reader that he had been a victim of police harassment all along; this is how Samuel got to know him. Working with Harding prompted Samuel, a radical sociologist and historian, to reflect about what a class society defines as crime (Samuel 1981:Appendix). This use of a life story to stimulate the sociological imagination exemplifies one of the possible solutions to the problem of life story “analysis.”

Paul Thompson’s study of fishing communities in Scotland demonstrates that not only does the economy exert a determining influence
upon culture, but that the opposite is true as well. Fishing is an activity that requires adaptability, initiative, and hence personal autonomy. Some local cultures, as embodied for example in the relations between men and women and in child-rearing practices, promote the development of autonomy; this is the case in the Shetlands. Thompson has observed that Shetlanders have been able to adapt to the new fishing conditions and relates it to their culture. In contrast, both the fishermen of another island characterized by a very rigid form of Protestantism and sexism, and the industrial fishing industry of Aberdeen, which is marked by a sharp class distinction between boat owners and sailors, have failed to adapt. This research is a fine example of how one can move from concrete life stories to fundamental sociological issues.

Spain

Born in Spain, the sociologist Juan F. Marsal worked for years on Spanish immigration into Argentina and emigration back to the home country. Inspired by Thomas & Znaniecki’s example, he succeeded in persuading one of his informants, J. S., to write his own autobiography. The result is a moving book that tells the sad story of a man born in poverty in a Spanish village, who enlisted in the colonial army, got married, and then was pushed by his wife (who stayed home) into migrating to Argentina. He worked there in various trades before becoming a traveling photographer, never making much money. After 20 years in Argentina, he came back to Spain as poor as when he left and was ostracized by his own wife and daughter. As Marsal (1972:3) says about the great drama of the return of emigrants to their homelands, “what is common to all greatly exceeds what is particular to each of them,” which is another way of stating that each human being is a universal, albeit a singular one (Sartre 1960).

Two of Marsal’s students have followed in his footsteps, using life stories to study both the formation of strong regionalist (Catalan) attitudes in spite of harsh repression by the Franco regime and the trajectory of Catalan intellectuals (Hernández 1982, Mercadé 1982).

Latin America

Life stories are being put to a multiplicity of uses in Latin America, which has its own distinct cultural identity. Aspasia Camargo and two colleagues have reviewed this subject in a paper presented at the 10th World Congress of Sociology (Camargo et al. 1982). Once again, for reasons of space we will refer the reader to this paper and mention only the main tendencies and a few outstanding works.
We single out three large projects because of their sociological relevance. The first has been carried out on a continuous basis since 1975 at the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação of the Fundação Getulio Vargas in Rio de Janeiro. Its aim is to retrace the history of Brazilian elites from the 1930s to 1964 (when the military seized power) and to analyze this group sociologically. Members of this Center have been conducting repeated interviews with retired political leaders, generals, and businessmen who played a major role during this period. The interviews are transcribed and kept as oral archives. Together with other data, they are also used as source materials for a sociological analysis of the processes of elite recruitment, formation of cliques, internal division of elites, policymaking, and the like (Camargo 1981). Some of the interviews have been turned into successful books (e.g. Camargo & Goes 1981). The project has been going on for several years and is still evolving; we know of no other comparable endeavor anywhere. The Center’s data bank now forms the basis for numerous specialized research projects.

Another important set of projects is being conducted in Mexico by the Oral History Department of the Museo Nacional de Antropología (Meyer 1978). One of these was started in 1959 with interviews of former leaders of the Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata movements during the Mexican Revolution of 1910; since 1972 the focus has shifted to rank-and-file activists (Villa 1982). Participants in another important Department project have examined political exile and its consequences by interviewing refugees from the Spanish Civil War (Alonso & Baranda 1980; on this topic see also de Oliveira Costa et al 1980 on Brazilian women in political exile). Other projects include studies of the history of the Mexican movie industry and of the medical profession.

A third outstanding example of work with life stories is the series of studies by Jorge Balan and Elizabeth Jelin, now at CEDES (Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad) in Buenos Aires. During several years at the University of Texas at Austin in the late 1960s, Balan and Jelin, together with the demographer Harlan Browning, conducted a survey using biographical questionnaires (the first of its kind) on the industrial town of Monterrey in northern Mexico. Their data enabled them to map out the life trajectories of migrants from rural areas who moved to the city and tried to find their way into its markets (Balan et al 1971). When they returned to Argentina, Balan and Jelin maintained an interest in biographies, published methodological studies on the subject (Jelin 1976), and carried out empirical research on the ways of life of the urban poor. In contrast to Oscar Lewis, who did not pay much attention to governmental policies, they have been able to trace the effects that changing policies have on the urban working class’s way of life by studying how families cope with problems of housing, health, education, and lack of resources (Balan & Jelin 1980).
Quebec

For a long time, the Québécois have been oppressed economically, politically, and culturally. Like all oppressed minorities, they have maintained a separate identity through their culture, and particularly through their language and Church. During the 1960s, the country underwent a very rapid and all encompassing process of modernization known as “la révolution tranquille.” In the early 1970s, a large and pioneering research project was launched under the initiative of Fernand Dumont to see how the Québécois had lived through and participated in this fundamental process of social change. A total of 150 life stories focusing on individuals’ lived experiences were collected from members of all social strata.

Nicole Gagnon (1980, 1981) has directed the process of analyzing these data. The main concepts she uses are, not unexpectedly, culture and identity; but these are interpreted in an original manner. Culture is seen as a collective praxis resulting from the actions of people who are dealing with continuity and change and trying to maintain or reinforce an identity at both the individual and the collective level. Identity is seen as “a process of symbolic appropriation of reality” through which people move subjectively from passivity to activity. Thus defined, these two concepts open the way for a sophisticated analysis of the collective cultural dynamics whose effects show up in the life stories. (See also Houle 1979 and Pineau 1983; the second work deals with the general topic of self-teaching and self-transformation through the particular case of a young woman whose autobiography is included in the volume.)

Links with Other Disciplines

Lives are totalities, even if broken ones. They develop simultaneously at several levels: the historical, the societal, the ethnosocial, the personal (C. W. Mills was particularly sensitive to this; see Mills 1959). Thus, it is no wonder that other disciplines besides sociology are interested in them.

Life stories are narratives; as such, they are undergirded by the inner structure of narrative discourse – a topic that has been studied in linguistics. Scholars who are closely analyzing life stories have therefore developed an interest in the possibilities and constraints that the narrative structure imposes on discourse. Most of the sociolinguistic work done on life stories bears on this question (e.g. Schütze 1976, 1980; Faris 1980; Catani 1981; Catani & Mazé 1982; Cohler 1982; Kaplan 1982). But within the overall narrative form various types of narration may exist, each of which expresses the basic relationship of the narrator to the world; this is the question Grele (1979), Burgos (1980), and Bennett (1981) address. Types of relationships to the world do not merely reflect personality types but
also social categories; to take an extreme example, working-class women who have spent their lives in the traditional housewife role do not tell their life stories in the same way that men in elite groups do (Bertaux-Wiame 1979).

Links with historians are now being built through a particular, quickly growing branch of this discipline, namely oral history. This expression refers to the works of those historians who study the twentieth century by using oral histories in the form of long interviews or (usually focused) life stories as one of their sources (Thompson 1975, 1978). While oral accounts appear to be of limited value in constructing a history of events, they provide considerable information on subcultures (e.g. life-styles, patterns of conduct, values) among elites or, conversely, among the rural or urban working classes. Social processes among both of these groups only leave a scant written record for future social historians — although for different reasons. The use of oral sources has led social historians to turn to sociology not only for methods of interviewing but for concepts as well. Thus, a clear pattern of convergence — exemplified in cross-references, joint conferences, and research projects — is visible. [On this subject, see the journals *Oral History* (Colchester, Essex) and *International Journal of Oral History* (New York); see also Thompson 1975, 1982; Revelli 1977; Niethammer 1980; Passerini 1980; Samuel 1981.]

Within psychology, interest in the biographical approach has been spurred by issues of development, especially development across the whole life-span (Bühler 1933, Thomae 1952, White 1952). With the growing psychometric emphasis of mainstream developmental psychology, the use of life stories became largely restricted to psychodynamic approaches (e.g. Erikson 1958, Levinson et al 1978). Recently, however, interest seems to be broadening again, as Cohler’s (1982) overview demonstrates. Two interesting, special approaches are the study of the lives of exceptional men (Runyan 1982), following the path opened by Erikson (1958), and the use of reminiscence as a therapeutic intervention technique with older people, following Butler’s (1963) arguments on the life-review.

Anthropology, of course, has a very long record of life story works (Langness 1965, Langness & Frank 1981). Oscar Lewis’s (1961) and Sidney Mintz’s (1960) books have probably had a greater influence than *The Polish Peasant* on the present revival of interest in life stories. Nevertheless, the trend toward scientism has now reached this discipline, and it seems that life stories are no longer fashionable. This change represents a great loss, as Morin (1982) has shown convincingly for French anthropology. Mandelbaum’s (1973) and Freeman’s (1979) works seem to be exceptions to this general trend.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, himself a promoter of scientism in anthropology, once acknowledged the particular quality of life stories: They allow one to perceive a foreign culture from within, as a living whole, rather
than as a set of seemingly conflicting norms, values, roles, rituals, and the like (Lévi-Strauss 1943). An important extension of this remark is that, in addition to their analytical potential which involves difficult methodological questions, life stories possess a synthetic power. One often gets the impression from reading one of the famous “native autobiographies” (e.g. Simmons 1942) that “everything is there!” In other words, in addition to expressing everything about a given culture that a treatise should, its parts (that is, the chapters of the treatise) are once again put together to form a “living whole.” This represents the synthetic moment; but one should be aware that it only comes after the analytic one. Behind every native autobiography there is an anthropologist who asked questions that were later erased: behind the children of Sanchez’s speech is Oscar Lewis’s searching mind; behind Arthur Harding’s words is Raphael Samuel’s relentless probing. Thus, the synthetic potential of the life story expresses itself only through the analytic skill of the researcher. And if some life stories possess an artistic quality, this is not a sign that they are prescientific, but on the contrary, that they have moved beyond the analytic stage (Bertaux 1977).

Conclusion

The revival of sociologists’ interest in life stories is in itself an intriguing social phenomenon that calls for more detailed analysis (cf Kohli 1981a). Its future cannot be predicted. Nevertheless, we hope to have shown that it is not a superficial trend. It is often said that the previous failure of the life story approach was mainly due to its own weaknesses. There were some weaknesses, but this is always true of any sociological method. What needs to be explained is why, instead of working to eliminate them, sociologists turned their backs on the method altogether. The failure of the method was not an isolated phenomenon; it suffered the same fate as the whole Chicago tradition, which encompassed more than just the life story method and which was marginalized when survey research became the dominant paradigm.

The present situation differs strikingly in two respects. First, the future of the method is not tied to the fate of a particular “theory group.” Second, survey research is no longer the exciting innovation attracting the forces vives of the profession; rather, it is an established and respectable tradition whose usefulness is undeniable, but whose claim for hegemony is now being questioned. Thus, the current situation is quite open. The eventual fate of the method’s revival is yet to be determined. In our opinion, it does not depend so much on methodological advances as on whether research projects are carried out in the years to come that can be used as exemplary works.
Even if such works do appear, however, their quality may be attributed not to the approach used, but to the personal skills of the scholar. This assertion has already been made about Oscar Lewis’s works, for instance. Therefore, it is necessary to recall that sociological inquiry is also a matter of skill. Science has become so bureaucratized that one tends to forget the extremely important fact that the process of discovery always requires some personal skill; using nonformalized methods only makes this more visible. Survey research always brings with it some information, even in the absence of sociological theorization (as in public opinion surveys); but research based on life stories or other kinds of “nonquantitative” data always requires some sociological thinking to make sense. It will always necessitate some skill – this is its challenge. So while it is true that sociological interpretations based on life stories require special skills, we do not believe that this is a sign of the nonscientific nature of the method – quite the contrary. Of course, it is necessary to find ways of controlling the interpretation of data, e.g. through extensive discussions in the scientific community or through feedback from the actors in the social process under study. But the problem of validating interpretations is not specific to the life story approach; it lies at the core of interpretive research.

To conclude, there has been a multiple “renaissance” in the use of life stories; this is why one should not expect the elaboration of a standard methodology. One should not expect the emergence of a new theoretical school either. The value of the life story movement lies elsewhere: the perspective it implies allows one to take a new look at old questions (e.g. aging, social mobility, migration, elites, marginality, or social movements); to open new fields (especially at the level of symbolic processes, e.g. life-long meaning construction); and to explore new approaches (e.g. through the implementation of hermeneutics within a sociological, not a philosophical, framework or through the implementation of an ethnographic approach to the study of sociological, not anthropological, questions). Above all, it constrains researchers to pay attention to the various levels of social life, to become sensitive to the weight of history, and to conceive of the present as history in the making. In short, it is highly challenging. Herein lies its fragility; herein lies its strength.

Note

1. Life story sociologists from about 15 countries met at the 9th World Congress of Sociology in Uppsala (August 14–19, 1978) and again at the 10th World Congress in Mexico (August 16–21, 1982) to exchange information on their research experiences (see Bertaux 1981). They have set up an international network that publishes a newsletter, Biography and Society (1983).
Literature Cited


The theory and practice of oral history has changed profoundly since its post-World War II origins, and these changes have paralleled — and influenced — wider historiographical and methodological shifts. Our work as oral historians today can be explained and enhanced by awareness of the history of our field and of the forces that have shaped its development.

This essay reviews critical developments in the history of oral history and outlines four paradigm transformations in theory and practice: the postwar renaissance of memory as a source for ‘people’s history’; the development, from the late 1970s, of ‘post-positivist’ approaches to memory and subjectivity: a transformation in perceptions about the role of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst from the late 1980s: and the digital revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Threaded through discussion of these paradigm shifts are reflections upon four factors that have impacted oral history and, in turn, been significantly influenced by oral historians: the growing significance of political and legal practices in which personal testimony is a central resource; the increasing interdisciplinarity of approaches to interviewing and the interpretation of memory: the proliferation from the 1980s of studies concerned with the relationship between history and memory: and the evolving internationalism of oral history. I do not attempt to survey the distinctive national or regional histories of oral history, which are readily available in other publications. Although the points of genesis and patterns of development for oral history have varied from one country to another,
particular social and intellectual forces have shaped contemporary approaches to oral history and have influenced oral historians around the world.

Oral history and People’s History: the Renaissance of Memory as an historical Source

The first paradigm transformation – and the genesis of contemporary oral history – was the post-World War II renaissance in the use of memory as a source for historical research. Paul Thompson, among others, charts the prehistory of the modern oral history movement, explaining that historians from ancient times relied upon eyewitness accounts of significant events, until the nineteenth-century development of an academic history discipline led to the primacy of archival research and documentary sources, and a marginalization of oral evidence. Gradual acceptance of the usefulness and validity of oral evidence, and the increasing availability of portable tape recorders, underpinned the development of oral history after the Second World War. The timing and pattern of this emergence differed markedly around the world. For example, the first organized oral history project was initiated by Allan Nevins at Columbia University in New York in 1948, and his interest in archival recordings with white male elites was representative of early oral history activity in the United States. In Britain in the 1950s and 1960s oral history pioneers were more interested in recording the experiences of so-called “ordinary” working people and had initial links with folklore studies; George Ewart Evans, for example, famously determined to “ask the fellows who cut hay.” The lived experience of working-class women’s or black history was undocumented or ill-recorded and oral history was an essential source for the “history from below” fostered by politically-committed social historians in Britain and around the world from the 1960s onwards.

Paul Thompson, a social historian at the University of Essex, played a leading role in the creation of the British Oral History Society in the early 1970s and the subsequent development of an international oral history movement from the end of that decade. His pioneering book, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, became a standard textbook – and a standard-bearer – for oral historians around the world when it was first published in 1978. Thompson sought to defend oral history against critics who claimed that memory was an unreliable historical source, and determined to prove the legitimacy and value of the approach. As a socialist, he was committed to a history which drew upon the words and experiences of working-class people, and argued that oral history was transforming both the content of history – “by shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions
and accepted judgments of historians, by bringing recognition to sub-
stantial groups of people who had been ignored"—and the processes of
writing history, breaking “through the boundaries between the educa-
tional institution and the world, between the professional and the ordi-
nary public.”8 For many oral historians, recording experiences which
have been ignored in history and involving people in exploring and
making their own histories, continue to be primary justifications for the
use of oral history.9 For example, Susan Armitage and Sherna Gluck
argue that oral history retains an urgent political importance in many
part of the world where women’s oppression is reinforced by the silenc-
ing of women’s voices and histories.10 And in many countries oral his-
tory has developed powerful roots outside higher education, in schools,
community projects and reminiscence work.11

Post-Positivist Approaches to Memory and Subjectivity

The second paradigm shift in oral history was, in part, a response to
positivist critics—for the most part traditional documentary historians of
a conservative political persuasion—who feared the politics of people’s
history and who targeted the “unreliability” of memory as its weakness.12
At the core of criticisms of oral history in the early 1970s was the assertion
that memory was distorted by physical deterioration and nostalgia in old
age, by the personal bias of both interviewer and interviewee, and by
the influence of collective and retrospective versions of the past. For
example, the Australian historiarn Patrick O’Farrell wrote in 1979 that
oral history was moving into “the world of image, selective memory,
later overlays and utter subjectivity . . . And where will it lead us? Not
into history but into myth.”13 Goaded by these critics, early oral histori-
ans developed their own handbook guidelines to assess the reliability of
oral memory (while shrewdly reminding the traditionalists that docu-
mentary sources—many of which were created as records of spoken
events—were no less selective and biased). From social psychology and
anthropology they showed how to determine the bias and fabulation of
memory, the significance of retrospection and the effects of the inter-
viewer upon remembering. From sociology they adopted methods of
representative sampling, and from documentary history they brought
rules for checking the reliability and internal consistency of their sources.
These guidelines provided useful signposts for reading memories and
for combining them with other historical sources to find out what hap-
pened in the past.14

In the late 1970s imaginative oral historians turned these criticisms on
their head and argued that the so-called unreliability of memory was
also its strength, and that the subjectivity of memory provided clues not
only about the meanings of historical experience, but also about the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity, and between individual and collective memory. For example, Luisa Passerini’s study of Italian memories of interwar fascism highlighted the role of subjectivity in history—the conscious and unconscious meanings of experience as lived and remembered—and showed how the influences of public culture and ideology upon individual memory might be revealed in the silences, discrepancies and idiosyncrasies of personal testimony. Also writing in the 1970s, North American oral historian Michael Frisch argued against the attitude that oral history provided “a pure sense of how it ‘really’ was,” and asserted that memory—“personal and historical, individual and generational”—should be moved to center stage “as the object, not merely the method, of oral history.” Used in this way, oral history could be “a powerful tool for discovering, exploring, and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory—how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social contest, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them.” Memory thus became the subject as well as the source of oral history, and oral historians began to use an exhilarating array of approaches—linguist, narrative, cultural, psychoanalytic and ethnographic—in their analysis and use of oral history interviews.

The work of Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli exemplifies the second paradigm shift in approaches to memory and oral history. In “What Makes Oral History Different,” first published in 1979, Portelli challenged the criticisms of “unreliable memory” head-on by arguing that “the peculiarities of oral history”—orality, narrative form, subjectivity, the ‘different credibility’ of memory, and the relationship between interviewer and interviewee—should be considered as strengths rather than weaknesses, a resource rather than a problem. Portelli, perhaps the most influential writer about oral history and memory, has since demonstrated these strengths in a series of outstandingly imaginative oral history studies.

Though conservative historians were the most vocal critics of oral history in the 1970s, oral history was also challenged from the Left. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, some socialist historians were particularly critical of the nation that the method of oral history was necessarily radical and democratic. Luisa Passerini cautioned against the “facile democratisation” and “complacent populism” of oral history projects which encouraged members of oppressed groups to “speak for themselves” but which did not see how memories might be influenced by dominant histories and thus require critical interpretation. At the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, the Popular Memory Group developed a similar critique of British oral history in their writings about
“popular memory.” The Group situated academic and other historical practices within the much wider process of “the social production of memory,” and argued that public struggles over the construction of the past are profoundly significant both in contemporary politics and for individual remembering. For example, oral history as used within the community and women’s history movements could be a significant resource for making more democratic and transformative histories, and might in turn enable people to tell stories that had been silenced because they did not match the dominant cultural memory. Yet the Popular Memory Group concluded that this radical potential was often undermined by superficial understandings of the connections in oral testimony between individual and social memory and between past and present, and by the unequal relationships between professional historians and other participants in oral history projects.

These arguments overlap with two interconnected concerns that continue to trouble some oral historians: that the increasing theoretical sophistication of academic oral history is incomprehensible to, or ignored by, oral historians outside the academy, for example those working in schools, community projects and the media, and that our interviewees may be bewildered by the deconstruction of their memories. A reflective, critical approach to memory and history undoubtedly makes for better oral history—as Linda Shopes has argued recently in the context of community history—yet at the same time oral historians who are committed to a dialogue with their interviewees and a wider public audience need to write and speak in terms that make accessible sense. Oral historians are sometimes better at this dialogue than other academic theorists: because unlike much social science research we rarely anonymize interviewees (who usually want their stories to be part of history and their names on the record); because we hope that our interviewees will understand what we write and say about their lives: and because memory is an intriguing, universal topic that can be written about in ways that will interest most people.

**Oral History and Political Memory Work in a Biographical Era**

The Popular Memory Group’s writing highlighted the political possibilities and contradictions for oral history projects which have a radical agenda. Yet in the early 1980s the political scope and impact of oral history and memory work was still comparatively limited. Since then memory has come to be used for advocacy and empowerment in an increasingly diverse range of contexts: intergenerational oral history projects with elders and Young people; health, social care and development work; community-based projects with marginalized groups such
as the homeless and refugees;\textsuperscript{26} and the use of testimony in legal and restitution, post-conflict resolution and national truth and reconciliation.\textsuperscript{27} Indeed, though oral history has often played a significant role within such projects, commentators such as Fuyuki Kurusawa argue that memory and testimony have become critical constituents of a more general “witnessing fever” in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, in which ‘bearing witness’ is “a mode of ethico-political practice.”\textsuperscript{28} Several factors have contributed to the development of our biographical era. The catastrophic violence of the twentieth century generated a culture of symbolic and material claims by individual and collective victims of immense suffering. A post-Freudian acceptance that talking about one’s life could have positive, therapeutic benefits has encouraged remembering for recognition and reconciliation. And the extraordinary growth and diversification of communication media has contributed to the growth and impact of commemorative practices, while also generating dominant cultural memories that both articulate and silence people’s life stories.

Two examples highlight the potent contribution that oral history can make to this politics of memory in twenty-first century nations. In Australia the contested memory of aborigines who were removed from their families and placed in foster families or state institutions – the so-called “Stolen Generation” – has been at the heart of debates about race relations, restitution and national identity. Rosanne Kennedy has noted how Stolen Generation memory is produced and treated differently in diverse contexts: oral history recordings compared with autobiographical writing: in law courts and national inquiries or “memory commissions”; by historians and in self-help advocacy groups.\textsuperscript{29} Drawing upon theoretical approaches to Holocaust and abuse survivor testimony, she argues against the assumption that personal accounts by removed aborigines have been unduly influenced by the collective memory of a Stolen Generation, and asserts that these accounts should be regarded as sophisticated interpretative narratives that incorporate sharp social and historical insights, and not simply as evidence for interpretation (or rejection) by historical “experts.” Yet Kennedy also notes that some aboriginal witnesses “may not have had the cultural resources available to them that would enable them to interpret their own experience,” and thus highlights the important though problematic supporting role of oral historians and other memory workers.

In a second example, from Northern Ireland, Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern explore their role as memory workers with the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP) in a Catholic working-class Belfast enclave.\textsuperscript{30} Lundy and McGovern explain that “in the last three decades truth-telling has come to be seen as a key element of post-conflict transition in societies throughout the world,” and they identify at least twenty-four national “truth commissions,” of which the most famous was the Truth and
Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Despite good intentions and many positive outcomes, the political compromises required by official truth-telling sometimes marginalize memories that do not fit their conciliatory aims, and official commissions can reinforce the trauma of silence or misrecognition. Ironically, Northern Ireland has not had a truth commission because “not confronting the causes and competing explanations” of the northern Irish conflict “was part of a deliberate State strategy to obtain a realpolitik consensus” following the Good Friday Agreement that more or less ended armed conflict in 1998. In the absence of official truth-telling, Lundy and McGovern describe how they worked with a group of Ardoyne residents to produce an oral history book commemorating local People who died in “the Troubles.” They detail the significant practical challenges of participatory oral history. For example, interviewees “had complete control to add, take out or change words in their own transcripts,” in discussion with ACP volunteers, and although participants could not change words in other people’s accounts they were encouraged to read other transcripts and raise questions or make suggestions for consideration in the final production. Through this painstaking process of recording and editing their stories, individuals were helped to deal with traumatic memories and “make peace with the past.” Furthermore, Lundy and McGovern argue, a “victim-centered approach . . . to community-based truth-telling” contributes to the wider project of “achieving truth and justice” in Northern Ireland, and offers a model “that can be transferred not only to other communities in the north but to other parts of the world.”

**The Subjectivity of Oral History Relationships – Interdisciplinary Approaches**

A third transformation in oral history involved a paradigmatic shift in our approach to the “objectivity” of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst. One of the primary concerns of critics of oral history in the 1970s was that historians were creating, and thus unduly influencing, their sources. By the end of that decade oral historians like Portelli and Passerini in Europe, and Frisch and Grele in North America, had begun to question the possibility of objectivity and to celebrate the subjectivity of the interview relationship. Throughout the 1980s positivist notions of researcher objectivity were increasingly questioned by feminist theorists, post-modern anthropologists and qualitative sociologists – and by oral history interviewers who were deeply reflective about the relationships they formed with their narrators. Oral historians were also influenced by developments in reminiscence work that highlighted the benefits of remembering for older people and reminded interviewers to consider the value of the exchange for both parties. In an article published in
the *Oral History Review* in 1997. Valerie Yow argued that from the late 1980s a new oral history “paradigm . . . permits awareness and use of the interactive process of interviewer and narrator, of inter-viewer and content.” Oral historians were increasingly alert to the ways that they were affected by their interviews and how the interviewer, in turn, affected the interview relationship, the data it generated and the interpretative process and product. Feminist oral historians have made especially important contributions in this regard, illuminating issues about oral history relationships and the interconnections between language, power and meaning. Quoting Victor Turner, Yow called for “an objective relation to our own subjectivity,” and proposed some extremely useful questions to help oral historians develop a reflexive alertness that would enhance interviews and their interpretation:

1. What am I feeling about this narrator?
2. What similarities and differences impinge on this interpersonal situation?
3. How does my own ideology affect this process? What group outside of the process am I identifying with?
4. Why am I doing the project in the first place?
5. In selecting topics and questions, what alternatives might I have taken? Why didn’t I choose these?
6. What other possibilities are there? Why did I reject them?
7. What are the effects on me as I go about this research? How are my reactions impinging on the research?

Valerie Yow’s article also exemplifies the interdisciplinarity that has been one of the most significant features of oral history from the 1980s onwards. Though memory is now a respected historical source, history is just one of many academic disciplines and emergent intellectual fields that work with memories. Yow writes about the “trickle over effect” from other disciplines such as qualitative sociology, anthropology, biographical and literary studies, and life review psychology. To this list we could add cultural studies, linguistics, communication and narrative studies, folklore studies and interdisciplinary work exploring the relationship between memory, narrative and personal identity. White theoretical and methodological developments in each of these fields have enriched the practice of oral history, oral historians have themselves made substantial contributions to the theory, method and politics of qualitative research through their interdisciplinary reflections on interview relationships and about the interpretation and use of recorded memories.

To cite just one recent example, Daniel James’ book, *Dona María’s Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity*, published in 2000, is an exemplary work of women’s oral history from South America. The first half of the book comprises Dona María’s own testimony, as recorded
74 HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND TRAJECTORIES

and edited by James, and vividly recalls the life and times of a working-class woman activist in a twentieth-century Argentinian industrial community. The interpretative essays that follow consider Dona María’s experience and testimony, and the history and memory of her community, from cutting-edge interdisciplinary perspectives. For example, “Listening in the cold” explores the challenges of recording, hearing and comprehending testimony that is influenced by prevalent narrative forms, by the political and psychological identity of the narrator, and by an interview relationship that can enable or disable recollection. “Stories, anecdotes and other performances” draws upon narrative theory to analyze the nature and meaning of personal testimony. “Tales told out on the borderlands” reads Dona María’s story for gender and argues that clues about gender tension and dissonance are found on the narrative “borderlands” between personal memory and the cultural frames of communal myth and public ideology. James argues that Dona María’s oral testimony — shaped by a dynamic ongoing relationship between personal and public memory, and between narrator and interviewer — is “more messy, more paradoxical, more contradiction-laden [than most written autobiographies], and perhaps because of this, more faithful to the complexity of working-class lives and working-class memory.”

The Ascent of Memory Studies

Daniel James also considers the importance of remembering – as “embodied in cultural practices such as storytelling” – for individuals and for their communities, and poses the problem of modern memory for working-class communities faced with deindustrialization and the destruction of sites for collective memory. In this regard his work exemplifies the “ascent of ‘memory’ as an object of investigation by historians” in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Omer Bartov offers a compelling explanation for this trend, in which the memory work of oral historians has played a significant role:

The stream of “memory studies” was clearly related to the pervasive cultural sense of an end of an era, both as a chronological fact and as a reflection of rapid socioeconomic transformation. The “rediscovery” of Maurice Halbwach’s theories on collective memory: the growing scholarly interest in the links between history and memory, documentation and testimony: the popularity of works of fiction and films on memory: debates among psychologists over “deep” and repressed memory: and not least, the public controversies on forms and implications of official commemoration. All seemed to indicate that “memory” had firmly established itself as
The ascent of memory studies poses two significant challenges for oral historians. Firstly, we need to keep abreast of a daunting interdisciplinary literature in the field. Secondly, oral historians can ensure that memory studies does not retreat into an arcane intellectual world of rarified debate, but rather is informed by our relationship with the men and women who tell us their memories and by our efforts to engage memory in political debate for social change.

The Internationalism of Oral history

Our response to these challenges has been bolstered by the increasing internationalism of oral history. In 1979 a number of North American oral historians met up with their European counterparts at an International Conference on Oral History held in Essex, England. This meeting was to be the first of many international exchanges, and was a catalyst for the publication of an *International Journal of Oral History* (from 1980 until 1990) and a series of collaborative, international oral history anthologies. In 1996 the international oral history conferences were formalized within a newly constituted International Oral History Association (IOHA), for which representatives from each geographical region were elected to a Council responsible for the biennial conference and a bilingual (Spanish and English) newsletter and journal. *Words and Silences/ Palabras y Silencios*. The conferences and publications have sustained and propelled a cross-fertilization of ideas and practices across the different national contexts of oral history, and have shifted the center of gravity in oral history away from Europe and North America. The recent sequence of IOHA conferences in Turkey, Brazil, South Africa and Australia (with the 2008 conference scheduled for Mexico) has showcased the rich histories and extraordinary growth of oral history in the "South."

Indeed, Latin American oral historians are challenging the European and North American oral history hegemony. In an editorial introducing a 2003 issue of *Words and Silences* about "Oral history and the experience of polities," the Mexican oral historian Gerardo Necoechea suggested that, whereas in western Europe and the United States oral history is often “directed to problems of identity and cultural recognition within democratic regimes. . . . Latin America continues to be a space for utopia, for thinking about the far-away relatively just society and fearing the fracture of the ever fragile present. Politics there jumps at you,” and oral history is intertwined with politics. In the same issue Brazilian José Sebe Bom Meihy argued that the international conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1998 was a turning point, with Latin American oral history in
particular offering a more radical political context and purpose. 49

The political circumstances of countries and regions emerging from—or struggling within—political turmoil undoubtedly generate important, often transformative, memory work. And it is certainly true that different national and regional contexts make for different types of oral history, and that all oral historians gain from international dialogue and comparative insights. But there are plenty of European and North American projects where oral history is also “intertwined with politics.” For example, Daniel Kerr has shown how oral history promoted “dialogue in the streets among the homeless” of the U.S. city of Cleveland, Ohio, and how “a democratically organized project built on the framework of what Michael Frisch terms ‘shared authority’ can play a significant role in movement building.” 50 Kerr’s project started with life history interviews but then shifted away from a victim model and refocused on homeless people’s own analysis of homelessness. He brought homeless people into a structured dialogue by presenting their video interviews in public, producing a radio program focusing each week on one person’s account of homelessness, and convening workshops at a drop-in center in which participants analyzed their experiences and drew out common themes about the history and causes of homelessness. Perhaps most importantly, the project built upon and linked existing discussions among homeless people, “identified avenues of resistance,” and “emboldened people” to campaign for social change. Kerr notes tensions in the oral historian’s role between scholarship and advocacy and argues, perhaps controversially, that research can be more objective if it is more inclusive.

The Digital Revolution in Oral History

We are in the middle of a fourth, dizzying digital revolution in oral history, and its outcomes are impossible to predict. E-mail and the Internet are certainly fostering oral history’s international dialogue. But, more than that, new digital technologies are transforming the ways in which we record, preserve, catalogue, interpret, share and present oral histories. Very soon we will all be recording interviews on computers, and we can already use web-cams to conduct virtual interviews with people on the other side of the world. Audio-visual digital recordings will be readily accessible in their entirety via the Internet, and sophisticated digital indexing and cataloguing tools—perhaps assisted in large projects by artificial intelligence—will enable anyone, anywhere to make extraordinary and unexpected creative connections within and across oral history collections, using sound and image as well as text. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software can already be used to support, extend and refine the interpretation of large sets of oral history interviews, and will,
inevitably, become more sophisticated and powerful.

Michael Frisch argues that the digitization of sound and image will challenge the current dominance of transcription and return aurality to oral history, as digital technology makes it easier to navigate audio (and video) material, and as we extend our text-based literacy to new forms of literacy with sound and image. Furthermore, non-text-reliant digital index and search mechanisms will enable users to find and hear the extracts they are looking for in their own interviews—and across countless interviews from other projects—and will enable imaginative, unforeseen interpretations. Frisch proposes the emergence of a “post-documentary sensibility” which breaks down the distinction between the oral history document source and the oral history documentary product. He offers the Prosaic but instructive example of family video collections and asks whether “instead of one, two, or even a file folder full of such pre-cast movies, it wouldn’t be more interesting to imagine the material so organized and accessible that . . . a path could be instantly generated in response to any visiting relative, or a child’s birthday, or a grandparent’s funeral, or the sale of a house in the hometown, or whatever might be occasioning interest in the relevant resources found in the video record. Such a located selection could easily be displayed, saved, and worked into a presentational form, if it proved interesting. Or, it could be released to return to the database, awaiting some later inquiry or use.” Frisch suggests a comparable future for oral history recordings and productions, and concludes that “new digital tools and the rich landscape of practice they define may become powerful resources in restoring one of the original appeals of oral history—to open new dimensions of understanding and engagement through the broadly inclusive sharing and interrogation of memory.”

The future that Frisch proposes may still be years away in terms of being widely adopted. How receptive are libraries and archives to moves away from the ‘document’? Who will have the time and inclination to generate non-text-reliant digital indexing of audio and video interviews? Who will have access to the software? At what point will extensive collections of indexed audio and video oral history recordings be readily accessible and searchable via the Internet? Furthermore, our interviewees may well think rather differently about telling a story that will be instantly accessible and easily manipulated.

Throughout the past decade oral historians have been grappling with the technical, ethical and epistemological implications of the digital revolution. But are we dealing with a paradigm transformation in the terms articulated by Thomas Kuhn, a profound change in understanding that revolutionizes our practice as oral historians? Is this technological revolution also a cognitive revolution? It is hard to tell, in the midst of such rapid change and when the technological changes in oral history
are just a small sideshow in the global digital revolution in information and communication technologies. Personally, I find this future especially difficult to predict precisely because the global digital frontier is so foreign to someone who grew up in a pre-digital age and who feels comfortable and literate with text but profoundly uncomfortable and illiterate with these new technologies (to be honest, I was never very competent with old technologies). My children and my younger students—who have only known a digital age and instinctively understand the ways in which mobile phones and web-cams create different ways of communicating and web-logs offer new processes for making and sharing personal stories—may well have a better sense of where these technologics might take us.

But I do think that the medium is part of the message, and that digital technologies are transforming so many aspects of our work as oral historians—and indeed the ways in which people remember and narrate their lives—that they will, over time, also change the way we think about memory and personal narrative, about telling and collecting life stories, and about sharing memories and making histories. This digital revolution—the fourth paradigm transformation of oral history—is still in process, and life on the cusp of change before an ever-shifting horizon can be uncomfortable. The future of oral history, and the role of the oral historian, has never been so exciting, or so uncertain.

Notes

1. This essay derives from research conducted by myself and Rob Perks in our development of a second edition of The Oral History Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).


5. The relationship between folklore studies and oral history has varied in different parts of the world. In England, despite initial links, oral history and folklore studies tended to travel different paths: Paul Thompson argues that English folklore studies “never escaped from the stigma of amateurism” (Thompson, The Voice of the Past, 71–2). A shared interest in aurality—fuelled by digital technologies, may be bringing the two fields closer again (see Rob Perks and Jonnie Robinson, ‘‘The way we speak’: web-based representations of changing com-


7. Subsequent editions published in 1988 and 2000 expanded the initial chapters about the history and achievements of oral history, and explored new thinking about memory, subjectivity and psychoanalysis.


14. See, for example, the first 1978 edition of Thompson’s *The Voice of the Past* for a
defence of oral history in these terms.


FOUR PARADIGM TRANSFORMATIONS IN ORAL HISTORY


50. Kerr, “‘We Know What the Problem Is,’” See Frisch. *A Shared Authority*.


Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History

Joan Sangster

When people talk about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a little, exaggerate, become confused, get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths … the guiding principle for [life histories] could be that all autobiographical memory is true: it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, and for what purpose.¹

For almost two decades, feminist historians have played an important role within the profession stimulating new interest in, and debate surrounding, oral history.² The feminist embrace of oral history emerged from a recognition that traditional sources have often neglected the lives of women, and that oral history offered a means of integrating women into historical scholarship, even contesting the reigning definitions of social, economic and political importance that obscured women’s lives. The topics potentially addressed through oral history; the possibilities of putting women’s voices at the centre of history and highlighting gender as a category of analysis; and the prospect that women interviewed will shape the research agenda by articulating what is of importance to them; all offer challenges to the dominant ethos of the discipline. Moreover, oral history not only redirects our gaze to overlooked topics, but it is also a methodology directly informed by interdisciplinary feminist debates about our research objectives, questions, and use of the interview material.³

Although both popular and scholarly historical works have increasingly embraced oral history as a methodology able to expose ignored topics and present diversified perspectives on the past, there lingers some suspicion that oral sources may be inappropriate for the discipline. As one labour historian recently pointed out, it would be unthinkable for historians to host a conference session asking “written sources: what is their use?”.

Yet one still finds that question posed for oral history. Consideration of whether oral sources are ‘objective’, it appears, still worries the profession – even for those using oral history.

While the biases and problems of oral history need to be examined – as do the limitations of other sources – my intention is not to retrace these older debates, but rather to examine some of the current theoretical dilemmas encountered by feminist historians employing oral history. Rather than seeing the creation of oral sources as biased or problematic, this creative process can become a central focus for our research: we need to explore the construction of women’s historical memory. Asking why and how women explain, rationalise and make sense of their past offers insight into the social and material framework within which they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced, and the complex relationship between individual consciousness and culture.

For feminist historians, two other questions are pressing: what are the ethical issues involved in interpreting other women’s lives through oral history, and what theoretical approaches are most effective in conceptualising this methodology? The latter question is especially timely in the light of recent post-structuralist scepticism that we can locate and describe a concrete and definable women’s experience, separate from the cultural discourses constructing that experience.

I wish to explore these three interrelated issues using examples from my own oral history research on the lives of wage-earning women in the large factories of Peterborough, Canada, from 1920 to the end of the Second World War. By exploring in some detail a concrete example – women’s memories of a major textile strike in 1937 – I hope to highlight our current theoretical dilemmas and argue for an oral history enhanced by post-structuralist insights, but firmly situated in a materialist and feminist context.

Oral History and the Construction of Women’s Memories

If we are to make “memory itself the subject of study”, our interviews must be carefully contextualised, with attention to who is speaking, what their personal and social agenda is, and what kind of event they are describing. We need to unearth the underlying assumptions or ‘problematic’ of the interview, and to analyse the subtexts and silences, as
well as the explicit descriptions in the interview.\textsuperscript{9} We need to avoid the tendency, still evident in historical works, of treating oral history only as a panacea designed to fill in the blanks in women’s or traditional history, providing ‘more’ history, compensating where we have no other sources, or ‘better’ history, a ‘purer’ version of the past coming, unadulterated, from the very people who experienced it.\textsuperscript{10} The latter approach erroneously presents oral histories as essentially unmediated, ignoring the process by which the researcher and the informant create the source together; it may also obscure the complicated questions of how memory is constructed, to what extent oral sources can ever reveal the objective experience of people, and whether oral histories should be seen as expressions of ideologies – whether dominant, submerged, oppositional – given to us in the form of personal testimony.

It is also crucial that we ask how gender, race and class, as structural and ideological relations, have shaped the construction of historical memory. The exploration of oral history must incorporate gender as a defining category of analysis, for women often remember the past in different ways in comparison with men. Some studies, Gwen Etter-Lewis points out have found that “women’s narratives” are more liable to be characterised by “understatements, avoidance of the first person point of view, rare mention of personal accomplishments and disguised statements of personal power”.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, a French oral historian noted that the women she interviewed were less likely than men to place themselves at the centre of public events; they downplayed their own activities, emphasising the role of other family members in their recollections.\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, women’s “embeddedness in familial life” may also shape their view of the world, and even their very consciousness of historical time.\textsuperscript{13} In my study, for instance, many women reconstructed the past using the benchmarks of their family’s life-cycle – as does Amelia, described below, whose recollections of a major textile strike are woven around, and indeed are crucially influenced by, her memory of her wedding.

Class, race and ethnicity, other writers have shown, create significant differences in how we remember and tell our lives: in some instances, these influences overshadow gender in the construction of memory. Cultural values shape our very ordering and prioritising of events, indeed our notions of what is myth, history, fact or fiction.\textsuperscript{14}

In my study, class shaped people’s recollections in stark, as well as subtle, ways. Not surprisingly, managers remember history differently than workers; a manager in one factory described the period when the company explored relocation to other cities in search of lower wages as “an interesting”\textsuperscript{15} time of travel and experimentation as he knew his job would be salvaged. But workers in the plant who faced job loss remember that same period as “stressful”\textsuperscript{16} and uncertain. On a more subtle
level, in this workplace, many women’s reticence to speak forcefully as critics of, or experts on, their workplace contrasted markedly to managers’ strong sense of pre-eminence on these issues; these contrasting styles reflected the confidence shaped by both class and gender inequalities.

One’s past and current political ideology also shapes the construction of memory. Women who were more class conscious, militant trade unionists did not hesitate to criticise managers and they presented workplace conditions in a more critical light than other workers. Interviewees’ knowledge of my ideological sympathies, combined with their own, could also shape the interview. A male trade union official I interviewed tended to remember his life story around the theme of himself as a progressive socialist battling more conservative unionists. Suspecting I was a feminist, his role vis à vis the defence of women’s rights in the union became aggrandised in his interview, beyond my own reading of the written record.

The influences of class, gender, culture or political worldview on memory may reveal themselves through both content and the narrative form of the interview. While recent writing on oral history draws heavily on poststructuralist theory to explore narrative form and the way in which subjectivity is created, similar themes have preoccupied oral history theorists for some time. Almost 20 years ago, Ronald Grele suggested we uncover the theme which suffuses the life history, the ‘script’ around which an informant shapes the presentation of their life. Amelia, for instance, though now comfortable, grew up in the 1930s in a poor farming family; at 15 she was forced to leave school to work in a textile mill. Throughout the interview, she criticised current social values, often by contrasting her youth – characterised by hard work and selfless dedication to her family – to the current selfish, affluent youth. Whether or not she was influenced by a conservative philosophy that distrusted modern trends, or whether she wished to understand her relative success as a result of hard work, or whether she was hurt by the seeming neglect by the younger members of her family – or all of the above – the point is that this critical worldview came to colour her description of the working conditions she had seen in the textile factory.

Oral history may also illuminate the collective scripts of a social group, revealing, for instance, how and why peoples’ memories of their workplaces or communities are created. Many workers I interviewed who were employed at a factory which embraced paternalism as a labour relations strategy, emphasised the ‘family-like’ atmosphere at the plant, and the way in which the patriarchal and charismatic company head saw himself as a father figure. Their descriptions of the rise and decline of the firm were recounted in the form of an epic family drama, with the eventual economic decline of the factory actually compared to a family breakup. Their way of remembering indicates the assimilation, at some level, of the familial metaphors employed by the company to promote its paternalism.
Other ingredients of the narrative form, such as expression, intonation and metaphors also offer clues to the construction of historical memory. When I asked one woman how her family survived during the time she and her father were on strike in 1937, she could not remember. It is possible, first, that the family went on welfare but that she has forgotten because it was a humiliating experience for some people. Later in the interview, however, she made a casual aside, noting her mother “sewed at home for extra money”. Her mother may have supported the family during the strike, but her work in the informal economy (like that of many women) was undervalued, remembered as an afterthought, indeed almost forgotten.

Revelations may also come from silences and omissions in women’s stories. The realisation that discrimination based on religion is not socially desirable led many women I interviewed initially to deny any religious rivalry in their workplaces; yet one such woman, when describing a different issue – the foreman intervening in a bitter dispute on the line – admitted that severe Catholic and Protestant taunting had initiated the disagreement. One of the most telling examples of silences is the way in which women reacted to the subject of violence. In response to questions about sexual harassment at work (often I did not begin by using that modern term) or about women’s freedom on the streets after work, women seldom spoke of women’s vulnerability to violence. Others purposefully contrasted the absence of violence when they were younger to contemporary times: in their youth, they claimed, women could walk home alone at night they were not bothered at work, and violence against women was rare.

Yet, from other sources and research, I knew that violence in the streets, and in women’s homes, was very much a part of daily life. I came to understand women’s silence in a number of ways: for one thing, a few women’s veiled and uncomfortable references to harassment indicated that some working women, especially in the 1930s, saw harassment as an unfortunate but sometimes obligatory part of the workplace that one could not change and did not talk about. Secondly, it is not only that feminism has made us more aware of harassment and thus provided us with a vocabulary to describe it, but also that similar experiences were labelled differently in the past, often with the term ‘favouritism’. Third, a denial of violence was sometimes an externalisation of women’s ongoing painful fears about violence, and a comforting means of idealising a chivalrous past in contrast to the more visible violence of today.

Finally, in order to contextualise oral histories, we also need to survey the dominant ideologies shaping women’s worlds; listening to women’s words, in turn, will help us to see how women understood, negotiated and sometimes challenged these dominant ideals. For example, perceptions of what was proper work for young women are
revealed as women explain the images, ideas and examples upon which they constructed their ambition and work choices. Ideals of female domesticity and motherhood, reproduced in early home life, the school and the workplace, and notions of innate physical differences, for instance, were both factors moulding young women’s sense of their limited occupational choices in both blue and white collar work in the 1930s. Interviews may also indicate when women questioned these dominant ideals, as a few notable women described how and why they made the unusual decision not to marry, to work after marriage, or to attempt a non-traditional job.

Understanding the ideological context may help to unravel the apparently contradictory effects of ideology and experience. Why, for example, when I interview women who worked during the Second World War, do they assume that the war had a liberating effect on women’s role in the workplace, even when they offer few concrete examples to substantiate this? As Ruth Pierson points out, sex segregation and gender hierarchy persisted in the Canadian wartime workforce, despite rhetoric to the contrary. Why this contradiction between women’s positive memory of new opportunities during the war, and the reality of persisting discrimination? One answer may be the powerful and hegemonic influence of a popular and mystifying ideology of ‘the people’s war’ – the notion that women were breaking down gender roles – on the very construction of women’s memory. Secondly, oral history may reveal women’s own definitions of liberation, which actually diverge from those utilised by historians. In this small city, women saw the wartime abandonment of the marriage bar in local factories as a small revolution for working women. Historians, on the other hand, have based their assessments of continuing inequality on the maintenance of a gendered division of labour during and after the war.

In using oral history as a means of exploring memory construction, then, careful attention to the processes of class and gender construction is needed, as is an understanding of ideological context shaping women’s actions. In order to understand the formation of women’s gendered consciousness and memory, however, we must also acknowledge our own influence on the shape of the interview.

**Ethical Dilemmas: For historians too**

It is important to acknowledge how our own culture, class position and political worldview shapes the oral histories we collect, for the interview is a historical document created by the agency of both the interviewer and the interviewee. Many of us originally turned to oral history as a methodology with the radical and democratic potential to reclaim the
history of ordinary people and raise working-class and women’s consciousness.

As feminists, we hoped to use oral history to empower women by creating a revised history “for women,” emerging from the actual lived experiences of women. Feminist oral history has often implicitly adopted (though perhaps not critically theorised about) some elements of feminist standpoint theory in its assumption that the distinct material and social position of women produces, in a complex way, a unique epistemological vision which might be slowly unveiled by the narrator and the historian.

‘Representing the world from the standpoint of women’, while a laudable feminist aim, may still be difficult to accomplish. As well as the thorny theoretical question of our ability to adequately locate women’s experience (discussed below) there are two other concerns. Are we exaggerating the radical potential of oral history, especially the likelihood of academic work changing popular attitudes? Even more important, are we ignoring the uncomfortable ethical issues involved in using living people as a source for our research?

Some years ago, feminist social scientists mounted a critique of interview relationships based on supposed ‘detachment’ and objectivity, but in reality on unequal power and control over outcome. As a solution, sociologists like Ann Oakley proposed the laudable aim of equalising the interview, making it a more cooperative venture. Yet, in attempting this, we may be simply masking our own privilege. While a detached objectivity may be impossible, a false claim to sisterhood is also unrealistic. As Janet Finch has argued, a romanticisation of oral history research that ignores the fact that we are often “trading on our identity – as a woman, a professional” to obtain information is unacceptable. Judith Stacey also points out that feminist research is inevitably enmeshed in unequal, intrusive and potentially exploitative relationships, simply by virtue of our position as researchers and that of other women, with less control over the finished product, as ‘subjects’ of study. I agree. Nor will renaming these relationships with terms implying a sharing of power completely erase our privilege. After all, we are using this material for the purpose of writing books which are often directed, at least in part, to ‘academic or career ends. I gained access to women’s memories not as a friend, but as a professional historian.

These ethical issues are visibly highlighted through the conflicting interpretations which may be embraced by my informants and myself. By necessity, historians analyse and judge, and in the process, we may presume to understand the consciousness of our interviewees. Yet our analysis may contradict women’s self-image, and our feminist perspective may be rejected by our interviewees. Would women who worked in the paternalist factory I studied agree to the very word paternalist as a description of their relationship to management? Would workers in low
paid textile work accept language like subordination or exploitation to describe their status in the family or workplace? The answer to the latter two questions may be no.

While I had every intention of allowing women to speak about their own perceptions, if my interpretation and theirs diverged, mine would assume precedence in my writing. We can honour feminist ethical obligations to make our material accessible to the women interviewed, never to reveal confidences spoken out of the interview, never to purposely distort or ridicule their lives, but in the last resort, it is our privilege that allows us to interpret, and it is our responsibility as historians to convey their insights using our own – as the opening quotation to this article indicated. Even feminists like Judith Stacey and Daphne Patai, who offer trenchant critiques of the unequal interview relationship, do not recommend abandoning this methodology; in the last resort, they see the potential for feminist awareness and understanding outweighing the humbling recognition that it is currently impossible to create an ideal feminist methodology which negates power differences.

These debates have usually taken place between sociologists and anthropologists, less often with historians’ participation. Why? Is it related to the fact that, as Ruth Pierson argues, until recently, we have undertheorised our work? Is it possible that our traditional disciplinary training – especially an emphasis on empirical methods and a tendency to objectify our sources, but also the preference of the discipline not to work with living subjects – has obscured these questions from our view? We might be less concerned about imposing our interpretations on women’s voices if we were dealing with a written source; we are particularly sensitive about judging women because of the personal relationship – however brief – established between ourselves and our interviewees. But this is not necessarily positive for it may lead us to shy away from critical conclusions about their lives.

Other limitations in our historical training may also obscure these ethical questions. Is the study of people of different time periods, cultures and classes so taken for granted that we have not questioned the power inherent in writing across these boundaries? As Pierson notes on the current, troubling question of who has the ‘right’ to write whose history, if historians cannot study women of different backgrounds who have less power, we may be reduced to writing autobiography. Perhaps the mere fact of historical time – again, inherent in the discipline – helps to distance us, if only in an illusory way, from the issue of unequal relationships. When I interview wage-earning women about their experience in the 1930s, the age gulf allows both of us detachment from the subject we are discussing, which then sanctions the licence to interpret and judge.

In the last resort, I wonder how much soul searching is useful: is endless debate self-indulgent, sometimes an ex post facto justification of our
work, and does our concern with interviewing women from other backgrounds sometimes take on a condescending tone?\textsuperscript{32} Perhaps it is important not to definitely answer, but rather to be ever aware of these questions: we need to continually analyse the interview as an interactive process, examine the context of the interview, especially inherent power imbalances, and always evaluate our own ethical obligations as feminists to the women we interview.

**Theoretical Dilemmas**

While it is important to explore the interview as a mediated source, moulded by the political and social worldview of the author and subject, I think we should beware of recent trends to see oral history embodying innumerable contingencies and interpretations. When more traditional historians questioned the reliability of oral sources, suggesting that interviews are more fiction than fact they may not have realised that they were echoing the tenets of some post-structuralist analyses which explore the relationship between language, subjectivity, and the construction of cultural meanings and social organisation.

While linguistic theories are far from new in the interdisciplinary field of oral history, the more recent turn to post-structuralism suggests a more intensive concern with both linguistic structure and cultural discourses determining oral narratives, as well as a scepticism about any direct relationship between experience and representation. This theorising has enriched our understanding of oral history, but it may also pose the danger of overstating the ultimate contingency, variability and ‘fictionality’ of oral histories and the impossibility of using them to locate a women’s past which is “real and knowable”.\textsuperscript{33}

Since the mid-1980s, oral historians have increasingly examined language “as the invisible force that shapes oral texts and gives meaning to historical events”.\textsuperscript{34} This approach is evident in the recent *Women’s Words*, whose editors urge us to consider “the interview as a linguistic, as well as a social and psychological event”.\textsuperscript{35} While the book’s contributions range widely in their perspective, substantial attention is paid to narrative form and language; one author urges the embrace of ‘deconstruction’ rather than mere ‘interpretation’ of the text.\textsuperscript{36} In other works, the emphasis on language has been taken to more extreme conclusions, resulting in the denigration of historical agency: one such writer claims that the “narrative discourses available in our culture . . . structure perceptual experience, organize memory . . . and purpose-build the very events of a life”. Our life stories then come to “reflect the cultural models available to us”, so much so that we become mere “variants on the culture’s canonical forms”.
Practitioners of oral history have been more visibly influenced by the post-structuralist turn in anthropology and by some literary theory than by similar historical debates. In anthropology, life histories are being re-evaluated as post-structuralist voices emphasise the power-laden, complex process of constructing the oral narratives; one author suggests that life histories “provide us with a conventionalized gloss on a social reality that . . . we cannot know . . . We may be discussing the dynamics of narration rather than the dynamics of society.”\(^{38}\) Similarly, works like *Writing Culture* have stressed the creation of an indeterminate reality by the observed and the observer, well summed up by the conclusion that we can only hope for “a constructed understanding of the constructed native’s constructed point of view”.\(^{39}\)

Of course, post-structuralism has also stimulated debate in historical circles, with feminists apparently sympathetic or at least divided, and some working-class historians more critical.\(^{40}\) Feminist historians have been understandably attracted to the challenge to androcentric epistemologies, critiques of essentialism, concerns with language and representation, and the analysis of power suggested by some post-structuralist writing.\(^{41}\) Nonetheless, critics have cautioned against the inherent idealism in some post-structuralist theory and the abandonment of the search for historical causality and agency, not to mention a sense of political despair when the very notions of exploitation and oppression are deconstructed so completely as to be abandoned.\(^{42}\)

These debates – which cannot be explored in detail here – have important implications for the way in which we interpret our interviews, confront the ethical questions of the power-laden interview and consider the concept of experience. New attention to language and the way in which gender is itself shaped through the discourses available to us can offer insight as we analyse the underlying form and structure of our interviews. Reading our interviews on many levels will encourage us to look for more than one discursive theme and for multiple relations of power based on age, class, race and culture as well as gender.

On the ethical question of the inherent inequality of this methodology, however, post-structuralist writing is less useful. As Judith Stacey persuasively argues, the post-modern strategy of dealing with ethical question in ethnography is inadequate because it highlights power imbalances we knew to exist, but does not suggest any way of acting to ameliorate them. Post-structuralist anthropologists, for instance, suggest the process of ‘evoking’ rather than describing narratives through ‘cooperative’ dialogue, fragmentary or polyphonic discourse\(^ {43}\) as an alternative to their own power of authorship. As critics point out, however, these tactics can also veil and deny power: they can involve “self reflection, perhaps self preoccupation, but not self criticism”.\(^ {44}\) Privilege is not negated simply by inclusion of other voices, or by denial of our ultimate
authorship and control. Solutions that disguise power are not helpful to the historical profession in particular, which still needs to face and debate the question of power inherent in historical writing.

Finally, there is also the troubling and seemingly unsolvable problem of ‘experience’. Exploring and revaluing women’s experience has been a cornerstone of feminist oral history, but the current emphasis on differences between women – in part encouraged by post-structuralist writing – has posed the dilemma of whether we can write across the divides of race, class and gender about other women’s experiences, past or present. In the case of oral history, Ruth Pierson implies that we should be “as close as possible” to the oppressed group being studied, preferably a member of that group. If we are not we should concentrate on the exterior context of women but avoid with ‘epistimal humility’ a presumption to know women’s interiority. This raises troubling questions for me: just how close should we be to the subjects we are interviewing? Across the boundaries of sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, disability, class and age, can we score two out of six and still explore subjectivity? Where are the boundaries and under what circumstances can they shift? Secondly, separating exterior context from inner lives is extremely difficult. Does my assertion that women’s ambition was socially constructed not emerge from precisely that presumptuous supposition about the relationship between context and interior life? Will we not impoverish our historical writing if we shy away from attempts to empathetically link women’s inner and outer lives?

Also, is experience itself a construction of the narratives available to us in our culture? The concept of experience is not without its problems in history and feminist theory; it has been used to justify essentialism and to create a homogeneous ‘woman’ whose existence is enigmatic. But what are the consequences of ignoring a concept which allows women to “name their own lives” and struggles, and thus validates a notion of real, lived oppression which was understood and felt by women in the past?

Related concerns were voiced over a decade ago by Louise Tilley, in her critique of oral history shaped by literary theory and used to study subjectivity, and her counter-endorsement of a materialist oral history, used to study social relations. But can these two aims be so easily separated? Can the interview not be interpreted with a keen materialist and feminist eye to context, and also informed by post-structuralist insights into language? The cultural construction of memory would still be a focus of inquiry, posed within a framework of social and economic relations and imperatives. While it is important to analyse how someone constructs an explanation for their life, ultimately there are patterns, structures, systemic reasons for those constructions which must be identified to understand historical causality. Polarities between subjectivity
and social relations, or between a dated ‘older’ generation of women doing oral history who supposedly naively accepted the ‘transparency’ of their interviewees’ accounts and the new, ‘complex’ approach influenced by theory may not be justified – and ironically creates precisely the kind of “conceptual hierarchy which post-structuralism is supposed to de-centre”.

It has been suggested that historians may be able to extract techniques and insights from post-structuralist writing, yet still critique other premises of post-structuralist theory. One way to explore some of the current theoretical dilemmas of feminist historians utilising oral history, and indicate a useful reconciliation of these debates, is to take a in-depth look at the process and outcome of my interviews with working women who participated in a major strike at Peterborough’s largest textile mill in 1937.

**Five Strike Stories**

In this small city, a variety of factories offered women employment, but one of the largest was a textile mill, the Bonnerworth, owned by a large absentee corporation, Dominion Woolens. In 1937 men working at another local Dominion Woolens mill initiated unionisation and strike action in pursuit of better wages, and the Bonnerworth women immediately joined the strike. Part of a larger Canadian pattern of revolt in the textile industry at this time, the Bonnerworth strike was characterised by anger and violence on the picket line, which came to dominate press coverage as well as governmental concern and action. In the city’s labour history, this textile strike has been portrayed within two dominant themes: as the first and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to organise industrial unions, which then had a negative effect on organising for some time; and as a rare example of violent class conflict polarising the community.

By the time I interviewed former Bonnerworth workers, I had already presumed the themes listed above to be historically significant – a fact that did shape the interview process. As Susan Geiger notes, our preconceived notions of what is important or marginal privileges certain voices and obscures unexplored themes. One of my first aims, for instance, was to find Edith, a well-known leader in the strike and union. Yet other women had very different memories than Edith, downplaying, or even forgetting (what I had considered) important parts of the strike, such as union organising or picket line violence.

Women’s strike stories varied significantly, despite similarities in their biographies: the five women described below all came from working-class families; by the age of 15, they were working in the mills, usually as spinners and twisters; they contributed their pay to the household economy; and they all left the mill by the early 1940s for married life.
Their stories highlight a long-standing problem for historians: how do we reconcile different interpretations of the past, in this case, all seemingly based on first-person experience. As their diverse accounts emerged, I reassessed my *a priori* assumptions about the strike and began to question the existence of an identifiable, common experience or class consciousness on the part of women. Would I be reduced to emphasising ‘individual’ experience – surely a pluralist retreat with little explanatory force? Perhaps the post-structuralists were right: there could be no ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ outside of our multitudinous constructions of them! What then were women’s strike stories? Five short samples taken from a much larger study follow.

Rosa was a second generation Italian immigrant who had to leave school at 13, despite the fact that she was very clever. She went to work at the Bonnerworth mill, and became a trusted, versatile employee, a talented machine operator often moved around to difficult jobs throughout the plant. When the strike began, she stayed out for a day or two, but she was soon back at work, crossing the picket line. “It wasn’t very nice going to work . . . I tried to find different ways of going, but you were always called a scab,” she remembers. “The police were always there . . . you couldn’t go home for lunch”. Extremely revealing is Rosa’s claim that her close friend also continued to work; yet other glaring evidence (her friend’s arrest notice in the paper, confirmed by a family member) says otherwise.

Initially guarded and defensive when talking to me about the strike, she slowly explained that her parents had influenced her stand, telling her to ignore the strikers and “mind my own business”. Moreover, the demand for more money was not a compelling enough reason to walk out; though acknowledging “the money wasn’t good” she also felt she was “getting by” and that she owed her boss, whom she liked, some loyalty. Overall, Rosa played down the strike in the history of her work life, de-emphasised its importance and conflictual nature, was critical of strikers’ tactics, and spent more time describing work dynamics in the mill, in particular her encounter with a woman who “wanted the [better] job” Rosa was on, and tried to convince the foreman she “could do it better”.

I believe that her memory of the strike was influenced by her need to justify her decision to cross the line and deal with the discomfort of this difficult event - being denounced as a scab is not something we all want imprinted in our memories for the rest of our lives. Her memory lapse about her friend probably reflects precisely this process of self-justification. Her loyalty to her boss becomes more understandable in the larger context of her life history. Living in a dominantly British city, which was often ambivalent to immigrants, and coming from an unskilled working-class family, she was understandably pleased to have the managers
recognise and respect her intelligence and talents. She felt pride in this recognition and was not willing to throw it away just to join others on the picket line, especially the same woman who “wanted her job”. While many other Italian workers supported the strike, Rosa did not: her memory reveals her very particular and individual efforts to cope with structures of economic and ethnic discrimination.

A second strike story told by June downplayed the strike even more dramatically. This young woman, from an English working-class background, had been working at Bonnerworth for a year, since she was 14, when the strike began. She described the strike as an abrupt, puzzling event which the women in the mill did not create: she simply went to work one day and found a picket line set up. Along with a group of friends, she became involved in strike aid, making sandwiches for the night picketers, collecting funds, and helping at the union office. But her attitude towards the union was less than dedicated; when fellow workers elected her shop steward after the strike, she said, laughing, “I was [so surprised] … I nearly flipped”. Drawing on her father’s advice “not to become involved” she declined and never attended a union meeting.

As she told her story to me, I was struck by June’s deprecation of the seriousness of this event, and by her denial of any leadership role in the strike. She distanced herself from a woman union leader whom she saw as both politically and morally ‘radical’; alternatively, she presented her own role as a social diversion for the summer. “During the strike, it was an opportunity for us to go downtown together . . . the girls I chummed with weren’t bitter about it . . . it was almost a heyday . . . we had street dances. I don’t remember any tear gas. Us kids didn’t know what strike was about”. Portraying a strike, which included tear gas, arrests and violence, as a heyday was not something I had expected. Her memory, however, was influenced by her youth at the time, her position in the household, and her later, more conservative political views, which became apparent during the interview. Because of the latter, she had no desire to assume the persona of a working-class militant. Secondly, for the young women workers – mere teenagers - the strike could have been ‘a lark’, a rest from the long, hot hours in the factory. If the family had other wage earners (as hers did) and could scrimp by, then why not enjoy this unexpected vacation? Because these young women did not have a strong say in the union, they understandably downplayed their agency in creating the strike. The tear gas is forgotten either because June missed those picketing days or because overall, these details do not fit in with her narrative script of the strike as a ‘heyday’.

The third story is told by Amelia, a farm girl who began work at 15. Like many other farm families, hers saw high school as an unattainable luxury, and so she dutifully followed her sister into the textile mill. When she moved into an inspector’s position, she had a slightly less arduous
job. This, along with a strong feeling that she owed her employer honest, hard work led to her ambivalence about the strike. Though Amelia recognised her pay “was very low”, she did not want to be seen as a complainer by management. She did not openly oppose her striking workmates, though their rejection of authority seemed outrageous and “brazen” to her; instead, she simply avoided picket duty. She told the union she lived too far from the mill, but to me she noted her choice was also political: “I wasn’t much of a politician then, and so I just went with them [the strikers] because I didn’t want to be seen against the strike”.

What was more memorable for Amelia, however, was the relationship between the strike and a more important event in her life: her wedding. She was disturbed about being off work because she was “saving up for [my] wedding and I wasn’t saving anything on strike”. Indeed, strike events become lost amidst her remembered concern with her trousseau and her wedding: “I remember being fretful about going on strike . . . there was a settlement suggested in August when I was getting ready for my wedding . . . Yes, I knew it ended before I got married because I [used my] back pay to buy new curtains for my home . . . I guess I missed the violence, but I was really preoccupied with my upcoming plans”.

