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John Goodwin

SAGE Biographical Research

Volume I - 4

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John Goodwin is a Reader in Sociology at the University of Leicester. As a sociologist, his principal research interests include the broad areas of the sociology of work (especially education to work transitions and gender and work), social science research methods (life histories, work narratives, auto/biography, the re-use of qualitative and archival data) and the history of sociology. He has expertise in using biographical methods and has used narrative interviews and epistolary analysis in his research on Norbert Elias, Ilya Neustadt and during the restudy of Elias's *Adjustment of Young Workers to Adult Roles* project. He is currently Associate Editor of the *Journal of Youth Studies* and an editorial board member of *Education and Training* and the *European Journal of Training and Development*.

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VOLUME I

*Biographical Research: Starting Points,
Debates and Approaches*

Edited by
John Goodwin



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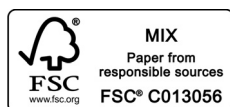
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SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
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Typeset by Star Compugraphics
Private Limited, Delhi

Printed on paper from sustainable resources

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall



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First published 2012

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2011941786

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

ISBN: 978-1-4462-4691-7 (set of four volumes)

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Editor's Introduction: Biographical Research – Researching 'Lives' at the Intersection of History and Biography

John Goodwin

Introduction

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst. (C. Wright Mills 1970: 12)

Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. (C. Wright Mills 1970: 248)

The year 2012 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of C. Wright Mills, a sociologist who remains a highly significant author and thinker for contemporary social science. Beyond his definitive trilogy of works covering American society during the middle part of the twentieth century, the Mills legacy for social science research is encapsulated in his work *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) – his blistering critique of both abstract empiricism and grand theory. Alongside the practical advice he offers in this book to would be social scientists, such as 'set up a file', Mills draws our attention to the interconnections between the individual and the social as the site for research. As the above quotations illustrate, for Mills the 'best' social science research is located at the intersection of histories and biographies and he encourages social scientists to 'learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it' (Mills 1970: 216). This explicit call to a return to biography, be it the biography of the researcher or the biographies of the those being researched, and his warning not to ignore the centrality of people in social research, was for me the starting point in a long standing interest in biographical methods. As Mills advised, for me social science research

is not only concerned with commenting upon the lives of 'others' but is also a necessary tool for understanding my own life, experiences and interconnections in the society within which I live. For example, my own experiences of making the transition from school to work and adult life, and the subsequent difficulties in these adjustments, led to an interest in youth and the transitions from education to employment and adulthood (see, for example, Goodwin and O'Connor 2007; 2009). The employment situation in the UK in the 1980s, and the working life experiences of my extended family, friends and peers, in an area marked by industrial decline and the demise of coal mining, instilled in me a long standing interest in work, work/life narratives and how paid employment intersects lives, communities and localities. Mills himself used biographical and epistolary writings in his own research to great effect and as a device to help him write and think. His book *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (1960) was conceived as a letter from a Cuban revolutionary to their American counterparts and in his *Letters and Autobiographical Writings* (2000) it is clear that his open letter to 'Tovarich' (a fictional Soviet academic) was a clearly devised stratagem for marshalling his thoughts on everything from East/West relations to the nature of academic life (see, especially, *Specimen Days of My Life* 1960)

Building upon writers such as Mills, the last twenty years or so have witnessed a significant increase in the use of biographical methods and biographical data in social research (Plummer 2001; Roberts 2002; Hardley 2004) – this is often referred to as the 'biographical turn'.

The turn to biography in social science – coupled with a more open, sometimes grudging, acceptance of the contribution of memory in historical research – has resulted in a proliferation of terms, schools and groupings often used interchangeably, some with a disciplinary base, others attempting to carve out new territory between disciplines. Labels such as oral history, biography, life story, life history, narrative analysis, reminiscence and life review jostle and compete for attention. What is common to all is a focus on the recording and interpretation, by some means or other, of the life experience of individuals. (Seale *et al* 2004:3)

As suggested by Seale *et al* (2004) biographical research may take a range of forms and may vary in its application and approach. For example, biographical research can include more familiar techniques and methodologies such as life histories, oral histories, life narratives and individual case studies. All of these methods are particularly concerned with the individual's life experiences and the meanings and interpretations they attach to their own life history or biographies. Some of these approaches are interview based. For example, life stories and life narratives may be gathered through the use of unstructured/depth interviews and the analysis of such data will be underpinned by qualitative analysis techniques such as grounded theory, thematic analysis or even hermeneutics. Yet, despite varying in origin and application, such methods

are unified and coherent as biographical research methods in that they are a means of giving a 'voice' to individuals.

In addition to these more usual interview based techniques there are other approaches, data sources, and methods that are also central to biographical research. 'Documents of life' or 'naturally occurring forms of life writing' (Stanley 2004: 224) including letters, diaries, auto/biographies, as well as other human documents (such as photographs, birth certificates etc.) are increasingly used as a site for, and subject of, social science research. Subject to analytical techniques, such as epistolary analysis, these documents are also important referents of social life given what they also reveal about individual experiences, meanings, life histories and biographies (Letherby and Zdrodowski 1995; Roper 2001; Stanley 2004; Smart 2007). For example, although the use of letters in social science research is still limited, when compared to literary or historical research, the analysis of letters and correspondence can yield significant insights. As Roberts (2002: 62) argues, correspondence can offer both factual and substantive information relating to the writer, the reader and other relationships 'in time and place' (see also Stanley 2004). Alongside the analysis of letters and correspondence, auto/biography is also gaining ground as a social science research method and, building upon developments within the arts and humanities, it has been highlighted by some as another means of revealing individual voices (Okely and Callaway, 1992). Such an approach, however, differs greatly to the more conventional qualitative techniques above, with researchers having to be mindful of which/whose story is being presented in auto/biographical texts. However, regardless of whether it is the author's own 'story' that is being analyzed or whether the author is presenting the story of others, such texts 'point outward to this life that has been led by this writer or this subject' (Denzin 1989: 11). Indeed, taken together life histories, oral histories, life narratives, individual case studies, letters, diaries, auto/biographies, and other more ephemeral human documents, comprise powerful research tools and significant data sources that offer the promise of detailed personal insights as compared to more traditional social science approaches (see, for example Vinitzky-Seroussi 2000; Hsu 2001; Hardley 2004; Elliot 2005; Smart 2007; Stanley 2004). As I have argued elsewhere (Goodwin and Hughes 2011) while biographical methods may be underpinned, to some extent, by a naive realism – that biographies, life stories and letters are based in and reflect some kind of reality (Roberts 2002), or as Stanley (2004) argues, 'ultimately letters matter because they are concerned with real lives' (Stanley 2004: 223), other authors, such as Elias (2001), allow us to view biographies, letters and so forth not as 'static' objects but instead as 'processes' highlighting relationships past, present and (possible) future and which refer to changing balances of power and changing interdependencies. To put it simply, letters and diaries point to relationships and configurations beyond the words on the page and images reveal more than a simple snapshot. Elias articulates this view further, and more fully in his writings (see Elias 2000; 2001) and

argues that 'I' is an outcome of interactions and relationships with others. In Elias's (2001) analysis:

... there can be no "I" without 'he', 'she', 'we', 'you' or 'they'. It is plainly misleading to use such concepts as 'I' or ego independently of their position with the web of relationships to which the rest of the pronouns refer. Taken together, the personal pronouns are in fact an elementary form of expression of the fact that every person is fundamentally related to other people, and that every human individual is fundamentally a social being. (Elias 2001: 124)

In this sense 'I' is not a singular but is instead a plurality with 'I' and 'we' being inextricably linked. As such, life-writings, biographical materials and documents of life cannot solely be about the 'individual' or their 'uniqueness' but, instead, they are historically and spatially located illuminating changing relationships, interactions, configurations, power balances and a web of relationships. This web of relationships includes the relationship between the writer and the reader and others interconnected with them both.

However, despite the inherent value of biographical research, researchers also need to engage critically with these research tools and sources of data. If the underlying power of these methods is that they reveal the individual, or give voice to the individual, one has to problematize the nature of the individual as a unit of analysis in social science research. For example, Denzin (1989) in the now classic text *Interpretive Biography* argues that biographical research 'involves the studied use and collection of personal-life documents, stories, accounts, and narratives which describe turning-point moments in individuals' lives. . . . The subject matter of the biographical method is the life experiences of a person' (Denzin 1989:2). Yet, there is a danger in such an approach and it may be an epistemological and ontological fallacy to imply that individuals exist in isolation from the society in which they live. As Stanley and Morgan (1993:3) suggest, social scientists need to reject 'any notion that "a life" can be understood as a representation of a single self in isolation from networks of interwoven biographies'.

SAGE's specialist social science journals, empirical subject journals, as well as their backlist of books, offer an unparalleled repository of research excellence that contains many key exemplars of work undertaken using a wide range of techniques and approaches to biographical research. It is clear that using biographical methods and data does not comprise a single, unified, methodological approach built around a central theoretical position but is, instead, a valuable orientation to research. Indeed, some authors included here might not have thought they were doing 'biographical research' *per se* but for me the definition of biographical research is very broad and encapsulates all those approaches that 'cast a lens' on lives or a life – be it through analysis of letters and diaries, though an exploration of how lives are captured in

visual representation, the construction of identities and narratives via new social media through to ethnography, autoethnography, oral histories and so forth. The emphasis on studying lives and the interconnectedness of lives is paramount. Likewise some may locate the biographical turn as being fairly recent but if one includes approaches such as oral history as biographical method (and I cannot see why one would not include it) then biographical methods have a much longer tradition in the social sciences than one may think. Indeed, the linkage between the individual life, or group of lives, with broader social processes has been a motif of much of social science research. What has changed is the shift in emphasis away from simply aggregating lives to numerical values to celebrating lives in their depth and richness and recognizing that it is the very depth and richness of biographies that makes 'biography' a suitable object of, and subject for, social research.

Given this orientation, the central concern of these edited volumes is to assemble exemplar articles (from sociology, social psychology, education, health, criminology, social gerontology, epidemiology, management, and organizational research) from SAGE's back catalogue that illustrate the full range of debates, methods and techniques that can be broadly defined as biographical research. Reflecting critically upon the theory and practice of biographical research and the use of documents of life, the collected volumes will i) Consider the nature of biographical research, outlining the methods and data sources this approach encapsulates; ii) Reflect upon the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of biographical research; iii) Illustrate how biographical research is/can be used in the social sciences; and finally iv) Reflect upon the practical, methodological and analytical issues surrounding biographical research. This collection also includes articles that critically evaluate the broader trend in social science of moving towards the 'personal' as the key site for analysis.

This collection will, hopefully introduce biographical methods to a broad audience by engaging directly with both qualitative and quantitative approaches to biography. In so doing it is envisaged that this edited collection will have relevance across all social science disciplines (especially sociology, social psychology, criminology, politics and international relations, management and business studies, health studies, media and communication studies) and would be of interest to professional researchers, undergraduate and postgraduate students alike. What the book does not do is offer a 'prescribed' approach to biographical research, privileging one set of techniques or approaches over another. Indeed, my approach in selecting the papers from the SAGE back catalogue was to aim to have as broad an appeal as possible – this means that the volumes contain a range of papers catering for different levels of expertise, from basic introductions to more substantive discussions of individual techniques and analytical approaches. This approach is undergirded by a belief that one of the best ways to understand biographical research is

to read exemplars from those who engage in this approach and learn directly from those who have considered the epistemological and ontological issues raised by these techniques and data. However, the volumes do not constitute a handbook *per se* and it is important that the volumes should not be viewed as such. Instead, readers can use these volumes as a resource and navigate their own way through the readings, depending upon their interests, rather than simply approaching the readings chronologically. Where possible I have tried to incorporate as many contemporary papers and articles on biographical research as well as including some definitive or 'classic' papers

Volume I Biographical Research: Starting Points, Debates and Approaches

This first volume contains readings, drawn from across the social sciences that locate, consider and operationalize the assumptions underpinning biographical research. Exemplar articles in this first volume explore the different biographical methods currently used. Priority is given to authors who have considered the epistemological and ontological differences between 'interview based' biographical methods and those approaches broadly defined as 'documents of life'. This first volume also contains readings that also locate biographical research within the history of social science methods in the US and Europe, covering debates ranging from humanism, feminism, and interpretive sociology to post-structuralism and the 'textual turn'. The opening article in this volume is a general introduction to autobiographical research by Smith, Denzin and Lincoln [1]. Readings [2] and [3] are by Ken Plummer and Norman Denzin, two authors along with writers such as Liz Stanley, who have defined biographical research and shaped its development since the early 1990s. Reading [3] *Assumptions of the Methods*, is the opening chapter from Denzin's highly influential book *Interpretive Biography* (1989). Here Denzin delineates the area of biographical methods as involving the 'collection of personal-life documents, stories, accounts, and narratives which describe turning-point moments in individuals' lives' (Denzin 1989: 13). Denzin then offers a number of examples of the method and makes a number of critical observations relating to this approach. Although not included here, it would be beneficial to also read the remainder of the *Interpretive Biography* given its significance and impact.

Wengraf, Chamberlayne and Bornat [4] explore the biographical turn in social science research to promote a 'greater mutual awareness and partnership between a 'German' approach, seen as having a more explicit conceptual and methodological apparatus, and a 'British' approach that had a greater concern for power relations around the interview relationship and in processing, interpreting, and reporting' (Wengraf, Chamberlayne and Bornat 2002: 245). Reading 4 is an excellent overview of the biographical turn and how the social

science research agenda has changed significantly since the 1990s. These themes are also raised by Stanley in Reading [5]. Liz Stanley is one of the most significant writers in the area of biographical research and here work on epistolary forms and her analysis of the Olive Schreiner letters have defined the biographical methods. Reading [5] is one of Stanley's earlier contributions to the area of auto/biography in which she considered the origins of sociological autobiography and reflexive sociology. In the same special edition of *Sociology* Cotterill and Letherby [6] locate auto/biography within feminist qualitative research with a central concern of feminist research being the interweaving stories of both researcher and researched. They argue that 'as all research involves the weaving (whether acknowledged or not) of the biographies of the researched and researcher, the lives of those involved will be altered from then on. There are likely to be practical, intellectual and personal changes for all those involved' . . . (Cotterill and Letherby 1993: 125). This sharing of experience in the research process pointing to the fact that the research process is transformatory is highly significant. The reading points to key aspects of biographical research including 'voice', 'stories', and 'representation'. Issues of power and representation are also discussed in Reading [7] Reed-Danahay who review the ethnographic practices that incorporate life writing.

In Reading [8] Kebede reflects on the value of biographical writing in developing the sociological imagination. Kebede argues clearly that the sociological imagination cannot be adopted by students through teaching alone, 'rather it is a disposition, in competition with other forms of sensibility, which can be acquired only when it is practiced' (Kebede 2009: 353). Kebede encourages the development of sociological imagination by encouraging students to write their one sociological autobiography in which they connect social history with their biography using sociological language. Kebede clearly highlights the value of biographical methods for teaching and demonstrates effectively that they are not simply for research and data generation.

In the next two readings we move beyond the 'written' in biographical research to authors who consider other sources of evidence in auto/biography. Linking back to the work of Plummer (2001) and others, such documents of life include photographs, videos and so forth. Hodder [9] reflects critically on the role of documents in social research while Wagner [10] considers documentary photography and visual methods.

In Reading [11] Prior argues that researchers should see 'documents as active agents in the world, and to view documentation as a key component of dynamic networks rather than as a set of static and immutable "things"' (Prior 2008: 821). Bornat [12] in considering oral history reflect on the overlap between different forms of approach since the so-called biographical turn. Readings [13] and [16] are taken from McLeod and Thomson's (2009) book *Researching Social Change*. In Reading [13] McLeod and Thomson extend Bornat [12] and discuss oral history and life history making a number of key

observations on their use in individual and collective memory, remembering and forgetting and the value of oral and life histories in challenging history. They suggest 'oral and life history are interdisciplinary approaches that take personal narratives and memories as a route into exploring social and historical processes. Interviews are the primary method of eliciting narrative, though these can be supplemented with other artefacts, such as texts or images – "documents of life"' (McLeod and Thomson 2009: 30). Reading [16] is McLeod and Thomson's equally valuable overview of qualitative longitudinal research that has reemerged as a social research methodology often underpinned with the aim of adding on the 'personal' or biographical to quantitative longitudinal studies.

A strong feature of the biographical turn has been the desire to capture individual biographies and this has often been achieved through life narrative. In Reading [14] Squire *et al* provides a useful introduction to narrative research, the contested nature of 'narrative' as a concept, the historical location of narrative research and its resent application. Despite the theoretical and conceptual disputes that underpin narrative research, the dominant view of narrative research is that it is located firmly within the qualitative paradigm. However, Elliott [15] in the next reading reminds us that this does have to be the case exclusively. Elliot highlights the narrative potential of longitudinal studies such as the British Birth Cohort Studies (BBCS), and explores the possibility of creating narrative case histories and conducting narrative analysis based on information available from the studies. The advantage of using data sets such as the British Birth Cohort Studies is that they are longitudinal, which adds a lifecourse dimension to this type of narrative research.

In Reading [17] Corradi explores the epistemological basis of biographical research to demonstrate the 'descriptive/explanatory power of life stories can be very fertile for sociology' (Corradi 1991: 363). Corradi applies hermeneutic concepts to life stories with the aim of building clearer analytical procedures while retaining the depth and richness of life story data. The personal and the biographical are also a key feature of autoethnography and Anderson [18] documents the expansions of autoethnography, auto-anthropology, auto-biographical, personal or self-narrative research and writing and links their growth to the 'turn' toward blurred genres of writing, a heightened self-reflexivity in ethnographic research, an increased focus on emotion in the social sciences' (Anderson 2006: 377). However, critical of 'evocative autoethnography' Anderson (2006) highlights the value of 'analytic autoethnography'. Anderson's historical overview of autoethnography is a very useful context against which to propose five key features of analytic autoethnography. Reading [19] by McIlveen *et al* concludes this volume by offering an exemplar of autoethnography in practice. Here autoethnography is 'presented as a potential vehicle to improve vocational psychologists' own class consciousness and to concomitantly enhance their capacity to grasp social class within their own spheres of research and practice' (McIlveen *et al* 2010: 599).

Volume II Biographical Interviews, Oral Histories and Life Narratives

The second volume in this collection focuses on the more established, interview based, biographical research methods including biographical interviews, oral histories and narrative interviews. The volume commences with articles from authors, spanning the social sciences, who have employed biographical interviews exploring a wide range of research questions. This volume considers the analytical strategies used for interview based biographical research. Alongside this, readings are also included that consider allied debates such as reflexivity, memory, voice and representation.

Volume II builds directly upon the introductory readings in Volume I and commences with a discussion of biographical interactionism by Denzin [20]. Here Denzin offers exemplars of problematic biographical experience – including extracts from four women, preparing food for a family picnic, a 53-year-old printer attending his second A.A. meeting, and letters concerning Flaubert – the biographical method and its relation to interpretive interactionism; and the evaluation, reading, and interpretation of biographical materials (Denzin 2001:1–3). The reading highlights different types of narrative and biography. Miller in Reading [21] also uses examples of biographical research to answer questions such as when to collect life histories. Miller considers practical aspects of the research process such as negotiating with respondents, sampling, finding cases, arranging interviews and so forth.

The next group of readings are exemplars as to how auto/biographical research has been used by researchers. All of the readings raise methodological and analytical questions that anyone interested in undertaking auto/research should consider carefully. However, what they all highlight is the centrality of the narrative to biography and how individual stories can be used to illuminate broader social processes. Readings [22] and [23] are provided by Liz Stanley. In Reading [22] Stanley and Temple offer an introduction to a special edition of the journal *Qualitative Research* in which they consider the theoretical and methodological context of the biographical turn and highlight the productive diversity with narrative research. In Reading [23] Stanley uses data from related projects on the South African War to consider the possibilities of using a narrative based research design to investigate large-scale complex social phenomena, embedded in large-scale data, as compared to the usual narrative research design which is usually small-scale and qualitative.

Using epistolary and fictional texts from the Finnish writer Helmi Krohn (1871–1967), in which the writer had connected fictional writings with her own life, Leskelä-Kärki [24] discusses the processes of identity formation in different textual narratives especially in this intersection between the fictional and epistolary. Although methodologically complex, Leskelä-Kärki (2008) argues that the various writings of Helmi Krohn (novels, letters, biographies)

overlap to 'reveal something of her narratable self. Together, they construct a dialogical and relational textual web in which everything is relevant in attempting to narrate her unique life story' (Leskelä-Kärki 2008: 331).

Barone in Reading [25] uses a collaborative piece of narrative/autobiographical writing to explore the long-term influence of a teacher on a student. Sparkes [26] also offers an innovative analysis of Lance Armstrong's autobiography *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life* informed by autobiographical studies and the sociology of the body and illness. Sparkes argues that 'narratives provide a structure for our very sense of selfhood and identity. That is, when we tell stories about our lives to ourselves and to others, we create a narrative identity' (Sparkes 2004:398). For Sparkes, Armstrong's autobiography provides a way of interpreting, experiencing and responding to serious illness and 'has the potential to provide a blueprint for all illness stories in sport, becoming a vehicle through which athletes comprehend the stories not only of others but also themselves' (Sparkes 2004:424). Illness narratives are also a central feature of Reading [29] where Bingley *et al* consider personal end of life stories. They argue that 'valuing the patient's story is, though, only the start of the engagement of palliative care with narrative research methods. Another important part of the process is to make narrative research work for palliative care' (Bingley *et al* 2008: 653). The authors go on to outline some narrative analysis approaches useful to palliative care and consider potential benefits and challenges in the use of narrative in a clinical end of life setting. Goldman *et al* [30] continue the biographical methods in medical research theme by reporting results from life history interviews conducted as part of the Harvard Cancer Prevention Program project, *Cancer Prevention in Working-Class, Multi-Ethnic Populations*.

In the next Reading [27] Paechter uses an autobiographical approach to explore her own experiences during the 1970s of being an adolescent daughter of a lesbian, arguing that personal experience, if treated theoretically, can illuminate experiences beyond the individual life story. Paechter's insightful analysis highlights the differences in 'coming out' as the child of a lesbian as compared to coming out in relation to ones own sexuality thus illuminating an under-researched aspect of sexuality.

Jones [28] considers the effectiveness of biography 'as a methodological tool for analyzing and interpreting socio-historical phenomena' (Jones 2001: 325) in this case Weber's protestant ethic debate while Humphrey [31], following the work of Denzin (1989), develops the notion of a social career to support the analysis of life stories from two groups involved in, or isolated from, a community in an ex mining area in County Durham, UK. Place is also central to Reading [34] where Riley considers the issues associated with life history interviewing 'in place'. Using research on changing agricultural practices in the Peak District, UK, Riley suggests 'spending time in the everyday lifescape of the farm, as both a work and home site of the respondents, means that the all-to-often "hidden voices" can be accessed, while taking through the

farm (or “interviewing the farm”) means that all narratives can have a legitimate, or at least valued, place in the constructed narrative of the farm’s management history. Conceptualizing place as both medium for, and topic of, discussion can help shift attention away from a face-to-face encounter with a single, lead narrator’ (Riley 2010: 659).

Warren [32] returns to some basic principles and asks questions including ‘what is a life history? What kinds of problems and what kinds of people are best suited for the use of the life history? What motivates people to write life histories? Does the collection procedure affect the contents? Does life history material speak for itself? How does one analyze life history material?’ (Warren 1982: 214). Warren usefully links life studies to the community studies that emerged from the University of Chicago.

Feldman and Howie [33] offer a really interesting discussion of a self-discovery tapestry (SDT) tool that they used in a life history study of community-dwelling older people aged 80 years and older in Australia. Feldman and Howie assess the SDT research instrument and argue that it might be used to further develop specific knowledge of aging to benefit research, education, and practice in gerontology.

The next selection of readings highlight the fact that life stories and auto/biography have been a concern for other methodological approaches concerned with placing lives (or a life) at the centre of social analysis. For example, in Reading [35] Blackman considers hidden ethnographies and emotion as revealed in studies of youth and highlights the centrality of the reflexive turn in such research. The need for reflexivity is a concern for Butler *et al* [40] who examines feminist perspectives of narrative and validating experience in the construction of self. Clary-Lemon [36], Thomas [37], Kortti and Mähönen [38] and Boschma *et al* [39] all approach life stories and auto/biography from the oral history tradition. For example, Clary-Lemon [36], examines how national and Irish immigrant identities are discursively constructed through the use of oral histories, using 15 oral-history interviews of members of the Irish Association of Manitoba. Thomas [37] uses oral histories to ‘access information from those “at the margins” of society who live in distressed neighborhoods’ (Thomas 2004: 50) in places such as Detroit, US and highlights the intertwining of lives, space and place. Kortti and Mähönen [38] use written reminiscences, to explore the changing role of television in the life of Finns while Boschma *et al* [39] reflect on consent and interview practice in oral history research.

Volume II concludes with a reading by Elliot [41] who again reminds us that narrative and biographical research does not necessarily have to be qualitative in terms of research design or analysis. Elliot offers an account of ‘statistical stories’ such as event history analysis and clearly highlights how longitudinal data can be used to highlight the life stories of individuals or groups of individuals.

Volume III Forms of Life Writing: Letters, Diaries and Auto/Biography

It is now well documented that there has been an increase in the use of 'documents of life' (Plummer 2001; Roberts 2002; Hardley 2004) or 'naturally occurring forms of life writing' (Stanley 2004: 224) in social research documents such as diaries and letters are becoming increasingly important for social science researchers (Letherby and Zdrodowski 1995; Mills and Mills 2000; Roper 2001; Stanley 2004; Smart 2007). Despite the fact that the use of letters in social science research is still limited, as compared to literary or historical research, letters can yield a great deal of insight (Plummer 2001: 54) or as Roberts (2002) suggests, letters can provide both factual and substantive information relating to the writer and reader and can 'signify personal attachments to relationships in time and place' (Roberts 2002:62).

As suggested above, letters, diaries and auto/biography, although increasing in popularity, remain under-utilized in social science research. Given this, it is important that the audience for this collection have access to some of the very best research in this area. The volume includes articles that consider the value of 'data' contained within letters, diaries and auto/biography and which illustrate how this data has been analyzed to reveal biographies and their social context. However, the volume also contains articles that reflect critically on this aspect of biographical research where authors have raised questions around issues of authenticity, voice, the writer/reader dichotomy and audience. Overall, the emphasis in this volume will be to provide examples of good research practice relating to the use of letters, diaries and auto/biography in the social sciences, acknowledging both the promise and limitations of such data.

As suggested above Stanley has been a central figure in the sociological analysis of epistolary forms since the early 1990s and her work on the South African feminist writer and theorist Olive Schreiner has been central to this. We commence Volume III with Reading [42] by Stanley in which she offers an analysis of the epistolary aspects of Schreiner's letters, drawing our attention to what Stanley calls 'the eventful I', 'a term which usefully characterizes the relationship between self and 'landscape' in Schreiner's letters and their commentaries on 'race' matters in South Africa. In her letters there is a complicated and often painful scrutiny of the changing dimensions of, and possible futures for, 'the landscape' of South Africa at the time of writing' (Stanley 2002: 263).

Chawansky [44] explores epistolary criticism within sport studies with the aim of encouraging researchers to use 'non-traditional' sport memorabilia as source materials when telling stories about sport and sport practices. Central to this analysis are recruiting letters written by coaches to recruit and attract potential athletes to their University sports programmes. Hallett [45] develops a useful analysis of epistolary forms and reminds us that 'there are, then, no

beginnings and no endings to the temporal effect of letters. . . . Effecting the present with an unsurpassed urgency, and appearing to halt time more insistently than any other genre the letter actually only ineffectually stalls synchronicity, however intense the urgent moment of communion, so that what sought to be a full stop of the clock is merely a comma' (Hallett 2002: 116).

Conaway and Wardrope [46] in their analysis of letters written by the executives in US and Latin American companies found that not only did the letters contain the more standard information, such as financial information, but also contain material that acted as referents to broader phenomenon such as organizational culture. Indeed, the letters used in this study were 'culturally complex', communicating 'more than factual information to their constituencies' (Conaway and Wardrope 2010: 164)

Lockyer and Pickering [48] explore letters of complaints about 'comic discourse'. The letters used in the article were taken from the UK satirical magazine *Private Eye* between 1971 and 1999 and are interesting in that the ways in which, the authors suggest, 'epistolary complaints use forms of linguistic framing to offset potential objections to what they want to say. . .' (Lockyer and Pickering 2001: 633). Bullough and Pinnegar in Reading [49], locate their work in the assertion of C. Wright Mills (1959) that personal troubles must be understood as public issues in the context of history, set out guidelines for those utilizing autobiography and correspondence in their 'self-study' research. Upadhyay [56] considers the meaning of work in Dalit autobiographies.

The readings move on to consider diaries in social research. The next two Readings [51] and [52] are from Andy Alaszweski's book *Using Diaries for Social Research* (2006). In the first of these Alaszweski offers a useful introduction as to the ways in which diaries have been and can be used for social research. However, Alaszweski does not only highlight their value of qualitative or life history research but also considers their inherent value to experimental research. In Reading [52] Alaszweski offers a range of practical guidance on 'getting started' with diary based social research again covering the quantitative and qualitative divide. Bell [53] moves the discussion of diaries in social research on from Alaszweski's more practical account to use daily diaries as a methodology in family and household research. Bell used a 'solicited diary', (account produced specifically at the researcher's request (Bell 1998: 2)) and, in doing so, reflects upon themes such as notions of time, of public and private, and inter-relationships between these themes. Hyers *et al.* [54] also offer a good overview of the research process when using diaries to understand experiences of everyday forms of discrimination, including coding and analysis. They usefully contrast 'personal' diaries with 'research diaries' before moving on to locate diary research as feminist methodology.