A fourth story moves closer to the images of class conflict portrayed in the press and government reports. Margaret also started in the mill at 13, but by 1937, she had been there 10 years. She was not involved in the union or strike planning but she was forthright in her support for the strike. Arrested for assaulting a police officer, she both denied the charge and later joked about her respectable family’s horror at her notoriety.

Margaret, despite this upsetting incident, tried to assess the strike from a number of perspectives, even offering a sympathetic interpretation of strikebreakers: “maybe they . . . needed the money more than we did”. Never concentrating only on her own story, she related the strike and its consequences to the lives of her workmates, friends and family – a common characteristic of women’s narratives. Margaret also avoided a depiction of her role as heroic or militant. She spoke of her horror at being arrested, but in retrospect couches the episode in humour, characterising her day as a “jailbird” as an aberration in an otherwise law-abiding life. While embracing an interpretation of the strike as a just cause precipitated by exploitative working conditions, she avoided placing the many actors, including herself, into polarised or one-dimensional roles.

Finally, Edith, a leader in the strike, did remember it as a tragic struggle between an unethical employer, aided by the police, and exploited workers. What was the strike about, I asked? “Wages, the whole thing was wages . . . they paid starvation wages, and everybody knew that” was her response. Edith came from an extremely large working-class family, many of whom had worked at the mill at some time. She was determined to create a better life for herself and her children, indicating to
me that she purposely had fewer children than her mother. She had worked at the plant for some time, even after her marriage, and this longevity, along with a streak of rebelliousness, earned her a reputation for ‘talking back’ to managers and standing up for other workers. She took some pride in her prominent role in the strike and saw it as just cause waged between the forces of greed and the right to basic decency and survival. In Edith’s words, I had finally found a voice which replicated the official version of the strike as unmitigated class conflict. As a labour historian I could readily identify with Edith’s method of presentation as it approximated a long tradition of ‘strike histories’ in the discipline! But other women’s voices, in all their diversity, also had to be explained. One possibility was to abandon the attempt to write “one true story,” looking instead at the structure of each narrative, uncovering the script being played out, contradictions in the narrative and the cultural discourses disclosed. Post-structuralist writing on oral history is useful in thinking through the deconstruction of these interviews. A close examination of narrative form helps to uncover layers of meanings in women’s words, the simultaneous stories that were being played out and the script around which the interview was moulded. Even the metaphors, tone and silences of women were significant: June’s repeated laughter denoting her deprecation of the strike; Edith’s use of resolute, cut-and-dried juxtapositions to convey images of class conflict; Rosa’s significant silences on the question of her strike breaking.

Secondly, attention to the construction of the text by myself and the women interviewed was also valuable. How did I help to shape the interview? It is possible that by appearing with newspaper clippings of strike battles, I actually encouraged Edith and Margaret to remember it as a conflictual event? And did my assumption that the important story was one of unionisation lead me to ignore the effect of the strike on young women marginalised from the union? Finally, the attempts of recent feminist (including post-structuralist) writing to challenge class reductionism encouraged me to contemplate how a woman’s gendered and class identity is created within a number of discourses, possibly producing a contradictory and fragmented consciousness: women’s understandings of the strike was shaped by more complex influences than predetermined notions of class conflict I had previously read into the event. Indeed, these strike stories evocatively point to the variability of working-class women’s experiences, and the way in which – even in the crucible of conflict – working-class consciousness may be oppositional, accommodating, and even a mixture of both.

While these insights are useful, the narrative form and the construction of these women’s identities must still be related to evidence from other historical sources. Some women’s denial of conflict and violence, for instance, might have led me to conclude that the strike was less
conflictual than subsequent history claimed; but I could not ignore the stark pictures of violence presented in the newspaper. Secondly, women’s diverse understandings of the strike must be situated within the economic, social and political context of women’s lives at this time.

The material structures of class and the dominant gender ideals, as well as women’s struggles to deal with these realities, must also be used as interpretative frameworks. The social relations of power in the family and society, the economic limits and possibilities of women’s lives, and their own reactions to those possibilities were all significant. All these women were expected to contribute to the family economy for basic survival; many were subject to parental authority or lose the roof over their heads; and they were influenced by dominant political ideology which feared communism and radical union activity. Even their individual negotiations of these realities can be partly understood by looking at the possibilities that emerged from existing social constraints: some young women did not entirely agree with parents’ admonitions not to become involved, but they felt they had few choices as “there was none of this leaving home like there is today.”

If we examine the power relations of age, gender, ethnicity and class, as well as the dominant gender ideals of the time, these apparently diverse stories assume more discernible patterns. Rosa, who crossed the picket line and has suppressed her recollections of her best friend’s different position, and in fact has constructed a life script stressing acceptance and achievement, is telling us something about her difficult status as a member of an ethnic minority in a WASP (‘white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant’) city and her purposeful memory of her hard-won battle to achieve respectability in the workplace. Like other women interviewed, Rosa is also telling us how difficult it was for young women to contradict the power of parental authority.

Amelia’s preoccupation with her wedding reveals much about dominant gender ideals of the time which stressed women’s private, marital and family lives. The expectation that women would marry as a natural part of their life course was firmly embedded in Canadian culture at this time;60 Amelia’s memories reflect the priority given to the ritual of marriage and investment in an ideal of domesticity as a fitting end to women’s time in the labour force. This is understood in many other interviews, including one where a woman remembered the “bitterness”61 after the strike in only one way; she was denied the ritual wedding present by her fellow workers because she had crossed the picket line.

Perhaps the strength of these gender ideals helps to explain in part why some of the younger women like June did not remain interested in the union. At the same time, though, June’s testimony also speaks to the male-dominated, exclusive power relations of union politics. Younger women were not adequately integrated into the union, seldom informed
of strategy or considered potential leaders; the result was their disinterest in the union. June’s story also made me aware of my tendency to view the motivations of women strikers through presentist glasses, and the need for a historical view of age differences and their meaning in different material and social contexts. The strikers were often teenagers: they were not women with immediately dependent families, older, with more workforce experience (except, significantly, the female leader) like those often visible in recent strikes. I had to ask myself if I was ready for serious political commitment, or just out for a ‘heyday’ at 16? My answer made me cognisant of the importance of June’s age and position in the household in shaping her role in the strike.

Finally, the role of political ideology in shaping memory is also important: given June’s later emphasis on respect for authority and loyalty to mainstream political parties, apparent in her interview, her early union militancy might be more embarrassing than heroic. In a city where radicalism remains a fringe, not a respectable ideology, her dismissal of her early activism becomes quite comprehensible.

While June’s deprecation of the strike is thus understandable, Edith’s public support for the strike becomes all the more exceptional and interesting. Edith played an extraordinarily vocal and militant role in the conflict; she was often the only visible female leader in bargaining meetings dominated by men. Edith’s radical persona led to criticisms that she was ignoring her family and not acting with enough feminine decorum. This did not seem to deter her. Her assumption of a vocal and public role in the strike indicates that dominant gender ideals, though certainly influential, have also been challenged by some women. Those challenges emerge not only from the material and social context, but also from the exceptional character, courage and intellectual bravery of individual women. Though most clearly evidenced in Edith’s response, this courage was also a small part of many women’s willingness to take a public stand on the picket line.

Conclusion

My conclusions are shaped by both the moral stance of Denise Riley’s assertion that, in the interests of a feminist praxis, we must lay political claim to women’s experience of oppression, and secondly, by a belief that post-structuralist insights must be situated in a feminist materialist context. While an emphasis on language and narrative form has enhanced our understanding of oral history, I worry about the dangers of emphasising form over context, of stressing deconstruction of individual narratives over analysis of social patterns, of disclaiming our duty as historians to analyse and interpret women’s stories. Nor do we want to
totally abandon the concept of experience, moving towards a notion of a de-politicised and ‘unknowable’ past. We do not want to return to a history which either obscures power relationships or marginalises women’s voices. Without a firm grounding of oral narratives in their material and social context and a probing analysis of the relation between the two, insights on narrative form and on representation may remain unconnected to any useful critique of oppression and inequality.

A glimpse of the workplace after the strike brings us back to questions of social relations, power, and its effects. There was one reality that all the women agreed on: their working conditions did not improve after the strike. The union lost; industrial unions were defeated for some time in the city; and the status quo in labour/capital relations was reasserted. Women at the Bonnerworth were still earning less than the minimum wage for a 12-hour day; moreover, they immediately experienced a work speed up. I cannot present such an ending without recourse to value judgements, moral outrage, and with a clear characterisation of class power and fixed notions of exploitation that some post-structuralist writing has rejected along with other elements of Marxism.

Women’s strike stories must be situated within social relations and structures of power which are real and “knowable.” We need to ask how these narratives reflect as well as shape women’s social and economic lives; why certain narratives emerge and take precedence; and who these particular scripts benefit. The experience of these women workers was not created out of many possible discourses, but out of a limited range of discourses which are the product of the power relations of class, ethnicity and gender, as well as people’s resistance to those relations. Moreover, women’s narratives do reflect certain knowable experiences, always mediated by cultural codes, which may in turn come to shape their interpretation of experience in a dialectical sense.

How we, as feminist oral historians, define experience and whether we think it is even a useful concept is central to this discussion. Locating experience, however difficult that project, however many dangers it encompasses, should remain one of our utopian goals. Otherwise, our feminist project of understanding and challenging inequality will always be one in which we gaze longingly through a distorted mirror, never able to make women whole again, but more important, never attempting to. Negating an understanding of experience as a ‘lived reality’ for women carries with it the danger of marginalising and trivialising women’s historical voices and their experiences (however varied) of oppression – a trivialisation which practising oral historians have heard only too often. If, as Joan Scott argues, we cannot really locate women’s experience because it lies within constructions of language and if women’s agency “is more wish than reality”, then will we not come to discount women’s agency as a force in history? While Margaret’s understanding of her
resistance during the strike is couched in narrative of humour and disparagement, this does not negate her momentary courage in the face of many structural constraints: her attempt to remake her own and other women’s history should not be diminished in any way.

So, it is true that women’s stories of the strike appear dissimilar. Women have forgotten their role in the strike. Women tried to hide their role in it. Women only remember how it related to their wedding day. Women explained their role by saying they were young and frivolous. Women denied that there was any violence, and women remembered violence. But these narratives, rather than being simply contradictory and ambiguous, or individual representations of memory, are reflections of, and active rejoinders to women’s work and family experiences, dominant ideals of femininity, the existing power structures of capitalism and patriarchy, and sometimes even women’s resistance to those structures.

Notes

7. The term post-structuralist is an umbrella expression, actually referring to a number of theoretical positions. In this article I deal primarily with theories shaped by linguistic and deconstructive approaches, which explore the construction of subjectivity and cultural meaning through language. As Chris Weedon argues, these positions generally argue that “experience has no inherent essential meaning”. See Chris Weedon (1987) Feminist Practice and Post-structuralist Theory, p. 34 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).

9. These warnings come from Grele, *Envelopes of Sound*.


15. Interview with M.H., 18 July 1989.


21. This conclusion, which is detailed elsewhere, is supported in an article on women teachers of this period which also uses oral histories. See Cecelia Reynolds (1990) hegemony and hierarchy: becoming a teacher in Toronto, 1930–80, *Historical Studies in Education*, 2(1).


29. See Personal Narrative Group, *Interpreting Women’s Lives*, p. 201, for the recommendation we replace “researcher-subject” with “life historian-producer”.


31. Ibid.

32. For example in Karen Olsen & Linda Shopes (1991) Crossing boundaries, building bridges: doing oral history with working-class women and men, in Gluck & Patai (Eds) *Women’s Words*, one author notes that she puts her working-class interviewees ‘at ease’ with a measure of self-disclosure: yet, the example she selects leaves me somewhat unsettled: “Informants are more willing to reveal their own experience when they learn that I have shared many of the family problems that plague them - a father who was chronically unemployed, a son whose adolescent acting-out included run-ins with juvenile services, a trouble marriage that ended in divorce” (p. 194). Are there certain ‘assumptions’ about working-class life inherent in this statement? For a critique of proceedings from such assumptions about ‘representativeness’ see Geiger, What’s so feminist about women’s oral history?


41. Indeed, some of these insights have been inspired by feminist writing. See Jane Flax (1987) Post modernism and gender relations in feminist theory, Signs; Linda Alcoff (1988) Cultural feminism versus post-structuralism, Signs, 13(3); Linda Gordon also points to way in which some ‘new’ insights of post-structuralism are not really very new in her review of Scott in (1990) Signs, 15(4). Her conclusion applies to the field of oral history.


44. Mascia-Lees et al (1989) The post-modernist turn in anthropology, Signs, 15(1). These authors are understandably sceptical of some post-modern theories implying that “verbal constructs (voices) do not relate to reality, that truth and knowledge are contingent, that no one subject position is possible” (p. 15) developed by Western, white academic men at precisely the moment these men are being challenged by women’s and Third World voices.


47. Liz Stanley (1990) Recovering women in history from feminist deconstruction, Women’s Studies International Forum, 13(1/2).

48. L. Tilly (1985) People’s history and social science history. See the responses in (1985) International Journal of Oral History, 6(1). This was also well characterised as a debate between hermeneutic and ethnographic methods in oral history by Daniel Bertaux & Martin Kohli (1984) The life story approach: a continental view, Annual Review of Sociology, 10. Again, analyses of linguistic structure and narrative form, and explorations of how the writer ‘creates’ the historical document are both long-standing concerns in oral history.

49. See Julie Cruikshank’s (1988) examination of myth, narrative form and social and economic structures in ‘Myth and tradition as narrative framework’.

52. Geiger (1990) What’s so feminist about women’s oral history?
53. All quotes from Interview with Rosa, 2 August 1989.
54. Ibid.
55. Interview with June, 31 July 1989.
56. Interview with Amelia, 29 August 1989.
57. Interview with Edith, 26 June 1989.
58. Harding. The science question in feminism, p. 194.
62. For example, see discussion of 1974 Fleck strike in Heather Jon Maroney (1983) *Feminism at work*, *New Left Review*, 141.
63. Riley (1988) *Am I That Name?*
64. Louise Tilly (1989) Gender, women’s history, social history and deconstruction, p. 463.
This book is about lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretative devices of the culture don’t quite work. It has a childhood at its centre – my childhood, a personal past – and it is about the disruption of that fifties childhood by the one my mother had lived out before me, and the stories she told about it. Now, the narrative of both these childhoods can be elaborated by the marginal and secret stories that other working-class girls and women from a recent historical past have to tell.

This book, then, is about interpretations, about the places where we rework what has already happened to give current events meaning. It is about the stories we make for ourselves, and the social specificity of our understanding of those stories. The childhood dreams recounted in this book, the fantasies, the particular and remembered events of a South London fifties childhood do not, by themselves, constitute its point. We all return to memories and dreams like this, again and again; the story we tell of our own life is reshaped around them. But the point doesn’t lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time at which they happened; the only point lies in interpretation. The past is re-used through the agency of social information, and that interpretation of it can only be made with what people know of a social world and their place within it. It matters then, whether one reshapes past time, re-uses the ordinary exigencies and crises of all childhoods whilst looking down from the curtainless windows of a terraced house like my mother did, or sees at that moment the long view stretching away from the big house in some richer and more detailed landscape. All children experience a first loss, a first

exclusion; lives shape themselves around this sense of being cut off and denied. The health visitor repeated the exclusion in the disdainful language of class, told my mother exactly what it was she stood outside. It is a proposition of this book that that specificity of place and politics has to be reckoned with in making an account of anybody’s life, and their use of their own past.

My mother’s longing shaped my own childhood. From a Lancashire mill town and a working-class twenties childhood she came away wanting: fine clothes, glamour, money; to be what she wasn’t. However that longing was produced in her distant childhood, what she actually wanted were real things, real entities, things she materially lacked, things that a culture and a social system withheld from her. The story she told was about this wanting, and it remained a resolutely social story. When the world didn’t deliver the goods, she held the world to blame. In this way, the story she told was a form of political analysis, that allows a political interpretation to be made of her life.

Personal interpretations of past time – the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit – are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture. This book is organized around a conflict like this, taking as a starting point the structures of class analysis and schools of cultural criticism that cannot deal with everything there is to say about my mother’s life. My mother was a single parent for most of her adulthood, who had children, but who also, in a quite particular way, didn’t want them. She was a woman who finds no place in the iconography of working-class motherhood that Jeremy Seabrook presents in *Working Class childhood*, and who is not to be found in Richard Hoggart’s landscape. She ran a working-class household far away from the traditional communities of class, in exile and isolation, and in which a man was not a master, nor even there very much. Surrounded as a child by the articulated politics of class-consciousness, she became a working-class Conservative, the only political form that allowed her to reveal the politics of envy.

Many of these ambiguities raise central questions about gender ‘as well as class, and the development of gender in particular social and class circumstances. So the usefulness of the biographical and autobiographical core of the book lies in the challenge it may offer to much of our conventional understanding of childhood, working-class childhood, and little-girlhood. In particular, it challenges the tradition of cultural criticism in this country, which has celebrated a kind of psychological simplicity in the lives lived out in Hoggart’s endless streets of little houses. It can help reverse a central question within feminism and psychoanalysis, about the reproduction of the desire to mother in little girls, and replace it with a consideration of women who, by refusing to mother,
have refused to reproduce themselves or the circumstances of their exile. The personal past that this book deals with can also serve to raise the question of what happens to theories of patriarchy in households where a father’s position is not confirmed by the social world outside the front door. And the story of two lives that follows points finally to a consideration of what people – particularly working-class children of the recent past – come to understand of themselves when all they possess is their labour, and what becomes of the notion of class-consciousness when it is seen as a structure of feeling that can be learned in childhood, with one of its components a proper envy, the desire of people for the things of the earth. Class and gender, and their articulations, are the bits and pieces from which psychological selfhood is made.

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I grew up in the 1950s, the place and time now located as the first scene of Labour’s failure to grasp the political consciousness of its constituency and its eschewal of socialism in favour of welfare philanthropism. But the left had failed with my mother long before the 1950s. A working-class Conservative from a traditional Labour background, she shaped my childhood by the stories she carried from her own, and from an earlier family history. They were stories designed to show me the terrible unfairness of things, the subterranean culture of longing for that which one can never have. These stories can be used now to show my mother’s dogged search, using what politics came to hand, for a public form to embody such longing.

Her envy, her sense of the unfairness of things, could not be directly translated into political understanding, and certainly could not be used by the left to shape an articulated politics of class. What follows offers no account of that particular political failure. It is rather an attempt to use that failure, which has been delineated by historians writing from quite different perspectives and for quite different purposes, as a device that may help to explain a particular childhood, and out of that childhood explain an individual life lived in historical time. This is not to say that this book involves a search for a past, or for what really happened. It is about how people use the past to tell the stories of their life. So the evidence presented here is of a different order from the biographical; it is about the experience of my own childhood, and the way in which my mother re-asserted, reversed and restructured her own within mine.

Envy as a political motive has always been condemned: a fierce morality pervades what little writing there is on the subject. Fiercely moral as well, the tradition of cultural criticism in this country has, by ignoring feelings like these, given us the map of an upright and decent country. Out of this tradition has come Jeremy Seabrook’s Working Class Childhood
and its nostalgia for a time when people who were ‘united against cruel material privations . . . discovered the possibilities of the human consolations they could offer each other’, and its celebration of the upbringing that produced the psychic structure of ‘the old working class’. I take a defiant pleasure in the way that my mother’s story can be used to subvert this account. Born into ‘the old working class’, she wanted: a New Look skirt, a timbered country cottage, to marry a prince.

The very devices that are intended to give expression to childhoods like mine and my mother’s actually deny their expression. The problem with most childhoods lived out in households maintained by social class III (manual), IV and V parents is that they simply are not bad enough to be worthy of attention. The literary form that allows presentation of working-class childhood, the working-class autobiography, reveals its mainspring in the title of books like Born to Struggle; Poverty, Hardship, But Happiness; Growing Up Poor in East London; Coronation Cups and Jam Jars – and I am deeply aware of the ambiguities that attach to the childhood I am about to recount. Not only was it not very bad, or only bad in a way that working-class autobiography doesn’t deal in, but also a particular set of emotional and psychological circumstances ensured that at the time, and for many years after it was over and I had escaped, I thought of it as ordinary, a period of relative material ease, just like everybody else’s childhood.

I read female working-class autobiography obsessively when I was in my twenties and early thirties (a reading that involved much repetition: it’s a small corpus), and whilst I wept over Catherine Cookson’s Our Kate I felt a simultaneous distance from the Edwardian child who fetched beer bare-footed for an alcoholic mother, the Kate of the title (I have to make it very clear that my childhood was really not like that). But it bore a relationship to a personal reality that I did not yet know about: what I now see in the book is its fine delineation of the feeling of being on the outside, outside the law for Catherine Cookson was illegitimate.

In 1928, when Kathleen Woodward, who had grown up in not-too-bad Peckham, South London, wrote Jipping Street, she set her childhood in Bermondsey, in a place of abject and abandoned poverty, ‘practically off the map, derelict’, and in this manner found a way, within an established literary form, of expressing a complexity of feeling about her personal past that the form itself did not allow.

The tradition of cultural criticism that has employed working-class lives, and their rare expression in literature, had made solid and concrete the absence of psychological individuality – of subjectivity – that Kathleen Woodward struggled against in Jipping Street. ‘In poor societies,’ writes Jeremy Seabrook in Working Class Childhood.
where survival is more important than elaboration of relationships, the kind of ferocious personal struggles that lock people together in our own more leisured society are less known.7

But by making this distinction, the very testimony to the continuing reverberation of pain and loss, absence and desire in childhood, which is made manifest in the words of ‘the old working-class’ people that makes up much of Working Class Childhood, is actually denied.

It would not be possible, in fact, to write a book called ‘Middle Class Childhood’ (this in spite of the fact that the shelves groan with psychoanalytic, developmental and literary accounts of such childhoods) and get the same kind of response from readers. It’s a faintly titillating title, carrying the promise that some kind of pathology is about to be investigated. What is more, in Working Class Childhood the discussion of childhood and what our society has done to the idea of childhood becomes the vehicle for an anguished rejection of post-War materialism, the metaphor for all that has gone wrong with the old politics of class and the stance of the labour movement towards the desires that capitalism has inculcated in those who are seen as the passive poor. An analysis like this denies its subjects a particular story, a personal history, except when that story illustrates a general thesis; and it denies the child, and the child who continues to live in the adult it becomes, both an unconscious life, and a particular and developing consciousness of the meanings presented by the social world.

Twenty years before Working Class Childhood was written, Richard Hoggart explored a similar passivity of emotional life in working-class communities, what in The Uses of Literacy he revealingly called ‘Landscape with Figures: A Setting’ – a place where in his own memories of the 1920s and 1930s and in his description of similar communities of the 1950s, most people lacked ‘any feeling that some change can, or indeed ought to be made in the general pattern of life’.8 All of Seabrook’s corpus, deals in the same way with what he sees as ‘the falling into decay of a life once believed by those who shared it to be the only admissible form that life could take’.9 I want to open the door of one of the terraced houses, in a mill town in the 1920s, show Seabrook my mother and her longing, make him see the child of my imagination sitting by an empty grate, reading a tale that tells her a goose-girl can marry a king.

Heaviness of time lies on the pages of The Uses of Literacy. The streets are all the same; nothing changes. Writing about the structure of a child’s life, Seabrook notes that as recently as thirty years ago (that is in the 1950s, the time of my own childhood) the week was measured out by each day’s function – wash-day, market-day, the day for ironing – and the day itself timed by ‘cradling and comforting’ ritual.10 This extraordinary attribution of sameness and the acceptance of sameness to generations
of lives arises from several sources. First of all, delineation of emotional and psychological selfhood has been made by and through the testimony of people in a central relationship to the dominant culture, that is to say by and through people who are not working class. This is an obvious point, but it measures out an immensely complicated and contradictory area of historical development that has scarcely yet been investigated. Superficially, it might be said that historians, failing to find evidence of most people’s emotional or psycho-sexual existence, have simply assumed that there can’t have been much there to find. Such an assumption ignores the structuring of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century psychology and psychoanalysis, and the way in which the lived experience of the majority of people in a class society has been pathologized and marginalized. When the sons of the working class, who have made their earlier escape from this landscape of psychological simplicity, put so much effort into accepting and celebrating it, into delineating a background of uniformity and passivity, in which pain, loss, love, anxiety and desire are washed over with a patina of stolid emotional sameness, then something important, and odd, and possibly promising of startling revelation, is actually going on. This refusal of a complicated psychology to those living in conditions of material distress is a central theme of this book, and will be considered again in its third section.

The attribution of psychological simplicity to working-class people also derives from the positioning of mental life within Marxism:

Mental life flows from material conditions. Social being is determined above all by class position – location within the realm of production. Consciousness and politics, all mental conceptions spring from material forces and the relations of production and so reflect these class origins.

This description is Sally Alexander’s summary of Marx’s ‘Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’, and of his thesis, expressed here and elsewhere, that ‘the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and mental life’. The attribution of simplicity to the mental life of working people is not, of course, made either in the original, nor in this particular critique of it. But like any theory developed in a social world, the notion of consciousness as located within the realm of production draws on the reality of that world. It is in the ‘Preface’ itself that Marx mentions his move to London in the 1850s as offering among other advantages ‘a convenient vantage point for the observation of bourgeois society’, and which indeed he did observe, and live within, in the novels he and his family read, in family theatricals, in dinner-table talk: a mental life apparently
much richer than that of the subjects of his theories. Lacking such possessions of culture, working-class people have come to be seen, within the field of cultural criticism, as bearing the elemental simplicity of class-consciousness and little more.

Technically, class-consciousness has not been conceived of as psychological consciousness. It has been separated from ‘the empirically given, and from the psychologically describable and explicable ideas that men form about their situation in life’, and has been seen rather as a possible set of reactions people might have to discovering the implications of the position they occupy within the realm of production.\textsuperscript{12} Theoretical propositions apart though, in the everyday world, the term is used in its psychological sense, is generally and casually used to describe what people have ‘thought, felt and wanted at any moment in history and from any point in the class structure’.\textsuperscript{13} Working-class autobiography and people’s history have been developed as forms that allow the individual and collective expression of these thoughts, feelings and desires about class societies and the effect of class structures on individuals and communities. But as forms of analysis and writing, people’s history and working-class autobiography are relatively innocent of psychological theory, and there has been little space within them to discuss the development of class-consciousness (as opposed to its expression), nor for understanding of it as a learned position, learned in childhood, and often through the exigencies of difficult and lonely lives.

Children present a particular problem here, for whilst some women may learn the official dimensions of class-consciousness by virtue of their entry into the labour market and by adopting forms of struggle and understanding evolved by men,\textsuperscript{14} children, who are not located directly within the realm of production, still reach understandings of social position, exclusion and difference. At all levels, class-consciousness must be learned in some way, and we need a model of such a process to explain the social and psychological development of working-class children (indeed, of all children).

When the mental life of working-class women is entered into the realm of production, and their narrative is allowed to disrupt the monolithic story of wage-labour and capital and when childhood and childhood learning are reckoned with, then what makes the old story unsatisfactory is not so much its granite-like plot, built around exploiter and exploited, capital and proletariat, but rather its timing: the precise how and why of the development of class-consciousness. But if we do allow an unconscious life to working-class children, then we can perhaps see the first loss, the earliest exclusion (known most familiarly to us as the oedipal crisis) brought forward later, and articulated through an adult experience of class and class relations.
An adult experience of class does not in any case, as Sally Alexander has pointed out, ‘produce a shared and even consciousness ‘even if it is fully registered and articulated.¹⁵ This uneven and problematic consciousness (which my mother’s life and political conviction represents so clearly) is one of the subjects of this book. A perception of childhood experience and understanding used as the lineaments of adult political analysis, may also help us see under the language and conflicts of class, historically much older articulations – the subjective and political expressions of radicalism – which may sill serve to give a voice to people who know that they do not have what they want, who know that they have been cut off from the earth in some way.¹⁶

The attribution of psychological sameness to the figures in the working-class landscape has been made by men, for whom the transitions of class are at once more ritualized than they are for women, and much harder to make. Hoggart’s description of the plight of the ‘scholarship boy’ of the thirties and forties, and the particular anxiety afflicting those in the working class who have been pulled one stage away from their original culture and have not the intellectual equipment which would then cause them to move on to join the ‘declassed’ professionals and experts¹⁷ makes nostalgic reading now in a post-War situation where a whole generation of escapees occupies professional positions that allow them to speak of their working-class origins with authority, to use them, in Seabrook’s words ‘as a kind of accomplishment’.¹⁸ By the 1950s the divisions of the educational establishment that produced Hoggart’s description were much altered and I, a grammar-school girl of the 1960s, was sent to university with a reasonably full equipment of culture and a relative degree of intellectual self-awareness. Jeremy Seabrook, some eight years older than me and at Cambridge in the late fifties, sat with his fellow travellers from working-class backgrounds ‘telling each other escape stories, in which we were all picaresque heroes of our own lives’.¹⁹

But at the University of Sussex in 1965, there were no other women to talk to like this, at least there were none that I met (though as proletarianism was fashionable at the time, there were several men with romantic and slightly untruthful tales to tell). And should I have met a woman like me (there must have been some: we were all children of the Robbins generation), we could not have talked of escape except within a literary framework that we had learned from the working-class novels of the early sixties (some of which, like Room at the Top, were set books on certain courses); and that framework was itself ignorant of the material stepping-stones of our escape: clothes, shoes, make-up. We could not be heroines of the conventional narratives of escape. Women are, in the sense that Hoggart and Seabrook present in their pictures of transition,
without class, because the cut and fall of a skirt and good leather shoes can take you across the river and to the other side: the fairy-tales tell you that goose-girls may marry kings.

The fixed townscapes of Northampton and Leeds that Hoggart and Seabrook have described show endless streets of houses, where mothers who don’t go out to work order the domestic day, where men are masters, and children, when they grow older, express gratitude for the harsh discipline meted out to them. The first task is to particularize this profoundly a-historical landscape (and so this book details a mother who was a working woman and a single parent, and a father who wasn’t a patriarch). And once the landscape is detailed and historicized in this way, the urgent need becomes to find a way of theorizing the result of such difference and particularity, not in order to find a description that can be universally applied (the point is not to say that all working-class childhoods are the same, nor that experience of them produces unique psychic structures) but so that the people in exile, the inhabitants of the long streets, may start to use the autobiographical ‘I’, and tell the stories of their life.

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There are other interpretative devices for my mother which, like working-class autobiographies of childhood, make her no easier to see. Nearly everything that has been written on the subject of mothering (except the literature of pathology, of bartering and violence) assumes the desire to mother; and there are feminisms now that ask me to return Persephone-like to my own mother, and find new histories of my strength. ‘When I first came across Kathleen Woodward’s jippping Street, I read it with the shocked astonishment of one who had never seen what she knows written down before. Kathleen Woodward’s mother of the 1890s was the one I knew: mothers were those who told you how hard it was to have you, how long they were in labour with you (‘twenty hours with you’, my mother frequently reminded me) and who told you to accept the impossible contradiction of being both desired and a burden; and not to complain.’ This ungiving endurance is admired by working-class boys who grow up to write about their mother’s flinty courage. But the daughter’s silence on the matter is a measure of the price you pay for survival. I don’t think the baggage will ever lighten, for me or my sister. We were born, and had no choice in the matter; but we were burdens, expensive, never grateful enough. There was nothing we could do to pay back the debt of our existence. ‘Never have children dear,’ she said; ‘they ruin your life.’ Shock moves swiftly across the faces of women to whom I tell this story. But it is ordinary not to want your children, I silently assert; normal to find them a nuisance.
I read the collection Fathers: Reflections by Daughters, or Ann Oakley’s Taking It Like a Woman and feel the painful and familiar sense of exclusion from these autobiographies of middle-class little-girlhood and womanhood, envy of those who belong, who can like Ann Oakley, use the outlines of conventional romantic fiction to tell a life story. And women like this, friends, say: but it was like that for me too, my childhood was like yours; my father was like that, my mother didn’t want me. What they cannot bear, I think, is that there exists a poverty and marginality of experience to which they have no access, structures of feeling that they have not lived within (and would not want to live within: for these are the structures of deprivation). They are caught then in a terrible exclusion, an exclusion from the experience of others that measures out their own central relationship to the culture. The myths tell their story, the fairy-tales show the topography of the houses they once inhabited. The psychoanalytic drama, which uses the spatial and temporal structures of all these old tales, permits the entry of such women to the drama itself. Indeed, the psychoanalytic drama was constructed to describe that of middle-class women (and as drama it does of course describe all such a woman’s exclusions, as well as her relationship to those exclusions, with her absence and all she lacks lying at the very heart of the theory). The woman whose drama psychoanalytic case-study describes in this way never does stand to one side, and watch, and know she doesn’t belong.

What follows is largely concerned with how two girl children, growing up in different historical periods, got to be the women they became. The sense of exclusion, of being cut off from what others enjoy, was a dominant sense of both childhoods, but expressed and used differently in two different historical settings. This detailing of social context to psychological development reveals not only difference, but also certain continuities of experience in working-class childhood. For instance, many recent accounts of psychological development and the development of gender, treat our current social situation as astonishingly new and strange:

On the social/historical level . . . we are living in a period in which mothers are increasingly living alone with their children, offering opportunities for new psychic patterns to emerge. Single mothers are forced to make themselves subject to their children; they are forced to invent new symbolic roles . . . The child cannot position the mother as object to the father’s law, since in single parent households her desire sets things in motion.

But the evidence of some nineteenth- and twentieth-century children used in this book shows that in their own reckoning their households were often those of a single female parent, sometimes because of the passivity of a father’s presence, sometimes because of his physical
absence. Recent feminisms have often, as Jane Gallop points out in *The Daughter’s Seduction*, endowed men with ‘the sort of unified phallic sovereignty that characterises an absolute monarch, and which little resembles actual power in our social, economic structure’. We need a reading of history that reveals fathers mattering in a different way from the way they matter in the corpus of traditional psychoanalysis, the novels that depict the same familial settings and in the bourgeois households of the fairy-tales.

A father like mine dictated each day’s existence; our lives would have been quite different had he not been there. But he didn’t matter, and his singular unimportance needs explaining. His not mattering has an effect like this: I don’t quite believe in male power; somehow the iron of patriarchy didn’t enter into my soul. I accept the idea of male power intellectually, of course (and I will eat my words the day I am raped, or the knife is slipped between my ribs; though I know that will not be the case: in the dreams it is a woman who holds the knife, and only a woman can kill).

Fixing my father, and my mother’s mothering, in time and politics can help show the creation of gender in particular households and in particular familial situations at the same time as it demonstrates the position of men and the social reality represented by them in particular households. We need historical accounts of such relationships, not just a longing that they might be different. Above all, perhaps, we need a sense of people’s complexity of relationship to the historical situations they inherit. In *Family and Kinship in East London*, the authors found that over half the married women they interviewed had seen their mothers within the preceding twenty-four hours, and that 80 per cent had seen them within the previous week. Young and Willmott assumed that the daughters wanted to do this, and interpreted four visits a week on average as an expression of attachment and devotion. There exists a letter that I wrote to a friend one vacation from Sussex, either in 1966 or in 1967, in which I described my sitting in the evenings with my mother, refusing to go out, holding tight to my guilt and duty, knowing that I was her, and that I must keep her company; and we were certainly not Demeter and Persephone to each other, nor ever could be, but two women caught by a web of sexual and psychological relationships in the front room of a council house, the South London streets stretching away outside like the railway lines that brought us and our history to that desperate and silent scene in front of the flickering television screen.

Raymond Williams has written about the difficulty of linking past and present in writing about working-class life, and the result of this difficulty in novels that either show the past to be a regional zone of experience in which the narrator cancels her present from the situation she is describing, or which are solely about the experience of flight. Writing like this, comments Williams, has lacked ‘any sense of the continuity of working
class life, which does not cease just because the individual [the writer] moves out of it, but which also itself changes internally. This kind of cancellation of a writer's present from the past may take place because novels – stories – work by a process of temporal revelation: they move forward in time in order to demonstrate a state of affairs. The novel that works in this way employs contingency, that is, it works towards the revelation of something not quite certain, but there, nevertheless, waiting to be shown by the story, and the story gets told without revealing the shaping force of the writer's current situation.

The highlighting not just of the subject matter of this book, but also of the possibilities of written form it involves, is important, because the construction of the account that follows has something to say about the question that Raymond Williams has raised, and which is largely to do with the writing of stories that aren't central to a dominant culture. My mother cut herself off from the old working class by the process of migration, by retreat from the North to a southern country with my father, hiding secrets in South London's long streets. But she carried with her childhood, as I have carried mine along the lines of embourgeoisement and state education. In order to outline these childhoods and the uses we put them to, the structure of psychoanalytic case-study – the narrative form that Freud is described as inventing – is used in this book. The written case-study allows the writer to enter the present into the past, allows the dream, the wish or the fantasy of the past to shape current time, and treats them as evidence in their own right. In this way, the narrative form of case-study shows what went into its writing, shows the bits and pieces from which it is made up, in the way that history refuses to do, and that fiction can't. Case-study presents the ebb and flow of memory, the structure of dreams, the stories that people tell to explain themselves to others. The autobiographical section of this book, the second part, is constructed on such a model.

But something else has to be done with these bits and pieces, with all the tales that are told, in order to take them beyond the point of anecdote and into history. To begin to construct history, the writer has to do two things, make two movements through time. First of all, we need to search backwards from the vantage point of the present in order to appraise things in the past and attribute meaning to them. When events and entities in the past have been given their meaning in this way, then we can trace forward what we have already traced backwards, and make a history. When a history is finally written, events are explained by putting them in causal order and establishing causal connections between them. But what follows in this book does not make a history (even though a great deal of historical material is presented). For a start, I simply do not know about many of the incidents described to explain the connections between them. I am unable to perform an act of historical explanation in this way.
This tension between the stories told to me as a child, the diffuse and timeless structure of the case-study with which they are presented, and the compulsions of historical explanation, is no mere rhetorical device. There is a real problem, a real tension here that I cannot resolve (my inability to resolve it is part of the story). All the stories that follow, told as this book tells them, aren’t stories in their own right: they exist in tension with other more central ones. In the same way, the processes of working-class autobiography, of people’s history and of the working-class novel cannot show a proper and valid culture existing in its own right, underneath the official forms, waiting for revelation. Accounts of working-class life are told by tension and ambiguity, out on the borderlands. The story – my mother’s story, a hundred thousand others – cannot be absorbed into the central one: it is both its disruption and its essential counterpoint: this is a drama of class.

But visions change, once any story is told; ways of seeing are altered. The point of a story is to present itself momentarily as complete, so that it can be said: it does for now, it will do; it is an account that will last a while. Its point is briefly to make an audience connive in the telling, so that they might say: yes, that’s how it was; or, that’s how it could have been. So now, the words written down, the world is suddenly full of women waiting, as in Ann Oakley’s extraordinary delineation of

the curiously impressive image of women as always waiting for someone or something, in shopping queues, in antenatal clinics, in bed, for men to come home, at the school gates, by the playground swing, for birth or the growing up of children, in hope of love or freedom or re-employment, waiting for the future to liberate or burden them and the past to catch up with them.31

The other side of waiting is wanting. The faces of the women in the queues are the faces of unfulfilled desire; if we look, there are many women driven mad in this way, as my mother was. This is a sad and secret story, but it isn’t just hers alone.

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What historically conscious readers may do with this book is read it as a Lancashire story, see here evidence of a political culture of 1890–1930 carried from the Northwest, to shape another childhood in another place and time. They will perhaps read it as part of an existing history, seeing here a culture shaped by working women, and their consciousness of themselves as workers. They may see the indefatigable capacity for work that has been described in many other places, the terrifying ability to get by, to cope, against all odds. Some historically conscious readers may
even find here the irony that this specific social and cultural experience imparted to its women: ‘No one gives you anything,’ said my mother, as if reading the part of ‘our mam’ handed to her by the tradition of working-class autobiography. ‘If you want things, you have to go out and work for them.’ But out of that tradition I can make the dislocation that the irony actually permits, and say: ‘If no one will write my story, then I shall have to go out and write it myself.’

The point of being a Lancashire weaver’s daughter, as my mother was, is that it is classy: what my mother knew was that if you were going to be working class, then you might as well be the best that’s going, and for women, Lancashire and weaving provided that elegance, that edge of difference and distinction. I’m sure that she told the titled women whose hands she did when she became a manicurist in the 1960s where it was she came from, proud, defiant: look at me. (Beatrix Campbell has made what I think is a similar point about the classiness of being a miner, for working-class men.)

This is a book about stories; and it is a book about things (objects, entities, relationships, people), and the way in which we talk and write about them: about the difficulties of metaphor. Above all, it is about people wanting those things, and the structures of political thought that have labelled this wanting as wrong. Later in the book, suggestions are made about a relatively old structure of political thought in this country, that of radicalism, and its possible entry into the political dialogue of the North-west; and how perhaps it allowed people to feel desire, anger and envy – for the things they did not have.

The things though, will remain a problem. The connection between women and clothes surfaces often in these pages, particularly in the unacknowledged testimony of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century women and girls; and it was with the image of a New Look coat that, in 1950, I made my first attempt to understand and symbolize the content of my mother’s desire. I think now of all the stories, all the reading, all the dreams that help us to see ourselves in the landscape, and see ourselves watching as well. ‘A woman must continually watch herself,’ remarked John Berger some years ago.

She is almost continually accompanied by her own, image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisioning herself walking and weeping.

This book is intended to specify, in historical terms, some of the processes by which we come to step into the landscape, and see ourselves. But the clothes we wear there remain a question. Donald Winnicott wrote about the transitional object (those battered teddies and bits of blanket
that babies use in the early stages of distinguishing themselves from the world around them) and its usefulness to the young children who adapt it. The transitional object, he wrote, ‘must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own.’

Notes

3. ‘What actually happened is less important than what is felt to have happened. Is that right?’ says Ronald Fraser to his analyst, and his analyst agrees. Ronald Fraser, *In Search of a Past*, Verso, 1984, p. 95.
7. Seabrook, op. cit., p. 140.
13. Lukas, op. cit, p. 51.
14. Pauline Hunt, *Gender and Class Consciousness*, Macmillan, 1980, pp. 171–9. A direct and simple learning isn’t posited here; but it is the workplace and an existing backdrop of trade-union organization that provides for the expression of women’s class consciousness.
17. Hoggart, op. cit., p. 293.
19. ibid., p. 262.
20. To be told how difficult it was to give birth to you is an extremely common experience for all little girls, and as John and Elizabeth Newson point out in *Seven Years Old in the Home Environment*, Allen & Unwin, 1976, pp. 186–7, chaperonage, and the consequent amount of time girls spend in adult company,
is likely to make such topics of conversation accessible to them. But the punish-
ment and the warning involved in telling girl children about the difficulties their
birth presented to their mother is rarely written about. But see Carolyn
*Taking It Like a Woman*, Cape, 1984.
of Female Sexuality*, Virago, 1984, p. 335.
23. Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter’s Seduction*, Macmillan,
24. For recent arguments concerning the necessity of historicization, see Jane Lewis,
25. Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, Penguin,
1962, pp. 44–61.
Seabrook, *What Went Wrong?*, p. 261, where the same process is described: a
working-class life, ossified by time, enacted in ‘symbolic institutional ways, by
those who teach in poor schools, or who write novels and memoirs about a way
of life which they have not directly experienced since childhood’.
27. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*,
28. See Steven Marcus, ‘Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case-History, in *Representa-
Freud invented a new narrative form in his writing of the ‘Dora’ case. See also
below, pp. 130–4.
29. For a brief discussion of the way in which historical writing masks the processes
that brought it into being, see Timothy Ashplant, ‘The New Social Function of
White, ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’, *Critical In-
118, 157.
To me, telling the story of my growing up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without really having to die. I wanted to kill that self in writing. Once that self was gone – out of my life forever – I could more easily become the me of me. It was clearly the Gloria Jean of my tormented and anguished childhood that I wanted to be rid of, the girl who was always wrong, always punished, always subjected to some humiliation or other, always crying, the girl who was to end up in a mental institution because she could not be anything but crazy, or so they told her. She was the girl who sat a hot iron on her arm pleading with them to leave her alone, the girl who wore her scar as a brand marking her madness. Even now I can hear the voices of my sisters saying “mama make Gloria stop cryin’”. By writing the autobiography, it was not just this Gloria I would be rid of, but the past that had a hold on me, that kept me from the present. I wanted not to forget the past but to break its hold. This death in writing was to be liberatory.

Until I began to try and write an autobiography, I thought that it would be a simple task this telling of one’s story. And yet I tried year after year, never writing more than a few pages. My inability to write out the story I interpreted as an indication that I was not ready to let go of the past, that I was not ready to be fully in the present. Psychologically, I considered the possibility that I had become attached to the wounds and sorrows of my childhood, that I held to them in a manner that blocked my efforts to be self-realized, whole, to be healed. A key message in

Toni Cade Bambara’s novel *The Saltaters*, which tells the story of Velma’s suicide attempt, her breakdown, is expressed when the healer asks her “are you sure sweetheart, that you want to be well?”

There was very clearly something blocking my ability to tell my story. Perhaps it was remembered scoldings and punishments when mama heard me saying something to a friend or stranger that she did not think should be said. Secrecy and silence – these were central issues. Secrecy about family, about what went on in the domestic household was a bond between us – was part of what made us family. There was a dread one felt about breaking that bond. And yet I could not grow inside the atmosphere of secrecy that had pervaded our lives and the lives of other families about us. Strange that I had always challenged the secrecy, always let something slip that should not be known growing up, yet as a writer staring into the solitary space of paper, I was bound, trapped in the fear that a bond is lost or broken in the telling. I did not want to be the traitor, the teller of family secrets – and yet I wanted to be a writer. Surely, I told myself, I could write a purely imaginative work – a work that would not hint at personal private realities. And so I tried. But always there were the intruding traces, those elements of real life however disguised. Claiming the freedom to grow as an imaginative writer was connected for me with having the courage to open, to be able to tell the truth of one’s life as I had experienced it in writing. To talk about one’s life – that I could do. To write about it, to leave a trace – that was frightening.

The longer it took me to begin the process of writing autobiography, the further removed from those memories I was becoming. Each year, a memory seemed less and less clear. I wanted not to lose the vividness, the recall and felt an urgent need to begin the work and complete it. Yet I could not begin even though I had begun to confront some of the reasons I was blocked, as I am blocked just now in writing this piece because I am afraid to express in writing the experience that served as a catalyst for that block to move.

I had met a young black man. We were having an affair. It is important that he was black. He was in some mysterious way a link to this past that I had been struggling to grapple with, to name in writing. With him I remembered incidents, moments of the past that I had completely suppressed. It was as though there was something about the passion of contact that was hypnotic, that enabled me to drop barriers and thus enter fully, rather re-enter those past experiences. A key aspect seemed to be the way he smelled, the combined odors of cigarettes, occasionally alcohol, and his body smells. I thought often of the phrase “scent of memory,” for it was those smells that carried me back. And there were specific occasions when it was very evident that the experience of being in his company was the catalyst for this remembering.
Two specific incidents come to mind. One day in the middle of the afternoon we met at his place. We were drinking cognac and dancing to music from the radio. He was smoking cigarettes (not only do I not smoke, but I usually make an effort to avoid smoke). As we held each other dancing those mingled odors of alcohol, sweat, and cigarettes led me to say, quite without thinking about it, “Uncle Pete.” It was not that I had forgotten Uncle Pete. It was more that I had forgotten the childhood experience of meeting him. He drank often, smoked cigarettes, and always on the few occasions that we met him, he held us children in tight embraces. It was the memory of those embraces – of the way I hated and longed to resist them – that I recalled.

Another day we went to a favorite park to feed ducks and parked the car in front of tall bushes. As we were sitting there, we suddenly heard the sound of an oncoming train – a sound which startled me so that it evoked another long-suppressed memory: that of crossing the train tracks in my father’s car. I recalled an incident where the car stopped on the tracks and my father left us sitting there while he raised the hood of the car and worked to repair it. This is an incident that I am not certain actually happened. As a child, I had been terrified of just such an incident occurring, perhaps so terrified that it played itself out in my mind as though it had happened. These are just two ways this encounter acted as a catalyst breaking down barriers enabling me to finally write this long-desired autobiography of my childhood.

Each day I sat at the typewriter and different memories were written about in short vignettes. They came in a rush, as though they were a sudden thunderstorm. They came in a surreal, dreamlike style which made me cease to think of them as strictly autobiographical because it seemed that myth, dream, and reality had merged. There were many incidents that I would talk about with my siblings to see if they recalled them. Often we remembered together a general outline of an incident but the details were different for us. This fact was a constant reminder of the limitations of autobiography, of the extent to which autobiography is a very personal story telling – a unique recounting of events not so much as they have happened but as we remember and invent them. One memory that I would have sworn was “the truth and nothing but the truth” concerned a wagon that my brother and I shared as a child. I remembered that we played with this toy only at my grandfather’s house, that we shared it, that I would ride it and my brother would push me. Yet one facet of the memory was puzzling, I remembered always returning home with bruises or scratches from this toy. When I called my mother, she said there had never been any wagon, that we had shared a red wheelbarrow, that it had always been at my grandfather’s house because there were sidewalks on that part of town. We lived in the hills where there were no sidewalks. Again I was compelled to face the fiction that is
a part of all retelling, remembering. I began to think of the work I was doing as both fiction and autobiography. It seemed to fail in the category of writing that Audre Lorde, in her autobiographically-based work *Zami*, calls bio-mythography. As I wrote, I felt that I was not as concerned with accuracy of detail as I was with evoking in writing the state of mind, the spirit of a particular moment.

The longing to tell one’s story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release. It was the longing for release that compelled the writing but concurrently it was the joy of reunion that enabled me to see that the act of writing one’s autobiography is a way to find again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one’s life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present. Autobiographical writing was a way for me to evoke the particular experience of growing up southern and black in segregated communities. It was a way to recapture the richness of southern black culture. The need to remember and hold to the legacy of that experience and what it taught me has been all the more important since I have since lived in predominately white communities and taught at predominately white colleges. Black southern folk experience was the foundation of the life around me when I was a child; that experience no longer exists in many places where it was once all of life that we knew. Capitalism, upward mobility, assimilation of other values have all led to rapid disintegration of black folk experience or in some cases the gradual wearing away of that experience.

Within the world of my childhood, we held onto the legacy of a distinct black culture by listening to the elders tell their stories. Autobiography was experienced most actively in the art of telling one’s story. I can recall sitting at Baba’s (my grandmother on my mother’s side) at 1200 Broad Street – listening to people come and recount their life experience. In those days, whenever I brought a playmate to my grandmother’s house, Baba would want a brief outline of their autobiography before we would begin playing. She wanted not only to know who their people were but what their values were. It was sometimes an awesome and terrifying experience to stand answering these questions or witness another playmate being subjected to the process and yet this was the way we would come to know our own and one another’s family history. It is the absence of such a tradition in my adult life that makes the written narrative of my girlhood all the more important. As the years pass and these glorious memories grow much more vague, there will remain the clarity contained within the written words.

Conceptually, the autobiography was framed in the manner of a hope chest. I remembered my mother’s hope chest, with its wonderful odor of cedar and thought about her taking the most precious items and placing
them there for safekeeping. Certain memories were for me a similar treasure. I wanted to place them somewhere for safekeeping. An autobiographical narrative seemed an appropriate place. Each particular incident, encounter, experience had its own story, sometimes told from the first person, sometimes told from the third person. Often I felt as though I was in a trance at my typewriter, that the shape of a particular memory was decided not by my conscious mind but by all that is dark and deep within me, unconscious but present. It was the act of making it present, bringing it into the open, so to speak, that was liberating.

From the perspective of trying to understand my psyche, it was also interesting to read the narrative in its entirety after I had completed the work. It had not occurred to me that bringing one’s past, one’s memories together in a complete narrative would allow one to view them from a different perspective, not as singular isolated events but as part of a continuum. Reading the completed manuscript, I felt as though I had an overview not so much of my childhood but of those experiences that were deeply imprinted in my consciousness. Significantly, that which was absent, left out, not included also was important. I was shocked to find at the end of my narrative that there were few incidents I recalled that involved my five sisters. Most of the incidents with siblings were with me and my brother. There was a sense of alienation from my sisters present in childhood, a sense of estrangement. This was reflected in the narrative. Another aspect of the completed manuscript that is interesting to me is the way in which the incidents describing adult men suggest that I feared them intensely, with the exception of my grandfather and a few old men. Writing the autobiographical narrative enabled me to look at my past from a different perspective and to use this knowledge as a means of self-growth and change in a practical way.

In the end I did not feel as though I had killed the Gloria of my childhood. Instead I had rescued her. She was no longer the enemy within, the little girl who had to be annihilated for the woman to come into being. In writing about her, I reclaimed that part of myself I had long ago rejected, left uncared for, just as she had often felt alone and uncared for as a child. Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, “the bits and pieces of my heart” that the narrative made whole again.
The Problem of Other Lives: Social Perspectives on Written Biography

*Michael Erben*

**Introduction**

The study of biography offers the surest indication of a particular era’s intellectual climate. For the purposes of this article biography is taken to be *written* accounts of individual lives, and, at its end, the reading of written lives. Modern biography emerges during the eighteenth century as part of the Enlightenment’s commitment to understanding the relationship between morality, ethics and the vagaries of everyday existence. It becomes a textual space in which to present a discourse on the nature of the public and the private that needs neither the imprimatur of religious doctrine nor that of the politically powerful. Biographies, with their tensions between verisimilitude and subjectivity, are intriguing cultural documents. C. Wright Mills (1959) sees the interaction between life-experience and history as the definition of sociology. From such a viewpoint accounts of lives are more or less interesting, depending on how effectively they are able to distil both social structure and a story of an individual life without, in the process, either swamping the personal or subjectivising the social. It is the purpose of this article to add to the building of a theory and practice of biography by examining some of the most illuminating discussions the topic has generated.

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Hermeneutical Biography – Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Ricoeur

Modern hermeneutical biography may be said to have been founded by Wilhelm Dilthey, who occupies a pivotal position between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher and the contemporary hermeneut Paul Ricoeur. Schleiermacher (1966, 1977) sought a method to explain and reconcile the most pressing of methodological issues for biography – namely, the relationship between the synchronic and the diachronic. He grappled with this problem through a discussion of the relationship between scriptural dogmatics and changing cultural conditions. Perhaps his most important recognition was that hermeneutics, although in no sense an arbitrary process, was nonetheless one subject to constant revisions. Schleiermacher acknowledged the distance between subjective and objective as primarily a linguistic one. He argued, in ways that find a modern echo, that, as we think and communicate in language, then understanding and rhetoric are bound to be related. For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was a tool at the disposal of theology that explicitly claimed not to be able philosophically to replicate God, but rather provide legitimacy for narrative routes as methods to approximate the apprehension of God.

It was by incorporating Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics and giving them a sociological basis that Dilthey (1970) advanced biographical studies in the long, unfinished biography of Schleiermacher that he wrote over many years. To Dilthey, access to the Godhead, through the story of Jesus Christ, was replaced by access to the human by the socio-historical recreation of the lived experience (Erlebnis). This view was codified into a general theory of the human sciences. Here he argued that while the natural sciences can explain observed events by relating them to other events, we may understand human beings only by going behind their actions and into the realm of the unobservable, and thereby understand them by recourse to thoughts, feelings and desires. We may know, not only what a person does, but the motives, memories, value-judgements and purposes that led them to do it. For Dilthey, the study of history was the composite study of such individuals, changing and causing change in their interactions – a sort of collective biography of verstehen (Dilthey 1961).

It is not surprising that it should be biography that was the most rewarding topic for the Diltheyean methodology, for it combined the interdisciplinary impetus behind the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) with a rejection of the inductive method. In fact Diltheyean hermeneutics proceeds from a careful examination, not of the simplest but the most complex social phenomena (Dilthey 1976). Socio-historical reality was to be captured and interpreted through an account of that highly
singular and highly complex repository of the cultural – the individual; in other words, through biography. The success or otherwise of biography is dependent upon a method of reflection which admits and seeks to render clear the advantages and limitations of specific social locations. In short, the biographer’s research will lead to an increasing understanding of the normative facet of her or his own cultural positioning while advancing the researched biography (Dilthey 1976).

If biography is a hermeneutical exercise, then the manner in which the objective slides into the subjective and vice versa needs to be the protocol of a successful treatise upon biographical method. The tendency to sentimentalise or to embroider, to be cynical in place of sceptical, or to turn vice into weakness or weakness into vice, to trivialise or over-endow, to avoid justified condemnation of the pragmatically evil or withhold compassion from the emotionally insecure, are merely some of the momentous undertakings required of effective biography. The systematisation of such tasks requires a firmer indisciplinary sociology and a deeper hermeneutical perspective than has been hitherto generally provided by even Dilthey or, in fact, more recent commentators (Bertaux 1981; Denzin 1990).

If neither Schleiermacher nor Dilthey denigrate the social or fetishise the individual, Paul Ricoeur goes still one step further in developing the hermeneutical project. While acknowledging a Diltheyean theory of approximations, he goes on to say that access to truth must not only never be final, but can only be approached through oblique methods – through a ‘hermeneutical detour’. As such, the search for increasing levels of approximation can be developed through a variety of cultural products – sociology, literary criticism, economics, history, the fine arts, science, etc. For Ricoeur there is a refusal even to let a system of explanation have exclusive rights to interpretation – be this codified into existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism or whatever. Ricoeur will always subvert the deification of method with other methods. As such, his hermeneutics provide the most developed background to biographical study.

In his attempt to do justice to the internal life Dilthey makes understanding the biographical subject be the reproduction of that inner life. For Ricoeur this limits the possibilities of biography and historical narrative. Ricoeur, in arguing that the texts of the past (in this case, of past lives) can never be fully open to us, argues also that the interpretations of these texts culminates in the interpreter understanding herself or himself differently and being then in a position to re-engage with the text. The self as such becomes aware that the cultural signs and symbols through which it understands itself constitute a document of selfhood. For Ricoeur, this process of self-understanding can only exist in the practice of the mediation of cultural signs, a mediation that is achieved through the
recognition of a universal feature of existence – namely, Time and its passage. Time is experienced by persons at both the naturalistic and reflective level, and life is composed of the narratives by which time is experienced. These narratives place upon existence – past, present and future – a cohering feature constituting the reasons for thoughts and actions. The understanding and explanation of existence occurs in what can be called ‘Temporal Reconciliation Narrative’, that is, all those elements that affect individuals by being members of society – unhappiness, pity, joy, anguish, solemnity, peace of mind, gaiety, etc. – have narratives without which they cannot be experienced (Ricoeur 1984).

This recognition of time and narrative allows Ricoeur to have an epistemologically clear objective and subjective dimension to his hermeneutics. It is for this reason that he is entirely willing to accept the products of positivism along with the processes of phenomenology. What is at stake is the mode of interpretation that can implement the findings of the differing disciplines, and it is here that Ricoeur is so rewarding for the understanding of biography and historical narrative. The painstakingly detailed elaboration of Ricoeur’s thought on these mutters is to be found in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1985, 1988).

The importance of *Time and Narrative* is unambiguously stated by Haydn White: ‘it must be accounted the most important synthesis of literary and historical theory produced in our century’ (1991:141). Ricoeur’s approach to the texts of the past, to the interpretation of historical narrative, to the understanding of the accounts of past lives, essentially concerns the nature of temporality itself. To study a written biography is to engage in a narrative discourse. This is not merely to ascertain the correctness of a chronicle, but to charter a narrative of the past by what Ricoeur calls the act of emplotment; that is, to devise a system of temporal consequences that provides those who analyse the past with a point of mediation to interpret the sense of time’s passage. This is far more than having a ‘perspective on the past’, or merely journeying to the past to live the biases of the present. We cannot re-do the past, we cannot re-give it in language, and as such we must represent it in a version of itself, using the same technique that it originally used to express itself – namely emplotment. However, that this form of rearticulation cannot be a completed representation (for, of course, no symbol can be) is further attested by an additional feature of distanciation, namely, ‘the ineluctably aporetic nature of the human experience of time’ (White 1991:144).

The meaning of human lives for Ricoeur is apprehended by an engagement with plots or the whole series of plots through which a life is lived. However, Ricoeur always observes the distinction between the imaginative productions of the creator of fiction and the imaginative productions of the creator of historical or biographical narratives. He argues that the imaginative integrity of the biographer is always grounded in
the enriched emplotment of the biographical subject’s narratives and not the emplotments of the purely autobiographical self. This relationship between the different integrities of the different forms of the imaginative is strongly reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s (1967) work on the nature of biography. Here with considerable economy and grace she hints at her own theory of emplotment through the idea of building narratives from fragments of meaning in order to understand other narrative fragments of meaning: ‘the artist’s imagination at its most intense fires out what is perishable in fact; he builds with what is durable; but the biographer must accept the perishable, build with it, embed it in the very fabric of his work’ (ibid. 227).

The biographer needs to enter the narratives of the subject and the narratives of hindsight, and, further, exploit the ‘techniques of analysis developed by the social sciences of their own time to identify the social forces at work in the agent’s milieu’ (White 1991:145). For Ricoeur, hindsight is not illegitimate in understanding the past – because it is the method through which the narratives of the present can be explicitly acknowledged before their journey to the past. To explain a biography or biographical material, we have to bring out the structure, ‘that is, the internal relations of dependence that constitute the statics of the text . . .' (Ricoeur 1991:72). But we must also be aware that interpretation is not a simple action on the text but also an act of the text: ‘What the interpreter says is a resaying that reactivates what is said by the text’ (ibid).

In the third volume of Time and Narrative Ricoeur re-states some of his thought on exploring the past in terms of what he calls the ‘trace’. By trace he means not only the evidence we have of a past event or life (the documentation), but also the recognition that the life or event that gave rise to it will be related to it in ways we cannot be sure of – that is, while the past must of necessity be partly illusory, it is not lost. As Ricoeur says, ‘in regard to the past, the trace exercises a function of “taking the place of” (lieutenance), of “standing for” (représentance)’ (1988:143). But this function is for Ricoeur only an indirect one – it is only by recognising this indirectness that a knowledge of traces can be established. In other words, we can gain complete knowledge of traces but never of lives. These approximations of a real life equal the configurations that are the biographical subject; ‘it is only by means of an endless rectification of our configurations’ that the inexhaustible resource of biography can become increasingly known to us (ibid.).

A convincing empirical exercise in which we see something very like Ricoeur’s ‘hermeneutical arc’ being formed is found in Liz Stanley’s (1984, 1986) work on Hannah Cullwick – the Victorian servant who secretly married her employer, Arthur Munby. The Cullwick/Munby relationship first came to general notice in 1972 with the publication of Derek Hudson’s Munby: Man of Two Worlds. Stanley, using this book as
a starting point, goes on to research the life of Cullwick in detail. What Stanley (1986) does is describe the accumulating ‘level’ of understandings during which her ideological project is ceaselessly confounded and enriched but by which she comes increasingly to apprehend her subject and develop her feminist hermeneutical commitments.

Stanley demonstrates clearly that the degree of emplotment that increasingly develops both individually and inter-actively between author, Cullwick and Munby is the process by which biography is performed. We are enabled in her exposure of her method to see how she manages the necessary relationship between chronicle research and narrative reconstruction. She in fact goes one step further than Woolf or Ricoeur would methodologically allow – she is reluctant to permit as great a distinction as they do between imaginative fiction and imaginative biography. Her methodological prescriptions, if they have a precursor, must be something like the one Harold Nicolson (1934) would have needed to employ in his Some People. However, her advantage for us over Nicolson is the way in which we can actually see her act of interpretation simultaneously developing her subject and displaying the moral integrity necessary to the production of hermeneutical biography.

What we have seen in the foregoing discussion of biographical hermeneutics is the way that the life under study is composed of events that in White’s terms ‘function as inaugurations, transitions and terminations of processes that are meaningful because they manifest the structure of plots’ (1991:148). And we may go further, with Ricoeur, and state that the narratives that form the biography are mimetic in the sense that they are emplotments upon emplotments and therefore resemble the structures of existence with which the original life fashioned itself.

I have attempted to demonstrate the seriousness for a sociology of selfhood that the biographical enterprise can offer. As such I will now look briefly at two particularly important biographies that have a formative honesty about them and that allow us sights into the operation of the creation of the social.

**Sartre’s The Family Idiot**

Sartre’s treatise on Gustave Flaubert, *The Family Idiot*, is possibly the most audacious biography ever produced (1981, 1987, 1989). It is a work that is difficult to classify as well as being long and often infuriating to read. It seems to be an interplay of genres – part biography, part novel, part autobiography. Nonetheless *The Family Idiot* and Sartre’s discussion of it in his *Itinerary of a Thought* (1974) represents an acknowledgement by him that biography is the expression *par excellence* of a fusion of sociological and psychoanalytical procedures. It is his claim that another life can be
known in the degree to which similarity and difference are established in relation to the composite totalising features of the wider society (Sartre 1963). The high degree of reflexivity necessary to carry this method forward is Sartre’s justification that *The Family Idiot* is part novel and autobiography. However, there is no Ricoeurian respect for the reader in Sartre, no acts of methodological charity. Sartre’s reader is always in conflict with the author. For example, his mix of genres assiduously avoids all attempts to allow the reader access to his emplotments. He mashes up, often garrulously and certainly not felicitously, what Woolf would call the ‘granite with the rainbow’.

It is of interest for contemporary sociology and the study of biography to see how Sartre describes how individuals become chronologically constituted. Sartre analyses human experience in terms of totalisation: a totalisation is for an individual the sum of the apprehended social world (the social world is experienced partly externally and partly internally) and is characterised by constant change. Totalisation I moves to totalisation II and so on – and, further, any totalisation is in part constituted by the totalising agent. When each totalisation has been experienced it is surpassed but incorporated within the next totalisation – the performance of this act is in Sartre’s term to *dépasse*. Laing puts this movement from one totalisation to another elegantly: ‘it is negated as an absolute, conserved as a relative, and subsumed in the later synthesis’ (1964:13). The rationality of a previous experience which is still felt as rational but is intellectualised as irrational is, for Sartre, a feature of all reasoning selves. The number of times this neurosis is experienced in new totalisings creates the biographical trajectory.

It is in these various ways, says Sartre, that Flaubert, picking up the felt residues of previous totalising experiences, can transfer them into his contradictory portrayal of himself as a woman – Emma Bovary. The intensity of this contradiction is the greatness of *Madame Bovary* – the fluctuating identification by Flaubert with Bovary seems to make Flaubert, like us, a reader of the novel that exposes himself. These conclusions, claims Sartre, can be drawn because we have co-achieved them from Flaubert’s artistic productions, his documentary productions and what we historically know of him. It is in working thus that the circumstances of individual biography and collective existence can function together to prevent an over-socialised view of the individual in which identity evaporates. It is by this method that Sartre can valorise his most famous biographical dictum: ‘that while undoubtedly Valéry is a petit-bourgeois intellectual, not every petit-bourgeois intellectual is Valéry’ (1982:141).