Duffy in reading [55] provides an interesting article in which he examines the oral testimonies about the literacy traditions of populations "hidden from history" such as immigrants, refugees, and undocumented persons whose

histories may be unknown or would have been lost. This is an interesting nuance of the debate and the discussion of 'writings about reading and writing' is a useful supplement to the epistolary forms discussion. We conclude the volume with Rolling and Brogden [57] considering subjectivities, naming and identity in written identities.

Volume IV Other Documents of Life: Photographs, Cyber Documents and Ephemera

The final volume in the collection focuses on the 'other' human documents and objects that are used extensively in biographical research. These include photographs, cyber-documents (emails, blogs, social networking sites, web-pages) and other ephemera (such as official documents). This builds upon the assumption that many objects are in some way referents of social life, or as Smith (1998) suggests, every written text inevitably carries something of the author within it and so at least in some small sense is autobiographical. This volume leads the reader through debates relating to the biographical content of more contemporary sources such as e-mails and blogs, reflecting upon how this data is collected, analyzed and represented in social research (for example, see Hardley 2004; Hookway 2008). The volume also includes articles on the biographical basis of photographs and, following Elliot (2005) a brief consideration of quantitative biographical material.

Carol Smart [58] begins Volume IV with a reading that draws upon Mass Observation Project data to consider how the telling of family secrets is tied into the workings of family memories, with Smart (2011: 539) arguing 'that the stories that people tell cannot be regarded as simple factual accounts'. What I like most about Smart's work is the linkage between personal family lives with broader social analysis and the fact she highlights very well how data such as that emerging from the Mass Observation Project can offer insight into the life histories and biographies of those who respond. Like the work of Elliot this opens up the possibility of which data and data sources can be used for biographical research. The analysis is also good in that Smart contrasts well the 'factual' information found in many documents of life with how narratives may be created and therefore not entirely truthful. Alongside official data sources which offer insight into lives and biographies we have to also consider what constitutes a document of life and it is certainly the case that technology and new social media has broadened the definition of documents of life to those objects and artefacts beyond the traditional written or paper based forms. The next few readings point to other sources of biographical material or data that may be of use to the social research. For example, in Chapter three of the ground-breaking *Documents of Life* text, Plummer [59] charts very clearly the 'biographical shift' from diaries and letters to video

diaries and other 'biographical objects' as well as the need to consider the visual as well as the written in biographical research. Such themes are taken up by other authors with Hine [60] considering virtual objects in ethnographic research, Hegel-Cantarella [61] exploring legal documents and legal subjectivities, while Rettberg [62] and Hookway [65] discuss the ways in which social media help us craft the narratives of our lives and how social media can be used in research. In Readings [70] and [71] Wall and then Chattopadhyay touch upon the value of other ephemera artifacts, mementoes or other physical objects such as work memorabilia for illuminating loves and the life course.

Ross *et al* [64], for me, extends the possibilities of biographical research and life story research still further to 'explore the ways in which mobile research methods can be utilized to create enabling research environments, encounters and exchanges, generating time and space for participants and researchers to co-generate and communicate meaningful understandings of everyday lives' (Ross *et al* 2009: 605). By using mobile methods, 'guided' walks and car journey interactions the authors were able to gain clear insights into the everyday lives of the young people being studied.

The final few readings take the discussion into the area of visual data and methods, again a rich source of material for biographical social science research. Sawyer [67] uses visual storytelling, an approach drawing on established methods of 'photovoice' and 'photo elicitation', to study chronic disease self-management in adolescents. The discussion presented by Drew *et al* clearly demonstrates the value of image based research for exploring lives and photograph 'the "realities" of their everyday encounters and experiences' (Drew *et al* 2010:1678). Likewise Bagnoli [68], Lozano *et al* [69] and Libby and Eibach [72] highlight the value of image based research. Lozano *et al* [69] in particular, and their discussion of prison tattoos and criminal lifestyles, suggests alternative ways to think about biography, 'documents of life' and how such associated imagery is analysed. Pink [74] provides a useful overview of visual ethnography using video, a method with great potential in biographical research given the range of volume of personal or home video that is produce each year for 'home use' or posted on social media websites.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Chris Rojek, Jason Hughes, Henrietta O'Connor and Susan Walker for their support whilst I have been editing these volumes. Special thanks must also be extend to Bhairav Dutt Sharma and Judi Burger for their patience and professionalism in accommodating my 'stretching' of their deadlines. Thanks must also go to the authors who have agreed for their papers to appear in these volumes. Any remaining errors are my own.

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Biographical Method

Louis M. Smith

A Perspective on Biography: Domain, Variety, and Complexity

Biographers write lives

Leon Edel, *Writing Lives*, 1984

This statement, “Biographers write lives,” is not so simple as it sounds. It is the first line in Leon Edel’s (1984) “manifesto” on doing biography. “Writing lives” carries connotations that seem more than a bit broader than biography per se. Handbooks and handbook chapters, such as this, are codifications, statements of rules of practice useful to practitioners – in this instance, practitioners of qualitative research methods. When one writes lives, so I would argue, one finds that every rule, even when so simply stated as a “rule of thumb,” always plays through some individual person and becomes his or her interpretation as the rule is thought about or put into practice. And when one writes a handbook chapter, giving form to an idea, such as “biographical method,” the individual author expresses a personal point of view. In an unusual sense, I would argue, every text that is created is a self-statement, a bit of autobiography, a statement that carries an individual signature. Such reasoning suggests that all writing should be in the first person, reflecting that individual voice, even when one writes a chapter in a handbook. At an extreme, paraphrasing Saroyan, I almost want to make the case that it’s autobiography, all down the line.

Source: Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1994), pp. 286–305.

In this essay I will speak in the first person, in spite of some conventional wisdom that suggests “handbooks” are more detached summaries of general knowledge. My audience is students and scholars of qualitative methods who are interested in adding biographical method and life writing to their inquiry repertory. My outline is fairly simple. First is a brief overview of domain or “turf.” Second, I present a process account of “doing biography,” the problems one encounters, the alternatives available, the trade-offs, and the decisions one tries to live with. The third section is a too-brief excursion into the place of biography in the several intellectual disciplines that make use of life writing. Finally, I offer a few tentative generalizations to integrate the overall perspective.

The Domain of Biography: General and Personal

Formally, biography is “the written history of a person’s life” – so says *Webster’s Dictionary*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* nearly agrees, but not quite. “A written record of the life of an individual” is that volume’s second usage. The word *life* appears in both definitions. *Person* and *individual* seem close synonyms, although some might argue that a person, a human being, is only one kind of individual within the larger category of individuals. And some might argue that *record* is different from *history*, perhaps less interpretive. Finally, *written* defines oral traditions as outside the genre. A too-limiting constraint for contemporary students and scholars? Obviously, yes! But the major point of this personal perspective and more formal definitional introduction lies in the domain or turf to be encompassed in any discussion of biography. The *OED*, in its first definition, confounds further the domain of biography as it states, “the history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature.” Women are excluded. The social sciences of anthropology, psychology, and sociology are excluded. From this point on, the concept of biography, and the activity it signifies, becomes contentious – some would argue “political.” And that is an important generalization.

Finally, part of what I want to say in this chapter draws upon several vivid personal professional experiences I have had in qualitative research. Three decades ago, I spent a long semester in an elementary classroom taught by a man named William Geoffrey. We wrote a book about that experience, *The Complexities of an Urban Classroom* (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968). It was cast as a “microethnography” of the classroom, a study of a small social system. In another sense the book was a piece of a biography, the story of one semester of Geoffrey and his teaching. In a further sense, it became part of my autobiography, the most important professional learning experience of my life, an “epiphany” or “turning point,” in Denzin’s (1989) interpretive theory of biography. The text carried, in a subdued way, both of those personal stories. At the time, neither of us thought about the experience or the book as his or

my biography or autobiography. But, I would say now, it can be reconstrued in this alternative way.

The second personal experience that is very pertinent was a follow-up study, the “life histories” of the teachers and administrators of the Kensington Elementary School and the Milford School District. We called that *Educational Innovators: Then and Now* (Smith, Kleine, Prunty, & Dwyer, 1986). Life histories, at least as we developed them in this instance from long, two- to seven-hour, interviews, are briefer, more focused biographies, mostly told from the teachers’ own perspectives. One of the major personal outcomes of that work was the realization that at some point I wanted to do what I came to call “a real biography.” I am now in the middle, actually toward the end, of that experience, a biography that carries the title *Nora Barlow and the Darwin Legacy* (Smith, in press). That effort, as process and product, will flow in and out of this essay. Each of these experiences has led to considerable reflection on “how we did what we did,” what we have called “miniature theories of methodology,” often written as “methodological appendices.” For me, writing this chapter on “biographical method” is not a simple, detached, impersonal exercise. And that may be good or bad, as we shall see.

Variants of Biography

Life writing comes with many labels – portrayals, portraits, profiles, memoirs, life stories, life histories, case studies, autobiographies, journals, diaries, and on and on – each suggesting a slightly different perspective under consideration. Most of these can be tracked through dictionary definitions, illustrations in this text, and various sources listed in the references. Noting variety in biography is perhaps too simple a point. But the world seems full of true believers, individuals who want to restrict options to one or just a few alternatives in creating or criticizing biography. Further, one of the points I want to make is that life writing is in serious contention among readers, critics, and practitioners of biography. For instance, one of the most investigated individuals in the Western world is Charles Darwin.¹ A brief glance at him, his interpreters, and the written records involving him suggests the range of possibilities in doing life writing and the difficulties of interpretation for anyone contemplating biography.

Darwin’s first major publication – life writing, if you will – was his journal (1839) of the five-year voyage of HMS *Beagle* as it circumnavigated the world between 1831 and 1836. Also in 1839, FitzRoy, captain of the *Beagle*, published his journal, a companion volume about the voyage. In 1845, Darwin revised, with significant additions and abridgments, his journal. New, but only slightly different, editions appeared in 1860 and 1870. Some hundred years after the voyage, in 1933, Nora Barlow published *Charles Darwin’s Diary of the Voyage of the H.M.S Beagle*. Approximately one-fourth of the material in that publication was new, previously unpublished Barlow included a number

of footnotes, a list of *dramatis personae* with brief identifying biographical information, maps, six pages of “bibliography,” of Darwin publications from the *Beagle* period, and other related material.

In his late 60s, Darwin wrote an autobiography for the “amusement” of his family. Darwin’s son Francis published the autobiography in 1888 as part of the three-volume *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*. But the autobiography had been expurgated. In 1958, Nora Barlow published a “de-edited” version of the autobiography, restoring some 6,000 words. In recent years, additions to a long list of major biographies continue to appear. Bowlby (1990) and Desmond and Moore (1991) have contributed at great length (500 and 800 pages) major new views. The list continues,² but the major point here is that biography, “life writing,” comes in multiple forms, lengths, focuses, and perspectives. A related point is the importance of insight and creativity on the part of the biographer in the studying, constructing, and writing of lives or parts of lives.

The Special Instance of Autobiography

Autobiography is a special case of life writing. Writing autobiographies and critiques of autobiography is one of the most rapidly developing and, recently, one of the most controversial forms (Lejeune, 1989; Olney, 1980; Stanley, 1992). Autobiography suggests the power of agency in social and literary affairs. It gives voice to people long denied access. By example, it usually, but not always, eulogizes the subjective, the “important part of human existence” over the objective, “less significant parts of life.” It blurs the borders of fiction and non-fiction. And, by example, it is a sharp critique of positivistic social science. In short, from my perspective, autobiography in its changing forms is at the core of late twentieth-century paradigmatic shifts in the structures of thought. And that is quite an agenda. Even as I state these tentative generalizations, I have to pull back, at least to a degree, for the eminent and consummate behavioristic psychologist B. F. Skinner (1977, 1979, 1983) has written a three-volume autobiography that denies every one of the points. The simple lesson is, Don’t generalize or evaluate too quickly about life writing!

With tantalizing good humor, Pritchett (1977), in his presidential address to the English Association, pushed some of the limits of “autobiography.” In his opening paragraph he posed one controversial version of the difficulties this variant of life writing creates for the scholar as reader: “It is common among knowing reviewers to lump autobiography and the novel together as examples of two different ways of telling agreeable lies.” For anyone with “scientific” leanings, doing “fiction” is anathema *Caveat emptor* is an immediate response. The paragraph continues:

But, of course, you have only to start writing your autobiography to know how crucial the distinction is. The novelist distributes himself in disguise

among the characters in his work. It is easy for him to pretend he's a man, woman, or child and, if he likes, in the first person. The autobiographer on the other hand comes forward as the hero or the anti-hero of his story and draws other people into himself.

But Pritchett can't quite let the audience off so easily as he concludes the paragraph with the bon mot:

In a sense he is sort of stripper: the suspense of his story lies in guessing how far he will undress. Or, of course – if he is writing about his career – we see him putting more and more important clothes on (p. 3).

In a penetrating essay, Gusdorf (1980) makes a similar point more pithily, that autobiography is “a sort of posthumous propaganda for posterity” (p. 36)

For the reader, determining what one learns from an autobiography becomes an exercise in critical judgment. Few would argue that they have not learned something of importance from reading an autobiography. But here as well, readers must do their own constructing, reconstructing, and evaluating. Reading Eakin (1989) reinforces such a conclusion.

The larger theory of knowledge issues and dilemmas – What do we know? How confident can we be in our knowledge? – becomes clearly visible in assaying this kind of scholarly inquiry. Olney (1980), in his historical and critical overview, does a kind of analysis on the label *per se*:

auto	bios	graphy
self	life	writing

As his argument proceeds, Olney sees the self in a never-ending transition, ending only in death. And that self will see the life from a different point of view at different points in the life. Finally, and this point is made even more strongly in Gusdorf's (1980) essay from the same volume, the very act of writing forces a self-examination that changes both the self and quite possibly the life as well. In a sense, three open-ended systems are in constant flux, flow, and interchange. From my point of view, positive knowledge about anything in the human condition is a misconstrual. At the same time, one knows more than “nothing.” Knowledge has a quality of a balancing act. The problems are both more subtle and more complex than Pritchett's metaphor of robing and disrobing and Eakin's analysis of Lejeune's definitional problems, although these are important parts of the dilemma.

In related disciplines, the historian Hexter (1971) speaks of the first and second records in historical inquiry. The first is the something “out there” that has happened over time in the past. The “second record” is what each historian brings to the first record – the questions, the values, the beliefs, and the idiosyncratic life experiences, some professional and some personal. If his distinction is credible, history has a quality of being “autohistory.”

The anthropologist Malinowski (1922) makes a similar point, that the anthropologist should bring along the best of contemporary theory when he or she goes into the field setting. In this personal intellectual baggage, Malinowski makes an oft-quoted distinction between “foreshadowed problems” and “preconceived solutions,” a distinction often hard to define in the particular situation. And those foreshadowed problems do not remain static but take on a life of their own in the field and in the writing of ethnographic reports, monographs, and books. The autobiographical, if not autobiography in the formal sense – that is, the personal – enters into any creative intellectual construction. Other students, especially the feminists and minority members of our culture, see larger political and ethical issues within the genre. Liberation, oppression, and multicultural themes get writ large in much autobiography, a point I shall raise later in this essay. Conceptual labels such as “auto/biographical” (Stanley, 1992) attempt to reflect and redirect inquiry in life writing.³

What Life Writers Do: The Craft of Biography

Writing lives is the devil.

Virginia Woolf
(quoted in Edel, 1984, p. 17)

Several years ago, Donald Schön (1983, 1987) introduced the concept of the “reflective practitioner” into the professional literature. In one sense, his argument is simple. Professional practitioners, be they physicians, architects, or teachers – or, one might add, craftspeople or artists – face “situations of practice” characterized by complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict. In my view, that is a formidable set of dimensions. In Schön’s view, the problems professionals face cannot be solved by the formulas of “technical rationality.” I would extend his view to social scientists in general and those doing qualitative case studies in particular. The problems and dilemmas confronting life writers as they practice some aspect or form of the craft of biography have the same quality. The decisions biographers make are constituted by ambiguity, and that is part of the excitement and the agony of doing biography (Smith, 1990, 1992).

Among a number of life writers illustrating the particulars of the processes involved in the craft of biography, none surpasses the insights of Catherine Drinker Bowen (1959, 1968), James Clifford (1970), and Leon Edel (1984). Each of their books is an autobiographical statement of its author’s perspective on biography: Edel – “all my writings on biography which I wish to preserve” (p. 248); Bowen – “the biographer’s way of life, which to my mind is a pleasant way” (p. ix); and Clifford – “the operative concerns of a writer who decides to recreate the career of another person” (p. vii). It is to them, and a few others, I turn for an outline of understandings and generalizations in the practice of the biographical craft.

Selecting a Subject and First Inquiries

The obvious first task of biography is the decision concerning a person to write about. One must select a hero or heroine, be he or she recognized as such or not by the population at large. The autobiographer solves this first problem simply, although questions arise immediately as to why an individual would think his or her life worth telling – for example, has a kind of self-deception already begun? In contrast, the biographer needs to think carefully and analytically, to perceive intuitively an anomaly, or to be serendipitous, that is, just plain lucky. The literature is full of examples of each variant of what social scientists call “problem finding,” a major element in creativity. And if one wants to complicate these simple interpretations, and perhaps make oneself a bit uneasy, follow Leon Edel (1984) as he reflects: “In a world full of subjects – centuries crowded with notables and dunces – we may indeed ask why a modern biographer fixes his attention on certain faces and turns his back on others” (p. 60). The biographer’s personality – motives, fears, unconscious conflicts, and yearnings – reaches out to responsive, if not similar, territory in the person to be subject. The dance of Boswell and Johnson, of Strachey and his eminent Victorians, and of more recent American biographers and their choices is analyzed vividly by Edel. In a compelling short preface to *Young Man Luther*, Erik Erikson (1962) poses the issues this way:

I have attempted in this preface to give a brief rationale for writing this book; I doubt, though, that the impetus for writing anything but a text-book can ever be rationalized. My choice of subject forces me to deal with problems of faith and problems of Germany, two enigmas which I could have avoided by writing about some other young great man. *But it seems that I did not wish to avoid them.* (p. 9; emphasis added)

What meets the eye is never quite what it seems – so Edel and others show and tell us.

Often the problem finding is mixed with discovering an important new pool of data. Derek Hudson (1972) commented in the introduction to his biography of A. J. Munby, the “hero” of the Hannah Cullwick story:

I first became aware of A. J. Munby in the autumn of 1968. I was looking through *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* and came to the heading: MUNBY, ARTHUR JOSEPH (1828–1910). After mentioning various books of his verse, the brief entry concluded: “Munby was secretly and happily married to his servant, who refused to quit her station. The fact explains some of the allusions in his poems.” (p. 1)

Then began his chase to find the manuscripts. That exciting adventure of biographer Derek Hudson is told briefly in the introduction and epilogue to the biography *Munby: Man of Two Worlds*. Later, others picked up on Hudson’s efforts (Hiley, 1979; Stanley, 1984) and Hannah Cullwick, maid-of-all-work,

became a nineteenth-century heroine. Photographic records would illuminate her life, Munby's life, and the nether side of women's work, women's lives, and social class in the Victorian era in England. One finds one improbable biographical story after another.

And, if you want to laugh and cry, and sometimes get angry, read Catherine Drinker Bowen's *Adventures of a Biographer* (1959). Her stories of being denied the role of authorized biographer of Chief Justice Holmes, of being made to feel an outsider at the American Historical Association, and of being snubbed at a display of John Adams's artifacts will make at least some of you want to become biographers. Some of the hellishness of life writing becomes clearer here, as well.

These exploratory activities and experiences, finding the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, Clifford labels "outside research."⁴ Clifford contrasts these with "inside research," the utilizing of library resources. He is content to tell a half dozen of these fascinating and improbable stories of his own adventures and those of others. He does not reach for patterns or conceptualizations of the activities. In contrast, in telling some of my own stories (Smith, 1990, 1992), I initially labeled the outside activity "anthropological biography"; later, I called it "ethnographic biography." The broader and compelling insight, for me, was the similarity between aspects of doing biography and ethnography, the latter having its own well-developed modes of inquiry. What a windfall it would seem if the ethnographic ideas of Bronislaw Malinowski, William Foote Whyte, and Clifford Geertz, among others, could be brought to bear on the craft of biography! The possibilities of intellectual integration and synthesis become readily apparent. One hopes that such possibilities will spill over into practice.

But my central point is the vagaries involved in selecting an individual to be the subject of one's biography and in beginning the inquiries into the life. A further corollary is caution in criticizing or judging too quickly anyone's motivation and selection of a subject for his or her life writing. Major personal issues may be involved.

Creating and/or Using an Archive

Life writing as an empirical exercise feeds on data: letters, documents, interviews. In these days of high intellectual specialization, many biographers miss the joys and the frustrations of creating an archive. But in the doing of archival creation, one runs into a number of interesting difficulties.

In general, part of my personal problem-solving strategy is to have several "tentative models" in my head whenever I approach new problems. As I began on the Nora Barlow task, I had heard that the Margaret Mead archive was housed in the Library of Congress. I already knew that Barlow and Mead were friends. I telephoned the Library of Congress to find out if any of the

Barlow letters were in the Mead collection. I was told, “Yes, we have a number of her letters.” During an American Educational Research Association meeting in Washington I stole away for a couple of half days and photocopied some 80 letters. Substantively, I learned that in her letters Barlow rarely discussed her Darwin work with either Mead or Gregory Bateson. Even as she was working on the HMS *Beagle* materials, Darwin’s time “in the field,” Mead and Bateson were getting married and were researching in Bali and elsewhere – that is, doing their own creative ethnographic work. And somehow no connections were ever drawn. I was amazed at that. That experience led to one of the most significant driving questions in the biography: Who did Nora Barlow talk to about her intellectual work? From a symbolic interactionist perspective, one’s immediate social intellectual world is important in what one does. The thematic question is both relevant and important. I have spent several years answering that question; it is a large part of the structure of the biography *per se*. And it arose as I was building an archive of Nora Barlow’s letters.

My wife and I spent parts of three summers creating the Nora Barlow archives – more than 1,000 A-4 envelopes in 38 R-Kive 725 Bankers Boxes and a small catalogue as well. In very practical terms, we have separate boxes for letters: immediate family, extended family, and friends and colleagues. They are arranged alphabetically and chronologically. Similarly, we have boxes of published and unpublished manuscripts, also ordered chronologically. There are also photos and books and more photos and books. All are now stored in the large temperature- and humidity-controlled wing adjacent to the Manuscripts Room of the Cambridge University Library. It makes one feel almost a “real” archivist. As Edel (1984) says, in his usual pithy style, “Biography, like history, is the organization of human memory. Assembled and hoarded papers are bits and pieces of that memory” (p. 93).

In addition, a major outcome of the archival activity is an overview of the life – original materials over nine or ten decades of her life span of 103 years. The archival work begins the construction of the life. “Becoming an archivist” (Smith, 1992) carries its own stories and theoretical implications. Other biographers “just” confront someone else’s archival efforts. But what would one, you or I, do with Margaret Mead and 600 feet of data? But then, I have never been in a presidential library – Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon. What does one do with that kind of archival wealth? McCullough (1992) hints at all that in the acknowledgments at the end of his recent *Truman*.

Finally, no one library or home study, even one as full as Nora Barlow’s, contains all of the papers that are important for the life story. “Pools of data” exist in all sorts of likely and unlikely places. Finding those is another story in doing biography, as my discussion has already indicated. The intellectual and social process turns back upon itself, in spite of attempts at analytic clarity. The general point is clear: One either finds or builds a data file, an archive, as one step in the process of doing biography. Resourcefulness and imagination can and should occur here as elsewhere in the process.

Finding and Developing One's Theme

One of the most difficult decisions facing the biographer as he or she practices the craft of biography resides in the slant, perspective, or theme that is needed to guide the development of the life to be written. Sometimes the theme comes early, based on an insight from preliminary knowledge and an overview of the subject's life. In two previous essays I have recounted in some detail knowing early that "the Darwin legacy" was the theme to integrate the life of Nora Barlow (Smith, 1987, 1990). The perception was grounded in the knowledge of her four books, written late in life, the first as she turned 50, and then one each in her 60s, 70s, and 80s. But sometimes also, reconstructions vie with the original decision as new data enter, new facets of the life begin to form, new views of the significance of the story arise, and new audiences appear or become salient. The biographer's agony is caught with what might be called "the restless theme" (Smith, 1992). In the biography of Nora Barlow, the "intellectual aristocracy" became a major competing theme. I agonized over that during much of my spring 1990 sabbatical in Cambridge. Which theme is superordinate and which is subordinate? Which will carry better the burden of the evidence of the life? And for which audience? The biographer's internal argument over which theme is the more powerful eventually is entangled in the question of "audience" and publisher. To whom does one want to speak, and who wants to produce the book?

The decisions regarding theme are both part of, and followed closely by, what Bowen (1968) calls "plotting the biography." "Conflict," "suspense," "humor," and "humanity" are some of the terms she uses to highlight issues and decisions regarding plot. Chronology is always important, but a simple chronology of birth, education, marriage, career, and death won't do – for her. What is the book to say about the hero or heroine? Is it a happy or tragic life? And what of the times the central figure lived through? And what scenes and incidents give the life a fullness and a richness? And who are the friends and acquaintances who breathe vitality into the existence? And how do they come and go over the years? In Bowen's view the life writer must have all this finding, settling on, and developing the theme in mind as he or she starts to put words linearly onto sheets of paper. And then, at least in some instances, the writing takes over and transforms things – such as a theme – once again.

"The Figure under the Carpet"

In the flow of interrelated problems and decisions – picking a subject, developing a theme, becoming aware of the multilayered contexts of lives – none is more difficult than insight into "the figure under the carpet," as Leon Edel (1979) phrases the problem of coming to know the essence of one's subject. The metaphor is mixed but vivid. From one perspective, the view can make

one pause, if not forget that “essences” are in high debate these days, and the best one can do is construct a pattern that fits well the data one has of the life of the person being studied and written about. The figure under the carpet is not so much found as constructed. The “mask of life” – the appearance, the facade, the overt behavior one sees (or finds in letters, diaries, and other documents) – and the underlying “life myth” – the major inferences into the character and personality of the person being written about – are like a tapestry, which shows images on its front side and displays the underlying construction on the back. In three pages, Edel dissects Ernest Hemingway – the macho, warring, champion of all he undertook tapestry and “the troubled, uncertain, insecure figure, who works terribly hard to give himself eternal assurance,” the figure under the carpet (p. 27). Great biographers look for that figure, construct it carefully, and paint it convincingly; lesser ones never do. Edel, thinking and acting like a composite of Sherlock Holmes and Sigmund Freud, hunts among slips of the tongue, anomalies in everyday behavior, the significant gestures, and the moving and poignant statement in a letter, essay, or novel for clues to that elusive figure.

Bowen, denied the letters of Justice Holmes, which were reserved for the official, the definitive, the authorized biography, talked to, so it seems, nearly everyone who had known Holmes. Eleven of his twelve law secretaries agreed to be interviewed by her. And often she sought out the places where Holmes had lived and worked. Through small detail she pursued the figure under the carpet. Even here, however, subtleties occur. As Bowen (1959) notes, “But the subject of a biography cannot remain at one age – at fifty, at twenty-five, at forty. He must grow old and the reader must see and feel the process” (p. 65). And what, we might ask, of the life myth? How does it evolve, change, grow, and decline – if it does?

Each biographer carries his or her own conception of personality, or character, as it is called by literary biographers. To Virginia Woolf (1927/1960), biography was about the truthful transmission of personality. The truth is like “granite,” and personality, at least in the selection of which truths to present, is like a “rainbow.” In Woolf’s view, truth and personality make one of the biographer’s perennial dilemmas. Present-day scholars often see truth as less than granite. As I will argue shortly, sometimes the implicit personality theories can be helpful as sensitizing concepts, and at other times they can be blinders. Once again, Edel (1984) suggests imaginative – and perhaps impractical – ways of coming to terms with such problems – reading psychoanalytic literature, being psychoanalyzed, or even entering into collaborative relationships with an analyst in doing biography. From my perspective, and in a not so simple manner, the biographer brings all of his or her own personality, understandings, and experience to the task of creating a view of the individual under study. If that be true, it poses severe problems for traditional social science, for the sources and implementation of creativity can only be bolstered by

technocratic procedures, not carried by them. That raises a long and tortuous argument for those of us working in that tradition.

Form and Shape

Even as one comprehends databases, themes, and underlying patterns or figures in the biography, other dilemmas and choices remain. One of the biographer's major decisions lies in the form or type of biography to be attempted. Clifford (1970) presents a taxonomy of types and a discussion of the factors to be considered in the decision. The underlying dimension of the classification is the degree of objectivity to subjectivity, perhaps better labeled the degree of intrusion of the author into the manuscript. He suggests five points on the continuum.

The "objective biography" is impossible in an absolute sense, but some biographies tend toward a factual collation, usually held together by chronology, with minimal biographer interpretation. In terms of an earlier perspective, if not cliché, "the facts speak for themselves." This type of biography shades into the "scholarly-historical," a form retaining heavy factual emphasis and a strong chronological organization, but with increasing historical background and attempts to develop the underlying character of the subject as defining features. The intruding author is beginning to construct a form with context. This is perhaps the most prevalent type among academic biographers.

The "artistic-scholarly" form involves some of the same exhaustive research, but the biographer takes the role "of an imaginative creative artist, presenting the details in the liveliest and most interesting manner possible" (p. 85). The rainbow is coming to dominate the granite. According to Clifford, most of Catherine Drinker Bowen's biographies fall here. And these efforts are damned by some as "popular." In this regard, I find Bowen's (1959) comment as she attended a frustrating-to-her meeting of the American Historical Association particularly instructive: "There are ways to come at history, I thought, pursuing my way down the hotel corridor. Let us say the professors come at it from the northeast and I from the southwest. Either way will serve, provided the wind blows clean and the fog lifts" (p. 102). Domains of intolerance and true belief infuriated her, and sometimes the wind does not blow clean and the fog does not lift.