We can say that *Madame Bovary* represents an attempt at a totalisation of Flaubert, an attempt to produce a ‘singular universal’ (Sartre 1986). *Madame Bovary* is, as many readers have noticed, a novel that permanently fascinates us and permanently leaves us unsatisfied, Flaubert’s adamant
refusal to press his dialectic between the real and the imaginary to a new synthesis stands as the perfect metaphor for Emma Bovary’s life, Flaubert’s life and Sartre’s life; the variations on this same dichotomy are there for all to see: in Flaubert between neurosis and artistic production, in Emma between womanhood and selfhood, in Sartre between political activity and the life of a bourgeois intellectual. All three felt that, when they recognised the received everyday culture in themselves, they were instantly turned into clichés. As the dichotomy works itself through, in Emma between self-contained authenticity and the socially sentimental, and in Flaubert in the disgust at having to produce narratives to show his genius, it is nonetheless laid most bare in Sartre’s own hostility to reconciliation – his absolute refusal to provide us with a distinction between himself, Flaubert and Emma leaves us irritatingly confused over fact and fiction. Nonetheless, his acts of refusal provide not only emplotments for Emma and Flaubert but for himself as well. Even in his political and personal life, where he ‘elevated’ the act of charity to the despicable moment of bourgeois collaboration (1990), he is completing an emplotment by a route that he assumed would only bring distanciation, and provides us with a unique work that wrestles with biography in a most uncompromising form.

Johnson’s Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage

The ambiguity of genre that concerned Sartre can in fact be readily discerned at that precise moment when modern biography begins to emerge. In this sense the 1740s present a crucial decade in the history of biography, for in it we see the recognition that subtlety and verisimilitude, veracity and good organisation, become simultaneously the hallmarks of the first great modern novel (Richardson’s Clarissa) and the first great modern biography (Dr. Johnson’s (1744) An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage). It is unwise to say which form caused the other; what can be said is that they are the two poles of an elective affinity, which has continued in the genres to the present. The chief point to be made about Clarissa and Savage is that they perform an amazing act of broad understanding in developing and interpreting a network of the psychological, the sociological and the historical. Both works are here not concerned with mono-causal, step-by-step accounts of their protagonists’ lives. In Browning’s terms, what is offered is ‘a kind of understanding which is independent of explanation, which consists in acquaintance with particulars, in familiarity with many details of a comprehensive vision of their configuration’ (1980:16).

Johnson (1750), who published the first modern treatise on the nature of biography in 1750 in The Rambler, acknowledges that a life story is
almost always of interest. As he says; ‘I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful’ (1750:169). Johnson’s use of the word ‘judicious’ is of interest because it directly highlights the differences between description and narration (Lukacs 1970); in fact he goes on to say; ‘the biography must keep an eye out, not for trivia, but for the significance of the trivial’ (ibid). Johnson is the first to note that feature of biography that has recently been taken up by sociologists (Denzin 1989; Bertaux 1981) when he supplies normative and sociological reasons for the significance of biographical study:

Those parallel circumstance and kindred images, to which we readily conform our minds, are, above all other writings, to be found in narratives of the lives of particular persons; and therefore no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition (1750:68–9).

For Johnson, biography is a ‘condition of thinking’ that will render a life psychologically and socially intelligible, informative and instructive, and which will provide us with mechanisms to refine our own impulses of reason and compassion.

It is for these reasons that Johnson’s biography of Richard Savage is so momentous. The details of the story of Savage (1697–1743) are as follows. He always claimed to be the illegitimate son of the fourth Earl of Rivers and the second Lady Macclesfield. He also claimed to have been disowned by his mother and made poor. After a brief apprenticeship he turned to London and literature for a livelihood and produced plays, poems and journalism. In 1727 he was condemned to death for killing a gentleman in a tavern brawl but was pardoned by Queen Caroline; he became a friend of Dr. Johnson’s in the late 1730s and died in a debtors prison in Bristol in 1743.

The importance of the superb biography of Savage is that Wright Mills’ injunction that sociology is where biography intersects with social structure is so fascinatingly realised within it. We are given an unforgettable picture of Savage in that socio-cultural whirlpool of occupation, class, family and intellectual life that was eighteenth-century London. It is often quite difficult to tell where Savage, his environment, and Johnson himself, begin and end. In a number of ways Johnson’s portrait of Savage is a more satisfying biography than Sartre’s of Flaubert – because although it shares similar methodological aims, these are achieved with empirical skill and compassion and without the stultifying self-absorption that so characterizes The Family Idiot.
Whether or not Savage’s claim in relation to his birth was correct or not has never been entirely resolved, although Moy Thomas’ series of articles in *Notes and Queries* (1858) make the evidence against the claim seem very strong indeed. However, it seems clear that Savage thought his claim was true (Erben 1991) and Johnson takes his word for it. And so the Savage biography becomes a crystallisation for an age characterised by a confused and surprising social mobility centred on a network of bohemian urbanities who in their coffee houses invented themselves as professional writers and became the major cultural configuration of the early eighteenth century. In Johnson we find a mind that in relation to biography has been under-theorised by students of literature and untouched by sociologists.

**Conclusion**

That biography should be of concern to sociologists should not be alarming: it is after all through the individual that the socio-historical becomes cultural. There are very few sociologists of even the most insistent Foucauldian tendencies who would accept that personal experience is merely a bit of cosmic twitching circuitry in the neurones of the discourses that compose us. Many sociologists would agree, however, that the cultural is a highly complex domain and that the individual is constituted in the very formation of ego at the social level, and that a reflection on the self can only ever be oblique (Lacan 1968). It is biography that attempts to render the illusive self as the allusive self, in its intriguing spiralling journey between the unique experience of the individual and the general experience of groups. It is often better (as Ricoeur and Lacan have shown us) to see ego and sociality as indissoluble aspects of social life. This makes biography not so much a worthwhile as an imperative study for sociology, and one that may go some way to making a virtue (instead of a stumbling block) out of the lack of any precise demarcation between the social structure and the individual.

**Note**

1. What may be briefly given here is a highly condensed outline of the content of *Time and Narrative*. The first volume (using the *Confessions* of Augustine) argues that the experience of time is a confusing concept because it tends to slip away just as it is being theoretically grounded, that is, the experience of time is ‘aporetic’. Ricoeur’s second volume attempts to reconcile this problem (using Aristotle’s *Poetics*) by developing narrative and ‘emplotment’ as the response to the aporias of time – in short that time can be approached only by employing the structuring features of stories. He argues that time becomes human to the extent that it is
organised after the manner of a narrative and that narrative can only be sustained to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience. In his third volume, Ricoeur acknowledges that ultimately time cannot be represented, but that the methods by which it is approximated – by which its singular and universal features are approached – need to involve the heritage of stories from which culture is woven and individual feeling derives its contours. There is no resolution here – we always fall short of Hegelian totalisation for the network of perspectives that is past, present and future are so interwoven that we cannot ever quite stand back from them. And, further, they contain a mystery about which we must never be sentimental or philosophically unrigorous but always respectful.

References


For the most part, people tell stories to do something – to complain, to boast, to inform, to alert, to tease, to explain or excuse or justify, or to provide for an interactional environment in whose course or context or interstices such actions and interactional inflections can be accomplished (M. H. Goodwin, 1989, 1990). Recipients are oriented not only to the story as a discursive unit, but to what is being done by it, with it, through it; for the story and any aspect of its telling, they can attend the “why that now” question (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). It should not be surprising that the projects that are being implemented in the telling of a story inform the design and constructional features of the story, as well as the details of the telling (Sacks, 1978). They inform as well the moment-to-moment manner of the story’s uptake by its recipients (C. Goodwin, 1984; C. Goodwin & M. H. Goodwin, 1987), and that uptake in turn is taken up by the teller (if indeed there is a single teller; cf Duranti & Brenneis, 1986; C. Goodwin, 1986; Lerner, 1992; Mandelbaum, 1993) and feeds back to affect the next increment of telling.

Design and constructional features of stories are shaped as well by an orientation to who the recipient(s) is, to how many of them there are, and who they are to one another and to the teller and what they can (or should) be supposed to know (C. Goodwin, 1981, 1986). Such quotidian storytellings arise in, or are prompted by, the ongoing course of an interactional occasion or the trajectory of a conversation or are made to interrupt it (Jefferson, 1978; Sacks, 1974, 1992). On the story’s completion the interaction and its participants have been brought to some further state of talk and interaction, transformed or not – talk and interaction whose...
further trajectory will in some fashion be related to that story’s telling (Jefferson, 1978; Sacks, 1974, 1992; Schegloff, 1992). Ordinary storytelling, in sum, is (choose your term) a coconstruction, an interactional achievement, a joint production, a collaboration, and so forth. Although the 1967 Labov and Waletzky paper, “Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience” [this issue; henceforth L&W], was important in attracting attention to the interest of ordinary persons’ stories of personal experience, it obscured part of what is involved in their very constitution by setting their formative examination in the context of the sociolinguistic interview, an interactional and situational context masked by the term “oral versions [of personal experience].” This formulation of their subject elevated the issue of “oral vs. written” into central prominence and glossed the telling differences (if I may put it that way) between contrasting auspices of speaking and organizations of talking in the interview on the one hand and less academically occasioned settings of storytelling on the other. Although we are celebrating the positive consequences of their paper on its 30th anniversary, it is worth detailing its unintended, less beneficial consequences in the hope of redirecting subsequent work toward a differently targeted and more compelling grasp of vernacular storytelling. This tack may strike readers as tangential to the occasion, and in a sense it is. It starts not from an interest in narrative as a field for whose development L&W is central, but from a more general interest in quotidian talk-in-interaction – a domain into which most occurrences of “oral versions of personal experience” are likely to fall. Taking narrative as the focus, one opts for a discursive unit, genre, and activity across contexts of realization, pushing to the background the consequences of those contexts – however conceived – for the actual constitution of stories. Taking “talk-in-interaction” as the relevant domain, an analyst is constrained to take into account the different settings of “orality” (henceforth “talking”) – in which different speech-exchange systems with different turn-taking practices differentially shape stories and the practices of storytelling, not to mention the different practical activities in whose course, and on whose behalf, storytelling may be undertaken. An analyst is so constrained because the participants embody these differences in their conduct. 

Taking the practices of conversation as a baseline for talk-in-interaction, what can be said about the sociolinguistic interview as a setting in which to describe an object generically formulated as “oral versions of personal experience” or narrative? For one thing, the context of the sociolinguistic elicitation plays havoc with the motive force of the telling – the action and interactional precipitant of the telling by making the elicitation question itself the invariant occasion for telling the story. Though the authors would surely now disavow or reject it, this seems to have embodied something of an ideal
of a “null context” in which one might get at the pure shape of storytelling itself, freed of the diverse situated motives and contingencies of actual tellings. It would not be the first time in the western intellectual and scientific tradition, or even in the context of contemporary linguistics, in which an ideal form is extracted from transient “distortions” of its idiosyncratic situated occasions, however ironic such an effort appears in the midst of otherwise sustained and innovative preoccupation with linguistic variation. However, the variationism of sociolinguistics has been couched more in terms of groups and sociodemographic categories than in terms of situations and interactional contexts (Goffman, 1964).

Actually, the image at work here appears to take the story or narrative as already formed, as waiting to be delivered, to fit in or be trimmed to fit the context into which it is to be inserted. In this regard it resembles common conceptions of speech acts, whose constitutive conditions and properties are autonomous, which have their origins in the psychology of the individual (whether in intentions or experiences and memories) and which are then stitched into the occasions on which they are enacted. One does not find here the sense of an ongoing interaction in which consequential next moments of the participants’ lives are being lived together (in contrast to the content of the stories being elicited, in which that property is valued) with the stories being touched off or mobilized by those moments, with the telling constituted to serve the exigencies of those moments and being shaped thereby.

This image of narrative was (and is) both reflected in, and fostered by, the data with which L&W worked, at least as displayed in the 1967 paper. Although it was an important step to present the data, to devote a whole separate section of the paper to the “texts,” when we look at “the data” today, a number of striking observations present themselves:

1. They report nothing (no talk or other conduct) by the recipient(s) in the course of the telling.
2. They report nothing (no talk or other conduct) by the recipient(s) at the end, on the completion of the story.
3. They report no silences “in the course” of the story to indicate where else (earlier) the story might have been (designed to be) possibly complete, without fruition.
4. They report no hesitations, hitches, or other deviations from smooth delivery in the course of the telling, nor any problems in its uptake during the course of the telling.

In short, there is nothing interactional in the data at all other than the eliciting question, which takes on a role much like that of an experimental stimulus to occasion the production of the already formed story waiting to be told.
Of course, L&W could not do everything, could not take everything into account, could not anticipate developments that were still embryonic at the time of the 1967 paper. Still, it is striking to what degree features of the 1967 paper have remained characteristic of treatments of narrative. This analytic tack has remained acceptable, and indeed celebrated, because it has fit so well with the academic tradition of ex cathedra decisions on analytic focus. I speak here of the academy, not of L&W.

Academics – whether literary, linguistic, psychological, and so forth – have wished to focus on narrative per se, so that is what they studied or how they formulated what they studied. A focus on the structure of narrative as an autonomous discursive form was consistent with the structuralism that dominated academic culture in the 1960s from the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss to the then-recent turn of literary studies, and which allowed an extension of themes familiar from literary studies to the study of the vernacular. They have collectively disattended the fact that, unlike the narratives examined in literary studies that are ordinarily singly authored (however sensitive to social and cultural context), in the natural social world narrative – in the form of the telling of stories in ordinary talk-in-interaction – is an organic part of its interactional environment. If it is disengaged from its environment, much is lost that is constitutive of its occurrence there. Even many of those otherwise committed to “coconstruction” as a theme of social, cultural, and linguistic practice might be drawn to disengage stories from the detailed interactional context of their telling by this effort to focus on narrative structure per se or by the uses to which it may be put. Thereby, the “product-narrative,” or an idealized version of narrative structure, logic, rhetoric, and so forth, has been disengaged from its context of production and reception and has become reinforced as a rich discursive resource, deployable for a wide variety of other interpretive undertakings, unconstrained by the symbiotic relation otherwise obtaining between a story and the occasion of its telling. But back to L&W.

L&W took the key problems of securing oral narratives of personal experience for analysis to be those of authenticity and spontaneity – how to get their tellers to transcend Labov’s version of the observer’s paradox (Labov, 1970, p. 47), the formality and hypercorrection of speech that set in with overt observation by outsiders, a problem which Labov had already encountered and described in other work. Part of the solution was to elicit stories so exciting and engaging to tell that the tellers would lose themselves in the very drama of the telling (hence stories about “a time you were almost killed,” etc.). At the same time, avoiding “contamination” by the observer led to an enforced reserve in the uptake of stories by the elicitor that could not but problematize the trajectory of the telling and the shape of the resultant story – especially in the
case of a dramatic or “exciting” story. In this respect, in treating the recipient as basically extraneous (and hence a source of “bias”), in treating the narrative as “belonging to” the basic unit of western culture – the individual doing the telling (the talking head) – the opportunity was missed to re-situate the narrative in social context, to see that the recipient(s) is an irremediable component of a story’s telling. Even if recipients stay blank (and perhaps especially then), their presence and conduct enters into the story’s telling. Nor are the consequences of having proceeded in this way trivial or incidental. They go to the heart of the matter – the characterization of the anatomy of ordinary storytelling. For example, the presence of a summary theme or evaluation in L&W’s account may well reflect the formative effect of the elicitation session and the eliciting inquiry as the occasion for telling. When stories come up “naturally,” such summings-up by teller are often not present (they may rather be articulated by recipients as part of a receipt sequence), and if they are present, it can testify to “trouble” in the uptake of the story (Jefferson, 1978, pp. 228-237).

Or consider the possible effects of the decision to solicit “stories of almost being killed” for their capacity to secure involved and spontaneous telling. This seems to be predicated on the view that “type of story” or “topic of story” is nonconsequential for its anatomy or structure and that only spontaneity is specially associated with it. This may well be so, but there is some past experience with this issue and some evidence that what stories are about (given their recipients, etc.) may be nonarbitrarily related to the trajectory of telling.

Jefferson (1980, 1988), for example, observed that she was initially reluctant to get involved in a proposed study of “talk about troubles,” suspecting that it was a structurally nonconsequential matter, focussed on a topic designed to be of interest for analytically extraneous reasons. Once engaged with the data, however, she found that “troubles-telling” mobilized distinctive interactional stances from both teller and recipients, engendered distinctive trajectories of telling and uptake Jafferson & Lee, 1981), and so forth. Similarly, Schegloff (1976/1984) found that “opposition-type stories in which teller was one of the protagonists” served to pose issues of alignment for recipients which could in turn have consequences for how the telling was brought to a close.

However “obvious” in retrospect, neither of these distinctive features, nor that these were relevant ways of “typologizing” stories, was accessible in advance. Whatever the virtues of stories about having almost been killed, when disengaged from the details of the context of their telling and in particular from their uptake-in-their-course by their recipients, we cannot know what distinctive features of structure or interactional enactment they occasion.
To sum up, there have been some developments over these 30 years in our understanding of talk-in-interaction and conversation in particular, and they suggest some directions of inquiry that merit more serious attention by those interested in narrative as a dressed-up version of storytelling. For example:

Consider the differences between storytellings by reference to their conditions of launching – between those which themselves launch a sequence and those which are “responsive,” that is, between storytellings that have to “make their own way” and those that are responsive to inquiry, to invitation, to solicitation, or can be introduced under that guise. Here we are noting not only the special character of stories “in second position” in the sense of being produced in answer to a question as compared to ones that launch a spate of talk, but that there can be striking differences between stories that have been solicited (and further between those already-known stories that are solicited and those not previously known) and those that are elicited, in which a question gets a story without having specifically asked for one (as in the excerpt reproduced in note 2).

Consider the differences between stories analyzably used to do something and those apparently told “for their own sake.”

Consider the relation between a story proper and the practices of storytelling, and the storytelling sequence, by which it is constructed and conveyed.

Consider the fact that one consequence of a storytelling can be the touching off of another storytelling (Sacks, 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 764–772; Vol. 2, 3–17, 249–68). Subsequent stories are mobilized in recipients’ memory by a story’s telling just because they can serve as displays of understanding of, and alignment (or misalignment) with, prior stories. Such a consequence is both background and prospect for storytelling in conversation. A “subsequent story” is designed for the place in a course of tellings that it is to occupy. Consider, then, the differences in storytellings by reference to their place in such a sequence of tellings. This is especially relevant for stories of personal experience, and much is lost by not incorporating it, for example, in collecting stories of the Holocaust. However, this is a consequence of severing narratives from their origins as stories told in real-life interaction.

Whatever findings may emerge from such inquiries, given that story recipients may contest the initial premises of the telling (C. Goodwin, 1986, pp. 298–301; Sacks, 1974, pp. 340–344), that the telling can be substantially shaped by such contestation (C. Goodwin, 1986, 301–302), or by other “interpolations” by recipients (Lerner, 1992; Mandelbaum, 1993), and that whether, where, and how the story and storytelling end can be contingent on the occurrence and form of recipient uptake (Jefferson, 1978, pp. 228–237; Schegloff, 1992, pp. 203–214), one might entertain the
possibility that the constitutive practices of storytelling incorporate recipients and that storytelling abstracted from its interactional setting, occasioning, and uptake is an academically hybridized form. A search for the vernacular or quotidian counterpart to literary narrative could benefit from a redirection from this path.

A body of conversation-analytic work over the last several decades has found that the organization and practices of talk-in-interaction in specialized (often work) settings is generally best described as a modification or transformation of the organization of talk in ordinary conversation (Drew & Heritage, 1992a, 1992b; Heritage, 1984; Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991). For example, the practices and organization of talk in classrooms, courts, news interviews, therapy sessions, and so forth all stand in systematic, describable relations to the organization and practices of ordinary conversation.6 “Elicitation sessions” appear to be a specialized setting and speech exchange system (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) as well. They ought to be understood by reference to ordinary interaction, as should the activities (like storytelling) that occur in them – and not the other way around.

Just because L&W was an early entry, very likely the first, in the effort to describe “ordinary” narrative does not mean that other story types, otherwise contexted and occasioned, should be described by comparison to their account. Although stories like those described by L&W surely get told, in ordinary conversation they take work to achieve, work that may vary from occasion to occasion, yielding stories that vary from occasion to occasion, or ones whose invariance took doing. We do not get to see any of that in L&W or to suspect it.

I have focused attention on the half of the cup that is empty, not the half that is full. L&W sought to bring attention from the stories that preoccupied students of high literature to those of ordinary folks. They sought to bridge the chasm between formalism and functionalism by taking on both jobs. This is the full half. They isolated the ordinary talks in the artificial environment of the academic elicitation and thereby suppressed the possibility of observing the very functions they hoped to link to their formal account. This is the empty half. There is, then, ample work remaining to be done.

Author’s Note

This article was prepared in response to an invitation to contribute to a special issue of the Journal of Narrative and Life History, assessing and reflecting on the article, “Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience” by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, 30 years after its publication.
Notes

1. It may be worth recalling “the times” in which L&W was produced by reference to other work and workers active in related areas, in order to complement the line drawn from L&W to this issue of Journal of Life History and Narrative. Recall, then, that the special issue of the American Anthropologist on “The Ethnography of Communication,” edited by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, appeared in 1964. Goffman’s influential “The Neglected Situation” appeared in that special issue, as did Labov’s “Phonological Correlates of Social Stratification,” in which the basic interview techniques used by L&W are described (L&W, 1967, fn. 5). Garfinkel’s Studies in Ethnomethodology appeared in 1967. The first of Sacks’ Lectures on Conversation (199 were delivered in 1964 and mimeographed transcripts began circulating informally shortly thereafter. The lectures for Spring 1966 began with several lectures on storytelling (later published as “On the Analyzability of Stories by Children,” Sacks, 1972), including observations on the mapping of sentence order to event order (Sacks, 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 236–266; cf. the notes for an earlier version of these lectures in Fall 1965, Vol 1, 223–231). Schegloff’s “Sequencing in Conversational Openings” appeared in the American Anthropologist in 1968. There was an informal meeting during the 1968 Linguistic Institute at UCLA at which many of these people – Garfinkel, Gumperz, Labov, Sacks, Schegloff – and others – Aaron Cicourel and Michael Moerman come to mind – met, some for the first time. For example, though Bill Labov and I had then been colleagues at Columbia for a year, we met for the first time at that UCLA encounter; it was also the first meeting of Labov and Sacks, as I recall. A few days later, there was an informal meeting at Bill Bright’s house involving a partially overlapping set of people – including Goffman, for example, but not Garfinkel or Sacks – to discuss the teaching of sociolinguistics. In short, the mid-60s was a time when a range of related ways of addressing a related range of subject matters at the intersection of language, interaction, discourse, practical action and inference, and the like was being explored.

2. Personal experience in this way emerges as a “type” of the larger class “narrative,” a taxonomy fitted to academic and investigatory preoccupations – such as the task of collecting examples of narrative by soliciting their telling and needing to specify “what kind of story” is wanted. This however, is an unusual way for the matter to come up in ordinary interaction. Rather than starting with “narrative” and choosing some “type,” participants are likely to have something to tell, with design considerations hearing on whether to tell it minimally in a single-unit utterance, as a story, and so forth, and, if as a story, what design features for story construction to adopt. For example, in the brief excerpt that follows, Hyla and Nancy are two college students with tickets to the theater that evening to see The Dark at the Top of the Stairs. In this telephone conversation several hours before they are to meet, Nancy asks Hyla how she came to get the tickets.

Hyla, 5:06-17
1 (0.8)
2 Hyla: [hhhhhh]
3 Nancy: [How did]ju hear about it from the paper?
4 Hyla: [hhhhh I sa:w
5 (0.4)
6 Hyla: Aright when was: it,
Here the question asked at Line 3 is ostensibly to be answered with a simple response: “I saw . . .” (“ostensibly” because this may be belied by the audibly deep in-breath which precedes it (“.hhhhhh”) and which may project a rather longer telling in the works). That initial response-in-progress is abandoned shortly after onset, and a storytelling format begins to be deployed, the story going on for a good two pages of single-spaced transcript. This is one type of instance of having something to tell and choosing among alternative formats of telling, in contrast with starting with a story-to-be-told and choosing among types of story.

3. If the inquiry for a story was designed to implement some other action or interactional tack, or was so understood by its recipients, L&W do not tell us. The same goes for the telling that ensued, though we might suppose the common “motive” of “helping science” to have been mobilized (cf. Orne, 1959, 1962; Rosenthal, 1966).

4. The problem is not the aim of arriving at some underlying practices or structures of narrative, only the effort to do so by stripping away naturally occurring circumstantial detail by intervening in the data collection (thereby distorting the data), rather than by arriving at it by analysis of naturally occurring “specimens.”

5. Here again there are analytic particulars, not hypothetical speculations, to be considered. For example, in the stretch of talk taken up in C. Goodwin, 1986, and Schegloff, 1987, 1992, the telling of a story is prompted for its dramatic, exciting character to escape the displayed boring character of the talk otherwise going on. However, the telling is no sooner launched than the auspices of its telling, the premise of its dramatic character, are challenged, and turn out to compromise the course of the telling. Where “excitement” is offered as relief from ennui, it may be taken as a complaint about the current active speakers and prompt responses which impact the teller quite differently from the “exciting” Stories elicited in the L&W. These too might have been compromised (or differently told) had others, familiar with the tale and the events it reported, been present to the telling. However, the elicitation setting provides a more antiseptic and hothouse environment, and in this respect at least, an unnatural one.

6. This goes specifically to the practices of storytelling in such settings as well. For example, with respect to talk in therapy sessions, Sacks (1992, vol. 1, pp. 767–768) called attention to Fromm-Reichmann’s observation that a key problem in the training of therapists and in the practice of therapy is listening to the stories of others without having those stories mobilize in the therapist subsequent stories (“second stories”) of their own experience. Her remarks exemplify the notion of specialized settings as transformations of ordinary conversational practice — therapists-in-training have to neutralize or suppress practices of story reception in ordinary conversation in favor of ones fitted to the technical tasks of therapeutic interaction. For another setting, see also Pomerantz (1987).
References


Reflections on the Biographical Turn in Social Science

Michael Rustin

Contemporary theories of individualisation (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991, 1992) argue that modern society is giving a new importance to individuals. Where earlier agrarian and industrial societies provided social scripts, which most individuals were expected to follow, contemporary societies throw more responsibility on to individuals to choose their own identities. Social structures – classes, extended families, occupational communities, long-term employment within a firm – which formerly provided strong frames of identity, grow weaker. Simultaneously, society exposes individuals to bombardments of information, alternative versions of how life might be lived, and requires of individuals that they construct an ‘authentic’ version of themselves, making use of the numerous identity-props which consumer-society makes available. The transition from The Hidden Injuries of Class (1972) in Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb’s classic book of that title, to Sennett’s recent study of the children of that generation The Corrosion of Character (1998) provides one description of this transition, which Sennett represents as involving as much loss as gain in terms of psychic and moral wellbeing.

Some theorists of this new ‘individualised’ order view it as embodying the possibility of emancipation. ‘Reflexivity’ – the possibility to understand and choose the circumstances and rules of one’s life – is for some the realisation of a prospect of human emancipation. Although the uncertainties and ‘risks’ of this situation are recognised, and anxieties

are expressed about the social bonds and solidarities that might be necessary to sustain the meaning of individual lives, some writers celebrate this new world of freedom and choice.

Others view individualisation more critically. Foucault noted that individuals were ‘produced’ through social procedures which were in their own way as coercive as the more collectivised routines of the previous social era. Critics of consumer capitalism have long seen the choices between commodities and the identities packaged with them as superficial, masking dependence on a system which exploits, without satisfying, a human need for authenticity. The concepts of ‘risk’ and ‘individualisation’ are viewed by some as a way of celebrating what for the majority is a condition of increased anxiety and insecurity, the consequence of a transfer of economic risk from the owners of capital to those without its advantages. While those better positioned in the labour or capital markets, and able to exploit the opportunities they provide for the management of uncertainty, may gain from this situation, many members of society lose, and might prefer, if offered a choice, a situation where risks were better contained.

Whatever view one takes of the phenomenon of ‘individualisation’, it is not surprising that a new focus on individuals is having influence on the methods of the social sciences. in such a climate, the time seems right for a fresh methodological turn towards the study of individuals, a turn to biography.

A Historical Paradox

Individual subjects were ‘discovered’ (some would say invented or constructed), and became the principal focus of cultural attention, at an earlier stage in modern history. This first happened in the culture and society of early modern Europe. From the late sixteenth century, with increasing momentum, European society became interested in individuals, in their differences from one another, in their imputed psychological depth, their moral value, their capacity for change and development. ‘To thine own self be true’ Polonius tells his son Laetes in Hamlet, echoing in his banal homily the fashionable ideas of the time. The portraits and self-portraits of Rembrandt convey a new dimension of self-reflection and of the passage of time. The printed word, the first and most important kind of disembedding of information from its local context, allowed individuals to make their own sense of other people’s experiences, initially in the vernacular translation of the Bible and then in many other kinds of writing. Protestantism required of individuals an intense capacity for self-scrutiny and self-purification. The philosophy of the seventeenth century took as the foundation of knowledge the sensory
experiences (Berkeley, Locke, Hume) or the introspected ideas (Descartes, Spinoza) of individuals. The emergence of the novel, in the eighteenth century, enabled readers to reflect on the meaning of lives of persons like themselves and those around them. One of the most influential of these early novels, *Robinson Crusoe*, imagined the life of a person living in a state of virtual isolation and self-sufficiency, giving an emblematic foundation to the idea of the individual. Lyric poetry established the idea of individual sensibility, a subjectivity based on discriminated states of feeling. In Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* the idea of a spiritual autobiography achieved its canonical modern form. In Germany, in the same period, the ‘*bildungsroman*’, or narrative of personal development (notably in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*), established a parallel view of the world through the life-experience of a representative individual. Later on, the drama which had been originally in the forefront of the cultural ‘discovery’ of the individual (in the plays of the ancient Greek tragedians and in England and France in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) reemerged as a significant form of exploration of the complexities of individual life, in the work of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov, and in a succession of later dramatists from Miller to Beckett. From its inception, the cinema became an exceptionally powerful and popular means of establishing images of individual identity, worth and beauty, popularising the idealisation of the individual through its invention of ‘the star’. These various kinds of images and reflections of individual lives are in the broadest sense ‘biographical’, even though the biographies they construct and represent are for the most part ‘imaginary’ or ‘fictional’ in quality.

The paradox is that, while a variety of forms of Western cultural representation have been preoccupied with individuals, and have been working in various imaginative biographical registers for centuries, social science has generally not been sympathetic to these approaches, and has mostly filtered biography out of its fields of interest.1 Why is this?

The explanation of this paradox, and also of the new possibility of escaping from its grip, lies in the prescriptive conceptions of scientific method which have dominated social scientific inquiry until recently. The power of the natural sciences lay in their methods of generalisation and abstraction, in their capacity to view phenomena through particular perspectives capable of generating knowledge, while blanking our all others. Plainly, in studying the solar system, or natural species, or human bodies, or the chemical elements, filtering out the prior texture of mythical, religious, cultural and emotional associations which such phenomena had for members of a culture was fundamental in enabling them to be seen in new and transformative ways.2 The capacity to reinterpret, and thereby to gain a new control of, the natural world, required the rejection of previous ‘common-sense’ understandings, in which religious,
aesthetic and moral meanings were as important as factual description and causal explanation.

A particularly sharp conjunction of ‘modern’ and ‘pre-modern’ ways of experiencing and analysing the natural world is described by Robert Sack’s (1986) work on the North American settlers’ understanding of land and place. What for the indigenous Indian population were places deeply invested with cultural meaning were for the settlers mere tracts of territory, measured by their potential economic yields. It was difficult for the communities holding these two world-views even to understand one another.

The extreme high (or low) point of this insistence on impersonal objectivity and generality was the philosophical doctrine of logical positivism, developed under the intellectual sway of physics in the early part of this century. This argued that statements which referred neither to observable facts, nor logical relations between their elements, were without meaning (Ayer 1936).

Thus, modelling themselves on the natural scientists, human biologists and psychologists set out to construct models of body and mind which described uniformities and regularities, and which enabled human behaviour to be understood ‘objectively’, that is in terms of its abstracted common attributes. Interests in individual idiosyncrasy and variation were seen as impediments to this ambition to create a generalising science of man. To explain the aspect of behaviour and social organisation that interested them, the economists constructed an ideal typical model of rational actors which similarly abstracted from the full range of human motives and meanings, with powerful explanatory effect. The intellectual ancestors of both scientific psychology and economics were the empiricist philosophers – Hobbes, Locke, Hume and the utilitarians – who had earlier stripped human motivation down to what they deemed to be its fundamental atomistic elements.

Exceptions to Scientism: Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis

There were two major exceptions to this dominant approach in the human sciences. The first of these was a minority idealist or subjectivist tradition within sociology originating with Dilthey. This influenced the mainstream of sociology through Max Weber, leading to the compromise between idealist and empiricist methodologies embodied in his prescription that explanation should be ‘adequate at the level of cause and adequate at the level of meaning’. The idealist tradition, especially in German philosophy, had a continuing influence on the social sciences via phenomenology and hermeneutics. This tradition influenced American interactionist sociology, via Husserl and Alfred Schütz, and
Husserl’s influence was also significant in France, via Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur. Although rationality ruled in England via a dominant philosophy of empiricism, in German-speaking culture these issues were more contested, even though the rival idealist and empiricist perspectives had both to be sustained in exile, and then renewed in the Federal Republic after the war (Adorno et al. 1976). In France, the idea of subjectivity was marginalised in a different way, through the structuralist and post-structuralist movements, whose intellectual programme was to insist on the construction of individual subjects through systems of language and culture. Even where sociologies of action and practice remained important, as in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, questions of individual subjectivity were subordinated to the mapping of social structures, which were seen to shape the competition of collective actors by allocating resources of material, social and cultural capital. This idealist or phenomenological tradition has been the primary source of biographical approaches in social science, both directly through its absorption by sociologists in Germany and France, and indirectly via its hybridisation with symbolic interactionist perspectives in the United States. These connections are explored elsewhere in this volume.

A second important exception to the dominant anti-subjectivist current of social science was psychoanalysis, which was unusual among the social sciences in rejecting the opposition between scientific and imaginative methods, between typification and the investigation of the particular. Freud wanted to develop a new psychological science which would provide causal explanations of mental states, and to connect these to their biological basis in instinctual drives. He saw himself as a scientist, yet his primary method of investigation was the case study, seen as the history elicited from patients and those around them, and more particularly as what could be learned through the method of psychoanalytic treatment, with its distinctive method of interpretation of dreams and free associations. Freud constructed his typified models of psychic structures from individual cases. Other psychoanalysts tested Freud’s findings both through investigation of the application of his theoretical models to their clinical experience, and through identifying similarities and differences between their own cases and those described by Freud and other analysts. The development of psychoanalysis post-Freud has followed this method. The investigations of cases in the consulting room, making increasing use of the transference and counter-transference as sources of understanding, have been the main empirical resource for the development of psychoanalytic theories and techniques. The transmission and reproduction of psychoanalytic ideas has always taken place to a great extent through clinical examples, through the family resemblances’ between one instance of a typical psychic structure in the consulting room and another. Without such clinical illustration and exemplification,
psychoanalytic theories appear scarcely intelligible abstractions, and where the field relies too heavily on abstracted theory, it does not make much progress.

In its insistence on the ‘whole person’ as the object of study, and on the necessity to understand non-rational aspects of mental life as constitutive of human nature, psychoanalysis refused to accept the legitimacy of prevailing orthodoxies in the human sciences. The claims made by Freud for the scientific status of psychoanalysis were vigorously disputed, and psychoanalysis gained little influence in academic psychology or psychiatry, in Britain at least. But, on the other side of the ‘two cultures’ divide, it was extremely influential. The resources that psychoanalysis provided for reflecting on disturbing and poorly understood aspects of the self were widely taken up, in particular in cultural metropolises such as Vienna, Berlin, London, New York, Paris and Buenos Aires where the educated congregated in the most contested and open cultural spaces. The fact that psychoanalysis could be sustained wherever individual patients were willing to pay psychoanalysts to analyse them made it possible for psychoanalysis, like modernist literature and art, to flourish even if universities and scientific establishments had little time for it (Rustin 1997, 1999). In fact, psychoanalytic ideas became part of everyday life, and were particularly influential in the arts, where the idea that the mind might not be transparent to itself and that communication often took place in unintended, over-determined, or metaphorical ways, was a stimulus to imaginative work. Since production in the arts did not usually take the form of following explicit rules and protocols, and often took as its subject-matter experiences which seemed to fall outside the domain of scientific understanding, psychoanalysis’ doubtful and ambiguous status as a scientific discipline was little obstacle to its influence in the arts and humanities.

In fact, argument about the scientific status of psychoanalysis has continued to take place within the psychoanalytic movement, as well as between psychoanalysts and scientific psychologists. While Freud himself was emphatic that he wished to create a science whose theories would be testable, and which would enable causal relations to be discovered, many psychoanalysts felt more comfortable working with ideas of meaning rather than of causal determination. The organisation of personality by reference to instincts, drives and desires, which had been important in Freuds early work, developed into a theory of personality governed by structures of relationship to internal and external objects. This development began in Freud’s own work – for example, his paper *Mounting and Melancholia* is based on the idea of relation to an internalised concept of a loved person – and was developed further by his successors. Melanie Klein’s concept of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions is based on the idea of a relation to ‘internal objects’ as providing
an unconscious template which shapes individuals’ relationships to persons in their external world, and is in turn shaped and constituted by their experiences of such others especially in early life. These unconscious structures of mind are the primary theoretical objects of this school of psychoanalysis. Some argue that such structures embody causal hypotheses; others prefer accounts which describe patterns of thought and action, and think of psychic structures in terms of meaning and coherence, not cause and effect.

It is clear in any case that the essence of all psychoanalytic method depends on the interpretation of descriptions of states of mind or mental acts (dreams, desires, actions) in terms of more abstract models of mind. Psychoanalysis moves between the phenomenological details of what patients say, as these are understood and interpreted by their analysts, and more generalised concepts and classifications of states of mind. An analysand will be understood at a given moment to be in a state of project time identification, or in a state of Oedipal jealousy, or to be narcissistic in libidinal or destructive ways, or to be experiencing persecutory or depressive anxiety. Or an individual, a child for example, may be deeply affected by the state of mind of loved persons, intruded into by their depression or anxiety, or deprived of emotional nourishment by their withdrawal of responsive attention.

States of mind and relationship that psychoanalysts have tried to map conceptually, by classifications which one might think of as the psychoanalytic equivalent of ideal-types, have at the same time been the imaginative subject of poets, novelists and artists. While the psychoanalysts were exploring the extreme and often unconscious responsiveness of individuals to the states of mind of others, writers such as D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, or Sylvia Plath, were describing parallel susceptibilities as states of mind which they located in particular imagined persons. Works of ‘fiction’ have paradoxically been able to come closer to the truths of subjective experience than either generalising works of science, which fail to capture the particularity and immediacy of lived lives, or factual descriptions of individuals, whose common defect is a lack of coherence and connectedness, a sufficient sense of ‘the essential’. It is for this reason that many people’s understanding of the human world, and the store of ideas they have for making sense of it, has probably been more shaped by so-called ‘fictional’ works – including films, plays, novels, television serials – than by works of social science, whether theoretical or descriptive. It has been said that American gangsters learned how to behave ‘in role’ by going to the movies. Most people can probably remember moments in which they looked for some external definition of this kind for their own uncertain identities. This seems to be one of the main social functions of the cultural industries, promoting fashions not only in commodities but also in life-styles and self-presentations.
The ‘Cultural Turn’ in the Social Sciences

The relatively firm boundaries between ‘scientific’ and ‘imaginative’ ways of understanding human lives and the societies in which they were lived began to be undermined in the 1960s, by a number of currents of thought. T.S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) itself initiated something like a revolution in the understanding of science, demonstrating that scientific understanding was itself the outcome of a social process like any other, and that the apparent objectivity and unanimity of ‘science’ in relation to its objects of study did not stand up well to investigation of the development, through argument and conflict, of actual scientific beliefs. Kuhn, and subsequent researchers in the field of the sociology and anthropology of science, introduced a new pluralism to the understanding of scientific knowledge, showing that scientific knowledge came in many varieties, and that its warrants to truth always depended on the consensus of particular scientific communities. Fierce arguments continue between defenders of the objectivity and absolute truth of science, and those who infer from Kuhn’s sociological account that all such claims are relative to the interests and norms of those who make them. Bruno Latour (1987; Latour and Woolgar 1986), one of Kuhn’s most important successors in the sociology of science, suggests that this choice is falsely posed. He argues that truths about the world are necessarily mediated by human perceptions. Even though nature has its own existence and attributes, and the effects of these enable us to discriminate between true propositions and false ones, there can be no direct revelation of these truths. What scientists bring to scientific inquiry unavoidably contributes to what science discovers.

The effect of this sociological approach was to broaden the understanding of science, and expose its actual diversity. It became easier as a result to recognise the validity of methodologies, including qualitative and interpretive approaches in the human sciences, hitherto deemed to belong more to the field of the arts than of science, the social sciences having occupied what had seemed to be an uneasy no man’s land between them.

While the absolutist claims of science were being called into question, a development was taking place in some of the arts and humanities that converged with it, to bring about the broad change in the social sciences known as the ‘cultural’ or ‘linguistic turn’ (Rorty 1967; Chancy 1994; Jameson 1998). This development, in literary and cultural theory, sought to question absolutist claims which were the obverse of those made on behalf of the hard scientists. While science bad insisted on the objectivity of nature, humanists had asserted the authenticity and autonomy of the individual subject. Structuralist and post-structuralist literary and cultural critics began in the 1960s to adopt a more systematic or
scientific approach to the analysis of language and other symbolic systems. They observed that meaning is always constructed through convections and expectations of particular kinds, and is not the spontaneous creation of autonomous individuals. An extreme version of this asserted the ‘death of the author’, and looked instead to interpret works of art as the synthesis of a variety of culturally given genres or ‘scripts’. Just as the sociological critique of science had undermined the idea of an Archimedean point of objective understanding of nature, so structuralist and post-structuralist accounts of textual determination undermined the idea of an absolute individual authenticity, the mirror-opposite of scientism.

These linked paradigm shifts – that were also sustained by idealistic and pragmatist developments in philosophy, which gave priority to ‘forms of life’ (Wittgenstein 1953) and to consensus based on shared interests and norms as the main legitimation of belief (Rorty 1980) – gave a new weight to cultural norms as the reality through which all understanding had to be reflexively mediated.

The recognition of the cultural variability or relativity of understandings reflected, as major intellectual revolutions usually do, changes in the world as well as in the models by which it was interpreted. The principal change was the widespread challenge to cultural authority which took place from the 1960s onwards, as new ‘voices’ of generation, gender, class, ethnicity and value demanded to be heard. Dominant ‘enlightenment’ world-views which had legitimised the ‘improving’ missions of imperialism, and which were institutionalised in two opposed versions in the Cold War, began to be undermined. Established cultural elites started to lose some of their power, and affluence, information flows and mass education brought about the beginnings of a kind of cultural democracy. The ‘cultural turn’ provided resources for reflecting on emergent differences of word-view. 4

From the Cultural to a Biographical Turn?

It is at this conjuncture that we must consider the place of biographical method in the social and cultural sciences, and its possibilities. It by no means follows, because a cultural and linguistic turn has taken place, that a biographical turn necessarily follows. The history of biographical methods in the social sciences seems to have been one of fits and starts, moments of creativity having usually been followed by a return to a normal marginal position. And as we have shown, the cultural turn is by no means automatically convergent with a subjectivist or biographical approach. An initial effect of the cultural turn was to deconstruct ideas of individual autonomy and authenticity which had hitherto been the main ground by which the ‘imaginative’ disciplines of the humanities
maintained their distinction from the sciences. Once all the decodable attributes of individual expression have been identified and traced to their cultural context, the individual can seem to be a vanishing-point, a residue that ties beyond explanation or specification. Not all students of literature and film have been pleased to discover that the authors or auteurs whom they thought they had come to university to study did not, as a matter of theoretical principle, exist.

What do we expect from the study of individuals and of subjectivity? It seems we must necessarily expect connections to be made between individual life stories and wider frameworks of understanding. Where biographical studies become wholly an investigation and celebration of individual lives per se, they seem unlikely to be either assimilable or compelling. There are too many lives, too many particulars, too many differences, for their mere elaboration and depiction to be in itself memorable. Social scientists, with their inherent leanings towards an understanding of representative or typical social facts, are particularly inclined to take this view. An approach which confines itself to the accumulation of facts is no less limited where the facts in question are those of subjective experience, life stories, or oral histories. Understanding involves the attribution of meaning, causal connection, typicality, and not merely detailed description. What else then should we want from the biographical method, in addition to the capturing of the particularity of lives which is its epistemological foundation?

A return to the two precedents of literary representation and psychoanalysis can help us to explore the particular senses of ‘the representative’ which will be needed if biographical methods are to establish themselves in the mainstream of the social sciences. Aesthetic realists, from Aristotle in his Poetics onwards, have argued that ‘fictional’ representations achieve, as a measure of their quality, a truth which we think of in terms of typicality, in the representation of hitherto unrecognised aspects of human experience. ‘Typicality’ is represented in art not in the form of abstract generalisations, but as imagined instances of particular configurations of experience. Truth is recognised by identification, by the recognition of identity or similarity. This perception of identity is achieved by the representation of an imaginable life, or episodes in a life. Audiences recognise that any woman, placed in the position of Medea in Euripedes’ tragedy could have murdered her children – thus what at first seems monstrous becomes understandable. It is the verisimilitude of the particular case (constructed and interpreted through signifying conventions) that enables the general significance of what is displayed to be recognised. As we have said, this mode of representation, discovery and understanding is one of the most powerful and definitive in our culture, perhaps in all imaginable human cultures.
Psychoanalysis adopts strategies of investigation which are both similar to and different from the imaginative. Its empirical method is the investigation of the individual case, but its concept of the representative is theoretically defined, cumulative and systematic. This discipline has sought to learn and teach by individual example (the case history, the case-narrative), but by theoretical generalisation and abstraction as well as by the heuristic and communicative power of its individual case examples. Psychoanalytic investigation of individual lives has been undertaken from a theoretically specific point of view. This presupposes the existence of an inner world or unconscious mind, which is not transparent to individuals, whose structures and processes can be illuminated, both for analysts and their patients, by psychoanalysis. The moral driving force of this process of inquiry has been the existence of mental pain, and the desire, by analysands and analysts alike, to alleviate it where possible. (There is an obvious derivation from the concern of medicine to prevent or alleviate physical suffering.)

The kinds of mental and emotional ill-being to which psychoanalysis has responded have evolved during its history, probably reflecting changes in socially constructed kinds of typical individual experience. Psychoanalytic patients are today less likely to present themselves with hysterical symptoms recognisable as the outcome of sexual repression than in Freud’s clay, and more likely to appear saying that their lives are without meaning, and that they feel incapable of love or of lasting attachments. The field has developed both in its theories and its techniques, in attempts to widen its scope of understanding to individuals with many kinds of disturbance, to group processes, to institutions and, through the method of unobtrusive naturalistic observation, to normal infants in their families. All of these methods of psychoanalytic work combine the empiricism of the case study with a commitment to the typification and generalisation of psychic attributes.

By contrast, the individual has been a largely subordinate preoccupation of sociology. Indeed the field in part constituted itself in the nineteenth century by opposition to disciplines (classical economics, psychology) which took the individual as their point of departure, and has yet fully to recover a capacity to take the individual seriously. The object of sociology as a field of knowledge has been to develop valid generalisations about societies, their component structures and processes and their development. The understanding of individuals has been subordinated to this task, and the effect of this has been to make it difficult, within this discipline, to do justice either to the particularity of human lives, or to their actual and potential agency.

The priority given to the social over the individual was most emphatic within the functionalist tradition, whose aim was to understand how different equilibrium states were maintained within societies, and how different elements of the social order contributed to this. Individuals,
in such models, were of interest in so far as they fulfilled the normative requirements of the social structures in which they took their places. Individuals were defined as place-holders, necessary to fill the slots provided by social roles, but contributing little autonomously to them. Psychoanalysis was invoked by Talcott Parsons to explain how individuals came to conform, by means of normal childhood socialisation, to these expectations. Interesting issues did arise where such obligations were found to be in conflict with each other, where it seemed impossible for role incumbents to follow an unambiguous script. Within the functionalist tradition, this situation was interpreted as ‘role strain’, and Robert Merton (1957) developed an important typology of modes of adaptation of typical individuals to such situations.9

Parsons was also able to identify areas of individual and social stress, for example in adolescence, through tracking the passage of typical individuals through the roles and expectations set out for them. The idealised conformity attributed to role-incumbents was one of the main points of departure from functionalist sociology by its symbolic interactionist critics. Once they began to theorise roles as being ‘made’ rather than ‘taken’, and to give attention to the interactions through which individuals found their ways through social structures, a different sociology became possible (Rose 1962). It is out of this ‘break’ that much of the socio-biographical tradition in America in particular has emerged.

The alternative sociological framework of ‘action theory’, which traces its origins back to Max Weber, gave more scope to agency, and with this to individual subjectivity. Weber’s ideal types are types of ‘social action’, in which typical configurations of ends and means are the building blocks of models of social structure. Emblematic individuals (Calvin, Benjamin Franklin) are described in Weber’s work for their exemplary significance, and even for their causal agency, in defining norms of action. The debate between ‘structure and agency’ continues to be a defining polarity of sociological theory, with important attempts now being made to resolve it once and for all (Giddens 1984; Areher 1995; Mouzelis 1995). But the ‘agency’ to which the voluntaristic and subjectivist school of sociology gives priority is more that of collective than of individual actors. Despite the current interest in individualisation and reflexivity, there has so far been little interest taken in studying these forms of being as they are experienced by individuals. It seems almost definitional of sociology that the social comes first, and although the consequences of social forms for character and personality have been memorably described by many sociologists (e.g. in studies of bureaucratic personalities, amoral families, total institutions, liminal experiences), the systematic study of individual biographies has rarely been important to this. Yet a biographical turn, if it occurs in social science on a significant scale, requires that methodologies be developed (the main topic of this book) which enable
societies and cultures to be studied from the individual ‘upwards’, rather than from the social structure ‘downwards’. This is a heuristic strategy that both the representational arts of imaginative literature, and psychoanalysis, have had no difficulty in following. What is necessary if sociology is to find its own uses for biography?

**Biographical Methods in Sociology: The Individual as Agent**

The essential problem for a biographical sociology is both to keep hold of an essentially sociological frame of reference and to demonstrate that original knowledge of social structure and process can be derived from the study of individual life stories (Rustin 1998). Just as the strength of the psychoanalytic method has come from its conjunction of the particular case study with a theoretical frame of reference (identifying characteristic defences against anxiety, developmental positions, psychic processes and their formative presences in the lives of individuals), so a biographical method in sociology must not forget its own primary frame of reference of sociological theory.

What has to be demonstrated is that sociological theory can be developed from the study of individual cases, in contrast to the usual sociological practice by which individual lives are shown to have meaning by their framing within previously established sociological categories. For such a methodology to be sociological, it is necessary to demonstrate that a life trajectory, or individual mode of being, is socially representative. It must enable us to understand, by inference or resemblance, other instances of the same kind. What is different in a biographical sociology (as is already the case in the knowledge-forms of psychoanalysis and the novel), is that the point of discovery, the ground from which inferences can be made, and similarities and differences identified, is the individual subject.

A much more radical argument can be made, about the *effectivity* of the individual. Changes in method often involve changes in ontology as well as in epistemology – that is, not only in how we come to know reality, but also in what reality consists of, and what has causal powers within it. In the case of the ‘cultural turn’, this change led to an epistemological focus on language and signs, and to an ontological belief that language and culture made a difference, shaped social reality. An earlier example of a transformation of this kind, in which changes in epistemology and ontology were linked, was the emergence of sociology, which both postulated a new category at ‘social facts’ and demonstrated their causal effectivity. Recent developments in geography, as it developed a post-Marxist theoretical basis, and challenged historicist assumptions in social theory, led to equally important heuristic claims, a change of
perspective summarised in the axiom, ‘space matters’. Similarly, the foundational idea in the development of psychoanalysis was that the unconscious exercised a determining influence on mental life, and it was from this assumption that psychoanalytic methods of investigation and clinical intervention developed.

If a ‘biographical turn’ is to take place in sociology, one expects it to have an ontological dimension as well as the new epistemology of sociobiographical research methods explored in this book. The ontological assumption must be that individuals have agency, that biographies make society and are not merely made by it. Unless it can be shown that individuals make a difference, that they have effectivity, there will in the end seem little to be gained from studying the social world from a biographical point of view.

The idea that individuals do (increasingly) embody agency is inherent in the contemporary ideas of ‘individualisation’ and ‘reflexivity’, ideas which thus seem to be awaiting their appropriate methods of research. This of course is an idea already deeply encoded in Western imaginative literature, whose heuristic value derives from its repeated demonstrations that though individuals interact with others, and with a social world, they do so as agents. This is the case for the central characters of novels, from Fielding or Jane Austen to Conan Doyle or John Le Carré, of drama, from Euripides to Athol Fugard, and their near parallels in cinema or television, where detectives, gangsters, private eyes and Western heroes and villains represent potent images of agency. To represent individuals as essentially lacking the power of agency, as in the plays of Beckett or Chekhov, is usually to draw attention to a condition of crisis and pain.

This has not been an uncontested position. Developments initially associated with the cultural turn demonstrated the shaping power of language, discourses, and sign-systems. They were anti-humanist and critical of the idea of the individual subject. But the later development of post-structuralism has taken a somewhat different course. Once the endless complexity of discourse and language comes to be recognised, the idea that it wholly determines individual and social experience becomes untenable. First, because individuals (and collective agents) find themselves at points of intersection and choice between competing and contradictory discourses, and therefore obliged to make choices. And second, because languages are after all spoken, improvised, renewed. They are not invariant templates merely stamping out utterances (or the individuals who speak them) like the identical products of a die.

The early structuralist version of the cultural turn was a highly rationalist one, attributing (in the work of Lévi-Strauss and Althusser) to ideologies and cultural systems the power to reproduce themselves without the intervention of agents – somewhat like the algorithms of computer
But as the complexities of discourse came to be recognised, a new post-structuralist emphasis was given to contingency, and to what lay outside language. The process of ‘coming into being’ of categories and modes of thought, and their instrumental role as forms of power (that is as the effects of agency) became the object of attention in Foucault’s work and in the renewed interest in Nietzsche. We might say that a perspective dominated by the clash of two great ideological systems was replaced by one in which contingency, and the critique of power itself, came to be objects of attention. Post-structuralism also opened the way, in a return to a more anarchic modernist spirit, to recognition of the ‘irrational preconditions of reason’, the substratum of experience which has to be reflected on before rational discourses emerge. The recovery of the ‘pre-rational’ and therefore contingent (which echoes the fundamental insights of psychoanalysis, and was indeed nourished by it, in Lacan’s contribution to post-structuralism) is one resource for the recognition of individual agency, as the process of self-construction and self-recognition.

Whereas the early structuralist phase of the ‘cultural turn’ was deliberately antithetical to the idea of the individual subject, its later post-structuralist phase has thus opened a space for the rediscovery of individual agency, though the individual in this new context is no longer the unified subject of classical humanism.

These developments clear the theoretical ground for investigations which begin with the identification in individuals of distinctive life-strategies, trajectories, or kinds of self-recognition, as building blocks from which a larger understanding of society can be imagined. Recognition of contingency, of the spaces within which individuals create meaning and devise strategies for their lives, is critical if a biographical perspective is to escape from an ultimate social reductionism.

Socio-biographical accounts usually seek to identify in individual utterances elements which are socially recognisable, which are typical of some social form or other. We may think of these as segments of ‘social script’ (Harré 1979), or forms of self-presentation derived from existing social repertoires. Scheff’s (1997) useful description of qualitative methodologies as focused on the links between parts and wholes describes one way in which social context is established. Essential as they are, there is still the risk that such interpretive procedures will merely deconstruct subjects into their socially derived elements, much like deconstructive textual procedures sometimes had the effect of dismantling the original work of art, transferring authority from its creator to its critic. The inherent tendency in sociology to hold the society to be the shaping force, and the individual subject as its product, will always threaten to push biographical methods in this direction.

This tendency can only be avoided if the individual case becomes the point of discovery and the starting-point for inferences about social
structure. Biographical methods in social science need to develop a lexicon from the empirical investigation of lives, of biographies which are exemplary nor in a moral sense, but as instances of representative kinds of lives. A tradition of such work (a socio-biographical ‘canon’) can be constructed from existing classics in the field, and needs to be further developed through new work.

Case examples have always been important sources of discovery, in sociology, and among its most memorable ‘inscription devices’. The ‘thick descriptions’ recommended, and provided, by Clifford Geertz, and in the ethnographies of Paul Willis, are examples of the conveying of sociological truths through holistic, particular kinds of report, from which theoretical generalisations are only subsequently inferred. Such case studies describe social agency in action. Historians normally work in this way, from particular cases. Knowledge of many social phenomena are contained and transmitted through memory of such instances, as well as through theoretical generalisation. A classic example is the idea of revolution and its dependence on the case (exemplary for both social scientists and revolutionaries) of the French Revolution. François Furet’s (1981) *Interpreting the French Revolution*, gave a postmodern theoretical cogency to this particularist approach, rejecting theories which explained the revolution by reference to ‘external’ social forces (notably those of class conflict) and explaining it instead as a process which evolved from its own discourse, in an episode of pure emergent collective agency. This process of learning from social particulars is the holistic or ethnographical equivalent of the biographical method.

Just as ethnographies have provided exemplary descriptions of social life, from which an understanding of its essential attributes is derived, so socio-biographies can do this from an individual perspective. This has been a normal form of knowledge-generation in psychoanalysis, via its case studies. But it is through imaginative writing that understanding has been most often achieved through the description of individual life stories. Oedipus the King, Medea, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Faust, Anna Karenina, Raskolnikov, Hedda Gabler, Nora, Estragon and Vladimir, are points of common reference in European culture because their creators have identified in them some previously unrecognised but nevertheless representative kind of social being. While it may seem from a scientific point of view that social truths are established only by abstract general propositions or laws, in fact understanding of the social world has been equally accomplished through the luminosity of single cases. Ethnography and biography explore process, rather than merely structure. It is because it is through single cases that self-reflection, decision and action in human lives can best be explored and represented that the case study is essential to human understanding.
Epilogue on Sociological Education

It seems to be a long time since sociology inspired the majority of its students, as the bearer of a uniquely illuminating and liberating way of seeing the world. It has, since its moment of greatest euphoria in the 1960s, been through countless minor theoretical revolutions, seen many of its best ideas and methods adopted by neighbouring fields of study, and has suffered some disillusion in discovering that its insights did not, after all, seem to change the world in the direction of greater equality of voice and participation. (Or perhaps they did help to do so, in a general delegitimation of social and cultural authority, but not in the ways most of the sociologists had expected.)

A ‘biographical turn’ may now provide a fresh opportunity for sociologists to capture the interest and enthusiasm of their students. In an ‘individualised’ world, in which many social identities, of class, gender, race and generation, are being rendered uncertain or contested, one might expect that to start the investigation of society with the individual’s own experience would have its appeal. The idea that the production as well as the reproduction of social identities takes place at an individual, subjective level, should be of interest to many who must be concerned to understand what spaces exist in which meaningful lives and careers can be made. Any theoretical and methodological programme will benefit from defining an associated field of practice. Gramscian neo-Marxists identified the practices of ‘organic intellectuals’ (those of teachers, nurses, journalists), whose work involved articulating social experiences on behalf of various collective subjects. For neo-liberals, the prescribed activity was to join the enterprise culture. A biographical turn in social science might offer a more exploratory form of action, in which students can explore how people make their world in the interaction with others, the sources of individuals’ pain and satisfaction, and about how inspiration can be found in the lives of others.

‘Undertake a socio-biographical interview, and through it explore the life story of an individual (for example, of one of your grandparents)’ might be a rewarding initial research assignment for a sociology student.

Notes

1. Within the humanities, and among historians, biographies have always been a major form, from Plutarch’s Lives and Vasari’s Lives of the Artists onwards. It is the social sciences that have mostly avoided a biographical approach.
2. This was a theme of much of Ernest Gellner’s work, e.g. The Legitimation of Belief (1975).

4. Bauman’s Legislators and Interpreters (1987) called attention to the authoritarian assumptions of enlightenment ways of thinking, and advocated a greater respect for difference.

5. Either, in other words, subjectivity is unintelligible, beyond the reach of reason, or it has already been wholly socialised. This stark choice summarises the position of Lacan.

6. The issue of ‘typicality’ was central to the adaptation of phenomenology to sociological inquiry in the United States, for example in the work of Alfred Schutz (1970).

7. This is an example of Anthony Giddens’ ‘double hermeneutic’ – the ‘discovery’ of sexual repression in Freud’s work contributed to a change in the social recognition and admissibility of sexuality, which is still proceeding. This of course does not abolish sexual repression, which remains a fact of normal development, but changes its forms and manifestations.

8. Psychoanalytic infant observation research is described in Miller et al. 1989; Reid 1997; and in The International Journal of Infant Observation.

9. Conformity or non-conformity on the dimensions of means and ends generated the illuminating four-fold typology of conformity, innovation, rebellion and retreatism.

10. The title ‘Social Strategies in Risk Society’ which was given to an EU-research project for the biographical study of social exclusion – see Chamberlayne and Spano, this volume – inches towards this insight, though ‘social strategies’ perhaps begs the question of where agency is believed to lie.

11. Not even genetic reproduction takes place without a substantial element of randomness, contingency and variation.

12. This insight has derived philosophically mainly from the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Heidegger, and has demanded recognition in social science of the ‘irrational’ substratum and preurser of the rational. It has been the outcome of a varied intellectual development, including developments of pragmatist philosophy in the United States (Richard Rorty), ethnomethodology, or the phenomenological tradition in sociology (Garfinkel), Derrida’s post-structuralist philosophy in France and its wide take-up in the field of literary criticism in the United States and Britain, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, which brought together Freud’s own attention to the ‘irrational’ with a Hegelian philosophical discourse also attentive to historical transformations of meaning and the problematic nature of fixed norms and ideals. In the Kleinian tradition of British psychoanalysis, Bion’s attention to the experienced moment in the consulting room, had a similar effect in displacing given models of psychic structure with a focus on the ways understanding emerged and evolved.

13. Socio-biography studies the lives of socially-representative persons, not the lives of ‘great men’ (or women) the main subjects of biography as ordinarily understood. Although a socio-biographical (or psychobiographical) approach can and should inform biographies of this more conventional kind, what is explored here is the socio-biography of the everyday citizen, the normal subjects of social science.


15. The concept of an ‘inscription device’ is Bruno Latour’s.
References


Reflections on the Role of Personal Narrative in Social Science

Camilla Stivers

Once upon a time (not so long ago), presenting a social science perspective on personal narratives would have been a relatively uncomplicated exercise. The editors of *Signs* would have been able to find an author who, despite her attachment to a particular discipline like sociology or political science, held a set of assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge acquisition, and truth so widely shared among social scientists that editors, readers, and author alike could have felt confident that the product reflected a “typical” or “representative” social science viewpoint.

The resulting essay would have been based on (at least) the following assumptions: that the subject matter of interest to social science – that is, social reality – is as hard or concrete as the physical objects studied by botanists or geologists and is “out there” waiting to be revealed; that social science acquires systematic knowledge by adhering to rules of hypothesis testing, controlled (unbiased) observation, and the replication of previous research results; and that by using the prescribed methodology, social science arrives at Truth, which consists of lawlike generalizations that take the form, “Given conditions A, B, and C, when X occurs, Y will follow,” laws that make possible the prediction – hence, the control – of events.

Holding these assumptions, a person assigned the task of reflecting on the role of personal narrative in social science, that is, of assessing its usefulness as knowledge, would have almost certainly found herself

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condescending to her subject in order to avoid being openly scornful. She would have concluded that, while it was entertaining, even edifying in a nonspecifiable way, personal narrative failed to qualify as knowledge because it was neither a set of logical propositions nor the product of scientific or quasi-scientific method—therefore, regrettably, it could have no real place in social science.

Clearly such a narrow understanding of knowledge, and the attitudes that go along with it, are products of a particular set of historical circumstances in Western society; positivist rules have never been as universally subscribed to, nor research as pure in practice, as the rhetoric of social science textbooks might lead one to believe. As ideology, however, the standards of positivism have served to shape and limit ideas about what constitutes the accepted procedure for acquiring and judging knowledge and who qualifies as a knower.

These standards still carry considerable political strength, but in the 1990s, positivism no longer reigns unchallenged as it did for practical purposes—that is, when it came to pursuing an academic career—throughout much of the century. Admittedly many, perhaps most, social scientists remain determined to pursue research along natural science lines, and those determined to do otherwise are still likely to be charged with bias or lack of rigor; but in retrospect the edifice of positivist epistemology was never as solid as it once looked and today the social sciences encompass, albeit uneasily, several diverse paradigms, each with its accompanying methodology. At this point in the intellectual history of social science, any assessment of the role of personal narrative must acknowledge its contingence on assumptions about the nature of social reality and what counts as knowledge and on the interests such assumptions support.

As I see the social sciences, a shift of techtonic proportions took place when the argument was advanced that “paradigms” existed at all—that knowledge acquisition was not unproblematically transparent but instead was a function of sets of rules or agreements among members of particular knowledge communities. This development and the proliferation of research frameworks that accompanied it moved social science into a postpositivist era. Its most fundamental marker is the premise that a particular social scientist operates on the basis of a framework rather than the framework. Each sees through the lens of intellectual and value assumptions, some consciously chosen, some perhaps not. What one sees through that lens are not “brute facts” but phenomena that are treated (or not) as facts based on the relevant knowledge community’s definition of what counts as a fact (or knowledge, or truth). This premise (which, it should be noted, occupies no higher an order than other paradigmatic claims) carries with it a number of implications for relationships among personal narrative, feminism, and social science. After summarizing these
points briefly, I will devote the balance of the essay to explicating them, using the books under consideration for illustration and amplification. While this may strike some readers as too instrumental a treatment of the books, my aim is to help clarify ways in which social science and personal narrative can be seen as mutually serviceable, a view that I believe many social scientists would still contest. In order to facilitate this union it seems necessary, to me at least, to focus directly on the issues that appear to divide the two. In an essay of limited length, this seems to require less detailed considerations of individual books than they deserve otherwise.

My propositions are these:

1. There is no such thing as removing the observer from the knowledge acquisition process, since to do so would be like trying to see without eyes; if so, frankly subjective knowledge, such as that found in personal narratives and defended by feminists, becomes a much more respectable way of knowing, even in social science.

2. There is no such thing as “unbiased” knowledge in the sense of knowledge ungrounded in a set of intellectual assumptions and constitutive interests; this awareness validates the kind of particular, contextual knowledge personal narrative imparts, and it undercut the universalizing claims that feminism is in the process of deconstructing.

3. It is difficult – may be impossible – to draw the kind of hard and fast line between a “fact” and an “interpretation” that efforts to distinguish “history” from “literature” sometimes imply. If so, the space occupied by personal narrative appears far less anomalous for social science that it would otherwise.

4. These awarenesses about the humanly constituted, contextual, interpretive nature of knowledge do not mean that it is simply a matter of personal whim; whether the knowledge acquisition process is relatively “subjective,” as in the case of personal narrative, or “objective” as is the stated goal of social science, the methods an investigator brings to the process, and the interpretations she makes based on them (including the judgment about what counts as a fact), are grounded in the consensual rules of the relevant knowledge community rather than in transcendent standards. On this basis, feminists can say coherently that individual, contextual accounts such as are found in personal narratives are “real knowledge” in as weighty a sense as the knowledge claims of positivism though the blend of subjectivity and objectivity is different for each. Such an assessment provides a foundation for feminism’s critical stance.

5. These awarenesses do mean that there is no such thing as Truth, in the sense of knowledge that transcends the definitions, values,
and rules of any or all specific knowledge communities. The vision of a Truth that transcends historical circumstance and societal context is ultimately a dream of power over others. Though there may be no infallible or unconditional knowledge and therefore no final destination or “best” standpoint for feminist thought, there may be “better” knowledge processes in the sense that they provide stronger support for the liberatory projects of feminism. Rather than aiming at universal Truth, feminism must work to constitute itself as the most inclusive possible knowledge community and its knowledge as a perpetual unfolding or developmental process, one in which personal narrative should play an important role.

**Subjectivity**

From the perspective of postpositivist social science, consensual definitions of reality and rules of knowledge acquisition shape and organize the field of investigation as such. Thus there is no possibility of separating the researcher in a hard and fast way from that which she seeks to know, nor is that sort of detachment desirable from a feminist perspective. Having rejected women’s historical status as the object of the male subject’s defining gaze, feminism demands that those who have been objectified now be able to define themselves, to tell their own stories. This is essentially a claim that each human being occupies a legitimate position from which to experience, interpret, and constitute the world. Since there is no distinct separation between person and life-world, the relationship between investigator and field becomes a subject-subject connection.

This perspective implies a much closer commonality between social science research into relatively large-scale social realities like organizations, cultures, and polities and the exploration of individual identity that takes place under the rubric of personal narrative. Matthews Masayuki Hamabata’s *Crested Kimono: Power and Love in the Japanese Business Family* is both an exploration of the self as investigator and a piece of research into the two-way constitutive relationship between meaning-making individuals and patterns of culture. In his account, the author’s own initiation process as a Japanese-American into Japanese society helps to illuminate how the men and women of Japanese business families “maintain meaningful personal lives in spite of, and because of, the cultural and institutional contexts in which they live” (4). The result is both personal narrative and ethnography. In a similar way, Linda Niemann’s *Boomer* is a simultaneous, seamless blend of knowledge about the intersubjective enterprise of railroading and a narrating-participating subject. By taking on the dangerous job of “boomer” or “brakeman”
who follows the work from place to place, Niemann undertook a high-stakes quest for self-understanding: “Self-image, sexual preference, profession, family, history, I wasn’t sure about any of them. That’s why I came out here – to avoid confrontations, to let the information emerge gradually” (134), to let railroading transform “the metaphor of my life” (2). Both Hamabata’s and Niemann’s narratives bring to light individual and collective dimensions of the self as they are created in and revealed by the subject’s relationship to larger intersubjective phenomena such as a family or an industry. The sense of self is an essentially narrative phenomenon; people conceive of themselves in terms of stories about their actions in the world, using them to make sense of the temporal flow of their lives. We find identity and meaning as a result of the stories we tell about ourselves or that others tell about us. Therefore, a narrative approach to self-understanding is not a distortion of reality but a confirmation of it.7

Thinking about subjectivity as existing in mutually constitutive relationship with societal structures redeems on two counts the claim that we can learn about the general from the particular, which is made by the books on the Nicaraguan revolution by Dianne Walta Hart and Denis Lynn Daly Heyck. First, if large-scale phenomena like the revolution are fundamentally intersubjective, as postpositivism permits one to theorize, then building a broad picture of such events by evoking the stories of participants, as both Hart and Heyck do, is justifiable on the grounds that the ultimate (though not sole) source of the revolution’s meaning is the experiential knowledge of those involved. As Manuel Calderon, one of Heyck’s narrators, says: “I know that to people who have never been involved in anything similar, [our] dedication seems crazy, but that’s the strength of the ideal. I don’t believe that psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists take this into account when they analyze societies. That’s where they are mistaken, because they are not able to understand why a worker, a campesino, would die for his land or his country, to make things better . . .” (116).

Second, since the language in which people tell about themselves, even to themselves alone, is communal, there is nothing completely idiosyncratic about a single personality. Rather, as makers of meaning, human beings share a fundamental uniqueness in relationship to all other material entities, one that validates the use of an individual biographical subject to illuminate “larger” historical, political, and sociocultural phenomena. Liz Stanley’s essay in All Sides of the Subject asserts that “social structures are as recoverable from single social beings as they are from groups of them” (Iles, ed., 118). While this may be a debatable position, it is clear that at least some personal narrative projects base themselves on this premise. For example, Carolyn Steedman’s biography of Margaret McMillan asserts that “what might be seen as McMillan’s ‘insideness,’”
her meaning, . . . actually spells out the public space of cultural change” in turn of the century Britain (251). Significantly, Steedman calls this a historical argument. Posing the question of why previous biographers of McMillan neglected her early socialist journalism in favor of her later role as welfare philanthropist and pioneer of nursery education, Steedman explores the “historiographic practice that cuts educational questions off from the political and the social” (173) and thus shapes our understanding of a particular moment in history. She looks within McMillan’s life for evidence that education, politics, and social relations are intertwined rather than partitioned off as some historical treatments have implied. In a similar way, as Leah D. Hewitt demonstrates in her Autobiographic Tightropes, French feminist writer Monique Wittig’s autobiographical fiction “universalizes the particular” of her lesbian perspective in order to undercut the purported universality of the masculine point of view (131). Wittig uses fictionalized accounts of her own life as a way toward “formulation of a feminist struggle on behalf of all women” (132).

From the perspective of positivist social science, such claims are bold. In a world pervaded with positivist restrictions on knowledge, the individual life is generally permitted to do no more than serve as an exemplar of laudable human qualities, inspiring us to lead better lives. This notion of exemplar is itself vulnerable to feminist criticism as a form of elitism, on the grounds that it perpetuates “the logic of domination, by encouraging us to look up to ’special women’ rather than to look around us for the women with whom we might act.” Nevertheless, the instructive potential in single lives remains, according to Bell and Yalom. In the introduction to their collection of essays on personal narrative, they argue that “attention to individual journeys through the life cycle . . . opens new vistas, offers unexpected precedents, provides a sense of continuity and connection” (11).

Probably the thorniest issue raised by a celebration of subjectivity and the subject-to-subject connection as a research mode is whether the subject-researcher is able to separate “her own” interpretations (like her language, never completely private) from those of her subjects in the field. Strictly speaking, if we accept the argument that the positivist goal of total detachment is a chimera, the answer would have to be no. Yet the feminist search for the truths of women’s lives (albeit “truth” with a small “T”) implies the needed possibility not only of distinguishing meaningfully between researcher and field but also of letting the field speak for itself in such a way that a claim of authenticity can be sustained. This question becomes particularly pertinent when it comes to interviewing or recording life histories. While the researcher clearly wants to avoid the phony posture that pretends the interview process is not an interaction, at the same time there are more or less effective ways of making it possible for people in situations – in a sense in which a researcher can
never hope to be – to convey their own interpretations. The researcher is responsible for making distinctions as clear as she can between her views of her subjects’ lives and their own.

A number of the books reflect the struggle (not always conscious) to convey these two modes of knowledge and the distinctions between them. Maurice Isserman’s joint project with long-time American Communist party member Dorothy Healy (which he characterizes as “first-person biography” [9]) comes close to reconciling what can sometimes seem conflicting demands on the facilitator of the story: to evoke the subject’s self-understanding, while acknowledging the inevitability of one’s own participation in its shaping into written narrative. Ultimately, Isserman says, while Healy let him do the writing and he sometimes changed her words in order to turn speech into readable prose, she remained the arbiter of whether the product had conveyed her meaning adequately. In his introduction, however, Isserman’s example of his approach revealed what seemed to me a substantive gap between her words and his; this perception nagged at me as I read the book, though I had to admire his honesty about his procedure. Anthropologist Margaret Blackman makes a similar effort in her life history of Sadie Brower Neakok, a leader of the Inupiaq people in Alaska; here the greater cultural distance between researcher and the life subject makes stiffer demands on the researcher to make sure that her subject’s own perspective comes through. Blackman’s project gained my confidence by preserving Neakok’s own words (albeit selectively), by using different type styles to distinguish the two contributors, by providing cultural and historical background information, and by means of an appendix on the life history method, in which Blackman describes the details of her method and reflects on its exigencies. As I read, I occasionally vacillated between approval of Blackman’s strategies and awareness of the size of the cultural gulf she has attempted to bridge. In both books, however, it is the authors’ expressed consciousness about the pitfalls of the project and specificity about methods that help to build legitimacy.

The other books under review that raise this issue solve the problem somewhat less successfully, in my view. Hart’s *Thanks to God and the Revolution* aims to evoke the story of the Nicaraguan revolution as experienced and told by the members of one family. Hart tells us that she “did not ask them questions that would lead them to one answer or another” (6) – but provides us none of the questions she did ask in order for us to judge for ourselves. She comments that her struggle to stay out of the family’s life story was not always successful (without saying how), and claims that her relationship with the family changed her life, without indicating awareness that the family’s relationship with her presumably changed their lives as well. In spite of the undeniable power of the narratives themselves, these failures of methodological consciousness make
it hard for the reader to trust, as Hart requests us to, that she has not “eliminated anything of critical importance” (7).

Heyck’s *Life Stories of the Nicaraguan Revolution* also offers a series of interesting personal accounts, this time not of one family but rather of a broad spectrum of Nicaraguan leaders. Since those interviewed generally held official positions and were speaking publicly even as they discussed their life stories, the tone of Heyck’s book is more journalistic than Hart’s and provides helpful context to the viewpoints of Hart’s subjects. But Heyck seems unaware of the difficulty of balancing her own interpretations with the participants’ stories. In a discussion of the scheme by which she has classified the stories as “political,” “religious,” and “survivors,” Heyck says both that the speakers’ own perceptions should determine where they fall and that sometimes she had difficulty deciding how to “classify people” (ix). She seems unaware that she has imposed a scheme that diverges from her declared intent of letting subjects decide the meaning of their own lives. Even more questionable, in my view, are the gratuitous descriptions peppering her introductions of the various life histories – for example, one life is a “fascinating living history of the time” (21), another portrays a “sincere, thoughtful revolutionary of humble extraction” (107). Since Heyck evidently does not trust the narratives she has elicited to speak for themselves, the reader has difficulty getting past her to them.

Coltelli’s book of interviews with American Indian writers seemed to me to display an even lower level of awareness about this issue. The author makes the startling claims that her interviews present the writers’ ideas “without any mediation or disguise” (1) and that she “let the writers speak for themselves” while performing the “difficult task of . . . remaining unobtrusive” (8); but the book’s question-and-answer format gives her own words as high a profile as those of the writers – one I found not only obtrusive but sometimes intrusive. The resulting narratives occasionally reflect the struggle of the interviewees to think up answers to overly specific and/or pretentious questions. For example:

[Coltelli:] Thus is language, in shaping the
“aboriginal names,” the first creative act?
[N. Scott Momaday:] Is it the first creative act?
Probably, probably.... [92]

Or:

[Coltelli:] Could you describe your writing process?
[Simon Ortiz:] No, I can’t. I mean, I could tell you
a few things. . . . [117]
In my view the least successful on this score is Patricia Huckle’s *Tish Sommers: Activist, and the Founding of the Older Women’s League*. The author tells us that the book began in her desire to have her students “hear the story of a woman who had lived in ‘interesting times’” (xiii); but after Sommers’s death, the project shifted from life history interviewing to what Huckle says “now . . . was my research, my voice, which would generate a different story” than the one her subject had attempted to tell while she was still alive: “a more balanced perspective, a more distanced retelling. . . . I wanted to select, to edit for better flow, to counter her vision with the complexities of implementation” (xvi). While every biographer has the right to do her own interpreting and to make judgments about balancing her own interpretations with those of her subject, by indicating the desire to tell a different story than the one Sommers was attempting to tell before her death, Huckle seems to me to have gone too far toward rejecting her subject’s sense of the meaning of her life. Can a person be “too close” to her own life? By what criterion? Such a position strikes me as problematic, regardless of whatever threats a subject’s “familiarity” with her life poses to self-understanding. I found myself wanting to know much more than Huckle preserves for us about what Tish Sommers thought her own life had been about.

**Contextual Knowledge**

If there is no sharp separation between investigator and field, there is also no hope of achieving “unbiased” knowledge in the sense of knowledge unaffected by the researcher’s constitutive assumptions. As Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan have pointed out, “The dream of modern Western man to be freed from his passions, his unconscious, his history, and his traditions through the liberating use of reason has been the deepest theme of contemporary social science thought.” Postpositivist epistemologies insist that transcendence of one’s history, culture, and interests is precisely a dream rather than a real possibility. That the dreamer is “man” feminist theorists have argued, is significant: liberation from circumstance and passion through reason is a fundamental animating principle of modern patriarchy, which grounds its claim of power in the view that (elite white) men’s “knowledge” is universal and that of others contingent.

Once the quest for universal-rational knowledge was called into question and revealed its definitive interest in control of events and processes, social scientists who have other interests no longer had to feel constrained by positivist disdain for the particular, the contingent, the nongeneralizable. They turned from a fruitless search for “unbiased” knowledge to seek knowledge in which the context, the unique
circumstances, the constitutive assumptions are made as explicit as possible. In this mode of research, the investigator’s explicit declaration of interests and assumptions constitutes the new objectivity. Increased use of contextual approaches such as case studies and ethnographies in social science has already laid the groundwork for the acceptance of personal narrative. Robert C. Bannister in fact calls his book on feminist sociologist Jessie Bernard a case study (13), and his approach is almost as much a historical ethnography of the discipline of sociology as it is a biography of one sociologist.

With growing social science interest in frankly contextual research, it is probable that lingering hesitancy to admit personal narrative to the corpus of knowledge has its source in a perception that there is something fundamentally nonhuman about the structures and systems that are the usual stuff of social science research – organizations, cultures, politics, markets, and so on. Seeing social realities as “things” makes them appear susceptible to research based on the natural science approach. Several of the works under review will help interested social scientists develop, instead, a sense of the fundamental intersubjectivity of these phenomena and their grounding in the social actions of human individuals. One example is Hamabata’s Crested Kimono, which draws explicitly on this premise to reach an understanding of Japanese business families and the individual subjectivities of family members, as well as how structure and sense of self are mutually constituted. Hamabata shows how the Japanese individual derives self-understanding by being embedded in the ie and uchi, or formal and informal households, so that “the Japanese comes to understand himself or herself as partly societal and partly personal” (51). Another instance is Steedman’s biography of Margaret McMillan, which aims, by restoring culture and class to McMillan’s story, to explore the interface between the ideas of relatively little-known people and broad-scale changes in ideology. Through McMillan’s life and work, Steedman brings to light the rootedness of societal structures like politics, childhood, gardens, cities, journalism, and education [titles of several of Steedman’s chapters], not in “grand bodies of thought” (5) but in the doings and ideas of relatively obscure people. In the process of examining the mutual relationship between actors and systems, both these works undercut the distinction between personal narrative and social science.

The social scientist who is prepared to entertain the notion that human beings and social structures mutually shape one another can also see as germane an exploration of the processes by which context constitutes the knowing subject – in other words, to see subjects in their own right (not as “group members”) as fit material for social science. This is essentially a shift from the old Enlightenment posture in which the experiencing self is clearly separable from the experienced world to a view of
subjective experience as part of the world.\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Black Women Writing Autobiography}, by Joanne M. Braxton, helps us in that direction, making us aware of how “emotional, philosophical, and spiritual affinities” shared by African-Americans shape the perspective of the individual writer (9), so that the writing self is both an expression of a community’s testimonial tradition and at the same time a reflection of the writer’s transcendence of it. Braxton notes that paradoxically black women’s autobiography constitutes a tradition of transcendence. Writing, developing a public voice, can be such a mode of freedom \textit{because} it perpetuates the longstanding practice of a community that sees it in this way.

In \textit{Autobiographical Voices}, Françoise Lionnet makes a similar argument about the interconnectedness of self and world, though her key concept of \textit{metissage} deliberately resists translation – that is, being understood on terms other than its own. Lionnet points out that the precursor of contemporary resistance among intellectuals to an epistemology of the particular (the different, the contextual, the indeterminate, the hybrid) was the nineteenth century discourse of racial purity (17). Yet, she argues, “subjectivity (and writing) is always already filled with the voices of others” (68) – voices by means of which we explicate not only ourselves but the world as well. Awareness of the fundamental sociality of the self bridges the apparent gap between investigation of the individual and research into structures and systems, and it undercuts the purity of detachment.

The realization that experience is \textit{in} and \textit{of} the world leads even further, however, than the constructedness of subjectivity. Stanley argues that “narratively structured autobiographical accounts and analytically structured theoretical accounts are in fact highly similar” (Iles, ed., 110). She suggests that dichotomizing them separates the world into two classes of people, those who analyze experiences (academics) and those who have them (other women). When you look closely, Stanley says, biography reveals itself not just as a story but also as a selective arrangement of relevant facts – that is, it is “a theory: a theory of a character or a person, but a theory nonetheless” (121). She argues that our ability to generate analysis out of narrative bridges the supposed gulf between knowing and being.

\textbf{Facts and Interpretations}

Autobiographies appear to straddle the divide between history and literature, or perhaps more accurately, between what “really happened” and the self’s esthetic and sense-making response. It is sometimes said that autobiographies raise the question of the extent to which they are reflections of actual experience rather than creative acts. The social scientist
is likely to try to extract the “factual content” from the autobiographical narrative, while the literary critic may tend to treat it as not significantly different from a novel.\textsuperscript{16}

From the postpositivist vantage point, the difference between facts and interpretations or between science and art, made so much of in several of the readings, appears less compelling than it once did. In both, consensual assumptions, hypotheses, and interests direct our attention in certain ways, thereby making possible the constitution of a meaningful world from a welter of otherwise meaningless phenomena. Thus artists are not the only ones who interpret experience; we all do, all the time. In science, phenomena become facts as a result of the interpretive work we do to measure our observations against our definition of terms like “science” and “fact” and to reflect on information in light of the interests animating our efforts. Thus for the postpositivist social scientist, anxiety over the anomalous nature of autobiography is largely beside the point, because, like all narrative, autobiography provides neither an “accurate” nor “inaccurate” description of preexisting “real” experience but instead helps to give experience form.\textsuperscript{17} Even leaving aside the problem that access to many of the “facts” of a life is gained only through the person who lives it, to think (as Patricia Huckle apparently does) that an outside observer can have a more objective picture of a life than the subject’s own is to accept the positivist dictate that human behavior can be understood in the same way that we understand what we perceive to be purely physical phenomena. An outsider may develop a different interpretation based on her own sense of the significance of the events of a life, but the judgment that this outside interpretation is closer to Truth can only be based on the premise that detachment makes it possible to “eliminate bias.” The feminist interest in personal narrative is grounded in the claim that the subject’s understanding of her life is inherently valid; maintaining that position coherently, it seems to me, requires recognition of the interpretive moment in all knowledge acquisition. Otherwise subjective accounts remain in a “one down” position because they are “soft.”

The interpretation in autobiography only seems more problematic than in other genres because the interpreting subject is so visible. But, as Diane Wood Middlebrook points out, biography is also “a narrative with a point of view” – that of the biographer, “behind the scenes, managing the chronology, not just documenting it” (in Bell and Yalom, eds., 159). I suggest that the cloaked presence of an author managing the explication is something personal narrative shares with ostensibly rigorous pieces of scientific writing.

Two of the books under consideration deal specifically with the question of facts and interpretations in autobiography: Timothy Dow Adams’s \textit{Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography} and Leah D. Hewitt’s
Both titles reflect the perceived ambiguity of autobiography, and in my view both tropes ("lies" and "tightropes") reveal unwitting acceptance of a positivist frame of reference, which makes hard distinctions between facts and interpretations at the same time that the books aim to transcend it. Adams counterposes historical accuracy with metaphorical authenticity, "literal fidelity" with "narrative truth and personal myth" (ix), as if these are two distinct possibilities: the first is true, the other (the "lie") rings true (9). Hewitt for her part sees her subjects walking "the tightrope between fiction and experience" (201) as if there can be pure fiction and pure (factual) experience. Clearly the two authors play out their tropes in a much more nuanced way than my summary suggests, and I suspect both would claim to be breaking down the distinction between history and literature. I only suggest that the choice of organizing metaphor has had the (perhaps unintended) consequence of perpetuating an either-or way of thinking about autobiography, one that reconstitutes the realm of objectified subjectivity in the very act of seeking to transcend it. As Simone de Beauvoir, one of Hewitt’s subjects, once observed, “Woman does not entertain the positive belief that the truth is something other than men claim; she recognizes, rather, that there is not any fixed truth” (quoted in Hewitt, 20) – or no facts that are not products of an interpretive process. Feminists want precisely, as Hewitt claims de Beauvoir’s autobiography did, to “chip away at these absolutes from the inside” (51). To do so, I suggest, requires treating facts and interpretations in a nondichotomous way. Lorraine Code argues that “only certain stories can accurately be told about a person,” with the most obvious constraints being externals such as age, sex, race, place and date of birth, and facts about major life events such as marriage, divorce, education, and employment. Yet, says Code, the externals do not add up to knowledge of the person; they simply constitute “a residual set of objective limits on adequate, responsible inquiry.” The externals operate as a set of constraints and opportunities, but interpretation is what breathes life into them. Facts and interpretations require and shape one another; they constitute a continuum rather than a dichotomy.

Critique

Observations about the contextuality of knowledge and the inevitability of interpretation are troubling to many people who are critical of the political and economic status quo, because such arguments seem to suggest that there are no firm grounds (such as “the facts”) on which to claim that things need to be changed. If all evidence of oppression is simply in the eye of the beholder, the argument goes, how are we to say that
anyone’s assessment is better than anyone else’s? We must redeem the possibility of “real” knowledge in order to preserve the possibility of critique.

To say that various bodies of knowledge are products of consensual agreements among relevant knowledge communities is not the same thing, however, as saying that knowledge is simply a matter of personal opinion. On the contrary, as a member of such a community I am not entitled to conclude, on the basis of my investigations, anything! like; rather, I engage in interpretation of my “data,” whatever form they take, according to rules that I share with other members of my community: agreements about valid knowledge acquisition procedures, the nature of evidence, and the proper animating purposes of inquiry. Insisting on “hard facts” and “unbiased analysis” as the grounds for social change is tantamount to claiming that facts and analysis provide an unmixed message about what we should do. At bottom, as Zygmunt Bauman has noted, refusal to acknowledge the interpretative moment in every knowledge process reveals the urge to control: “Only if I can be sure that what I have grasped is from now on immutable and immune to contingencies of fate, can my knowledge give me the feeling of genuine mastery over the object.”

Feminists have devoted a good deal of energy to uncovering the masculinity in this impulse to control. Unfortunately, it is not as easy as it may seem to distance oneself from the desire to control events and processes; it inhabits every dream or project of social change. Sherwood Anderson once observed that fact is the realm of “all those who desire to uplift” (quoted in Adams, 44) – an assessment that threatens to become relevant every time a radical social scientist asserts that certain people do not understand their own situation. A rejection of the notion of “real” knowledge does not mean that oppressed people need learn nothing, nor that feminists should cease collecting quantifiable data on the dimensions of women’s oppression as one basis for justifying law and policy changes. But awareness of the inevitability of a moment of interpretation in the most “objective” knowledge (such as that which decides to treat a certain phenomenon as a fact or that which finds that certain facts do indeed constitute evidence of “oppression”) should make us more reluctant to label as invalid the experiential knowledge of subjects in situations the meaning of which we as observers might assess differently. A new sensitivity to the sort of data revealed by narrating subjects about the meaning of their lives should narrow the gap we perceive between, as Stanley put it, living and theorizing. The relationship between a researcher with liberatory aims and her subjects, one in which subjects’ existing interpretations of their life situations may be called into question, is a relationship between equals, not one between more and less enlightened people. It is one in which the views of people in situations have fundamental, though not overriding, weight. As Marta, one of Hart’s
subjects, reminds us, “It’s the consciousness of the people that will change things” (192). Another Nicaraguan, Manuel Calderon, observes that a scientific theory such as Marxism-Leninism is a useful guide, but “in real life, it is the concrete, personal example that motivates people” (Heyck, 122). Gerald Vizenor says: “You can’t understand the world without telling a story. There isn’t any center to the world but a story” (Coltelli, 156). Yet, he goes on, “stories are not static,” as most social scientists would claim they must be in order to be “real” (Coltelli, 164).

If all knowledge requires some form of interpretation that assesses the extent to which the results of knowledge acquisition processes conform to the knowledge community’s agreed-upon criteria, then critique becomes a negotiation process among equal interpreters rather than a show of force, a matter of persuasion and willing assent to membership in a new knowledge community rather than unilateral invalidation of one community by another. This view of critique makes room in critical social science for personal narrative, since it melds life and theory without insisting on there being only one story, and thus provides the grounding for an impulse toward social change that still acknowledges the fundamental (though not absolute) authenticity of an interpretation based on direct experience. The juxtaposition of different stories – “alternative truths” – could be particularly helpful in developing a nuanced understanding of structures and processes of domination, one that assumes that people’s self-understandings are fundamentally compelling but not that we must simply accept them as all there is to say. Regina Gagnier suggests that “all autobiographical ‘moves’ . . . are ‘interested’” (Bell and Yalom, eds., 101) – that is, each is a specific project of self-definition that is more or less complicit (more or less consciously) with existing power dynamics. If so, each will reveal a particular mutual relationship between the individual actions and perceptions that make up a life and broader structures and systems. At the same time, the constitutive process of self-definition is a marker of the extent to which human stories are not static but rather change in the process of reflection. This means that it is not only “hard facts” that change things; if structures and actors are in relationship, individual interpretations themselves constitute a societal change process. To forget this is once again to objectify human beings.

“Truth”

Despite our longing for “absolute, indubitable knowledge of the world” in the postpositivist era there is no Truth, only the hope of agreement. What the Personal Narratives Group has to say about personal narrative, it seems to me, can be applied to the question of knowledge itself: “Only by attending to the conditions which create these narratives, the forms
that guide them, and the relationships that produce them are we able to understand what is communicated in a personal narrative.\textsuperscript{25} I believe that we feminists cannot have it both ways: we cannot unmask the oppression inherent in the aim to control nature, we cannot celebrate difference, and at the same time claim that (at least eventually) we will arrive at a standpoint that trumps others because it produces “real” knowledge while the viewpoints of others do not. We must ground feminist standpoints (I think they must remain plural) in our commitment to liberation and allow them to unfold in many directions. We must aim for believability, not certitude, for enlargement of understanding rather than control.\textsuperscript{26} Otherwise we will eventually stand convicted of Gerald Vizenor’s charge against the social sciences – that they “separate people from the human spirit . . . through word icons, methods that become icons because they’re powerful, because they’re rewarded by institutions” (Coltelli, 170).

Personal narrative can help feminist social scientists center themselves in knowledge development and the widening of the feminist knowledge community rather than in ultimate Truth. The construction of personal narrative is both a way of systematizing, of ordering reality, and a way of maintaining the dynamism of knowledge creation since there is never only one story to tell about any situation. Personal narrative models a way of knowing for social science by blending the subjective with the system-wide. Thus, for example, \textit{Boomer} is the source of knowledge about Niemann’s own changing consciousness, the enterprise of railroading, its everyday practices, the structures of domination as they reveal themselves in the everyday, and personal and societal change possibilities. It is both authentic and not all there is to say or feel about any one of these elements. Neimann herself knows this: when an engineer compares the railroad yard on a foggy night to \textit{Heart of Darkness}, she feels the situation as a text and the engineer’s comment as a reading over her shoulder (13). She sees her book as “a signal fire” (245) – that is, a communication that evokes more meaning than it can say in words.

Dorothy Healy’s life story (Healy with Isserman) represents a similar unfolding of perspective, this time at the intersection of an individual consciousness, the American Communist party, and the American political economy at a moment in history – again, unarguably genuine and fundamentally limited. Instead of plotting a trajectory of mastery over the future, her narrative (as Isserman has shaped it) constitutes systematic and artful retrospective knowledge, facilitating a creative distance that does not require detachment but still permits the shifting of perspective. Healy’s vision of the future is supported by “knowledge of what collective action by human beings can mean, rather than on faith in the infallibility of either . . . dogma or . . . leaders” (255) – that is, her vision is grounded in the unfolding and widening of perspective and in the commitment to liberatory values and action rather than in Truth.
If in postpositivist social science there is no knowledge without an interpretive community, no account without prior accounts, no science without a stock of stories, then personal narrative symbolizes the liberation of feminist social science from (sometimes unconscious) reliance on the form of knowledge that cancels out experience. We must be brave enough to “see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than as beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately,” and to aim for development and for solidarity rather than Truth.27 We must be creative enough “to articulate new visions of ourselves, new concepts that allow us to think otherwise, to bypass the ancient symmetries and dichotomies that have governed the ground and the very condition of possibility of thought, of ‘clarity,’ in all of Western philosophy” (Lionnet, 5).

Notes

1. The story of its undermining plays out somewhat differently depending on the particular discipline. Robert C. Bannister’s Jessie Bernard: The Making of a Feminist portrays the challenge feminism posed to positivist sociology as one academic’s life evokes it.

2. There are a multitude of sources for this shift; one of the most important is Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

3. Such definitions are not redeemable on their own terms; e.g., positivists would surely want to treat as knowledge (rather than as nonsense) the definition statement restricting “knowledge” to either tautologies or the results of hypothesis testing – but the definition itself does not support such an assertion.

4. This is not a solipsistic position; there is, indeed, material outside the self, but the self organizes and makes it meaningful.

5. Evelyn Fox Keller’s biography of botanist Barbara McClintock, A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock (New York: Freeman, 1983), makes it clear that subject-subject connections are not necessarily limited to research on social reality.


9. I will deal with this issue in the discussion of facts and interpretations (below).


14. Bannister heightens the impression with a somewhat dismissive comment in his introduction to the effect that Bernard’s work was neither very original nor very bold (5). She seems to serve in his view as a symbol of women’s progress in the discipline of sociology.

15. Polkinghorne, 135.


The Personal Narratives Group notes that during their project “the social scientists emphasized social structure and human agency, the humanities scholars focused on textual interpretation and narrative structure” (“Origins” [n. 6 above], 10).

17. Polkinghorne (n. 7 above), 67.


19. Ibid., 43.


22. See Evelyn Fox Keller, Reflections on Gender and Science (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1985); Bordo (n. 11 above).


24. The quotation is from Joyce McCarl Nielsen’s introduction to Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in the Social Sciences, ed. Joyce McCarl Nielsen (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1990), 1–37, esp. 3.


26. Polkinghorne (n. 7 above), chap. 7.

In his book *Documents of life*–2, Plummer (2000) notes that since the earlier edition, published in 1983, the development of digital information and communications technologies (ICTs) have opened up new possibilities for the construction and publication of autobiographies:

Search for ‘autobiography’ and you will come up with millions of entries of all kinds: from thousands of school children telling their lives in simple formats for a classroom project to CD-Roms that help you format your family tree; from the most personal sexual autobiography in a ‘chat room’ to the published life stories of Thomas Jefferson or Alex Haley’s *Roots*.

(Plummer, 2000: 97)

The time between the two publications captures something of the pace of technological change that led to the often hyperbolized notion of the ‘information revolution’ and the advent of life with, if not in, the ‘information age’ (Castells, 1996: 328). For Castells, the digital integration of oral, print and visual modalities into one system has a social impact compatible with the advent of the alphabet, giving rise to new forms of identity, organization and decentred flows of power. He went on to argue that ‘the internet is the fabric of our lives’ (Castells, 2001: 1). While auto/biography is part of this fabric, the analysis of Internet-based narratives remains neglected. A recent text that provides a detailed review of...
auto/biographical research left it to the conclusion to note that we may be 'entering an interactive, “real”-cyber world of auto/biographies' (Roberts, 2002: 174). A purpose of this paper is to argue that we have been living in the information age long enough for digital life stories to become a significant new form of narrative that reflects the social realities of everyday life under conditions of global complexity (Urry, 2002).

The way that the hardware and software that give access to the Internet also provides users with the ability to ‘talk back’ through email, newsgroups and web pages is central to any conceptualization of an information age. Despite the diversity of formulations as to what constitutes this age, there is a general consensus that organizations and individuals are confronted by, and contribute to, a rapidly evolving amount of information of local, national and international origins (Webster, 1995). Figures for 2003 from the Office for National Statistics reveal that for the first time over half the UK population were Internet users.1 North America reached this level of connectivity some time ago and most European countries are at least equal if not ahead of the UK in citizens access to ICTs. This use of ICTs is reflected in contemporary theories that place an emphasis on the role of ‘networks’ ‘mobilities,’ ‘scapes’, ‘liquidity’ and ‘flows’ of various sorts (e.g., Castells, 1996; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Lash, 2002; Bauman, 2000; Urry, 2000; 2002). Scapes reflect a new geographical fluidity and the flow and exchange of extraordinary amounts of information. Space-time compression and the pluralization of information are forces of globalization that enable many people to be more physically, economically and socially mobile and consequently more embedded within networked technologies of various sorts (Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). Email, for example, enables families to remain in touch with each other on a daily basis wherever individual members are geographically located. Indeed, contemporary notions of identity and family are less embedded in the proximate, everyday life of neighbourhoods and communities and increasingly lived out through connections mediated by the *** ICTs have therefore taken a central place in how people live out their lives, find and maintain connections and seek to represent themselves to others.

One of my concerns, therefore, is about ‘digital life stories’ that reflect the new ability, open to anyone with access to a computer linked to the Internet, to create and publish their auto/biography and interact with a global audience. They constitute a new form of self-expression that is constructed through text, images and hyperlinks (Selvin, 2000). The accounts considered here are ‘digital’, as they are created and consumed within a media framed by digital data. This enables material that in other media is distinct, for example, photographs and text, to flow together in complex relationships. Digital media occupies a disembodied space where the boundaries between author and reader and other
dualities of the modern off-line world are challenged or recast (see Featherstone and Burrows, 1995; Haraway, 1991). ‘Life stories’, rather than more familiar labels such as ‘autobiography’ and ‘life history’, help mark out a distinctive genre. The term has also been used elsewhere in the context of the lives of women, colonial subjects and others who are underrepresented in other narrative forms. Chanfrault-Duchet (2000), for example, notes the complexity of meanings weaved by ‘ordinary people’ (2000: 74) in their accounts of their lives. The use of the label ‘digital life story’ is also congruent with the emphasis placed by many authors of internet narratives, who explain that they want to ‘tell my story’ (Hardey, 2002a), and the emergent nature of identity and biography in our contemporary era (Giddens, 1991).

The aim of this paper is to encourage recognition of the significance of digital life stories to the study of auto/biographical material and move towards a definition of them as a genre. It opens with an outline description and analysis of the key features of this new genre and proceeds to examine the format, narrative pattern, tensions between the author and the audience, and the content of digital life stories. This is followed by an examination of the methodological approaches needed to identify and understand digital life stories. The conclusion reflects on the role of digital life stories in the information age.

**Digital Life Stories as a Genre**

The notion of ‘genre’ has various usages, but it is used here to distinguish digital life stories from other material on the Internet and other forms of auto/biography. This is also helps to locate digital life stories within the tradition of recounting lives in other forms such as auto/biography and oral histories. Therefore, while digital life stories represent ‘a major change’ (Plummer, 2000: 99) in life story telling there are continuities with past forms. Key characteristics of the genre are outlined below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format and medium</th>
<th>Web pages and <strong>weblogs</strong> that are inherently digital, dynamic, inclusive of text, pictures and other media.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrative pattern</td>
<td>Interweaving narratives that are loosely ordered by hyperlinks that are attached to an archive of material and other places on the Internet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author and audience</td>
<td>Constructed and reconstructed for a global audience that reads ‘unique’ narratives by making hyperlink choices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>An individual life that is grounded in other people, localities and events.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These features shape the expectations and experiences of digital life stories for both author and reader. They also point to a tension between the construction of the stories and their ‘reading’. This arises because digital life stories are more or less reconstructed by the act of consumption. However, a digital life story has, as in other media, a broad structure that commonly opens with significant life event such as a marriage, separation or illness. It then proceeds through various events that are more or less loosely attached to a chronology. This self-referential narrative enables people to tell the story of who they are, where they are and what makes their experiences distinctive. However, the audience may consume a narrative that transcends an individual web page or weblog by following hypertext links to other places on the Internet.

Format and Medium

There are a vast number of personal home pages that, as Chandler (1999) has observed, reflect the ‘construction of their makers identities’. In the early 1990s when the World Wide Web was novel, the construction of Internet web pages demanded a knowledge of Hypertext Mark-up Language (HTML) as well as relatively rare access to suitable networked computer equipment. Since then access to the Internet has grown exponentially and new, ‘click and drag’ tools have simplified the construction of web pages. In 1995 there were an estimated 20,000 web sites which had grown to over 10 million by 2000 with some 2 million pages being added every day (Netcraft, 2000). Estimates of the number of web pages need to be treated with caution, but whatever the actual number there is a general agreement about their continued and rapid growth. The weblog (aka blog) emerged as a new space relatively free of commercial interests that are increasingly represented on web pages. For example, advertising may be more or less overtly associated with personal home pages as part of users agreement with their Internet Service Provider (ISP). Blogs have their origins in software developed to make updating web pages simple. They are therefore similar to personal home pages but make even less demands on technical skills and do not require users to have an account with an ISP in order to publish material on the Internet. Indeed, the earlier label of ‘me-zines’ indicates the essential subjective nature of the blog. Marked by rapid growth it has been estimated that there are 701, 150 blogs. With about half this number being written in languages other than English. This is significant, in that a far greater proportion of general Internet resources are written in English and may reflect the relative accessibility of the blog format to those unable or unwilling to subscribe to a ISP. This suggests that the blog format may be particularly useful to those whose only access to ICTs is via cyber cafes, centres set up to address the digital divide and libraries.
Selvin (2000) notes that home pages are presented to visitors and the links made to other parts of the Internet constitute a means of self-expression. The personal home page and blog is, therefore, a distinctive space within the Internet with some of the attributes commonly associated with broadcast media. In effect, users can design, create and broadcast material about issues that concern them. Digital life stories involve the construction of individual narratives that may include pictures, scanned documents and sound bites linked together through hypertext. These narratives are scattered across the Internet and can be found through search engines or any of the many indexes of web pages and blogs (for example, Yahoo.com, Lycos.com, Blogger.com, Gblogs.com). They may also be found embedded in web pages that are constructed around particular themes or issues such as a chronic illness or a social problem (Kennedy, 1999). The stories within these pages tend to be used to offer people a grounded experiential account of, for example depression or divorce. Indeed, some of these narratives may also exist independently as blogs or home pages that the author continues to construct.

Narrative Pattern

Web pages and blogs have a discernible pattern that is shaped by the technology that is used to construct them. Blogs encourage authors to adopt a ‘diary’ approach so that as they add new material it is displayed consecutively. Chronology is therefore an important dimension of digital life stories as in more familiar print based auto/biographical forms (Erben, 1998). Roberts’s (1999) observation in relation to print narratives that the analysis of ‘time perspectives’ may reveal significant assumptions about how individuals view their lives is also true of digital life stories. However, the dynamic nature of the media means that such perspectives may be continually subject to revision as the author makes changes to the narrative.

Whether a web page or blog format is used, authors of digital life stories in effect ‘store’ material that may be linked into their narrative by hypertext links. Behind the main narrative, an archival collection of fragments is stored and can be called up to add more to a particular thread of the story, should a reader follow the related hyperlink. These links take two forms. First, those links that are attached to, for example, a picture or scanned document that may contain some text and links back to main narrative. Secondly, links that ‘jump’ the reader to other parts of the narrative or to Internet resources elsewhere such as newsgroups. Here the reader moves away from the original locality as they are in effect constructing a narrative that, as a whole, will contain material gleaned from across the Internet. While the author of a digital life story may
construct the narrative within a temporal ordering of experiences this may be more or less subverted by readers making choices of hyperlinks to follow.

**Writer and Audience**

McLuhan (1964) argued that what he referred to as ‘hypermedia’ would revolutionize writing by overturning author-centred text and its attendant apparatus of publishers and distribution systems. As a publishing and distribution system, the Internet enables individuals to circumvent the print media with its attendant production and marketing structures. For some, this is seen as liberating users from the inequalities between producers and consumers that exist in other media and suggests that the Internet is inherently democratic (Poster, 1995). For others, such developments reflect the ‘scapes’ within which people may make new connections and seek new ways of anchoring their identity (Urry, 2000). In any event as Featherstone and Lash (1999: 5) argue, ‘in cyberspace we move beyond the old realist divisions of space/time, sender/receiver, medium/message’. The interactivity celebrated by theorists has been understood to give readers the power over content previously enjoyed by the author (Landow, 1992). There are strong associations here with poststructuralist literary theory, which celebrated amongst other things the ‘death of the author’ (Culler, 1983). However, in digital life stories the author rather than ended or transformed because he or she decides how to use the hypertext medium and, for example, when and to what links may be offered to readers. Indeed in terms of control over the appearance and ‘rhythm’ of a digital life story, the author has more control than is the case in print media (Levine, 1995). Therefore, while every reading is potentially unique (Snyder, 1996), it is underpinned by a form and structure that is constructed by the author.

Digital life stories lack a defined audience. Anyone can visit them from anywhere and at anytime. Boller (1992: 20) goes so far as to suggest that ‘an electronic text only exists in the act of reading – in the interaction between the reader and textual structure’. As Skinner (2002: 28) concludes, such ‘narratives can truly be without end’. If writers of biographies have in mind a reader (Elbaz, 1987), the authors of digital life stories construct them with visitors in mind. However, this audience is global, lacks the proximity of off-line communities and, unless contact is made through email, is unknown. The mediated nature of the Internet has led some to argue that the consequent social distance may decrease inhibitions about describing intimate personal information (Turkle, 1995). This may be a contributing factor in authors’ apparent lack of concern about some of the information they open up to readers. Indeed, the
ways individuals utilize the Internet to facilitate their own agendas is associated with broader social and cultural inequalities. Bourdieu’s (1984) assertion that the ability to play a musical instrument and that a knowledge of ‘classical’ music is one of important signs of cultural capital may be reframed in terms of digital technologies. The increasing popularity of digital life stories suggests that the ability to create and maintain a presence on the Internet may be a sign of cultural capital appropriate to our contemporary era. Inscribed with links and other cultural and social preferences digital life stories may become both a repository for and display of cultural adroitness and social distinction. Within the rapidly expanding blog community, there is competition amongst some authors to have their blog achieve the status of a ‘featured’ blog. Such blogs are given particular prominence on web resources from which searches can be conducted to identify blogs with specific content. The unseen Internet audience may become more or less visible when individuals enter into email exchanges with the author. The widespread recognition of the quality of information or advice offered on some web pages or blogs can promote the author to the status of an ‘expert’ in a particular field. Indeed, the contents of a blog that was authored in Baghdad during the recent war was reproduced in the Guardian newspaper. However, as in other media there may be for some a desire for Warhol’s promise of 15 minutes of fame by establishing an evolving presence on the Internet (Stenger, 1991).

Content

The anonymity made possible within Internet domains has been drawn on by Turkle (1996) and others as one of the most fruitful ways of investigating the possibilities of identity. Influenced by a postmodern agenda some argued that online identities become detached from the embodied self as users experimented with their disembodied identity in cyberspace (Haraway, 1991). More broadly ICTs, and especially increased public use of the Internet, has been seen as an important, if not key, driver of what Hall (1992), in a different context, described as disembedding processes that are closely linked to the rise of individual reflexivity:

The more social life becomes mediated by the global marketing of styles, places and images, by international travel, and by globally networked media images and communications systems, the more identities become detached – disembedded – from specific times, places, histories and traditions, and appear ‘free-floating’.

(Hall, 1992: 303)
However, digital life stories represent one way people are using ICTs to embed their identities and maintain if not create links within their communities in all senses of the word. Miller and Slater’s (2000) ethnography of Internet users in Trinidad pointed to these embedding possibilities. Trinidian users promoted ‘Trinidadianness’ and their own sense of identity through the Internet. In effect, Trinidadians who frequently had globally dispersed families could be in everyday contact and establish a sense of ‘household’ not previously possible. Complete with photographs and sometimes video and sound recordings, evolving digital life stories may become highly effective mechanisms for promoting a sense of belonging and solidarity.

One of the challenges for individuals in this information age of ‘scapes’ and ‘flows’ is, therefore, to construct and anchor their identity and relationships. As Giddens (1991: 53) argues in the contemporary era, the self is ‘reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography’. This is inscribed with experiences that include relationships and places that can enhance the narrative, which is a mode of cognition rather than a literary construction. Such ‘autobiographical thinking’ in a ‘broad sense of an interpretative self-history produced by the individual concerned . . . whether written down or not . . . is actually the core of self-identity’ (1991: 53). This ‘core’ *** to displacement by some cyber identity. As Wynn and Katz’s (1998) study of home pages round, authors ‘pull together a cohesive presentation of self across eclectic social contexts in which individuals participate in’ (1998: 324). There is an affinity here with Giddens’s (1991) reflexive narratives of the self that are always ‘under construction’ and those accounts mapped out in digital life stories. The subject of digital life stories may therefore be simply stated to be ‘the self’. In this, digital life stories follow the traditional auto/biographical path of representing a life and the interconnectedness of that life with other people and places. In effect, authors are ‘telling their story’ in a way that anchors their identity on the Internet and at the same time represents an ongoing reflexive process. The diary-like format of many blogs facilitates a flow of narrative writing that may involve the author in daily accounts of events and their reflections on them. In addition to this basic auto/biographical form, it is possible to identity three broad types of narrative.

First, as noted previously, there are what might be referred to as ‘family’ auto/biographies. Here, individual digital life stories may be interlinked through hypertext to create a ‘family web’. A family or community history may also be constructed as people seek to generate a sense of ‘family’ despite the geographical dispersal of individual members. The extract below is taken from the opening of a digital life story that runs to many thousands of words as well as photographs and hyperlinks.
My name is George Davies and this web page is about my life (up to now) [hyperlink to a baby picture] and the town [hyperlink to map and part of the narrative about the place] I have lived in for forty years. I’m interested in family history and so I also keep this page so that we can stay in touch and maybe find lost people that are our relatives [hyperlink to family tree]. Things have changed so last that Hull is not the place that most of us once called home.

There is an echo here of a sense of the ‘loss’ or transformation of community depicted by Willmot and Young (1960) and others. Within some digital life stories, there is an attempt to use them as a platform not only for family life but as an evolving family history, so that past members are represented in something like memorial tones. For example, one author whose son died of an AIDS-related illness maintained his digital life story, which is hyperlinked to others in the family, as a ‘living remembrance’ so that future generations will recognize the son’s place in the family. It should be noted that while such digital life stories may be a conduit for the remembrance of family experiences and interaction they are one of many ways the same people may interact (cf. Wellman and Gulia, 1999).

The second category reflects a desire to share difficult life transitions and offer others advice and support. The narratives commonly challenge expert knowledge domains such as medicine and the law. There is a resemblance here with what Frank (1995) has identified as a ‘quest narrative’, whereby illness may reveal new aspects of the self following a metaphorical journey, involving various difficulties and interactions, from which the protagonist returns with a ‘boon’ to share with others. This may be, for example, expressed in terms of ‘how I got back my life from doctors’ or ‘my story of divorce and the loss of my children’. Such digital life stories can contain what in other media would be contentious material. For example, one author in the process of explaining the process of his divorce included a severe criticism of the social workers who were involved in his case along with their photographs, email addresses and other material that he has found on the Internet:

I’m a local lad. Always lived around the same streets. Known people since I was at school. . . . Only time I have really left it was when I was in the navy. Got to see bit of the world and gave me a trade but I never belonged out there. . . . I work with an old mate in his garage [hyperlink to several pictures and an advertisement for the garage]. . . .

When I first saw Mrs Smith [hyperlinks to a social service web site and details of the social worker’s background taken from a social services web site, including an email address] she said to me
she didn’t want any trouble, like she was already expecting it. This is about class. She had an education and thought she was better than me. She knew this because of my accent which as you might expect is not like that of a country lady.

Fathers must fight prejudice [hyperlinks to campaigning organizations]. My life may share things with yours which shows that my experiences are not unusual.

Foucault (1991: 189) reminds us that organized expert knowledge involves the archiving of information and places the individual ‘in a network of writing’ and that ‘engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them’. Such classificatory processes have become ‘designed in to the flows of everyday life’ (Rose, 1999: 234) as digital technology opens up new possibilities for surveillance. The proliferation of such documentation is a feature of the information age that also provides individuals with the ability to reproduce and publish such material. Medical, social work, educational and other documents may be scanned and depicted within digital life stories to verify some aspects of the author’s narrative. In effect, authors attempt to construct a counter-narrative to the expert discourses they have been the subject of and seek a degree of confirmation through interaction with readers.

The third category may be thought of as ‘conversion’ narratives. The auto/biography is used partly to tell a story of conversion which concludes with a plea to readers to ‘take a similar path’. Religion represents a common theme that partly reflects the way faith communities in the United States encourage individual members to use the Internet. The proliferation of new religious movements, especially in the United States, has led to fierce competition for members. These movements have been quick to adopt new technology such as television and the Internet to ‘spread their message’ (Hadden, 1988). However, conversion is not necessarily associated with religion. Digital life stories that emphasize ‘downsizing’ or one of the alternative approaches to health and lifestyle may be constructed in the hope that readers will ‘follow my example and change your life’:

Welcome to my cyber home. I started two years ago as I traced my family history [hyperlink to a detailed family tree complete with many photographs, and links to other sites about black history]. It has grown into the story of my troubles and how I got back my life from the social workers and psychiatrist by finding Jesus [hyperlinks to a community church web site]. It might help you not to fall under their power and find ways of dealing with issue that life throws at you. I don’t pretend to have the answer but you won’t hear my story from the professionals.
Within these digital life stories, links are provided to congruent web sites and similar digital life stories. Readers are also encouraged to email the author so that specific advice or support can be provided. Moreover, sonic digital life stories may have developed into what amounts to an active promotion and selling of an illness remedy that has helped ‘transform’ the author’s life. For example, Hardey (2000b) describes how web pages may move from an individual account of an illness to a resource through which drugs or remedies of various kinds may be purchased.

Towards a Methodology

Digital life stories represent a challenge to traditional approaches to collecting and analysing auto/biographical material. The first problem is how to identify digital life stories which also raises the issue of how any one or number of accounts may be considered to be ‘representative’. Like other auto/biographical material, it may not be possible or desirable to make claims about the representativeness of individual lives (Plummer, 2000). Digital life stories offer a subjective account by the author on the author. Unlike many narratives used in research, such accounts are not constructed in collaboration with an interviewer who has a particular research agenda (Erben, 1993). Moreover, given the rapidly expanding nature of web pages and blogs there is no easily identifiable ‘population’ of digital life stories from which such a sample could be drawn. However, one purpose of this paper is to at least move towards a basis for identifying what constitutes a digital life story. The identification and selection of digital life stories may, as in other areas of qualitative research, be driven by theoretical concerns (Erben, 1998). For example, the desire to understand how people with a chronic illness are sharing their experiences with others through the Internet leads to the identification of narratives written round particular conditions (Hardey, 2002b).

Search engines provide an obvious starting place to identify material on the Internet. Terms such as ‘my story’, ‘me and my family’ and so forth will reveal a mass of links, some of which will lead to digital life stories. However, search engines identify material on the Internet in many different ways and these tend to neglect personal web pages in favour of more visible commercial and organizational led material. Those who want to transmit a ‘message’, whether as a challenge to authority or as a call to conversion, are more likely to ‘post’ an indication of their Internet resources directly to search engines than those concerned for example to construct a resource for their family. The mutual cross linking of sites whereby one web page makes a hypertext link to another can also do much to increase its visibility to search engines. This again suggests that
the more ‘private’ self constructed in family and self-narratives may require a greater degree of effort to identify. Newsgroups can provide another source of links to digital life stories. However, these are more likely to reveal links to resources constructed by those active in groups devoted to, for example, alternative health or faith communities. Blogs have their own and rapidly evolving mechanisms for identification. Again mutual hypertext links are important but search engines such as Yahoo.com, Lycos.com, Blogger.com and Gblogs.com enable specific word searches. Indeed, given the relatively greater emphasis on personal narratives within this domain of the Internet, it may be more easy to identify relevant digital life stories here than within the vast pool of web pages.

Ethics are uncertain in Internet-based research (Hakken, 1999) and it is too easy for researchers to view the contents and activities in digital space as a vast collection of data just waiting for analysis. Digital life stories, like an autobiography or work of art displayed in the public domain. Indeed, authors may be keen for their site or blog to be visited and requests for visitors to email questions and comments are common. It is therefore possible to follow ‘informed consent’ guidelines and ask the author for permission to use his or her Internet resource for research purposes. Unlike research conducted within newsgroups or chat rooms, the researcher need not cast into the role of a covert participant (Mann and Stewart, 2000). However, should an email link not be provided, requests be ignored or permission refused it remains in the hands of the researcher to decide whether to include such material. Moreover, whether permission is given for one ‘reading’ of the author’s Internet material or a succession over a period of time may not be clear. A further consideration in some instances relates to the content of some digital life stories. As we have noted documents of various kinds may be scanned and published together with personal details of others. It may not be clear whether individuals or organizations are aware of such material that they may well not want to be publicly available. However, the inclusion of others within auto/biographical work has been discussed in relation to more established forms of auto biography so that similar strategies could be followed here (Roberts, 2002). There is a caveat here in that given some basic information it may be possible to identify a digital life story through the use of powerful search facilities so it is more difficult to insulate research material than in other settings.

Questions related to authenticity and detachment from off-line identities are one of the major themes running through both utopian and dystopian accounts of the Internet. Disembodiment and anonymity allow users to take on many new identities that may have little connection to their off-line selves. Indeed there are now many well-known examples of people who have deceived the Internet audience into believing that their ‘true’ off-line lives and identities are congruent with their online
persona. Some researchers have addressed this problem by meeting respondents off-line ‘in person as well as persona’ (Turkle, 1995: 324) while others argue that online environments and identities are valid in themselves and need not be verified by off-line presence (Hine, 2000). Jones (1999) reminds us that it is the embodied user who interacts online and that we can never fully ‘escape’ from lived experiences. Many studies of online communities point to the flow between on and off-line lives. Rheingold (1994), for example, describes how his observation of the WELL community was ‘grounded in my everyday physical world’ as he attended marriages and other events in the off-line lives of members. In a similar way, it has been claimed that personal home pages tend to be situated with and often seen as part of the author’s off-line life (Wynn and Katz, 1998). As Denzin (1999: 108) concluded, ‘cybernarratives are grounded in the everyday lives and biographies of the women and men who write them’. The apparent tension between off-line and online identities and environments reflects broader and long-established debates about authenticity and ‘truth’ within ethnographic research (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Plummer, 1999) as well as more recent theoretical strands within writing about the Internet (Wellman 1997). However, there are established domains within the Internet where people can ‘play’ with identity (Haraway, 1991) or write imaginative fictional stones. The inclusion of email addresses and the desire to make connections, whether with family members or the Internet community further mitigate against users constructing fictional narratives that resemble digital life stories and interact with others on the same basis.

The loss of the authoritative place of the interviewer and the fixed form of the written account challenges the conventions of narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993; Becker, 1999). The dynamic nature of the material means that it has to be captured and ‘frozen’ to become what is conventionally thought of as ‘data’. In the case of the material alluded to in this paper, it was captured as complete HTML documents together with all internal links, which included pictures and scanned documents, and stored on a CD ROM. This allows the researcher to gain a familiar sense of control over data and subject it to various forms of analysis. New approaches may be needed if the dynamic nature of digital life stories is to be understood so that, for example, a series of captures of the same story over time would allow changes to be mapped and comparisons across the time as the author alters and adds to the story. Once captured, it is tempting to simply transfer the text into a qualitative analysis package such as Ethnograph or NUDIST. However, the danger here is that text is given a priority that it may not deserve so that visual and other material is ignored or marginalized. Moreover, as Chandler’s (1999) work on personal home pages shows, the design and layout of the material viewed through a web browser may be significant. The inclusion of material
other than text in auto/biographies is not new (Plummer, 2000) and as Knowles’s (2000) work suggests, images may provide important insights into individual narratives.

**Conclusion**

Computer technology and access to the Internet are pervasive life in the information age. In a world of ‘mobilities’, ‘scapes’ and ‘flows’ where people may be confronted with new forms of risks (Beck, 1992) and uncertainties (Giddens, 1991), the making and maintenance connections and the anchoring of identity takes on a new significance. It is not therefore surprising that ICTs are used by people to situate themselves in the relational, familial, social and organizational structures they occupy. While digital life stories are relatively new to the long established traditions of auto/biographical writing, a number of conclusions about their nature and trajectory can be made. First, digital life stories are cased in the offline self rather than representing an escape from it. They are not purely performances or narratives of imagined selves that have been associated with other Internet environments such as MUDs (multi-user dungeons) where disembodiment may encourage such experimentation. Like more established auto/biographies, they are about and reflect the life lived by an individual author. Secondly, digital life stories reflect and are immersed in a self that is struggling to make choices and establish relationships in a world characterized by fluidity, uncertainty, change and ever greater levels of classification and surveillance. This may involve working through a sense of being perceived as an ‘other’ that politicizes identity and is played out among several discourses, be they in the form of a challenge to expertise or a ‘conversion’ narrative. Thirdly, and relatedly, digital life stories form part of what in another context has been called ‘backyard ethnography’ (Smith and Watson, 1996), which indicates how these are narratives of everyday lives that would not otherwise find a global audience unknown to the author. Plummer (2000) partly bases his assertion that what lie labels ‘cyber life stories’ represent a major change in life-story telling on this ability to publish to a mass audience. Digital life stories, therefore, appear likely to be a significant way people ‘tell their story’, maintain a presence and make connections in the information age. Fourthly, and finally, digital life stories represent both a challenge to and opportunity for academic research into auto/biography. There are methodological and ethical issues to be worked through and we need to find new ways of understanding dynamic digital material that may include visual and other components. Digital life stories provide an ever-expanding resource so that never before have so many auto biographies been available to us. As material on the Internet is
subject to rapid change we need to consider, with some urgency, how to capture and archive the digital life stories that exist today before they are transformed as the authors make changes to them or simply deleted from the Internet.

Notes

3. These extracts are taken from an analysis of 132 web pages, 37 blogs and the 89 subsequent responses to an emailed questionnaire (see Hardey, 2002a).

References


THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES IN LIFE STORY RESEARCH
Is Oral History Auto/Biography?

Joanna Bornat

Introduction

I have to confess to a whole range of complex feelings when I consider the issue of the relationship between oral history and auto/biography. As an oral historian reading the newly emerging auto/biography literature, I hear problems being outlined, dilemmas presented and see constructs developed which I recognise. I feel myself reacting defensively, but at the same time am curious to find out how this literature relates to what I think I know and practice. In part I am responding in the traditional role of the academic, staking out territory, declaring possession and owning thoughts. But I am also responding as a potential subject, rebelling against the possibility that my work and my activities might become part of someone else’s thinking and be returned to me as only part of a larger scheme or, worse still, analysed and explained in a language beyond my recognition. I may be guilty of inventing a distinction which only exists in my mind but, in following the development of what seems to be a new area of interest for sociologists, I am conscious that what is being discussed sounds familiar to me. What follows is an exploration of what I, as an oral historian, sense as differences and similarities between what I think I know about and what I now see being discussed as auto/biography.

Defining Terms

I begin with definitions. Seeking a form of words which is inclusive of what seems to the most reflective thinking, I have chosen a quotation

from a recent article by Liz Stanley, written for an audience of oral historians:

“Unlike oral history, auto/biography has no common method, nor a preferred form of data, nor is it programmatically based in a methodological sense, and nor does it ‘belong’ to one discipline’ Its common focus lies in the notion of auto/biography as an epistemologically-oriented concern with the political ramifications of the shifting boundaries between self and other, past and present, writing and reading, fact and fiction, and with an analytic attention to these within the oral, visual and written texts that are ‘biographies’ and ‘autobiographies’ in the widest sense of these terms. The writer or author and the researcher are certainly not treated as transparent or ‘dead’, but very much as agents actively at work in textual political production” (Stanley 1994, p. 89)

This definition is explicitly engaged with the issues I want to confront in this paper. It sets out the key areas of engagement and disengagement between these two discipline areas. Looking for a useful definition of oral history I have been struck by the fact that oral historians seem to be more interested in stating what oral history can do, rather than what it is (Thompson 1988; Grele 1985; Frisch 1990). In the end I have chosen a definition offered by Michael Frisch who argues that oral history is:

“a powerful tool for discovering, exploring and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory – how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them” (Frisch 1990 p. 188)

Thus definitions of auto/biography and oral history are at once the same and different. There is a shared interest in knowledge and how it is constructed, with references to ‘epistemologically-oriented’ and words like ‘the nature of the process of historical memory’. They allow for the manufacture of reality, by problematising the nature of arrived at accounts, with reference to ‘how people make sense of the past’ and ‘political production’. Each defines itself in terms of both method and content. They connect with notions of reflexivity, referencing the inter-relationship of ‘self and other’ and the role the past plays in personal explorations of life experience: each suggesting a central role for the individual in the process of understanding accounts. Finally, they both acknowledge the possibilities of a merging of categories: the individual and the social, the past and the present, fact and fiction, writing and reading.
Though there are similarities there are also differences. It is the focus on the ‘doing’, on its use as a ‘tool’ that I think provides a distinction between the tasks of oral history and autobiography. There is scope here for openness in the process. It is perhaps a question of where theorising is placed, whether, as in auto/biography it is a goal, or whether, as in oral history it is a means. Moving on to a second difference, there is the actual method. Though each describes a process of interactions between self and society, self and described selves, I want to suggest that the interactions of oral history are by nature interrogative. Whereas the interactions of auto/biography are imposed on the texts, be they oral, visual or written, or contained within them, oral history is a process of social interaction and interrogation. A third distinction which I draw is in terms of aims. Whereas auto/biography’s aim, though political in terms of its openness to debate and its interest in challenging orthodoxies, remains contained within an academic discourse, the aim of oral history is broader being unashamedly political in its instrumentality and with concern for outcomes. I will argue each of these differences in more detail, but first I want to explain where I think oral history is at present and where it has come from. I need to do this in order to make it clear that I come from an area of work that, like auto/biography, is developing and has its own history.

The Past and Present of Oral History

Elsewhere (Bornat 1993a) I have outlined some of the changes which oral history has gone through. From positivist beginnings it has reached out to more reflective and interpretative ways of working. Looking back through early issues of Oral History it is clear that the drive was towards collection and itemisation, what Michael Frisch describes as “more history”: “a source of new information about otherwise inaccessible experience” (Frisch 1988 pp. 186-7). Innovators in England in the late 1960’s were academic historians, archivists, librarians, folklorists, museum workers and broadcasters amongst others whose “primary concern (was) with research in social and political history making use of sound recordings” (Oral History, 1972 Vol I, no 1, p.5). Collectors at that time were actively interviewing for information about rural crafts, details of local history, traditional lore and belief, family life and work experience, christian socialism, dialect speech, Oxford college servants, labour history, Welsh International Brigaders. This was an eclectic set of interests but with a shared perspective, the collection of memories of the past through interviews.

In the United States, the goal was similar. Alan Nevins, who is credited as the founder of oral history in that country, began a series of interviews in 1948 with the aim of obtaining “from the lips and papers of living
Americans who have led significant lives, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic and cultural life of the last sixty years” (Baum 1972 p. 17). From quite an early point, however, British oral history demonstrated evidence that it aimed to fulfill another function. Michael Frisch again supplies the descriptor: this is the “anti-history” approach which assumes that “conventional historical frameworks are not only inadequate, but more fundamentally obstructive of deeper understanding. In this sense, oral history is offered as a way to bypass such obstacles, a short cut to a more direct, emotionally informed sense of ‘the way it was’” (Frisch 1988 p. 186–7). George Ewart Evans, whose oral history work in East Anglia inspired the first generation of oral historians in Britain talked about his realisation of this direct and humanistic link to the past in relation to his neighbours, a retired shepherd and his wife

“I found that they were books that walked and the whole village was living history. But I realised that although the old survivors were walking books, I could not just leaf them over. They were persons and I had to be very very careful”. (Evans 1972 p. 57)

George Ewart Evans’ early awareness of his informants as older people was later advanced with some oral historians’ exploration of the relationship between remembering and those existential issues raised by the experience of ageing. It is perhaps a distinctive feature of oral history in Britain that what is known as ‘reminiscence work’ has kept in close association with oral history with each informing the other (Bornat 1993b), reinforcing awareness of the contribution which even the most frail older person makes to our understanding of the past while underscoring the fact that most oral history practice is a dialogue about ageing.

Understanding aspects of ageing is acknowledged to be of importance to the competent and empathetic oral historian, so is an understanding that what may be given as an account is no more objectively ‘true’ than a written document. Oral history has moved from an obsessive concern with validity towards a more relaxed attitude which allows for interpretation and an awareness of presentation skills on both sides of the microphone. In this it has been influenced from two directions. European oral historians, in particular the Italian school, have long had an interest in the cultural and symbolic content of oral evidence. The work of Sandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini has been key in this. Sandro Portelli has developed ways of acknowledging the contribution of mythical accounts both to an understanding of the internal worlds of some informants and to explaining the history of left politics and action (Portelli 1988; 1991). Luisa Passerini writes about:
the impossibility of making direct use of oral memories as immediately revealing facts and events. Rather, they reveal a tension between forms of behaviour and mental representations expressed through particular narrative guises.” (Passerini 1989 p.194)

‘Narrative guises’ and strategies crop up in unexpected circumstances. A nurse writing about his work with older women on a continuing care ward gives an example of an account being given in the form of a traditional story. An older woman near death from heart disease talked to him about her early childhood experiences of family abuse and neglect and introduced fairy tale elements with the story of a passing ‘gentleman’ who asked to adopt her. Looking back on this interview John Adams suggests that this may have been a way for her to generalise painful experiences and present these in an acceptable form to her hearer (Adams 1993 p. 86–9).

The other influence has been feminist oral history. Where Michael Frisch points to oral history’s two poles of ‘more history’ and ‘anti history’, feminist historians have identified the ‘how’ in history. It has been feminist oral historians who have shown most interest in how we work, what assumptions and motives we bring to the process and how the process is changed by and changes us. In part this influence has emerged as women oral historians have reflected on shared experience across and between generations, it is partly through a need, an urgency to tell and reveal hidden accounts, to right wrongs and to stake claims for justice. But it is also a result of having to come to terms with the limits of sharing while we reflect on the divisions of class, race, age, culture and impairment which continue to distinguish groups of women from each other. It is this tension between sharing and dividing which has led to the identification of issues relating to how we work as oral historians.