"Narrative biography" involves a fictionalizing of scenes and conversations, based on letters and documents, that make the writing both factual and highly imaginative at the same time. The end of the continuum is the fifth form, the "fictional biography," almost a historical novel, with minimal attention to original research and primary resources. The difficulty in putting biographies into these categories appears when one names Irving Stone as an instance of an author whose work falls into the fifth category. For example, correspondence in the Nora Barlow archives contains questions from him to

her about items such as the nature of the china used in the Darwin household, asked as Stone wrote his biography of Darwin, *The Origin*.

The continuum is helpful for biographers as they think about the kind of book they want to write or feel they are able to write. And that, the special talents and skills the biographer brings to the task, is an undertreated issue in my view.⁵

Context and Writing

Heroes and heroines do not exist in isolation. Contexts exist in lives and context exists in writing lives. In a vivid illustration, Bowen suggests the problems in beginning and ending the written biography per se. In *Yankee From Olympus*, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., does not appear in the first 80 pages (seven chapters) of the biography, for to understand Holmes, Bowen argues, one must understand New England, Yankee traditions, and Holmes's father, the senior Oliver, who was poet, physician, professor, and storytelling author of "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table." Other biographies begin alternatively. If the subject is well known, the "opening scene" can be of his or her birth; if the subject is unknown, it might be better to present "some scene to catch the reader's attention, show that the hero and his doings are important and exciting and perhaps have a bearing upon history" (Bowen, 1968, p. 21). So Bowen contributes to a reflective conversation with her fellow biographers on a particular dilemma of the craft.

Bowen (1968) also addresses the issue of how the biographer thinks through the "end scene." Most striking perhaps is her account of her book *John Adams and the American Revolution*. Adams's last words were "Thomas Jefferson survives"; he was unaware that Jefferson had died the same day. As Bowen notes, "This double departure of the heroes was epic, tremendous, and needed only to be set down in its bare facts. How could a biographer miss, I asked myself, and looked forward with relish from the day Adams was chosen as subject" (p. 38). But she lost her plot, the proportions of the life, and the original shape of the book, and she had a manuscript already book length with some 50 years to go before 1826. She ended the story in 1776, not a bad eventful moment, but still not the grander ending scene she really wanted. Along the way in her essay, Bowen raises important ideas, such as the "burden of the whole," the keeping of the totality in mind as one writes, the fact that "sometimes luck favors the biographer," the joy in finding a key note lost for years; she notes that "history came at least to a partial rescue" in her case, in the form of what would become Independence Day, July 4. And that provided a significant way of ending the biography, even if less than the possibilities of 1823.

Following upon Bowen, a neophyte biographer can be sensitized and begin thinking through his or her specific subject and situation. Critical judgment,

reflective practice, is never right or wrong in some absolute or technical rule-application sense. Nonetheless, some decisions work out better than others, and helping with all this is what a theory of biographical method should be about.

A Brief Conclusion on Craft

Virginia Woolf was half right: Writing lives is the devil. But a strand of intellectual excitement, approaching ecstasy, also exists. If one is fortunate to find a heroine or hero from another time, place, and culture, the biographical activity takes on a strong cast of ethnography. Earlier craft skills come into play, even though always with a bit different flavor. The intellectual problems seem to demand more of creativity than of technical or rule-governed problem solving. And that is a challenge to the practice of traditional social science. Some of my students and colleagues suggest that the integration might occur in “metacognition,” self-directed thinking about thinking. My own tentative choice of guiding labels is “reflective practice,” caught vividly by Donald Schön (1987): “Clearly, it is one thing to be able to reflect-in-action and quite another to be able to reflect on our reflection in action so as to produce a good verbal description of it; and it is still another thing to be able to reflect on the resulting description” (p. 31). The problems of the craft of biography are “messy,” not “well-formed.” The problems contain elements of ambiguity, complexity, uncertainty, value conflict, and uniqueness.

In too-brief fashion I have presented some of the dilemmas and some of the several taxonomies of resolutions used by such master biographical practitioners as Catherine Drinker Bowen, James Clifford, and Leon Edel. Thinking along with them creates images and metaphors for handling one’s own devils. Doing biography is a great way to live.

Disciplinary Strands: Alternative Interpretations

There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography.

Paul Valéry
(quoted in Olney, 1980, preface)

Biographical method can be viewed in alternative, and perhaps more abstract, ways than as a craft or process. For better and worse – that is, the benefits of focused vision and the limits of sometimes narrowed vision – much intellectual activity is organized as academic disciplines. Several of the disciplines have claims on biography and biographical method. Even though they can be clustered into literature, history, social science, education, and feminist and minority perspectives, each of these can be differentiated further. Even a

cursory scanning of references and illustrations indicates that these disciplinary points of view often run relatively independent of each other.⁶ That independence seems limiting, if not tragic, for students and scholars who want diverse images and models of how life writing might be conceived and carried out, to enhance their own intellectual creativity. And lurking behind, almost hauntingly so, is the idea of autobiography, undermining many of the claims of detachment and specialization from the disciplines. Are our theories, as Valéry suggests, “simple” extensions of our autobiographies? If so, what then becomes of social science?

Literary Biography

Reading literary biographies and accompanying statements of biographical method is exciting, especially if one is partial to competition, conflict, and sharp jousting. The contentiousness is neither superficial nor limited to domains and turf, but spills over into style and substance of the biography. Note the strongly stated positions of two eminent English intellectuals and biographers. In his preface to *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey (1918) reoriented English biography with his critique of traditional biographies: “Those two fat volumes with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead – who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design?” (p. viii). In his view, “it is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as it is to live one”.

In 1932, G. M. Trevelyan, in a new preface to an older biography (1876) seemed to write almost in rebuttal and in elaboration to Strachey. He comments regarding the “life and letters” biography:

My father [G. O. Trevelyan] certainly chose the form of biography most suitable to his uncle [Lord Macaulay]. He had not Boswell’s rare gift of reproducing the essence of conversation, nor did Macaulay’s real strength lie, like Dr. Johnson’s in his tongue, but rather in his pen. His letters would reveal him and amuse the reader. It would have been equally beside the mark to treat Macaulay in a subjective, psychological character sketch, such as “the new biography” prefers, with the documents and letters omitted. Macaulay was not subtle enough for such subtleties, and his letters are much too good to miss. His description of his interview with the clergyman who thought Napoleon was the Beast in Revelations (p. 342) both amuses us more and tells us more about Macaulay than a page of psychological analysis. In this book the man lives and speaks for himself (pp. v–vi).

In this short paragraph, Trevelyan raises a much more complex set of events facing the biographer: the special talents of the biographer, the special strengths of the subject, the importance of an interpretive character sketch versus letting the individual speak for him- or herself, and the need for or desirability of a psychological analysis.

The debate continues to the present. Other perspectives are possible as well. More recently, Horner (1987), in her brief introduction to the Radcliffe Biography Series, has noted that “fine biographies give us both a glimpse of ourselves and a reflection of the human spirit. Biography illuminates history, inspires by example, and fires the imagination to life’s possibilities. Good biography can create lifelong models for us” (p. ix). That position opens further doors insofar as it is reminiscent of Kluckhohn’s (1949) powerful statement of anthropology being a “mirror of man.” Concepts and metaphors of biography run in many directions.

Earlier transformations occurred as well Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* dominated the English scene after its publication in 1791. Rogers, in an introduction to the 1980 Oxford University Press edition, comments on the book with phrases such as “lonely eminence,” “towered over lesser works,” and “dominated the skyline” of biography. In my view, Boswell’s own eight-page introduction is a marvelous and strikingly modern essay in its own right. He presents a view of his relationship to Johnson – in my words, that of “humble servant.” He was a friend of some 20 years; had the biography in mind from the start; cleared his “rights of human subjects,” in that Johnson knew what he was about; kept voluminous records of activities, conversations, and events; cautioned against “panegyrick”; urged the importance of chronology; argued the method of conversation as the method to “best display his character”; cited Plutarch on the importance of an action of small note, a short saying, or a jest as the door to an individual’s “real” character; quoted Johnson about how to study and understand Johnson; and staked his territory vis-à-vis other biographers who knew Johnson less well. Boswell read widely and knew about biography; he reflected well upon the process, and he wrote a memorable biography.

Illuminating Boswell’s eight pages is Edel’s (1984) brilliant essay on Boswell. Here we find Boswell arranging meetings, setting scenes, and determining the course of conversations – shades of Monet arranging and planting his gardens at Giverny to enhance his paintings of the bridge and lily ponds! Who and what is to be believed about anything in biography? It seems that one pits one’s own intelligence against the world and others’ views of the world, if they be two phenomena, gathers data and evidence from whatever simple and esoteric sources one can find, and does the best one can. And that can be exciting, frustrating, and terrifying – if one has high need of certainty.

So change and contentiousness exist, and have existed for centuries, in and around literary biography. Further implications for the life writer seem to follow on this generalization. In situations of intellectual conflict considerable room exists for multiple alternatives, choices, reflection, and creativity, that is, individual agency. Artistry as well as factual representation and reality, in varying proportions, vie with each other. Granite and rainbows again! That seems another important generalization for individuals who want to write lives.

History

History lies somewhere between the humanities and the social sciences. However, construed in a disciplinary sense, history has claims on biography, as our introductory definitions indicate. In a series of three major essays, Lawrence Stone (1981) has addressed the relationship of history to the social sciences, the nature and place of prosopography in historical thinking, and the changing emphasis on narration in history. But it is the “prosopography” essay that is most germane here. In resurrecting the classical label for “group biography,” Stone argues for its contemporary importance.

The collective study of lives, Stone asserts, leads to insight into two of the most basic problems in history. The roots of political actions lie in the motives, personalities, and characters of key individual actors in any set of important historical events. Private events and papers relate a different facet of politics than do public events and speeches. And it is not only the great men and women who are important, but also the other people who surround them in complex social events. Stone argues that not only is biography important, but group biography, that is, prosopography, adds a further dimension. The social and symbolic interactionists from other social sciences would strongly agree.⁷ Second, the study of group biography gives insight into the larger problems of social structure and social mobility. Networks, overlapping boards, connections, and family relationships are built on individual people interacting together for their own interests. Mapping those careers and linkages is an important means of understanding.

In a small way, we found this kind of approach, what we called life histories of a group of educational administrators and teachers who had created the innovative Kensington Elementary School, to be a powerful way of understanding the rise and fall of the school and the complexities of educational innovation and reform (Smith et al., 1986; Smith, Dwyer, Prunty, & Kleine, 1988; Smith, Prunty, Dwyer, & Kleine, 1987). Overall we blended history, ethnography, and life history as inquiry methods. Part of our rationale concerned the idea of a case study, a bounded system, in our view. The individual life history pieces or brief biographies were interlinked because of the time the staff taught and administered together in the Kensington Elementary School and the Milford School District. That linkage presented possibilities of understanding beyond any one individual biography. Powerful group patterns emerged in their lives.

One of Stone’s conclusions is that group biography can link together “constitutional and institutional history” and “personal biography,” two of the oldest and best developed parts of the historian’s craft, but ones that have run too independent of each other. Biography becomes not an end in itself, but a helpful element in the pursuit of other ends.⁸ In addition, the rise of oral history, investigative journalism in the political domain, and the making of archives into presidential libraries offers an array of possibilities to the

historian as life writer. Old ideas and methods take on a fresh look and open up imaginative possibilities in new contexts.

Social Science Perspectives

Although variation exists among social scientists, most argue that biography should move beyond narration and storytelling of the particular into more abstract conceptualizations, interpretations, and explanations. Writing lives can serve multiple purposes. In general, “scientists” seek patterns in the forms of concepts, hypotheses, theories, and metaphors. These patterns are both the fruits of scientific inquiry and practice and the stimulus for further inquiry and improved practice. For convenience, I divide the social scientists by discipline – anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists. Some might argue that a trichotomy of conservative, liberal, and radical is a more powerful split. And others see the paradigmatic assumptions – positivism, neopositivism, interpretivism, and critical theory as more powerful organizing conceptions. Finding the joints at which to cut “nature” seems more and more difficult. Some would argue that Plato was wrong – at least for social science and the humanities.

Anthropologists Anthropologists have had a long relationship with biography, mostly under the rubrics of “life histories” and “culture and personality.” Langness (1965: Langness & Frank, 1981) presents an overview of this history and the multiple approaches being used. To pick only one strand, Oscar Lewis and Robert Redfield illustrate some of the excitement in the field. Both did ethnographies of Tepoztlan, attempts at a total view, Redfield’s (1930) in the 1920s and Lewis’s (1951) “restudy” two decades later. But the views were different: the positive side, bright view of Redfield contrasted with the dark side, nether view of Lewis. And that posed a severe intellectual problem for holistic anthropologists. Redfield (1955) responded with *The Little Community*, one of the most provocative and, I would maintain, underappreciated methodological books in social science. Essentially, he argued for a half dozen approaches for studying the small community. Three chapters are particularly important for the interpretations here – “A Typical Biography,” “A Kind of Person,” and “An Outlook on Life.” The sequence of events as an individual passes through a culture during the course of a life is one view of that culture. And the resulting kind of person and his or her outlook on life are related additional ways of viewing a culture. These views play off against ecological, social structural, and historical perspectives. Cultures can be written through lives. And that is part of some of the best of Lewis’s later work, life stories of individuals and families who moved from rural Tepoztlan to urban Mexico City. In *Five Families* (1959) and *The Children of Sanchez* (1961), Lewis tape-recorded individual life stories and, with only minor editing, presented them as documents of lives, “multiple autobiographies,” to use his label. Out of this work came the controversial conception of the “culture of poverty.”

Valentine (1968) raised a “critique and counterproposals” of Lewis’s use of the long autobiographical life story data for the kind of theoretical interpretations lying within the conception of the “culture of poverty.”

After writing one of the most autobiographically laden accounts of fieldwork ever presented in his “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” (in Geertz, 1973), Geertz, in a more recent book, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988), faces directly the issue of the dual role of the anthropological investigator between the horns of the “other,” the individual or the culture being studied, and the “text,” the narrative written about the world “out there.” With his usual persuasive style, he makes the point that the reader’s acceptance of the text occurs not because of its factual weight or the theoretical places being created, but rather because of its narrative strength, based on rhetorical devices, convincing the reader that he, the anthropologist, was really there “Vas you dere Sharlie?” is his paraphrase of an earlier literary statement. And what better, in his earlier “Deep Play,” than the scramble by Geertz and his wife to escape the police breaking up the cockfight and the charade of having tea with a local dignitary when all the postfight commotion was occurring Geertz’s “host” had not only been at the cockfight but had helped organize it Geertz’s more recent analysis, without reference to the early piece, is a vivid exposition of that earlier writing strategy. For Geertz the incident was a major breakthrough in community acceptance of his fieldwork. For the reader, it authenticated everything substantive he had to say about Bali. I was left with the feeling, “After that episode, how could he have gotten anything wrong?” But Geertz in 1988 writes not only of the relationship between the investigator and the community or individual being studied, but mainly of the relationship between the investigator and the kind of text he or she has written. Although not intended as biography, the narrative of his argument is carried by the intellectual and professional lives of four major anthropologists – Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, and Benedict. The writing of lives can and does serve many purposes.

Recently, Rabinow (1977) and Crapanzano (1980), both writing Moroccan culture and biography, suggest difficulties and creative possibilities in understanding and blending life writing and cultural analysis. The identities of literature and science are lost and recreated brilliantly.

Psychologists. Psychologists have trouble with biography. On the one hand, psychoanalytic literature has influenced countless life writers; Leon Edel is one of the more noteworthy. With a psychoanalytic perspective, almost as a wand, he probes problems, issues, and interpretations with ease and facility as he writes biographies, critiques biographies, and surveys the tremendous volume of literature on biography. But academic psychologists have never lived easily with psychoanalysis. On the other hand, too, psychologists have a passion for truth, and a particular kind of truth at that, exemplified in experimentation, quantification, and tested propositions. Some see psychology as

physics writ large. Garraty (1954, 1957), citing varied attempts at quantification of life documents, such as graphology, content analysis, and discomfort-relief quotients, turns his hand to issues of personality in biography. Though raised in that tradition, I now find it chilling to the creativity involved in the writing of lives.

A kind of middle ground is found in the work of Gordon Allport and Henry Murray. Allport, an out-of-step third-force psychologist, produced a fascinating set of books relevant to biography. His well-received *Personality* (1937) was followed by his classic *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science* (1942), and the brilliant *Letters from Jenny* (1965). In the last, he presented and then explored a large collection of letters written by a woman named Jenny, mostly to her son and daughter-in-law. They are vivid, troubling, introspective accounts of both her life as a working woman and mother and her accompanying mental states. The exploration involved Allport in a consideration of several competing theories for understanding and explaining the letters. Existential psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis vied with his own structural-dynamic approach. He concluded with an estimate of Jenny's mental health. The life story, told mostly in the letters, with minimal commentary, was in the service of general theory. Allport also took up the challenge of Stefan Zweig in his infamous quote regarding writers such as Proust and Flaubert: "Writers like these are giants in observation and literature, whereas in psychology the field of personality is worked by lesser men, mere flies, who have the safe anchorage of a frame of science in which to place their petty platitudes and minor heresies" (quoted in Allport, 1960, p. 6). Allport (1960) makes the case for both literature and psychology in his "Personality: A Problem for Science or a Problem for Art?"

Henry Murray's contribution to biography also lies in his explorations in personality, and in a book by the same title (Murray et al., 1938); in his invention of the TAT, the thematic apperception test; and in his collaboration with a remarkable group of colleagues and students who have pursued problems in the nature of lives. With the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn he edited the well-recognized *Personality in Nature, Society, and Culture* (Kluckhohn & Murray, 1953). Concepts such as needs, presses, proceedings, serials, plans, schedules, ego strength, and proactive systems guided the work of several generations of American psychologists interested in lives and life writing. *Lives in Progress* (White, 1952) is a major illustration of the post-Murray approach. The eclectic emphasis on biology, family, social circumstances, and the individuals themselves appears and reappears. Erikson, another former Murray colleague, in his *Childhood and Society* (1963) and his *Young Man Luther* (1962) brought the "eight ages of man," "identity crises," and other conceptualizations to life writing. The ideas of Murray and others in the psychobiography and psychohistory traditions are extended in McAdams and Ochberg (1989) and Runyan (1982, 1988).

In the more recent *Seasons of a Man's Life*, Levinson (1978) accents the stages in adult life and the difficult transitions – most notably, the mid-life crisis – as a framework for the consideration of a life. The dilemma of the general and the particular appears once again. Academic psychologists tend to pursue the former with greater zeal. Although major disagreements exist here, Coles, in a series of books that includes *Women of Crisis II* (Coles & Coles, 1980), attacks vigorously the social scientists and the theorists, even while developing and presenting, mostly implicitly, his own more subtle theoretical point of view (Smith et al., 1986, pp. 21–23). It is an exciting world; the granite and rainbow dichotomy does not rest easily within psychology.

As much as any disciplinary group, psychologists have used biography in the service of other ends. One illustration must suffice. In his very stimulating *Contrary Imaginations*, Liam Hudson (1966) collected short, open-ended autobiographical statements of clever English schoolboys. “Just describe those aspects of your life which seem to you interesting or important” provoked responses useful in clarifying major hypotheses in his study. More far-reaching was his turning the autobiographical perspective on himself and his career shifts from experimental psychology to a more humanistic kind of psychology in his *The Cult of the Fact* (1972). He sets his authorial position with a powerful initial sentence: “The story begins in Cambridge, in the spring of 1968; my eleventh year in Cambridge, and my third in the superlative if stagey ambience of King’s College” (p. 15). For anyone who has spent any time in Cambridge, the invitation is irresistible. Insights and personal help come in strange ways! I have now a major lead toward revising and extending my *Doing Ethnographic Biography: A Reflective Practitioner at Work During a Spring in Cambridge* (1992). Serendipity once again! Psychologists really should have less trouble with biography.

Sociologists. Like psychologists and anthropologists, sociologists have been ambivalent toward biography. But writing lives, in the form of life histories, became part of the world of the Chicago school with the publication of Clifford Shaw’s *The Jack-Roller* in 1930. And life history was only one of the broader category of qualitative inquiries, labeled better as “case studies.” From the Gold Coast to the Ghetto, they were to have a permanent impact on sociological thought and method. And out of such work, and the seminal thought of George Herbert Mead, was to come the very influential symbolic interactionism as a social science point of view. In two short introductions, one to a republication of Shaw’s book and the other to his own collected essays, Howard Becker (1966, 1970) makes the case for both this kind of “close-up” sociology and the place of biographical and autobiographical life histories in sociology.

I can remember reading several of the Chicago case study books in a general sociology course when I was an undergraduate, being absorbed in them and the four wishes of Thomas as discussed in Waller (1932), but not being able to integrate all that into the kind of “scientific” psychology I was to learn

in graduate school. Now, several decades later, as a latter-day practitioner of case studies of schools, curricula, and school districts, and life histories of teachers, and now of more formal biography, I find the power of the Chicago perspective awesome.

Becker makes the argument for life histories as part of a “mosaic” of community and institutional investigations, as important “touchstones” for considering any abstract theory of person and community, and the testing of implicit assumptions about human beings in the larger sociological studies. Biography has an overriding dimension, the chronology between birth and death. In a social science that often makes pleas for “process” interpretations, the clash between the synchronic and the diachronic usually ends in the victory of the more structural synchronic. Biography, and history as well, opens the theorist to data organized on a diachronic timeline. In addition, biography with a concern for the way a specific individual perceives and construes the world also moves the sociological interpreter toward the subject’s perspective rather than the observer’s point of view, a major issue labeled by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz as “experience near” versus “experience distant” conceptualizations.

Following in these same traditions, Denzin (1989) raises his sociological perspective as “interpretive biography,” the creating of literary and narrative accounts and stories of lived experience. He pursues in great analytic detail the development of taxonomies and concepts; the multiple ways lives can be studied, construed, and written; and the implications of taking one perspective or another. “Turning points,” the never-ending construction and reconstruction of lives, and obituaries as documents (that is, brief life statements), the cultural categories we use in describing lives, and the ethical responsibilities in studying lives, suggest the creative range of ideas his brand of sociology brings to the biographical task. In much the same tradition, with some stronger overtones of radicalism as well, Bertaux (1981) edited an international collection of essays, *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*. Sociology is reclaiming one of its important roots. C. Wright Mills (1959) would be pleased as history, biography, and social structure have moved a step closer to productive syntheses.

Taking the sociological position just a shade more toward journalism are life writers such as Studs Terkel (1970, 1972), who describes his study *Hard Times* as an “oral history.” In a page or two to a half dozen pages he presents brief vignettes of the lives of individuals who lived through the Depression years of the 1930s in the United States. One might see it as a collection of “episodes” in autobiographical life stories, with some biographical editing by Terkel from his tape-recorded interviews. In his introduction, labeled “A Personal Memoir,” he classifies the effort this way:

This is a memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic. In recalling an epoch, some thirty, forty, years ago, my colleagues experienced pain, in some instances; exhilaration, in others. Often it was a fusing

of both. A hesitancy, at first, was followed by a flow of memories: long-ago hurts and small triumphs. Honors and humiliations. There was laughter, too. (Terkel, 1970, p. 17)

Inner perspectives, experience near phrasings and conceptualizations, and tidal waves of feeling and emotion present individuals and their lives. These coalesce into larger images and patterns. Whether journalism, or oral history, or a kind of sociology, the labels seem less relevant than the power. Terkel brings to the reporting and evoking of images. Most social scientists would envy his ability to capture his focus in *Working*:

It is about search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. Perhaps immortality, too, is part of the quest. To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book. (Terkel, 1972, p. xiii)

Creativity and insight come in varied forms. Honoring them is high on my list of life-writing priorities.

Feminist and Minority Perspectives

Anyone who has ever felt left out, ignored, or powerless has the beginnings of an understanding of the feminist and minority perspectives that have arisen in recent decades with great vigor and anger in the field of biography and autobiography. From the *Oxford English Dictionary's* early limiting definitions of who is included and excluded to the more personal reports of experience, the argument grows. In a small but poignant and potent personal experience, while walking through the corridors of the Cambridge University Library, actually from the Manuscripts Room on the third floor to the Tea Room in the basement, while working on the biography of Nora Barlow, I noted an exhibition of books from the seventeenth century focusing on the "Worthies of England" (Smith, 1992). Though "worthies" was a label new to me, it seems to say it all. In that era it was clear who was important and who decided on the criteria of importance. That human experience is gendered is the fundamental truth underlying the feminist perspective. Race and class as categories of individuals echo, follow quickly upon, similar assumptions.

Examining issues in equity, power, social structure, agency, self-definition, and their interrelations, so it is argued by feminists, will be enhanced by the writing of all kinds of personal narratives of all kinds of lives of all kinds of women. Images, models, and insights for change exist in the life-writing narratives and critical reflections upon those stories. A gripping particularistic account of these issues appears in the "Origins" chapter of the Personal Narratives Group (1989) book, *Interpreting Women's Lives*. Variations in lifestyles, with their attendant satisfactions and deep dissatisfactions, appear along

with an array of conceptual attempts to broaden the meaning of the experiences recounted. This broadening occurs with counternarratives as illustrations and arguments for women who are not thinking or feeling or behaving as they are “supposed to,” constructing and negotiating new alternatives, and the troubling constraints posed by one’s disciplinary training in the humanities versus the social sciences.

Ultimately, the Personal Narratives Group structured its book around four major sensitizing concepts: context, narrative form, narrator-interpreter relations, and truths. Each of these “lenses” or “pieces of madras cloth” illuminates the meanings of women’s life stories. *Context* refers to the particular conditions that prevail in any society at any moment in time. *Narrative forms*, the fluid shapes into which one’s creative constructions of lives flow, are rich with alternatives. The *narrator-interpreter* relations conception addresses the multiple people involved in living, narrating, writing, critiquing, and meaning making in biography, and also the complex interrelationships of the individuals themselves. *Truths* refers to “the multiplicity of ways in which a woman’s life story reveals and reflects important features of her conscious experience and social landscape, creating from both her essential reality” (p. 14).

If those abstractions, retold here for brevity, lose their concrete meaning, the reader has only to go to any of the individual essays for the particulars. For instance, Swindell’s essay reinterprets Stanley (1984) on the Hannah Cullwick diaries. The diaries were written by a Victorian maidservant, a “maid-of-all-work,” at the urging of A. J. Munby, “man of two worlds,” her male exploiter and later husband (if these be different). Recently they were published by a feminist press and interpreted by the editor (Stanley, 1984). More recently, the diaries have been reinterpreted by Swindell, and given additional interpretation by the Personal Narratives Group editors. Now each reader, with the help of Derek Hudson’s (1972) biography of Munby and Hiley’s (1979) book of photographs (mostly Munby’s) *Victorian Working Women: Portraits From Life*, can make his or her own interpretation. It is an incredible story – or set of interrelated stories. The exciting complexities of “auto/biographical” methods, to use Stanley’s phrasing, in the late twentieth century are readily apparent.

Alternative, more conventional if not more tempered, accounts appear in such highly discussed books as Mary Catherine Bateson’s (1990) *Composing a Life* and Carolyn Heilbrun’s (1988) *Writing a Woman’s Life*. Bateson’s five biographical stories of lives raise conceptualizations such as “unfolding stories,” “improvisation” versus “a vision already defined,” “patchwork quilt” as a metaphor for a life, and “a rethinking of the concept of achievement.” I was reminded of an earlier and personally influential book by Gruenberg and Krech (1952), *The Many Lives of Modern Woman*, which provided a metaphor and guided the decisions of some of us a generation or two ago.

Heilbrun’s opening sentence gives pause to anyone contemplating any aspect of the topic “biography and women.” She begins:

There are four ways to write a woman's life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously, and without recognizing or naming the process. (p. 11)

"Nostalgia," "anger," and "taking control of their own lives" are concepts that appear early and throughout her analysis. Early autobiographies by women, and many of the more recent as well, read "flat" to Heilbrun, especially as she contrasts the autobiographies with the more emotional books of letters. Perhaps it is my contentiousness, but I find some of her interpretations open to further exploration. She cites the differences between two of May Sarton's autobiographical books: *Plant Dreaming Deep* (1968) tends toward a positive, upbeat flavor, whereas *Journal of a Solitude* (1973) tends to probe the nether side of life, but, in my view, tragedy as well as anger. And for reasons not clear to me as reader, Heilbrun does not mention the earlier *I Knew a Phoenix: Sketches for an Autobiography* (1959), in which Sarton draws portraits of her parents: George Sarton, the historian of science, and Mabel Elwes Sarton, painter, interior decorator, and artisan, and the joys and despair of Europe in the World War I era. Her own youth is caught in a series of sketches, "The Education of a Poet." May Sarton, as person, writer, and text, seems much more complex than Heilbrun's brief comments and interpretations indicate.

And Heilbrun is very complex as well. I encountered her first as writer of the introductory essays to two of Vera Brittain's *Testament* books, a kind of "documentary" history through autobiography (see, e. g., Heilbrun, 1981). Much of *Writing a Woman's Life* appears there. Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby seem, to me as a bit more than casual observer, to have influenced Heilbrun mightily. More recently I have started reading the Amanda Cross mystery novels. Picture this: Heilbrun writes under the pseudonym of Amanda Cross (mystery writers don't get tenure in literature at Columbia, she says); the heroine of the novels is Kate Fansler, a detective and university literary critic, and in one of the more recent novels, *The Players Come Again* (1990), heroine Fansler is writing a biography of a woman who is allegedly the author of her husband's world-famous stream-of-consciousness novel. Perhaps all this life writing will be clearer when I have read the rest of Heilbrun's long series of books and essays. For the moment – what a provocative set of ambiguous interpretive possibilities!