Two papers in a recent issue of Oral History contribute to these developing debates. Mazy Stuart has been interviewing women with learning difficulties who have lived in a convent for most of their lives. Her interviews made her remember herself as a four year old, left at a convent by her mother and only returning home for holidays. She began to realise that the experience of taking part was affecting her, the interviewer. This became clear when, on asking one woman about how she felt about being interviewed, she was surprised to hear the same question being put back to her, “And how was it for you Mary?” Her conclusion is

“As participants in the creation of an oral history the process itself will change ‘us’ and this must not be hidden from scrutiny but must be part of that process. Our roles and our meanings and identities, as oral historians, must be investigated” (Stuart 1993 p. 82)
The other paper is by Miriam Zukas and raises the issue of interviews as friendship. She writes as a psychologist who has come upon oral history. In the process of interviewing twenty nine women about friendships she notes that she changed her usual terminology of interviewee as ‘subject’ to using the term “respondent”. She considers the interviews as friendships but in the end she sees them as “quasi-friendships”. Women confided in her easily, she felt, but she acknowledges that there was no reciprocity in what was essentially a research relationship.

“I asked many more direct questions, directed the conversation much more, was more controlled about my interventions and said much less than I would have done if I had been talking to a friend” (Zukas 1993 p. 78)

Her reflection on their experience of each other’s company, over questions and cups of tea, evokes the detailed analysis of interview practice by US feminist oral historians who have recently written about their recognition of differences and the limits to ideals of empowerment and partnership, in the oral history interview. Where objectives and backgrounds differ then the experience of being interviewed and of relating life history cannot be controlled or predetermined either in essentialist or democratic terms (Gluck & Patai 1991).

I have introduced some developments in what I recognise as oral history in order to illustrate ways in which it is approaching some of the issues which auto/biography commonly deals with, issues of identity, fabulation, revealing and accounting for self in the research process. Now I want to retrace my steps and gather tip the three points of difference between auto/biography and oral history which I identified earlier. These are: openness, interrogation, and instrumentality. I look at each in turn.

**Openness**

Oral history seeks to explore and explain in a way which involves an active seeking out of lives. It therefore goes beyond the inhibitions and the social and political restraints which still determine who will participate in writing and reflecting on the self. This means that there is potentially a greater inclusivity, a greater openness: hidden histories come to light.

Over a decade ago this process began with the new histories of women in the family and community, (Chamberlain 1975; McCrindle & Rowbotham 1977; Liddington and Norris 1978; Wilson 1978; Thompson 1981; Roberts 1984, Davidoff & Westover 1986 are just a few examples). Recently we have seen histories of other previously groups begin to emerge. People with learning disabilities who have spent lifetimes in
institutions, (Potts & Fido 1991; Atkinson 1993) or whose experiences as children and young people with physical disabilities have remained hidden because they lived apart within their community (Humphries & Gordon 1992). Oral historians can take the initiative, persuade and cajole, demonstrate with examples, encourage participation and create new biographers or autobiographers. The traditions of community publishing have done much to promote the idea of writing about oneself and a self defined community. Groups of people for whom the idea that their lives could have any wider worth and value beyond their immediate family or community found new ways to record their histories and recognition both as historians and as creative writers (Centerprise 1977; Bornat 1992; Woodin 1992).

Working with older women living in hospital recently we came up against the familiar refrain, “you wouldn’t be interested in my life, I’ve done nothing”. Part of openness lies in freeing up old skills or finding new ones. Making life story books with these women has highlighted ways in which past experience needs to be recreated and remembered if present conditions and circumstances are to be understood and needs met. Once begun, the process overwhelmed the self-doubts and inhibitions which these older women had accumulated within an institutional regime. What emerged was a compromise between privately owned knowledge and public life. The women we talked to clearly made selections, determined their own stories and created accounts which both accommodated with and challenged the presentation of themselves as hospital patients (Adams, Bornat & Prickett 1993).

Oral history opened up possibilities for self expression amongst this marginalised group of older women who thereby joined the community of historians a truly open process.

**Interrogative**

Auto/biography is concerned with interrogation of the text. But oral history is wholly interrogation, a practice and method shaped by the rules, conventions and opportunities of question and answer. This means that what is produced is the result not simply of conversational exchange, but may also have a wider purpose, for both parties. The effect of interrogation may mean that what is an often told story comes out quite differently. There are as yet few examples of the difference which questioning makes to the same account. Paul Thompson includes an example from a comparison of memoirs written by Swedish working men and interviews with these same men (Thompson 1988 p.244–5). My experience of comparing a tape, its transcription, and a written account of the same events, shows similar differences. Where the oral account is lively and responsive to the questioner the written account is pallid, literary conventions having ironed out the dialed and somehow rendered the
The recorded voice . . . becomes an ambiguous gateway between life and death. While an image – a dead relative’s photograph . . . evokes that person’s memory, the recorded voice evokes the presence. . . . The speaking person is both there and not there, both living and vanished” (Portelli 1993 p. 221)

In terms of the experience of being questioned it is clear that many interviewees find the process of voicing their thoughts in response to questions an enjoyable experience. Oral historians develop ways to build relationships which may be of short duration. They may want to talk about quite intimate aspects of people’s lives, or they may find themselves talking to people who have not recently experienced anyone else taking an interest in their lives. This means cultivating a supportive manner without guaranteeing a lasting and deep relationship. More than likely the person being interviewed finds positive enjoyment in the experience and is able to take it for what it is. They may relish the opportunity to put themselves on the map of achievements, local or national. They may find that in talking to someone else they are able to connect their life into a meaningful whole for the first time. They may welcome the chance to express quite deep emotions with someone who has no
personal expectations. While oral historians are ever mindful of the ethics of the life history interview, there are many examples from the oral history literature of the interviewee’s positive involvement in the process of questioning, and of deliberate management of an interview on the part of the interviewee (Bornat 1993a; 1993b).

A Political Instrumentality

The origins of oral history in Britain lie in that period of the late 1960s with those who, in the main, identified themselves with social and political change. It traces its roots back to areas of research and teaching which challenged the established order of things. This was the search for alternative explanations to the ‘official’ view of the past, the ‘people’s history’ of GDH Cole, Raymond Postgate, the Webbs and others. It sees itself as connected to that part of sociology which immersed itself in the life of communities, and elicited accounts directly through testimony, witness and the detailed observation of everyday life. Challenges to authority in education came with student action, ‘sit ins’, ‘free universities’, moments when a new spirit seemed to be abroad on the campuses of some English universities (Thompson & Bornat 1994). That period of possibilities saw developments for learning outside conventional settings with the growth of the adult literacy movement in inner city areas and the deliberate production of texts drawn directly from life history for use by adults and published for local audiences (Centerprise 1977). As a conscious departure from documentary conventions in historical research, and by attempting to find new methodologies in the space created by discussions initiated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), oral history set out to define a territory for itself in an area overlapping with sociology.

Oral history developed under the influence of a modernist belief in the possibility of future change and with commitment to a particular type of change. To give it the label ‘socialist’ today is to pronounce an academic exclusion order, however its leading protagonists clearly identified themselves with socialist traditions of explanation and change and most probably still do. This has had definite implications for oral history as a self aware project and, in my opinion, accounts for its particular instrumental qualities.

Instrumentality has recently been levelled as a criticism of feminist methodology by a leading ethnographer. His accusation is that this may encourage ‘dogmatism’ since both oppression and emancipation have a plurality of meanings (Hammersley 1992 p. 199-203). His attack, as feminists point out, is couched in terms which distract attention away from inequalities in research methodologies. The goal of oral history, to achieve a “shared authority” (my emphasis), to
‘redefine and redistribute intellectual authority, so that this might
be shared more broadly in historical research and communication”
(Frisch 1990 p.xx)

is, I argue, one which allows for differences both in terms of present
understandings and past experience.

What I have been describing may be a generational effect. Perhaps
future oral historians will tread different paths. Certainly in other parts
of the world, oral historians have other preoccupations beyond those
which we in England have developed. Nevertheless, all are likely to be
instrumental in their own way. In the Ukraine, as in other parts of the
former Soviet Union, oral history is developing partly in response to a
need to write a new history of the past, but also as a way of bringing
retribution against that other past and those who profited from it (Perks
1993). In the Sahel, oral historians work with local communities, particu-
larly with women, to record perceptions of a changing environment –
climatic, social and cultural – with a view to incorporating such knowledge
into development projects and to evaluating them (Cross & Barker 1991).
In India, oral historians working with rural health workers are helping to
develop successful interventions in leprosy prevention and treatment
programmes (Kakar forthcoming).

Oral history’s involvement with instrumentality comes from an aware-
ness of the way in which telling life experience can easily lead to some
form of personal or social transformation. To be able to put a stamp on
the past, to recognise it and claim it is a way of authenticating an account
and the person who gives that account. Oral historians working with
disadvantaged groups and individuals talk of ‘empowerment’ and, though
this is an elusive and over-worked term it clearly has some measurable
meaning in these contexts, and elsewhere. To have a notion of empow-
erment requires theories of power and its distribution. Oral historians,
from their work, whether elitist or populist, clearly work with notions of
power inequalities, Where recognition of class and race led the way ini-
tially, gender, age, sexuality and disability have followed. Oral histori-
ans work with a view to restore, empower, reclaim, give back and re-
value. The terms used vary, but they tend all to relate to people making
changes in their lives.

Oral history as a set of practices includes many examples of instru-
mentality. I feel that this commitment to change distinguishes it from
auto/biography. Where auto/biography uses the text as its boundary,
oral history, with its focus on outputs, goes beyond the text to make
connections with present situations and to seek remedies or explanation.
Its membership and audience is therefore broadly based in a wide range
of settings, traditions and ways of working. To be effectively utilitarian
and instrumental its language needs to be understandable and its terms
of reference meaningful, both to those who take part in it as an activity and to those who are its audience. Its origins as a dialogue give rise to a commitment to a theorising which is within the understanding of those whose lives are the data. This is a quality which I do not find so far in auto/biography. Looking back at the definitions which I quoted at the start I find a language which risks the transformation of ordinary lives and the common sense understandings which surround them into an unrecognisable and estranging code.

Conclusions

In seeking out the similarities and differences between auto/biography and oral history I am aware that I have ranged loosely across ways in which both terms are used and understood. This is inevitable. Both enjoy an immense popularity currently and encompass an enormous and, at points, overlapping literature. I have pointed out the areas of shared activity. I feel that this is important since oral history can only learn and develop from an awareness of commonality and helpful comparison. However, I do feel that there are important differences in our approaches to understanding the past through memory and reflection. In part these differences relate to our own particular histories and I have spent some time outlining where I think oral history comes from in order to make this point. In part I feel that this is because of the traditions which each has drawn on and the language that is a part of these. Oral history has a background in history and in sociology whereas I see auto/biography coming from an association between sociology and literary theory. There is an openness in oral history which I see as essential to its mission and its method, an inclusiveness which means that both the exotic and the mundane are both eligible and sought after. The interrogative nature of oral history opens up possibilities to extend reflection and interaction within the interview and afterwards. Finally, the focus on a text, as distinct from the voice on tape and the way this may be negotiated into an output, means that auto/biography has a narrower goal and speaks to a smaller and less differentiated audience compared with oral history. In part I see a difference in the way the two approaches deal with interactions, there is a fundamentally social nature to oral history which means that it is forced to consider divisions, inequalities and policy at all stages of its enterprise.

Perhaps because we gave ourselves a strongly instrumental, empowering tradition oral historians have found it more difficult to put our own selves into accounts. The urge has been to make space for others to talk and reflect. Even though oral historians are now more sensitive to the various ways in which an awareness of self affects the accounts given, this awareness tends to be reserved almost exclusively for an analysis of the
subject or at most the interactions of selves in the interview. The self of
the interviewer is only just coming into focus and so far the selves we are
learning about are exclusively women’s. It is the analysis of self which
auto/biography encourages that I feel provides a link between the two
endeavours. I began by indicating the common ground between us –
our shared interest in process, our awareness of the way reality may be
manufactured in remembering, the connection with existential issues
and the acceptance of a reflexive understanding of the self. It is by build-
ing links in this last area that I feel oral history has most to gain and
auto/biography has most to communicate to us. As oral historians we
can only benefit from a deeper focus on the self and the personal. More
about where we have come from) how we account for this, how we work,
how our work changes us, how, we relate to interviews and what the
outcomes are for our future selves, can only improve our skills and make
oral history more accessible and understandable to the world at large.

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Like all sciences, sociology – which is the disciplinary base for many narrative approaches – has its own narratives to make sense of the contemporary world. In recent years, many of these narratives have shifted to make sense of the radically altered socio-economic state we now find ourselves in and, to do so, they employ metaphors of ‘flexibility’ and ‘fluidity’. For example, to Harvey (1990) we are now living under ‘flexible accumulation’, a new form of global capitalism where all national barriers to the flow of capital have been removed, empowering multinational corporations over nation states and individual citizens. Gone are the days of state-managed capitalism, and, with it, gone also are the days of jobs for life, of living out one’s days in relatively stable communities of fellow workers, long-time neighbours and extended families. Now our lives are flexible lives, to be uprooted at a moment’s notice. Bauman (2000) characterizes this as a transformation from ‘heavy’ to ‘light’ capitalism, which is indicative of a new ‘liquid modernity’: that is, the current phase in history where all social forms and relations solidified in specific places are uprooted and made transient in time. For Sennett (1998), this creates the conditions for a ‘corrosion of character’ – character meaning the long-term aspect of personal traits valued by self and others – for in a world where people are always starting over again, in new jobs, work teams, or neighbourhoods, many have lost the witnesses to their days.
My aim here is to begin to understand the effect of these social changes on the auto/biographies of individuals and to question whether the sociological narratives that seek to explain them are reflected in, or contradicted by, biographical narrative. If we regard biography as that which ‘render[s] intelligible historical action in context’ (Chamberlayne et al., 2000: 8), then the condition of flexible accumulation or liquid modernity should have profound effects on the ways in which individuals attempt to construct a biography with others. Indeed, these social conditions would seem to splinter the times, places and social relations – the very fabric of everyday life – in which biographies have traditionally been nested and that provided the context for people to render intelligible their historical actions. If people can never settle in jobs, towns or cities with groups of long-term or medium-term companions with whom to share their lives, how has this affected the coherence of the narratives they construct to make sense and meaning of themselves and their historical actions? According to Bauman (1995), in a society where time fragments into a series of episodes, there can be no consistent or cohesive life strategy or narrative to deal with the world or make sense of it.

However, the sociological story lines of flexible accumulation and liquid modernity are, like all narratives, extremely complex once one gets below the surface. As Gergen (1994) has pointed out, there is never a single narrative providing a linear theme that runs throughout the biography of an individual, nor, by extension of this idea, can there be a single narrative that unifies the themes of an author telling a story of society. For example, as a Marxist, Harvey (2000) wants to tell other stories about resistance to flexible capitalism, and, as a geographer, about the spaces of hope that exist in everyday life which provide the basis for this resistance. Likewise, Sennett is interested in the coherent narratives people create in the face of flexible capitalism, how they maintain a sense of personal responsibility and meaning in their lives through narratives about ‘career’. And Bauman realizes that while modern society attempts to evaporate all solid forms into liquids and make them fluid, this often results in contradictions. For example, in order to be recognized by others there must be something about one’s identity that is relatively substantial and which does not change from moment to moment. There is, then, a contradiction ‘of self-made identities which must be solid enough to be acknowledged as such and yet flexible enough not to bar freedom of future movements in the constantly changing, volatile circumstances [of liquid modernity]’ (Bauman, 2000: 49–50). So the search for identity must at certain points make solid what is fluid and make form out of the formless. How we achieve this in our biographies and narratives is another central concern of this piece.
Overall, then, quoting C. Wright Mills, one could say that here I am attempting to 'work out and revise (my) views of the problems of history, the problems of biography, and the problems of social structure in which biography and history intersect' (1959: 225). However, this intersection of history and biography can be fraught with theoretical and methodological difficulties. Rustin (2000: 45) has claimed that, in biographical work, societies and cultures must be studied from the ground ‘upwards’, the ontological assumption being that individuals have agency, which leads to the conclusion that biographies make society and are not merely made by it. While I have some sympathy with this, I think the ontological assumption is skewed: where history and biography meet there must surely be reciprocal interchange, with individuals able to shape their biographies in various ways, but always within social contexts not entirely of their own making. As I hope to show here, the places and social contexts within which individuals create meaning and devise strategies for their lives are a co-production, sometimes of many individuals stretching across enormous vistas of time and space. Biographies cannot simply be the products of individual agency and, in many cases, people have to be hugely creative in order to salvage agency and personal narratives in a global world that often moves with a momentum beyond their individual control. It is, of course, important to avoid social reductionism, by showing how individuals have a subjective or psychological position within their objective sociological location in the world. It is in this sense that I hope to show here how individuals can resist social forces, solidifying part of their experience and looking for sense and meaning in fragmented social contexts. Individuals are not overdetermined by the social, although ontologically history sets the parameters in which we act and can make our biographies.

So how do history and biography intersect in flexible capitalism, and what are the strategies people can adopt for salvaging a sense of narrative continuity in the world? I will address this question by examining how biographies are composed of time, place, and others, and how narratives help to weave all this together into meaningful coherence. Threaded through the larger sociological narratives about change in contemporary society is the biography of Paul, with whom I did a biographical interview. Paul is a 40-year old man who has always lived in the West Yorkshire area of England and has first-hand experience of many of the social changes about which sociologists are concerned. Although one biography cannot prove or disprove larger sociological theories, nor can it be taken to represent biographies in general, it is nevertheless interesting to see how this one personal story both reflects social change and demonstrates resistance to it. It also illustrates my central theme: how wider social changes have affected the everyday lives and biographies of individuals and, with it, their narratives.
Biographies in Everyday Life: Time, Place, Others, and Narrative

Back in the 1970s, the French Marxist Lucien Seve (1978) wrote about the biographies of individuals living in capitalist society. From Seve’s Marxist position, a person’s biography is made up of the activity they engage in, through which they assimilate their social and cultural heritage, and, thus, a biography can be divided up according to the time an individual has to engage in various activities. Most peoples’ lives are divided between the time they have to spend on activities that hold a personal interest for them – usually in their ‘free time’ – and the time they must spend on activities done for others. In the latter category, most of this time belongs to an employer, who uses the worker’s activity to extract surplus value. From the worker’s point of view, this is ‘abstract activity’ with little personal sense or gain, while activity done in their own free time is ‘concrete activity’ and can be spent on their own self-development or enjoyment. In addition to this, Seve also split the time in a person’s biography between that spent on learning new activities – which would be the most rewarding, with the acquisition of new skills and capacities – and that spent on repeating activities already learned. For Seve, the limiting and exploitative nature of capitalism was expressed in the fact that for most people, certainly the working classes, most of their time is spent on boring repetitive tasks, the sole purpose of which is to make money for capitalists.

While some aspects of Seve’s ideas about biographies are still interesting, especially in the way he understands them as shaped by the time people have for different activities, the overall tenor of his writings speak of another capitalist age. Although Seve never says this explicitly, his writings conjure up a world in which work is regular and routine, with the carving out of biographical time monotonously predictable. One can picture Seve’s workers with their shoulder to the grindstone, seven to five daily, coming home for their hours of leisure and dreaming for their pensions. I can see this world in the life of my own father, who worked in the same Yorkshire textile mill, seven to five each day, from age 14 to 65. It was only after retirement that his life seemed to begin, with more time to spend watching rugby and cricket and going to the horse races. Equally, while my mother did not do paid work, her working life was centred around the home, fixing her biography in a way that was typical for many working-class women of her generation. But so much of this world has now changed. Work is no longer routine in terms of regular hours, with more flexible work practices being introduced, such as shift work and working across the seven-day week. Also, who can rely on a job for life, working in the same occupation, let alone for the same company, for the span of one’s working life? In addition, most
women now have to juggle paid work outside the home with unpaid domestic work for partners and/or children.

This has had two effects on biographical time. More flexible working patterns within the day, with shifts often varying week to week, have meant that biographical time is more disrupted, people finding they have less ability to plan the time they will be able to spend with family and friends. Some financially poor workers find this flexibility allows them to do more than one job (Sennett, 1998), and, in general, people in the UK are working for longer hours (Hertz, 2001). A Marxist like Seve would see in these working conditions the existence of greater exploitation, with a large number of workers working more of their time for capitalist corporations and having less free time for themselves. The greater encroachment of routine work into biographical time leads to people spending more time on abstract activities, the result of which is a stunting of personal growth.

The second effect on biographical time is more long term: indeed, as Sennett has noted, one of the effects of flexible capitalism is that there is ‘no long term’. In his extended essay, *The corrosion of character*, Sennett (1998) recounts meeting by chance with Rico, the son of a worker he had interviewed 25 years earlier for another study. While Rico’s father had worked in the same occupation all his life and lived in roughly the same locality, his son had already had a number of different jobs and moved around the USA. What this meant was constant relocation for himself and his family in various places, never staying long enough to feel that they belonged. Worse still, this involved losing friends made in particular places, breaking precious relationships that were either lost or kept alive through the Internet. The new neighbourhoods into which the family moved were not empty of sociability, but the people there were used to others moving in and out – to the making and breaking of temporary relationships – and the social bonds formed there lacked a feeling a permanence. Sennett’s book is full of such stories: broken narratives of relocation and of constantly starting all over again.

But the biggest dislocation reported in all these stories is the dislocation in time, and the feeling for many that they lack control over their time. During busy times at work, children become strangers to their overworked parents (Hertz, 2001), and new technologies provide managers with new means of controlling work time. At call centres or in offices, even working from home by computer, managers can monitor the number of calls taken or the amount of time spent working at the computer. This is graphically illustrated in Paul’s biographical narrative, in which he began by talking to me about his work for a large bank, where he started out selling insurance from a call centre. As I was listening to Paul’s story, many of the sociological theories of modernity and flexible capitalism started to come alive for me, especially in his description of
his job, which illustrates how working life has become subject to new technologies and new forms of control.

In his first job for his current employers, Paul spent all of his time in a call centre selling insurance by phone. The workers themselves did not control the pace of the phone calls and the calls were all monitored for time duration and content. A dialler contains all the phone numbers that each worker must call in order to sell an insurance policy and it also records the number of calls made each day. At the end of each call the salespeople have five minutes to ‘write up’ the call on computer and, when they are finished, they press a button on the dialler to call the next number on its list. The dialler also records how long each call takes and how long each salesperson is waiting for someone to answer the call. In addition, calls are often recorded to make sure that a thorough list of products is being offered to potential customers.

Managers also monitor the salespeople, making sure they spend no more than five minutes writing up the results of each call. Workers at the call centre developed a technique of ‘slacking’ by staying in update (that is, writing up their calls) longer than the allotted five minutes, thereby dictating the pace of the calls. Managers spotted this strategy and began warning salespeople who stayed in update too long. The whole process is therefore rigorously monitored, and Paul tells me there is little opportunity for ‘slacking’ among the workers, so that there is little they can do to control the pace of their work. This leads to ‘burnout’, with workers becoming demoralised and literally ‘giving up’ on the job, or adopting a ‘couldn’t be bothered’ attitude to targets. When they hit burnout, workers move to other parts of the company where work is more interesting or manageable, or just move on to another company. Paul has now hit that point and has just moved to another section of the company.

While Paul felt that his current job allows him plenty of free time away from work to pursue other interests, he has worked in places before – and knows of plenty others – where the shift systems play havoc with the possibility of normal life patterns or of maintaining a social life. In this respect, Paul currently counts himself lucky.

From my record of Paul’s story it seems that while he has time to devote to his own personal development in his leisure time, he regarded work in the call centre as abstract activity and unrewarding, illustrated by the fact it commonly led to burnout. Indeed, his move from the call centre to another section of the bank was because he requested a more
personally rewarding position – a request granted to him because he was thought to be a good worker.

However, despite the micro-management of time within the working day, it is the destruction of the long-term time duration within flexible capitalism that most affects people’s lives. Sennett asks what are, for me, crucial questions about how people can make their lives and selves under such conditions, ‘How can long-term purposes be pursued in a short-term society? How can durable social relations be sustained? How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments?’ (Sennett, 1998: 26). In particular, how do we develop ‘those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnish each with a sense of sustainable self’? (Sennett, 1998: 27). This is why flexible capitalism can corrode character, because it eats away at the very social fabric that sustains a long-term narrative of self, one that is created with others in relations of loyalty, commitment and purpose.

At this point, however, there is a danger of getting carried away by a too linear and simplistic sociological narrative. Flexible capitalism has not only enslaved us in new regimes of micro-management of time, and disrupted the possibility of developing long-term biographical narratives solidly located in place; it has also freed us from some of the shackles of the past. Comparing myself with my parent’s generation, which stayed in jobs, traditional roles and places all their lives, my own biography is freed from some of these restrictions. As an academic, I can choose to a large degree when and where I work, although some of these freedoms are currently under threat. I am not bound by the rigid timing of the working day that my father experienced in the textile mills, or that Paul is subject to in the call centre. In the global world of academia, I could also try to relocate myself in another country if I so wanted. As Giddens (1991) has noted, in late-modernity biographical narratives are no longer set by tradition – by moral codes, work routines, or roles – passed from generation to generation. In post-traditional societies the self becomes a reflexive project involving the constant revision of biographical narratives. To do this we now look to various forms of knowledge, such as self-help books or taking guidance from counsellors and therapists, in order to decide how to live.

But these freedoms are highly variable tinder flexible capitalism, with the creation of what Lash and Urry (1994) refer to as ‘reflexivity winners and losers’. That’s, the control of time and place, and thus the control over the revision of one’s biographical narratives, depends on one’s class location and, with it, the power and privilege to shape our lives. Giddens is wrong to imply that we all share the same power and equal access to knowledge on which the reflexive project of the self is based. I would also add that it is questionable to fix in advance, as Rustin (2000) suggested,
the ontological assumption that biographies make society and are not merely made by it, because the experience of people in this respect will be variable depending on their power to influence their own biography. For example, Sennett has found that ‘flextime’ – people working on different, individualized schedules has resulted in work in the evenings or nights being passed on to the less privileged classes (1998: 58). Those with more choice over how and when they work are mainly among the more privileged, and they can also afford to bear some of the risks of flexible, short-term capitalism.

Both the advantages and disadvantages of the loss of tradition and the greater flexibility in peoples’ lives can be seen in Paul’s biography. Below, he was reflecting on his life so far and how he sees this as fragmented and yet full of possibility.

In terms of his working life, Paul looks back at his past and says that you could divide his CV up into four year chunks; a working life lived in four-year fragments. He spent four years working for an electricity company, four years running his own business, three years at University studying for a degree, and since then a number of years in various sales jobs. When asked about the future, Paul made it clear that he has no plans beyond the immediate year, professionally or personally. He clearly felt that ‘a year is a long time’, and that ‘anything can happen between now and next year’. This lesson comes in particular from the last company he worked for being sold and all the employees being made redundant, and also from the breakdown of a long-term relationship. If you can’t know what is going to happen to you in a year, it is better not to plan and to be prepared for anything. However, these sentiments were not expressed with a hint of fatalism, more a readiness to meet future challenges head-on, and a feeling that he is now better equipped to deal with uncertainty and the unforeseen.

Comparing these experiences with those of our parents’ generation, who kept jobs and relationships for life, Paul did not express a hankering after the past. The high turnover of employees at the hank where he works is an illustration of the way people now switch jobs as easily as our parent’s generation would change a suit of clothes, but again this uncertainty can also provide opportunity. Paul felt that if you were looking for a promotion or another position, this provided the condition for rapid opportunities: ‘you’re not waiting for someone to die’ before you can step into a better position or a more interesting job. The fact that a career is no longer carved out for life is a problem only ‘if you’re directionless’. In other words, if people themselves lose a sense of direction and purpose, if they begin to drift aimlessly or get
depressed, then they are lost. There is no preordained path to save people from drifting. Furthermore, Paul has seen the failure of those who work with him who believe they can find an easy niche for themselves and stay there: for those who think ‘the place owes them a living’, he has seen ‘doors shut to them’. Employers now look for direction and motivation from their employees.

So for Paul, the past is fragmented and the future unknown: but the world of insecurity is also loaded with possibility. Looking at this narrative sociologically, it mirrors Bauman’s (1995) notion that contemporary life is lived in fragments and also reflects many themes in Giddens’s (1991) work. In particular, Paul’s story seems to give credence to the idea of the reflexive project of the self, in that Paul believes one has to be continually revising biographical narrative to keep a sense of direction and find one’s way in the flexible modern world. Traditional, custom bound routes through life do not exist anymore. As an articulate and educated person, Paul also clearly feels he has some of the necessary power to revise his narratives and steer his reflexive project of the self. But what he says above also reveals two paradoxes. First, that one must not drift and instead must maintain direction and purpose, and yet one must also be prepared for anything because one cannot know what will happen inside a year. This is the paradox of agency – all of us have varying degrees of reflexive power to revise our own narratives and projects, yet this control is limited by many factors that we cannot influence. Indeed, under the sway of flexible capitalism, the number of unpredictable and uncontrollable elements in life has multiplied. The second paradox is that, in the workplace, employers expect more self-direction and motivation from their employees yet subject them to stricter and more detailed micro-management of work activity.

However, there is another important distinction opening up in flexible capitalism, one that also marks the difference between social classes – the experience of surface and depth, and the relative ability to exploit the advantages, and avoid the disadvantages, of the two. As Sennett (1998) notes, less powerful workers do not always gain the knowledge and skills to attain a deep understanding or mastery of their task. Where understanding of work is superficial, the identity of the worker is ‘light’. The flexible productive process – in which workers can be moved around easily and interchanged – is characterised by user-friendly tasks whose deeper logic need not be penetrated. In contrast, workers higher up the social scale tend to have more qualifications and to acquire deeper levels of knowledge and skill at work. Sennett does not say so, but in comparison to the light identity of lower level workers, the identity of the more powerful, skilled workers, has greater ‘weight’. Their biographical narratives have more continuity, bound as they are into the development
of career through the acquisition of skills and knowledge that contribute to the building of character.

Something of this can be seen in Paul’s biographical narrative. Below, Paul was talking about his transfer to a different section of the bank, something he requested in order to give him more personally rewarding work. This involves a search for less abstract and more concrete activity, which has more depth and can add to the development of character.

Although he still sells insurance, Paul has now moved to another section of the bank and his reasons for doing so are interesting: His new work involves him looking after the ‘premier customers’, that is those with a high income who are already customers of the bank. This job brings a higher income, but more importantly it allows him to deliver a more personal service to clients. Gone is the dreaded dialler, meaning that Paul can now manage his own time and regulate his pace of work. This allows him to build a rapport with his customers and also deal with the brokers of the insurance policies, instead of being at the mercy of the dialler, Paul now has the ability ‘to manage a case’. What this means is that he can get involved in this work in a deeper way, not just staying at the surface of the task, attempting to make a quick sale. He has to have more knowledge about what he is doing and to go into each case in more depth, but also he is building relations with customers and brokers and using his communication skills. This gives the new work greater depth: he is not just learning more, he is able to involve himself with the people he is dealing with, making the work more meaningful. Paul also has greater control over work-time and this has reduced the stress he felt from the repetitive nature of his previous section, controlled as it was by the technological and personal surveillance of tasks.

Here, we find Paul not only beginning to manage his own time and deepening his knowledge of the job, he is also using and building qualities of character in relation to others through his work. An all-round sense of control, depth, and character is reflected in the above, and we will find this in other areas of Paul’s biographical narrative. For now, though, we can say it is the degree of control each of us has over biographical time, place, and selection of narratives, that marks out our social class location, along with the power to resist some of the more destructive forces of modern society. There can be no sense of narrative coherence to bind together an identity when one is constantly subject to change that one cannot control. Again, under such conditions, the experience of being is one of lightness rather than weight, of insubstantiality and a lack of anchoring. As Milan Kundera says in his novel, *The unbearable
lightness of being, the more weighted we feel, ‘the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become’. Without weight, we ‘become only half-real, [our] movements as free as they are insignificant’ (1984: 5). Kundera then asks, ‘What shall we choose? Weight or lightness?’ But the ability to choose between these two ways of being in the world is as variable as our other choices, dependent upon our power to choose.

As individuals, then, we have different degrees of power and ability to establish some depth in our lives, along with a degree of narrative coherence to our sense of self. We also have different degrees of power to at least temporarily arrest the flow of liquid modernity and establish with others a character. Individuals who have less power to affect these things may feel themselves more open to the exploitative and corrosive side of flexible capitalism. One strategy to salvage character, identified by Sennett, is to adopt the narrative of ‘career’ to create a sense of coherence, agency and responsibility in the face of a continually changing world. He takes Lippmann’s definition of career, which is a narrative of ‘inner development, unfolding through both skill and struggle’ (Sennett, 1998: 120). With this there develops a sense of responsibility for one’s conduct that is bound into a more long-term vision of life, one that is leading to some aim or has purpose. All aspects of flexible capitalism would seem to undermine the possibility of such a narrative, and yet Sennett found people – who had ostensibly been the victims of flexible capitalism – developing just such a narrative. They were ex-employees of IBM, computer programmers who had been laid off when that company began to fail in the 1990s. After explaining their predicament through narratives which, first of all, blamed the managers of the company, then the globalization of the economy, the men eventually settled on a narrative in which they figured as having miscalculated their own careers by not seeing the trends developing in their own industry. They then began to develop narratives of career, through which they started accepting responsibility for not taking more chances in their professional lives, instead staying with IBM for the long-term company benefits (which rapidly disappeared as the company hit trouble).

Even though the theme of the narratives was failure rather than success, the programmers began to tell stories in which they figured as agents, possessed of will, choice and responsibility. The stories also followed a traditional narrative pattern that was centred on a period of crisis – in this case, losing a job – which became the locus of change and transformation. This narrative convention makes the crucial moment of change ‘legible and clear, rather than messy, blind’ (Sennett, 1998: 131): it is a focal point in a continually developing saga, rather than the chance that leads us nowhere. In taking responsibility and agency through this narrative there is also established at its centre the sense of ‘I’ so common in
autobiographical stories (Stanley, 1992). The sense of ‘I’ is established in the face of conditions that demand the flexible pliant self, one who can bend and adapt to all the conditions that flexible capitalism can throw at him or her. However, as Sennett points out, these narratives are not simple acts of resistance in the face of an indifferent social, political and economic system: they speak of the deep pain that comes with failure, especially in middle age, when many find themselves considered to be past the cut and thrust of new, aggressive industries. Sennett says, ‘given the destruction of hope and desire, the preservation of one’s active voice is the only way to make failure bearable’ (1998: 134). This is so because, through the very structure that a narrative provides, it acts as a form of healing, a way of recovering from the wounds inflicted by a fickle world.

However, Sennett’s concept of career applies only to the idea as it bears upon the world of work and the trajectory this sets us on across the life course. Yet the notion of career can be applied to the narratives we develop to order our lives more generally. Indeed, Goffman used the term ‘moral career’ to refer ‘to any social strand of any person’s course through life’ (1961/1991: 119). This course will involve a sequence of changes in a person’s self and in his or her framework of imagery for judging self and others. Because the notion of career involves changes, an important aspect of it is the way we constantly reconstruct the view of our career when we look back over our lives. A career is never a solid or stable thing, for it is thrown into periodic states of reconstruction that select, and sometimes distort, in order to form a view of the self. According to Goffman, we often distort the facts or events of our lives to present ourselves as good or worthy. When the story can not be presented favourably, we tend to disclaim responsibility for the way things have turned out. Instead of being the agent of the story – the ‘I’ who makes things happen – I become the victim of circumstance or chance. However, this was not what Sennett found; for those he interviewed, the claiming of agency and responsibility was enough, in time, to help them come to terms with failure.

The location of a sense of agency can be seen clearly in Paul’s narrative. Below, he was reflecting on his fragmented working career, but reconstructing this in a way that makes narrative sense from fragmentation.

It is clear from Paul’s story that he feels himself to be the main point or agency in the narrative. His changes of direction in terms of career, which seemed to happen every four years, he reflects upon as his own choice. Interestingly, he sees this as stemming from success rather than failure. That is, it was when he achieved everything he felt he could in a job, or saw the possibility of getting more out of life by a change of direction, that he took the plunge and did something different. However, that is not the whole
story. Paul also clearly expressed the view that life had taught him that you can’t plan too far ahead, that you don’t know what will happen to you over the course of the next year, so that it is not possible to be in control of every move you make. Indeed, when referring to the fact that he hasn’t sought employment in the subject area he studied at University, Paul says he lost interest in the subject because he changed so much over the three years of study. In other words, he changed in ways he could never have predicted, so that something he thought he might pursue as a career, he ended up not pursuing. There is a strong counter theme in this narrative of leaning these things from experience, that life cannot be known in advance and controlled.

As Paul is reconstructing the narrative of his moral career, it is clear that he locates himself as a powerful ‘I’ at the centre of the narrative, choosing when to make moves and knowing the reasons for this. The reasons given are ones of success, of having achieved something and then moved on. Paul is therefore generating what Gilbert Ryle referred to as ‘thick’ rather than ‘thin’ description (in Geertz, 1973). That, is, he is not simply recounting a series of random changes that have befallen him, he is looking for the deeper sense of meaning to these changes and locating the points of his own active influence over them. One could say that this is the generation of ‘thick narrative’, one in which he is locating the points and the meaning of his own agency. At the same time, there is a counter narrative at work within the overall narrative where there is a sense of circumstances – and even of the self – changing in ways that was not controlled by Paul’s own agency. These are not necessarily failures attributed to some other agency, as Goffman would have it; rather, it is the acknowledgement that biography is never completely within one’s own control: changes occur, and one must accept them with good reasons or adapt to them. No matter how powerful an individual may be there are always limits to that power, and this shapes biography and influences narrative.

**Narrative and the Places of Everyday Life**

The effects of flexible capitalism are contradictory, for just as it appears to be driving many into forming more coherent, or ‘thick’ narratives in which the self figures as an agent, so too is it encouraging people to seek out the ‘depth’ of place. For geographers like Casey, place indicates ‘an arena of action that is at once physical and historical, social and cultural’, as opposed to the ‘volumetric void’ of space in which all things exist (2001: 683). Place, then, is a historical, cultural and interpersonal
context for action, giving it a depth of meaning. As arenas of action, places are constitutive of our sense of self, for they are the context of that historical agency of which biographies are composed. I have already said that my aim here is to try to understand how time, place and people are bound together in narrative, and that it is dislocation in place, as much as in time, which is fragmenting biographical experience in flexible capitalism.

For Bauman (2000), it is the dislocation in place and the movement of time that is so characteristic of liquid modernity. This is because solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralise time, whereas fluids do not keep shape for long and are always flowing in time. Thus the period of ‘heavy capitalism’ was rooted in places – factories, ‘heavy plant’, purpose built workers’ housing, communities – whereas the current period of ‘light capitalism’ is not rooted in place, but always ready to move. Investment, information, communication, is always flowing and exists in time rather than in place, for these things are associated with mobility and inconstancy. Also, for Bauman, it is those who can move and respond instantly to changing conditions that have power in liquid modernity, whereas those who cannot leave a place at will find themselves locked, as it were, and become the dominated. Thus, ‘[d]omination consists in one’s own capacity to escape, to disengage, to “be elsewhere”, and the right to decide the speed with which all that is clone’ (Bauman, 2000: 120).

However, once again, as we start to apply these metaphors the story becomes more complex. For example, in flexible capitalism many are compelled to move to find work or pursue careers, so that this movement is not always synonymous with having power. As Sennett (1998) illustrated in his study, those workers who are dislocated and forced to move around the country, or the globe, in search of work are also the ones whose sense of character is most under threat. The sense of dislocation caused by constantly moving between places puts the sense of self in jeopardy, as places are ‘thinned out’ and merge with space (Casey, 2001). For example, in Sennett’s study, Rico found that relations forged in one place could only be continued after a move through the Internet. While this provides a new means of keeping alive relationships that would, in earlier times, have died, the Internet constitutes a thinned out place, for interactions through the Internet are not embedded in any densely enmeshed infrastructure. Or the Internet, this is replaced with more ethereal interconnections.

These ‘thin’ places are also open to continual reshaping and reconnecting with others; they are as flexible us the capitalist society that created the technology, which, in turn, makes the transformation of place possible. For example, programmes on television or items on the web melt into each other as we switch channels or surf the net (Casey, 2001).
However, as Casey goes on to point out, the more places are levelled down, the more individuals seem to seek out the places in which personal enrichment can flourish. He gives two examples. First, the proliferation of films on video and DVD has not meant the end of cinemas: on the contrary, more people than ever are going to cinemas, finding them to be ‘real places with their own sensuous density and interpersonal interest’ (Casey, 2001: 685). Secondly, Internet book-selling has not brought about the demise of the bookshop: instead, there now are bigger bookshops than ever, many with their own coffee bars where people can read, or meet and talk. Possibilities such as these have actually created a richer environment for selves, who can now move between actual places and virtual spaces between embodied and disembodied relations.

Once again, the power of individuals seems to be constituted not so much in the ability to be totally flexible and fluid, to have complete freedom of movement, but to be able to choose when to move and stay at the surface of experience, and when to be rooted and search out the depth of interconnection with others in a place. If the search for identity is a struggle to arrest the flow and solidify the fluid and to create the thick narratives that give form to an otherwise fragmentary experience, so too is this struggle for identity expressed in the search for places that can add some weight to one’s being. In actual places one can construct the kind of interpersonal relationships that one cannot in the thin spaces of the Internet: embodied relations in which we can develop the qualities of character that bind human beings to one another and create for each a sense of sustainable self. This is clearly reflected below in Paul’s biographical narrative.

There is one part of his life that Paul sees as not open to change, and that is the place where he lives. Paul has lived his life so far in one city in West Yorkshire. Asked if he would be prepared to move to live somewhere else, Paul clearly said that he wouldn’t, expressing the view that it was important for him ‘not having to start over again’. So while Paul has accepted many of the challenges of living under flexible capitalism in his working life, he is not prepared to uproot and start again in same new city or area of the country. When asked why this is, Paul stated it was to do with practical matters like having to sell his house and find another. However, he also said he feels ‘settled’ where he lives, which seems to indicate a sense of belonging to a place.

But there is also another aspect to feeling settled in the place he lives. A constant theme in Paul’s narrative is the importance of relationships, both at work and in his personal life, and relating to others is clearly something that she regards as interesting and
important. One of the main reasons Paul gives selling up his successful business and going to University as a mature student, is that he and his partner had little time to build friendships outside of their own relationship. University was therefore seen not only as an intellectual challenge, but also as an opportunity to meet other people. Indeed, since starting University, and from graduation onwards, Paul has built up a network of friends located in the same region. He also has family in the area and this provides a backdrop of continuity and shared history in Paul’s biography. Feeling settled in the place he lives also provides a framework of stability as well as continuity in an otherwise uncertain world. This seems to be the point of resistance in Paul’s narrative, the part or his life he seeks to protect from change, the sense of belonging someplace that he seeks to continue into the future.

Thus, while there is no sense from Paul’s narrative of being rooted in a particular community – there is no ‘we’ to which the story constantly refers – there is nevertheless the strong sense or the importance of ‘personal community’: that is, the importance of friendship, family, and relationships at work. This seems to be the point of stability and resistance in Paul’s narrative, where he roots himself in a sense of shared continuity and history through place. It also seems that place, and the personal relationships it contains, is the binding which allows him to create a sense of sustainable self. His belonging to a place and its people provides the social fabric that can sustain a long-term narrative of self and a moral career – a base from which he can reconstruct a narrative shared with others that accounts for all the changes that have happened to him.

Conclusion

While ‘fluidity’, ‘flexibility’ and ‘lightness’ may be fitting metaphors for sociologists to use in telling the story of our contemporary lives, it is far too simplistic to assume that metaphors of ‘solidity’ and ‘weight’ are only useful in narratives about the past. Certainly, there has been greater fragmentation of the times and places in which biographies are set, breaking the network of bonds with others and creating a corrosive threat to the formation of character through coherent narratives. However, it is perhaps an exaggeration to say that no consistent or cohesive life strategy can emerge to deal with the social conditions created by flexible capitalism and liquid modernity. While the power to form a cohesive life strategy and continually revise biographical narrative is limited by one’s social class, Paul’s biographical narrative, alongside Sennett’s findings, suggests some interesting possibilities for further research. In
particular, how individuals create thick narratives and moral careers that locate a sense of agency, responsibility and meaning in the face of fragmentation, along with qualities of character that bind them to others and create a sense of sustainable self. Individuals may also have different life strategies for attempting to resist flexibility and fluidity and make aspects of their lives solid. For Paul, place provides stability and continuity, which he guards from change. It forms the bedrock of his biography and sense of sustainable self that allows him to meet the challenges of a flexible world in which he has to have freedom of movement – a more slowly’ moving undercurrent in his life over which flows more rapidly moving currents and changes. The resistance of social forces found in his rooting in place allows for the more pragmatic approach he adopts towards other aspects of his biography where he has to be ready for any unexpected changes at any time.

Given that under these circumstances modern individuals have to be constantly ready to revise aspects of biographical narrative, as social scientists we may have to rethink our strategies towards notions of self and identity. The theoretical deconstruction of concepts like character and self may only leave individuals more open to the corrosive and exploitative effects of flexible accumulation. This makes it imperative for those of us interested in biography and narrative to be more sensitive to the life strategies individuals are forming to reconstruct identity within their moral careers, thus working against the forces fragmenting the times, places and relations of everyday life.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was given as a keynote address to the Narrative, Memory and Everyday Life conference at Huddersfield University, 3 April 2004.
2. This interview was done in one session lasting about an hour and a half, and was recorded by note taking during the interview. This is why only snippets of actual quotations appear from Paul’s own words, the rest being my reconstruction of the general contours of the narrative from my notes.

References

Why Study People’s Stories? The Dialogical Ethics of Narrative Analysis

Arthur W. Frank

The stories people tell about their lives are one way they confront a dilemma clearly posed by Max Weber in “Science as a Vocation,” unexpectedly one of his last public lectures before his sudden death in 1920. At the core of Weber’s understanding of modernity is the idea of disenchantment. Our contemporary fate, Weber (1958) told his audience in 1919, is to live in times when “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play” (p. 139). Modernity has lost, or renounced, “recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savages, for whom such mysterious powers existed” (p. 139). What modernity has gained are the very real powers of technology and calculation. The core belief of modernity is “that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation” (p. 139). One current manifestation of this modernist belief is the recurring news coverage of the promises attending the discovery of the genetic code, which is presented as another step in the inexorable mastery of the human body by scientific calculation. Weber would, I think, be both fascinated by what science has discovered and bemused by the publicity hype that attends this discovery. He was no Luddite about the real benefits of technological mastery, but neither did he ignore what is lost in the disenchantment of the world.

Weber asked in 1919 whether modernity has lost access to “meanings that go beyond the purely practical and technical” (p. 139). He defers to Tolstoy, who puts the question in terms of death. On Weber’s reading, Tolstoy’s conclusion was that:

WHY STUDY PEOPLE’S STORIES?

...for civilized man death has no meaning. ...because the individual life of civilized man, placed into an infinite ‘progress,’ according to its own imminent meaning should never come to an end; for there is always a further step ahead of one who stands in the march of progress. (Tolstoy, quoted by Weber, pp. 139–140)

The implication that Weber draws from Tolstoy is stark: “And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless; by its very ‘progressiveness’ it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness” (p. 140).

Weber’s pessimism attempts to recognize, with the clearest possible vision, the conditions in which each person faces up to modernity. “What stand should one take?” is Weber’s great question. He is particularly interested in the stance of the scientist. Again he turns to Tolstoy to pose the dilemma, quoting Tolstoy’s prophetic words: “Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important to us, ‘What shall we do and how shall we live’” (p. 143). Weber concurs that science cannot answer this question, yet he still finds in science the best possibility for a vocation worthy of the times.

Weber’s imagination of any possible reenchantment of the world seems limited to some mass charismatic renewal; the idea of reenchantment occurring in mundane, everyday practices seems outside his horizons. Contrary to this view, it seems most consistent with a respect for personal narrative to believe that one vocation for social science – not the vocation but one honorable one – is to gather the fragments of these acts of reenchantment and suggest how their collective patterns offer exemplary answers to Tolstoy’s question of how we should live. The local and contingent solutions that people have found to how they should live are expressed as stories that recount past attempted solutions to how they should live and are part of their ongoing attempts to seek present ways of living.

To suggest how stories work to address the Tolstoy/Weber question of how we should live, allow me a brief autobiographical digression. As I enter late middle age I realize what a densely storied world I grew up in. My childhood was richly populated by grandparents and around them a traveling circus of great-aunts and great-uncles who came to town and stayed for lengths of time inversely related to their economic prosperity. But the reputations of these great-aunts and great-uncles depended not on their prosperity but on their abilities as storytellers; by their stories they were dreaded as bores or anticipated as good company, whatever the length of the visit. Stories were the hard currency of our family gatherings; they elevated conversation beyond small talk. Telling “a story” commanded respectful silence. Originality of stories garnered hardly any points at all; most of those present already knew the stories being told. What counted was the linkage between the small talk of the moment
and the story – how well the transition was made – and how effectively the telling of the story focused the family attention.

These stories were mostly recollections of how family members, often the previous generation, had acted in some situation that had an analogy in the conversation that had recalled the story. I now read my daughter the fables of Brer Rabbit and realize how much my transplanted southern family told stories in that tradition of fable. The stories were about the kind of cleverness necessary to get on in the world, the kind of humour required to persevere, what people and situations to look out for, and what actions were memorable and even exemplary. The stories were familial moral education, reminding everyone who we were – and were not – and why that identity was valuable.

I am compelled to recollect that the specific moral lessons of many of these stories are not ones I would now affirm to my children. As might be expected of southern stories of that generation, many were racist. But – and this is a crucial point in my thinking about stories – what counted for me as a child, and what continues to count, is not the specific message of a certain story’s content, but rather the sense of the world as a narratable place; that is, a place that stories can make sense of. Michael Bérubé (1996) writes that he tells stories about his family because for his son Jamie, who lives with Down syndrome, to be considered valuable as a human being, Jamie’s actions must be just as “narratable” as those of his brother Nick (p. 127). Narratability means that events and lives are affirmed as being worth telling and thus worth living. Being narratable implies value and attributes reality.

I find a complementary concern for the importance of narratability in Richard Sennett’s (1998) argument that character depends on engaging in work that is “legible” in allowing workers to know what they’re doing. Sennett finds much contemporary work to be illegible. Stories give lives legibility; when shaped as narratives, lives come from somewhere and are going somewhere. Narratability provides for legibility and out of both comes a sense of morality – practical if tacit answers to how we should live. This morality is not fixed but is constantly being revised in subsequent stories, including retellings that put different emphases on old stories. I note with regret that my family engaged in too little narrative revisionism. No childhood is ideal.

Social theory has always been suspicious of what can become too personal. Weber worried about German youth who “crave not only religious experience but experience as such . . . this is where the modern intellectualist form of romantic irrationalism leads” (p. 143). We now read his concerns as prophetic, since we know where romantic irrationalism did lead in the decades after his speech. But the problem, I propose, is not that German youth were captured by stories; rather it is the particular stories they were captured by. If stories are dangerous, this is
WHY STUDY PEOPLE’S STORIES?

because they are powerful. This distinction is important when we get to contemporary objections to storytelling.

Weber’s pessimism about the craving for “experience as such” has been echoed recently by Zygmunt Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity* (2000), in which he approvingly quotes Paul Atkinson and David Silverman’s critique of “the interview society.” Bauman’s criticism, as vague as it is with respect to what he is criticizing, is worth quoting at length:

Numerous studies [none are cited] show that personal narratives are merely rehearsals of public rhetorics designed by the public media to ‘represent subjective truths’. But the inauthenticity of the allegedly authentic self is thoroughly covered up by the spectacles of sincerity – the public rituals of in-depth interviews and public confessions of which chat-shows are the most prominent, though by no means the only examples. Ostensibly, the spectacles are meant to give vent to the stirrings of ‘inner selves’ striving to be let out; in fact, they are the vehicles of the consumer society version of a sentimental education: they display and stamp with public acceptability the yarn of emotive states and their expressions from which the ‘thoroughly personal identities’ are to be woven. (p. 86)

The context of this criticism is Bauman’s general argument that contemporary society has lost its capacity for what he likes to call “Politics with a capital P,” which I understand to mean people’s sustained civic involvements in the instigation of collective social change. I agree with Bauman’s observation of this decline and with his complementary argument that “the idea of ‘the common good’ (let alone ‘the good society’) [is] branded suspect, threatening, nebulous or addle-brained” (p. 106). This loss of the common good seems at the core of what is increasingly called neoliberalism (see Bourdieu, 1998a). In particular, I agree that we live with “a new type of social uncertainty: ‘not knowing the ends instead of the traditional uncertainty of not knowing the means”’ (p. 61; Bauman quotes Gerhard Schulze). I part company from Bauman over how to restore a sense of the common good and how to negotiate living with uncertainty as to ultimate ends. While he finds a symptom of these problems in the prominence afforded to narrative, I find a potential solution.

Bauman’s argument follows the tradition of those whom philosopher Charles Taylor (1991) calls “knockers” of the contemporary ideal of authenticity. Taylor describes knockers as “people who think that the whole language of self-fulfillment and finding one’s own path is suspect and either nonsense or a vehicle of self-indulgence” (p. 74). Knockers generally take two lines. One is what Taylor calls “a hard-line, scientific attitude to the world”; they find talk about authenticity to be “vague and woolly” (p. 74). The other line is humanist. They find emphasis on authenticity to
be “an expression of moral laxity, or at least as reflecting simply a loss of the more stringent ideals formerly dominant in our culture” (pp. 74–75).

Bauman seems to represent a third sort of politically-motivated knocker who fears that the narrative self is a ruse of commodity culture, individualizing social problems and distracting people away from the true calling of “Politics with a capital P.”

I agree with Bauman (2000) and other knockers that the task of social science and of public discourse generally is to link what C. Wright Mills called “personal troubles” to “public issues,” a link that neo-liberalism obscures or denies. But for me this linkage of personal troubles and public issues, which is the foundation of politics, begins in the cultivation of personal stories. People can move from experience to politics only when their experience is narratable to themselves and others, and thus made legible. Storytelling is an occasion when people co-author responses to Tolstoy’s great question of what shall we do and how shall we live; not permanent answers applicable for the rest of their lives, but the crucial if provisional answers that guide what to do next and how to live now.

Taylor’s understanding of authenticity provides a central argument that personal stories are both a response to disenchantment and a beginning of politics. Taylor’s singular contribution, as I read him, is his demonstration that personal authenticity is not, strictly speaking, personal at all; authenticity is a dialogical achievement. The core of Taylor’s argument seems to be this:

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands. (p. 41)

The knocker position seems to be that our (postmodern) personal stories lack reference to what Taylor calls “things that matter,” and so these stories have become a cul de sac of triviality, an abyss into which persons, politics, and thought itself threaten to fall. Taylor recognizes the kernel of truth in this response; thus he takes seriously Allan Bloom, probably the best-selling of any knocker, who finds in claims of authenticity “a rather facile relativism” in which “everybody has his or her own ‘values,’ and about these it is impossible to argue” (p. 13). Bloom’s suspicion
of relativist individualism is echoed by Bauman (2000), who fears that “the idea of common interests, and most notably negotiated common interests, [have become] all the more incredible and fanciful, and the ability and will to pursue them all the less likely to appear” (p. 106).

I myself have tried to show (Frank, 2000b; 2000e; forthcoming) how culture exerts enormous pressure on people to settle for identities that are trivial in Taylor’s specific sense of lacking “the background of things that matter.” The pitfall of such arguments is their attempts to specify, even legislate, what can count as things that matter; terms of affirmation invariably reflect what Bourdieu (1998b) calls the habitus, taste, or cultural capital of whoever is doing the affirming. Thus talk of “things that matter” readily becomes what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence: convincing some groups that what matters to them is inferior, thus they are inferior.

My response to this crucial problem is to return to stories. Things come to matter and continue to matter insofar as they instigate stories that affirm those things in relation to how lives are lived. Thus I find most significant Taylor’s argument that the knockers don’t “seem to recognize that there is a powerful moral ideal at work here [in the search for authenticity], however debased and travestied its expression might be” (15; emphases added). In that failure of recognition lies the knockers’ potential for symbolic violence.

Taylor describes this moral ideal as “being true to oneself” (p. 15) and he traces its genealogy from the early Romantics, especially Herder (see pp. 28-29). Taylor’s eventual point is that being true to oneself requires an orientation to what is beyond oneself: truth to oneself requires values such as the “things that matter” enumerated in the quotation above. How well anyone orients his or her life according to these things that matter requires on-going dialogical recognition from others that one’s life expresses values they share. On Taylor’s account, only the dialogical pursuit of authenticity will yield the “moral ideal” that offers “a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where ‘better’ and ‘higher’ are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire” (p. 16).

Taylor recognizes that what he calls “the liberalism of neutrality” involves a reluctance to accept the idea that “some forms of life are indeed higher than others” (p. 17; original emphasis). As suggested above, I find in Bourdieu’s work the strongest grounds for suspicion that some forms of life can be affirmed as higher than others. Yet to surrender any idea that some forms are higher would seem to require everyone, including Bourdieu, to give up holding values crucial to who they are; so we have a dilemma. The way out seems to involve not only accepting but affirming that standards of higher, while crucial at any moment in any life, cannot necessarily be universalized to other lives or to other moments of
the same life. Ideals of higher can only be asserted with the humility that these ideals are, in my terms, contingent, provisional, and local. Taylor adopts the motto of the Italian Red Brigade, “La lotta continua”: “The nature of a free society is that it will always be the locus of a struggle between higher and lower forms of freedom” (p. 78). The nature of being a free individual also seems to be perpetual engagement in this struggle.

Sociologist Alan Wolfe (2001) places this continual struggle at the core of what he calls contemporary moral freedom. Wolfe’s careful attention to people’s stories of how they construct their moral lives affirms empirically what Taylor observes philosophically. People need to create some standard of what is higher, otherwise they could not discriminate their own and others’ actions. But their standards are not fixed and their ongoing revision requires constant dialogical affirmation. Moral life takes place in the stories (including Wolfe’s interviews and his reporting of those interviews) through which that affirmation is sought.

Narrative analysis begins with an attitude toward stories. The knocker position is one such attitude, and perhaps the one most easily assumed when viewing the chat-shows that Bauman refers to, with their staging and saturated commercialization of storytelling. To see these stories as part of the struggle to construct moral life requires an imagination—found in Taylor and Wolfe—that I can only call democratic. Thus we reach a crucial issue. Does narrative analysis really believe that people can work out their own ideals of higher in their stories? Can we hear stories as attempts—“however debased and travestied” (Taylor, quoted above)—to render lives and experience legible and dialogical? Can we hear others’ stories as discoveries of what things matter to them—since “things that matter” are not there a priori but are discovered in the course of living and narrating. Can we hear stories as presentations of these newfound terms of valuing to others for their response, including both affirmation and revision?

Taylor concludes that “the cultural pessimism of the knockers is not only mistaken, it is also counter-productive. Because root-and-branch condemnation of the culture of authenticity is not a way to move us closer to the heights.” As to what those heights are, the “outcome is continually up for grabs” (p. 79). Perhaps what most annoys many knockers, who speak from considerable academic heights, is the democracy inherent in leaving the outcome up for grabs. The pervasive belief of those on the heights is that they know better where the outcome should lie. Instead Taylor proposes “la lotta continua,” the struggle goes on—in fact, forever” (p. 78).

The “interview society” is often not a pretty sight, although that depends entirely on which interview scenes one looks at. The apology for the worst of these scenes is that most elections and most jury trials are not pretty sights either—recent history provides salient examples of the
WHY STUDY PEOPLE’S STORIES?

shortcomings of both. Yet democracy muddles on. Personally and collectively we reinvent ourselves as we go along, making extraordinary mistakes in the process but occasionally learning something from these.

I return to a qualitative methodologist’s version of the great Tolstoyan question: What sense shall we make of the stories we hear, and how shall we represent these stories to others? And beyond that the Weberian question: How is research on stories a vocation in disenchanted times?

The simple answer is that in disenchanted times, when the only consensus is that there are no grand narratives with sufficient charismatic force to elicit mass belief, people begin with their own stories and proceed by how these stories are accepted or criticized by their peers. But because the knockers make some important points about the dangers of personal stories— from Weber’s fear of irrationality to Bauman’s observed loss of the common good—the social scientist’s responsibilities for analysis go beyond those of the folklorist who collects and archives stories that might otherwise be unrecorded and thus lost (indeed, most folklorists do a good deal more). In moving to the tasks of analysis, however, I hope to sustain the recognition that stories are not waiting for social scientists to endow them with sense. Narrative analysis needs all possible humility when asking what it can bring to stories.

Social scientists can begin with Bauman’s observation that storytellers very often fail to understand the public rhetorics that they have appropriated. Thus storytellers may not be aware how their stories carry assumptions embedded in these rhetorics. It seems inescapable that any stories will be told in the conventional rhetoric of a cultural context. Social scientists can enhance the legibility of stories by showing how types of stories participate in conventional rhetorics. Yet people’s stories are not what Bauman (quoted above) calls “merely rehearsals” of these rhetorics, nor does the use of these rhetorics render those stories any less authentic, in Taylor’s use of that term. Storytellers face the dilemma of only being able to question the assumptions of their social context by using the conventional rhetorics of that context. Narrative analysis can show how, even as stories participate in conventional rhetorics, they question the assumptions of the groups whose preferred reality is expressed in these rhetorics (see Nelson, 2001, as one example of such an analysis). As stories develop their own preferred rhetoric, narrative analysis can assist in the project of unpacking the assumptions embedded in that rhetoric. As Taylor observes, the struggle continues.

Narrative analysis can also call attention to the ways that stories seek what Taylor calls the heights of moral life. A moral analytic approach—whether based in sociology, nursing, or other disciplines—might begin with how stories sort out what makes some modes of life higher or better. The method for this enterprise might adapt the example of many psychotherapeutic clinicians, especially family therapists, who have moved away
the older practice of offering their clients care fully timed interpretations of the stories they tell. In much contemporary therapeutic practice what counts is not to interpret the client's story, and certainly not to impose on it some diagnostic scheme (then classifying clients as resistant or non-compliant if they refuse to classify themselves according to this scheme). Instead therapy seeks to punctuate certain moments in the story that represent some movement, even if it is not yet clear where that movement is going (Palazzoli et al., 1978). In these punctuations, the therapist begins to co-create a new story with the client (White, 1995, 2000). Narrative analysis can proceed along similar lines. Our task, I believe, is to show where moments in some collection of stories represent the kind of moral impulse that Taylor describes as the basis of authenticity.

Taking seriously Taylor’s argument about the moral impulse of authenticity seems to instigate at least these questions, among others:

How does a story detail practices in which the teller claims an identity? How does the identity claimed in the story depend on certain values that go beyond the self, and how does the personal story make a claim for some social values and against others? These questions reflect the recognition that the story is not, as Bauman imagines it, a spectacle “of ‘inner selves’ striving to be let out.” Stories are attempts of a self to find identity in terms outside itself.

How does the act of storytelling work dialogically, not so much to claim others’ recognition for the self’s authenticity, but rather to fashion that authenticity out of recognitions that the story provides for? How are dialogical relationships both the topic of the story, its content, and also the goal of telling the story, its process? Again, authenticity is interpersonal. Before Taylor’s emphasis on dialogue comes the classic statement of Mikhail Bakhtin (1929/1984), writing on Dostoevsky: “To portray the inner man . . . was possible only by portraying his communion with another. Only in communion, in the interactions of one person with another, can the ‘man in man’ be revealed, for others as well as for oneself” (p. 252). Stories, as dialogue, do not present a self formed before the story is told. Rather in stories the person “becomes for the first time that which [she or] he is – and we repeat, not only for others but for himself [or herself] as well” (p. 252). Narrative analysis can show how that process of becoming “for the first time” works, even as the analysis itself is another stage in this on-going process. How do stories address disenchantment? How do groups of stories build communities in response to shared disenchantments? These questions reflect the persistence of the moral impulse in people’s lives. People do seek what is better and they form communities based on agreements about what is better. These communities are reaffirmed in shared stories that display those values, even as new stories question old values and propose revisions to what is considered better. Values in this sense reflect not only individual preferences but communal narratives.
Finally, I want to make explicit that my whole argument has implicitly been about the ethics of research into stories, or as I prefer to say, the moral auspices of such research. Qualitative methodologists agree that the ethical issue is not simply attaining the respondent’s consent to have his or her story recorded and analyzed. There has been less discussion about what constitutes respect for stories in narrative analysis. Narrative analysis entails extensive ethical obligations. The researcher who solicits people’s stories does not simply collect data but assents to enter into a relationship with the respondent and become part of that person’s ongoing struggle (“la lotta continua”) toward a moral life. As I suggested earlier, that struggle is about narratability and legibility.

This relationship does not require that researcher accept the morality of the story as it is told – quite the contrary. If the dialogical recognition of the story is worth valuing, that recognition must, on occasion, be withheld. The moral impulse of telling any story includes taking the risk that the listener, who may be a researcher, may not offer the recognition that the teller seeks. But there are levels of recognition, and it is possible to recognize the storyteller’s moral impulse to make life narratable, even while rejecting the specific morality of the content. And then the listener’s rejection may, in turn, be accepted or rejected by the original storyteller in the generation of a new story, as the struggle continues.

Narrative analysis, on this account, goes far beyond the production of knowledge from and about people’s stories. The process of narrative research – research as participating in storytelling – has the potential to model how members of society can most usefully recognize each other’s stories. Rather than bemoan the low condition of storytelling in the “interview society,” researchers can lead the process of storytelling toward something better. People are not going to stop telling stories; moral life, for better and worse, takes place in storytelling. Narrative analysis can be a significant model for a society that will continue to work out its moral dilemmas in story form.

I conclude with the big Weberian issue with which I began (and with which Taylor begins). If stories are told to provide provisional moments of reenchantment, how is that reenchantment to be cared for, as someone starting a fire on a cold night cares for a faintly glowing ember or spark? Our task in disenchanted times is to hear and to amplify those sparks of moral impulse in stories that are too often debased and travestic in their expression (using Taylor’s phrase for a third time). Narrative analyses that offer readers ways to hear in the story what Taylor calls “a standard of what we ought to desire” is, I believe, being far more critical – in the sense of constructively evaluative – than any of the knockers of such stories.

Hearing authenticity in its contemporary idiom has never been easy. To return again to Weber, let me note that one of his great intellectual and emotional struggles was with Freudianism, which he first opposed
and then made some peace with; how far that peace might have extended is one of the questions left forever open by his untimely death. Freud’s ideas were Weber’s contemporary idiom of the search for authenticity. Searching for the moral impulse in our own contemporary idioms of authenticity requires imagination and a democratic faith. Hearing the moral impulse in others’ stories enables us to become part of their struggle to reenchant a disenchanted world. Failing to hear this impulse we seem doomed to a pessimism that can only lament what is not. Such pessimism, I believe, articulates all too well with neo-liberalism, which as political economic practice first deforms the personal and then holds up this deformed version of personal life to attest to its core belief that people are only consumers. By affirming the authenticity of the personal, narrative analysis can initiate a significant political intervention.