Further, what Heilbrun calls "the claim of achievement, the admission of ambition, the recognition that accomplishment" was earned appeared in the letters of some writers but not in their formal autobiographies. In her view, scripts, other than reflecting men's stories, for telling life stories seldom existed in the lives of eminent women. In my view, Healey's (1986) *Wives of Fame* gives the beginning of a kind of redressing of the comment "I didn't know he

had a wife” regarding Jenny – and Marx; and Mary – and Livingstone; and Emma – and Darwin. Heilbrun’s own anecdotes and stories continue excitedly, culminating in statements about aging, courage, freedom, and endings. She argues that being 50 years old is an important transition time. To a social scientist, many of these interpretations are empirically testable propositions. Another agenda?

The life-writing literature by minority and ethnic groups is immense and growing as well. From the early autobiographies of Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass to the more recent ones by Malcolm X and Maya Angelou, the multiple definitions of the black experience have continued to cumulate. Butterfield’s *Black Autobiography in America* (1974) presents a vivid historical picture of major transitions from the early slave narrative period, to one of search, and now to the period of rebirth, to use his phrases. The first sentence of the introduction presages the overall perspective of the book:

George Orwell’s image of the future in 1984 was of a boot stamping on the human face forever. He could have used the same image to represent the Negro past in America, fitting the boot easily to the foot of a slavetrader, overseer, master, policeman, soldier, vigilante, capitalist, and politician. (p. 1)

Overall, his interpretation of autobiography is a mix of history and literature and an attempt to integrate “objective fact and subjective awareness.” In his later, more interpretive chapters, Butterfield analyzes issues of constructing black identity in terms of politics, separatism, and revolution among many young black writers. In his essay “The Language of Black Satire” he cites powerful short excerpts from Cleaver, Seale, and others, most of whom spent time in prison. Butterfield’s “history as subjective experience” is an exercise in a set of propositions linking personal experience to individuality, an awakening of a “truer and better self,” and the birth of a new world. Example follows example.

As I read Haley’s epilogue at the end of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, multiple “biographical method” questions arose. In what sense is the book Malcolm X’s autobiography and in what sense is it Haley’s biography of him? Is Stanley’s phrasing “auto/biography” the more viable alternative? And what should we make of the point in time in which the book was narrated and written? While the book was in process, Malcolm X parted company with Elijah Muhammad. The climax of the book was now different. Should the early materials be rewritten? Malcolm said no. What problems were created for Haley, the writer of the auto/biography? The questions run on insistently.

As I reread Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), a larger essay loomed in my mind. Life stories can be a powerful influence on creativity, and that is no mean accomplishment. I believe it was her four-part table of contents – “Childhood,” “High School,” “College,” and “The Movement” – and

the vivid vignettes and brief stories from the text per se that seemed so simply similar to many of my interests and perspectives. I saw the possibilities of comparisons and contrasts between her book and the very different but equally powerful *Period Piece: A Cambridge Childhood*, Gwen Raverat's (1952) auto/biography of the Darwin family at the turn of the century. In addition, our multiple ethnographic case studies of pupils, teachers, and schools in and around the metropolitan area of St. Louis and the central Midwest in the United States, all of which have biographical and autobiographical strands, would provide a large further comparison and contrast. Bridging some of these differences is Wilma Wells, my colleague and coauthor of "*Difficult to Reach, Maintain, and Help*" *Urban Families in PAT: Issues, Dilemmas, Strategies, and Resolutions in Parent Education* (Smith & Wells, 1990). This was very heavily an auto/biographical account of struggles to educate poor urban mothers in child-rearing practices. As I think about such work, family, schooling, class, and caste cut across gender, generations, and continents. Now, the larger essay and this paragraph seem like a promissory note for a new, autobiographical book that will bring together numerous loose ends, nagging unsolved problems, from a professional lifetime. At this point I feel I am co-opting someone else's narrative. But Anne Moody is alive, and not so well, in St. Louis's urban ghetto in 1993.

The influential life-writing literature from the feminist and minority perspectives reflects back on some of the intellectual cynicism regarding autobiography. Some believe that autobiography is impossible, as noted earlier in this essay. Criticism has its own complexities and power.

Professional Education

Much of recent life writing in professional education carries the same intellectual flavor of the feminist and minority perspective, finding voice among the disenfranchised, the powerless, or those with alternative visions. Marilyn Cohn and Robert Kottkamp (1992) gave their book *Teachers* the subtitle *The Missing Voice in Education*.

Several strands seem especially important. Representative of a first strand are collections of essays such as Ball and Goodson's (1985) *Teachers' Lives and Careers* and Goodson's (1992) *Studying Teachers' Lives*. Conceptually the major thrust lies in the accenting of "agency," of teachers in the daily give and take of teaching in classrooms and schools. This is particularly important in a domain that experiences fads of curriculum reform and school innovation under the control of central office administrators, university educationists, and subject matter specialists. Perhaps the most telling illustration was the development of "teacher-proof" curricula in the 1960s by disciplinary specialists. The new materials were supposed to be so powerful and well done that

even incompetent teachers, like you and me, could not spoil them in the transmission from text to students. Similarly, the field of school innovation and change, exemplified by the “RD&D” (research, development, and diffusion) model, placed the classroom teacher as one technocratic spot in the conveyor belt of school change. Images of Charlie Chaplin on the assembly line in *Modern Times* suggest the frenetic, but not so hilarious, life of the teacher. Teacher life stories attempt to change both the teachers themselves and the educational system of which they are a part. Another minority group is seeking a voice.

A second strand with both distant roots and recent flowering is made up of those teachers with alternative visions. A. S. Neill is best known for his *Summerhill* (1960), but even more impressive is his *A Dominie's Log* and the other two dominie books (see Neill, 1975). The *Log* contains all the significant material that he was not permitted to include in the official records he had to keep for the inspectorate. Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher* (1963) brings a personal view of New Zealand, multiculturalism, and a more organic way of teaching. And the “romantics” of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Hentoff (1966), Hernden (1966, 1971), and Holt (1964), present powerful life-writing statements. Nonmainstream voices entered into the dialogue about schooling.

A third strand that seldom is described as life writing is the growing interest in “action research.” As described by Elliott (1991) and others, action research involves teachers studying their own teaching. In a cycle that involves proposing, planning, implementing, observing, recording (through diaries and journals), reflecting, and writing, teachers have begun to talk about their teaching, their hopes and desires, the immediate context of a particular group of pupils, a particular set of curriculum materials, and a particular school with its particular principal and staff of colleagues. Although the focus is usually on an innovative teaching strategy or piece of curriculum, I would argue that a more powerful way of thinking about action research is to construe the activity as “really” a piece of teacher autobiography. And if this be true, then action researchers should be including more personal context, larger chunks of autobiography, in their research statements. For educationists, the epigraph from Valéry with which I began this section needs to be extended beyond “theory” to “practice” as well.

Conclusions

No foundation. All the way down the line.

William Saroyan, *The Time of Your Life*, 1939

Several conclusions, not quite foundations, in the form of patterns, tentative generalizations, or lessons seem to follow reasonably closely upon the arguments presented in this chapter. In wrestling with the theme and audience of this chapter I found I wanted to say something of the multiple and conflicting definitions and perspectives of life writing; I wanted to address the

process or craft aspects of doing biography; and finally I wanted to acquaint any one disciplinarian with images of life writing from other disciplines. Eventually, integration or talking across boundaries was on my agenda. My focal audiences, as frequently is the case, are my graduate students interested in doing one form or another of qualitative inquiry. They seem not too far from a larger population of students and scholars.

Underlying this essay is an image of an ideal. For reasons I understand only partially, I am drawn to those scholars who write interesting and important biographies, who seem to know huge amounts of the relevant literature on life writing, and who reflect insightfully upon the craft, the process of doing biography – an awesome and nearly unattainable ideal! In attempting to actualize such an ideal, I have raised a few of the older, more classical biographers and their perspectives as well as the more contemporary. In addition, and as part of a perspective on the importance of the individual as agent, I have written in the first person and about some of my own efforts, even though the chapter is part of a “handbook,” which usually assumes a more detached perspective.

For the educational and social science researcher interested in qualitative methods, biography – and its variants, autobiography, life history, and life story – seems a rich and only partially exploited form of inquiry for reaching multiple intellectual goals and purposes. In her recent book, Stanley (1992) makes a strong case for the label “auto/biographical.” In an important summary, Lancey (1993) suggests “personal accounts.” *Life writing* might be the more apt generic label.

Although this discussion has not been organized explicitly on a historical or chronological basis, it is clear that the nature, purpose, form, and function of life writing have evolved over recent years and decades, as well as centuries. For scholars with even a bit of an innovative or experimentalist set of values, current biographical forms and formats should be seen as only tentative guidelines toward their own creative inquiry endeavors. Any constraining formalistic definitions and rules about the nature and function of biography seem out of keeping with the vigor of intellectual activity under way.

Almost as a corollary of the prior generalizations, biographical inquiry is in high contention among scholars within and among different disciplines – literature, history, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Each of these traditions has evolved its own standards and perspectives on life writing. Conflict seems everywhere. Each discipline, and subgroups within disciplines, vents its anger and displeasure upon other groups and traditions. Ecumenical approaches often are not seen as desirable. Large personal, professional, and disciplinary issues and interests are at stake. The best counsel seems to be, Realize that this is happening, come to know as much of the variety as time permits, and integrate the differences in ways that contribute to one's own creativity in life writing.

The kind of data drawn upon by different researchers – letters, interviews, documents, self-statements, and so on – as they construct their biographies will vary in amount, quality, relevance, and perceived significance. Autobiographies – sometimes as statements in their own right and sometimes as data for other statements – seem to draw disdain from several quarters and high support from others. Critics and evaluators will need to use their own judgment, just as the biographer *per se* must do, to assess the meaning and the quality of the effort. In my view, building a rationale for any particular form of life writing as legitimate inquiry seems possible in the diversity of orientations presented here. The important test case for an academic might well be: What variants are permissible as Ph.D. dissertations? Clearly, formal biographies of eminent white males qualify. But what of a Moody or a latter-day Cullwick? Would their autobiographies or diaries count? I would argue yes, but others might disagree. And the debate would continue: Purposes? Limits? Criteria?

In my view, doing biography is an active constructionist activity, from the picking of a hero or heroine to the seeking of data pools, to the selection of issues and themes, and to the final image or portrait that is drawn. The importance of serendipity in selecting a subject for a biography, in determining a particular theme and perspective, and in working one's way through the doing of the biography needs to be noted as a significant possibility in both purpose and strategy. While searching for one solution, life writers seem to find other things. Serendipity needs to be contrasted with more formal intellectual approaches, which are often, in my view, an illustration of reconstructed logic rather than logic in use. Theories of biography remain partial and limited in scope.

One of my major aspirations in this essay has been the presentation of ideas and people who espouse the ideas, that is, the perspectives that will “move along” the inquiries of the readers. At a minimum, if I have intrigued any of you who have never done life histories or biographies, or those of you who have never read Bowen, Clifford, or Edel, among others, to begin those journeys, this essay will have been a success.

Finally, many social scientists who worry about the relationships among inquiry, theory, and practice speak of the importance of “sensitizing concepts,” “models,” and “metaphors” as aids to thinking about and doing practical activity. Engaging in life-writing inquiry is, in part, a craft, an instance of practice. In my interpretation of these views, I believe an essentially pragmatic perspective arises. I believe that the stories and ideas that one creates should be useful for solving further problems in one's professional life. Autobiography is writ large, at least implicitly. Reflective practice is another of the broader and more significant conceptions. This essay on “biographical method” is intended to fall within these traditions.

Notes

1. A similar extended illustration could be drawn using the multiple life writings by and about a figure such as Virginia Woolf (1929, 1938, 1940). Bell's (1972) two-volume biography of Woolf contrasts sharply with the more recent biography by DeSalvo (1989), who accents a sexual abuse theme.
2. The Darwin illustration can be pursued further with such variants as Kohn (1985), Barrett (1977), Gruber (1981), Healey (1986), Marks (1991), Darwin and Seward (1903), F. Darwin (1909), and Barlow (1946, 1967).
3. My current views presented here are in transformation once again as I participate in a Washington University faculty seminar on "autobiography." The stimulating discussion ranges across the humanities – comparative literature, performing arts, romance languages – and occasionally the social sciences.
4. Clifford (1970) tells a similar set of fascinating stories under the heading "the vague footnote," which sent him off to Wales in the 1930s.
5. Bowen (1968, p. 11) suggests an alternative typology: narrative, topical, or essay for forming and shaping the biography. See, for example, Sarton's (1959) *I Knew a Phoenix*, which carries the subtitle *Sketches for an Autobiography*.
6. Even as this essay is being revised, my Washington University colleagues in the faculty seminar have inundated me with literally dozens (hundreds?) of references, especially from comparative literature, that I have never seen. It is a humbling experience.
7. A number of sources exist in the symbolic interactionist tradition; classically, Blumer's (1969) "Chicago school" of sociology's extension of George Herbert Mead is critical. Recently, Hargreaves (1986) has presented, especially for the educationist, a potent summary perspective with the title "Whatever Happened to Symbolic Interactionism?" Dexter's (1970) methodological book *Elite and Specialized Interviewing* is grounded in a similar view (see, e.g., p. 5).
8. The relationship of shorter biographical studies in the service of other inquiry approaches is a major intellectual and practical issue in itself. I have touched on it only briefly and in passing.

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The Auto/Biographical Society

Ken Plummer

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They all speak at once.

Estragon: Each one to itself . . .

Vladimir: What do they say?

Estragon: They talk about their lives.

Vladimir: To have lived life is not enough for them.

Estragon: They have to talk about it.

(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 1952)

Our society has become a recited society, in three senses: it is defined by *stories*, (*récits*, the fables constituted by our advertising and informational media), by *citations* of stories, and by the interminable *recitation* of stories . . .

(Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984: 186)

There is little doubt that fascination for 'life' narratives is a defining feature of Western societies, linking phenomena as disparate as the documentary evidence occasionally collected to enliven quantitative research and the sensational outbursts filling in the intervals between TV commercials on the reality-show catwalk.

(D. Simeoni and D. Diani, 'Biographical research', 1995a: 1)

The telling of a life is a messy business. It comes in many forms, shifting across time and space. Sometimes it is silenced and at other times it speaks volumes. Indeed, right now at the start of a twenty-first century, the telling of life stories has become such a voluminous business that we

could even start to talk of something like an ‘auto/biographical society’: life stories are everywhere. In this chapter, my aim is to sense a little of how the tellings of lives have changed and grown and to capture some of the emerging dilemmas around them. My main task will be to start an analysis of some of the key elements that would be needed for a kind of genealogy of life stories. I will detect a long-term (western) shift from an oral culture stuffed full of folklore handed across the generations, and still to be found in much of the world today, and sense the emergence of a more text based society where written narratives of lives start to appear. And I will move on to more recent developments, where stories have become increasingly told by the powerless, where they have been told more reflectively, and where new modes of a kind of ‘cyber-story telling’ have entered the popular media and hi-tech worlds. A lesser aim is to start some kind of evaluation of such stories and the role they play in lives, a task continued throughout the book. Here I will just note the paradox: a world of life stories that can surely aid human emancipation and help people understand their lives may also be a world which, if we are not careful, leads to a packaging of stories where they may easily become forms of control, consumption and self-absorption, robbing lives of the very authenticity they thought they were claiming.

Elements for a Genealogy of Life Stories: The Rise of the Personal Tale

From Oral to Written Traditions

Throughout most of human history, telling the stories of lives has largely been an oral tradition – passed down across generations, suitably modified and reconstructed, showing why things got to be the way they were, feeding into the great myths people may later come to live by. The tales of religious figures – of Christ and Buddha, of Mohammed and of ancestors long worshipped – all these lives feed into the cultural bricolage. Oral traditions have been defined as ‘verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation’ (Vansina, 1985: 27). It is the story handed down across generations – through performance or poetry, through epic tale or song, through reminiscence and ‘memorized speech’, through ‘historical gossip’ and ‘eyewitness accounts’ (all terms developed and discussed in Vansina’s classic text *Oral Tradition as History*, 1985).

Whilst oral traditions are still widespread today (cf. Tonkin, 1992: Introduction), most cultures now either have, or are at least deeply aware of, written traditions. Indeed, a significant shift in the telling of lives comes with their being inscribed into written texts. Once inscribed, they can take on a life of their own across the generations: awaiting interpretations. With the earliest depictions of lives in Stone Age drawings on walls through their depictions

into more permanent and elaborate elite hieroglyphics of the Pharaohs some 3,000 years BC – preserving records of their lives and riches in the great tombs, temples and pyramids – and on to the scribes of Christian monasteries – we find the tales of a life starting to take on a life of their own. And here indeed are stories that enable the historian, the archaeologist and the narratologist even surer routes than those provided by oral traditions into understanding the cultures of the past. Written lives solidify and accumulate more densely than oral ones.

The Rise of the Individual and the Autobiographical Form

Just when did the autobiographical form appear? Georg Misch (the son-in-law of the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey who played an influential part in providing a philosophical base for life histories) in his classic history of autobiography devotes some 2,724 pages (out of a total of 3,881 pages) to the story of autobiography during the Middle Ages, but takes the form back as far as the ancient Egyptian tomb inscriptions (Misch, 1951). Likewise, Paul Thompson, in his much more modest book on oral history, remarks: ‘Oral history is as old as history itself. It was the first kind of history. And it is only quite recently that skill in handling oral evidence has ceased to be one of the marks of the great historian’ (Thompson, 1978: 19). Rather mischievously, one of the key contemporary writers on autobiography, James Olney, has written:

The first autobiography was written by a gentleman named W.P. Scargill; it was published in 1834, and was called the *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister*. Or perhaps the first autobiography was written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 1760s (but he called it his *Confessions*); or by Michel de Montaigne in the latter half of the sixteenth century (but he called it *Essays*); or by St Augustine at the turn of the fourth-fifth century (but he called it his *Confessions*); or by Plato in the fourth century BC (but he wrote it as a letter, which we know as the seventh epistle); or . . . and so on . . . (Olney, 1980: 5)

Whatever may be the case, it would be wrong to suggest that these testaments of personal lives which have existed throughout history would have the same meanings then as they do now. To read Augustine, for example, is to enter a world dominated by a concern with reflective, religious submission, whilst to read modern accounts is often to enter a secular world where reflection is minimal and individual self-absorption is maximized! The roots of this individualism (and humanism) as major forms may be traced back at least to the medieval period – the religious confession transcending the penance, the sensitive human portraiture becoming distinguished from the hierarchically observed picture, romantic and courtly love rising from instrumental

Box 1: Some 'Classic and Notable Biographies

4th century BCE	Greece	Xenophon	<i>Memorabilia</i>
		Plato	<i>Dialogues</i>
1st century BCE		Plutarch	<i>Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans</i>
		Svetorias	<i>Lives of Caesars</i>
		Svetonius	<i>Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers</i>
Early 3rd century	Rome	Laertus	
1212–14	England	Eadmer	<i>Life of St Anselm</i>
14th century	Italy	Boccaccio	<i>Life of Dante</i>
1550		Vasari	<i>Lives of the Most Excellent Architects, Painters and Sculptors</i>
mid 16th century	England	William Roper	<i>Life of St Thomas More</i>
1605		Francis Bacon	<i>Advancement of Learning</i>
1779–1781		Samuel Johnson	<i>Lives of the English Poets</i>
1791		James Boswell	<i>Life of Johnson</i>
1850		Ralph Emerson	<i>Representative Men</i>
1908–33		Gertrude Stein	<i>Three Lives</i>
1910		Freud	<i>Leonardo Da Vinci</i>
1920s		Virginia Woolf	<i>The New Biography</i>
1918		Lytton Strachey	<i>Eminent Victorians</i>
1947		Sartre	<i>Lives of Baudelaire, Genet and Flaubert</i>
1958		Erikson	<i>Young Man Luther</i>
For a much more detailed chronology see Catherine Parke, <i>Biography: Writing Lives</i> (1996).			

marriage; through the era of Thomism, with its gradual separation of reason and revelation, the secular and the religious – and on to the Renaissance period. But it is surely with industrialization that the modern so-called 'Possessive Individual' is announced. A new kind of individual with a new kind of 'self' seems to emerge (cf. Taylor, 1989). As the influential literary critic Lionel Trilling once put it: 'At a certain point in history men became individuals' (Trilling, 1972: 24). It is probably at this moment that people, overwhelmingly from the west, start to develop fully a sense of themselves as objects of introspection, of interest, of value; when the individual begins to brood and reflect over his or her inner nature; a time when the individual starts to retreat from the public life into the realms of privacy – the inner thought, the private home, the real self. There are many cultures in time and space where such an individual self is not to be found – many African cultures, and many countries in South East Asia for instance, and often linked to their religions,

do not sense such an individuated or private self as does the modern west (for an account of selves in other cultures, see Brian Morris, 1994).

In the latter part of the twentieth century, much sociological writing has testified to this change. A wide range of terms have appeared which all attempt to capture varying aspects of this: 'the self' or 'identity' has been variously described as in crisis (Erikson), impulsive (Turner), fragmented (James), mutable (Zurcher), saturated (Gergen), protean (Lifton), other-looking (Riesman), narcissistic (Lasch), actualizing (Maslow), situated (Benhabib), postmodern (Sarup), and self-reflexive (Giddens). The list goes on; and what lies at the heart of this enormous outpouring of writing about 'the modern human being' is the idea that a highly individuated, self-conscious and unstable identity is replacing the old, stable, unitary self of traditional communities. These new selves are 'constructed' through shifts and changes in the modern world, and partly create a new sense of permanent identity crisis. The search for 'understanding' and making sense of the self has become a key feature of the modern world.

Box 2: Traditional, Modern and Postmodern Identities

TRADITIONAL IDENTITIES ARE

more likely to be tied to:

place
kinship
community
hierarchy
religion . . .

And hence more likely to be:

stable
static – little change over long periods of time . . .
unified
fixed
given
taken for granted and hence unquestioned

MODERN IDENTITIES ARE

'To make it new'

are more open to:

rationalization (science, technology)
capitalization (production, markets)
bureaucratization (rules, hierarchy)
secularization (death of God)
urbanization (big city life)
individualization (ideology of self)
democratization (aims of equality and freedom . . .)

(Continued)

Box 2: (*Continued*)

which often means a less strong sense of place and
loss of meaning . . .
homelessness

likely to become more:
fragmented
pluralized
individualized
impulsive
destabilized
'in crisis' but also 'empowering'

POST-LATE MODERN IDENTITIES

'The end of the meta-narrative'

Accelerating changes means
identities become linked to:

hi-tech and hi-media
changes in time and space . . .
globalization and glocalization . . .
fragmentations and differences . . .
loss of one big story
tribalism

and become more
self-reflexive, self-conscious and
ironic
relational and relating
saturated
cyberlinked and simulated
prone to anxiety

For further reading on all this, see Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self* (1991); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991); Roy Baumeister, *Identity: Cultural Change and the Struggle for Self* (1986).

Diane Bjorklund (1999) has reviewed two hundred years of North American autobiography to capture how such written accounts can be seen to provide different and shifting visions of a self. Not suggesting that everything can be neatly slotted into her characterization, she nevertheless suggests four 'ideal type' models. The earliest model takes autobiography to be a kind of 'morality play' – the life story may see human nature as essentially corrupt, and the life as contingent upon religious searching and conversion. This is followed by what she calls 'masters of fate', whereby the stories of self envision people

gaining control over their own destinies – where there is both ‘character’ and ‘will power’. Next comes ‘the uncertain self’ where psychological models – such as those provided by Erik Erikson – come to play a crucial role, and instinct, feelings, drives become the key to understanding human life. And finally, once again, she ends by suggesting that the contemporary self at the end of the twentieth century has become – beleaguered’: a sociological view that sees the impact of society on self-conception. For her, the ‘autobiographical self’ may be seen as a ‘dialogue with history’ (1999: 18). What is grasped in this account is the way ‘the human being’ changes, even in very recent times, bringing new languages and metaphors of the self with it. ‘Writing the story of your life’ becomes central to this sense-making. As Dan McAdams says: ‘if you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am’. In short, ‘Identity is a Life Story’ (McAdams, 1985; 1993: 11).

There are optimists, pessimists and agnostics on these recent trends. Some suggest this individuality has now gone so far as to create a narcissistic culture of self-absorbed individuals with no sense of public life, shared morality or outer control (cf. Lasch, 1979). The preoccupation with individualism, choice and changing identities is seen to be part of a wider social and moral breakdown. Others have suggested too that this brooding introspection – embodied in the ‘confessional’ – is part of a more general shift in control: from the outer constraints on the *body* to the inner constraints on the *soul*. Through *the technologies of the self* power circulates, regulates and embodies surveillance (cf. Foucault, 1977, 1978). By contrast, optimists sense that we are discovering a broader, more available cultured individuality. A growing control over our lives, an increased sense of choice, the democratization of personhood: these are the features that accompany the rise in individualism. This virtue of the ‘autobiographical society’ is well stated by the liberal historian Karl Weintraub in this more agnostic, cautious, closing paragraph of his major ‘essay’ on autobiographical study, *The Value of the Individual*. He writes:

When understood in the best terms, a view of life resting on a loving admiration for the diversity and the manifold richness of life is a magnificent one. It embodies the deepest respect for the formative powers of man. Even if we can know nothing about ultimate human purpose and the end objectives of this mysterious process of life, we can derive gratification and hope from a conception of cosmic order where creative individuality adds forever to the growing richness of the world. There is nobility in our willingness to understand men [*sic*] on their own terms and to complicate our judgment by giving each man [*sic*] his due. There is a refinement of knowledge in a perspectivist understanding of reality. All matters of great value exact their price. We pay for our commitment to individuality by incurring the dangers of lives floundering in capricious subjectivism, the pursuit of arbitrary whims, the loss of real selves in unrealistic dreams, and by cutting mistakenly the life giving interaction between self-formation and responsible cultivation of our given social and cultural world.

Only the future can show whether the price is too high and whether we can live responsibly with the ideal of the self. Perhaps those are right who say that history has no lessons. But historical contemplation may, at least? help us to be wiser. The only admonition that the historian gives us that is worth repeating may well be that, whatever else we do, we ought to live our lives as responsible heirs. (Weintraub, 1978: 379)

Until the dawn of the Enlightenment, documents of lives were primarily documents of memorable events (*memoirs*), of great deeds done (*res gestae*), or philosophers' lives; there were few instances in which there were ponderings about the nature of one's inner self. Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (around AD 400) is a notable exception – it is always cited as the foundational text of 'autobiography', and it is seen as setting the major pattern of coherence for the next fourteen centuries: admitting sins in order to be saved, in search of the spiritual core. For most scholars of the autobiographical form it is precisely this *search for a self* which is its hallmark; and the very word autobiography, suggests Karl Weintraub, did not appear until 1796 (cf. Olney, 1998). As Georges Gusdorf writes in 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography' (1956), 'autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist' (Olney, 1980: 30).

There are some key figures who signpost the modern personal document. Thus, when on 1 January 1660 Samuel Pepys sat down to record the first entry in his famous diaries – a task he was to regularly perform for the following nine years – we find the symbolic emergence of the modern diary as a distinctive form. When at the end of the eighteenth century Rousseau published his *Confessions* (1782) and Goethe his *Dichtung und Wahrheit* we have the emergence of the distinctive autobiography, a form 'inspired by a reverence for the self, tender yet severe, [seeing] the self not as a property but as trust' (Pascal, 1960: 181); it is motivated by '*Selbstbestimmung*' – a search for one's inner understanding – and is a search not a clear answer. Throughout it 'holds the balance between the self and the world, the subjective and the objective' (Pascal, 1960: 180), casting light upon both.

These concerns of the humanities – of understanding the inner world, the pursuit of self, of linking self with an outer world, of grasping the outer world via the inner world, of capturing the 'real life' – all start to be reflected in the emerging social science around the middle part of the nineteenth century. In England, Henry Mayhew's studies begin to give voice to the ordinary people of mid-Victorian England; in France, Frederic Le Play started the painstaking task of documenting family budgets as indicators of family life; a little later, in Vienna, Sigmund Freud was to begin his famous explorations into dreaming, autobiography, biography and the inner mind. And in America, notably in the work of the Chicago School of Sociology, life stories were to have a symbolic sociological birth, first in William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant* and Clifford Shaw's *The Jack Roller*.

Puzzling the Auto/Biography

All this is, of course, too simple, though it surely makes clear that self/life stories have a shifting history. Attempting a full genealogy of auto/biography is as hard a task as doing it for any other form of writing, like 'the novel', and is well beyond the scope of this book. The term is unclear, multiple and contested – and so are the routes to understanding the pathways to its contemporary manifestations. Some useful starts are to be found in books like Karl Weintraub's *The Value of the Individual* (1978) (though its male bias is very much in evidence); and the more recent feminist-inspired accounts by Liz Stanley (1992) of auto/biography and Laura Marcus (1994) of auto/biographical discourses. Such studies clearly show that the literature is consistently haunted by a number of troublesome questions – what we might in effect see as issues around 'The Philosophy of Auto/Biography and the Self'. The debates have a repetitive refrain and some we have already met (and we will continue to meet them throughout this book). They are very grand: *What is a life? How indeed can we know a life? What is the link between telling a life and living a life? What are the ways of telling a life? How does 'writing a life' differ from a telling? How does a life's telling link to a culture and its history? How does the reading of a life link to the telling of a life? And to truth? Are all lives to be told equally or are some better to tell?* Or to put it all another way, we are concerned with understanding the three components harboured in the word: *autos* (what do we mean by the self?), *bios* (what do we mean by the life?) and *graphe* (what do we presume in the act of writing?). Finding answers to such questions is not easy and they have been the basis of philosophical reflections for centuries. Yet they are returned to over and over again in the musings over telling a life. So let me at least try to be clear what I think the issues are.

First, is the problematic nature of the very lived life or the life experience. Whatever this may be (and it is hotly debated), it cannot be the same thing as the telling of a life. The flow of existential experience, of phenomenological consciousness, of movement and brute being, of self and identity – all these are key concerns and we all know them as the stuff of everyday life. Certainly auto/biography and life stories set out to engage with such issues, but they remain elusive. Getting at this bedrock of experience remains an honourable goal for many, but critics suggest that these very terms imply humanity as capable of existing free from social constraints and discourse and are hence suspect (cf. Scott, 1998). Can there really be a realm of experiences which can exist independently of the telling of them? Maybe without the telling of a life, the flow of a life – 'experience' – would have no meaning, no referent. Indeed, is it possible to live a life without in some way telling it? Can a life be imagined without some sense of the person accumulating traces of their experiences into some form of coherence through a narrative form – as they

live through it? Some sense of time, of place, of family and friends, of wider connections? So it may be that the very lived life itself is bound up with versions of speaking and telling about it.

In any event, part of the auto/biographical quest must be a concern with the kinds of tellings given of the life. Certainly, as I suggested above, the life is not told in the same way across all cultures. Western ways have come to be orchestrated by particularly individualistic notions that are driven in part by the quest to understand the self – and to move inwards towards self-knowledge. Autobiographical theory often suggests that a deep understanding of a life is a high intellectual and spiritual goal for an individual's life – maybe the highest of all goals. Indeed, classically: 'In autobiography we encounter the highest and most instructive form of the understanding of life' (cf. Marcus, 1994: 137 et seq.). Often, the life story in its various forms is seen as a journey towards an ultimate, truer understanding of a unique inner being, an inner quest for self: the injunction to know yourself.

Autobiographical writing aims to capture this self-reflexive process, to know it through consciousness, to ultimately understand the flow of this particular life. Part of the philosophy of autobiography, then, concerns this self-reflective debate and the streams of consciousness it provokes. Whether in St Augustine's spiritual soul-searching quest in the fifth century or in Rousseau's late eighteenth-century soul-searching, there is often a tension within the telling: reflections on time, memory, coherence and truth jostle with an attempt to 'confess' the life. As Dilthey (a key student of autobiography) says, whilst agreeing with Augustine:

The starting point is always the same here: it lies in *discovering the reality in one's own interior life*. 'You who wish to know yourself, do you know that you exist?' ? know it.' 'How so?' ? don't know.' 'Do you feel yourself to be simple or complex?' ? don't know.' 'Do you know that you move yourself?' ? don't know that.' 'Do you know that you think?' ? know that.' 'Then it's true that you think?' 'Yes, it is true.' (Dilthey, 1923/1988: 234; emphasis in original)

And this links to a third issue: from these reflections is it possible to detect a deep – even essential or core – self? The goal may be to get at the essential life, its underlying design (Pascal, 1960), and the pathways into this come through the reflective life and the reflections. The challenge is to find the 'real' or 'authentic' self in the telling. Liz Stanley's probing account provides two strong images to capture this problem. What she sees as a conventional model can be likened to using a microscope – 'the more information about the subject you collect, the closer to "the truth" – the "whole truth" – you get' (Stanley, 1992: 158). This is a strong 'realist' perspective and it pervades much auto/biographical work. The life can ultimately, with another focus, be grasped! It suggests that auto/biography can hold out the hope of a true, real essential self, awaiting discovery. Yet Liz Stanley does not think this is possible. In critical

contrast, she sees auto/biographical work as more akin to a 'kaleidoscope': 'Each time you look you see something rather different, composed mainly of the same elements but in a new configuration' (Stanley, 1992: 158). It all depends on how you look. She uses her own work on Hannah Cullwick and A.J. Mumby (see Chapter 3), as well as research she has conducted on serial killer Peter Sutcliffe to make it very clear that the researcher's changing position in all this must be included. There is no 'fixed' core story for her. And so this leads to a sense of all the elements in the kaleidoscope that need attending to – and there are many of them.

Not least are the issues of 'writing' and 'reading' a life. Whilst people may have always told the stories of their lives throughout history, the writing/reading of lives becomes something newer (mass writing after all is a relatively recent development). We can start to sense that 'acts of writing' help us see that lives are always 'composed' and that it may be the very act of composition itself which lies at the heart of the auto/biographical mode. It is not the real life, but the composed life. The emphasis on being able to gain access to the real, essential self is greatly diminished, if nonexistent. And the life story is seen to be an artefact, a creation depending upon time, space, audience and a multitude of 'rhetorical tricks' that allow a person to write a life. It may indeed be constrained by the laws of genre – the writing conventions which dictate the form of auto/biography. Again, feminist sociologist Liz Stanley puts it well when she says:

the notion of the 'reconstruction' of a biographical subject is an intellectual non-starter. It proposes we can somehow recover the past, understand it as it was experienced and understood by the people who actually lived it. Good history eschews such a belief and so too should good biography. In contrast, within a feminist and cultural political approach, questions like 'the past from *whose* viewpoint?', 'why *this* viewpoint and not another?', and 'what would be the effect of working from a *contrary* viewpoint?' should be asked. The past, like the present, is the result of competing negotiated *versions* of what happened, why it happened, and with what consequences'. (Stanley, 1992: 7)

The leading psychologist Jerome Bruner also puts it forcefully:

an autobiography is not and never can be a way of simply signifying or referring to a 'life as lived'. I take the view that there is no such thing as 'life as lived' to refer to. On this view, a life is created or constructed by an act of autobiography. It is a way of construing experience – and reconstruing and reconstruing till our breath or our pen fails us . . . (1993: 38)

Once this is accepted, the conventions of telling a life become of great interest. We become more and more concerned with the arts of writing and presenting the life. And the classic distinction of biography, autobiography and fiction become altogether less clear. (Stanley hence uses the term auto/biography, a

convention that I will largely follow to highlight this problematic relation.) Thus, for example, an almost standard requirement of classic auto/biography is to start telling the life at the beginning or birth, move through various linear stages of a life, and go as close to death as you can by the end with the assumption that the 'true' life is being followed in the narrative! Yet we do not have to follow these linear narratives – this is just a convention. We can instead adopt 'more experimental' forms. And this is just what can be found in a number of great modern 'auto/biographies' where the nature of autobiographical writing is itself under challenge, often being spliced with fictional tricks and devices. Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) is actually the autobiography of Stein (and see also her *Everybody's Autobiography*, 1938/1985); Virginia Woolf's work as a whole contains a complex fusion of fiction and auto/biographies in works as diverse as *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), *A Room of Her Own* (1929) and *Moments of Being* (1978); Roland Barthes's work threatens to abolish the very genre with its self-conscious trickery (see *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*) (1975). Indeed, almost all modernist writers play with the form – from Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* to Sartre's *Words* – recognizing the story of a life can never be the life as lived. Indeed, it may be possible to detect an abrupt rise in experimentalism at the end of the twentieth century, with the spread of postmodern thought. The distinctions between author and subject, autobiography and biography, fiction and fact become more and more blurred.

And all this now has to be linked to the layers of theorizing placed over the life story. All the great intellectual strands of the twentieth century have been used to shape autobiographical writing. Freud's theory of the unconscious seeps into more and more accounts (and Freud himself uses it to great effect in his study of Leonardo (*Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*, 1910). Sartre's existentialism is clearly present in his own autobiographical works. Barthes's own book *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) is self-consciously deconstructive and playful (it actually being quite hard to learn much about his life from the curious melange of fragments that he throws up in seemingly chaotic fashion!). In all of this there is a serious questioning of author and authorship – enough for some to deny the very existence of the autobiographical mode – collapsing it into power, discourse, language. Here we ask with Foucault 'What is an author?' (Foucault, 1979a), and declare with Barthes "The death of the author" (Barthes, 1977).

A final puzzle is, on the surface, more simple: whose life can be told? In much of the classical writing the answer is clearly that of the 'exemplary' life. Here the story is taken to be that of 'great men', great leaders, or else 'men of letters', the 'genius' producing 'great autobiographies' (which usually can be taken to tell us significant things about an important culture!). Here are great leaders, literary figures, usually western men, where the 'public life' is stressed over the 'private life'. They often come to be seen as exemplars of the historical moment. As Dilthey writes of this – 'a man looks at his now existence from the standpoint of universal history', 'man knows himself only in history,

never through introspection', 'the totality of human nature exists only in history', 'only history tells a man what he is' (Dilthey, 1923/1988: 15). These are grand claims. They exclude many writings of women and other classes, for example. Yet, even at the end of the twentieth century, with auto/biography everywhere, a distinction still runs right through it: some lives are really worth reading about, others much less so. Once again, as Liz Stanley trenchantly saw as she was reviewing a number of telling biographies, even within feminism the most discussed are usually those of the intellectuals – Gertrude Stein, Simone de Beauvoir, Audre Lorde, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, etc. – rather than more popular figures – Shirley Maclaine, Martina Navratilova, Dora Preven (Stanley, 1992: 100). The minor tales, the confessionals, the stock journalist stories are bypassed in favour of the great literary characters.

Making New Voices: Collective Stories 'Up from Below'

Yet a change is in the air. It is not that 'ordinary voices', 'hidden voices' and 'voices from below' could not tell their stories at all. They could – but with difficulty, and rarely in the public sphere (cf. Habermas, 1989; Lara, 1998). The dominant forms of auto/biography that appeared in the public domain were those of the wealthy and powerful, which usually meant white, western, middle and upper class men. But what we start to see more and more with the slow 'democratization of society' (whereby some principles of choice, equality and individuality become a little more widespread) is the emergence of 'other' kinds of stories being told – stories from the margins, writings which start to work at the borders of boundaries and differences. The working class challenging the middle class, women challenging men, slaves challenging oppression, the young challenging elders. Gradually, more marginal voices speak – indeed have to speak; and as they do, they speak not just of themselves but of and for 'others' in the world. The autobiographies 'from below' hence work to create a different sense of autobiographical form, one where consciousness of self becomes more of a collective exploration than just a private one. The author is somehow located as a member of a class, a gendered group, a generational group, an outcast group. Indeed, these stories can transcend the traditional isolated 'individual' of classic autobiography – the St Augustine or Rousseau – to create a more collective awareness of others. This is the start of what might be called 'collective autobiography' (Hazlett, 1998). Thus, in the famous biography of a Guatemalan woman – already introduced in Chapter 2 – we read a now almost classic remark in the opening of the book. She says:

My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty-three 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. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life

since there have been very many bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: *My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.* (Menchú, 1984: 1; emphasis added)

A personal tale is now a story of a whole people.

Thus any genealogy of an auto/biographical society must now start to detect the moments when various tales of the outcast, the marginal and the silenced begin to appear and how they come to take a hold in the imagination of a wider society. Tentatively, I would date such shifts from the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century when there appears to have been a growth in writings that move into the margins and help redefine fields. Some of the earliest of these stories are to be found in tales of the outcast poor, 'common lives', and delinquents (cf. Bennett, 1981; Stanley, 1992: 12). We can also detect a growth of interest in the hitherto ignored 'women's autobiographies'. 'Slave narratives' of North American blacks become noticed and start to play a prominent role in the anti-slavery movement. Spaces, then, are opened up which, by the mid-twentieth century, allow for more and more 'voices' to enter: holocaust survivor stories, lesbian and gay coming out stories, the tales of different age generations, health stories and narratives of HIV/AIDS, stories from indigenous peoples who have been 'colonized'.

Consider, for instance, women's auto/biographies and personal narratives on which much has been written recently. It has been argued that they often bring with them a different voice and a distinctive form: that they are more likely to be understated; have less concern with their own achievements; focus more on the private and the personal and less on the public; and have more 'embeddedness' and connectedness to others. Liz Stanley's impressive review of this field is careful, however, not to overstate this – some of these characteristics can easily be found in male auto/biographies too (Stanley, 1992: 132). At the same time, she does argue for a distinctive feminist auto/biographical method which should inevitably be rooted in women's ontology or experience of the world (men therefore cannot write such an auto/biography) and which would stress contingency, an 'anti-spotlight' stance, anti-realism and a self-awareness of textual practices (Stanley, 1992: 253).

Apart from a burgeoning field of women's autobiography – often blended with class (Steedman, 1986) and ethnicity (hooks, 1992) – within modern feminism, there has been a remarkably strong concern with 'telling the personal tales', often as a way of bringing to voice a private worry that then becomes a public problem. Thus, Susan Griffin begins her famous study of rape – *Rape: The Power of Consciousness* (1979) – with the line: 'I have never been free of the fear of rape . . .'. Nancy Friday starts her study of mothers, *My Mother, My Self* (1977) with the lines: 'I have always lied to my mother. And she to me . . .'. Adrienne Rich starts her study of mothering (*Of Woman Born*, 1976) with the line: 'My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of

which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness.' Whilst Betty Friedan starts her pathbreaking *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) with: 'The problem lay buried, unspoken for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone . . . "Is this all?"". And much earlier, in a classic remark, Sojourner Truth asks: 'Ain't I a woman?'

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever

Box 3: A Selection of Women's Auto/Biographies

Maya Angelou	<i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> (1969)
Gloria Anzaldúa	<i>The Heart of a Woman</i> (1981)
Domitila Barrios de Chungra	<i>Borderlands/La Frontera</i> (1987)
Simone de Beauvoir	<i>Let Me Speak!</i> (1978)
Vera Brittain	<i>The Prime of Life</i> (1962)
Marie Cardinal	<i>Testament of Youth</i> (1985)
Jung Chang	<i>The Words to Say It</i> (1983)
Angela Davis	<i>Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China</i> (1991)
Isak Dinesen	<i>With My Mind on Freedom</i> (1975)
Anne Frank	<i>Out of Africa</i> (1937)
Lillian Hellman	<i>The Diary of a Young Girl</i> (1952)
Helen Keller	<i>Pentimento</i> (1976)
Doris Lessing	<i>The Story of My Life</i> (1902)
Audre Lorde	<i>The Memoirs of a Survivor</i> (1974)
Harriet Martineau	<i>The Cancer Journals</i> (1980)
Mary McCarthy	<i>Zami: A New Spelling of My Name</i> (1982)
Margaret Mead	<i>Harriet Martineau's Autobiography</i> (1877)
Kate Millett	<i>Memories of a Catholic Girlhood</i> (1957)
Ann Oakley	<i>Blackberry Winter</i> (1972)
Sylvia Plath	<i>Flying</i> (1974)
Margaret Sanger	<i>The Loony Bin Trip</i> (1990)
Jo Spence	<i>Sita</i> (1977)
Carolyn Steedman	<i>Taking it Like a Woman</i> (1984)
Gertrude Stein	<i>The Journal of Sylvia Plath</i> (1982)
Beatrice Webb	<i>An Autobiography</i> (1938)
Virginia Woolf	<i>Putting Myself in the Picture</i> (1988)
	<i>Landscape for a Good Woman</i> (1986)
	<i>Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas</i> (1933)
	<i>Everybody's Autobiography</i> (1937)
	<i>My Apprenticeship</i> (1926)
	<i>Moments of Being</i> (1976)

helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed an' planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well. And ain't I a woman? I have born thirteen children and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (From 1851 speech by Sojourner Truth, cited by Collins, 1990: 14)

Many classics of feminism, then, start with a personal narrative and many women's lives have been told. But increasingly they highlight not an essential woman's experience but a range of differences – cutting across ethnicities, class, disabilities, ages, health and sexualities. (For a critique and evaluation of some of this, see Marcus, 1994; Smith and Watson, 1998; Stanley, 1992.) The collective stories start to get fractured into a proliferation of what might be called 'difference stories'.

From slave narratives to a Black Public Sphere Another interesting example must be the stories of 'blacks' in the United States. Indeed, black autobiography with its roots in slave narratives serves as something of a paradigm for this kind of work. Certainly, as black studies of different kinds grew in the 1970s onwards, the autobiographical mode was usually at its heart because, as James Olney remarks:

black history was preserved in autobiographies rather than standard histories, and because black writers entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography. From Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X, from Olaudah Equiano to Maya Angelou, the mode specific to the black experience has been autobiography . . . In black autobiography and criticism of it, we have something akin to a paradigm of the situation of autobiography in general . . . (1980: 15)

Many of the earliest slave accounts were actually told through conditions of slavery, documenting the lives of some men and women as they lived the lives of slaves. The story of Frederick Douglass is usually seen as the most famous (it warrants a place in the Penguin Classics series). Although he suffered the many indignities and horrors of slavery, one of his captors did at least afford him the opportunity to learn to read and write; and shortly after he escaped from slavery in 1838, he turned his hand to writing the narrative of his life. Published in the spring of 1845, priced at 50 cents, and 125 pages long, it immediately became a best-seller (cf. Douglass, 1982: 19). The tone and style is to be found in many slave narratives, exemplified by the following:

If at any one time of my life more than another, I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr. Covey. We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail or snow, too hard for us to work

in the field. Work, work, work was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for him and the shortest nights too long for him. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. I was broken in body, soul and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died: the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute. (Douglass, 1845/1982: 105)

The writing on slavery is colossal. Much has been gathered through what might now be called 'oral history' projects, the most famous being the New Deal's Federal Writing Project in the 1930s which gathered stories from former slaves asking 'What does it mean to be a slave? What does it mean to be free? And, even more, how does it feel?' They are published in forty-one volumes as *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Rawick, 1971–9), with a more popular (now paperback) version in *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slaves* (Botkin, 1945/1994): a history in which 'the people are the historians as well as the history, telling their own story in their own words' (p. xii).

These narratives then are often seen to be the wellsprings out of which African American literature has evolved in the United States: they set patterns, genres, sensitivities and feelings for how such work could be done; and they have helped shape what has been called a 'Black Public Sphere' (Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995).

'Coming out' through life stories: gay and lesbian lives One of the clearest of situations where voices have appeared telling their life stories where once there was silence is in the case of gay and lesbian stories. Until roughly the 1970s, if any life stories were to be told of 'homosexuality' they were usually to be told by doctors and moralists, and were couched in the most negative terms – since homosexuality was seen as a sickness, a pathology and a crime. There were a few 'confessional' biographies – like Peter Wildeblood's *Against the Law*, and a few semi-autobiographical novels – like Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, for example; but in the main there was a stigmatizing silence. Yet in tandem with the arrival of 'gay liberation' an unceasing number of life stories started to be told – sometimes as autobiography, sometimes as biography, sometimes in film and video, and often in collections of 'coming out' stories – where large numbers of gays and lesbians spoke of their own experiences of being silenced, of being in the closet, of learning about gayness, of coming out, of settling down. Books such as *Gay Voices from East Germany*, *Growing Up Before Stonewall*, *Walking After Midnight: Gay Men's Life Stories*; *Quiet Fire: Memoirs of Older Gay Men*, *The Coming Out Stories*, *Lesbians Talk Transgender*. And with them, as with women, the working class and 'blacks', major archiving projects start to appear to house these testimonies.

Living with AIDS As a sign of just how pervasive such life stories have begun to be, AIDS stories started to appear almost simultaneously with the

announcement of the disease itself. Not only did the human interest story start to appear within the gay press within weeks, researchers were gathering compilations of stories and 'victims/survivors' and their relatives were publishing full-length autobiographies. Thus, Lon Nungesser's *Epidemic of Courage* was published in 1986 and gathers thirteen life stories of men and their relatives (under such titles as 'Speaking for Ourselves' by Bobby Reynolds and? Mother's Love' by Gertrude Cook), published more or less as interviews with Nungesser's questions incorporated. (Nungesser talks about his own illness as shaping the book – 'to reveal the reality of AIDS as one is living through it is the contribution I have to offer', Nungesser, 1986: xiii.) Such 'academic' stories have continued to this day, but in addition there has been an enormous outpouring of life stories – ways of dealing with death, ways of coping with the illness, ways of dealing with rage, ways of just getting down what was happening – now a huge chronicle awaits the twenty-first century reader: it is probably chronicled as no other disease has been in history, though there are now many illness narratives for all kinds of illnesses (see for instance Cook, 1991; and Mathiesen and Stam, 1995 on cancer narratives). We have: *The Screaming Room: A Mother's Journal* (Barbara Peabody, 1986); *The Walking Wounded: A Mother's True Story* (Beverly Barbo, 1987); *Thanksgiving: An Aids Journal* (Elizabeth Cox, 1990); *Surviving and Thriving with AIDS* (Michael Callen, 1987/1990); *The Absence of Angels* (Elizabeth Glaser and Laura Palmer, 1991); *Mark: How a Boy's Courage in Facing AIDS Inspired a Town* (Jay Hoyle, 1991); *Reports from the Holocaust* (Larry Kramer, 1989); *Borrowed Time* (Paul Monette, 1992); *Ryan White: My Own Story* (1991); *To All the Girls I Loved Before: An AIDS Diary* (J.W. Money, 1987); *Goodbye I Love You* (Carol Pearson, 1988); and John Preston's edited collection *Personal Dispatches* (1989), amongst many, many others. It also led to thousands of mini biographies on the AIDS Quilt (see Chapter 10; and Ruskin, 1988), which in turn inspired a film of some of these stories).

The Warholian moment It would seem that by the start of the twenty-first century, everyone in the minority world has a potential story to be told, and many others in the third or majority world are starting to claim rights to tell them too. No longer is the life story the privilege of the intellectual, the rich, or the elite – although it is clearly still their dominant form. But now auto/biography has spread across the globe and become a sign of self- and group awareness, and of a kind of equality of life: we can all speak the life. In all these instances there is a marked autobiographical turn from tales of an elite to tales previously not told. The genealogy of voices from below leads to seeing the task of these stories as being much more engaged in a political practice . . . at the end of the twentieth century, more and more diversity in human lives appears in the life story form. On the surface, there has been a shift from 'dominant stories', dominant genres', 'dominant memories' to a language of resistance, the popular, alternatives, difference.

Yet caution is needed. Starting to think about how voices come to recognize themselves and get their audience (cf. Chapter 2) soon leads to more questions about whether a voice takes on a particular form or not; whether indeed the voice gets changed in this process of speaking. This is what much post-colonial theory would argue: that ironically, marginal voices can often be co-opted into dominant ones through the very processes of telling their stories. And likewise, many women's autobiographies get co-opted into the canon of middle class male autobiography, using their theories and conventions. More generally, Patricia Hill Collins says:

Oppressed groups are frequently placed in a situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups. (1990: xiii)

Pulp Confessionals, Cyberdocuments and Hi-tech Lives

Autobiography and 'confession' may have had a long history in thought – from St Augustine to the newer Marginal Voices located above – but it is during the latter part of the twentieth century that it starts to appear in new forms of media, often giving it new features. We should not be surprised to find that just as the 'new information technologies are transforming the way we produce, consume, manage, live and die . . .' (Castells, 1998), so they are starting to change the very way we tell the story of our lives.

As a quick opening example of a shifting form, consider what might be called the 'paperbacking of confessions'. This is often linked to self-help worlds, where the personal tale is turned into an international best-seller – books like Nancy Friday's *My Mother, My Self* (1977), Rosemary Daniell's *Sleeping with Soldiers* (1984), Robin Norwood's collections of *Letters from Women who Love Too Much* (1987), studies of *The Soap Opera Syndrome* (Davidson, 1988). As one writer puts it, it is 'the self on the shelf' (Greenberg, 1994; Irvine, 1999). Since the 1960s, such 'confessional' books have rarely been out of the best-selling book lists. And as I write, it has culminated at century's end in a form of television confessional talk show: at its best perhaps in the now defunct *Donahue* and *Oprah*, at its worst maybe in *The Jerry Springer Show*. These are modern day 'freak shows' (Gamson, 1998), with the life on full media display, backed up with therapeutic suggestions – *The Talking Cure* (Shattuc, 1997). These are the many programmes which encourage people to go on screen and announce their lives, usually the most tragic parts of them, to a very wide audience. Incest, abuse, transgender, violence, wives who kill, men who abuse – these are the daily fodder of such shows. They are mass produced confessional tales. The new auto/biography has now moved into the new talk show auto/biography.

Life stories in an age of mechanical reproduction: from Benjamin to Baudrillard One of the first and most influential writers to start noticing how the shifts in technology were shaping 'art' forms was Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). He argued, in a very influential paper, that art forms were changing dramatically in the new modern world. They were becoming increasingly reproducible – in everything from books and cheap art prints, to photos and postcards. (We can take this on further to electronic forms such as computers and videos.) The original authenticity of art – and in our case, the story of a life – was being broken down. Originally full of 'aura' – authenticity, uniqueness, spontaneity – art becomes detached from its source and turned into 'a plurality of copies' (Benjamin, 1990: 30). Once this happens 'art' (and 'life stories') can become a mass form. More, people expect art to be reproduced and the very acts of creation become clouded with the potential of reproduction and its reception by a mass audience.

But if Walter Benjamin gave us the age of mechanical reproduction – one where the unique life story can become the paperbacked best-seller, where the story told of a life round the fire becomes the industry of 'confessional telling' exemplified in self-help books – then Jean Baudrillard (1929–) has given us the age of the simulacrum, where the actual lived life can become entrapped in a hi-tech whirl of media simulations, of chat shows, of computerized imagery. Now the lived life is no longer embodied and bounded as it was in the past; rather it swirls into a curious simulated form of its own apart from its author and apart from its authentic being. Go, for instance, into a web site, 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 on line of Thomas Jefferson, or Alex Haley's *Roots*. And when we watch films like *The Truman Show*, *Pleasantville* or *The Matrix* we find lives entrapped within media forms. In the much acclaimed *The Truman Show*, for example, 'Truman' – the lead character – is born on television and lives the story of his life entirely encapsulated through a television village (though somehow escaping at the end). In all this, the boundaries between life, media and the story of a life are seriously changing. Reproductions, then, are everywhere; and we start to sense that 'life stories' in the twenty-first century harbour so many changes that it may seem we have entered the age when science fiction becomes the new 'reality'.

Indeed, it is as if some of the utopian and dystopian tales written by the science fiction writers over the past century or so are starting to come true. From Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* 'cyborg' – half science/half person – to George Orwell's 1984 stuffed full of surveillance strategies and monitoring the personal life in a myriad of ways, it would seem new forms of being may well be in the making, which connects to the telling of life stories in new forms. Utopian images sense a new human being in the making who will be more autonomous, liberated, free, and who is confronting more and more choices – especially

around who they are to be: what has been called the postmodernization of intimacy. Here life stories start to be told in more and more fluid ways. In contrast, dystopian images sense a new human being turned into a mechanical robot or lost in a dehumanized cyberspace – efficient yet clichéd. Here we find what could be called – after George Ritzer’s (1995) work – *The McDonaldization of Society*. Life stories become controlling, calculable, predictable, efficient (perhaps most apparent in the standardization of the ‘Curriculum Vitae’ – the marketed story of a life for job persuasion) (Danahay, 1996). For still others, the story is more mixed: here the (post-) modern human being becomes a pastiche (Gergen, 1991). And all this is present in the popular imagination of films like *Terminator*, *Aliens*, *Lawnmower Man* etc. where the ‘morphing of the body’ (best known from *Terminator 2* and *The Abyss*) suggests that objects and humans melt seamlessly into one another.

New Trends in Life Documents

The backdrop to all this is the rise of a new series of technologies that are implicated in postmodern life. The old low-tech is being shifted into the new hi-tech. From print and sound recordings, through film and video, on to new digital forms – personal computing, web sites, CD-Roms, e-mail etc.; and ultimately towards lands only dimly sensed – cyberspace, virtual realities, medical scanning, the new genetics. A new world of holography, satellites, cybernetics, fibre-optics, digitalism, and virtuality may start to reorder the forms in which our lives are assembled, displayed and stored.

We have already seen some of the changes in the processes through which our lives get told (cf. Chapter 3): the sound recording in oral history, the visual record in the photograph, the documentary film, the rise of video diaries and video/ethnography. Just one hundred years ago, few lives could be told through any of these media: now they are quite widespread and even global. But all these are about to change. For example, as photographs move from the *analogic* mode they have previously displayed since their inception to a *digital* mode, so – it has been argued – we are moving into a ‘post-photographic era’ where we will reach ‘the end of photography as we know it’ (Mitchell, 1992; Ritchin, 1990). For analogic photography simply allowed copying; digital photography allows for a complete remixing and splicing of digitalized images. Likewise, as oral history confronts the new technologies, not only do massive databases become instantly accessible across the world, but voice recognition techniques make direct transcription of tapes possible. Combined with developments in video and hypertext, oral histories of everyone may soon be available! We now also have the accessing of lives in and through e-mail, CD-Roms, web sites and qualitative data packages. Not only are these increasingly common in the more formal ‘auto/biographical worlds’ of social sciences, there are also many popularly available programs for ‘writing your own family genealogy’, ‘writing your own life’, ‘writing your own

web page', or going into life story web sites that encourage the free exchange of life stories – not all of them sexual! Life stories may be put in digital form and made accessible with hypertext allowing the reader access to an electronic document where each page has many buttons which can lead you to further pages: you can access a life story and then find sounds, film clips, images, archives that are linked to the life. This life is not fixed, but one assembled through the reader. We are just at the start of what may be called 'virtual life story documents' – existing in computer memories, but having no tangible form in print. And, of course, through a global information highway, much of this can move across vast spaces in rapid time. If any of this was to become widespread (and surely much of it will?) life story telling will have undergone a major change. And yet even more: we can find many other new modes of encoding lives – from finger printing, eye scanning and bar codes, on to the new mechanisms visually invading the personal body – *mammography* (usually for breast cancer), *ultrasonography* (where sound waves help build up a portrait of the self), and the *CAT scan* (computerized axial tomography) which can go deep, right into the bones (injected fluids making cancers in the bone visible). Finally, we can detect the very *DNA* encoded in our body (Cook in Smith and Watson, 1996: 63–85). The so-called stories of our life are starting to penetrate our very 'souls'.