Notes

1. See also Atkinson, 1997 and my response, Frank, 2000a.
2. For those not familiar with the term, the core beliefs of neo-liberalism are the superiority of the market over the polity in setting priorities for society, the imperative to globalize markets, and the complementary devaluation of the state as an instrument of social change. Public services are held to be inherently less efficient than the private sector, and any state regulation is viewed with suspicion as unwarranted restraint on trade. The citizen becomes the taxpayer, and in the payment of taxes what counts is the expectation of services in return for investment, not contribution to the common good.

References

Narrative research, rooted in interpretive hermeneutics and phenomenology, strives to preserve the complexity of what it means to be human and to locate its observations of people and phenomena in society, history and time. Narrative researchers eschew the objectification of the people that we study and we understand and espouse the constructedness of our knowledge. Yet different narrative researchers, situated differently, study different people, make highly contextualized interpretations and theorize their understandings differently. We are then met with the problem of building a knowledge base that can amalgamate the insight and understandings across researchers. This is a problem that has yet to be taken up directly within narrative research.

The practice of narrative research, rooted in postmodernism, is always interpretive, at every stage. From framing the conceptual question through choosing the participants, deciding what to ask them, with what phrasing, transcribing from spoken language to text, understanding the verbal locutions, making sense of the meanings thus encoded, to deciding what to attend to and to highlight – the work is interpretive at every point. In addition, from a hermeneutic point of view, there are tensions related to Paul Ricoeur’s distinction between a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970; Josselson, 2004). Does the interpreter/researcher privilege the voice of the participant, trying to render the meanings as presented in the interview – or does the researcher...

try to read beneath – or, in Ricoeur’s metaphor – in front of the text – for meanings that are hidden, either unconscious or so embedded in cultural context as to make them seem invisible?

From a hermeneutic standpoint, narrative psychology aims to understand human experience as a form of text construction, relying on the assumption that humans create their lives through an autobiographical process akin to producing a story. It is not just the material “facts” of a life that are of concern here, but the meaningful shape emerging from selected inner and outer experiences. “Facts,” in the naive historical sense, are understood as created rather than reproduced. This approach has allowed psychology to view and analyze people’s lives as lived, people whose life experience had been lost in the search for central tendencies, for statistically significant group differences on oversimplified measures or in contrived experimental conditions.

As the narrative research agenda has taken hold, we find ourselves with an array of fascinating, richly-detailed expositions of life as lived, well-interpreted studies full of nuance and insight that befit the complexity of human lives. The problem that confronts us, though, is that these studies are accumulating, forming now a mass of studies, many largely, unfortunately, published only as dissertations, that represent thousands of person-hours of intensive work. As scholars, we now have to ask ourselves – are we working together to put together a joint multilayered jigsaw puzzle, each one contributing a piece – or are we instead creating a long gallery of finely wrought miniatures, inviting the onlooker to visit and make of it whatever they will?

A gallery is nice, but I am interested in assembling a puzzle. And I have been occupied with the question of how to advance to the level of theory without reifying or losing the richness of the narrative data base? As narrative studies, with their accompanying interpretations, accumulate, how do we “add them up?” What, in effect, would a meta-analysis of narrative studies look like?

Recently, while preparing a chapter for the forthcoming Handbook of Narrative Research, edited by Jean Clandinin, I spent many weeks reading through the existing understanding of this work. In doing so, I came across references to narrative studies of Mexicans, lesbians, drug dealers, strippers, unwed mothers, infertile women, cancer survivors, migrant workers, philanthropists, biracial couples and transvestites – to name just a few. All of them looked intriguing, but I will not live long enough to read them all. Most of the papers in the Handbook of Interview Research and The Handbooks of Qualitative Research focus on method, citing the approaches of these various studies. But what I found myself wishing for was someone who would summarize for me what these various narrative studies found out. Instead, as I read authors who referenced their own work, my impression was that each wrote as if only their study was of
concern. The demands of considering context, reflexivity, co-construction and multiple truths were sufficiently occupying for each writer. In a postmodern framework, there are no “facts” so knowledge has to be considered relative to its context of creation – and each study, if done well, includes an awareness of who is the knower, how the knowledge was obtained, whose voice is privileged and how understandings are rooted in the sociohistorical setting and time in which the research interaction occurred. The question that occupies me, though, is how do we build a knowledge base out of these proliferating studies?

As editors of the series, *The Narrative Study of Lives*, we made the decision long ago not to have abstracts for the papers we publish. Abstracting, it seemed to us, was a (modernistic) scientific convention that constrained the complexity and relativity of the intricate matters our narrative research authors were attempting to elucidate in their work. Abstracts inevitably simplify the complex, the very heart of narrative research. Similarly, we felt unable to index the papers – what would be indexed? And how can one index experience?

As researchers experiment with new forms of presentation, we then have our narrative understandings of various psychological and social phenomena expressed as poems and performances or disseminated in multimedia formats. As though just organizing the more traditional prose scholarship weren’t challenging enough!

Relatively few theorists of narrative research have taken up the problem of the consumption of research findings. Researchers writing reports of narrative studies often go to great pains to temper and contextualize what they wish to communicate to others only to see their tentative understandings transmuted in someone else’s paper into something that resembles fact. After struggling with all the problems of reflexivity and representation, we shudder in horror at the idea of certain ideas being extracted and enshrined, most likely in distorted form, as a citation in someone else’s paper. Narrative work articulates on a different set of principles from hypothesis-testing quantified studies. Such research stands outside the hierarchical realm of facts, and the knowledge thus derived cannot be treated in the same fashion. Because narrative research eschews the principles of certainty, understanding is based in scholarly consensus. Donald Polkinghorne put it well by stating, “The conclusions of narrative research remain open-ended. New information or argument may convince scholars that the conclusion is in error or that another conclusion is more likely. Narrative research, then, uses the ideal of a scholarly consensus as the test of verisimilitude (p. 176).”

There is now enough narrative research proliferating to warrant serious concern about how we are to amalgamate what we have learned from these studies. If we don’t do this, we are in danger of drowning in a tsunami of solipsistic studies that we are unable to assimilate.
The problems of building a knowledge base out of narrative studies mirrors the dilemmas of cross case analysis (Rosenwald, 1988). Each individual is unique, yet what we seek in narrative research is some understanding of the patterns that cohere among individuals and the aspects of lived experience that differentiate. When we look across our interviews, we try to find a template to place across the various experiences we have had as researchers of this particular topic with these particular people and note, with reference to that template, how the undulations of lived experience and psychosocial realities resonate with other thematic structures – albeit structures of our own devising. In our reports, we reflect on ourselves as knowers, ourselves positioned within culture and language. We try to present what we have learned with all its ambiguity and inconsistency.

When we look across narrative research reports, we have to do something similar to what we do with our case analyses – at a conceptual level. If we are researching Mexicans or lesbians, we need to come to some understanding of the status of interpretive understanding of these groups already present in the literature. But this does not mean that our review should be limited to these groups. Indeed, in some ways, studies of lesbians may have more in common with studies of Mexicans, if we think of these as marginalized, but politically-emerging groups, than studies of drug dealers have in common with other studies of drug dealers. We look for the commonalities and disjunctures that help us go beyond individual studies to larger frameworks of understanding. And we have to try to carry into our summaries the tentativeness and multiplicity of the original account.

We also have to take into account that the reports we are trying to digest are, in Claude Levi-Strauss’ phrase, superpositions of the knower on the other. Observations always entwine the observer and the observed. We have to allow for the inherent subjectivity of accounts, recognizing the positionality and personal characteristics of the researcher. But how do we add up intersubjectivities and co-constructed understandings? What do we make of contradictions and disparities?

The challenge that confronts us is how assimilate narrative understanding at a conceptual level in a way that does not return to a modernist frame, treating the various research reports as “facts” – but rather to treat them as situated interpretations.

Let me offer an example: While participating in a committee to approve a narrative dissertation on health information among immigrant groups in Israel, I raised some concerns about the findings in regard to how Ethiopian-Israeli girls learned about menstruation. I referred to findings offered by one of my students, now Dr. Ilana Tal, who had studied first menstruation stories of Ethiopian immigrants to Israel. In Ethiopian society, women are segregated in a special hut during the days of their
menstruation. What Dr. Tal had discussed insightfully and at length concerned the dynamics of knowing and not knowing. The girls, she demonstrated, in one sense “knew” about menstruation because they had frequently accompanied their mothers to the menstrual hut. But they didn’t “know” that this would also happen to them, and therefore felt shocked, shamed and uninformed when they first saw their menstrual blood. It was a very interesting finding. When I spoke about this in the committee meeting at hand, however, the other student’s supervisor said, “but we don’t find that. I haven’t heard that.” The question is how we reconcile these experiences. One response is that my claim is not that this is true for all young women, but it is true for some and that it marks a process we can attend to and learn from. Another response is that I wondered if their analysis was deep enough or sensitive enough to be able to discern this process. Perhaps she simply asked her participants if they “knew” about menstruation and received a cognitive answer and left it at that. This example, I think, illustrates the problem at hand – how do we integrate our findings?

What we need to search for together are ways of conceptualizing different levels of psychological, social and cultural reality and relating them to each other in a way that puts a strong theoretical grounding under detailed studies of particular groups or phenomena and thereby allows for some form of aggregation.

We can perhaps look to the field of anthropology for some instruction on these matters. What anthropology seems to have learned is that the more systematic they tried to become, the less anthropological they found themselves. The problem lay in trying to find communality without sacrificing context. Looking for the universalities in initiation rites across cultures, for example, they lost the essence of the phenomena, which was the meanings and construction of the initiation rite within a specific culture. Clifford Geertz largely gave up the quest for commonalities, arguing for the importance of local knowledge and Richard Shweder (1991) has pointed out that inevitably, the transcendental loses its essence.

But there are some directions. Steiner Kvale (1996) has written that “The knowledge produced in an interview comes close to postmodern conceptions of knowledge as conversational, narrative, linguistic, contextual and interrelational (p. 51):” Following Richard Rorty, we might remind ourselves that conversation is the context in which knowledge is to be understood. As narrative researchers, we can only have effective collaboration as scholars if we imagine ourselves – and present ourselves in conversation with others – and here I mean elaborate, extended conversation, not bracketed citations. We need to converse with each other in print and publicly about the terms of our knowledge of a group or a phenomenon.

In the mid-90s, I collaborated with Amia Lieblich, Ruth Sharabany, and Hadas Wiseman in experimenting with this process. All of us had
done research on the experience of growing up communally in the Israeli kibbutz and, rather than use an expert authorial voice in separate papers or discuss each other’s work in critical reviews, we made public our process of thinking about our material by publishing a book as a conversation among us (Josselson, Lieblich, Sharabany, and Wiseman, 1997). The interconnection between who we are and what we thought we knew was apparent rather than veiled. We could reflect on and try to contextualize and understand the points of difference. We could elaborate on how we arrived at our interpretations, the questions that remained open and the doubts we had in short, we could explore the subtext of knowing that is usually omitted from academic presentations. Some of the conversation had the nature of deepening the understanding by framing the experiential example from the narrative study in richer conceptual terms, offering a broader interpretation or new connections to other material, or placing it in a different theoretical context. We ended with an effort to summarize our discussion. But presenting our discourse with the process of making conclusions and generalizations explicit left it to readers to make their own criticisms and corrections. We left the reader free to observe the intersection of the multiple truths we encountered and how we attempted to integrate them.

I think this model of conversation is a useful one for the future of narrative research. And I think the conversation must take place on a number of grounds. In what follows, I draw freely on a paper written by anthropologist Jane Guyer (1999) reflecting on similar dilemmas in anthropology. And to make my point clearer, I will thread the argument with an imagined example. My example is this: as I have traveled to various countries teaching narrative research and, concurrently, consulting to students in these countries who are actively working on narrative research projects, I discovered that in each place there is some young female graduate student, not surprisingly, working on the problem of the transition to motherhood. I try to put them in touch with one another but they resist, fearful that someone else is doing “their” study. Indeed, not all scholars have the luxury that my group on relationships in the kibbutz had – the opportunity to gather together and discuss our shared work and interests in depth. As scholars, we are separated from one another by time and location. But let us imagine someone reading all of these dissertations and trying to say something integrative about the issue of transition to motherhood. How would they begin? And on what would they focus? I would like to offer some ideas about categories and processes for amalgamation of narrative knowledge.

The first ground is the linguistic – We need to compare the language structures of our participants – across studies. What is common? What is distinct and how does the research or cultural context affect the way in which experience is languaged? We may bring questions not central to
the original presentation such as how temporalities are managed. We may look at sequences of expression rather than just concepts. In my imagined example, this would involve looking at the ways in which the various researchers report the language patterns of their participants as the participants, in different languages, try to give verbal shape to their experiences. In what ways are the language patterns denotive of similar experiential frames? In what ways do the languages signify different states of meaning?

The second ground of comparison is the case study or studies. Here it is not a matter of counting instances, but layering studies in a way that establishes correspondence and difference. By viewing overlapping characteristics, we can build support for repeated patterns that remain situated rather than generalized. This, of course, means bringing to our reading of the text of other people’s studies the same attentiveness to detail that we bring to our own. In the example of the transition to motherhood, the aggregating scholar would treat each report as a case study and try to understand the contextual basis of thematic consistency and difference.

Third is reflection on the criteria for judging variation across studies. Different interpreter/researchers take a different stance to what is viewed as same or distinct. The terms of variability across participants within a study are always imposed by the researcher in the hermeneutic circle created by the interpretive process. But we can investigate the variability in the kinds of categories or conceptual frames that emerge from a range of studies. Here, of course, we have to also consider the situatedness of the researcher. For example, do women researchers who themselves are newly mothers categorize their findings differently from nonmothers or older mothers? And what could we learn from this?

Fourth is the pursuit of redundancy. Here we have to retain adequate doubt about our premises and assumptions, but we can adopt a position of iterative thinking. We attempt to illuminate from different angles, with different lenses, a range of views of a phenomenon and then assess the extent to which we are seeing something similar. To what extent do new observations, again taken across studies, affirm a shared position and give us confidence in our assertions? This is not to suggest that the central or shared is to be privileged. Outliers may give us a map of the repertoire of the phenomenon in which we are interested and provide the keys to an understanding of distribution and process. So here, finding repeated themes across narrative investigations of the transition to motherhood, far from being the already-done, would give us confidence that our understandings reflect something in the experiential world.

Fifth is configuration. Here the effort is to link empirically unrelated phenomena through discovery of related patterning. As I mentioned before, shared psychological patterns may become apparent among marginalized groups that are socially distinct. One traces out themes as
they wend their way through lives, rooting understanding in psychological logic, using either classificatory or structural strategies – or deconstructive ones or strategies that we haven’t yet imagined. Freud’s genius lay in his ability to be a configurational thinker, abstracting a map of the unconscious from unrelated psychopathologies. His approach was configuration through structural analysis. Doing this as narrative researchers involves reading widely, much more widely than is typical, in my experience, both as a supervisor of dissertations and a journal editor. I don’t know how this would play out in the imagined example, but I suspect that someone who could find a metaphor that links the transition to motherhood with other phenomena will be credited with the most profound scholarly contribution. Sara Ruddick did something like this in her book *Maternal Thinking*, a meditation on motherhood, morality and the politics of peace.

Sixth is identifying the frontiers of ignorance. Here it becomes important to note what the researcher reveals s/he cannot understand. What remains opaque across studies? What are the dilemmas that cannot be conceived in available terms? Of course, this also speaks to the imperative for narrative researchers to write about what they do not succeed in interpreting as well as what they do. A meta-analysis of interpretive blocks then may point the way to new studies that could transcend the barriers.

Finally, an amalgam of narrative studies ought to imply action in the world. What does this understanding of psychosocial experience suggest about how people may act on their social constructions, or their psychological structures, or their experiences of marginalization, or victimization, or empowerment or idealism? Here, the aim is not statistical prediction but attention to suggested consequences of the interpretive reality of the people we have jointly studied. In other words, if this is what we together understand about how people’s interior and social lives are constituted, what does this mean for what they may do or for what kind of world order we are building?

None of the conclusions we draw from this aggregation, however, will be certain, nor should they be. Certainty may exist in models of the material world, but will never apply to the realm of people. We may find some forms of order, but order in the process of never-ending change. Clifford Geertz wrote, looking back over his years as an anthropologist...”

It is necessary, then, to be satisfied with swirls, confluxions and inconstant connections; clouds collecting, clouds dispersing...What we can construct are hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things (p. 190).”

I believe, with Bakhtin (1986) that all research is fundamentally conversation. I therefore suggest that the route of developing a knowledge base for narrative research is to privilege dialogue. We can perhaps best know a field of scholarship when we can engage those areas of tension where multiple facets of understanding intersect, interweave, collide,
contradict and show themselves in their shifting and often paradoxical relation to each other. Our account of “the connectedness of things” is ultimately a joint effort.

Note

1. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the American Psychological Association meeting in 2006.

References


Who’s Talking/Who’s Talking Back? The Subject of Personal Narrative

Sidonie Smith

I have shown myself such as I was... I have unveiled my inmost self such as You Yourself have seen it. Eternal Being. [JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, Les Confessions]

My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I’m 23 years old. This is my testimony. I didn’t learn it from a book and I didn’t learn it alone. I’d like to stress that it’s not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people. . . . My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people. [I, Rigoberta Menchú]

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice. [BELL HOOKS, “Talking Back”]

Until the last several decades scholars in the humanities did not pay much attention to personal narratives. They were read as history, read for the “facts” and information they provided about people’s lives. Or they were dismissed as popular forms that lacked the sophisticated structure, language play, and poetics of forms such as the novel. Now, however, personal narratives are at “the center of modernist

concerns:’ as Domna C. Stanton suggests, because they raise issues preoccupying literary and cultural critics at this point in time, issues concerning something that used to be called the self but is now called the subject.¹

The old notion of an Enlightenment self – autonomous, rational, and unified – has given way throughout this century to new understandings of the subject, influenced by such phenomena as Marxian materialism, Freudian psychoanalysis, Saussurian linguistics, and postmodern critiques of authority, truth, and self-presence. For some the self has become fragmented, alienated, a fragile fiction without origin. For some it has become more verb than noun, more process than entity, emergent at any moment in language, discourse, ideology. For some the subject yields inevitably to cultural determinations, what Valerie Walkerdine calls “provided subjectivities.”² For some the subject actively negotiates cultural discourses as an agent of resistance. However understood, the subject fascinates us, and so the contemporary fascination with personal narratives.

While life writing used to appear the most transparent kind of writing, perhaps because of the seductions of factuality, it now seems almost too complicated for words. Reading personal narratives we find ourselves immersed in complex issues of representation, ideology, history, identity, and politics as they bear on subjectivity. In the following discussion of the books under review, I want to address these issues through three subjects of personal narrative: the subject of bourgeois individualism, the collaborative subject, and the resisting subject.

### The Subject of Bourgeois Individualism

For three centuries now, traditional autobiography and biography have, through what Jacques Derrida calls the “law of genre:” both reproduced and consolidated the West’s notion of the self, or, to invoke the first epigraph, Rousseau’s “eternal being.”³ Generic clothes have made the man, so to speak. Making men in specific ways, these practices reinforce dominant ideologies, official histories, and founding mythologies of the subject. In effect, the white, male, bourgeois, heterosexual human being becomes representative man, the universal human subject. “His” life story becomes recognizable, legitimate, and culturally real. Making representative men in this way, generic practices reinforce the subjectivities provided to those who do not share this set of identities. Moreover, they neutralize or suppress ideologies, histories, and subjectivities non-identical to those of the universal human subject. The life stories of many people whose history differs from that of the universal human subject because of race, class, and gender identifications go unwritten, or if written, misread or unread.
Recently, biographers interested in these unofficial life stories have gone to the past to find subjects whose lives need telling either because they managed to live a life that exceeded culturally prescribed norms or because the telling of the life offers the biographer an opportunity to challenge official histories, including that of the universal human subject. Such is the case with several of the auto/biographies before us. But the differences in their various understandings of the subject lead to quite different interventions in the official history of the universal human subject.

One strategy for the biographer is to take the life of the woman who rebels against the feminine subjectivity culturally provided to women and to provide her with a narrative that affirms her extraordinary achievement. This approach is advocated by contributors to Teresa Iles’s *All Sides of the Subject*, an anthology of essays on the relationship of biography and feminism. According to Rachel Gutiérrez, the feminist biographer should find a woman from the past who “becomes an example of independence and creative work” (49). Such an approach, according to Miriam Kalman Harris, serves the political purpose of affirming “our notion of the heroic” (77). In *Kate Chopin*, Emily Toth aligns herself with this notion of feminist biography as she positions Chopin as the rebel, the individualist who challenges cultural codes, resists normative expectations, flaunts her iconoclasm, and thus refuses the provided subjectivity of the proper lady and becomes instead the exceptional artist. Noting the difference between Chopin and other women writers of the time, Toth writes, “And so Kate Chopin created herself. Virtually alone among writers in her own time, she possessed that special spark that transcends time. She was, finally, what Edna could not be: ‘the artist with the courageous soul that dares and defies’” (406).

Yet Toth’s representation, as it romanticizes Chopin and promotes what Lillian S. Robinson critiques as “individualist aesthetics,” raises serious questions about this feminist strategy. Embedding the subject in a myriad of quotidian details but not in an analysis of the material and discursive conditions engendering romantic individualism, the biographer paradoxically constructs a history of the biographical subject that situates that subject outside history. Toth thus lifts Chopin out of her historical context, effectively dehistoricizing her as the exceptional woman in control of her own destiny. While Toth adds the extraordinary woman to the identities available to the universal subject and the biography of Chopin to the canon of American lives, she maintains the very ideology of normative bourgeois subjectivity that marginalized women, among others, in the first place.

But there are ways to use personal narrative to challenge the certitudes of bourgeois individualism – for instance, the certitude of stable, unified selfhood. This is what Linda Niemann does in her memoir,
Boomer. In contrast to Toth’s Chopin, who in Toth’s “romance of the profession” seems to find her “true” self in writing, Niemann’s autobiographical subject discovers that her nontraditional professional life throws all her identities into confusion. “The hurricane ambience of Houston,” she writes, “brought to the surface all my old struggles to fit in, to feel located in an identity. I had never found a niche where I didn’t violate some of the membership rules. I was an intellectual, and I looked like an all-American bimbo. I was bisexual, but lesbians thought I looked straight, and straights thought I looked gay. I was middle class, but I was living a working-class life. I was extremely ambitious, but in a curiously spiritual sense” (33–34). With identities in a constant state of flux, the founding mythology of the unified subject loses its power to give meaning to her life, leaving her in a state of homelessness: “I found my borders disappearing. The simplest questions were gnomic. Self-image, sexual preference, profession, family, history. I wasn’t sure about any of them” (134). Niemann’s text points to the ways in which subjects are situated in multiple discourses of identity and the ways in which those identities coalesce, disperse, reform, and transform one another contextually. By implication it offers a critique of the myth of unified selfhood.

The romance with bourgeois subjectivity reifies an ahistoricized individualism as well. And so another interventionist strategy involves historicizing the subject, a strategy pursued by both Robert C. Bannister and Carolyn Steedman. In Jessie Bernard: The Making of a Feminist, Bannister turns life into case study, not to understand Bernard’s individualized life but to understand the relationship of social thought to consciousness through an exploration of the ideology of professional life and its impact on a woman who joins the profession. In Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain, Steedman engages Margaret McMillan’s life as a means “to illuminate ideas, ideologies, class and gender relations, and the social practices of a particular period of British history” (245). Both biographers insist on the dialogic encounter of subject and culture.

Bannister’s Jessie seeks to escape her marginalized identities (as a Jew, as a woman) by entering the public zone of professional social science, a zone apparently free of the messy identity contents of gender and ethnicity, a zone apparently neutral but obviously normatively masculine. In Bernard’s embrace of professionalism, Bannister discovers a profound paradox: “The professionalism that promised (and finally delivered) personal success and autonomy was bound to assumptions that retarded feminist consciousness, as she later understood it” (12). In his narrative, Bannister tracks the fate of the marginalized person who enters into a domain identified as that of the universal human/neutral subject, Thus the poignancy of Bernard’s epithet: “I have been the prototypical marginal man” (123) – man and not-man, representative and marginal, inside and outside. Explicitly this study asks us to consider the ways in
which consciousness is contextualized rather than privatized. Implicitly it asks us to consider the ways in which specific subjects not only resist provided subjectivities but also comply with those that affect their exclusion from history— that is, the ways in which hegemonic ideologies exact compliance in marginalized subjects.

Steedman, more reflective yet about the relationship of narratives to subjects, incorporates within her text a discussion of the discourses of biography. She conceives her project metacritically as an intervention in previous biographies of McMillan that construct the subject as “a prophet of childhood, pioneer of nursery education, and a modern Santa Barbara” (3). Such hagiographical epithets present McMillan as an exceptional individual and thereby erase the specific cultural and class context in which she rewrote childhood. To contextualize McMillan’s achievement, Steedman weaves into her text histories of the medical profession, health services, socialist movements, labor movements, educational reform movements, and local politics. Moreover, she is explicit in her criticism of feminist biographies such as Toth’s that celebrate exceptional women: “The nineteenth-century heroine of modern biography remains perforce an exceptional and unusual figure, whose life story explains only itself. This is partly to do with the absence of analyses of women’s structural relationship to the societies in which they become actors, but the exceptional female figure is also partly produced out of the biographer’s use of a personal, or individual, frame of time” (249). To avoid bracketing McMillan’s life in personal chronology, Steedman organizes her narrative around topical discussions of the body, the voice, minds, cities, gardens, education. To avoid preoccupation with “the affective and personal” that contains women’s lives in individualistic psychology, she eschews interiorization for the “political and social context” (250). Steedman more than the other biographers discussed here develops a new form for a new notion of the historicized subject and suggests how alternative histories of the subject call for alternative forms of life writing.

Elizabeth Stanley, in her essay in the Iles book, describes yet another strategy for intervening in the “rampant individualism” promoted by “the spotlight approach to a single individual.” She calls for biographical methods that look at women in groups, attending to their structural relationships (Stanley, 115). In his study of Japanese elites, Matthews Masayuki Hamabata ends up doing just this as he moves into a cultural context where subjectivity is understood in radically different terms than in the west. Hamabata discovers that the “patriarchal, patrilineal, primogenitural, and patrilocal” (33) Japanese *te* (or household) “is not made up of individuals but of positions.” As a result, its “existence, unlike that of the nuclear family’s or the extended family’s, is highly resistant to the unpredictability of individual characteristics and behavior” (40). Any concept of individualism recedes before the responsibilities
attached to the familial positions subjects fill. Here we have a concept of subjectivity, as a dialogue between person and structure, that challenges western assumptions about the universality and cultural neutrality of the bourgeois subject.

Hamabata directs his attention to what Steedman sees as a missing element in biographies of exceptional women in the West: “women’s structural relationship to the societies in which they become actors” (249). For he traces how, from their positions as alliance brokers in the ie, wealthy women determine the boundaries of subjectivity of all members of the ie and, by extension, the business relations of the larger Japanese community. This radically different context of subject formation therefore requires us to consider the inadequacy of any universalized concept of “woman,” the imprecisions in our theories of marginality, and the cultural specificity of any one woman’s relationship to subjectivity.

Finally, narrators can undermine the myth of bourgeois subjectivity by attending to their own relationship to the subject of study. Compellingly self-reflexive, Steedman entwines autobiographical commentary with the biography of McMillan, telling us that a “disappearance into the children” and her own working-class childhood links her, a teacher of working-class children, with her biographical subject. The final pages of this biography echo with autobiographical confession: “I think I came to understand, through a growing acquaintance with McMillan’s writing and thought, that when we weep for children it is for ourselves that we weep” (258). The autobiographical here becomes communal as she subsumes both herself and her subject in the “we.” And in the microautobiographical narrative that opens Crested Kimono, Hamabata records his personal odyssey of identity. A Japanese American, he begins his project as a “ghost,” a person with no positionality and thus no identity within the milieu he seeks to study. “Blundering across boundaries of culture, class, and sexuality” (6), he eventually discovers a cultural position through which his social identity and roles “coalesced” (25). He becomes a person, “Matto.” In becoming “Matto” he comes to understand the ways in which the cultural context creates him as a specific kind of subject.

Steedman and Hamabata put themselves in the picture, so to speak. Having written narratives in which they situate the subjects of inquiry in culturally and historically specific locations, they understand that they too, in the words of Diane Middlebrook, are not “uninfluenced by points of view that structure the cultures that fostered them” (Bell and Yalom, 156). That they write from specific cultural locations, ones filled with class, nationality, and ethnicity contents. That they, like their subjects, are products of history and culture. Through such acknowledgments, they implicitly challenge the concept of author that would make of the biographer/ethnographer a disembodied and neutral voice, a universal human subject, outside history, nation, culture, gender, race. As important,
they affirm the intersubjectivity of the biographical/ethnographical process, the mutually constitutive process of one subject writing about another subject. We are reading a different kind of text than Toth’s, a text influenced by what Middlebrook calls the “upheaval in biographies” caused by the postmodern decentering of both narrator and subject (164).

Collaborating Subjects

As Elspeth Probyn notes, “One doesn’t have to scratch the surface very deeply to find that class, race, and gender have a lot to do with whose experiences are on top” – that is, with whose lives traditionally have gotten written and read, with whose experiences have been seen as “real.” Nonetheless, all kinds of subjects excluded from the status of bourgeois individual have also engaged in autobiographical acts – colonized and enslaved people, working-class men and women, bourgeois women, members of variously oppressed groups. To this scene of life writing they bring what bell hooks calls their “experientially based history,” a history in which they create themselves as subjects. Often their life stories emerge through acts of collaboration that bring together a subject who narrates her or his story orally and another subject who collects, transcribes, organizes, and edits that story. As John Beverley argues, such collaborative practices challenge the western notion of the “author” of an “autobiography” by dispersing the “author” function into the dual positions of the “speaker” and “interviewer/recorder.” This multiplication of narrating subjects differentiates collaborative life writing from traditional biography and autobiography.

The confusions of Patricia Huckle’s Tish Sommers point to the important distinctions between auto/biographical and collaborative modes of life writing. Seeking to authenticate women’s political struggle for her students, Huckle began interviewing Sommers, a longtime activist with a specific commitment to organizing older women. Sommers, dying from cancer, used the process to order her past life and to establish a vision of herself as a role model for women. But with Sommers’s death, the oral history metamorphosed into a biography; and the biographer changed from “instrument of [Sommers’s] autobiography” (xv) to a biographer who sought to understand the intersection of gender, aging, and political activism. Huckle fails in that transition, however. The work is effective neither as biography nor as oral history. And here the issue of control becomes critical. The interviewer turned biographer does not let Sommers’s voice emerge as the distinct voice of oral narrative but contains it in her own narrative. Paradoxically, Sommers controls the biographer in turn, as Huckle cannot develop a clear way of interpreting Sommers’s life outside Sommers’s own interpretation.
As we see here, collaborative projects raise complex questions about who speaks in the text and whose story is being told, about who maintains control over the narrative and by implication over the purposes to which the story is put. Issues of voice and power are related, of course. But the dynamics between the two shift if the collaborative project joins people on relatively equal terms or joins them across cultures, classes, races, nationalities, and thus across unequal power relationships.

Reading Maurice Isserman’s collaboration with Dorothy Healey, one of the central figures in the history of the American Communist party, against Margaret B. Blackman’s collaboration with Sadie Neakok, a leader in the Inupiaq community of Barrow, Alaska, allows us to explore issues of voice and power as they play out in the story of a single individual. Both Isserman and Blackman reveal that they reshaped the taped narratives, adding explanatory information or clarifying details, filling in the gaps between narrative units, smoothing over the edges of the oral narrative. Throughout these edited first-person narratives, they introduce diverse materials that effect a kind of multivoiced chorus. Isserman incorporates heterogeneous voices from documentary materials, such as newspaper clippings, FBI reports, summaries of telephone taps, party reports, letters. He also uses excerpts from interviews with family members, friends, and contemporaries of Healey. Blackman provides supplementary historical and cultural information to bind various parts of Neakok’s narrative together, using italics to signal her own narrative voice and quotations to signal the voices of others, including that of Neakok’s father, whose autobiography serves as an inspiration to his daughter. Through this multiplication of voices and discourses the interviewers situate their subjects in a specific yet complex cultural history.

But for me there is a telling difference between Dorothy Healey Remembers and Sadie Brower Neakok: An Inupiaq Woman. Isserman is explicitly aware of the complexities of his collaboration, recognizing that “the memories of someone who came of political age in the 1930s are here filtered through the sensibility of someone who came of political age in the 1960s” (13). He acknowledges that he writes from a particular location and that that location influences his interpretation of Healey’s narrative. Positioning himself as “historian” and Healey as “historical subject;’ he calls the product of their life writing collaboration “first-person biography;” a hybrid amalgam of autobiography, oral history, biography, and documentary (9). Its hybrid nature derives from the related but slightly different motivations of the subject and her interlocutor. Healey initiates the project because she wants to testify to her lifelong commitment as a revolutionary and thus participate in the testimonial tradition of left politics. Preoccupied with the question that he considers the “crux” of the narrative – why Healey waited so long to make her break with the American Communist party – Isserman wants to explore the relationship
between individual consciousness and revolutionary institution. The narrative becomes both a celebration of the revolutionary and a historicized critique of a revolutionary consciousness too full of its good intentions. Thus the collaborative subject is simultaneously individualized and historicized, and the single voice of the individual is held in tension with the multiple voices of history. The role of controlling author is relinquished and the control and authority of the “I” called into question; thus both author and subject are decentered. Since meaning is not unified but multiple, Isserman’s text forces us to “know” the subject in multiple ways as well.

In contrast, Blackman’s text suggests a different epistemological outcome, one related to the fact that Blackman and Neakok come together across a cultural divide. Granted, we hear Sadie Neakok’s voice in what is a speakerly rather than a readerly text. The cadence, language usage, narrative directness, and responsiveness to the silenced questions of the interlocutor combine to give authenticity to the oral history subject. But Neakok does not participate in the final editing of her story as Healey does (although she reads it [223]). In fact, the final meaning of Neakok’s life story is summarized by Blackman when she writes in her concluding chapter, “Surely one of the great attractions of life history is the potential it offers for discovery and rediscovery of the common threads of our gender, our state in life, our humanity” (242). In other words, this collaborative project affirms the universal values of liberal humanism. While I liked Blackman’s book in many ways, I found this unproblematised universalization of Neakok’s life disturbing. “The life history:” Blackman argues, “is a singular creation, born of the collaboration of two unique individuals, working together at a particular time and place. Yet there is a structure to the story that transcends audience, place, and time” (234–35). The subject she creates here is the unique individual whose story speaks to all other unique individuals. Thus Blackman herself has created those transcendent commonalities by flattening Neakok’s oral narrative into a traditional autobiographical format and conforming Neakok’s story to western notions of the individual.

In the collaborative project the interviewer/editor often maintains total control over the narrative. If she comes to the subject of her project across a divide of inequality and differences of culture, class, nationality, or race, she brings to the exercise of that control her own ideologies of subjectivity. As a result, she may conform the storytelling of the multicultural subject to the normative traditions of her own culture and thereby construct a familiar subject through a familiar frame. If the collaborator from the dominant culture is unselfconscious about the possibility of such cultural appropriation, she may reinscribe the collaborative subject in the image of the western subject and thereby neutralize cultural differences in service to cross-cultural similarities.
Thus when a person from what is sometimes called the metropolitan center seeks out and interviews people from marginalized and oppressed cultures in order to hear their story, we need to be especially attentive to their purposes and their strategies. Three of the works before us call for that attentiveness. In *Thanks to God and the Revolution*, Dianne Walta Hart seeks out “standpoint” knowledge about the lives of women in the Nicaraguan Revolution. To this end, she collaborates with four members of the López family, who, she says, “represent the poor who fought for the revolution and for whom the revolution was fought” (5). Her project is expressly political: she considers it “important that this history be published in English because most North Americans, whose country is the most significant player in the hemisphere, have little understanding of the politics or culture of Latin America or Latin Americans” (5). Through this collaborative project, the family members become subjects in their own stories and commentators on the meaning of national history. For the women specifically, it becomes an occasion to construct themselves as active agents of that history in spite of patriarchal resistance to their agency (see 117, 161). Through life writing, these family members articulate what Carole Boyce Davies calls “themes of collective epic” by means of which they participate in the national epic of the Nicaraguan revolution.

In *Life Stories of the Nicaraguan Revolution*, Denis Lynn Daly Heyck seeks out, records, edits, and compiles twenty-six short personal narratives of people of diverse political and religious commitments, economic circumstances, and social standing, in order to “convey the powerful impact of such a dramatically altered reality” as the Nicaraguan revolution (x). This “multi-layered collage” constructed of multiple speaking subjects creates a fragmented sense of the political events in Nicaragua and thereby counters any simplistically unified vision of the meaning of the revolution in the lives of its peoples. Moreover, the project puts pressure on the reader to listen to the polyphony of voices, to sort through various truth claims and interpretations, and to come to an understanding of what Heyck terms in her introduction “the human dimension” of the Nicaraguan revolution. And in *Winged Words* Laura Coltelli uses collaborative life writing in the form of interviews as a way of writing a “collective epic” of the American Indian writer, compiling interviews with eleven writers who speak of the complexities, complicities, and resistances of a multicultural subjectivity, and who speak of their experiences and visions as artists.

Hart, Heyck, and Coltelli all eschew “the spotlight approach on a single individual” in favor of a collective epic that situates multiple speakers as subjects in and of communal history. Thus a dialogue is set in motion between individual story and collective saga. In Hart’s “testimonio vivo” the four family members, Doña María, Marta, Letitia, and Omar, speak from distinct personal, familial, and cultural positions. This
polyphony keeps differences constantly circulating – differences in voice, differences in the meanings assigned to their experientially based history, differences in interpretations of events over real time, differences in their positions within the family and within the revolution, differences in the knowledge they have of one another. Nonetheless, in sharing this history they constantly affirm the communal nature of their lives. By allowing each subject to contribute her or his particular perspective to the history of the Nicaraguan revolution, Heyck refuses to provide the reader with any unified, linear history of the revolution as either progressive or regressive event, for such a master narrative would conform individuals to a universalized subjectivity and effectively erase the specificity of their experiential history. In multiplying American Indian subjects, Coltelli attends to the differences of American Indian cultures and histories, even as she encourages us to listen for commonalities across cultures. Moreover, the interview format, as Coltelli notes, honors traditions central to American Indian storytelling. The speakerly immediacy of the voices evokes the oral performances of traditional storytelling while the antiphonal rhythm of question/response underscores its communal context.

But these texts open other issues. Heyck’s text, for instance, raises disturbing questions about the impact of rampant polyphony. On the one hand, the text can be read as polyphonic testimonio, an effort to capture for foreign readers the differential experiences of the revolution and to legitimate the stories of subjects from all cultural locations. Because all the stories are given the same valence, credibility, and weight, the politics of the text seems democratic and egalitarian. On the other hand, the incorporation of so many voices threatens to vitiate the impact of any specific voice; and the story of the revolution threatens to consume individual story. Thus the potential benefits of polyphonic interpretation give way before commodified cacophony. As readers we end up only with a kind of touristic experience.

Coltelli’s text, for its part, raises questions about the power dynamics of the interview format. Granted, the interviewer does not hide behind a cloak of anonymity, invisibly controlling the text. She leaves her voice in the narrative frame. But she asserts another kind of control over the “conversation” by having a specific agenda. Working from a set of questions, Coltelli asks each subject the same questions in approximately the same order. She thus implies a kind of homogeneity of experience among all the interviewees, a homogeneity she specifically alludes to in her introduction: “It was my wish to interview all the writers at one single period and literary climate [sic] so that a common cultural milieu could be seen” (7). Here the interview format, which has the potential to affirm the intersubjective dimensions of two-way communal exchange between collaborative subjects, constructs the American Indian writing subject in a unidimensional way.
For me, Hart’s collaborative project is most successful. There is neither an emphasis on individualism per se, nor on the revolution per se, nor on the sociological family. Each member of the family “talks back” to Hart, constructing her or his story of hardship, oppression, struggle, hope, disappointment, and resistance. Hart frames the multiple voices at the beginning and orders the juxtaposition of voices, but she attempts to minimize her interference, organizing by chronology, juxtaposing voices in the same order. And yet even here there is an unquestioned assumption of editorial neutrality.

This leads me to some final comments on these collaborative narratives. Collaborative projects that bring subjects together across unequal power relationships have the potential to reform and thereby appropriate the histories of oppressed peoples. But there are ways in which collaborative projects might be conceptualized and structured so as to empower in more specific ways the subject of the collaboration. For one, the issue of control might be renegotiated so that the subject shares responsibility for setting purposes, developing questions, evolving a narrative style, and editing. Or the interviewer/editor might make more explicit her own cultural standpoint; including her assumptions about subjects and storytelling. Or, as Steedman does in her biography of McMillan, the interviewer/editor might put herself in the picture so that the project becomes explicitly intersubjective and transcultural. She might create herself as a subject of the collaboration, without privileging her story over the other story.

**Resisting Subjects**

When people assigned in varying ways to the cultural position of “other” speak as autobiographical subjects, they consciously and/or unconsciously negotiate the laws of genre that work to construct them as culturally recognizable subjects. These laws establish rules of inclusion and exclusion and set the terms for participation in privileged or canonical forms. In her essay in the Bell and Yalom anthology, Regenia Gagnier addresses this relationship of subject formation to narrative form when she looks at the ways in which working-class subjects entered and negotiated the terrain of bourgeois autobiography in Victorian England. Laws of genre also generate resistance as well as conformity to normative discourses of identity. Talking back to the dominant culture, formerly excluded subjects bring their experientially based history into biographical, autobiographical, and life writing locales and there undermine the intent of provided forms by staging different performances of subjectivity. Moreover, the discourses of identity within any culture are multiple and heterogeneous, and their impacts on any specific subject variable. And so, as Paul Smith
suggests, “a person is not simply the actor who follows ideological scripts, but is also an agent who reads them in order to insert him/herself into them – or not.”

Steedman emphasizes this doubleness in her biography of McMillan, attending to the ways her subject passively transmitted and actively refused prevailing class and gender ideologies.

The ways autobiographical subjects struggle against provided subjectivities and disorient traditional forms, languages, and truths of subjectivity are central to the critical and theoretical studies before us. Several essays in *Revealing Lives*, for instance, take as their focus women’s reworking of the only apparently stable boundaries between such official forms as biography and autobiography. In their respective essays, Carol Hanbery MacKay and Marilyn Yalom explore how nineteenth-century bourgeois women insinuate autobiographical stories between the lines of official biographies of husband and father, thereby using the culturally acceptable because self-effacing activity of writing biography to screen the unacceptable work of writing self-promoting autobiography.

The relationship of genre to engendered subject formation also interests Leah Hewitt in her *Autobiographical Tightropes*, a study of the autobiographical writings of twentieth-century French writers. Hewitt sets two reading processes in motion. The first looks to “the frictions between traditional and modern perspectives on autobiography,” a meta-autobiographical friction permeating many autobiographical works, and the second looks to the constitution of female subjects through autobiographical practice. These considerations converge as Hewitt explores the ways in which the laws of genre lock the autobiographical subject into certain forms of compulsory gender identity and how the autobiographical subject seeks to unlock the genre and thereby unlock those compulsory identities. For instance, through the shifting of voices from first to third person and through the shifting of subject positions within the scene of prostitution, Marguerite Duras in *The Lover* shuttles back and forth between the positions of object and subject of desire, gendered as feminine and masculine, respectively, with the result that “the desiring subject, and, by extension, the autobiographical ‘I,’ are shown to be positional effects, not absolute origins” (Hewitt, 116). In other words, Duras challenges the notion that the “I” secures itself in any stable and essential difference.

Playing with truth also offers an occasion for resistance, a resistance implicit rather than explicit in Timothy Dow Adams’s *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*. Since autobiographical acts are acts of self-construction, Adams sees points of fabrication and falsification as indexes of the metaphors of subjectivity necessary to the autobiographer’s understanding of him or herself. Thus Gertrude Stein, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, constructs herself as “a legendary figure” by means of the “tall tale.” Diversions from truth telling in her text can be understood
in terms of this mythmaking. “Taking on the role of both teller and subject: suggests Adams, “Gertrude Stein presents herself as a great American folk hero, living on the frontier of narrative innovation and the literary establishment” (37). We might say that lying in the place of the “I” becomes for Stein one means of resisting culturally provided identities, specifically the identities of the unwomanly, egotistic artist and the physically grotesque and sexually perverse lesbian. Moreover, it effects an un-manning of a masculine tradition since Stein puts herself in the place of the (male) folk hero.

Lying is one kind of subversive ruse. Françoise Lionnet looks at another in *Autobiographical Voices*. If discourses of race as well as gender serve to essentialize identities and hierarchize differences, then oppressed subjects can either comply with these discursive pressures or maneuver through them in search of points of resistance. Lionnet finds such resistance in what she calls the art of the métis, “an aesthetics of the ruse that allows the weak to survive by escaping through duplicitous means the very system of power intent on destroying them” (18), including the system of provided subjectivities. Elaborating through the figure of métissage the constitutive force in postcolonial subject formation of multiple linguistic traditions, she explores how five postcolonial writers use “both Western literary (or religious) traditions and vernacular cultures (or dialects)” in order to “form [an] intertextual weaving or métissage of styles” (29). Through this braiding multicultural writers challenge the binary oppositions sustaining the discourses of race and gender by mapping “intermediary spaces where boundaries become effaced and Manichean categories collapse into each other” (18).

These modes of resistance lead to the proliferation of hybrid autobiographical practices that challenge the laws of genre identified with western notions of traditional autobiography, hybrid practices Caren Kaplan describes as “out-law” genres – autoethnography, biomythography, prison narratives, testimonio, regulative psychobiography. In addition to generating outlaw genres, resisting readings of subjectivity also generate outlaw traditions such as the one Joanne M. Braxton traces in her *Black Women Writing Autobiography*. Conceptualizing her project as “an occasion for viewing the individual in relation to those others with whom she shares emotional, philosophical, and spiritual affinities, as well as political realities” (9), Braxton situates autobiographers in a tradition that links them to one another through cultural identity, thematic foci, and formal orientations. Affirming the distinct history of black women’s autobiographical writing, she insists both on the visibility of the writing subject and on the instrumentality of her specific history with its own traditions of life writing.

To conclude, I return to two of the collaborative narratives and those disruptive gestures through which the speaking subject resists the
interlocutor’s provided subjectivity and form. The first is an implied disruption, a quiet one. Blackman uses her final chapter to describe how, during the last visit to Sadie Neakok’s house for the purposes of getting Neakok to respond to questions fashioned out of the gaps in the narrative, Neakok tells the same stories again. “The life story was retold:’ Blackman writes, “in abbreviated form, and I had the comfortable feeling of one who had listened before and could anticipate the narrative. It was not important that I had already heard the story; like all stories, Sadie’s is meant to be retold. I did learn ‘more’ that afternoon, but not necessarily in answer to the specific question I had asked” (224). Here is the introduction of another mode of storytelling, an oral, communal mode of storytelling that the written, chronological mode generated by questions and responses cannot accommodate. It is a mode full of contradiction and confusion, which Blackman eventually cleans up, straightens out. Yet I like to read this moment as one in which Sadie Neakok talks back to her interpreter and to me as a reader, insinuating a point of resistance through another life writing tradition. Granted, we would not attend to this other story if Blackman had not included it in her conclusion. But she does and we do.

And in Coltelli’s text, several writers whom Coltelli interviews resist the constraint of her list of questions. Gerald Vizenor plays the trickster by returning again and again to his persistent critique of western anthropology and anthropologists, no matter what the question. Leslie Silko introduces a metacritical commentary on the format in the note preceding her interview and ultimately absorbs the interview in her own creative process. These respondents insist on their voices, their traditions, their histories, and their identities. In this way they evade fixing in the questions of the interlocutor. In this way they turn the forms of personal narrative to their own purposes.

Notes
4. See Lillian S. Robinson, “Working/Women/Writing,” in her Sex, Class, and Culture (New York: Methuen, 1986), 226. See also the Regenia Gagnier essay in Bell
and Yalom, eds., *Revealing Lives*, 93. While celebrating the woman as exceptional artist, Toth fails to discuss the complexity of the voice that speaks in Chopin’s narratives, but particularly in *The Awakening*, or to explore Chopin’s very thematizing of the romantic writing and reading practices in which Toth herself seems to participate.


8. To distinguish collaborative forms from traditional autobiography, Carole Boyce Davies uses the phrase “life writing”; see Carole Boyce Davies, “Collaboration and the Ordering Imperative in Life Story Production:” in Smith and Watson, eds., 3–6.


10. For a discussion of the relationship of testimonial forms to the nationalist movements in Latin America, see Sommers, 112.

11. Davies, 16.


What Is the Subject?

Shelley Day Sclater

Introduction

Since the ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences (Mishler, 1991), an assumption that is often made is that selves and stories are linked. It is said that our very ‘selves’ are ‘storied’ (see, for example, Bruner, 1990; Eakin, 1999; McAdams, 1997; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992), or that stories are the cornerstone of our identity (see, for example, Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). Sarbin (1986) postulates a ‘narratory principle’ whereby persons think, feel, act and make moral choices according to narrative structures. Andrews (2000, pp. 77–78) summarises the position succinctly: ‘Stories are not only the way in which we come to ascribe significance to experiences. . .they are one of the primary means through which we constitute our very selves. . .We become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell.’ On this view, narratives not only help us to organise and make sense of experience, and not only help us imbue our lives with meaning, but in these very acts of meaning-making, the human subject sculpts a narrative identity (see, for example, Widdershoven, 1993).

Others take a more sceptical view. Craib (2000), for example, argues that selves are always more than stories can express – for him, stories that claim otherwise are ‘bad faith’ narratives. Craib worries about a sanitised, even idealised, view of narrative. For him, the sorts of psychic realities that can be talked about in the language of psychoanalysis necessarily evade narrative formalisations. Frosh (1999) poses a similar problem in a different way: ‘What is outside discourse?’, he asks. He is

worried about the postmodern ‘collapse of self-boundaries’ and the idea that the self is no more than an effect of language/discourse, an ‘alienating fiction’ (p. 381). Like Craib, Frosh invokes the language of psychoanalysis to think about those aspects of self and identity that are internal to the psyche. For him, a discursive or narrative (Frosh, 2002) account of the self cannot do justice to its persistence, interiority and complexity. Hollway and Jefferson (2000a, 2000b) tackle the problem by positing a ‘defended’ subject – a subject whose unconscious defences against anxiety will colour their experiences and relationships and fashion the stories that they tell. On this view, particular ways of ‘reading’ personal narratives, using psychoanalytic concepts, permits insight into the complexities of the human subject.

But Frosh, Craib and Hollway and Jefferson are going further than just saying that there are selves, or aspects of selves, that lie ‘beyond’ the story. What they are also saying is that the selves that are expressed in stories – Rosenwald and Ochberg’s ‘storied selves’ (1992) – are superficial covers for something that is much more deep, complex and threatening. Frosh (p. 382) says, for instance, that ‘identities are . . . important protective devices against something worse’. The common position taken by these critical thinkers is that the storied self, far from encapsulating the ‘real’ self, or expressing/constituting identity, is something that defends against it.

Importantly, though, whether we believe that selves are constructed or revealed by stories, or whether we take the contrary view that selves are more concealed by them, both positions assume some kind of linkage or, more likely, a complex matrix of connections between narrative and identity. My project is to explore these links between stories and selves, beginning with how we might theorise a ‘narrative subject’ in such a way as to take account of both opposing positions set out above. That is to say, the purpose of this article is to discuss the issue of ‘What is the subject?’ with reference to the determining power of language but that does not lose sight of the significance of specifically psychic realities.

First I will consider ‘narrative’; I ask what kind of thing do we have to imagine narrative to be in order for us to think about it as a primary locus for selfhood? Next, I focus on the nature of the subject, and I ask what kind of entity do we have to imagine the subject to be, such that the self is capable of being realised in narrative? Finally, I speculate on the processes by which selves and stories are linked, and the means by which it may be said that subjectivities are narratively produced. First, a few words about ‘narrative psychology’.

For many, the need for a ‘narrative psychology’ arises in order to take account of the ‘turn to language’ in social science. On this view, a significance is accorded to language, at both individual and social levels, that is absent in traditional psychological paradigms. Traditionally, language
is seen merely as a means of representation and communication – a transparent medium by which ‘reality’ is reflected and conveyed in a meaningful way. From this perspective, meanings are given in language and are, more or less, self evident in any given community where the language is shared. By contrast, a critical approach challenges this mimetic view of language and problematises the production of meaning. It sees language, not as reflecting experience, but as constitutive of both experience and subjectivity, It seems meaning as the outcome of ongoing processes of negotiation – always partial and contingent, never final or fixed. This view requires a specifically narrative psychology to frame a different view of the human subject as primarily a self-reflective meaning-maker.

For others, however, a ‘narrative psychology’ becomes necessary because the ‘turn to language’ is seen as in danger of reducing the subject to an effect of language. On this view, formulating a ‘narrative psychology’ becomes crucial if the ‘turn to language’ makes it difficult, or impossible, to talk about an ‘inner world or to recognise a specifically psychological realm of experience (see Andrews et al., 2000).

It is this kind of dilemma posed by the changes in the landscape of social science that has led me to explore ‘narrative psychology. I begin with a recognition of, on the one hand, the constitutive power of language. On the other hand, however. I acknowledge that social constructionism can deny, in important ways, the felt realities of agency and an experiencing self. Can a ‘narrative psychology’ enable us, perhaps, to take account of all the complexities of subjectivity, including unconscious processes?

**Narrative**

For many, the attraction of narrative studies lies in its promise to enable us to think about a human subject who is socially situated and culturally fashioned, at the same time as that subject expresses a unique individuality and an agency that makes the subject, at once, quite singular but also part of more or less local and global communities. But ‘narrative’ is a vague term and means many things to many people. I would like to ask what kind of thing do we have to imagine narrative to be in order for us to think about it as a primary locus for selfhood?

There are now many distinct orientations towards narrative (for example, realist, phenomenological, psychodynamic, textual and so on) each of which has different implications for our understanding of the linkages between selves and stories and of how subjectivities are produced. Whilst I don’t think that it’s helpful to get bogged down in issues of definition – of saying precisely what narrative is and is not, even if that
were possible – I think that it is useful to identify some of the common characteristics of narrative across different orientations. My purpose here is not to draw boundaries of inclusion/exclusion, nor to make judgments about the worthiness of some narratives as opposed to others, but rather to uncover some common assumptions about the nature of narrative and consider what the possibilities and limitations might be if narratives are considered to be the locus of the self.

Gergen gives us a useful summary; he sets out six characteristics of narrative. First, and most importantly, a story has a point and the point is saturated with value. Narratives are evaluative frameworks and thus to tell a personal story is to take up a moral position – it is to make a claim for a particular moral dimension for the self. Taylor (1985, p. 3) summarises this idea succinctly when he says ‘To be a full human agent, to be a person or self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth. A self is a being for whom certain questions of categoric value have arisen, and received at least partial answers.’

Secondly, an intelligible story is one in which events are selected to make the point more or less probable, accessible, important or vivid. Narrative demands, Gergen reminds us, have ontological consequences. Thirdly, the events in the story are typically placed in an ordered arrangement, according to local convention. Fourth, the characters in the story typically have continuous identities across time. Fifth, the ideal narrative is one that gives an explanation – it suggests or establishes causal linkages that form the basis of the ‘plot’. Finally, the narrative is framed as a narrative, using conventions that signal the beginning and the end, generating a sense of direction and a feeling of purpose.

The implicit view of narrative that inhabits Gergen’s account, and renders narrative problematic as the locus of subjectivity, is that of narrative as a thing, a static product. Yet there is some tension here, as Gergen also draws our attention to three crucial aspects of narrative with implications for identity. First is his emphasis on the moral dimensions of both narrative and the self. This is Taylor’s (1989) main point – that ‘modern’ selfhood and morality are inextricably intertwined themes. Secondly, he reminds us, not only of the social and cultural dimensions of narrative, but also of its inevitably interpersonal nature. To narrate is to assume or imagine an audience but it is also more than that – it is to engage as a self, as an active, interpretive human agent, with others and with the world. As Macmurray (1970) says – persons are only persons insofar as they are persons-in-relation. Thirdly, and again this echoes Macmurray, persons are embodied human agents; what makes us human is our ability to act intentionally in terms of the perceived nature of the Other. There are thus tensions in Gergen’s account between a static and a more dynamic view of narrative.
If we are thinking about narrative as the locus for subjectivity, a view that makes better sense than an implicit idea of the story as a static product is that of narrative as a dynamic practice. This practice – narration – is, at once uniquely individual, yet social, cultural and interpersonal. It is the practice of active human agents, where those human agents are intentional and embodied, and where their practices have an inevitable moral dimension. Narration is a dynamic signifying practice that is the work of embodied human agents in cultural settings. At times those settings are local, at times more global; the historical, social and geographic contours of our lives fashion the language and discourses that we employ to construct our stories and make claims about our selves.

But, as practices, are those acts of narration merely ‘performances’, as Craib or Frosh might argue, or do they, as Hollway and Jefferson would say, contain and potentially reveal something of the hidden depths of psychic realities? The notion of ‘performance’, for some, implies a degree of superficiality, of inauthenticity of the self that inhabits those narratives. This is because it is contrasted to an assumed ‘real’ – a binary, real or performed, underlies our thinking – where the ‘real’ is the privileged of the pair. But, at the same time, a focus on practice/performance implies an open-endedness that leaves room for creative possibilities and for us to conclude that the self is always more than any one narrative can hold. It also refocuses our thinking towards relationships, rather than identities; and when we focus more closely on relationships, the self/other boundary becomes blurred in interesting ways. It reminds us that we are who we are, not just inside ourselves, but in relation to others, and those interactions with others, real and imagined, present or absent, occur routinely on many levels, including the unconscious.

The Subject

Henriques et al. (1998), in Changing the Subject problematised ‘the individual’ of psychology and replaced it with a more nuanced notion of ‘subjectivity’ that was situated, contingent, realised in language and always had an unconscious dimension. Subjectivity was, very decisively, a discursive phenomenon. The new emphasis on discourse seemed to offer the possibility of talking politically about self and identity – of situating selves in webs of social relations. But there was a downside. For those who felt that psychology, as a discipline, had left out all that was interesting and ‘subjective’ about the person, discursive psychology offered rather fewer possibilities. Those of us who wanted to bring together both the personal and the political were in a real quandary. Parker (1992), a pioneer of discursive psychology, later drew our attention to the fact that discursive approaches, in their focus on language and text,
could tell us nothing about what was going on in people’s heads when they used discourse. The implication was that discursive psychology, interesting and useful though it might be, couldn’t touch a specifically psychological realm of experience – indeed, it seemed to deny the very existence of such a realm of experience, of any ‘inner’ world. My aim now is to think about how we might re-introduce ‘the subject’ into a new kind of psychology that could recognise the developmental and experiential significances of both inner and outer worlds, without sidestepping the complexities of either.

In thinking through the discursive aspects of subjectivity, I was drawn to Althusser’s work. His ideas about ‘interpellation’ – how ideologies ‘hail’ the subject – ‘hey, you!’ – such that the subject (mis)recognises her or himself in the ‘mirror’, thus internalising social relations – were exciting and had been used by Judith Williamson (1978), in her groundbreaking work on advertising, to good effect. Her work reminded us of the very important fact that social relations and cultural symbols exert a psychological ‘hold’ over us, and that we can only really understand the workings of the social and the cultural if we are prepared to look for the complex ways in which they are manifested and processed at the level of each human subject. Althusser’s formulation appealed because it seemed to address both the absence of the psychological in Marx, and the (apparent) absence of the political in Freud.

Davies and Harré’s (1990) article on ‘Positioning: The Discursive Construction of Selves’ showed that the power of discourses could only be realised if individual human subjects were prepared to engage with them, positioning themselves with respect to the discourses, with consequences for their selves and identities. Clearly, discourses are not determining of either selves or identities, not least because human subjects can refuse the positions they offer, or they might negotiate a slightly modified position. I am reminded here of that axiom of Marxism, that people make history, although not in conditions of their own making. Davies and Harré’s work offered a place for thinking about the human subject as a psychological subject, actively engaging with discourse, perhaps identifying with a particular discursive position, perhaps not. The result of discursive positioning, argued Davies and Harré, was the discursive construction of self. It has become commonplace to talk about ‘the self’ as ‘discursively constituted’ or as ‘constituted in language’. But, from a psychological point of view, it’s as if there’s little (if anything) more to ‘the self’ than its multiple and shifting positionings in discourse, or language, its presentation in narrative. It’s as though ‘the self’ only exists through its fleeting yet continuous identifications with discursive positions. Some feel (see, for example, Crossley, 2000) that this postmodern take on the self is quite at odds with the kind of unified, coherent and continuing self that people often feel themselves to ‘have’ or to be.
But, even a discursive self demands that we take some account of extra-discursive factors. How else are we to account for the fact that discursive positions may be accepted, negotiated or resisted? Equally a narrative self demands that we imagine aspects of that self that are, at some point at least, external to the story. A more complete conception of a narrative self demands that we take account of the subject’s moral agency, her embodiment, and the force of unconscious fantasy, as well as the determinations of language, discourse and story. Crucially, too, selves are always relational (see, for example, Macmurray, 1970); subjectivity is intersubjective, arising and being sustained only in interactions (see Day Sclater, 1998). But there are also factors intrinsic to the story, and to the act of telling, that have a significant bearing upon how we conceptualise a narrative self.

Cohan and Shires (1988), drawing on the work of Benveniste (1971), show that an understanding of the divisions of subjectivity in narration is central to the structural analysis of narrative. They offer a perspective that may be useful in our quest to understand the nature of the ‘I’ that proliferates in our discourse, a perspective that helps us to re-orient our understanding of the links between the self and signifying practices. For our purposes, five main divisions may be identified and usefully applied to the analysis of personal narratives in social scientific research. First, the speaking subject is the ‘author’ of the text, the person who tells the story. In psychology, this is the subject we want to know something about — the embodied, living, breathing person. But the divisions of subjectivity in narration indicate that it is not possible simply to ‘read off’ information about this person from what they tell us in their personal narratives, in the same way that traditional psychology ‘reads off’ information from, say, personality tests. Secondly in telling her personal story, the speaking subject produces a text in which she articulates herself as an ‘I’ — the subject of speech. This ‘I’ is a discursive element that stands in for the speaker — it is a signifier and not a referent.

The ‘I’ of discourse is not co-terminus with the embodied speaking subject, the narrating agent, but marks the way in which that agency traditionally is represented in discourse. Because of the conventions of language use, ‘I’ appears to point outside of discourse to a real speaker as its referent. But, as Benveniste shows, ‘I’ simply marks out the linguistic condition for subjectivity; it bears no necessary relationship with the speaking subject. ‘I’ is an ‘empty signifier’ that becomes full only in discourse (Cohan & Shires, 1988, p. 105). Thirdly, the narrating subject is a linguistic subject and not a person. It is the subject that expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text. It is the agency responsible for the telling as an enunciation. In life history work, it is the ‘I’ who tells the life story at the point of the telling, the ‘I’ in the ‘now’ of the story. The speaking subject uses linguistic conventions and discursive devices to tell a
story in which it appears that the speaking subject is identical to the narrating subject. But the former is a person, an embodied subject, and the latter is linguistic, and there is no necessary correspondence between the two. Fourth, the narrating subject articulates a subject of narration, a character in the story. The subject of narration is a signifier that represents the narrating subject. Finally, the narrated subject is the signified of the narration. As such it is, as Cohan and Shires (1988, p. 108) argue, not only commutable to a signifier, but is forever divided from the narrating subject by the intervention of the subject of narration.

This emphasis on the fragmentations of subjectivity in narrative reflects the multiplicity of identifications that we can make and leads us to ask about how it is that identity typically assumes a unity and an internal coherence. The unity of the self becomes an achievement, rather than a given. The use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ in personal narrative has the effect of unifying the diverse forms of subjectivity that appear in the story. Through the use of ‘I’, the speaking subject appears to be co- incidental with the narrating subject, and (invoking a developmental narrative) also co- incidental with the subject of narration. These subjectivities coincide around the name that links them to the embodied person who speaks the narrative, achieving an apparently unified subjectivity – the narrated subject of the narrative. What this shows us is that narrating and narrated subjects are not co-terminus, but are divided by a subject of narration, and neither can be straightforwardly linked to the original speaking subject.

It is often assumed in analysing personal narrative data that we are uncovering something about the real embodied human subject that produced the narrative, what Plummer refers to as the ‘breathing, passionate being in the full stream of social life’ (Plummer, 1995). Quite apart from the issues raised by a recognition of the role of the researcher in the production of ‘personal’ narrative accounts, which are beyond the scope of this article, our brief foray into the structural analysis of narratives shows that the subjectivity we are so prone to assume manifests itself in the personal narrative is likely to be much more elusive than we have previously thought. Our access to the selves that are constituted in stories, or that lie behind those stories, is necessarily constrained by our formulations of those selves.

Does our argument lead to the conclusion that subjectivity is just a linguistic phenomenon after all, that we can’t have any access to the ‘truth’ of the living, breathing, embodied human subject, because language is always going to mediate our access, always get in the way? The answer to this is both yes and no. ‘Yes’ because subjectivity as manifested in narrative clearly is a linguistic phenomenon – talking subjectivity is, in fact, talking subjectivity; it’s using language to express who we think we are or who we claim to be. And those processes, by which subjectivity is continually reconstituted, are both social and personal ones
we draw on cultural resources to tell our stories, but it’s we who choose what to use, what to include and what to exclude. Though our choices are constrained, transgressions can and do occur. ‘No’ because subjectivity is not just a linguistic phenomenon – to phrase the issue in this way suggests that selves are superficial, insubstantial, and implies also a limited view of language. Language and discourse and narrative are complex socio-cultural systems; most crucially, they are signifying practices that operate at many levels. Further, subjectivity can be expressed in ways other than through talk (art, poetry, dance, ordinary ‘body language’, and so on). And just because something is a linguistic phenomenon, doesn’t mean that it’s merely a fiction.

I have found it helpful to conceive of subjectivity as neither internal nor external, nor even as a product between ‘interactions’ between the internal and the external, but as a process. The process is one of always-becoming, it is psycho-social, it involves the ongoing ‘identity work’ of a human agent, and is dependent upon what Winnicott (1971) called a ‘potential’ or ‘transitional’ space in which aspects of the self are created and transformed in relationships with others and within the matrices of culture. Narrative is important for the creation and maintenance of the self because it can constitute such a ‘transitional’ space.