Once upon a time there was a dispute between so called 'ancients' and 'moderns'. The 'ancients' would dig around in the past but find so little documentation to go on that they had to 'wring the last ounce of information out of them'. The 'moderns' by contrast 'drown in documents' (Vansina, 1985: 158). To this we may now add the 'post-moderns': at the dawn of the Information Age, we have reached new levels of 'saturation'. We can now be overwhelmed with the numbers of lives and tellings. Almost everyone can have their Warholian 15 minutes of fame. The problem may now be to devise the best ways to simplify, sift and select from such a cornucopia.

The Dark Side of Life Stories

I have written this chapter in a fairly optimistic mood. From St Augustine's deep explorations of his inner self to the recovery of oppressed and marginal voices in slave narratives or HIV stories and on to the rise of personal web sites in cyberspace, we may trace the rise of auto/biography as a positive force for understanding and social change. But as I hinted at in the opening sections, all is not necessarily well with such life story work at the start of a new century. Indeed, it has many critics who sense something less than benign in this life story telling that seems to be everywhere. There is, then, a dark side.

Three main problems are coming to the fore. First, as we started to see with Benjamin above, there is a copying and commodification effect. Mimesis. Cliché. We start to live our lives through the stories of others, repeating and rehearsing others' stories as if they were our own, turning them along

the way into commodities – literally stories that may be exchanged or sold. Many auto/biographical stories thus start to get a tired, passé feel about them: we have heard it all before. Rather than the story being a clue to authenticity as Weintraub and others claimed, it has become a cliché, endlessly recycled, repeated, replayed.

Closely linked, such repetitions can easily become extensions of control. Indeed, in a broad sense this is Foucault's concern in his critique of the confessional society. The life story telling becomes a 'technology of the self: one of the means through which power is dispersed and lives are constituted and regulated. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Getting a Life* (1996) charts the many new ways in which 'autobiography' is becoming ubiquitous in everyday life – taking on new forms and extending its reach. It can be found in film, electronic mail, video, TV talk shows, newspaper 'personal' ads; in CVs, medical investigations, therapies of all kinds, as well as records kept in all kinds of institutions. This is not Rousseau's *Confession*: it is a million little theatres of confession in which everyday lives are acted out. It is everywhere.

And finally, there is the fear of an excessive individualization and personalization – what Smith and Watson have called 'the paradox of radical individualism [which] haunts late twentieth century "America"'. As they tellingly ask:

What does the right to privacy mean in a world of fragmented and dispersed subjects?

What does it mean to insist on a culture of individuals whose very individuality must be authenticated again and again?

What kind of autobiographical subjects are produced and verified in a culture that commodifies self-authentication?

How does commodification operate at a time when the bases of authentication seem unstable?

How do we account for the simultaneous promise and corrosion of identity and identity politics? For the promise of subject formation and the disillusion of deformation?

How can we account for the obsessive desire to find a 'true' self in the midst of a culture that fetishizes what we might call tourist identities, throwaways . . . ? (1996: 7)

In Conclusion

We are living in the auto/biographical society. Worlds of life story telling have been in the making for the past millennium, but they are more and more taking on new forms. This chapter has tried to sense a bit of this evolving form. It is a long journey from St Augustine's *Confessions* to cyberspace and television confessionals.

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Assumptions of the Method

Norman K. Denzin

The interpretive biographical method, as indicated in the preface, involves the studied use and collection of personal-life documents, stories, accounts, and narratives which describe turning-point moments in individuals' lives (Denzin, 1989a, chapter 2; 1989b, chapter 8). The subject matter of the biographical method is the life experiences of a person. When written in the first person, it is called an autobiography, life story, or life history (Allport, 1942, chapter 6). When written by another person, observing the life in question, it is called a biography. My intentions in this chapter are to offer a series of examples of autobiographical and biographical writing and then to make a number of critical points about the method and its assumptions. But, first, a brief aside.

The Subject and the Biographical Method

From its birth, modern, qualitative, interpretive sociology – which I date with Weber's meditations on *verstehen* and method (1922/1947; 1922/1949) – has been haunted by a *metaphysics of presence* (Derrida, 1972, p. 250), which asserts that real, concrete subjects live lives with meaning and these meanings have a concrete presence in the lives of these people.¹ This belief in a real subject who is present in the world has led sociologists to continue to search for a method (Sartre, 1963) that would allow them to uncover how these subjects give subjective meaning to their life experiences (Schutz, 1932/1967). This method would rely upon the subjective verbal and written expressions of meaning given by the individuals being studied, these expressions being windows

Source: *Interpretive Biography*, Qualitative Research Methods Series 17 (Newbury Park, California: SAGE, 1989), pp. 13–27.

into the inner life of the person. Since Dilthey (1900/1976), this search has led to a perennial focus in the human sciences on the autobiographical approach and its interpretive biographical variants, including hermeneutics.²

Derrida (1972) has contributed to the understanding that there is no clear window into the inner life of a person, for any window is always filtered through the glaze of language, signs, and the process of signification. And language, in both its written and spoken forms, is always inherently unstable, in flux, and made up of the traces of other signs and symbolic statements. Hence there can never be a clear, unambiguous statement of anything, including an intention or a meaning. My task in this book is to reconcile this concern with the metaphysics of presence, and its representations with a commitment to the position that interpretive sociologists and anthropologists study real people who have real-life experiences in the social world (Turner and Bruner, 1986; Plath, 1987).

Exemplars

Consider the following excerpts from some classic and contemporary autobiographical and biographical texts.

Autobiographies

Augustine (1960, p. 43) opens his *Confessions*:

You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is your power and to your wisdom there is no limit. And man who is part of your creation, wishes to praise you . . .

In her quasi-autobiographical *A Room of One's Own* (1929, p. 76), Virginia Woolf comments on the values that shaped her writing about her own life:

It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex . . . it is the masculine values that prevail.

Carolyn Kay Steedman (1987, pp. 6, 7, 9) situates her life story in *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, in her mother's life:

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 [p. 6] . . . I grew up in the 1950s [p. 7] . . . 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.

John Cheever, the novelist, pays some attention to the details of his life, which might otherwise not have been worthy of attention:

I have been a storyteller since the beginning of my life, rearranging facts in order to make them more interesting and sometimes more significant. I have turned my eccentric old mother into a woman of wealth and position and made my father a captain at sea. I have improvised a background for myself – genteel, traditional – and it is generally accepted. But what are the bare facts, if I were to write them. The yellow house, the small north living room with a player piano and on a card table, a small stage where I made scenery and manipulated puppets. The old mahogany gramophone with its crank, its pitiful power of reproduction. In the dining room an overhead lamp made from the panels of a mandarin coat. Against the wall the helm of my father's sailboat – long gone, inlaid with mother of pearl (Susan Cheever, 1984, p. 12).

Stanley, the young subject of *The Jack-Roller* (Shaw, 1930/1966), perhaps the most famous sociological autobiography, and the victim of a bad childhood, starts his story with the following words:

To start out in life, everyone has his chances – some good and some very bad. Some are born with good fortunes, beautiful homes, good educated parents; while others are born in ignorance, poverty and crime. In other words, Fate begins to guide our lives even before we are born . . . My start was handicapped by a no-good, ignorant, and selfish stepmother, who thought only of herself and her own children.

Nine pages into his autobiography, *The Words* (1964/1981, pp. 18–19), Jean-Paul Sartre locates himself in the family history he has been telling:

The death of Jean-Baptiste [his father] was the big event in my life: it sent my mother back to her chains and gave me my freedom. There is no good father, that's the rule . . . I left behind me a young man who did not have time to be my father and who could now be my son. Was it a good thing or a bad? I don't know. But I readily subscribe to the verdict of the eminent psychoanalyst: I have no Superego.

Biographies

Helmut R. Wagner (1983, p. 5) begins his intellectual biography of Alfred Schutz with the following lines:

Alfred Schutz was born in Vienna on April 13, 1899. His father died before his birth, and his mother married the brother of her first husband, Otto Schutz. This man was a bank executive who secured a good middle-class existence for his family; a quiet person, he did not exert much influence on his stepson. By contrast, Schutz's mother was energetic, strong-willed, and protective. She played a decisive role in guiding her son's development . . .

Richard Ellman (1959, p. vii) describes the origins of his justly famous biography of James Joyce:

Twelve years ago in Dublin Mrs. W. B. Yeats showed me an unpublished preface in which Yeats described his first meeting with James Joyce. My book had its origins at that time, although I did not work on it steadily until 1952.

Ellman's text (1959, p. 1) begins:

We are still learning to be James Joyce's contemporaries, to understand our interpreter. This book enters Joyce's life to reflect his complex . . . incessant joining of event and composition.

In the next chapter, "The Family Before Joyce," Ellman (1959, p. 9) states:

Stephen Dedalus (the hero of Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), said the family was a net which he would fly past, but James Joyce chose rather to entangle himself and his works in it. His relations appear in his books under thin disguises.

Quentin Bell (1972, p. 1), begins his biography of his aunt, Virginia Woolf, by locating her within her family history:

Virginia Woolf was a Miss Stephen. The Stephens emerge from obscurity in the middle of the eighteenth century. They were farmers, merchants, and receivers of contraband goods in Aberdeenshire . . . As soon as she was able to consider such things Virginia believed that she was heiress to two very different and in fact opposed traditions (p. 18).

Situating the Method

Several critical points concerning the autobiographical and biographical method may be drawn from these extended excerpts. Autobiographies and biographies are conventionalized, narrative expressions of life experiences. These conventions, which structure how lives are told and written about, involve the following problematic presuppositions, and taken-for-granted assumptions: (1) the existence of others, (2) the influence and importance of gender and class, (3) family beginnings, (4) starting points, (5) known and knowing authors and observers, (6) objective life markers, (7) real persons with real lives, (8) turning-point experiences, (9) truthful statements distinguished from fictions.

These conventions serve to define the biographical method as a distinct approach to the study of human experience. They are the methods by which the "real" appearances of "real" people are created. They are Western literary conventions and have been present since the invention of the biographical form.

Some are more central than others although they all appear to be universal, while they change and take different form depending on the writer, the place of writing, and the historical moment. They shape how lives are told. In so doing, they create the subject matter of the biographical approach. They were each present in the biographical and autobiographical excerpts just presented. I will treat each in turn.

The "Other": Biographical texts are always written with an "other" in mind. This other may be God, as with Augustine; other women (Woolf and Steedman); or an intellectual or status community of abstract and specific people (Ellman, Wagner, Sartre, Cheever, Bell, Stanley). The presence of an "other" in autobiographical and biographical texts means that they are always written with at least a double perspective in mind: the author's and the other's. The eye of the other directs the eye of the writer (Elbaz, 1987, p. 14).

Gender and Class: These texts are gendered, class productions, reflecting the biases and values of patriarchy and the middle class. They are ideological statements, often representing and defending the class or gender position of the writer. But more is at issue. Until recently, women did not write autobiographies. Their lives were not deemed important enough to have biographies written about them (Steedman, 1987, p. 9). For example, William Mathew's standard bibliography of British spiritual autobiographies written during the nineteenth century lists twenty-two written by men and five by women (Peterson, 1986, pp. 120–121). Of the twenty-five individuals in Plummer's (1983, p. 15) cast of social science subjects from whom life stories were gathered, four are female subjects, an additional three are about males who were female hermaphrodites.

Family Beginnings: These productions are grounded in family, family history, the biographies and the presences and absences of mothers and fathers. It is as if every author of an autobiography or biography must start with family, finding there the zero point of origin for the life in question. Elbaz (1987, p. 70) argues that, by the eighteenth century, "this concept of zero point had extended from the realm of the individual self to that of the social whole." Davis (1986, pp. 53–54) suggests that, in sixteenth-century France, the family system played a double function of placing persons within a patriarchal structure while positioning them within a larger social field. These "family" others are seen as having major structuring effects on the life being written about, for example, Schutz's mother and stepfather or Stanley's wicked stepmother.

Textual Turning Points: By beginning the autobiographical or biographical text with family, these sources presume that lives have beginnings or starting points. But, on this, Gertrude Stein (1960, quoted by Elbaz, 1987, p. 13) reminds us:

About six weeks Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it.

This passage appears at the end of Stein's autobiography, titled, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1960). Stein is telling the reader that "the beginning coincides with the end and the end with the beginning – which is the end – for autobiography (like fiction) is an act of ceaseless renewal: the story is never 'told' finally, exhaustively, completely" (Elbaz, 1987, p. 13). Stein is suggesting that the narrator or writer of an autobiography is a fiction, just as an autobiography is a fiction. That is, just as Defoe wrote a fictional autobiography of a fictional character, Robinson Crusoe, Stein has written a fictional autobiography of herself called, the autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. Stein is contending that the line between lives and fictions is impossibly and unnecessarily drawn (see discussion below).

The autobiographical and biographical genre is structured by the belief that lives have beginnings in families. Since this belief is part of the genre, virtually all biographical texts begin with family history. Stein's position challenges this conventional view concerning beginnings.

Knowing Authors: These texts presume the presence of an author or "outside" observer who can record and make sense of the life in question. If the text is autobiographical, it is assumed that the self of the writer knows his or her life, and hence is in the best position to write about it. In the biographical text, the same presumption holds, only now the interpretive work must be done by a diligent, hardworking, attentive scholar, for example, Ellman's text above.

Objective Markers: The above excerpts suggest that lives have objective and subjective markers and that these markers reflect key, critical points about the life in question.

They suggest the existence of "real" persons, whose existence in a real world can be mapped, charted, and given meaning. The markers of these "real" lives may be the values that structure the text (Woolf), a working class mother's wants and desires (Steedman), the house where one grew up (Cheever), a selfish stepmother (Stanley), the death of a father (Sartre, Schutz), a writer's works (Joyce). It is assumed that these markers fit into place and give coherence to the life in question.

Sartre (1971/1981, p. ix), in his discussion of Flaubert's life, makes the following argument as he describes two pieces of information about Flaubert:

The fragments of information we have are very different in *kind*; Flaubert was born in December 1821 . . . that is one kind of information . . . he writes, much later, to his mistress: "Art terrifies me" – that is another. The first is an objective, social fact, confirmed by official documents; the second, objective too . . . refers in its meaning to a feeling that issues from experience . . . Do we not then risk ending up with layers of heterogeneous and irreducible meanings? This book attempts to prove that irreducibility is only apparent, and that each piece of data set in its place becomes a portion of the whole, which is constantly being created, and by the same token reveals its profound homogeneity with all the other parts that make up the whole.

A life, it is assumed, is cut of whole cloth, and its many pieces, with careful scrutiny, can be fitted into proper place. But this writing of a life, Sartre suggests, like Stein, is constantly being created as it is written. Hence the meanings of the pieces change as new patterns are found.

The Subject in the Text: An Aside

Sartre's position skirts the problem of the subject's "reality" in the world of the autobiographical text. Granted Flaubert was born in December 1821, but how does Sartre get Flaubert's life into his text? This is the problem of language and writing, for, as Derrida (1981) argues, the principle knowledge of (and about) a subject only exists in the texts written about them. Sartre proclaims the existence of a "real" person, Flaubert. However, as Benveniste (1966) argues, and Derrida (1972/1981, p. 29; 1972, p. 271), develops, the linguistic concept of *person* or *subject* in language only refers to the person making an utterance, as in "I am writing this line about persons." My referentiality in the above line is only given in the pronoun *I*. My personhood is not in this line. The pronoun *I* is a shifter, and its only reference is in the discourse that surrounds it. This means, as Elbaz (1987, p. 6) argues, that "the notion of person takes meaning only within the parameters of the discursive event." My existence, or Flaubert's, is primarily, and discursively documented in the words written about or by them.

But more is involved than just the use of personal pronouns like *I*. Persons as speaking subjects (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 84) are not just empty signs, created solely by the syntactical and semiological structures of language (Ricoeur, 1974, pp. 236–266).³ Language, for the biographer and autobiographer, is not just an object or a structure "but a mediation through which and by means of which" (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 251), writers and speakers are directed toward biographically meaningful reality. What is at issue here is how the writing and speaking subject, as "the bearer of meaning" (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 246) in his or her texts, appropriates this pronoun *I*, which is an empty sign, and "posits himself [herself] in expressing himself [herself]" (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 256).

The pronoun *I* is waiting to be used by the autobiographical subject. Indeed, the genre and the larger political economy where such texts circulate dictates its use, along with its referent, *self* (see Elbaz, 1987, p. 153). But, as Benveniste (1966, p. 218) observes, "I signifies the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing I." Now, while any speaker or writer can use this empty sign, when it is used by the writer of a biographical or autobiographical text, its use signifies *this* person making *this* utterance, *this* claim, or *this* statement. Behind the pronoun stands a named person – a person with a biography. When, as a writer and a speaker, this person appropriates these words and this pronoun (*I, you, he, she, me*), he or she brings the full weight of his or her personal biography to bear upon the utterance

or statement in question (see Schutz and Luckmann, 1973, p. 114). The personal pronoun thus signifies this person making this utterance. It becomes a historical claim.

This is what autobiographies and biographies are all about: writers making biographical claims about their ability to make biographical and autobiographical statements about themselves and others. In this way, the personal pronouns take on semantic and not just syntactic and semiological meanings (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 256). The self, and its signifies (*I*, etc.) thus take on a double existence in the biographical text. First, they point inward to the text itself, where they are arranged within a system of narrative biographical discourse. Second, they point outward to this life that has been led by this writer or this subject. Untangling this mediation and interaction between these two points of reference is what the above discussion has been all about.

The Real Person: When a biographer purports to be giving the “real” objective details of a “real” person’s life, he or she is, in fact, only creating that subject in the text that is written. To send readers back to a “real” person is to send them back to yet another version of the fiction that is in the text. There is no “real” person behind the text, except as he or she exists in another system of discourse. But the central postulate of the biographical method (and of this book) is that there is a “real” person “out there” who has lived a life, and this life can be written about. This “real” person was born, has perhaps died, has left his or her mark on other people, and has probably deeply felt the human emotions of shame, love, hate, guilt, anger, despair, and caring for others. This feeling, thinking, living, breathing person, is the “real” subject of the biographical method.

The languages of autobiographical and biographical texts, then, cannot be taken as mere windows into the “real” world of “real” interacting subjects. These languages are only devices, tools, or *bricolages* for creating texts. The writers who use them are *bricoleurs*, or persons who use the “means at hand” to create texts which look like autobiographies or biographies (Derrida, 1972, p. 255).

Turning Points: Barely hinted at in the above excerpts, is the belief that a life is shaped by key, turning-point moments. These moments leave permanent marks. Again the author draws an example from Sartre, only now from his biography of Jean Genet (1952/1963, p. 1):

An accident riveted him to a childhood memory, and this memory became sacred. In his early childhood, a liturgical drama was performed, a drama of which he was the officiant [one who officiates]: he knew paradise and lost it, he was a child and driven from his childhood. No doubt this “break” is not easy to localize. It shifts back and forth, at the dictates of his moods and myths, between the ages of ten and fifteen. But that is unimportant. What matters is that it exists and that he believes in it. His life is divided into two heterogeneous parts: before and after the sacred drama.

The notion that lives are turned around by significant events, what I call *epiphanies*, is deeply entrenched in Western thought. At least since Augustine, the idea of transformation has been a central part of the autobiographical and biographical form.⁴ This means that biographical texts will typically be structured by the significant, turning-point moments in a subject's life. These moments may be as insignificant as Augustine's stealing pears from a pear tree and feeling guilt about the theft (Freccero, 1986, p. 23), or as profoundly moving as the scene in Genet's life described above by Sartre.

Truth: The above texts suggest that lives have objective, factually correct, "truth-like," documentary features. A person was born on such a date, died on this date, and, in between these dates, lived an important life. Cheever challenges this point, reminding the reader that facts can be altered by a storyteller in order to make them interesting and more significant. It is necessary, however, to dispense with Cheever's distinction. As suggested above, to argue for a factually correct picture of a "real" person is to ignore how persons are created in texts and other systems of discourse.

Standards of Autobiographical Truth

Various standards of truth in autobiographies have been proposed.⁵ These include sincerity, subjective truth, historical truth, and fictional truth. The sincere autobiographer is assumed to be willing to tell the subjective truths about his or her life. A historically truthful statement would be one that accords with existing empirical data on an event or experience. An aesthetic truth is evidenced when "the autobiography is an aesthetic success" (Kohli, 1981, p. 70). Presumably such a work conforms to the canons of the autobiographical genre and reports the writer's life as the public wants to hear it reported. A fictional truth occurs when it is argued that the "'real' truth is to be contained in 'pure' fiction" (Kohli, 1981, p. 73).

More is at issue, however, than just different types of truth. The problem involves facts, facticities, and fiction. *Facts* refer to events that are believed to have occurred or will occur, i.e. the date today is July 27, 1988. *Facticities* describe how those facts were lived and experienced by interacting individuals (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 119; Husserl, 1913/1962, pp. 184 and 410). *Fiction* is a narrative (story, account) which deals with real or imagined facts and facticities. *Truth*, in the present context, refers to statements that are in agreement with facts and facticities as they are known and commonly understood "within a community of minds" (Peirce, 1959, Volume 8, p. 18; 1958, p. 74). *Reality* consists of the "objects, qualities or events to which true ideas are" directed (Peirce, 1958, p. 74). There are, then, true and false fictions; that is, fictions that are in accord with facts and facticities as they are known or have been experienced, and fictions that distort or misrepresent these understandings. A truthful fiction (narrative) is faithful to facticities and facts. It creates verisimilitude, or what are for the reader believable experiences.

Shapiro (1968, p. 425), Pascal (1960, p. 19), and Renza (1977, p. 26) argue, and Cheever would agree that the autobiography is an imaginative organization of experience that imposes a distortion of truth.⁶ Autobiographical statements are, then, viewed as a mixture of fiction and nonfiction, for each text contains certain unique truths or verisimilitudes about life and particular lived experiences.

Elbaz (1987, p. 11) quotes Renza (1977, p. 26) who claims that autobiographies are neither fictional or factual:

We might say . . . that autobiography is neither fictive nor non-fictive. . . . We might view it . . . as a unique, self-defining mode of self-referential expression . . . that allows, then inhibits, the project of self-presentification. . . . Thus we might conceive of autobiographical writing as an endless prelude: a beginning without middle (the realm of fiction), or without end (the realm of history); a purely fragmentary, incomplete literary project, unable to be more than an arbitrary document.

Here Renza is making an unnecessary distinction between fiction and non-fiction, for all writing, as suggested above, is fictional. His other points about the autobiography warrant discussion. He assumes that there is a real self-referential self that gets expressed in the writer's text, and this self expresses itself in unique ways. What he fails to clarify is that the real, self-referential self is only present in a series of discourses about who a person is or was in the past. As Elbaz (1987, p. 12) observes, "The autobiographer always writes a novel, a fiction, about a third person," this third person being who he or she was yesterday, last year, or one hour ago. Autobiography and biography present fictions about "thought" selves, "thought" experiences, events and their meanings. Such works are tormented by the problem of getting this person into the text, of bringing them alive and making them believable. Fictions, in this sense, merely arrange and rearrange events that could have or did happen. Realist fiction, for example, presents its narrative in a way that is made to appear factual, i.e. as a linear, chronological sequence of events. Elbaz (1987, p. 1) argues, and I agree, "autobiography is fiction and fiction is autobiography: *both are narrative arrangements of reality*" (italics added).

The autobiographical and biographical forms, like all writing forms, are always *incomplete* literary productions. They are never arbitrary, as Renza argues, for no document is ever arbitrary (Elbaz, 1987, p. 12). These two forms are always a series of beginnings, which are then closed or brought to closure through the use of a set of narrative devices. These devices, called conclusions or last chapters, allow these forms to conform with the cultural myth that lives have endings,⁷ and that true, complete stories about these lives have been or can be told. However, as argued above, autobiographies and biographies are only fictional statements with varying degrees of "truth" about "real" lives. True stories are stories that are believed in.

The dividing line between fact and fiction thus becomes blurred in the autobiographical and biographical text, for if an author can make up facts about his or her life, who is to know what is true and what is false? The point is, however, as Sartre notes, that if an author thinks something existed and believes in its existence, its effects are real.⁸ Since all writing is fictional, made-up out of things that could have happened or did happen, it is necessary to do away with the distinction between fact and fiction (see additional discussion below).

Recapitulation

Given the above arguments, it is suggested that the following assumptions and arguments should structure the use of the biographical method in the human disciplines. The lived experiences of interacting individuals are the proper subject matter of sociology. That is, sociologists must learn how to connect and join biographically meaningful experiences to society-at-hand and to the larger culture- and meaning-making institutions of the late postmodern period (Mills, 1959; Denzin, 1989a, chap. 1; Becker, 1986, pp. 12–13). The meanings of these experiences are best given by the persons who experience them. A preoccupation with method, with the validity, reliability, generalizability, and theoretical relevance of the biographical method (Blumer, 1939 and 1979; Plummer, 1983; Kohli, 1981 and 1986; Helling, 1988) must be set aside in favor of a concern for meaning and interpretation (Denzin, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c, 1984b). Students of the biographical method must learn how to use the strategies and techniques of literary interpretation and criticism (Dolby-Stahl, 1985). They must bring their use of the method in line with recent structuralist and poststructuralist developments in critical theory (Derrida, 1967/1973; 1967/1978; 1972/1981; Frank, 1985; Jameson, 1975–1976; Denzin, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c) concerning the reading and writing of social texts. This will involve a concern with hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1975); semiotics (Barthes, 1957/1972; Manning, 1987); feminist theory (Balsamo, 1988); cultural studies and Marxism (Hall, 1980, 1987); postmodern social theory (Denzin, 1986a), and deconstructionism (Derrida, 1972/1981).

Lives and the biographical methods that construct them are literary productions. Lives are arbitrary constructions, constrained by the cultural writing practices of the time. These cultural practices lead to the inventions and influences of gendered, knowing others who can locate subjects within familial social spaces where lives have beginnings, turning points, and clearly defined endings. Such texts create “real” persons about whom truthful statements are presumably made. In fact, as argued above, these texts are narrative fictions, cut from the same kinds of cloth as the lives they tell about.

When a writer writes a biography, he or she writes him- or herself into the life of the subject written about.⁹ When the reader reads a biographical

text, that text is read through the life of the reader. Hence, writers and readers conspire to create the lives they write and read about. Along the way, the produced text is cluttered by the traces of the life of the “real” person being written about (Roth, 1988; Lesser, 1988).

These assumptions or positions turn on and are structured by the problem of how to locate and interpret the subject in biographical materials. This problem organizes the author’s arguments throughout the remainder of this book. In the next chapter I seek to clarify a number of concepts which surround this method, its use, and its history in sociology and literature (Bertaux, 1981, pp. 7–8; Bertaux and Kohli, 1984; Helling, 1988; Plummer, 1983, chapter 2; Titon, 1980; Denzin, 1989b, chapter 8; Elbaz, 1987, chapter 1).

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A Biographical Turn in the Social Sciences? A British-European View

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The Burgeoning of Biographical Method

Our choice of the phrase *biographical turn* for the title of our collection was a statement about the scope and influence of a shift in thinking that is currently shaping the agenda of research (and some policy applications) across the social science disciplines. This shift, which amounts to a paradigm change (Kuhn, 1960) or a change of knowledge culture (Somers, 1996), affects not only the orientations of a range of disciplines but their inter-relations with each other. In general, it may be characterized as a “subjective” or “cultural” turn in which personal and social meanings, as bases of action, gain greater prominence.

There is also by now a wide recognition that social science, in its *longues durées* of positivism, determinism, and social constructionism, has become detached from lived realities. And although structuration theory conceptualized the reproduction of social structures and cultures through the social action of subjects, debates about the relative effects of structure and agency, which have been vigorous, have remained abstract (Archer, 1995; Giddens, 1990; Mouzelis, 1995). The concerns of postmodernism with, on one hand, individual, multiple, and floating identities and, on the other, the discursive constitution of the social did even less to clarify the interconnections between the personal and the social/historical.

Perhaps it was inevitable that concerns with reflexivity, individualism, and identity would lead back to a more structural level of analysis and on to preoccupation with the social and psychic conditions and efficacy of agency. Certainly, the late 1990s saw an intensified search to take better account of the interweaving of human and sociopolitical development (Newton, 1999, p. 411) and to find research tools that could “prize open the different dimensions of lived totality” (Gottfried, 1998, p. 452), reconnect with “the vitality” and the “bedrock reality” of everyday lives (Crook, 1998, p. 524). It is this concern to link macro and micro levels of analysis that explains, it seems to us, the burgeoning interest and development in biographical methods. For biographies, which are rooted in an analysis of both social history and the wellsprings of individual personality, reach forwards and backwards in time, documenting processes and experiences of social change (Bertaux & Thompson, 1998; Giele, 1998). And biographical methods, with their long and diverse genealogy (e.g., Mills, 1967), provide a sophisticated stock of interpretive procedures for relating the personal and the social.

Developments in biographical methods need to be placed within a history of social theory, and working examples of processes of interpretation, laying bare the methodological premises of particular protocols, need to be provided. We attempted to do this in *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science (TBM)* (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000). Up until now, the constitutive effects of interpretive practices (at least in Britain, but probably elsewhere as well) remained relatively still too immune from reflexive questioning; comparative research forces attention on differences in research traditions, not just at the level of the interview but at the level of theorization of data. It is important to impel such questioning forward, creating opportunities both for hybridity and for more discerning selectivity.

We need also to consider the push-and-pull relationship between developments in policy and the turn to biographical methods. It was oral historians, some of whom were or became social practitioners, who already in the early 1980s adopted life history methods as an emancipatory tool and launched the concept of “empowerment” as a key concept in welfare practice. Yet despite the relevance of biographical methods to life course work, which was prominent in British social work training, such approaches remained relatively marginalized in academic social policy in the 1980s. In the sociology of medicine, by contrast, interpretive methods were widely used. Gerontology, which spans medicine and social policy, was an exception here (see Ruth & Kenyon, 1996). By the late 1990s, however, biographical approaches had become widely accepted, even sought out, by policy makers as “useful.” Principles of user involvement had become officially sanctioned, even mandated, although whether the effect was one of genuine democratization might be disputed. A cynical view would see the “turn” as a fig leaf for off-loading collective responsibilities and the more selective targeting of resources. But perhaps policy makers were at last responding to the requirements of a more differentiated and

reflexive society and the need to realign policy with the realities and strategies of everyday lives.

Antecedents

What are the antecedents of this “biographical turn” in social science? It is within the shifting boundaries between history and sociology that some of the most telling and stimulating debating issues have emerged. Attempts to account for individual agency, whether in relation to shifting power balances over time or measured against broad structural determinants in societies, have drawn historians and sociologists toward evidence that is rooted in autobiography, eyewitness statements, or straightforward personal narrative. In each discipline, the status of personal accounts, unless drawn from more powerful actors in the case of history, raised questions of reliability, subjectivity, and representativeness. Where historians elevated the document and its provenance as reliable evidence, sociologists sought evidence in quantitative measures of social events. Nevertheless, Paul Thompson (1978), in his classic text on the roots of oral history, *The Voice of the Past*, found evidence of historians making use of personal testimony over the centuries, and Ken Plummer’s (1983, 2001) search for the origins of a “humanistic method” in sociology identifies diaries, letters, photographs, and life histories as typical source materials of 19th- and early-20th-century social investigators.

Although the antecedents have long histories, a more modern and decisive shift to embrace personal accounts can be located within the later half of the 20th century. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, a more political and populist turn within history and sociology led to a recognition that the personal account provides a means to reaching those sections of society, both in the present and the past, whose experiences could not be directly tapped through documentary or formal survey sources.

Plummer (1983) argued that Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1958) *The Polish Peasant*, published from 1918–1920 onwards, was the first substantive sociological engagement with “the individual and the social” (p. 40). Their distinction between the “*objective* factors of the situation and the *subjective* interpretation of that situation” (p. 41) he held as being of fundamental significance. Paul Thompson (1978) defined this shift in historiography as one of both method and meaning. Engaging with personal accounts meant valuing and finding ways of eliciting and analyzing the spoken and written words of people who, earlier, had been seen as marginal to history making or to sociological explanation. Immigrant Poles, moving between Europe and the United States, were perceived as a social problem in the first decades of the century, but their personal experiences had not been appreciated as a part of any explanation of ensuing social change. Similarly, the new history of the midcentury, as it turned to include the voices of people whose marginalization

and resistance had contributed to the effects of industrial change a hundred years earlier, was to alter both the methods and the content of history making. The historian E. P. Thompson (1963) explained in *The Making of the English Working Class* that for working-class people, “their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience” (p. 13).

In giving value to subjective experience, historians and sociologists were discovering common ground, although the fine work of developing explanations around telling, remembering, and their functions in relation to agency and meaning had yet to be explored. However, issues were beginning to be recognized. In 1982, the French sociologist Daniel Bertaux argued that what he chose to call “anthroponomy” (p. 142), the identification of the ways human beings act on society and how the actions of past generations shape and form a basis for current action, was “a fundamental philosophical question” (p. 149).

Early 1980s: The Questioning of Memory and Identity

In Britain, biographical methods have been enriched by a number of interrelated influences. Although the points in time when these were acknowledged and accepted continue to be debated, their significance and contribution are not. Here, we look briefly at the significance and contribution of three main influences: debates about memory, feminism, and postmodernism and identity.¹ All three have challenged approaches to working with biographies, both in terms of method and meaning.

Debates about memory preoccupied oral historians in the early 1980s as they responded to criticisms of their emergent method. In seeking validation alongside traditionally more trusted sources such as documents and evidence from representative surveys, there was a tendency to emphasize the quality and originality of data, while at the same time setting up sampling procedures and advocating interview methods to ensure representativity and lack of bias (Lummis, 1987; Thomson, Frisch, & Hamilton, 1994, p. 33). This emphasis left the new method open to criticism for its lack of attention to subjectivity and for the neglect of social and psychological influences on remembering. A significant assault came from the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. Their 1982 essay attacked oral history’s empiricism, its unquestioning validation of the individual, its alleged epistemologically impoverished presentation of the past, and its lack of engagement with the political nature of research as based in an unequal relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Popular Memory Group, 1998).

These criticisms, despite their exaggeration in many respects, set an agenda for oral history and, by association, biographical methods debates, which has continued to be productive over subsequent years. The issue of subjectivity had already been exposed by Luisa Passerini, an Italian oral historian. Her exploration of working-class communities in Turin during the Fascist period,

to account for the contradictions and silences in interviews, deliberately emphasized the rewards of an emphasis on subjectivity and ambivalence in remembering rather than staying with the apparent security of more “positivist and historicist” approaches (Passerini, 1979). Similarly, Alessandro Portelli (1981) was recommending oral history precisely because “it tells us less about events than about their meaning” and because it can “force on the historian . . . the speaker’s subjectivity” (p. 99). Identifying individual meaning and giving weight to the changing perspective of the interviewee have remained an abiding focus for oral historians and others who are keen to understand the tensions between stability and instability and between public genre and individual experience in remembering. So, for example, Al Thomson (1994), in his study of Anzac veterans, has traced how public narratives of the Australian experience of the First World War combine with the events of individuals’ life histories to affect remembering in very late life.

Although the Popular Memory Group’s criticisms were telling, they were ultimately bypassed by developments in feminism. Feminist historians in the early 1970s drew from oral and biographical sources to substantiate arguments about marginalized histories inaccessible through conventional documentary sources. Early works by writers such as Elizabeth Roberts (1975), Mary Chamberlain (1975), Sheila Rowbotham and Jean McCrindle (1977), Jill Liddington and Jill Norris (1978), Catherine Hall (1977), Di Gittins (1977), Thea Thompson (1981), and others opened up topics such as everyday domestic life, women’s industrial labor, maternity, sexuality, and birth control to research scrutiny. However, given feminism’s political drive, this was not simply a question of redressing an imbalance in the making and telling of history. These new agendas for historical research were also a means to establishing continuities with women’s oppression in the present. This meant that understanding what was meant by the past shifted as feminists redrew the maps of responsibilities and power, challenging assumptions with accounts that used women’s words, women’s knowledge, and women’s stories. From here, the move to seeing the interview itself as both a positive and negative force, as misrepresenting through inequality or as empowering by giving voice to individual experience of oppression, was only a short step (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Oakley, 1981; Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Debates about the ethics of telling, hearing, and representing have continued to dominate in English oral history and biographical work.

The third area that we identify as contributing to the shaping of biographical work is the turn to reflexivity, identified by Anthony Giddens (1991) as a key diagnostic feature of the postmodern state. In tandem with feminists such as Liz Stanley and her exploration in *The Auto/Biographical I* (1992), an emphasis on self-construction, life review, and the fashioning of identity made its own impact on the development of biographical methods. Tracing reflexivity in the process of interviewing and being interviewed has resulted

in the exposure of often quite raw emotions, misconceptions, and even traumatic remembering, bringing oral history and biographical work close to an identification with therapeutic processes, far distant from their originating antecedents (see “Auto/Biography in Sociology,” 1993; “Memory, Trauma and Ethics,” 1998). Nevertheless, such work has maintained a continuing commitment to changing perspectives in social science, adding a critically personal edge to what had earlier been defined as simply history, society, or policy.

The 1980s postmodernist movement against positivist social science saw the celebration of the freedom and arbitrariness of subjectivity and a denial of the determinisms of alleged “social structures,” including the determinisms of class but also of other “positioning categories.” Taken up in the “linguistic-textualist turn” of that time, a significant minority of sociologists developed a canon of “qualitative inquiry” that focused completely or almost completely on “the point of view of the actor” while simultaneously coming to assert the extreme fragility of any particular actor’s identity or point of view. This was a new version of the earlier “structuralist” assertion (attacked by E. P. Thompson, 1978) that individual actors were nothing more than the expression of ideological and social-structural determinations playing on them. An extreme version of this postmodernist skepticism and refusal to make inferences from text was those who denied that actors had any coherent point of view or any stable “identity” that could be expressed by what they said or did. Given sufficient emphasis on the incoherence of the alleged points of view in the text and on any alleged identity that the text might be deemed to express, the safest position was to celebrate the text as a momentary expression of transient and precarious pseudo-coherence. A present-time analysis of the “text of the moment” was all that could be achieved without falling into any inferences about alleged continuities of point of view, identity, the speaking subject, and so forth. Breaking with social and oral history’s stress on the “experiencing speaking subject” and with sociology’s concern for the historically evolving macro-context, cultural studies almost exclusively followed this exciting and rewarding linguistic-textualist turn.

Previous grand narratives about the collective agents of class and nation had been decomposed and subverted by the industrial transformations in modern societies after the 1970s, by what may be loosely called globalization and the crisis of the nation state, and in particular by the collapse of communism in Soviet Russia and its satellites. Newer collective identities of “women” and “Blacks” were proposed but were soon “deconstructed” in their turn. Associated with this apparent “world transformation,” there spread very widely in society and in the social sciences a denial of the relevance of history, a denial originally put forward by the archetypical capitalist Henry Ford (“history is bunk”), by Marxist structuralists in the 1970s, and then in the Western euphoria generated by the collapse of communism (in, for example, Fukayama, 1992). The “end of history” – the biggest rupture possible in the grand meta-narrative – for some implied the end of the relevance of doing historically minded research work.

The 1990s: “Historical” and “Cultural” Understanding of Agents and Actions

During the 1980s, however, alongside the postmodernist belief in “situational freedom,” there developed a countermovement that was deeply skeptical of declarations that we had reached the end of history and useful historical mindedness. This countermovement, which has increased in its relative strength since the 1990s as the limits of postmodernist description and neo-liberal market self-celebration have become more apparent, takes account of the earlier structuralist and later postmodernist critiques of essentialist or determinist positions but is doing so to deepen its historical and cultural approach to structures and agencies.

To understand oneself and others, we need to understand our own histories and how we have come to be what we are. We make our own histories but not under conditions of our own choosing, and we need to understand these conditions of action more if our future making of our own histories is to produce outcomes closer to our intentions and projects. Fischer-Rosenthal (2000) argued that in the contemporary epoch, modernization has and will foreground individualization and “the individual.” This, together with a historical movement in society and in social science, may well lead – both on the part of the individual actor and on the part of the researcher attempting to understand the individual actor – to a biographical approach.

We have discovered considerable convergence between our concern for reflexivity in our interviewees and in ourselves with that of a research tradition not particularly focused toward biography. McDonald (1996), in a mid-1990s collection, has a discussion of a general turn toward history in the human sciences with a beautiful formulation that could be our own: “The notion . . . of historically self-conscious analysts reconstructing fully contextualized historical actors and representing them in a theoretically-sophisticated narrative that takes account of multiple causes and effects is at the heart of the vision of the historic turn” (p. 10).

Biographical social researchers in the 1990s were increasingly attempting to describe people as historically formed actors whose biographies are necessary to render fully intelligible their historical action in context – its conditions, meanings, and outcomes, whether such conditions, meanings, and outcomes be conscious or unconscious. We expect this to develop further in the 21st century.

Consequently, although the historical turn in the social sciences does not have to be a biographic turn, to introduce “biographizing” into social science is to accentuate a historical orientation. We are now seeing more and more understandings of the evolutions of structures, agencies, and actions as historically formed and historically forming. These accounts tend to move to higher levels of sophistication and depth of analysis both of intrapsychic and of societal-context realities. *TBM* is part of that movement.

Four Areas of Change in the 1990s

Staying with the “British story” for the moment, we consider four areas of change that result from and contribute to this general shift in perspective in the 1990s. These are movements in the relationship between psychoanalysis and social sciences, a new orientation to “culture” in social policy, the use of narrativity in gerontology, and the “officializing” of “empowerment.” All these changes are illustrative of mutations in social science in the past decade and are inter-related with the new burgeoning of biographical methods.

Relationship between Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences

Until very recently, the psychoanalytic tradition was kept very firmly apart from sociology and from the practice of biographizing in the social sciences (Rustin, 2000). A key chapter in Bertaux’s (1981) volume, by Ferrarotti, regrettably concluded that at that time, “no intrapsychic or relational model of the social individual” existed for sociological use.

However, to attempt to deepen *our understanding of individual agency as historical* means avoiding an excessively present-centered and functionalist “over-socialised concept of man” (Wrong, 1961). It is not surprising then that the turn to subjectivity has meant for some sociologists a turn toward a particular view of, or model of, subjectivity – that presented by psychoanalysis. Fitting the turns to subjectivity and to history, psychoanalysis provides a “thick description” of the historical evolution of the individual as acted-on agent: It accounts for subjectivity in a historical way.

It is true that this classic model of psychoanalysis – one in which personal self-understanding moves from self-defensive unconscious mystification to self-aware understanding of real personal history, from illusion to truth – was challenged strongly in the 1980s by postmodernism within the psychoanalytic tradition. Schafer (1976) and Spence (1982), in different ways, argued that psychoanalysis did not discover any truths but only produced a more coherent and a more personally accepted narrative. What was important was “narrative truth,” however historically untrue it might be. This version of psychoanalysis could then be freely used for “understanding” the subjective texts of postmodernist narrations. Under this regime of pseudo-knowledge, as the oxymoronic concept of narrative truth suggests, the researcher’s account and understanding of the life history narration only needed to be “coherent and attractive” and need not worry about its historical truth.

Despite this postmodernist challenge, the presupposition that all actors are incompletely conscious of the conditions, meanings, and outcomes of their actions remained strong in both psychoanalysis and in social science, and the 1990s saw increased use and assimilation by biographic researchers of

psychodynamic and psychoanalytic structures of understanding. One of the strengths of the biographical-narrative interpretive method (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Wengraf, 2001) is precisely its ability to explore latent levels of personal meaning. Ferrarotti's regret for an absent "intrapsychic or relational model of the social individual," if it was ever justified, now seems increasingly out of place (see Chamberlayne & Spano, 2000; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000a, 2000b; Rustin, 2000).

The Rediscovery of Culture

Another shift across the social sciences, which biographical methods both reflect and impel, lies in the rediscovery of "culture." There is an understanding that in social policy, for example, material policies and practices are lived out or "filtered" through networks of relationships and shared assumptions and meanings that vary greatly between societies. Such explorations of the cultural underpinnings of welfare systems, and the relating of theory to experience and practice, bring anthropological methods to the fore.

The social order is not just transmitted, in the way cultural studies might emphasize, but experienced and explored. Formal systems are played out in interaction with informal cultures and structures and through the lives and strategies of individuals.² The productive potential for reworking social policy through a cultural approach is explored in the volume *Welfare and Culture in Europe* (Chamberlayne, Cooper, Freeman, & Rustin, 1999). Such an orientation to culture can paradoxically draw little from cultural studies, which we suggest has tended to focus on the study of youth and on "representation" rather than "agency." We argued in the original version of this article that "'cultural sociology' rather than 'cultural studies' is what is needed" (Chamberlayne et al., 2000, p. 9). We take up this discussion later.

The Use of Narrativity in Gerontology

Narratologists who work in gerontology argue that storying, storytelling, and narrative maintenance play an important role in personal adjustment in late life. Seen in this way, biographizing becomes a normal human activity, contributing to the maintenance of identity, the presentation of self, and the passing on or transference of key cultural and personal elements – even a guarantee of immortality at the end of life (Biggs, 1993, pp. 61–66; Coleman, 1986; McAdams, 1993; Phillipson, 1998, pp. 23–28). Identifying the characters, plots, and archetypes employed in narratives is more than simply a question of classification of types. Bruner (1995) argued for the role of the autobiography as the basis for "negotiability," the process whereby an individual presents himself or herself to the world through a storied version of his or her life (p. 169). Indeed, Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson (1993), drawing on data from

a longitudinal study of older people, saw storytelling as one of the most enduring themes of late old age. This very social function of the narrative act is also detected in studies of narration among elderly people living in residential care, where the life story, as told, may be a product of the social context in which someone lives, a version of a life made ready for public consumption in a situation where identity is at risk from the negative stereotypes of frailty and the processes and procedures of caring (Dobroff, 1984; Gubrium & Holstein, 1995a, 1995b; Wallace, 1992).

Against Disempowerment

Though talk about past experience is accepted as a normal part of everyday life, its role as a legitimate practice in work with vulnerable children and adults has only recently been legitimated. Work with life story books, where adults with learning disabilities are moving from institutional care to community settings, in care planning with older people, or with children separated from their birth parents, now has established sets of procedures including ethical guidelines. Such practices have emerged in tandem with philosophies of care that now focus on the individual as a consumer rather than a recipient of services. Working with the “whole person” calls for knowledge of that person’s past as well as his or her current needs and preferences. How that past is presented, in what detail and with what emphases, is a relevant issue. It may include hitherto unrevealed aspects of identity; it may be incompletely communicated where there is cognitive impairment (Middleton & Hewitt, 2000). Whatever form it takes, its presentation enables the opportunity for the development of appropriate and sensitive care practice and interventions and the promotion of more socialized and empowering perceptions of the self in circumstances when stigma, segregation, and disempowerment may have been a more common experience (Adams, Bornat, & Prickett, 1998; Atkinson, 1997; Ryan & Walker, 1999).

As well as other researchers, oral historians, as Portelli (1997) argued, recognize that oral history is in essence dialogic and interrogative, a process of social relationships in which both interviewer and interviewee play a part, each with his or her own agenda, intentions, and unanticipated reactions to the experience. This “live” quality brings with it the potential to link what is narrated to current experience and future states in ways that have been democratizing, reflexive, critical, and emancipatory. The invitation to talk about the past, to recall from memory, puts the subject center stage with the authority that comes with ownership of a scarce and unique resource: the personal account. The result is that boundaries between researcher and researched, data and source, experience and fact, past and future are shifted, merged, and sometimes dissolved. Opportunities to reveal, revise, and reclaim the past have led to individual life changes as well as collective challenges to established accounts

and dominant narratives. Survivors of mental health systems, holocausts, and disasters; witnesses to political dealings, policy reform, and popular power; and narrators of experiences of exclusion, of life on the margins, of authority, and creativity all have the potential to change their own and others' lives through the process of telling and then differently telling their and other people's life stories. Many have done so.

Comparative Work in the *TBM*

Work on *TBM* facilitated some fascinating and creative exchanges as the common quests and overlaps in what at times feel like separate and yet parallel universes in sociology and oral history, and in pure and applied social sciences, became manifest. However, as mediators between research traditions, we needed to hold a balance between seeking commonalities between approaches and deepening understanding of differences, the latter being vital to appreciating and negotiating debates. A danger of "Euro-Anglo-speak" is that researchers talk past each other in a semblance of common terminology, overriding more subtle and deep-rooted cultural meanings (Chamberlayne, 1997).

It is possible that the subjective, cultural, and biographical turn in the social sciences is specific to Britain. Certainly, the shift toward biographical methods occurred earlier in France and Germany. Heinritz and Rammstedt (1991), in a review of biographical work, dated the "craze" (*mode galopante*) for it in France to the early 1970s, and the international collection edited by Bertaux (1981), *Biography and Society*, spoke already of a "biographical movement," whose impact had been considerable in shifting sociological perspectives.

The key aim of *TBM* was to encourage changes in the nature and direction of both the theoretical and the methodological traffic of biographical research. In particular, we wanted it to help in bridging the intellectual gaps that have developed between German and either French or British intellectual traditions in postwar years, as these bear on biographical and narrative work. For although collaboration between German and British research and social policy has been increasing (Clasen, Gould, & Vincent, 1998; Leisering & Walker, 1998), British sociology has in many ways been more strongly inspired by French structuralism and poststructuralism in recent decades and increasingly detached from German phenomenology. Much "realist" French work using life histories, on the other hand, is more influenced by the Chicago school than by poststructuralism and narrativism, despite the influence of Ricoeur's (1984) *Time and Narrative*. An interest in the construction of identity through narrative is shared by both discourse theorists and phenomenologists. Yet approaching identity through biographical reconstruction (which is inherently historical) or through the structures of language and cultural representation (especially if these are treated situationally) is very different.

The “realism” of the Chicago school approach as a means of researching social processes and social change has entered and reentered different European sociological traditions at different times. Apitzsch and Inowlocki (2000) traced this history with regard to German sociology, while also bringing into view a greater variety of contributory influences to biographical work in Germany than is captured by a narrower emphasis on its roots in phenomenological interpretation and meaning. There are of course many aspects to the Chicago school. Apitzsch and Inowlocki stressed the interest of Fritz Schütze as a key figure in the development of German biographical methods, in the symbolic interactionism and the grounded-theory analytical procedures of Anselm Strauss, and in the group methods and detailed supervision of students used by the Chicago school (see Strauss, 1987, for examples). They also highlighted his interest in suffering and disorderly social processes and, hence, his interest in “trajectories” as a means of comparing responses to traumatic events.³

In France, the reburgeoning of interest in the Chicago school in the 1990s has centered rather on its study of social relations and “the historical fabric of social relations which underlies practical behaviour” (Heinritz & Rammstedt, 1991, p. 353, quoting Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame). Likewise, Bertaux and Thompson (1993) and Bertaux and Delcroix (2000) argued for the cross-generational study of families, combining history and sociology, as a means of identifying intergenerational transmission. As compared with the concept of social reproduction as used by Bourdieu, this is a far more particularized approach, which takes account of individual initiative as well as sociocultural determinations (Heinritz & Rammstedt, 1991, pp. 353, 358).

As Heinritz and Rammstedt (1991) pointed out, however strong and prolific the realist tradition in French biographical work, there are others in France who regard narratives as artifacts, and there is a wide spectrum in between. A well-known text by Demazière and Dubar (1997), for example, which draws on Greimas (1986), makes a sociological analysis of the structural categories used by young unemployed men and women from all over France in narrative interviews, using a process of inductive typologizing.

In British traditions of biographical analysis, there has predominantly been an emphasis on the social relations of the interview understood in terms of power and positioning. Cooper (2000) and Hazzard (2000) drew on French and German studies, respectively, highlighting differences between British and “continental” approaches.

The introduction of biographical interpretive methods in Britain has catalyzed some new orientations (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000b). On the other hand, as we emphasized above, we see our intervention as occurring within a wider set of paradigm changes. Whether similar paradigm changes are in train in France or Germany or the United States is beyond the scope of this text – the question itself and the difficulty of answering it confirm our argument of the need for much more work in this field – it is hoped that *TBM* will add impetus to such a change of paradigm, not least in cultural studies.

Cultural Studies

Cultural studies can be said to have begun in Britain with Richard Hoggart's (1957) *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life With Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* and the oeuvre of Raymond Williams. As a field, it started off on its trajectory as a mixture of critique and appreciation of "popular culture," seen as a contested site between the authentic popular culture of settled working-class communities and their cultural swamping and erosion by "commercial culture," at that time principally the commercial press and films, as well as radio. Hoggart's strategic move was to insist on a "problematic space" between experience as spontaneously experienced through traditional working-class culture and experience under pressure from establishment, middle-class, and commercial representations. It was the existence of this problematic distance between historical experience and media representations that defined the area that cultural studies was to study. In a sense, it forced a "sociology of the people" onto what was then "English studies" and what is now "media studies."

The first generation of "scholarship boys" – who took an oppositional stance from their experiences as children from working-class homes into their critiques of university and media representations and preoccupations – took their self-biographizing, their observant participation in their original experiences, and their double vision of the middle class to which they were struggling to belong (and at the same time, not belong) and produced a first wave of what could be described as a biographically sensitized "informal critical sociology."

However, most "cultural studies" writers (and then lecturers and then researchers) came from "text-focused" disciplines such as English studies, literary studies, art history, film and TV studies, and philosophy. This was to provide a basis for a later "disciplinary regression" when the historical context changed and the field became more "academicized." As we discussed earlier, in all the social sciences say from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, there was a strong swing toward textualism; cultural studies, whose nontextualism was always weak and undertheorized and at variance with the professional origins and training of most of its proponents, was in no position to resist. Earlier students had previously wanted to be able to criticize the mass media; a newer generation now wanted to join them and get good jobs in them; college and academic staff who were always more comfortable with thinking in sophisticated ways about texts now had nothing "political" to stop them from just being much more armchair sophisticated. In a word, cultural studies intellectuals ceased being oppositional (Giroux, Shumway, Smith, & Sosnoski, 1995). When the concept of "hegemonic power" was replaced by the wonderful permission to "pursue desire/pleasure" not to speak of *jouissance* (Harris, 1992), then permission to become ever-more-sophisticated "consumer/commentators" on the pleasures and ironies of cultural consumption (including one's own) took over more and more. The realities of history and society could be taken for

granted – or indeed, in the heights of text fetishism, denied or defined as merely another text.

Older and more well-established disciplines had greater powers of resistance – through methodological paradigms and rituals. Though the original “year in a foreign/colonial field” was under pressure from the advocates of “brief ethnography,” anthropology students might still have to “work in the field” – a long, messy, expensive, and uncomfortable business. Historians might be required to go to archives and explore the documents to find out what actually happened (the 19th-century German historian von Ranke) and, where appropriate, laboriously find and interview people and analyze their oral testimonies at some length. Sociologists might need to do their own interviews and their participant observations of life worlds not their own – hanging out on corners with a street gang, shadowing executives as they went about their business, and sitting in newsrooms to see how decisions were actually taken. Compared to any of these, the “cultural studies” analysis of texts was incredibly clean, tidy, and economic with research time, and so – in a period of decreasing time to train in any methodology at all (Steedman, 1992, commented on declining resources allocated to training) and intensifying need to publish – armchair textualism had to be the way to go. The historical dimension was abandoned (social history got scorned as “empiricist” and naive) (see Pickering, 1997, pp. 1–10); the sociological was also lost – at least in terms of its varied experiential and empirical methodologies; the juncture with Frankfurt school critical theory was never made because of cultural populism’s fear of “elitism” (Kellner, 1997; McGuigan, 1997).

The indexes to two exhaustive readers in cultural studies published in 1992 and 1993 (During, 1993; Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992) contain no references to methodology, to interview, to observation, or to participant observation, let alone biography or autobiography. Ethnography is mentioned in one (During, 1993) but refers only to some 15 pages out of 454. The first methodological book relating explicitly to the field of cultural studies appeared as late as 1995 when Pertti Alasuutari brought out his *Researching Culture: Qualitative Method and Cultural Studies*. This, too, has nothing on biography and the merest mention of autobiography. In 1997, Ferguson and Golding brought out a promisingly sounding collection titled *Cultural Studies in Question*, but this – despite its other considerable merits – does not mention Alasuutari’s work and does not have in its index references to methodology, interview, observation, or participant observation. Ethnography appears as usual just as “ethnography of audiences.”

It seems that students or researchers who consult these texts are not supposed to be concerned with exploring such methodologies. In turn, they will have found little there to push them beyond the analysis of verbal and visual texts (“text-reader-researcher” as “sufficient audience of one”), except perhaps for “audience-research” and “reception-studies” (e.g., Brunt, 1992).

In cultural studies as elsewhere, the later 1990s have seen signs of change, perhaps. This could be symbolically dated from 1997. Ferguson and Golding's (1997) *Cultural Studies in Question* – despite its methodological vacuum noted above – pushes for, among other things, a “political economy” contextualization (see chapters by Kellner, Garnham, and Golding). Their push toward an understanding of macro-structures is balanced in Jim McGuigan's (1997) *Cultural Methodologies*, where chapters by Ann Gray (1997) and Carolyn Steedman (1997) highlight autobiography. Murdock (1997) devoted a whole chapter to thin descriptions, questions of method in cultural analysis. McGuigan's index has substantial entries under ethnography but also under autobiography and interviews. Also, in 1997, Denzin brought out a call for a return to interpretive ethnography that, following on his earlier calls for interpretive biography, symbolic and interpretive interactionism might start having effects this decade.

Similarly promising is the recent article by Van Loon (2001) in the *Handbook of Ethnography* titled “Ethnography: A Critical Turn in Cultural Studies,” which concludes that “every autobiography is always an ethnography” (p. 282), inverting and complementing Clifford and Marcus's (1986) claim that “every ethnography is also an autobiography.”

The linguistic and textualist turn has kept the cultural studies' concept of “culture” (popular culture or other) retarded. A “way of life,” a citizenry, a “people,” or “the popular” is not just a (mass) audience for (commercial mass media) texts. What may be needed is an “ethnographic re/turn” in cultural studies in which the ethnographizing biography would be crucial and in which the type of ethnographizing would not itself be simply merely linguistically turned (*détourné*) and dehistoricized. Such a move toward biographic research within a historically conscious “political economy” and “sociology” may – if it ever percolates to the level of graduate training for cultural studies research – result in serious change.