**Narrative as Transitional Space**

How can telling one’s story be productive of subjectivity? How is the self constituted in stories? I have argued elsewhere (Day Sclater, 1998) that Winnicott’s notion of the ‘transitional phenomena’ is useful for developing a psycho-social understanding of the dynamic links between selves and stories. Personal narratives, like Winnicott’s transitional phenomena, have their origin neither wholly inside the teller, nor wholly outside of them in culture. Rather, they are a dynamic mixture of the subjectively experienced, the objectively perceived and the relational, and are reducible to none of these things. Winnicott devised the idea of the transitional phenomena to explain how it was that individuals were able to achieve autonomous selfhood when the infant begins its life in a state of merged dependence with the mother, a dependence so complete that, initially, the baby has no sense of itself as a separate self. The idea of the transitional phenomena explains the process through which separation and individuation is gradually achieved. The baby makes the transition from complete dependence to relative independence, from subjectivity to a capacity for objectivity, from a location in an illusory inner world to an appreciation that the external world, and other subjects, have an existence independent of the baby’s perceptions. The transitional phenomena facilitate these changes because they represent a space where
the infant’s emerging self is contained at each stage; mother and infant participate to create and maintain an area of experience whose crucial feature is that its inherent paradoxes – the fact that it belongs simultaneously to both internal and external reality – remain unchallenged. This is a creative space that we continue to use throughout life. To tell one’s story is to occupy such a transitional space. It’s a way of integrating the inner and the outer. The story provides an intermediate or transitional area of experience in which the self continually negotiates its position in the world, inscribes itself in relation to the available cultural scripts, integrates past, present and future through acts of remembering and telling.

Conclusion

Whether we take the view that selves are constructed in or by stories, or whether we think that selves, or significant aspects of those selves, are more likely to be concealed by narratives, we are assuming some connections between narrative and identity. In this article I have begun to explore the links between stories and selves, specifically by unpacking ideas about ‘subjectivity’ and ‘narrative’, to enable us to think about how we might theorise a ‘narrative subject’ in such a way as to take account of both opposing positions. In order to explore the issue of what kind of entity we have to imagine the subject to be, such that the self is capable of being realised in narrative, one that recognises the determining power of language but that does not lose sight of the significance of specifically psychic realities, I have suggested that subjectivity is best seen, not as the product of anything, but in processual terms, as a dynamic state of always-becoming in the ‘transitional’ spaces of culture that are, at once, both cultural and psychic spaces. I have further suggested that a useful distinction might be drawn between narrative, as a product, and the act of narration. On this view, it is possible to address the concerns of those who worry about those aspects of the self that lie outside the story. Narrative becomes embodied practice – something that intentional, moral human agents routinely do every day of their lives – a way of simultaneously constructing and reconstructing both ‘the individual’ and ‘the social’. Winnicott’s notion of the transitional phenomena helps us to theorise the linkages between stories and subjectivities, and to appreciate the deep psychological significance of relationships and of culture.

Notes

1. For a clear exposition of the post-structuralist view of language as constitutive of social and individual reality, see Weedon (1987).
2. The emphasis on the performative derives from Judith Butler’s work. See Butler 1990, 1993.

3. Foucault’s view is that power operates at the level of the body, through the discourses and technologies of self. The discourse that positions ‘the real’ and ‘the performative’ as binary opposites is one of those discourses of the self. For Foucault, power operates through rather than over subjectivity; individuals aren’t often ‘disciplined’ against their will, but are enjoined to regulate themselves. Discourses do not have to be coercive to the extent that they command our subjective investments. See Foucault 1979. See also Rose 1990.

References


Reflections on the Narrative Research Approach

Torill Moen

As we make our way through life, we have continuous experiences and dialogic interactions both with our surrounding world and with ourselves. All of these are woven together into a seamless web, where they might strike one as being overwhelming in their complexity. One way of structuring these experiences is to organize them into meaningful units. One such meaningful unit could be a story, a narrative. For most people, storytelling is a natural way of recounting experience, a practical solution to a fundamental problem in life, creating reasonable order out of experience. Not only are we continually producing narratives to order and structure our life experiences, we are also constantly being bombarded with narratives from the social world we live in. We create narrative descriptions about our experiences for ourselves and others, and we also develop narratives to make sense of the behavior of others (Zellermayer, 1997). According to Polkinghorne (1988), people without narratives do not exist. Life itself might thus be considered a narrative inside which we find a number of other stories.

Narrative research is increasingly used in studies of educational practice and experience, chiefly because teachers, like all other human beings, are storytellers who individually and socially lead storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative research is thus the study of how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories and write narratives of experience (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Even if narrative inquiry is a relatively new branch within the

qualitative or interpretive research tradition, much has already been written on the theme. When reading about narratives and narrative research, one is left with the impression that the focus of attention becomes diffuse, spreading in many directions: Very often, the concept of narrative is used in connection with how to represent a qualitative research study. Thus, it is maintained that a case study, a biographical study, a phenomenological study or an ethnographic study may have a narrative form of representation (Creswell, 1998). The narrative representation particularly appears to be connected to teacher biographies and autobiographies. Within this tradition, it even seems as if the terms biography and narrative are used synonymously (Goodson, 1992). Some researchers have focused on the narrative approach as a method of inquiry (Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gudmundsdottir, 1997, 2001), a research genre situated within the qualitative or interpretive research family. Others have claimed that the narrative approach is not a method but, rather, a frame of reference in a research process, wherein narratives are seen as producers and transmitters of reality (Heikkinen, 2002).

My point of departure is that the narrative approach is a frame of reference, a way of reflecting during the entire inquiry process, a research method, and a mode for representing the research study. Hence, the narrative approach is both the phenomenon and the method (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), a postulate that some might find rather confusing and overwhelming. In this article, I therefore intend to present some thoughts on narrative inquiry as being both the phenomenon and method. In doing so, I will present three basic underpinnings incorporated in the narrative approach, then I will examine the narrative research process before finally addressing the question of whether the stories occurring within this field of research are true. First, I will place the narrative research approach within the framework of sociocultural theory, focusing on Vygotsky’s (1978) ideas on the developmental approach to the study of human beings, and Bakhtin’s (1986) ideas on dialogue.

The Sociocultural Foundation of Narrative Research

For centuries, scholars have studied and puzzled over the development of human beings, leading, not surprisingly, to a number of theories. We find models that emphasize the importance of the environment for the development of individuals, and, on the other hand, we find theories that focus on how development is propelled by an inner biological maturing of individuals. Both approaches represent traditional epistemologies. Social constructivism introduces alternative theories on the development of human beings. Although there are different versions of social
constructivism, what they have in common is the belief that individuals learn and develop through participation in social activities in the world, Society — or the world, for that matter — has continuous influence on the individual or the mind, and vice versa. Human beings learn and develop in these mutual processes between the individual and society. In this way, the dualism between the individual and her or his social environment, or what is called the mind-world problem, is abolished (Prawat, 1996). Sociocultural theory is one version of social constructivism that connects the entities mind and world.

**Vygotsky’s Ideas on Developmental Analysis**

According to Vygotsky (1978), human learning and development occur in socially and culturally shaped contexts. How people become what they are thus depends on what they have experienced in the social contexts in which they have participated. The social contexts individuals encounter are based on where they are at any particular point in time. As historical conditions are constantly changing, this also results in changed contexts and opportunities for learning and development. Thus, consciousness, or the human mind, cannot be considered as a fixed category, in the sense that it can be described once and for all (Schribner, 1985). Quite to the contrary, it is a category undergoing continual change and development, a change and development that occur in step with historical development and activities on the social plane.

Vygotsky (1978) was critical of research that considered individuals in isolation, and when arguing for his genetic or developmental approach, he contrasted it with approaches that attempt to analyze psychological phenomena without regard for their place in development. In fact, he devoted more than a fourth of his manuscripts to an analysis of the shortcomings in psychological theory and methods responsible for this failure (Schribner, 1985). He claimed that analyses of “fossilized” or static products would often be misleading, as they provided description but not explanation of human mental development, and he maintained that it is impossible to understand human mental functioning without considering how and where this occurs through growth. Genetic analysis, thus, means that focus is placed on the very process by which human consciousness is formed:

> We need to concentrate not only on the product of development but on the very process by which higher forms are established . . . To encompass in research the process of a given thing’s development in all its phases and changes — from birth to death — fundamentally means to discover its nature, its essence, for it is only in movement that a body shows what it is. (pp. 64-65).
Researchers (Dysthe, 2001; Elbaz-Luwisch, Moen, & Gudmundsdottir, 2002; Hundeide, 2001; Moen, Gudmundsdottir, & Flem, 2003; Wertsch, 1991) have increasingly promoted Bakhtin’s (1986) theories as a useful supplement to Vygotsky’s ideas on a developmental approach to the study of human beings. In particular, they focus on Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue.

**Bakhtin’s Concept of Dialogue**

Dialogue, the most fundamental of Bakhtin’s (1986) concepts, is used in a very wide perspective. All human action is dialogic in nature. In its widest sense, even existence itself might be considered to be dialogic. Not only do we conduct dialogues with the surrounding world when we, for example, interact with other people, we also conduct dialogues with ourselves in our consciousness. The dialogue concept means that none of the things we say or do, whether we speak, listen, write, read, or think, occur in a vacuum. To gain insight into what dialogue implies, we must consider three other central concepts in Bakhtin’s theory: utterance, addressee and voice.

Utterance, which is closely linked to dialogue, is a concept that must also be understood in a wide sense. In social contexts, an utterance may be spoken or written, whereas on the inner, mental level, it may be thought. An utterance assumes a person to be speaking to someone, an addressee. Such an addressee may be ourselves on the inner psychological plane, as well as various people we meet on our way through life. Finally, an utterance assumes a voice. An utterance can exist only if produced by a voice. According to this strong emphasis on dialogue, a voice can never exist in isolation. It never exists in a vacuum and is never neutral. The voice producing an utterance always addresses someone. An individual always exists in relation to others, and living means being in an endless dialogue with others, Thus Bakhtin (1986) is concerned with voices that interact and that together create meaning and understanding. Meaning and understanding cannot be transferred from one person to the next; rather, they are created when voices engage in dialogue with each other.

The voice producing the utterance considers or reflects the person or persons to whom the utterance is addressed. When, for example, a teacher speaks to the children in her class, she behaves differently from when she is talking with her colleagues in the staff room or when talking with the researcher. In addition to having her own voice, she therefore also reflects the voice of the addressee. Thus, an utterance includes at least two voices, and one of Bakhtin’s (1986) key points is to ascertain who is doing the talking. Not only does an utterance reflect the voice of the speaker and the addressee, it also reflects other voices that have been
experienced previously in life, in history, in culture. Thus a voice is overpopulated with other voices, with the intentions, expectations, and attitudes of others. As the voice producing the utterance also includes the voices of many others, Wertsch (1991) has argued that it is inappropriate to use the singular form of voice; the plural, “voices,” is the more correct term. Gudmundsdottir (2001) agreed with this when she said, “One finds no singular voice, because any claimed voice is a heteroglossia of culturally situated voices that ventriloquate through the singular voice that is claimed by an individual” (p. 235).

Narratives as a Unit of Analysis

We have seen that Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1986) argued for the need to go beyond the isolated individual when trying to understand human development and functioning. When using their ideas as a theoretical framework, the challenge is to examine and understand how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur and to consider how and where they occur through growth. The task for the analysis is therefore to find a way to avoid the pitfalls of individualistic and societal reductionism. The narrative as a unit of analysis provides the means for doing this (Wertsch, 1998). Before exploring this issue, let us take a moment to examine Vygotsky’s ideas on the unit of analysis.

Vygotsky’s (1978) deep interest in methodological problems of science and, in particular, the units of analysis is evident in various areas of his writings; both when he is describing his own studies and in his critique of other researchers’ methodological approaches. His preoccupation with methodological issues in general and with units of analysis in particular is not exceptional. Throughout history, many scholars have dealt with the problem of how to understand complex wholes. A major approach has been to break the complex whole down to its constituent parts, which are supposedly easier to grasp. The nature of the complex whole is then explained on the basis of an understanding of these parts (Van der Veer, 2001). Vygotsky warned against the decomposition of the complex whole into elements. In doing so, he employed an analogy from chemistry about the relationship between water, on the one hand, and the elements of oxygen and hydrogen, on the other.

It may be compared to the chemical analysis of water into hydrogen and oxygen, neither of which possesses the properties of the whole and each of which possesses properties not present in the whole. The student applying this method in looking for the explanation of some property of water—why it extinguishes fire, for example—will find to his surprise that hydrogen burns and oxygen sustains fire. These discoveries will not help him much in solving the problem. . . . Nothing is left to the investigator but to search out the mechanical interaction of the two elements in
the hope of reconstructing, in a purely speculative way, the vanished properties of the whole (Vygotsky, 1962/2000, p. 3).

When discussing this topic, Vygotsky (1962/2000) said, “By unit (italics in original) we mean a product of analysis which, unlike elements, retains all the basic properties of the whole and which cannot be further divided without losing them” (p. 4). It is on the basis of these postulations that Zincheneo (1985) has outlined criteria in Vygotsky’s notion of the unit of analysis: A unit must not be a diffuse, syneretic whole of elements, something that combines everything with everything else. It should, rather, be an integrated whole. The unit of analysis must also be a living part of the whole. It must be a unified system that cannot be broken down further. Any further division of the whole into elements is possible but results in its decomposition as a living and unified entity. The unit must also maintain the characteristics of the unified whole, though internal contradictions and oppositions may exist. Finally, the unit of analysis must be capable of development, including self-development. It must possess the appropriate inherent properties and the potential for being transformed into something that differs from its initial form (Zinchenco, 1985). I maintain that the narrative contains all these criteria. Narratives are not broken into elements; they are neither reductionistic nor static. Narratives, rather, enable us to study teachers and their teaching in movement, in a process of development, and within the teachers’ social, cultural, and institutional settings. Bearing this in mind, we can now turn our focus to narrative research.

Narrative Research

In Latin, the noun narrario means a narrative or a story, and the verb narrare to tell or narrate (Heikkinen, 2002). A narrative is a story that tells a sequence of events that is significant for the narrator or her or his audience. To repeat, when narratives are looked on within the framework of sociocultural theory, we have to remember the interlinking between the individual and her or his context. As individuals are telling their stories, they are not isolated and independent of their context. On the contrary, it is important to remember that the individual in question is irreducibly connected to her or his social, cultural and institutional setting (Wertsch, 1991). Narratives, therefore, capture both the individual and the context.

Three Basic Claims About Narrative Research

In literature on the narrative research approach, we find three basic underpinnings, or claims. We have already seen the first claim in the
introduction to this article: that human beings organize their experiences of the world into narratives. Second, narrative researchers maintain that the stories that are told depend on the individual’s past and present experiences, her or his values, the people of the stories are being told to, the addressees, and when and where they are being told. The third claim, closely connected to the second, concerns the multivoicedness that occurs in the narratives. I will examine these claims in the following.

The narrative is regarded as “the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1). Following this line of thought, human experience is always narrated. Narrative research is, consequently, focused on how individuals assign meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell. According to Carter (1993), human beings come to understand sorrow or love or joy in particularly rich ways through the characters and incidents we become familiar with in novels or plays. The richness and nuances cannot be expressed in definitions or abstract propositions. They can only be demonstrated or evoked through storytelling. Narratives are therefore inevitably linked to language. The narration of experience comes naturally, like learning a language. This means that young children learn to tell all sorts of narratives, short and long, as they gradually master the language. As children experience through participation in all sorts of social events in their infinite varieties, they also learn to tell stories about them. In this way, they gradually learn what kind of meaning culture has imposed on the various events (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Thus, storytelling as a way of recounting and creating order out of experience starts in childhood and continues through all stages of our lives. When teachers talk about their lives as teachers, they naturally appropriate a narrative structure (Butt Raymond, McCue, & Yanagishi, 1992; Casey, 1992).

Like all of us, teachers tell and retell their stories of experience both for themselves and for others in different social settings, at different times and for different addressees. This means that the perspective on their experiences constantly changes form as they gain new experiences and engage in dialogues with other people (Heikkinen, 2002). Stories cannot be viewed simply as abstract structures isolated from their cultural context. They must be seen as rooted in society and as experienced and performed by individuals in cultural settings (Bruner, 1984). Human knowledge and personal identities are therefore continually constructed and revised. Experience of the world, like each person’s perception of her or himself is a continuously developing narrative that is constantly forming and changing form. Here human knowledge is regarded as a plurality of small narratives, local and personal in nature, that are always under construction (Neikkinen, 2002). There is no single, dominant, or static reality but rather, a number of realities that are constructed in the process of interactions and dialogues. Human knowledge of the
world is thus relative. It is dependent on the individual’s past and present experiences, her or his values, the people the stories are being told to (the addressees), and when and where they are being told (Bakhtin, 1986). Brwier (1984) maintained that you always create or hear about a narrative in terms of your life experiences and background. Although research from this perspective perhaps has the ability to produce some kind of authentic view on reality, the belief in the potential attainment of an objective reality or truth is rejected (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

As stated above, the narrative approach is situated within the qualitative or interpretive research method (Gudmundsdottir, 1997, 2001). A qualitative approach to the field of investigation means that researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. The immediate and local meanings of actions, as defined from the actor’s point of view, are thus crucial (Erickson, 1986). This understanding of qualitative research shifts our focus to the concept of voice. Several educational researchers refer to the voice as the research subject’s voice. However, more and more scholars (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991; Elbaz-Luwisheh, 2002; Gudmundsdottir, 2001; Hoel, 1997; Moen et al, 2003) within the narrative approach use the term voices rather than voice because they recognize that the narratives are in part personal stories shaped by the knowledge, experiences, values and feelings of the persons who are telling them. At the same time, they are also collective stories that are shaped by the addressees and the cultural, historical and institutional settings in which they occur (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002, 2005).

The process of claiming voice is therefore basically an interaction between the individual’s beliefs and experiences and past, present and future external voices. To use Vygotsky’s (1978) concepts, it is an interaction between intermental and intramental processes. The notion of intermental processes refers to the social plane, and the notion of intramental processes refers to the inner psychological plane. In this way, narratives connect the individual and her or his social context, and therefore a multitude of voices are present within an individual’s stories. All the three basic claims presented here are closely linked to the above mentioned ideas of Vygotsky and Bakhtin (1986), and, I would add, important aspects to keep in mind during the entire narrative research process.

The Narrative Research Process

As will be shown below, one of the main characteristics of narrative research is the collaboration process between the researcher and her or his research subjects. Within this approach, the research subject is regarded as a collaborator rather than an informant guided by the agenda
of the researcher (Altork, 1998). This is the reason why I prefer research subject rather than the more traditional term informant. Other terms I just as easily could have preferred are collaborator or participant.

In narrative research, stories of experience are shaped through discussions with the research subject in a dialogue. A number of data collection methods can be used, as the researcher and the research subjects work together in this collaborative dialogic relationship. Data can be in the form of field notes; journal records; interview transcripts; one’s own and other’s observations; storytelling; letter writing; autobiographical writing; documents such as school and class plans, newsletters, and other texts, such as rules and principles, and pictures (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). To this list I would add video recordings, as these are also useful data in narrative research. Although other qualitative research approaches, such as case studies, biographies, phenomenological studies, grounded theory studies, and ethnographic studies, are described in detail, the literature on narrative research appears to be rather vague about concrete inquiry procedures. In this section I will focus on three recurrent issues in discussions on the narrative research approach. First is the relationship between the researcher and her or his research subjects. The second is how a narrative is developed from an experienced and orally told story into a written text, and the third is the hermeneutic or interpretive nature of narrative research.

Several researchers (Altork, 1998; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Heikkinan, 2002; Kyralzis & Green, 1997) have been interested in the collaborative, dialogic nature of the relationship between the researcher and her or his research subjects. What seems to be important when discussing this issue is the necessity of time and space to develop a caring situation in which both the researcher and the research subjects feel comfortable, it has also been claimed that a sense of a nonjudgmental attitude (Fetterman, 1998) and a sense of equality between the participants is particularly important in narrative inquiry, because teachers have traditionally experienced that they do not have their own voice in the field of educational research and might find it difficult to feel empowered to tell their stories. The ideal is that the narrator and the researcher reach a joint intersubjective understanding of the narratives that occur during the research process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

However, a dilemma can occur if the researcher and the research subjects interpret specific events in different ways or if the research subjects question the interpretive authority of the researcher (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Closely connected to this dilemma is the question of whether the research subjects always have a better appreciation of their actions than the outside observer. Must the accounts of those individuals whose customs or actions are being explained always be accepted as the “correct” account of the phenomenon in question? According to Phillips (1991), it
is difficult to tell if a particular story is a reflection of the facts in the case or whether it has been shaped by the storyteller. In my opinion, the dilemma outlined here could and should be solved by including both the researcher’s and the research subject’s points of view in the research report. Perhaps in this way, the multivoicedness of the narrative would appear more clearly than it would if the researcher and the research subject have a joint understanding of the narratives that occur during the inquiry process.

Creating a narrative implies a process whereby an accurate story that occurs in collaboration between the researcher and the research subject becomes fixed in a written text. Ricoeur (1981) has provided useful theory that helps us understand this process. First, in the dialogic collaboration process between the researcher and the research subject, one or more stories are written down and become fixed in a text. This means that the narrative in question is no longer tied to the moment in which it occurred. Second, by fixing the narrative into a text it becomes “autonomized”: It has been detached from the moment it occurred and has assumed consequences of its own. Third, the narrative can, in this way, assume importance that goes beyond the initial situation and becomes relevant in other contexts. The story has been liberated from its origin and can enter into new interpretive frames, where it might assume meanings not intended by the persons involved in the original event. Fourth, the narrative that is fixed in a text is thus considered an “open work” where the meaning is addressed to those who read and hear about it. Looking on narrative as an open text makes it possible to engage in a wide range of interpretations.

Creating a narrative is primarily a process that organizes human experiences into meaningful episodes. The “raw material” for the narratives comes from intermental life experiences and intramental images that are not accessible to direct observation. The individual stories that emerge in texts in the creation of narratives are, however, available for direct observation and interpretation (Polkinghome, 198K). In this way, any narrative functions at two levels. The First level comprises the story that has been carefully selected out of a complex situation and has been fixed in a narrative. By selecting one episode from a complex social situation, the event has already been interpreted and infused with meaning: meaning ascribed to it by the narrative under construction, which is the second level (Gudmundsdottir, 1997, 2001).

Implicit in what has been discussed so far is that narrative research is an ongoing hermeneutic or interpretive process. The interpretation starts immediately when one story is selected out of any number of other possible stories, and it continues during the entire research process. Above we have seen that both the researcher and the research subjects participate in this interpretive process during the entire research period. We
have also seen that the interpretation does not end with the finished research report. Quite to the contrary, the final narrative opens far a wide range of interpretations by others who read and hear about the report (Ricoeur, 1981).

I will end this section with some reflections on the interpretive role of the researcher. Often, researchers occupied with teaching practice are former teachers themselves. When they enter the classroom to collect their data, the scene is so familiar that it might be difficult to see anything at all. The researcher may, however, distance him- or herself from the everyday life of a classroom, making it unfamiliar, by looking at it through theory. Theoretical perspectives enable us to gain further understanding and insight. Researchers using a narrative approach employ theory in systematic ways both when they approach the field and when they give reasons for the interpretations (Gudmundsdottir, 1992). Thus, it is the constant interaction between theory and empirical data that makes it possible to understand and gain new insight. The stories that occur within the narrative research approach are therefore always told and interpreted within a theoretical framework (Gudmundsdottir, 2001).

*The “True” Narrative*

According to Bakhtin’s (1986) notions of utterance and addressee, the narratives can differ depending on to whom the stories are being told, and this naturally raises the question of whether the stories are true. When it comes to this crucial element, it is important to remember the second basic claim of narrative research. In fact, this fundamental claim makes the question irrelevant. According to this view, there is no static and everlasting truth. Instead there are different subjective positions from which we experience and interpret the world (Peshkin, 1988, 1991). Nevertheless, the question about the truth seems to be a recurring theme within the literature on narrative research on educational practice (Goodson, 1992; Gudmundsdotir, 1997; Heikkinen, 2002; Phillips, 1997). Phillips, for example, claimed that a narrative often must be true to be considered acceptable. The point he is making is that we do not always know, or are not always aware of or honest about the reasons underlying our actions. Consequently, he suggested that the account of an outsider might be more truthful than the first-person story of the research subject. He argued that at special times, such as when policy or future important actions rely on the acceptance of the narrative, it is particularly important for the account in the narrative to be true. The point Phillips was making here took on special significance during the political crisis in January and February 2003. In the political discussions on what was called the “Iraqi conflict,” the US. president, George W. Bush, and the U.K. prime minister, Tony Blair, appeared to have one story about Iraq and
Saddam Hussein, whereas countries such as France, Germany, and Russia seemed to have another. The crucial question at that time was what kind of story the United Nation’s Security Council would accept. This issue also has special interest today when we listen to various stories about the war between Israel and the Hezbollah. When discussing the issue of the “true” story, Phillips did not touch on questions like what truth, whose truth, from what context, what social location, and so on.

Denzin (1989) contended that narratives are fictional statements that, to a varying degree, are about real lived lives. During the collaborative process of collecting and producing narratives of experience, the researcher and the research subjects inevitably remove themselves from the real lived event that was the starting point for the story in question. Consequently, narrative research always presents stories about remembered events and how these were experienced. The notions of facts, facilities, and fiction are used in this reasoning. Facts refer to events that are believed to have occurred, and facilities describe how those facts were lived and experienced by the interacting individuals. Fiction, then, is a truthful narrative that deals with the facts and facilities, and is faithful to them both. True stories are, thus, stories that are believed.

Bruner (1984) followed the same line of thinking when he made a distinction between a life as lived, experienced, and told. A life lived is what actually has happened. A life experienced consists of the images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person whose life it is. A life told is a narrative or several narratives influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context. One can imagine a life that is lived, experienced, and told about in a way that depicts a complete relationship between these three terms. In real life, however, there are inevitable gaps between reality, experience, and expression. Goodson (1992) has developed Bruner’s ideas, claiming that in narrative research, there are not three but four levels. The life is told by the person who lived and experienced it, and it is then retold when the storyteller and the researcher collaborate to produce an inter subjective understanding of the narrative. According to Goodson (1992), there is a distinctive relationship between life as lived and experienced and life as told and rendered in text. In a study where, for example, one particular teacher is in focus, it is important to remember that the written text is a representation of her or his life as a teacher, not her or his life as lived or experienced (Bruner, 1984). However, the written text should be produced in a way that achieves as much harmony as possible across these levels. It is also important to bear in mind in this context that narrative inquiry in the social sciences is a form of empirical narrative in which empirical data and theory are key elements in the work. Thus, in every narrative from educational practice, there will always be some facts (Denzin, 1989) or particles of truth (Lincoln, 2000).
When asking whether a story is true, another question naturally arises, that is, how to ensure the quality of the study. This is, needless to say, a recurrent concern when reading about qualitative methods in general (Creswell, 1998; Krathwohl, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Wolcott, 1990). Here, it is repeatedly argued that other terms than those used within the quantitative research tradition should be used. However, the language and criteria for narrative inquiry are still under development, hence the suggestion that each researcher must seek and defend the criteria that best apply to her or his work (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In pointing out several important aspects when discussing how to ensure the quality of a study, Wolcott (1990) maintained that in the qualitative research process the inquirer is in the field to be studied for a long period. He added that the researcher has to listen to the research subjects, because the most important aim is to capture each research subject’s voice. He also pointed to the importance of beginning writing early, reporting fully, and writing fieldwork notes accurately. Moreover, the researcher has to be candid and at all times aware of her or his subjectivity. In this way, Wolcott (1990) claimed, qualitative researchers are always striving “to not get it all wrong” (p. 126), and bearing this in mind, I would suggest that narrative research is trustworthy or reliable because of the extensive data generation procedures and the entire narrative research process outlined above.

Several scholars have suggested various verification procedures to ensure the quality of qualitative research. First, there is a focus on prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field, whereby the researcher works with people day in and day out for a long period. This includes building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking to ascertain whether there are any misunderstandings and misinformation. In triangulation, researchers make use of multiple and different sources of data. This process involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or a perspective (Creswell, 1998). In negative case analysis, the researcher refines the working hypothesis as the inquiry is advanced in light of negative evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994). When looking for negative evidence, the researcher actively looks for disconfirmation of what she or he thinks is the case. During this process, the researcher constantly reconsiders the working hypothesis until there is no disconfirmation. In member checks, the researcher solicits the research subject’s view of the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and this technique can be considered “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985, p. 314). This verification procedure involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the research subjects so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account.
To understand a human being, her or his actions, thoughts, and reflections, you have to look at the environment, or the social, cultural, and institutional context in which the particular individual operates. Within the framework of sociocultural theory, this idea is stated repeatedly throughout this article. Together with all other qualitative researchers, Denzin (1989), therefore, talked about the importance of using thick description in narrative studies. By this, he meant that the narrative presents both the context and the web of social relationships. Rich, thick description means that the researcher describes in detail the participants and the settings of the study. In this way, the inquirer enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of shared characteristics (Creswell, 1998). By using these verification procedures, we as narrative researchers are faithful to both facts and facilities (Denzin, 1989), and we can develop the narratives from the research field into stories that are believed.

**Final Comments**

In this article, I have situated the narrative research approach within the framework of sociocultural theory, and I have presented some of my reflections on narrative research as being both the phenomenon and method. In the final part of this article, I shall add a few comments on narrative research and, in particular, argue for the use of narratives in the field of teacher education.

Classroom reality is complex, multidimensional and, occasionally, hard to understand (Doyle, 1986). One way for researchers to deal with this complexity is to divide it into elements. Following Vygotsky’s (1978) line of thought, this carries the risk of losing sight of the whole. In narratives, the complexity of the classroom is not broken down and divided into elements. On the contrary, narratives from classrooms capture both the complexity and, as we have seen, the multivoicedness of teaching. I reiterate that narratives retain all the characteristics of the whole and that they occur as an integrated and living part of the whole. When appearing as a whole rather than elements, narratives are not abstract remote, or inaccessible. Instead, they can rather be perceived as familiar, informative, and relevant for those who hear about or read them. In this way, narratives bring practice up close (Carter, 1993), contributing, we hope, to provoking, inspiring, and initiating discussions and dialogues, something that is crucial for reflection on practice and its development. Approaching it in this way, narratives are understood as cultural scaffolds or thinking tools that can be used to develop the profession and the field of practice (Carter, 1993; Gudmundsdottir, 1997). In my view, narratives are not thinking tools only for teachers practicing in the field. Those of
us who are narrative researchers would also like our stories to be thinking tools for the politicians who are making decisions affecting our schools. We would like the stories to be thinking tools for our research colleagues, as new inquiry questions might arise from the narratives. Finally, we would like the stories to be thinking tools within the field of teacher education. In the following, I shall look at this last wish.

When student teachers enter teacher education, they have been students for many years themselves. Thus, they enter teacher education already knowing and believing a great deal about the field, and assuming they know a lot about teaching (Richert, 1991). According to Lampert and Ball (1998), student teachers, therefore, believe that what they need to learn during their teacher education is what to do, not to think or reflect on what they are seeing or hearing. Dewey (1904/1965) maintained that as the classroom is a well-known arena, it is difficult for prospective teachers to consider alternative visions and ways of teaching. Student teachers do not stop, think, reflect, and ask questions in the same way they might have done if they had entered a more unfamiliar arena. This is a major challenge within the field of teacher education, one for which a number of “solutions” or perspectives have been proposed. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) have organized these into three categories.

The first perspective is referred to as knowledge-for-practice. The focus here is on formal knowledge and theory, and the assumption appears to be that teacher learners can be goaded teachers with more theoretical knowledge. The second perspective—knowledge-in-practice—highlights teachers’ practical knowledge. Here it is assumed that teachers learn when they have opportunities to probe the skills embedded in the work of expert teachers and to develop their own practical skills when they are teaching in classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). These two perspectives on student teachers’ learning point out the traditional dualism, or the distinction between theory and practice.

The third perspective, knowledge-of-practice, does not have this distinction between theory and practice. The aim is, rather, to link field-based school experiences and theoretical perspectives. Within this perspective, knowledge is understood not as fixed and forever lasting answers but as a “terrain to be explored by multiple journeys through it” (Lampert & Ball, 1998, p. 45). It is within this perspective that narratives can be located. Narratives from classrooms and teaching incorporate both empirical data and relevant theory. When student teachers read or hear about a narrative, it will appear that the constant interaction between theory and empirical data is where it is possible to understand and gain new insight. Hence, I would suggest that narratives are particularly suitable for teacher education.

Finally, a great number of voices are heard in public debates on teaching. Our politicians have their ideas and visions, and, thus, voices. Researchers
studying teaching from different theoretical perspectives have their particular voices. School administrators have their ideas. From time to time, the voices of pupils’ parents are also heard in the media. Their voices seem to be particularly public when funding problems are the issue at hand. What is remarkable is that the voices of teachers are virtually absent from the public debate on teaching. Teaching has become increasingly demanding, and teachers’ classrooms today are characterized by diversity and variety, full of complexities and multidimensionality. In these environments we expect that the teachers will teach our children to be reflective, thoughtful, responsible, and active human beings. This demanding task does not have any simple solutions; there is no tried and true formula. Narrative research in which teachers’ voices are heard in their stories of experience offers an opportunity to present the complexity of teaching to the public.

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Rescuing Narrative from Qualitative Research

Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont

The collection of narratives and other biographical or autobiographical texts has become a central feature of qualitative research in many social sciences. Indeed, a close inspection of many published papers and monographs, together with the burgeoning methodological literature on qualitative research, shows that it is the in-depth interview and the data that it yields that holds sway in many quarters. A great deal of what passes for qualitative – and even ethnographic – research is grounded in the collection of personal narratives. Despite its considerable popularity, however, we believe that the analysis of narratives needs to be ‘rescued’ from many applications in contemporary social research. This is intended to be a polemical formulation, designed to highlight what we perceive to be a recurrent problem in much of the contemporary literature.

This claim may seem paradoxical. There is absolutely no doubt as to the significance of the ‘narrative turn’ in many of the disciplines and specialist fields of the social sciences. Proponents and advocates of narrative-based inquiry have sometimes argued that narratives provide analysts with particularly valuable insights into the organization of personal experience: narrative seems to structure our understanding of events, ourselves and other social actors. Narrative, memory and identity are all implicated in narrative forms and content, and many social scientists have focused on narrative work as a consequence. Our general approach is to stress the importance of narrative and narrative analysis, but to

resist the most extreme enthusiasms that have been evident from among some of our academic colleagues. There need be no advocacy of narrative work, nor need there be any ‘defence’ of narrative. Narratives are social phenomena. They are among the many forms through which social life is enacted. They do not, therefore, need endorsement any more than they deserve to be neglected. Our stance towards such forms and genres of social life should be analytic, not celebratory. While narratives are important forms of action and representation, we do not seek to privilege them by claiming for them any unique or special qualities.

Our discussion starts from the premise that when social scientists collect narratives, whether life histories, biographies, myths, atrocity stories, jokes or whatever, they need to focus on the social and cultural context in which such tales are told, and to recognise that all cultures or sub-cultures have narrative conventions. ‘Traditional’ societies have multiple forms of narrative and oral performance, but the significance of narratives is by no means confined to face-to-face cultures. The professional and organizational cultures of complex ‘modern’ societies are replete with narrative forms (e.g., Cortazzi, 1991; Delamont, 1991; Hunter, 1991; Mishler, 1997; Thomas 1995). ‘The coming of the internet has also created a whole new ‘virtual’ world with its own conventions and norms of narrative (Markham, 2004; Kendall, 1998).

The study of narratives is by no means confined simply to the narration itself. Narratives are embedded in interactional and organizational contexts (Czarniawska, 2002). ‘The telling and sharing of stories have important social functions. Narratives have moral force, and may accomplish social status and professional authority. Storytelling rights are as important as the collection of the stories themselves (Goodwin, 1990). There will be conventions about who can tell particular stories, who can listen and respond, who can listen but must not respond, whether the narrative can be varied or not, and whether it is, or is not legitimate to write things down (e.g., Frankenberg, 1993). Frankenberg contrasts his original Welsh village field site, where any written record was ‘illegitimate’ (p. 55) with the Tuscan commune where literary texts were celebrated as a community strength. In Heath’s (1983) ethnographic work on talk in white working class homes in the Carolinas there was a restricted range of story-types that women could tell. Likewise, the different communities Heath studied were characterised by differentially distributed rights to tell stories. In one, the right to narrate was clearly allocated to particular senior members, whereas in another such rights were more evenly distributed and competitively exercised. Talk, including narrative rights, is therefore performative of status and identity. In a quite different context, Atkinson’s account of haematologists in an American teaching hospital shows how professional seniority is partly enacted through differential rights to recount clinical cases and professional experience (Atkinson, 1995).
From the perspective, then, of an analytic social science, there is ample opportunity and scope to examine the forms and functions of narrative in a wide variety of naturally occurring settings, as well as collecting them specifically for research purposes, in the interview encounter. On the other hand, we are not convinced that these analytic opportunities are always identified or exploited to the full. All too often, we believe, narratives are collected and celebrated in an uncritical and unanalysed fashion. It is a common failing, for instance, to imply that informants’ voices ‘speak for themselves’, or that personal, biographical materials provide privileged means of access to informants’ personal experiences, or their sources of self-identity.

In contrast to these essentially sociological or anthropological perspectives, the unreflective and uncritical use of narratives is complicit in the forms of social life that the social scientist ought to be investigating. Our own attitude is captured by Behar, who asks rhetorically: ‘At a moment when the autobiographical voice is so highly commodified – most visibly in the talk shows . . . shouldn’t scholars write against the grain of this personalising of culture rather than reproduce it?’ (Behar, 1996, p. 25).

As Atkinson and Silverman (1997) and Gubrium and Holstein (2002) have pointed out, many of us in the West inhabit an ‘interview society’, in which celebrity is created through the mass distribution of confessions, and through which ordinary people can have their personal problems and experiences transformed into public (albeit ephemeral) goods. The interview and the personal revelation are among the devices that produce Warhol’s proverbial fifteen minutes of fame. There is a clear danger that the narrative turn in the cultural and social sciences merely mirrors this phenomenon, rather than scrutinising its workings (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997).

Atkinson (1997) also argued that the popularity of narrative data and narrative analysis is a mixed blessing. Atkinson in particular warned against the use of narratives in a ‘recuperative’ role: giving voice to otherwise muted groups. This perspective is highly sceptical regarding implicit claims that in-depth interviews or collected narratives are a route into an interior authentic self. In a discussion focused specifically on illness narratives Atkinson suggested that too many narrative analyses lack a thoroughgoing sense of social action and organization, so that ‘The narratives seem to float in a social vacuum. The voices echo in an otherwise empty world. There is an extraordinary absence of social context, social action, and social interaction’ (Atkinson 1997, p. 339). In contrast, it is argued that researchers must apply the same canons of methodological scepticism to illness narratives as to any other social acts and cultural forms. Autobiographical accounts are no more ‘authentic’ than other modes of representation: a narrative of a personal experience is not a clear route into ‘the truth’ either about the reported events, or of the
teller’s private experience. It is one of the key lessons of narrative analysis that ‘experience’ is constructed through the various forms of narrative. This is one of the most important messages conveyed by Plummer’s analysis of narratives concerned with a number of sexually-related experiences, including accounts of ‘coming out’ as gay, and the stories of rape victims (Plummer, 1995). He shows that while such stories – and the events they refer to – are intensely personal, they are thoroughly shaped by cultural conventions. They conform to conventions of genre, in other words.

It is, therefore, clear that social scientists need to treat narratives as ‘accounts’ and as ‘performances’. The analysis of personal narratives as accounts owes much to the inspiration of Lyman and Scott (1968), and to subsequent authors who stress the character of narratives as kinds of speech acts, or as incorporating speech acts. In other words, narratives are analysed in terms of their rhetorical, persuasive properties, and their functions in constructing particular versions of events, justifications of actions, evaluations of others, and so on. One of the classic empirical examples of work in this vein is the analysis of scientists’ talk by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984). They examined the results of interviewing natural scientists about the process of scientific discovery. They demonstrate how scientists employ different registers or accounting devices, in order to provide, and implicitly to reconcile, contrasting versions of how science gets done. Scientists’ accounts included explanations of scientific discovery couched in terms of the inexorable revelation of truth through scientific method and explanations in terms of serendipity and personal circumstances (see also Atkinson, Batchelor & Parsons, 1997, for a similar analysis of genetic scientists’ talk). In other words, such accounts are not treated ‘at face value’, as if they revealed a consistent and coherent representation of a reality that is independent of the accounts themselves. Rather, the narratives, and the accounting devices they enshrine, create the realities they purport to describe. With data drawn from social circumstances very different from the world of science, Riessman’s analysis of divorce talk shows that women and men can construct quite different realities of their relationship through contrasting narrative accounts (Riessman, 1990). As Atkinson and Coffey (2002) point out, the research interview should be examined analytically as a performative act, through which identities are enacted, actions are justified and recounted events are retrospectively constructed. This overall perspective owes much to the pioneering observations of C. Wright Mills (1940), whose discussion of ‘vocabularies of motive’ was a prescient analysis of how motivational accounts should be analysed as speech acts, invoking justificatory frames of reference, rather than as transparent indices of actual predispositions. This is a perspective also carried through in ethnomethodological analyses (Baker 2002) and in discursive psychology (Hepburn & Potter, 2004).
We can identify a convergence between the ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences and a ‘performative turn’ (Doyle 1998). Researchers have always been interested in performance in ‘other’ cultures: anthropologists’ accounts of performances were high points of many monographs (e.g., Cowan 1990). One of the most famous anthropological analyses ever written, Geertz’s (1973) of the Balinese cock-fight would fall into this category. Gary Marvin’s (1988) and Sara Pink’s (1997, 1998) ethnographies of Spanish bull-fighting are more recent examples. Sociology has also been interested in some kinds of performances, but had, until relatively recently been relatively neglectful towards high culture performances of ballet, opera and serious literature (Atkinson, 2006). In recent years, however, the idea of performance has become widened, to a generic interest in ‘performativity’ (e.g., Butler, 1997; Denzin, 2003; Tulloch, 1999). The analytic notion of ‘performance’ may, conceptually speaking, be extended beyond its traditional meanings, to encompass a wide range of actions, representations and displays. It needs to be recognized that narratives are performative, and performances are often couched in narrative terms. Narratives have their ethnopoetic features, and the most mundane of stories have aesthetic and dramatic features (Tedlock, 1983; Richardson, 2002).

Performative acts, including narratives, life-histories and personal testimony have been celebrated and advocated as acts of cultural resistance on the part of the marginal, the dispossessed and the muted. The influence of women’s studies, black studies, gay and lesbian studies, and other movements to provide intellectual space in academic disciplines for those previously regarded as the objects of study or as an ignored subaltern class or a deviance object for social control, has also led to a growth of narratives. Performative acts are seen as a potent cultural form of anti-colonialism (Denzin, 2003). Testimonios are particularly an example of this; Behar (1996, p. 27) writes that the testimonio ‘speak to the role of witnessing in our time as a key form of approaching and transforming reality’. She locates its origins in the therapeutic: initially helping Holocaust survivors face up to their trauma, and subsequently with Latin American and Central American victims of political repression. Anzaldúa and Moraga’s (1981) This bridge called my back, in which minority women provided their own narratives without the normally explicit intervention and translation by anthropologists, led to a rapid growth in the publication of such pieces. The most famous testimonio, Burgos Debray’s (1984) I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian woman in Guatemala, is both a tool for consciousness raising and a symbol, for conservative American educational writers, of all that has gone wrong with scholarship in the humanities and social sciences.

Scheurich and Foley (2000) summarise the production of this work of personal testimony and its aftermath. They remind us that Rigoberta
Menchú was a Guatemalan woman involved in Central American people’s resistance against the US government and corporations and the indigenous political and military elites. Elisabeth Burgos-Derby, a Venezuelan anthropologist recorded Rigoberta Menchú’s story over a twelve-day period in Paris. The recordings were translated into English and the book sold 150,000 copies, became famous, and Rigoberta Menchu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Then David Stoll, whom Scheurich and Foley describe as ‘a largely unknown U.S. ethnographer trying to disparage the left in Central America’, discovered discrepancies in the *testimonio* and published a book accusing Menchú of falsehood (Stoll, 1999). At this point a fully-fledged intellectual controversy broke out in the United States. As Scheurich and Foley (2000, p. 102) point out, this intellectual row ‘displaces the deadly horror of what has been done’ in Central America. Lather (2000) addresses how Rigoberta Menchú’s work is to be read, in a special issue of *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (QSE) devoted to the debates over the Nobel Peace Prize Menchú won. In 2003 QSE subsequently devoted another special issue to Rigoberta Menchú and testimonies. This is but the best known, and most controversial, of the many uses of life-history and narrative to give voice to the silenced, in explicitly political ways. Here the narrative turn overlaps with a critical desire to create multi-vocality in the reporting of research: so that the lives and voices of the people are made available to a wide audience rather than being assimilated to the discourse of hegemonic academic texts.

It is clear, however, that, given what we have had to say in foregoing sections we would wish to commend a degree of caution and methodological scepticism. Our concern would not be whether a given *testimonio* is internally consistent or entirely accurate. Since we do not believe that any account simply mirrors some antecedent reality, but helps to create that very reality itself, we also believe that such performances cannot be held to give privileged access to a political ‘truth’. As social scientists, we believe that we must sustain a commitment to an analytic stance, and not a celebratory one. We need, therefore, to retain a degree of distance from the narrative materials we collect, analyse and reproduce. In our view, the political engagement of some authors should not become an excuse for the uncritical celebration of particular kinds and sources of social acts, nor for the abandonment of obligations to treat them as social ‘facts’ susceptible to sustained analytic inspection. As we have argued elsewhere, such an analytic stance reconfigures the hoary methodological question: ‘How do you know if your informant is telling the truth?’ In its original formulation in sociological research methods, this problem was posed in relation to research interviewing (see Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont, 2003). It is couched primarily in terms of the *reliability* of data collected by such means. From our perspective, however,
‘truth’ is not a property to be treated as an issue in the quality-control of information. On the contrary, veracity and verisimilitude are to be inspected as embedded in the rhetorical properties and discursive structures of narrative accounts themselves (Atkinson & Coffey, 2002).

It should be clear, therefore, from these brief comments and examples that we urge ‘qualitative’ researchers to treat narratives and spoken performances very seriously. Our stance is in no way oppositional to the collection and use of narrative materials as resources for social analysis. We do, however, believe that ‘treating them seriously’ involves the recognition that they are forms of social action, like any other. Moreover, they are inescapably social phenomena. That means more than acknowledging that they are produced and circulated in ‘social contexts’. It also implies the recognition that they are based on socially shared conventions. As Plummer’s work, referred to above, makes abundantly clear, even the most superficially ‘private’ experiences are enacted in accordance with culturally prescribed genres and formats of expression. The ‘confession’ is as much a ritual performance as is the proverbial Balinese cock-fight.

From a sociological or anthropological perspective, therefore, the very categories of the ‘personal’ and of ‘experience’ need to be disassembled and subjected to analytic scrutiny. This is especially urgent at a time when social scientists are increasingly generating their own narratives of experience under the rubric of autoethnography. There is a long tradition of ethnographers in sociology and anthropology writing personal accounts of their own fieldwork (cf. Van Maanen, 1988; Coffey, 1999; Atkinson, 1996). In recent years, however, the narrative turn and the renewed emphasis on autobiographical narrative have given a new urgency to the genre. The amount of research attention given to narrative has varied between different disciplines for over a century, and has also changed within disciplines over that period. In anthropology, Behar (1996, pp. 26–27) states that there has been ‘a re-theorization of genres like the life history and the life story and the creations of hybrid genres life self-ethnography and ethno-biography. . . . The genres of life history and life story are merging with the testimonio, which speaks to the role of witnessing in our time as a key form of approaching and transforming reality: There is, therefore, a convergence in the intellectual commitments of narrative and life-history research and the reflexive representation of the ethnographer (Davies, 1999). The ethnographer is simultaneously narrator and narrated in her or his textual representations. This translation of what might once have been seen as a relatively marginal activity – the fieldwork confessional – into a central activity by anthropologists and others, is a welcome development in one way. One cannot but applaud the desire to foreground the personal craft work of fashioning field research and ethnographic texts (cf. Atkinson, 1990). But, as with all narratives,
such accounts must be treated with analytic symmetry. We cannot proceed as if they were privileged accounts, or as if they gave the writer and the reader access to the private domain of personal experience. The autobiographical narratives of ethnographers are subject to the same cultural conventions as are any other of the social actions and performances that they might document (Atkinson, 1996).

To conclude, therefore, while we are thoroughly appreciate of the ethnographic or qualitative turn in the social sciences, and of the collection of narrative materials in that context, we counsel a degree of caution, and a greater emphasis on analytic rigour. When it comes to personal narratives, spoken performances, oral testimony and autoethnographies, we should not simply collect them as if they were untramelled, unmediated representations of social realities. While the development and spread of qualitative social science are to be welcomed, too many of its manifestations result in slack social science, born of an adherence to the evocation of ‘experience’, as opposed to the systematic analysis of social action and cultural forms. It is, we suggest, a vital corrective that narrative should be viewed as a form of social action, with its indigenous, socially shared, forms of organization. Narratives should be analyzed as a social phenomenon, not as the vehicle for personal or private experience. Equally, we counsel caution when it comes to attributing to narratives or narrative analysis an especially moral quality. While the ‘voices’ of otherwise muted groups may be charged with political significance, we cannot proceed as if they were guaranteed authenticity simply by virtue of narrators’ social positions. ‘The testimony of the powerless and the testimony of the powerful equally deserve close analytic attention. Moral commitment is not a substitute for social-scientific analysis.

Note
1. This contribution is adapted from sections of our Editorial Introduction to Narrative Methods, 4 Volumes, London, Sage, 2006.

References


Life Histories and the Perspective of the Present

Margaretha Järvinen

Introduction

The aim of this article is to combine George Herbert Mead’s theory of the past with Paul Ricoeur’s theory of emplotment and to offer this combination as a framework for narrative life history research. When Mead is quoted by social researchers, it is mostly for his theory of the self. Mead’s “remarkable theory of the past”, however, “has not been mined for its relevance to sociological concerns”, as Strauss pointed out in his introduction to George Herbert Mead on social psychology (1964, p. xiii). Forty years later, this still seems to be the case. Mead’s “perspective of the present” has not received much attention within life history research, or social research in general.

The narrative turn in social life history research has been very marked since the early 1980’s. Narrative life history research may be said to form a contrast to the “subjectivist” tradition within biographical research, a tradition in which life histories were comprehended as unanimously individualist projects (see Bourdieu, 1987, for a critique of this tradition). The narrative turn brought about “a refusal to search for the true self”, “a challenging of chronological, linear sequence” and a sense of “the problem of voice” (Plummer, 1995, p. 103). It also implied that the composition and form of life histories became important, that “[t]he artifice of biographical story telling became visible”, that “the very act of assembling the story became apart of the story” (Plummer, 1995, p. 111).
Gradually, however, the narrative turn has been met by more and more critical voices who claim that late modern life history researchers focus on the textual structures of the stories to such a degree that they forget the lived experience and the human agents behind the stories (e.g. Roos, 1992).

The purpose of this article is to suggest a development of the narrative life history tradition along the lines represented by Mead and Ricoeur. I present this theoretical combination as an alternative to both subjectivist approaches, that continue the search for the solitary, true self behind the biographies, and to structuralist approaches, where the self and its past experience disappears. What I want to sketch in the following is 1) a framework that focuses on “the perspective of the present” (Mead, Ricoeur) but does not lose sight of the past, and 2) a framework that emphasizes the interactionist dimensions of life histories but also pays attention to the self and its ongoing projects (Mead). Mead’s theory of the past is closely interwoven with his theory of the self, just like Ricoeur’s theory of time and narrative is associated with his theory of identity (see Ricoeur, 1992, p. 140ff.). Hence, the focus of concern in this article is both on the concept of time and the concept of self/identity, as well as the application of these theories to empirical life history research.

The Perspective of the Present

The central question of Mead’s essay “History and the experimental method” (1964) is: “Does the significance of the results of historical investigation and consequent reconstruction belong to the past where these events lie, or is it to be found in the present and future?” (p. 320). Mead opts for the second alternative. From the point of view of the present, there is no objective past in the history of individuals, institutions or societies. There is no past to be captured, understood and described in its pure essence. There is only a past – or a plurality of pasts – constructed from the point of view of an ever-changing present. The “what it was” is always established through the “what it is. With every new present, there comes a new past. In Mead’s theory of time, “it is not only that the past happened but that it is happening” (Maines et al., 1983).

We often act as if there was an in-itself irrevocable past, a past to be reached if only we could catch everything implied in our memories and in other people’s memories about us. We act on the assumption that if we could have all the correct data, we could determine what it really was that happened to us. We speak of the past as final and irrevocable, but there is nothing that is less so, according to Mead. The past we choose, consciously or unconsciously, is a past that is significant to our present undertakings. The meaning of our world lies in what we are going to do
with it. History serves a community in the same way as the memory serves the individual: “It is always prejudiced in one sense, that is, determined by the problem before the community” (Mead, 1972b, p. 81). Hence, the historian or life history narrator may be said to be correct in so far as he/she places past events in an acceptable relation to the problems of the present.

Mead’s pragmatic theory of time is also a pragmatic theory of truth (see Eames, 1973; Reck, 1964). When Mead discusses the validity of the pasts we construct, he does not refer to their veracity, but rather to their position in shared consciousness. As Maines et al. (1983, p. 165) point out, in their discussion of the theory: “If a past is created which believably ‘fits’ with other pasts, presents and futures, and is acted upon as such, it is real”. Meanings exist in relation to our solving of the problems of the present, and assuming they are effective meanings, there is something in the world that answers to them. According to Mead, our past is always hypothetical, in the same way as the future lying ahead of us is hypothetical, and the only truth test of these hypotheses is “our ability so to state the past that we can continue the conduct whose inhibition has set the problem to us” (Mead, 1972b, p. 97).

Mead (1959, p. 3) talks about “the world that is there”, the world of immediate experience, as an unanalyzed, unquestioned world. It is when our immediate experience is disturbed, when our being-in-the-present is somehow frustrated that we start to reconstruct our past and future with the intention of permitting action to proceed in a satisfactory way. In Miller’s (1973, p. 40) formulation of Mead’s theory, “mind deals only with uncertainties”. Mind’s narrative function is to reconstruct passage so that inhibitions may be dispensed with. Animals live in a present, according to Mead, for them there is neither past nor future. For there to be either, there must be a self, and where there is a self, there is reference to something beyond the present. If we could live by habit alone, there would be no mapping out of time into a past, present and future.

In our living present we cannot approach the past as if we were still a part of it. “When one records his boyhood days, he cannot get into them as he then was, without their relationship to what he has become” says Mead (1959, p. 30); “and if he could, that is, if he could reproduce the experience as it then took place, he could not use it, for this would involve his not being in the present within which that use must take place”.

Paul Ricoeur’s reasoning parallels Mead’s on this point. In Time and narrative (1984) history is comprehended as a form of knowledge only through the relation we establish between the perspective of today and the lived experience of yesterday. If the past – our own or other people’s – was directly accessible to us, it would not be as an object of knowledge: “When it was present, this past was like our present, confused, multiform,
and unintelligible” (ibid., p. 99); it was not knowledge, understood as an organized, systematized vision of the world. The life events of our past are not demarcated units hoarded up in a container of experience, without being able to be altered. The initiative in narrated history does not belong to the past but to the questions asked about it, and these questions are always posed from a specific perspective, the perspective of the present.

This brings us to the core of Ricoeur’s (1984, 1985, 1988) theory on time and narrative: Events are organized into meaningful stories by way of “emplotment” and the author of a plot is always situated in a living present. Ricoeur (1985, p. 8) defines a plot as “an integrating dynamism that draws a unified and complete story from a variety of incidents, in other words, that transforms this variety into a unified and complete story”. The plot mediates between the shattered and chaotic elements of lived experience and the history taken as a whole. Events only get their meaning from their contribution to the development of the plot. Emplotment imposes an “end point” on the indefinite succession of events, and this end point is the point of view from which the story can be seen as a whole. When we narrate our lives we seem to invert the so-called natural order of time: “In reading the ending in the beginning and the beginning in the ending, we also learn to read time itself backwards (Ricouer, 1984, pp. 67–68). Since “order is our homeland despite everything” (ibid., p. 72), we demand of history – our own life’s history or the history of society – that it gives form to what was unformed, that it “puts consonance where there was only dissonance” (ibid.).

Continuity and Discontinuity

Mead’s theory of time puts emphasis upon “emergence”. Continuity cannot be experienced without discontinuity. Novel elements are necessary for our conception of time. The emerging element can be very slight but for the individual it represents something new, something different, meaning that it was not predictable in the past. “In the universe as then existing, they [the novel elements] were not determinable, nor in the universe as then existing did there exist the conditions that were the sufficient reason for their appearing” (Mead, 1964, p. 111). Mead opposes the assumption that time is the unfolding of what is enfolded; the making explicit of what was implicit from the beginning (see Miller, 1973, p. 183). “[W]hat the past of any emergent was cannot be known until after the emergent happens”. The new can never be found in the old. Even if we did experience the presents that are now pasts, we could not have experienced them as causes or conditions for the emergence of the novel, for the simple reason that the novel was not yet causally related to them.
The present is always in some sense new and abrupt, but once it has occurred, we start on the arduous task of reconstructing the past in terms of it. The abruptness of the present is mitigated by our new perspective on the past, a perspective from which the emergent becomes understandable. What this amounts to, according to Mead, is that whatever happens, seems to happen under determining conditions. With the new perspective on the past, continuity is re-established. The emergent loses its status as emergent and becomes an event naturally following from its causes and conditions. Previous pasts become valid in interpreting the present only “in so far as they present a history of becomings in nature leading up to that which is becoming today” (Mead, 1959, p. 21).

Novelty can never be predicted, nor can the self’s actions. A social self is not a determined self; it astonishes itself as much as it astonishes others. As interacting selves we assume that the future will be intelligible and ordered, and yet we constantly have to face a chaotic present filled with novel acts and elements. And this novelty, says Mead (1972a, p. 116) extends not only to what we call the future, it also extends to the past. From emergence, novelty reaches out in both directions. The present structures time by finding in the past the conditions for the emergent event and predicting consequences for the future. The present is the holding together of past and future as possibilities – all pasts are as essentially subject to revision as are the futures (Mead, 1964, p. 352). The bringing together of past and future in a functional present may, in Morris’ (1972, p. iii) interpretation of Mead, be generalized and called “the organization of a perspective”. The future and past belonging to the present and the ever-changing perspectives due to emergent events is what constitute time itself (ibid.). Without the passing away of events and the continuous reformulation of these events from the point of view of the present, there would be no experience of time – and no life histories to tell.

An often-heard objection to Mead’s theory of time is that it is only our interpretation of the past that changes with every new present, while the past in itself is unalterable. As Murphy (1959, p. xx) points out however, in his introduction to Mead’s The philosophy of the present, this is the distinction that Mead’s whole analysis attempts to bridge over. In Mead’s theory of time, the past “in itself” is not a past at all – its relation to the present is the ground for its pastness. The past generated by the present is the real past, since only for a present can a past be real at all. If we are referring to any other in-itself past, and any other in-itself correctness of this past, says Mead (1959, p. 8), “it must be either to that of a reality which by definition could never get into our experience, or to that of a goal at infinity in which the type of experience in which we find ourselves ceases”.
At this point, Mead seems to echo Augustine. In Augustine’s *Confessions*, human time – the ever-changing present with its past and future – is contrasted with mythological eternity: “Eternity is for ever still. This stillness lies in the fact that in eternity nothing moves into the past: all is present. Time, on the other hand, is never all present at once” (Augustine, quoted in Ricoeur, 1984, p. 25). Only in eternity can we conceive of a past with an objective, unchangeable essence; since, in eternity, “your years are completely present to you all at once, because they are at a permanent standstill” (ibid., p. 26). Human time, on the other hand, can never be fixed; it emanates from a constantly changing three-piece: the present of the future, the present of the past, and the present of the present. By including the past and the future in an extended present, thus tying human time (in opposition to universal time) to human experience, Augustine seems to solve the puzzle of time’s being: “How then can time exist if the past is no longer, if the future is not yet, and if the present is not always?” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 7). From the Augustinean point of view, the past and the future exist only in relation to a human present possessing the power of self-reference: “So, wherever they are and whatever they are [future and past things], it is only by being present that they are” (Augustine, quoted in Ricoeur, 1984, p. 10). Human time is bound to human narrative. In Ricoeur’s formulation, “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience” (ibid., p. 3).

History, according to Ricoeur (1984, p. 157) is tracing the lines backwards, from the present towards the past, from the “ending” towards individual events, singled out as significant by the plot of the story. In this act of retrospection, describing cannot be separated from explaining. In Ricoeur’s words, “narrative answers the question *why* at the same time as it answers the question *what*” (ibid., p. 152). To narrate history is always a selective affair of grouping some elements together into temporal wholes while leaving others out as lacking evidence. A narrative requires a plot, however miniature, that imposes a structure on the events. A list of events without connection is not a narrative. Emplotment extracts configuration from a simple succession. Supplementary explanations seem to be needed when emplotment fails. It is when the narrative process is inconsistent or blocked that the listener – or the narrator herself starts to look for further (or alternative) explanations. To understand a narrative is to follow the successive events in as much as they present a particular “directedness” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 150). To follow a story to its conclusion, however, is not the same as following an argument to its logical conclusion; “rather than being predictable, a narrative’s conclusion should be acceptable” (ibid.). Looking back from the conclusion to the events preceding it, we must be able to say that this result
followed naturally from – or may be even demanded – that chain of action. This retrospective reasoning builds up a plot that no observer could have put together when the events were occurring. “The symmetry between explanation and prediction, characteristic of the nomological sciences, is broken at the very level of historical statements” (ibid., p. 147).

The Narrator as Subject and Object

In a perspective inspired by Mead, a life history narrator is a person acting toward him/herself. Or rather, in telling his/her life history the narrator both acts and reacts upon him/herself. When we narrate our lives, we take a step outside ourselves and organize the others’ attitudes towards us as well as our attitudes towards others into a biographical system. The individual narrator does not construct his/her life history single-handedly and directly, but only indirectly, from the standpoint of the generalized other. According to Mead, no definite line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others, between our own experience of ourselves and other’s experiences of us. Reality is always in the present, but this present is anchored in social interaction (see Strauss’ introduction to Mead’s On social psychology, 1964, p. x).

This also means that we in our biographical narratives have to conceive of ourselves as others conceive of us, that we must respond to ourselves as our community responds to us – otherwise we do not genuinely belong to the community. We may belong to a small part of our community, a clique of outsiders but in that case the generalized other present in our narratives is an “other” of a very narrow social diameter. To be socially integrated then, means that your life history harmonizes with the perspective of the generalized other. This does not mean that our life histories are static and transfixed. On the contrary: “The self involves a process that is going on, that takes on now one form and now another – a subject-object relationship which has a process behind it, one which can appear now in this phase, now in that” (Mead, 1964, p. 13).

As mentioned in the introduction, Mead’s theory of time is closely interwoven with his theory of the self. Time without a human subject is not human time at all, and; subjects outside social time are not human subjects. With every reconstruction of its past, the self reconstructs itself and vice versa. In Mead’s (1972a, p. 72) words, “a new past is always a criterion of a new self”. The present self projects itself into the past, hence making new sense of the past, and this adjustment in turn creates a “very different self from that which had existed under the old order” (ibid.). Mead’s theory of time (and the self) is persistently social, insofar as it emphasizes the interactionist dimension of the present (see Maines et
al., 1983). It is also nondeterministic, however, insofar as it describes the symbiotic relationship between that which is continuous and that which is discontinuous, between the “object-part” of the self and the “subject-part” of the self (Mead, 1964, p. 199ff).

According to Ricoeur (1992, pp. 147–148), “[t]he narrative constructs the identity of the character. . . . It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character”. When we read or listen to a story we come to understand the characters by way of the plot of the story. The same may be said about our self-understanding. We make sense of our own identity by telling and listening to stories. A person’s narrative identity at a certain point of time – the answer to the question who he/she is – is the net result of all the stories told by and about that person, and these stories are always open to revision. Identity is mobile: “it takes part in the story’s movement, in the dialectic between order and disorder” (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 6). Still, the narrative identity of a person cannot be molded according to any kind of plot. In a very profound sense, “the plot of a narrative has to be typical” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 41) – typical for a culture, typical for a category of people, typical for a category of problems. It is the universalizing of the plot that universalizes the narrative identity; it is the generality of the plot that makes the identity understandable and acceptable.

One of the main questions in Ricoeur’s work *Time and narrative* is how we should conceive of the relationship between a character – that of a people or that of an individual – and the narratives told about it. The relationship seems to be a circle, with our narratives both reflecting and shaping our identity. “Is there any experience that is not already the fruit of narrative activity”, asks Ricoeur (1988, p. 248), and answers: “At the end of our inquiry, we can affirm without hesitation that this circle is a wholesome one”.

### Turning to Life History Research

What kinds of emplotment people use in their life histories; how emergence is mitigated by changing perspectives on the past; what kind of narrative identities are constructed by the stories, what kind of relationship the story establishes between the narrator and his/her social environment, and finally, how all this is related to the narrator’s “ongoing projects” – these seem to be the aspects Mead’s and Ricoeur’s theories invite us to focus on as life history researchers. In the rest of this article, the reasonings of Mead and Ricoeur will be applied to a series of empirical examples, drawn from different areas of life history research. The connecting thread through the empirical discussions are the following assumptions (described in detail above): a) that the relationship between
past and present is established through emplotment; b) that “emergence” requires a reconstruction of the past in terms of the novel and unexpected, and hence that describing in life histories cannot be separated from explaining; c) that narrating history is a social process shaped both by an established social order and a self that intervenes in that order. The identity of a person is both constituted by the emplotment of the socially and culturally embedded narratives and by the self’s capability of initiating something new and unexpected.

Identifying Plots

According to Ricoeur (1984, p. 99), culture provides us with plots or “organized visions of the world”, that help us make sense of what happened to us in the past and what may be expected to happen in the future. As many life history researchers (and Ricoeur, 1984) have pointed out, one of the prototypes for Western autobiographies is the conversion plot – as modeled by Augustine’s Confessions. In this plot, “we are forever telling how we became what we are by leaving behind what we were” (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, p. 12). Conversion arranges the chaotic elements of lived experience into a story with a beginning, middle and an end, picturing a change from one state of affairs (beginning), via reversal (middle) to the opposite state of affairs (end). Conversion may turn bad fortune into good, or good fortune into bad, but what makes these stories recognizable is some kind of reversal on the theme human happiness/success vs. human unhappiness/misfortune.

While reversal of fortune, either for better or for worse, may be a general structure in Western biographies, there also seems to be organized visions of different types of conversions. In order to be acceptable, Ricoeur and Mead tell us, the plot of our narratives has to be typical – typical for the category of people we belong to, typical for our time, typical for the problems we struggle with. In the perspective outlined in this article, it is the generality of our life histories, not their individuality or uniqueness, that makes them meaningful to other people (and ourselves). It is the correspondence between our own story and the stories of other persons (struggling with equal problems or uncertainties) that makes our biographies “real” (Maines et al., 1983, p. 165). According to Linde (1993) one central function of life histories is to claim and negotiate group membership. By telling their stories in adequate ways, narrators demonstrate that they are worthy members of the group and that they know and share the group’s ideals for respectable and coherent self-presentations. Among other things life history narrators have to strive for “adequate causality” in their stories; they have to choose “a chain of causality that is acceptable by addressees as a good reason for some particular event or sequence of events” (ibid., p. 127).
Plummer (1995) describes the patterns according to which many homosexuals construct their biographical narratives. It is a “coming out” pattern where the individual narrator is engaged in a journey of discovery “to be true to his/her inner self”. The journey starts with suffering; the narrator recalls the loneliness, shame, secrecy and feelings of being different in his/her youth. It continues with struggle, rebellion and a contest with “parents, friends and ultimately the whole homophobic, heterosexist, patriarchal, racist, classist and unbearable straight world” (Plummer, 1995, p. 107). And it ends with consummation and the narrator’s experience of coming home, becoming part of a community, taking on a strong identity. Plummer describes this plot as a “generic personal narrative” he has met over and over again, in fieldwork, reading and interviews with homosexuals. It builds on many strings of reversal in the homosexual’s life: from a secretive world to a public one, from loneliness to sharing, from shame to pride, from a less true self to a more true self. Although there are great variations in the stories told by individual homosexuals, according to Plummer, most of them seem to fall back on this plot of “suffering, coming-out and surviving” (ibid.). Plummer comments upon the contextual and time-bound character of these narratives. All life history scripts are dependent, not only on narrators who find it meaningful to reproduce them, but also on audiences that will listen to and accept them (in this case, gay and lesbian movements, women’s movements, érapy groups). Will these specific homosexual coming-out stories survive, asks Plummer (1995, p. 109), or are they starting to reach exhaustion?

Arminen (1994) describes the semantic structures of life histories told by Finnish alcoholics involved in AA. Although the concrete events depicted in the biographies vary considerably from narrator to narrator, there is, according to Arminen, a certain conversion theme running through most of them. It is a three-phase theme, leading the narrator from agony and self-deception, via a “personal awakening”, to self-respect and hope for the future. First, in the life of the alcoholic, there is the ‘journey downwards’, a history of continuous and destructive drinking, leading him/her into more and more trouble. The degree of suffering on this journey is related to the narrator’s current status in AA. According to the movement’s internal standards, says Arminen: “the worse a boozer the narrator once was, the more respect and prestige he/she is ascribed in AA today” (ibid., p. 93) Then there is the “reaching of the bottom”, a phase with no specific content, just a period in the individual’s life, when his/her situation is defined as worse than ever before – or after. Finally, there is the journey upwards, set off by the narrator’s decision to enter AA. In the continuous telling and retelling of this story, as Arminen words it, “alcoholism is step by step talked to death, while the force of AA is conjured up” (ibid.). The narrator’s “metaphors”, i.e. open,
creative perspectives on drinking, are slowly turned into “idioms”, i.e. negative, closed perspectives on drinking, while the positive metaphors are reserved for AA and the future. Thus, the narrator’s drinking career is demystified, curbed and systematized into a clinical alcoholic past, devoid of excitement and temptation. The functions of alcohol, the reasons for and consequences of drinking are no longer open to negotiations. The longer and deeper the narrator has been involved in AA, the more his/her life history seems to be adapted to the AA-plot, described by Arminen.

Gergen (1992) analyses the differences in culturally available life history patterns for men and women. According to her, many of the traditional Western life history scripts may be identified as androcentric, i.e. as masculine constructions excluding women’s experiences. The hero’s myth, for instance – the story of a person who, dedicated to a quest, ventures forth from the everyday world, fights and defeats dangerous forces, returns home and is rewarded for his deed – is a clear-cut “manstory”. Gergen contrasts this “autonomous ego-enhancing hero single-handedly and single-heartedly progressing toward a goal” with the traditional feminine pattern of “the long-suffering, selfless, socially embedded heroine, being moved in many directions, lacking the tenacious loyalty demanded of a quest” (ibid., p. 130). From ancient times until today, manstories have been stories about achievement, while womenstories have been stories about social embeddedness. In Gergen’s view, there is a paucity of non-stereotypical gender stories to tell for modern women (and men). Even when women are top leaders, or prominent in society in some other way, they cannot construct their personal narratives according to a plot that would be self-evident – and self-explanatory – for their male colleagues. As Estelle Jelinek (1980) points out, there may even be a conflict between the plots available for women and the very concept of autobiography: “The emphasis by women on the personal, especially on other people, rather than on their work life, their professional success, or their connectedness to current political or intellectual history clearly contradicts the established criterion of autobiography” (Jelinek, quoted in Gergen, 1992, pp. 131–132).

In this context, I use Gergen’s (1992), Plummer’s (1995) and Arminen’s (1994) analyses of gendered, homosexual and alcoholic life history patterns as illustrative examples of emplotment – the mechanism by which a relationship is established between lived experience and the perspective of the present. The studies show how coherence is created through narrative interpretation and how the stories we tell – and live out – are always based on already existing stories. The meaning of life cannot be comprehended outside the narrative processes. The contents of a person’s past cannot be separated from the structure of the stories told about it. In Ricoeur’s view, lived life has a pre-narrative formless existence, which is
changed into a meaningful whole by the plots of our stories. Thus, the story is the instance where meaning is created, and the meaning of the story in turn changes life and gives it a more specific form. “Life and story are not two separate phenomena. They are part of the same fabric, in that life informs and is formed by the stories”, writes Widdershoven (1993, p. 2). According to Linde (1993), narratives provide the resources for creating a sense of self and for negotiating that self in relation to others. Narratives allow storytellers to construct a continuous self whose past is logically related to its present. Just like the hypotheses we use to understand our past and future take form in social interaction, so must our identity as narrating subjects correspond to the perspective of the generalized other. Whoever or whatever this generalized other is for individual narrators situated in a specific time and context – the homosexual community, the AA-movement or androcentric society – the stories they tell must square with the narrative configurations of “shared consciousness” (Mead, above). Otherwise, as Mead (1964) tells us, the narrators do not genuinely belong to their community.

Describing by Explaining

As mentioned earlier, biographical narratives (like other historical narratives) tend to answer the question why at the same time as they answer the question what. Confronted with emergence, of whatever kind, the self starts to look for explanations, in order to link up the present with the past and re-establish continuity in experience and identity (Mead, 1959). Narrated life history can be described as a series of shortcuts from one significant event to the next, a causally organized summary of lived life, where “vacuous time is excluded” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 39). Seldom do we ask what the narrator did in between the significant events in his/her life, in all the years, days and hours deemed irrelevant by the plot of the story. Neither do we disdain the configurations the narrator draws from his/her experience, or demand that the narrator turn upside down the explanatory models of the story – at least as long as the plot of the narrative seems reasonable. If we cannot accept/understand the plot, however, we may start to venture into “the vacuous times” of the narrator’s biography or begin to question the causal models of the story.

Again, these reasonings about emplotment and the past will be illustrated by concrete examples, drawn from empirical research on life histories. In order to shed light on the relationship between describing and explaining in personal narratives, I will turn to one specific area of research: studies focusing on accounts used by persons involved in deviant acts. Deviance may be comprehended as an “inhibition” or “disturbance” (Mead, 1972b, p. 97) in a life history, urging the narrator and/or the
listener to venture for explanations. Deviant acts – actual or alleged – often give rise to reconstructions of a person’s life history so that the shortcomings and adversities in his/her past are brought into absolute focus. In Goffman’s (1963, p. 5) words, we construct “stigma-theories” to explain the deviant’s acts and account for the disorder, disturbance or danger he/she represents. In this process we tend to “impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one” (the act identified as deviant) (ibid.). As the literature on deviance shows, however, accounts can also be used by the narrators themselves as legitimations or excuses for the deviance. To quote Goffman again: “the stigmatized individual may use his disadvantage as a basis for organizing his whole life”, and in so doing, “he may develop to its fullest his sad tale accounting for his possession of the stigma” (ibid., p. 21).

Scully and Marolla (1984) analyze the accounts by which a sample of convicted, incarcerated rapists in the US explain themselves and their crimes. Drawing on Scott and Lyman (1968), Scully and Marolla distinguish between two types of accounts: justifications, where the interviewee accepts responsibility for the act but denies that the act was wrong, and: excuses, where the interviewee regards the act as wrong but denies responsibility. Both types of accounts may be comprehended as attempts to “render the emergent understandable” (Mead, 1959) or “to shore up the timbers of fractured sociation, to throw bridge between the promised and the performed, to repair the broken and restore the estranged” (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 46 on the functions of accounts). In Scully and Marolla’s interviews, the rapists’ choice of plot was clearly influenced by one specific aspect of their present situation: their status as admitters vs. deniers. The interviewees who admitted rape often used excuses. They constructed a narrative past where negative forces outside their own control reigned – an unhappy childhood and youth, a miserable marital situation, an alcohol or drug problem, uncontrollable rage – and described the rape as a regrettable consequence of all this. At the same time, they looked upon the rape as a suddenly emerging and isolated event in their life history, an idiosyncratic phase they already had “recovered” from, an episode that did not reflect their true selves. Deniers, on the other hand, did not explain/excuse the crime by referring to negative forces in their own life; they focused on the background and character of the female victim. According to many deniers, the women they had raped had a bad sexual reputation, they had seduced them, they actually enjoyed the sexual encounter, they – like women in general, “said no hut meant yes”. Contrary to admitters, deniers did not point to intoxication or emotional problems as an explanation for their act. To say that they had been drunk or in personal trouble would probably have cast doubt on their ability to control themselves and remember events as they really happened. However, they often declared that the woman had been drunk
or hysterical, a fact that, according to the deniers, lessened her credibility and made her even more responsible for the act.

As Scully and Marolla (1984) point out, these plots were not invented by the rapists. They reflect androcentric belief systems, according to which women both enjoy and are responsible for their own rape, and according to which men “can be compelled to” rape, due to locked-up aggressions and frustrations. By describing/explaining their acts in these terms, the rapists reproduced cultural stereotypes of women as coy but seductive and men as sexually masterful but sometimes unable to control themselves (ibid., p. 542). Although the plot of the deniers’ narratives conflicted with the jury’s reconstruction of what happened, it fit in with forceful cultural stereotypes about men and women, sex and violence. Thus, the legitimations and excuses used by the rapists may indeed have helped them to bring their narrative into “alignment with culture” (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976, p. 837), by reconfiguring the underlying conditions of the act, and hence, construct a bearable narrative identity for themselves.

Järvinen (1998, 2001) analyses legitimations and excuses used by Danish alcoholics enrolled at treatment units and hostels for alcohol abusers. Although all the interviewees in the study were identified as alcoholics by the staff at the institutions, many of them struggled against the identity constructions the treatment system had in readiness for them. Just like Scully and Marolla above, Järvinen found two types of accounts – excuses and justifications – to be related to the interviewees’ present status as “admitters” vs. “deniers”. Persons who did not identify themselves as alcoholics tended to construct a life history where they were “in control”, where their drinking (although abundant) had not caused them any trouble – marital or work-related problems, health problems. If there was a connection, it was the other way round, according to the interviewees; their drinking was probably a reaction to marital unhappiness and work-related stress. Also, they insisted that their enrolment at the institution for homeless abusers was temporary and that they were misplaced there. Other authorities should have helped them: the housing department, the employment office, the health insurance etc. For many of these interviewees, alcohol was not the main plot of their life history. Interviewees identifying themselves as alcoholics, on the other hand, tended to construct narratives where all aspects of their life revolved round their drinking problems. The explanatory models used in these narratives often echoed the vocabulary of the alcohol treatment system. Alcoholics enrolled at “psychosocial” treatment units (outpatient or residential) tended to explain their drinking problem by reference to childhood traumas, emotional stress, problems with self-esteem and self-assertion. Alcoholics enrolled at 12 step programs, on the other hand, often described their destructive drinking as related to “loss-of-control” or an “inherited oversensitivity to alcohol”.
Contrary to the interviewees above, this group used explanatory models in which their drinking was depicted as the reason behind other problems in life (marital and work problems, health problems). In their own words, alcohol therapy had helped them realize that “it is drinking that makes your life troublesome and not the troubles that make you drink” (Järvinen, 1998).

Like Scully and Marolla, Järvinen (2001) demonstrates that description in life histories cannot be separated from explanation; that biographical emplotment always implies causal thinking. In trying to make sense of their present situation, whether as alcoholics in treatment or “heavy drinkers” uninterested in treatment, the narrators in Järvinen’s study had to mark out and select “a history of becomings in nature leading up to what is becoming today” (Mead, 1959, p. 21). Interviewees in treatment constructed narratives where the “problem-to-be-solved” – depending on treatment context – was psychosocial stress or loss of control. Interviewees uninterested in treatment constructed narratives where the problem-to-be-solved was related to their housing situation, marriage or economy. What they all did, however, was to present a life history where the conditions of the past, in one way or another, harmonized with their perspective on the present and their plans for the future (drinking vs. abstinence, treatment vs. no treatment).

Narratives and Situated Identities

Just like our future is not determined in advance, we all have more than one life history to tell. If the homeless alcoholics in Järvinen’s study had been contacted at another point of time in their life – when some of the admitters may have been deniers, and some of the deniers may have been admitters, they probably would have used other plots and other explanatory models than the present ones. According to Rosenwald (1992, p. 266), the stories people tell about their lives are “arbitrary stopping places in a ceaseless groping toward fulfillment and completion”. The self is a process that is going on, appearing now in this form, now in that, depending of the perspective of the present (Mead, 1964). Life history plots are not ready-made stories imposed on individual narrators once and for all. Neither, however, are they altogether fluid and optional. Inspired by Mead (1967), Gubrium and Holstein (2000, p. 101) describe the self of our life histories as both constructing and constructed: “In a sense we talk ourselves into being. But not just anything goes. Social selves are not without design or restraint. . . . What we say about ourselves and others is mediated by recognizable identities”.

In Mead’s view, the past of our experience is the past of our narratives, and this past is without meaning unless it grows out of the ongoing
projects of our lives. The pasts we create have to be acceptable as grounds for creating current action. Holstein and Gubrium’s (1995) interviews with women providing care for their elderly parents may be taken as an illustration of the relationship between narrative identities and the ongoing activities of people’s lives. Holstein and Gubrium show how “the perspective of the present” in an interviewee’s life may indeed consist of many different perspectives, reflecting a manifold of “situated identities”. They also show, however, that these identities are held together by a self, responsive to and responsible for “the lived conditions of its construction” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, p. 101). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) describe the past of their respondents as linked with all the respective Positions from which they speak: as adult daughters reconstructing their caregiver-caretaker relationship with their mother, as spouses with particular marital histories, as mothers with responsibility and love for their children. These situated identities gave rise to different plots, biographical constructions that sometimes harmonized and sometimes clashed – as observed by one woman, describing herself as being in “the sandwich generation”, a phase of her life when she is sandwiched between having to care for both her children and her elderly parents. According to Holstein and Gubrium (1995), a life history is “a matter of practice”, an ongoing, interpretative accomplishment, in which a person rethinks the relationship between past and present. In interviews as well as everyday life, human agents struggle to discern and designate the recognizable and orderly parameters of experience, combining the different meaning making horizons of their life. Despite its variability, self-construction is always accountable to the institutional preferences and the pertinent biographical particulars of one’s life (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, p. 102). Life histories are “knowledge in the making” – knowledge that is simultaneously substantive (i.e. reflecting the consistencies in the narrator’s biography), reflexive (re-interpretations of these consistencies) and emergent (incorporating the novelty of the present). In our biographical narratives we combine expectation and experience, from all the differing perspectives of our life, into a coherent whole that is subjectively meaningful to us, and hence “true to life” (ibid., p. 28).

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to combine Mead’s theory of the past (and the self) with Ricoeur’s theory of emplotment, and to apply this framework to a series of examples drawn from narrative research. The examples represented a wide range of studies on emplotment: from studies describing conversion models (Arminen, 1994; Plummer, 1995), via studies analyzing two specific types of emplotment – justifications and excuses (Järvinen, 2001; Scully & Marolla, 1984) to research describing a
multiplicity of plots in one and the same interview (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). As stated in the introduction, the purpose of the article was to suggest 1) a framework that focuses on “the perspective of the present” (Mead, Ricoeur) but does not lose sight of the past, and 2) a framework that emphasizes the interactionist dimensions of life histories but also pays attention to the self and its ongoing projects (Mead). By way of concluding, I will discuss these two points.

On the one hand, Mead’s theory of the past invites us to look at the “what it was” through the lens of “what it is”. Ricoeur’s theory of emplotment conceives of the present as a temporary end-point on the indefinite succession of events, a point of view from which the story can be seen as a whole. Both ask us to focus on the present situation of the narrators: their ongoing projects, their current living conditions, the social relations and functions they have committed themselves to, the communicative settings of which they are a part. According to Gusdorf (1980, p. 39), biographies can be read as “a kind of apologetics or theodicy for the individual being”. In life histories, the past is often excused by reference to a better present; while the sins of the present are excused by invoking past difficulties. A biography is a narrative told by a person no longer the same as the person the story concerns. The function of the story, however, is to create a meaningful relationship between “the present of the past, the present of the present and the present of the future” (cf. above). In the conversion stories discussed by Plummer (1995) and Arminen (1994) the dialectical relationship between the present perspective and the events of the past becomes very visible. The better adapted (to the homosexual community, the AA-movement) an interviewee seems to be today, the easier it may be for him/her to construct a past that was altogether unhappy, confused or unfulfilling. And vice versa: the more the narrator seemed to have suffered in the past – from his/her own immaturity, from other people’s misdeeds or from miserable social circumstances – the more understandable and respectable is his/her decision to finally “change his/her life”.

Although the theories of Mead and Ricoeur emphasize emplotment, the framework outlined in this article does not imply that the events and actions of the interviewee’s life lose their meaning. A past analyzed through the lens of the narrator’s present situation is not an “anything goes” past. Life does not disappear out of the life histories, leaving us with mere histories, comprehended as textual structures. The life we should focus on, if we follow Mead and Ricoeur, does not only consist of events in the narrator’s past, but also of his/her experience, commitments and ongoing projects in the present. Emplotment harnesses the chaos of “the world that is there” (Mead, 1959, p. 3) and makes it possible for individual actors – in their lives as well as their stories about life to continue in a direction that for the time being seems reasonable to them. Other people,
including us as interviewers, may agree or disagree with the plot the narrator presents. We may accept it immediately, without further questioning, as coherent and convincing; we may ask for further information in order to make the biographical structure correspond to the configurations of a generalized other, or we may realize that our “hypotheses about the narrator’s past and future” (Mead, 1964, p. 352) do not correspond to the narrator’s own hypotheses – in which case we may start to analyze his/her accounts in terms of legitimations and excuses (see Järvinen, 2001, above; Scully & Marolla, 1984). However badly the narrated past fits in with our expectations, Mead invites us to look upon it as meaningful – from the perspective of the interviewee’s present situation and ongoing projects. The conditions and causes in our interviewees’ constructions of the past are always valuable and relevant, if we comprehend them as elements of a perspective used by individual actors struggling to make emergence understandable. Experience is not ignored in the theories of Mead and Ricoeur. The what of our interviewees’ pasts is not scarified for the benefit of the structural how of emplotment. Or rather, in a perspective inspired by Mead and Ricoeur, the how of the interviewees’ narratives cannot in any meaningful way be separated from the what of their past – and the what of their present.

With his interactionist theory of the self, Mead provides us with an alternative to the subjectivist approach in life history research. According to Bourdieu (1987), the subjectivist tradition constructs life histories as unambiguously individual “careers”, processes in which the subject single-handedly plans and implements his/her project. In this tradition, life is a straightforward and lonesome affair, advancing from the individual’s prerequisites towards the fulfillment of his/her goals. The narrating individual may initiate others into the history of his/her life, a life that both retrospectively and prospectively is comprehended as a clearly delimited and progressive process. Mead’s theory of the self (and the past) is in glaring contrast to this approach. The self in Mead’s theory is a genuinely social self, organized with reference to the community to which the self belongs, and to the situation in which it finds itself (see Mead, 1967, p. 143). Mead comprehends of the “unified self” as consisting of many different selves, each one of them dependent on the set of social relations they are involved in (cf. the discussion of situated identities above).

However, Mead’s conception of the self, drawing social meaning out of experience in life and narrative is certainly not a structuralist approach either. With his focus on emergence and unpredictability, Mead emphasizes the active role of the personal self in shaping its social environment and destiny. The self is always creative in constructing its future and past, and this creativity arises out of the individual’s ongoing projects. Therefore, meaning is always dependent on what action is taken in the present,
and not solely on the self’s reconstructions of its past from the perspective of the community. For Mead then, the personal self exists, but, as Gubrium & Holstein (2000, pp. 100–101) point out. “[this] self is not so much the cloistered core of our being as an important operating principle used to morally anchor thoughts and feelings about who and what we are”. Contrary to the structuralist tradition, the self (and its past, present and future) is very much alive in Mead’s theory, but this self is not a solitary self (a mere subject), nor is it a socially determined self (a mere object) – it is a subject/object relationship (Mead, 1964).

Earlier, examples from conversion stories (Arminen, 1994; Plummer, 1995) showed how narrators, as subjects/objects divided their life and identity into two parts: one part that was unwanted and negative (the self of the past) and another that was wanted and positive (the self of the present and future). Arminen’s (1994) alcoholics placed themselves as choosing and acting subjects in the present, while they depicted their past selves as surrendered to the forces of alcohol. Likewise, Plummer’s (1995) homosexuals seemed to dichotomize their lives into an objectified, unhappy past, consisting of apathy and artificiality, and a more fulfilling present, where they have found and realized themselves. These dichotomizations are important, not only for the interviewees’ conceptions of the past but also for their conceptions of the future. To paraphrase Bruner (1986, p. 13), the relationship between “life so-called and narrative is a two-way affair: just as narrative imitates life so life imitates narrative”. By constructing their past selves as irresponsible, deplorable or sick, Arminen’s alcoholics seemed to create a barrier against drinking in their present life and future. By depicting their past selves as untrue, unhappy and unfree, Plummer’s homosexuals seemed to create an unambiguous – and total – identity for themselves – cE Plummer’s (1995, p. 109) comment that coming-out stories can be read as “testimonies of the power of sexual orientation as shaper, cause and unifier of whole lives”. A life history is always a way of creating meaning and this meaning is both a hypothesis about the past and a hypothesis about the future. Step by step, the narratives people tell about their lives structure their identity, hence building the very events of life, “not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future” (Bruner, 1986, p. 31).

References


I have tried to pinpoint when I first read Labov and Waletzky’s paper (1967/this issue; henceforth, L&W), proposing a model of narrative analysis for “oral versions of personal experience.” I imagine other contributors to this celebratory issue have also searched for the “beginnings” to their stories of L&W’s influence on their work. After rummaging through files of teaching memos, early drafts of both my book on research interviewing (Mishler, 1986b) and my first application of L&W to an interview narrative (Mishler, 1986a), my best guess is that the “when” for me was during the 1982–83 academic year.

In the Fall of 1982, after completing the manuscript of a book on clinical discourse (Mishler, 1984), I began a new project centered on a critique of standard methods of interviewing in both the social sciences and medical encounters. My memos from that period refer to Labov’s coauthored book on therapeutic discourse (Labov & Fanshel, 1977). Cited earlier in my work on medical interviews, it retained its relevance for my analysis of interviewing practices, offering an alternative, sociolinguistic model of interviewing as “conversation.” It includes a brief section on narrative with references to the two earlier papers on L&W, which I then tracked down (Labov, 1972; L&W, 1967/this issue).

A year later, my work on interviewing had moved beyond critique to a formulation of interviews as “speech events,” dialogic encounters in which narrative accounts would appear if they were not suppressed by standard approaches. Further, I argued that methods of narrative analysis

had become available – others in addition to L&W – that allowed for systematic research on “stories” and the interview process through which they were produced.

By the early Fall of 1983, my memos refer not only to the two earlier papers and the Labov-Fanshel (1977) book, but also to the later – and until now – the last of Labov’s papers on narrative (Labov, 1982). In that paper, he retreated from the analytic approach represented in L&W, rejecting its assumptions and offering an alternative model of analysis and interpretation. Appearing while I was deeply involved; n trying both to learn how to do narrative work and in developing a general perspective on narrative methods as an alternative to traditional approaches to interviewing and other forms of psychological and social research, this paper became a prominent focus in both my book and my first exercise in narrative analysis (Mishler, 1986a, 1986b).

While describing the “setting” for this story of my encounter and dialogue with L&W, I have been outlining two chronologies: the temporally ordered sequences of narrative-relevant events for Labov and myself. This seems appropriate given the centrality of temporal sequence in L&W. Labov’s trajectory of interest in narrative, as expressed in his publications, has the form of an episodic story with a beginning and end, marked off in 5-year intervals: 1967, 1972, 1977, 1982. My path was more continuous, with shifts and turns reflecting other influences.

For me and my students during the early and mid-1980s, the impact of L&W was immediate and powerful. We were, it seems, already prepared to hear the message and apply it to our own studies. Of course, we were listening to our own special understanding of the message, translating it into our discipline-based languages and making it relevant to our particular interests. Through different routes and in varying degrees, we – along with many others in psychology and the social sciences – had become disenchanted with the traditional positivist-based “science” in which we had been trained and which dominated research in our fields. I had already turned away, a decade earlier, from the experimental-quantitative research paradigm in my own field of social psychology toward alternative ways of studying naturally occurring discourse, first in classrooms (Mishler, 1972) and later in clinical encounters (Mishler, 1984), and had also published a critique of positivist approaches (Mishler, 1979).

So, I was “ready,” and L&W had a special combination of features that seemed to match my requirements for a new methodological approach. It displayed theoretical rigor with formal definitions of narrative and nonnarrative clauses and provided methods for empirical research through specification of coding categories for narrative functions. In these ways, it mirrored the “scientific” perspective of our home disciplines to which I and my students were still loyal though dissatisfied citizens.
It also met our other theoretical and empirical interests in studying “meaningful” units of language and social action by focusing on personal narratives elicited in interviews. L&W was a bridge to the study of narratives for those of us struggling to find an alternative way of doing “science.” My first efforts to analyze interview narratives (Mishler, l986a, 1986b) were based on L&W, as were the studies of my postdoctoral Fellows in the l980s who adopted a narrative approach (Attanucci, 1993; Bell, 1988; Riessman, 1990).

However, the story told so far is incomplete. There is a counterplot, and the narrative takes an ironic turn. These initial studies were framed by the “fundamental question of narrative analysis” asserted in L&W: “how can we relate the sequence of clauses in the narrative to the sequence of events inferred from the narrative?” We relied on the definition of a narrative “as one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which actually occurred” (L&W, 1967/this issue).

Nonetheless, there were early signs that these were problematic and restrictive assumptions. In my exposition of L&W, I pointed to its relative inattention to the interview context in the production of narratives and to the “limited usefulness” of the requirement of “concrete equivalence or ‘identity’ in the temporal ordering of narrative clauses and actual events (Mishler, 1986b, p. 86). Others also urged caution. For example, in a May 1985 letter commenting on a draft of my paper on the analysis of interview narratives, Dell Hymes urged me to consider an alternative perspective: “Stories have form of their own in terms of lines. Not every cultural tradition or community observes the purposed universals of Bill’s schemes . . . it’s only fair to say that if the material includes narratives, I would look for recognition of line and groups of lines.” He warned that if I “rely on it (L&W), it will perpetuate part of what you want to transcend.”

The “story,” that is, the fate of L&W in my own work, gets complicated right from the start because of the increasing influence of alternative conceptions of narrative analysis I was also learning about in this early period. For example, On Narrative (Mitchell, 1981), the 1980 special issue of Critical Inquiry, became a critical resource, although it is cited only in the Appendix of “suggested readings” in my research interviewing book. Its direct influence appears later: for example, in the varied “exemplars” presented in my paper on validation in narrative research (Mishler, 1990), in a focus on structural approaches and the retrospective character of life history narratives (Mishler, 1992), and my proposed “typology” of alternative models of narrative analysis (Mishler, 1995).

On Narrative (Mitchell, 1981) plays an important role in this story, in part because it sharpened my awareness of the relative insulation from each other of different groups of narrative scholars and researchers – a problem I have often addressed in my teaching and writing, as in the papers
noted previously. Essays by a dozen eminent scholars were included in the volume—philosophers and literary critics, novelist and historian, anthropologist and psychoanalyst. We learn from the Editor’s introduction that the issue was the “product” of a 1979 “symposium on: Narrative: The Illusion of Sequence” (p. 1). L&W’s “fundamental question of narrative analysis” is itself interrogated by the title. Referring to the “inevitable temptation” to “try to tell the story of the symposium,” the Editor asks “which story would be the right one to tell?” The symposium organizers’ “plot” was the “first plan to go awry, as one speaker after another quarreled with the assumption that sequence is either illusory or is definitive of narrativity” (p. 1).

What is significant in the present context is that though the 1981 collection of papers focused on the problematic of sequence there is not a single reference by any contributor to any of the three earlier publications on L&W. This may reflect the notable absence of linguists or sociolinguists among the contributors. It appears that “turnabout is fair play,” because it is rare to find reference to any of them in studies of discourse and narrative by sociolinguists. One example will have to serve: the recent encyclopedic and quite exceptional text by Schiffrin (1994) on discourse analysis includes a brief section on L&W citing the key references, but does not refer to any of the symposium authors, whose collective corpus of work on language and narrative is voluminous.

Reflecting back on our first attempts at narrative analysis, I think our “readiness” for alternative approaches to research led us to push the problems raised by Hymes and the symposium authors to the fringes of consciousness. We could not hear the cautions about the overzealous focus on temporal order and chronology but had to come to the problems in the course of our own work. The irony in all this is that in our effort to escape positivism we had grasped a “positivism with a human face.”

The story does not end there. Each of us discovered one or another limitation of L&W as we tried to make sense of our own materials. For example, in intensive life history interviews, respondents rarely provided chronological accounts. Finding a temporally ordered sequence of events was a task of analytic reconstruction, and the technical apparatus of narrative and nonnarrative clauses had to be subordinated to or displaced by other methods (Mishler, 1992). Respondents also told storylike accounts that did not depend on a sequence of event clauses but reflected a course of affective experiences or the impact of events of extended duration, that is, habitual narratives (Riessman, 1990). Or they told several stories, and there were problems of boundaries and connections not addressed by L&W (Bell, 1988).

As I mentioned earlier, Labov was well aware of deep problems with the original version of L&W. In his 1982 paper, he shifted away from the
conception of narrative as a sequence of temporally ordered clauses toward a model, drawn from Goffmari, of social “moves.” Providing detailed analyses of instances of “unexpected violence” in terms of the denial of the legitimacy of requests, he offered a functional perspective based on his analysis of requests as speech acts in his work on therapeutic discourse (Labov & Fanshel, 1977).

L&W is not a static fixture but a source of many stories, including Labov’s own. For many of us, it opened up a world of possibilities we are still exploring. In my first detailed analysis of an interview narrative, I used a combination of L&W with Labov’s later speech-act approach (Mishler, 1986a). Since then I have used it only in teaching novice narrative researchers and as an example of one among other approaches (Mishler, 1992). In more recent work (Mishler, 1997) I have borrowed another sociolinguist’s approach that relies on a line and stanza model (Gee, 1985, 1991), as Hymes earlier recommended.

This has been a brief story of a long journey that remains as exciting as it was at the beginning. I recently introduced a group of students to work on narrative analysis with examples of new questions emerging from current studies to explain “Why I love doing narrative research.” One was drawn from a discussion in my ongoing Narrative Study Group about problems of working with translations of stories in other languages. The value and limits of L&W for this problem had an important place in our discussion. My thanks to Labov and Waletzky for giving me the key to the garden. It turns out that there are many entries, but it was that first look that captured me.

References


The study of human concepts and constructions of time faces several difficulties. One is that time is elusive, another that it is ubiquitous, which together make a third difficulty. There is no aspect of human reality that is without temporal dimension. This becomes particularly obvious when people talk about their lives, about what matters in the long run. Autobiographical discourse is the form par excellence in which we give shape to the time of our life – and this, I believe, can be said equally from a narrative, philosophical, psychological, and anthropological point of view. But there is something curious about the construals of time which emerge from our autobiographical self accounts. As Kierkegaard (1843/1938) observed: “It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it – backwards.”

What Kierkegaard describes here is not only the fact that understanding a life is understanding the continuous oscillating of the different orders of past, present, and future, but he also addresses the dilemma that the very attempt to understand this scenario is subject to the same difficulty. It is part of the same temporal flux that it tries to grasp. On a more general plane, various forms of this epistemological and hermeneutic circularity have become prominent topics in 20th century physics and philosophy. Yet in this paper, I shall deal with this issue only in as far as we encounter it in a particular type of time construction. The time

scenarios I am dealing with are those of human lifetime; they emerge when people talk about their lives and their personal experience, reflections, and concerns – past and present. Usually, telling one’s life is closely intertwined with autobiographical remembering, the retrospective reconstruction of one’s life history. I therefore shall begin with briefly outlining my approach to the autobiographical process and the relations among the different orders of this process, that is, the orders of memory, identity, and narrative.

**Autobiographical Memory, Identity, and Narrative**

Over the last years, a new literature has emerged that has highlighted the specific cultural nature of autobiographical memory by studying the narrative and discursive fabric of the stories people tell about themselves. This perspective has been supported by investigations in several disciplines which have radically questioned the traditional model of autobiographical memory as the somehow internally stored knowledge of a “lived life,” a knowledge which can be remembered and re-presented in hindsight in a more or less linear, coherent, and true life account. It seems that Kierkegaard tried precisely this: to describe how he came to question this view. And Kierkegaard was not the only critical mind concerned with this issue; philosophers like Nietzsche, psychologists like Freud, and writers like Marcel Proust had also, long ago, already challenged what for most scientific students of memory in the 20th century has remained the positivist bedrock of their investigations.

To conceive of the autobiographical process as a narrative construction marks a sharp contrast not only to traditional conceptions of autobiographical remembering, but also to the very notion of autobiography, a notion which, in one way or another, is centered around the idea of “the story of one’s life written by himself [or herself],” as the *Oxford English Dictionary* states. An important insight elaborated in the new literature is that the autobiographical process is not only restricted to what the relatively few authors of written or even literary autobiography do, but is an everyday phenomenon, at least in the modern cultures of the West. Autobiographical accounts, or fragments of it, are common and elementary practices of the self, neither bound to a particular age, education or social habitus, nor to the act or linguistic form of writing in the narrow sense. Rather, it is in many forms of discourse, oral and written, that we order our experiences, memories, intentions, hopes, desires, fears, and concerns in an autobiographical perspective. Recalling and recounting events in our lives is one of those everyday discursive activities, as Edwards (1997) emphasized, that blur easy distinctions we might be tempted to draw between talk and action, memory and language, fact and fiction, individual and collective remembering.
What is meant by “ordering” such self-referential forms of “memory,” “cognition,” “emotion,” and “motivation,” as psychologists would call them? It means giving them the shape and meaning of life events with personal significance; it means interpreting and reconstructing these events along the lines of genres or other narrative conventions provided by culture. In this view, then, the discourse genre of autobiographical narrative is the central place where personal experiences and their evaluations come to be interwoven with the threads of a life history.

Closely related to this view, a new idea of identity has taken form. It suggests that identity, the concept for the sense of who we are, is not only a construction but a reflexive construction. It embraces two or more constellations in time, which are to be connected. In contrast with self concepts, which are not necessarily reflexive and can be based on the here and now (just consider an ad hoc phenomenon like proprio-perception which is fundamental for a sense of self), identity is a diachronic construction, a gestalt in time (Brockmeier, in press, a). In a more general sense, we might say that in order to speak about what is identical with itself, we need to refer to at least two distinct moments in time. Harré (1996) has pointed out that most of our time constructions come down to a similar mode of linguistic reference to different events and places.

Viewed in this way, autobiographical remembering is a paradigmatic case of relating temporally distinct events and places. It is a back-and-forth movement between the past and the present that furthermore relates to the future, even if this might not always be evident. Yet, unless I give up on my life at all, there is always a future towards which it is directed, a future that begins in this very moment and already looms into the present in which I tell my story. As Kierkegaard wrote, a life must be lived forwards. The point of this argument is that such reflexive identity construction – I have called it a gestalt in time – depends on narrative as a necessary condition of the possibility of its existence. To put it simply, where else, and how else, could we imagine such a complex construction if not in linguistic forms?

To be sure, there are several modes in which human beings come to terms with the experience of temporality (Brockmeier, 1996). In the first place, we might think of clocks and calendars as one of the “anthropological operators” of time which we use to represent and create a vision of human temporality. The numerical measurement of diachrony has, especially in modern times, strongly influenced both our theoretical concepts of time and everyday time discourse. However, if it comes to the oscillating and multi-layered scenarios of autobiographical time, chronology seems to be as inappropriate as measuring happiness by the volume of air we breathe when we experience happy moments. Human time is time told, as Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1991) has pointed out in great detail. For Ricoeur, narrativity and temporality are as closely related
as, in Wittgenstein’s terms, a language game and a form of life. What the phenomenologist refers to as human time is what we also could call experienced time, that is, time as human meaning construction. It is precisely this meaningful **gestalt** of human temporality, I suggest, that takes form in the construction of autobiographical time, a construction that is intimately intertwined with the telling of stories (or of fragments of them) about ourselves and our lives. Because chronological operators of time always remain tied to the notion of a sequence (a sequence of “nows,” that is), they simply are not appropriately complex – as several authors (Carr, 1986; Freeman, 1998; Kerby, 1991) have pointed out – if faced with the much more sophisticated fabric of narrative time construction. How then, do we have to understand the narrative fabric of autobiographical time?

In his book *Acts of Meaning*, Bruner (1990) has described how, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, the notion of self as a storyteller came on the scene of the human sciences. In the wake of this narrative and discursive turn, the traditional concept of identity as an unchangeable and substantial self has lost more and more ground, whereas the concept of identity as a life-long process of construction and reconstruction, a continuous rewriting the text of one’s identity, has become the underlying idea of many research projects. The agent of autobiographical remembering who has come to the fore in this view is entangled in a variety of social interactions which are all but peripheral. Identity construction, then, appears to be first of all a function of the present life of a person within such interactions. And the outcome of this construction appears to be, as a consequence, a local, ephemeral, always emergent gestalt. Viewed this way, the autobiographical process turns out to be not so much about an individual and sovereign subject taking stock of past events – an idea that might better be understood as a projection in the wake of Cartesian metaphysics. Rather, what happens in the autobiographical process is an interplay of positioning possible pasts and possible beginnings in the light of an end, that is the present of the story at the time, and in the context, of its telling.

### Autobiographical Time

So far, I have given a brief outline of the narrative approach to identity and autobiographical remembering. This approach can be understood as one of the new perspectives deriving from the post-metaphysical and post-positivist paradigm which has become influential in many discussions in the social sciences and philosophy of science (Habermas, 1992; Brockmeier & Harré, 1997). In my description, the autobiographical process overlaps with the process of identity construction; both are processes of understanding one’s self in time. As autobiographical memory is about
past events and the process of remembering links the past with the present – a connection which is construed in the light of present events and future expectations – it seems as if this process is all about time. In fact, time, lived and experienced time, plays a major role in both natural events and literary life accounts, be it as an organizing principle of narrative experience, or as an explicit subject or theme. What makes the study of these diverse forms and modes of time so difficult, but also so fascinating, is that they all are fleeting structures. Philosophers from Augustine to Wittgenstein and psychologists from William Stem to Katherine Nelson have emphasized the elusive nature of human time experience. Although “time” seems to be most familiar to all of us, there is no such thing as time “as such,” as a detached, material, or noetic entity. It is hard, if not impossible, to compare the “existence” of time to that of a thought, a sentence, a perception, an action, or an emotion, despite the fact that we encounter time in all these phenomena.

Looking closer at autobiographical narratives we find, moreover, that these constructions are not so much about time but about times. They encompass and evoke a number of different forms and orders of time, creating a multi-layered weave of human temporality (Brockmeier, 1995a). I already mentioned the classical time modalities of past, present, and future. In the autobiographical process, these modalities not only change all the time; for example, when a life story jumps from the past to the future and back to the present, and life stories continuously jump back and forth (autobiographies exclusively told in the past tense are rare exceptions). But the different modalities also are inextricably interwoven among each other – and this is so not only because of narrative jumps and the use of mixed tenses. As already pointed out, every narrative about my past is always also a story told in, and about, the present as well as story about the future.

This all, we might say, is much like the temporal structure of human life itself, which is essentially a multi-layered and many-centered fabric of different orders of time, investigated in great detail by social scientists (e.g., Bender & Welibery, 1991; Nowotny, 1994; Young. 1988) and interdisciplinary scholars of time (e.g., Fraser, 1987). Nevertheless, the particular merger of different times which I am addressing is a function that specifically takes place in the autobiographical process. In being transformed into the diachronic structures and thematic aspects of a story, episodes of fundamentally different temporal dimensions appear to be fused in one order, the order of autobiographical time. For this merger the form of narrative is not only the most adequate form; it is, I suspect, the only form in which this most complex mode of human time construction can exist at all.

In short, my argument is that autobiographical time, the time of the autobiographical process, emerges in a continuous synthesis of various times and time orders. This is one of the conclusions to which I have
come in studying autobiographical narratives in a variety of social and cultural contexts. In this paper, I want to focus on one aspect of the construction of life time; namely, how autobiographical time is shaped by visions of time suggested by the canonical narrative repertoire of a culture. I shall call these cultural forms of construal narrative models. But before I deal with this particular time synthesis of the individual and the cultural, let me have a look at the repertoire of linguistic forms that shapes our ideas of time. What are, technically speaking, the linguistic devices by which our experience of time and temporality take form in autobiographical narratives?

The Linguistic Construction of Autobiographical Time

We use a broad spectrum of linguistic devices to express the temporal dimension of our experiences, memories, intentions, and imaginations. However, in doing so we not only express them but also give them shape. Of course, this is a universal phenomenon, language does not only represent reality but also creates it; it not only reflects experience but also brings it into existence. All natural languages have developed a rich repertoire of aspectual, descriptive, and perspectival devices to express and create time (Ter Meulen, 1997). Most “Standard Average European Languages” basically use three different categories of these devices. The first category encompasses the time armature of traditional sentence grammar, that is, the temporal markers of (1) tense and aspect, (2) inherent lexical features of the verb and (3) the various types of temporal adverbs. All of them interact in manifold ways (Klein, 1994).

These forms are complemented by a second category of rhetoric and discourse devices. These include (4) metaphors, metonymies, symbols, allegories, and other tropes of time (e.g., Father Time, the flux or space of time, five to twelve); and (5) temporal collocations, that is, idioms, sayings, proverbs, cliches and “stock phrases” (e.g., we spend, divide and steal time, we are out of time, waste time, time waits for no one, time heals and marches on, time is over and we are running out of time).

And third, there are larger discursive and narrative structures by which we express and shape visions of time. Here we have such devices as (6) anachronies (flashbacks, flash-forwards, ellipsis, overlappings, stretches, summaries, pauses, gaps); (7) points of view or perspectives; (8) sequencing (e.g., by conjunctions); (9) embedding or framing (e.g., by integrating one story into another); (10) narrative speed (the story of a life of 80 years can be told in 1 hour, in 10 or even three minutes); (11) indexical systems (that define time, space, identity, and moral orders of actors and actions in a story); and finally, (12) narrative types and genres (that frame a life, e.g., as the story of a voyage, adventure, work of artistic creation, or Bildungsroman).
In narrative discourse, as in smaller linguistic units, usually several of these time devices are closely linked with each other, interacting as elements of one – albeit sometimes contradictory – “structure of determination” (Weinrich, 1971). Such composed structures of determination organize various larger forms of time synthesis, for example in autobiographical stories. As I have argued, autobiographical time emerges as a synthesis of several forms and orders of temporality. What, more precisely, are these orders?

Three Categories of Time Synthesis

I suggest distinguishing three categories of time synthesis, which also represent three main orders of autobiographical time. The first order is that of time modalities (or tenses, as most of today’s philosophers would say). Here we deal with autobiographical time as composed of past, present, and future. A second order comes to view if we study how the different processes of individual, natural, and cultural time are synthesized. Autobiographical time, viewed from this vantage point, is simultaneously embedded in the distinct temporalities of the individual, the natural, and the cultural. A good example to study how these temporalities blend is “Greenspeak,” the discourse of environmentalism (Harré, Brockmeier, & Mühlahusler, 1999). Within a decade, Greenspeak has become a ubiquitous cultural dialect in the West, a way to talk about nature, i.e., the “environment” and the world, which also has influenced the way people talk about themselves. Environmental discourse is all about the relations between natural, cultural, and individual orders of time or, more precisely, about their distortion and the (biological, political, moral) necessity to recalibrate the lost balance.

A third order of time synthesis becomes visible when we examine the models of the course and direction of time that either underlie or are being evoked in autobiographical self accounts. In what follows I shall concentrate on this third order, explaining in some detail how such autobiographical models of course and direction of time look like and how they work.

Narrative Models of Course and Direction of Time

What Exactly is an Autobiographical Narrative?

The literature on narrative and autobiography suggests various answers to this question. Drawing on these suggestions, let me offer some characteristics of a descriptive definition that I have found useful in my own work. First, an autobiographical narrative usually presents a time-evolving plot
(I say ‘usually’ because there are striking exceptions, as we will see a bit later). Although it is true that all narrative implies a diachronic structure, this does not necessarily imply that a life narrative follows the lines of a linearly ordered plot, a fabula, as it is sometimes called in narratology. Rather, the story of one’s life almost always leaves the paths of chronology, presenting life as a sjuzet, a narratively composed synthesis. The autobiographical process does not follow chronological time but creates its own time, narrative time.

A second characteristic of autobiographical narrative is that all events of either plot and story revolve around a protagonist. More precisely, they revolve around one protagonist, the self, and his or her actions, thoughts, feelings, memories, and intentions. However open, interrupted, and fragmentary the autobiographical story is, however numerous the characters, their story lines, and points of view populating it, the story has a center: the self, a protagonist who finally blends with the narrator. Whenever someone tells his or her life, this is the constellation: We have a narrator, in the here and now, who, as Bruner (1991, p. 69) remarks, “takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name. He must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and the narrator eventually fuse and become one person with a shared consciousness.”

Third, autobiographical narrative does not just describe or represent a self in time, but it evaluates this self in the light of moral assumptions and ethical convictions. To take up on the distinction just mentioned, the narrator does not just tell the story of the protagonist, but he also makes clear his stance towards this protagonist; he positions himself within a moral and affective framework. Consider this sequence: “... but when I came back from college, I just couldn’t stand it any more, my Dad’s talk and all that stuff. You know, he’s such a know-it-all. It sounded to me like stuff from another century, from another planet. This probably wasn’t fair to him, but I simply couldn’t stand it any more...” This remark not only sketches a conflict — not an atypical conflict, of course — but also includes a twofold evaluation: one that reflects the view of the narrator at the time of his return from college, and another one that refers, at the time the story is told, to both the conflict and its evaluation as events in the past. As we see, the evaluation is itself subject to temporal change.

Often it is this change over time that becomes a dominant story line in an autobiographical narrative; it might even affect the very nature of the story being told. Imagine the story of one’s life that has been told again and again until it has become inappropriate, unconvincing, pale. Perhaps it is the sense of this inappropriateness that, at one point, becomes
the dominant note of a new story in which this person tells about himself and his autobiographical consciousness at it has turned precarious.

The fourth characteristic that I wish to highlight is the particular retrospective teleology of autobiographical narrative. A life story starts in the here and now and reconstructs the past as if it were teleologically directed towards this specific present. I shall come back to the structure of this retrospective teleology in a moment.

All four characteristics have to do with localizing or positioning oneself in time. This is not to say that time is necessarily thematized in an explicit fashion. Rather, life narratives usually address the issue of time, at least in its common meaning as clock and calendar time, only marginally. But on a more fundamental plane, life narratives imply far-ranging assumptions of time. These assumptions may take form in a certain vision of the course of one’s life, or the direction which a life has taken: be it a specific way in which one’s “life time” has been spent, or a specific course or direction which one’s life has taken “in time.” In the first case, the underlying trajectory is that of time as an arrow or a flow, a stream of time; in the second case, time is conceived of as a huge container, an endless space within which one’s life goes on for a limited period or space of time. Our lives, to slightly alter a line from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with an endless sleep.

**Narrative Models**

In my work, I have come to distinguish several narrative models of autobiographical time, each suggesting a particular vision of the course and direction of time. I use the concept of narrative model in a twofold sense. On the one hand, model is an analytical term, a notion that helps one to understand structural properties of the narrative process. A model, in this sense, is an analogue. It links the unknown to the known. It offers an interpretation, perhaps even an explanation, of strange, unusual, and surprising phenomena by referring to familiar phenomena or “rules” (schemata, scripts, allegories, metaphors, and the like). The point of narrative as a model is, as Rom Harré and I have argued, that it does this job in an amazingly flexible fashion, due to its peculiar plasticity and openness (Brockmeier & Harré, 1997). On the other hand, I use the term narrative model in a sense similar to Bruner’s (1997) “narrative prototypes”: narrative models encapsulate culturally normative views, patterns of experience and evaluations. They structure stories within the hermeneutic horizon of a culture. Within this horizon, the same narrative model often underlies a variety of different genres and discourse types; we may find the same model in folk tales, novels, medical case histories, law texts, and obituaries.
The particular narrative models I am interested in organize the account of a life course; which is to say, their specific function is to order complex temporal scenarios. In aligning actions and events along long-term episodic structures, they give a meaningful diachronic order to a selected multitude of singular life events. Put the other way around, only by being integrated into a particular gestalt of order and coherence, life events become meaningful. Only in this way, we might say, they become episodic “(auto)biographemes,” part and parcel of one’s life history.

I shall distinguish six models of autobiographical time: the linear, the circular, the cyclical, the spiral, the fragmentary, and the static model. In discussing some examples of them, I will pay particular attention to two structural features which play a central role in organizing the overarching composition of an autobiographical account. These are genres and pivotal metaphors which integrate the various episodes and story lines that run through a life narrative.

The Linear Model

The first model suggests viewing life time as if it were a continuous line of chronological marks. I mentioned earlier the idea of time as arrow and flow, elements of the classical Newtonian picture. The linear view, now, comes close to it. Of course, we might wonder, how else could a life be lived if not along a diachronic sequence that links a beginning with an end. In autobiographical narrative, as already observed, this end usually is the present, the present of the narrative situation in which the story is told. In fact, the linear and chronological view is quite common in autobiographical accounts – at least, this is what most people believe if they are asked what idea of time emerges when someone tells his or her life. A life, as common sense suggests, starts with the birth and then follows step by step the chronological path of the time one’s life supposedly has taken. The underlying idea of time here is that of something that simply “goes on.” As banal as this idea may be, it has a more intellectual variant that is widespread in historical conceptions of time. According to this notion, as Freeman (1998) has critically pointed out, the primary temporal layout of reality is that of a succession, a continuous sequence of events, which is coextensive with historical time conceived of as a linear and irreversible “flow of nows.”

The prototypical example of this view, applied to the history of the individual, is the various forms of the CV, the oral or written Curriculum Vitae or “course of the life,” a self-presentation that occurs in formalized social settings. More elaborated versions of this model are to be found in simple narrative genres like the folk tale and elementary variations of the Bildungsroman (a concept originally referring to a type of novel that presents a protagonist’s course of development and progress
of education). Corresponding to these genres, such narratives comprise plot-integrating metaphors which depict life as a journey, a process of life-long learning, the striving for perfection, a pilgrimage, and the like. Just think of the familiar short (auto)biographies that are supposed to present their protagonists as successful (i.e., consequent and goal-oriented) politicians, business people, and academics.

However, when it comes to the very process of what Bruner (1993) has described as the autobiographical reconfiguration of a life along interpretive lines, the possibilities offered by the linear model are altogether limited. Although we learn early to tell our lives along the chronological order of calendar time (Brockmeier, 1995b), this model seems to have only little impact on our attempts to give meaning to our lives, in fact, it is not hard to demonstrate that every autobiography (including the linear version itself, if we look closer at it) consists of a number of features which do not suit this model – such as gaps, intersections, overlaps and anachronies like flashbacks and flash-forwards. To understand the difference between linear and historical time, on the one hand, and narrative time, on the other, the distinction between plot (fabula) and story (sjuzet) is useful because it makes clear that even the supposedly given chronology of a life is always already a story, a highly selective reconfiguration. If it were not selective, the account of a life would last at least as long as the life itself – indeed, in light of the arguments I have put forward, it would take much longer.

The Circular Model

Not surprisingly, then, it takes just a little shift, and the linear pattern appears to be a circular one. Even the telling of a linear or chronological life story already can be seen to be following a circular pattern. Usually, it needs only a little awareness, and a few linguistic markers, to transform the linear model into an explicitly circular one. There is no telling of a sequence of life events in a linear order that does not presuppose a view in hindsight. Remember, this story is about past events but told in the present. That is, it is about the reconfiguration of the past in an act of retrospection which first of all aligns a view in the here and now. This story can only be told because both its beginning and end are already known.

This curious retrospective teleology is one of the general characteristics of autobiographical narratives to which I referred earlier: The plot of a life narrative, even though it mostly deals with the past, always emerges as an order of the present. If I tell my life as the story of the development of a little boy who loved flowers, trees, and animals, and who later would become a biologist, I describe interests and features of a character, my character, in the light of the scientist who I am now. That is, I am not
interpreting those early signs in the light of someone who could also have become a gardener or zoo warden.

No autobiographical narrative escapes this teleological order. Whenever I tell my life, I unavoidably see the beginning of it in the light of the end or the present in which I present my story. It is this retrospective teleology that, I suspect, transforms the autobiographical account into a more or less goal-directed development, a development in which the end of the story appears as if it were its natural, logical or spiritual telos. In this sense, circularity seems to be an inevitable feature of autobiographical narrative (Brockmeier, in press, b).

A compelling example of this teleological circularity can be found in the autobiographies of Jean Piaget. In the course of his long life, Piaget wrote several autobiographies. All of them, as Vonècle (in press) has pointed out, differ from each other to a remarkable degree. But each story strives to present its author’s life course as driven by an unfolding rationality – albeit the type of rationality changes from one life account to the next – that underlies the development of life and thought and, in a sense, even the process of autobiographical self reflection itself. Along these lines, Piaget spent the time of his life according to a given program of development that culminated in his theory of logical self-construction, a theory by which, in turn, he wanted to explain not only the evolutionary teleology of this program but also of his own life; a life, as it were, lived and told full circle.

The Cyclical Model

Again, it only needs a small shift to move from the circular to the cyclical model. This shift transforms the figure of the circular that is repeated with a small variation into the figure of the cyclical. In telling their lives, people often emphasize such repetitive structures – although, as with all events in “real time,” there is of course no identical repetition. As an ancient philosopher put it, “you never step twice into the same river.”

Both circular and cyclical forms of life time play a pivotal role in psychoanalytic theory and practice. Psychoanalysis is a good example here because it is not only a well established clinical and therapeutic system of explanation for human lives and their manifold troubles and disorders, but it is also widespread in all kinds of everyday life accounts as well as in the autobiographical theory upon which these accounts draw (Brockmeier, 1997). There is ample evidence to suggest that psychoanalytic concepts have become the most influential form of folk psychology for making sense of human life and its predicaments in Western cultures. This entails a similar ubiquity of the cyclical model, in particular, the view that takes as its point of departure the early event structure which Freud called “family romance.” The “family romance” is a narrative genre
that frames childhood constellations as being compulsively repeated in later stages of the life. Correspondingly, we find in many life accounts organizing metaphors like the “prison of childhood,” the “lifelong monkey on one’s back,” and the “stage of life” on which we are actors “playing the same parts over and over again.”

In the psychoanalytic view, even the treatment itself manifests a repetitive structure insofar as the therapeutic treatment aims to help the person undergoing analysis to “work through” – another of Freud’s influential metaphors – the original traumatic constellation, the “primary scene”, which is thought to be responsible for later repetition compulsions.

The Spiral Model

Studying autobiographies – oral and written, natural and literary – in various cultural contexts, one finds many different examples of the cyclical model. However, not all accounts are framed in genres that lay out repetitive cycles as compulsive or otherwise “neurotic” forms of behavior. Again, sometimes it needs only a little shift and the cycles of repetition take on an upbeat tenor; they seem to open up towards a view of one’s life as a forward-moving spiral. This can take form in genres, for example, that depict the course of a life as a succession of discoveries, revelations, or new variations of one or more themes. Along these lines, we find metaphors that suggest life as a “continuous opening-up of windows,” a “theatre with ever changing plays,” or a series of always new undertakings driven by one’s being “hungry for life.”

I have had a chance to conduct a series of autobiographical interviews with a retired English architect. He described his life as part of a countermovement against the life of his father who was an Austrian painter. In hindsight, he saw his life as an attempt to repeat the artistic vision that he believed inherent in the pictures of his father; indeed, he had spent all his life as an architect in England surrounded by his father’s paintings which covered almost every wall in his house. What he did not want, however, was to buy into the political convictions of his father who had become, in the late 1930s, a member of the Nazi party. Shortly before our conversations started, he had discovered by accident that his father was not only a mere opportunistic member of the party, but, as a professor of design, was also actively involved in creating Nazi propaganda material, he was still stunned over his discovery when he first told me about its possible implications for his own life story. I asked him to tape-record his story and, as he agreed, we began with the first autobiographical interview or, perhaps better, we continued our conversations about the past of the present and the present of the past in his life. By means of designing a social, communal architecture for ordinary people, I learnt, he wanted to work and live the life of an artist, quite as his
father, but freed from what he considered the bourgeois class barriers of
his father’s outlook upon life and art. “I admired my father and his paint-
ing,” he said. “I always wanted somehow to remain faithful to him, to his
seriousness, his high standards. He just was such an incredible artist. He
really created a new style, his style. But at the same time, you know, I
wanted to live in a world that was not as narrow-minded and reactionary
as his world, both artistically and politically. That’s why I left Austria. I
wanted a world that was more social, more open to the people . . . I
wanted to build houses for ordinary people, simple but good buildings.
Small houses that nevertheless lived up to high standards. You know,
there’s always been such a tradition in architecture . . . Houses for people
who would work and live in a better world, in a world . . . , well, that was
more just and equal . . .”

Whenever I went to that small University town in the following years,
I asked him for another interview, following how his life became
reconfigured and “rewritten” as a consequence of that discovery, and
how the spiral of his life got wider and wider. But this is another story.
Here I only want to explain what it means when the narrative shape of a
life can be likened to a spiral, that is, in the case of this architect, when it
can be seen as a spiral counter-movement against the life of his father for
whom he felt both admiration and contempt.

To describe one’s life as a widening spiral, even if possibly following
or repeating a pre-given constellation, maths only a small difference from
the cyclical and the circular layout. As a matter of fact, these models
often overlap. As autobiographical narratives mostly comprise more than
one story, more than one perspective on a life, more that one possible
life, it is not surprising that we find more than one genre and more than
one model of life time in them. And as we have seen, only small shifts
are needed for all kinds of mutual transformations among the linear,
circular, cyclical, and spiral perspective to emerge.

The Static Model

There are, however, not only gradated differences between these four
models and the two forms of autobiographical narrative to which I will
turn now. The models we have looked at so far can certainly be con-
ceived of as evoking certain visions of the course of one’s life and of the
direction it has taken in time. In all of them, life is seen as a movement,
a process, and the autobiographical process proves to be a site for devel-
opmental work. We might call such accounts developmental stories, nar-
ratives of human development. Yet there also are types of life narration
that mark a sharp contrast, in form and content, to these narratives inso-
far as they seem to lack a developmental trajectory at all. And what’s
more, they tend to ignore or even deny the idea that life is a process that
has a direction and sometimes even a precise goal. I believe that we can distinguish two categories of “timeless” models in life narratives, one I call the static model, the other one the fragmentary model.

A static view of a life or, at least, of a certain period of a life, is usually to be found in autobiographical stories that revolve around one central, usually catastrophic event. The loss of a close and important person, illness, war, prison, and torture are traumatic experiences that, as has often been observed, leave their mark on each who has survived them. Reading or listening to these life stories we often do not find any of the previous forms of narrative organization. Instead, an altogether immovable picture emerges, a fixed constellation determined by an all-dominating experience or by irresolvable contradictions and conflicts. In terms of narrative theory, such plots often owe their form to the genre of the tragic. Correspondingly, we discern stagnant metaphors like “as if my watch stopped,” “waiting for death,” “petrified,” or “frozen n time,” to name four.

The holocaust stands for an emblematic event in the 20th century that has become prominent both in the autobiographical and theoretical literature on memory and traumatic experience. “If I have discovered anything in my investigation,” writes Lawrence Langer (1991, p. xi), “it is that oral Holocaust testimonies are doomed on one level to remain disrupted narratives, not only by the vicissitudes of technology but by the quintessence of the experiences they record. Instead of leading to further chapters in the autobiography of the witnesses, they exhaust themselves in the telling. They do not function in time like other narratives, since the losses they record raise few expectations of renewal or hopes of reconciliation.” Most holocaust accounts use a vocabulary of disruption, absence, and irreversible loss. Some even seem to renounce grammar and idiomatic expressions at all. At the end of a long interview about his life in several camps, Mr. B. is asked what he is left with, what he thinks, in hindsight, his ordeal has done to him. He looks down, shrugs his shoulders, and whispers barely audibly: “Nothing to say. Sad.” (as quoted in Langer, 1991, p. ix).

But there also are more extended accounts of holocaust survivors—I think, for example, of Primo Levi’s autobiographical writings—that provide painfully exact descriptions of what surviving Auschwitz meant for life afterwards. It meant that all autobiographical memories, not only of Auschwitz, but also of everything that happened before and after would never escape the camp. It meant the camp would never really become the past, that its time would indeed be frozen forever, and so would the horizon of all possible experience, old and new. Charlotte Belbo, author of a four volume commentary on her camp experience Auschwitz et après, when asked if she lives with Auschwitz after her return, replies: “No, I live beside it. Auschwitz is there, fixed and unchangeable, but
wrapped in the impervious skin of memory that segregates itself from the present ‘me’” (as quoted in Langer, 1991, p. 5). Surviving Auschwitz meant the camp would always remain the center of gravity of one’s life, the starting point and ultimate telos of all concerns. It meant living in a state of mnemonic paralysis, overpowered by an experience that, like a psychological black hole, absorbs all possible development, all movement that could lead the autobiographical process away from this all-consuming experience.

The Fragmentary Model

The second “timeless” model of life time is localized in quite a different cultural field, a field of experience that only recently has taken shape as a distinctive narrative and aesthetic, sociological and philosophical constellation. Referred to in literary terms as postmodernist and in cultural-historical and sociological terms as postmodern, this formation has extended into all forms of discourse in Western societies. The socio-economic characteristics of postmodern societies have often been pointed out. One is the dissolution of stable patterns of social life that were more or less determining for modern or earlier forms of society. To emphasize the contrast between current social mobility and traditional life forms, cultural theorists and sociologists like Beck (1992) speak of permanently fragmentary and unfinished life projects that reflect the accelerating dynamics of postmodern “risk societies.” For Sennett (1998), one reason for these changes is the transformations of the societal structure of work in postmodern capitalism that “corrode” traditional forms of personality. For example, a young university graduate in Britain must expect, over the course her working life, to change her job twelve times. Against this backdrop, postmodern critique of modern concepts of identity as autonomous, substantial, and fixed in its proper place, has grown into a deep distrust of the concept of identity itself. In cultural analysis (e.g., Bal, 1999), identity is today generally imagined as discontinuous, shifting, and polycentric. As in most avant-garde discourse, individual or personal identity is referred to, if at all, only in terms of irony or parody, as an essentially fictitious construction.

Thus it is not surprising that we find narrative forms associated with a postmodern outlook upon life both in literary and everyday forms of autobiographical narrative. Particularly, the narratives of younger, educated, and urban people are often driven by the attempt to avoid presenting one’s life in traditional developmental genres. They are told under the explicit premise of breaking with coherent and linear story lines that are associated with outdated “grand narratives” of life. Instead, autobiographical accounts that share the “decentered,” “open,” “ludic” and “fragmentary” agenda of postmodernist narrating (Francese, 1997) seek to emphasize
the unpredictable nature of life, the spontaneous emergence of “projects” that do not fit any traditional order. They show up and disappear again from a life, according to – apparently – highly subjective ideas of a timely “good life.” We thus find metaphors of life as “play” and “playing,” “scenes” and “patchwork,” “fragments” and “pieces” of life. And we find, on the level of larger narrative units, alternative versions that are told simultaneously, mingling real, possible, imagined and anticipated life courses like equal story lines. Instead of the traditional autobiographical “I”, the “first voice” narrative, we find two, three or more voices in dia-
logic or multivoiced discourse, creating a mosaic composition of identity (Fischer, 1994).

Accordingly, the visions of time, both individual and historical, inherent in these life stories display a likewise fragmentary layout. And what’s more, the very idea of autobiographical time as having a course or even being directed towards a goal appears to be an arbitrary tele-
ological construction, an all too obvious attempt to impose an outdated limitation upon the openness and flux of life.

Conclusions: Narrative Models as Cultural Hinges

Patently, all narrative models of the course and direction of life time which I have presented are cultural moorings of individual identity con-
struction. They are dialectical hinges between individual and society. While they are forms of thought and imagination that help the indi-
vidual to re-invent the culture in their minds, they bind the individual into culture. In our autobiographical constructions, we create particular individual concepts and views of time and temporality that are regarded as canonical in our societal life. As we learn in kindergarten, school, college, and university how to meet the institutional expectations in pre-
senting ourselves through our CVs, so we learn to craft our lives into stories that integrate both “normal” ways of development and critical life events, turning points, and all other kinds of unexpected experiences. At least we try.

My argument in this paper has been that narrative models play a central role in this autobiographical process, and they do so especially in the construction of our autobiographical time syntheses. In suggesting options for understanding human development in time and, as we saw, even of non-development, such narrative models are also hinges be-
tween concepts of individual life history and history in the broader sense. It should be mentioned, at least as an aside, that similar models are also being discussed among historians as narrative genres that organize not only the writing of history, but also our entire notion of what history is all about (e.g., While, 1987).
But this is only one side of the coin. The other side is that these models, although they are deeply embedded in specific cultural-historical milieus, allow for a broad spectrum of the most individual options of identity construction. They offer possibilities to fashion not only one’s life history but also one’s unique sense of self within a given cultural canon. This however, is not to say that they are forms of cultural determination. They must not be mistaken for causal mechanisms. Rather, they are amazingly malleable, negotiable, and adaptable to the very specific conditions under which each individual life is lived. Especially in Western cultures, this flexibility can be seen as a general characteristic of life narratives which finds a most sensitive seismograph in the constructions of autobiographical time. As a consequence, the models of time that we use in our life stories reflect a general dialectic of narrative identity construction: namely, that such construction is perpetually caught between “the mimetic rendering of its unique detail and the requirement of finding a negotiable genre in terms of which to render those details into a life,” as Bruner (1993, p. 47) writes.

What I have pointed out in this essay is how narrative models of autobiographical time that are widespread in our culture can render these unique details into a life. These models stand for cultural trajectories that are experienced and handled as issues of one’s own life time: in the time of work, love, memory, death, and in the narrative life history which is meant to bind all this together.

Note

1. Especially, I draw here on results of a recent research project at the University of Innsbruck in which my colleague Barbara Juen and I have collected and examined life narratives told by immigrants, refugees, “guest workers” and other foreign residents, representing a variety of countries and ethnicities, who have come to live in the Austrian Alpine region of the Tirol. Some of the examples referred to in this paper are taken from this material.

References