The argument we have made about our problems with the field of cultural studies as it has appeared over the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s should not be taken as meaning that the conceptual research of that period has nothing to offer. Though we cannot go into this here, we think it has a great deal to offer, on condition that it offers them differently. We think that biographical research into particular feeling, experiencing, and reflecting nonunitary and relational selves would be the way to do it. Although disagreeing with McRobbie's (1997) underestimation of the historical and overconcern for “the contemporary new,” a short period in Western culture, we would agree with a modified version – with which she might well not be happy – of her conclusions:

The critical task now is to return in feminist cultural studies to *the historical* [italics added], the empirical, the ethnographic and the experiential, and

to use these tools to explore the social and cultural practices and . . . subjectivities . . . in relation to what has been happening in the theoretical world of anti-essentialism, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism. (p. 186)

So far, however, we must say, among existing empirical cultural studies researchers we have not yet found any significant participation in the “turn to biography.” Dominant cultural studies concern for the “told story” (self-representation, studies of any narrative text) can be very high and highly rewarding; interest in the macro/micro political economy “lived and experienced life” understood separately from the told story (and helping to contextualize it) is remarkably low, whether we are dealing with individual or collective lives. The flight of cultural studies students from the realities of world history and local milieus and psychic realities seems built into their training and their opportunity costs; it will not be easy to change. Boredom might do the trick, though, and methodological awareness is always a good sign!

Self-Critical Theory and Self-Critical Method

What is required for methodology to be critical and serve critical theory? We would argue that at least one of two conditions needs to be satisfied. Both conditions can be seen as satisfying some notion of “triangulation” of concepts, of empirical sources, and of methods for processing and interpreting raw data (Denzin, 1970).

The notion of triangulation suggests that hypotheses are better established, knowledge can be accepted as more robustly validated, if truth-claims are supported not just by one source of data but by many, not just by one methodology for generating and analyzing data but by many, and not just by one witness or observer but by several.

We have said that just as an earlier form of oral history was almost exclusively concerned with establishing “objective facts” (in general and in particular, the biographical data about an individual life), so other studies have been almost exclusively concerned with establishing “subjective facts” (in general and in particular, a person’s narrative of his or her own life). These might be seen not as triangular but monoangular genres of study and sources of understanding: As such, they are intrinsically more limited in what they can provide.

The biographical movement is potentially a mode of study requiring more than one source of data and “treating” its data in more than one way. For example, the biographic-narrative interpretive method (Wengraf, 2001) restricts its immediate data to interview material but processes these to generate independent analyses of the lived life (as seen from the outside) and the told story (account given by the history-twisting, story-making, selective subjective). These are then confronted and synthesized in a “case reconstruction.” The sociobiographic approach (Chamberlayne, Rustin, & Wengraf, 2002;

SOSTRIS Working Paper 9, 1999) complements such material by researching the historical background and providing contextual-historical material that makes further sense of the particularities of each case.

One could also, perhaps, argue the need for a triangulation (or at least a binary tension) of concepts. If we have separate research fields for “textual representations” and “historical experiencing,” for example, then each field has only one nontriangulated concept (though of course subdifferentiated and internally competitive). Intellectual fields under conditions of extreme academic competition suffer from “crazes” in which one set of concepts, even one concept from a given conceptual set or framework, is gradually “hyped up” to become the one integrating concept from which all others can be derived. Cultural studies suffers from such modishness; “biography” could suffer the same fate. Lyotard initiated a proper critique of meta-narratives (except for his meta-meta-narrative that all [other] meta-narratives are always unhelpful). We need to have a similar suspicion of what we may call megaconcepts.

Most concepts are first put forward in a dynamic relation with a polar opposite: solidarity with alienation, power with powerlessness, hegemony with counterhegemony, experience with representation, signifier with the signified, and so forth (Bendix & Berger, 1959). We would tentatively suggest that a critical conceptual field is one in which a number of concepts stay in a dynamic self-interrogative and mutually interrogative and tolerant tension/relation and that a critical methodological strategy is one in which the operationalization of the concepts of such a dynamically tense field is triangulated such that a variety of methods of data generation and collection are used and also that the same data are “processed” or interpreted according to different procedures. A failure to “mix methods” and a failure to “triangulate concepts” (Brannen, 1992) will lead to a less interesting and less productive form of study, for the biographical movement, for cultural studies, as for any other genre of research and presentation.

We are (or should be) all taking part in a continuing dialogue, which, as we have suggested, spans national cultures, academic traditions, discipline barriers, and academic discourses and which has raised issues of purpose and ethics in qualitative research. We want to sustain the momentum of the biographical turn and its critical force well into the 21st century.

Where Do We Think Biographical Studies Will Be in 10 or 20 Years’ Time?

Because the categories of the powerful of each generation are always experienced as partially oppressive and self-seeking by individuals and cultural minorities within a given culture, and often by a majority outside, it is likely that experience-based challenging of old representations and inventing of more appropriate ones via autobiography and the biographical movement can never be suppressed. The quantifications of power will always meet with qualitative

resistance and questioning. We have argued elsewhere (Chamberlayne & Rustin, 1999) that failures of the social policy of the powerful correspond with their use of “presumed sociologies of the present.” Indeed, it is the qualitative models of the past that provide the “naturalized” concepts for the obsolete quantifications of present-day uncritical “administrative research,” which are then challenged by new qualitative models. National policy generals are usually fighting the last war. Biographical work – first qualitative and then quantifiable – can do much to speed up the “disposal” of obsolete social policy and societal assumptions.

The current conjuncture of world political forces, it might be suggested, can be seen from one angle as the struggle by giant corporations for the concentration of global power through neoliberalism, on one hand, and the struggle for the democratization and extension of citizenship and popular solidarity on the other. The biographies of individuals throughout the planet can reveal the hidden injuries and hidden potentials of individuals and networks (all differently “identified” in monied, classed, racialized, gendered, and stateified terms, to name but a few) outside the world empire elites. The self-biographizing and mutually biographizing movement of those involved can be a powerful force – as class, gender, race, religious, and national movements have disclosed – against disempowerment. Biographical research challenges the assumptions of the totalitarian thinking of neoliberal orthodoxy, which requires and promotes images of people as psychically flat and dehistoricized consumers. In our British-European view, the prospects of the biographical movement in different disciplines cross-cut by issues of class, gender, and race, by struggles and hybrid fusions, depend on the fundings and effectivities of the globally powerful and the sense of oppression and the effectivity of social movements of those oppressed as much as it depends on the career biographies and prospects envisaged by the academic actors in the field of forces (Bourdieu, 1971; Foucault, 1977). Certainly, its current productivity for enriching our understanding is considerable.

Just as the individual life encompasses experiences that draw on a multiplicity of forms of thought and action, so its interpretation requires reference to a wide range of disciplines, as we hope our discussion and *TBM* demonstrate. The interdisciplinarity of the biographical turn is another of the benefits that the approach brings to the social sciences. The different concepts and theories of psychology, sociology, history, politics, feminism, cultural studies, and anthropology all make contributions, as do their individual, yet cross-referenced methodologies. So, for example, oral history’s origins in history and sociology have led to lively and critical debates in relation to representativity and comparative approaches. At the same time, debates about gendered remembering have drawn on the literatures of psychoanalysis and anthropology, among others. Biographical work in all its differing forms, auto/biography, narrative studies, oral history, and the biographical/interpretive

method, relies on disciplinary difference, while absorbing and provoking those features that best advance its development.

If disciplinary regressions and conceptual and methodological overinflations can be avoided, we think prospects are good for achieving better ways of researching and better understandings of the historically and culturally various relations between the personal and the social, and between structures' agency and restructuring, such that progress can be made in democratizing citizenship and achieving solidarities, because our better understanding of particular individuals and collective biographies has transformed us and our academic disciplines.

Notes

1. Community history was another important contributory strand to the development of biographical methods.
2. The importance of such thinking has been belatedly recognized in the case of German unification, where the "imposition" of the federal system of welfare on East Germany cut across and failed to utilize existing East German social infrastructures and forms of social capital (Chamberlayne, 1998; Pollack, 1998).
3. It may be understandable that a nation in which public and ritual grieving for sufferings under Nazism have been repressed should be particularly preoccupied by issues of suffering and disorder.

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On Auto/Biography in Sociology

Liz Stanley

Introduction

Recent sociological work on biography (writing the life of another) and autobiography (writing the life of one's self) frequently traces a particular history of which it positions itself as the logical heritage. This is typically done by: (i) positing a particular temporal site of origin for autobiography and/or biography as the product of the Enlightenment, and/or modernism, and/or industrial capitalism; and/or, (ii) locating a temporal point of origin for sociological concern with such materials, through invoking, usually, Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918–1920) *The Polish Peasant . . .*, and typically this via Ken Plummer's (1983) discussion of the 'documents of life', including biographical and autobiographical ones. The intellectual heritage of such a history is seen to be the present sociological concern with a particular kind of data source – life history, interview data treated as life history, biography, autobiography, and so on – to use this data as a resource: that is, to tell sociologists something about general features of 'life out there' as exemplified in this and other particular cases, rather than as a topic of sociological investigation in its own right.

However, such an apparent 'history' is actually composed by histories, by competing historiographies (written *versions* of the past, not slices of the past itself) which systematically excise or silence or dismiss their alternatives (Stanley 1990a). In contrast with this now usual history of the heritage of present-day sociological concern with biography and autobiography, I offer two alternative histories, which focus, in the order I discuss them, on

methodological procedures and on ontological problematics.¹ Both, I shall suggest, raise fundamental epistemological issues.

The first I locate in Mertonian sociology, specifically in Merton's analytic attention to the way that insider and outsider positions systematically influence what kind of knowledge is produced, and, relatedly, his conceptual investigation of the dynamics of 'sociological autobiography'. The second I locate in the analytic attention that academic feminists have given to the generation – the engendering – of changing ideas, initially within the lives of women expressed through the collective processes known as consciousness-raising, and latterly by an insistence on reflexivity in feminist sociological research processes. I see these two alternatives to the conventional lineage ascribed to sociological work on biography and autobiography as actually *parallel* accounts; that is, as *additions* to a complex historiography, rather than one of them providing *replacement* history, the really true history of the birth and life of sociology on biography and autobiography.

The notion of 'auto/biography'² encapsulates the key elements of both these parallel histories. Moreover, 'auto/biography' also disputes the conventional genre distinction between biography and autobiography, as well as the divisions between self/other, public/private, and immediacy/memory, also seen to exist. I discuss 'auto/biography' following the accounts of sociological autobiography and reflexivity in feminist sociological research processes.

Sociological Autobiography

In a discussion of 'insiders and outsiders' in research contexts, Robert Merton (1972) notes that different kinds of knowledge, both equally valid in their different ways, are produced by such persons. Merton recognises that the valid existence of different, related but neither coterminous nor necessarily agreeing, kinds of knowledge about a 'single' piece of social reality – the 'same' event, context, person and so forth – raises fundamental and actually insoluble issues for the sociology of knowledge. These issues include firstly, that reality is not 'single', it is not precisely the 'same' event that people construct different and often competing 'descriptions' of; and, secondly and relatedly, there are no *sociological* means of systematically adjudicating between these knowledges differently located and produced, although there are of course the means typically used to adjudicate them by 'lay' social actors.

It is these latter means or methodological procedures that Merton's (1988) discussion of 'sociological autobiography' draws attention to. In a reflection on a set of 'sociological lives' (Riley 1988), he bypasses the fundamental question of whether the 'art and craft' of autobiography is practised differently by differently socially-located people (by employment, by belief-system, by gender and age, and so on), although his implicit 'answer' as indicated by the earlier discussion of insiders and outsiders is yes they do differ. Instead he

focusses on the notion of a distinctively 'sociological autobiography'. He defines this in the following way:

The sociological autobiography utilizes sociological perspectives, ideas, concepts, findings, and analytical procedures to construct and interpret a narrative text that purports to tell one's own history within the larger history of one's times . . . autobiographers are the ultimate participants in a dual participant-observer role, having privileged access – in some cases, monopolistic access – to their own inner experience (Merton 1988:18).

Here Merton directs attention to autobiography as a text – that is, seeing it as a *topic* for investigation in its own right, and not as a *resource* to tell us about something lying outside the text itself; and also to the processes by which such texts are constructed as well as interpreted – to the processes of *writing* autobiographical texts, and also to the processes of *reading* them. He notes that autobiography does not have to be limited by the tricks and distortions of memory and errors of observation. Like biographers, autobiographers can use personal documents, public documents, the testimony of relevant others and so forth, to compare and contrast these different accounts. He argues that the 'truly sociological autobiography' (p. 19) combines the advantages of both and minimises the disadvantages of each. He goes on to extend his definition of sociological autobiography thus conceived:

Among other things, then, the sociological autobiography is a personal exercise – a self-exemplifying exercise – in the sociology of scientific knowledge. The constructed personal text of the interplay between the active agent and the social structure, the interplay between one's sequences of status-sets and role-sets on the one hand and one's intellectual development on the other, with its succession of theoretical commitments, foci of scientific attention, planned or serendipitous choices of problems and choices of strategic research sites for their investigation . . . full-fledged sociological autobiographers relate their intellectual development both to changing social and cognitive micro-environments close at hand and to the encompassing macro-environments provided by the larger society and culture (Merton 1988: 19–20).

In one fell swoop here Merton revolutionises sociological attention to autobiography, and just as fundamentally shifts the epistemological stakes involved in this by treating the 'insider' who can also take on 'outsider' attributes as the source of privileged access to a particular kind of knowledge. That is, a good sociological autobiography in his terms is one which combines 'autobiography' and 'biography' as conventionally conceived, and which is analytically concerned with relating its product to the epistemological conditions of its own production.

Merton's discussion constitutes one of the parallel histories for the heritage of the current sociological concern with biography and autobiography, located

in the 'middle range' theorising of this particular social theorist, and related to his long-term interest in the sociology of knowledge. The second alternative derives from the activities and practices of feminism as a social movement as well as an academic standpoint, and which perceives ideas as social products and of their times rather than being the invention of particular theorists.

Reflexivity in Feminist Research Processes

The processes known as 'consciousness-raising' encapsulate, among other things, a way of conceptualising as well as encouraging social change, as the product of re-thinking the relationship between social and political structure and human agency – in other words, social change brought about through mass individual change. Here conventional dichotomies or binaries are refused, by seeing them as actually symbiotically linked: the social and the individual, the personal and the political. 'Personal life' and 'ideas' are both socialised in this standpoint, the conventional individualistic treatment of them being thoroughly rejected in favour of conceptualising them as socially-constructed and socially re/produced.

Another way of perceiving consciousness-raising is as a means of encouraging a reflexive understanding of the relationship between individual practice and social structure, not only relating selves to social collectivities, but also recognising the part that selves play in constructing structures as well as being mediated by them. 'Reflexivity' here is located in treating one's self as subject for intellectual inquiry, and it encapsulates the socialised, non-unitary and changing self posited in feminist social thought.

Reflexivity figures in feminist praxis in another way, with equally important implications for a view of 'the self', through academic feminist ideas about sociological research processes. Discussions of the methodological/epistemological bases of feminism situate reflexivity as central, as fundamental. Judith Cook and Mary Fonow (1986), for example, argue that five basic methodological postulates of feminist methodology characterise most grounded feminist research, and position 'a reflexive concern with gender' as underpinning the four others: consciousness-raising as a way of re/seeing the social world, the rejection of the claimed objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy, a concern with researching and theorising experience, and an insistence on ethics as a facet of these others. Similarly Fonow and Cook's (1992) collection of feminist writings on 'methodology' bears the sub-title 'feminist scholarship as lived experience', and editorially it inscribes reflexivity as first and foremost among the themes that characterise its constituent chapters.

Editorially they see this analytic examination applying to the 'research setting and its participants' (p. 20), although their contributors overall actually concern themselves with all aspects of sociological research processes, from the glimmerings of an idea, to deliberations on 'method' conceived narrowly,

to the dynamics of research settings, to theorising, to authorship and publication, to lecture and promotion tours.

Through the notion of 'intellectual autobiography',³ I have tried to put such precepts concerning reflexivity in feminist research processes into analytic practice, in particular by focusing on the processes by which evaluations, interpretations and conclusions have been reached from whatever 'data' I have worked on, including my auto/biographical work.⁴ In doing so, conceptually I have argued that: firstly, the practices of sociology, feminist sociology in particular, should not be immune from the critical analytic attention devoted to other areas of social and political life; secondly, 'mind' is not 'inner' but can be observed and analysed through concrete material examples of 'it' at work; thirdly, focusing on 'the sociologist' and their intellectual practices and labour processes does *not* mean that we focus on one person and exclude all else: for example, from even the two papers discussed above, from Merton's 'intellectual practices and labour processes' we can recover something of the history and present state of American sociology, changing social divisions in American society, social networks, the social location and construction of ideas, and more; fourthly, there is no need to individualise, to de-socialise, 'the individual', because from one person we can recover social process and social structure, networks, social change and so forth, for people are located in a social and cultural environment which constructs and shapes not only *what* we see but also *how* we see it; and fifthly, having access to our own ontological and epistemological puzzles, we can make 'ourselves' in this sense objects for analytical sociological attention. And in doing this, 'feminist sociology' rather than 'feminism analysing gender' has been my aim, and work on biography and autobiography in the form of 'auto/biography' has been crucial to this, as a set of practices or methodological procedures, rather than a kind of dataset.

The Relation to Auto/Biography

Some reflections on these parallel histories: firstly, not only are the notions of 'sociological autobiography' as developed by Merton and 'intellectual autobiography' as developed from feminist ideas about reflexivity interestingly similar,⁵ although developed in different intellectual contexts, but also their differences are 'sympathetic' rather than imperialistic. By this I mean that the 'Mertonian' and the 'feminist' notions of autobiography both acknowledge that knowledge differs systematically according to social position; therefore both have the capacity to regard 'difference' as equally valid epistemologically, rather than seeking to erode such difference in the name of an imperialist foundationalism.

Secondly, it is clear how the first history I referred to – biography and autobiography as product of post/Enlightenment changes in ideas about the self – connects with biography and autobiography as conventionally understood.

At a particular historical juncture, this approach claims or implies, the processes of change – economic, social, intellectual – permitted or even required the emergence of a particular notion of ‘character’ or ‘personality’ or ‘self’. Thus the textual concern with these matters in written biography and autobiography is seen to coincide with, and be part product of and part contributor to, ‘the self’ as the meta-narrative of modernism currently and conventionally positions it. However, it is perhaps less immediately clear how the other two parallel histories connect with biography and autobiography.

In the case of the Mertonian approach, Merton himself provides one set of possibilities when he positions sociological autobiography as questioning the exemplary sociological lives in the collection which includes his own discussion; that is, it provides the means or procedures of a sociology of sociology as well as a sociology of knowledge, and underpins a turn to textuality within the discipline. Thus Merton positions the textual representation of lives – ‘the life and times of’ – as suitable subject-matter for sociological inquiry, as well as the intertextuality of biography and autobiography in its own constituent practices.

In the case of the feminist approach, feminism as a social movement is concerned with the re/making of lives, of inscribing them as gendered (and raced, and classed, with sexualities), and also with inscribing a wider range of possibilities for women’s lives by providing contrasting exemplars. Relatedly, academic feminist work has focused specifically on women’s *autobiographies* (for instance, Jelinek 1980; Stanton 1984; Benstock 1988; Brodzki and Schenck 1988; and for comment on this and a different approach, Stanley 1992), in part as valorisation and in part, and more recently increasingly so, as analysis of the rhetorical practices involved in the making of ‘a woman’s life’ in textual form, for women’s textual and published lives are made against the grain of exemplary *male* lives, whose implied universalism is thereby rejected. This is not to say that feminists have not produced biography, indeed there are some notable feminist biographies of women’s lives. It is however to acknowledge that (with exceptions, including Steedman (1991) and Stanley (1988)) this has largely not been an analytic engagement with the artifices and claims of the genre, but rather a promotion and use of these to claim that women too can have ‘great lives’.

The reasons why an analytic feminist attention has not turned towards biography are complex, but seem to lie in the conjunction of two factors. One is that the feminist attention to autobiography not only questions but largely rejects the referential claims of autobiography writing, focusing on textuality alone. Such referential claims are however a considerable presence in modern biography through its insistence on the facticity, veracity and validity of the knowledge-claims it advances; and to rebut or deconstruct them would require taking on a quasi-academic, highly professionalised and powerful group of living writers. The other is that, relatedly, questioning the professional practices of biographers in rhetorically inscribing referentiality comes perhaps too close

for comfort to interrogating the professional practices and knowledge-claims of these critics themselves, for, perhaps paradoxically in work which promotes re/readings and the analysis of textual structure and rhetoric, the critics' own auto/biographical textual practices remain immune. Another way of making the same point: the reflexivity of feminist social science has been notable for its absence from feminist literary criticism.

However, a feminist concern with the textuality and intertextuality of lives in my view must encompass the intertextuality of biography and autobiography, and of both with actual lives. It is to express this that I use the term 'auto/biography', and I now go on to explore some of its ramifications.

The Auto/Biographical I

There are a large number of ways, outside of sociology and cognate disciplines, that 'a life' can be written:⁵ in biography and its various sub-divisions, in diaries, journals and letters, and in autobiographies and memoirs, as well as in perhaps more renegade forms such as photograph albums, TV and radio biographies, video diaries and CVs, and in the fictional forms of many of these. The main division here, one conventionally seen to produce genre difference between them, is that between 'a life' produced by one's self (the different forms of autobiography), and 'a life' produced by another person (the different forms of biography). But further, some forms of life writing are seen as essentially private forms (for example diaries and letters), the self concerned reflectively with its private world; but with other forms of life writing (for example, memoirs and biographies) being concerned with public achievements, albeit in a dialectic with the subject's private life and feelings; of course some forms of autobiography are published and thus take on more of a 'public' character; this argument runs, but other forms of it are never intended for any kind of public gaze. However, cross-cutting the two divisions above is the claimed immediacy of some forms of life writing (particularly diaries and letters), written at the time that the events described within them occurred, as contrasted with the writing often many years after the event of others (such as memoirs and autobiographies as well as biographies), which thus rely upon the vagaries and tricks of memory.

These three conventional ways of classifying different forms of 'naturally-occurring' (by which I mean forms not initiated by the investigations of social science) life writing – self/other, public/private, and immediacy/memory – are each disputed from an auto/biographical standpoint.

1. *Self/other*: It is a very rare autobiography that does not contain within its pages many, shorter or longer, biographies of other people who figure, in different times and places, in the subject's life. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir's volumes of autobiography not only importantly include Sartre, but also a galaxy of other denizens of French intellectual and political life. This is

by no means unusual, for 'the life' of one person absolutely alone cannot be written, apart from in those actually very rare autobiographical accounts that are totally preoccupied with 'inner' thoughts and feelings.⁶ Relatedly, biography has many implications for the autobiography of its writer, at the least because several years of close familiarity with the life of another and all the many people involved with them always has such implications, but sometimes in ways beyond this because of characteristics of the particular person the biographer is concerned with.⁷

The biographical self and the autobiographical self can overlap in ways beyond this, as my earlier discussion of Merton's ideas about 'sociological autobiography' and feminist ideas about reflexivity point up; indeed, for a sociologist I would contend that they *ought* to overlap in such ways. That is, that each sociologist should analytically account for their intellectual products by investigating the material grounds of their own labour processes, recognising that knowledge is situational and contextual and differs systematically in relation to the social location of its producers.

2. *Public/private*: Many of the so-called 'private' forms of life writing involve an explicit address to a named audience, a 'public'. Letters are an obvious instance of this, published autobiographies and memoirs another. Diaries are often seen as a quintessentially private form, but many of these too are directed to an audience outside the text; for instance, in a direct sense the diaries of Hannah Cullwick are addressed to Arthur Munby (Stanley 1984, 1992: 158–80), and in an indirect sense both hers and also his diaries are addressed to 'the future', to readers who will not be shocked by their cross-class relationship. Most other diaries that I have read also contain a 'voice' that speaks to some presence outside of the text, sometimes an ideal understanding reader (like Fanny Burney's 'certain Miss Nobody'), sometimes a named and known other (like the implicit audience of William to his brother Henry James), sometimes a transcendental reflection point such as God. But there is a more fundamental way that life writing dissolves the public/private division.

The act of writing *presupposes* 'an audience', immediately through the writing self-as-subject confronting the written self-as-object. Roland Barthes (1975) expresses this when he distinguishes between the 'self who writes', the 'self who was', and the 'self who is'. The 'self who writes' does not have unproblematic access to the past and thus – to the 'self who writes' – the past has to be recovered in traces and hints, rather than appearing before us whole and entire in our minds; and for the 'self who is', time moves on outside of the text, so that the 'self who writes' becomes a part of the 'self who was', a part of the past and its sets of multiple overlapping but not coterminous stages in the assemblage of the 'self who is' currently. Moreover, the 'self who was' is an object for attempted reconstruction by the 'self who writes': this other self becomes a project for, indeed an invention of, the writing self. Typically, these ideas about life writing have been applied to autobiography; however, exactly the same dynamics of interlinkage and disjuncture exist for the biographer

as for the autobiographer. For autobiographical and biographical writing in equal measure, the act of writing through its presupposition of an audience dissolves the conventional public/private way of classifying and distinguishing between different forms of life writing.

3. *Immediacy/memory*: It is actually very infrequently that any life writing acts as reportage, describing and/or commenting on events at the precise moment they happen around the writer. Even that supposedly most immediate kind of life writing, the diary, is not so very immediate. For instance, habitual diarists, of the present as well as of the past, write their diaries as a way of describing or commenting upon events gone by: earlier that day, the day before, sometimes at further temporal remove.

The supposed immediacy of diary writing is hinged to perception of it as a *descriptive* narrative form, which records from the time and place of occurrence and is thus more closely related to these than any other form of life writing. However, once inquiring sociological attention is directed toward 'description' (Sacks 1963), it becomes apparent that its immediacy is rhetorically-constituted rather than deriving from any actual one-to-one relationship between the events and the writing that this is 'of'. Firstly, literal description is simply not possible. Even the most careful of ethnographic descriptions, for example, are actually rigorous combinations of selectivity and interpretation.⁸ In terms of life writing, it is clear that, for example, the 'descriptions' of events and conversations (as in Maya Angelou's autobiographies (e.g. Angelou 1969)) are post hoc constructions in order to demonstrate points of interpretation or understanding, and this is so even when diarists attempt to capture what is almost immediate: Munby writing about a major fire in London as soon as he could rush home to do so (Hudson 1972:100–2) comes to mind here. Secondly and relatedly, description is always in fact a gloss which, effectively, provides a theoretical account, composed of selections in and out and emphases which derive from and demonstrate the validity of a particular viewpoint. It is interesting here, for example, to compare diary-entries by Munby and Cullwick, or indeed by Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf, concerning the 'same' event recorded very differently but still accurately by each of them.

Memory is always and inevitably involved when writing post hoc (even if notes or other *aides mémoires*, like photographs or videos, are available), and, as I have argued, there is almost no life writing that actually has the literal quality of 'immediacy', of recording as something is happening. But even insofar as there is, its 'description' is in fact highly selective and highly interpretive. Thus taxonomical attempts to divide up life writings between those characterised by their immediacy and those characterised by their reliance on memory are as over-simplistic as those that use sharp divisions between public and private forms of life writing and between life writing concerned with the self and concerned with another or others.

The notion of auto/biography is linked to that of 'the auto/biographical I'. The auto/biographical I is an inquiring analytic sociological – here feminist

sociological – agent who is concerned in constructing, rather than ‘discovering’, social reality and sociological knowledge. The use of ‘I’ explicitly recognises that such knowledge is contextual, situational, and specific, and that it will differ systematically according to the social location (as a gendered, raced, classed, sexualised, person) of the particular knowledge-producer. Thus the ‘autobiography’ – in the terms used in the first part of this discussion, the ‘intellectual autobiography’ or the ‘sociological autobiography’ – of the sociologist becomes epistemologically crucial no matter what particular research activity we are engaged in.

Some Concluding Thoughts

To argue for the epistemological project glossed in the phrase ‘sociological auto/biography’ – which I use to bring together the Mertonian and the feminist approaches outlined earlier – is most certainly *not* to anchor the discipline either to individualism or to solipsism. Knowledge-production does indeed differ *systematically* by social-location: we are social beings through and through, and it is the shared features of ‘knowledge’ seen from particular vantage-points that such a style of sociological inquiry makes available. Nor does working in this way confine sociologists to researching ‘ourselves’. ‘My self’ encompasses second- and third-hand knowledges as well as first-hand knowledges; ‘experience’ is multi-faceted and always at the least first-order theorised, always understood through social typifications and common ‘stocks of knowledge’; and ‘the self’, its mind and body, its thoughts and feelings, is socially produced and understood. Another way of expressing many of these points is to emphasise that ‘a life’, whether of one’s self or another, is never composed of one decorticated person alone. Lives are composed by a variety of social networks of others that the subject of ‘a life’ moves between; and how these overlapping but not coterminous collectivities of people understand a life, character, relationships, achievement, death, may differ or even clash, but the differences will be associated with particular social groupings. Moreover, the existence of these different typifications is crucial to understanding ‘the life’ of any person who moves between such groupings or collectivities.

This article has drawn together some thoughts about ‘lives’ and knowledge about lives inscribed in these, and some thoughts about the sociological lives that produce sociological knowledge; but has been concerned more with the latter than the former. This is not because I think biography and autobiography are unimportant topics of sociological inquiry, rather the reverse. I see a concern with biography and autobiography as fundamental to sociology, because I perceive the grounds of their sociological interest lying within the epistemological problematics concerning how we understand ‘the self’ and ‘a life’, how we ‘describe’ ourselves and other people and events, how we justify the knowledge-claims we make in the name of the discipline, in particular

through the processes of textual production. It is through work such as Merton's on sociological autobiography and feminist ideas about reflexivity that these connections between what is epistemologically crucial to the discipline, and what is socially fascinating to the reading public, are demonstrated.

Notes

1. I could have included more alternatives than these two – for example, Schutzian phenomenology and its discussion of the biographically determined situation, or Wright Mills' insistence that unless sociology works at the level of biography it does not and cannot work at the level of structure. My point is of course to emphasise, as does Durkheim in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, that causal patterns of change cannot be determined by working backwards in this fashion, for the product is composed by connections in the mind of the sociologist, not those in the past itself.
2. In *The Auto/Biographical I* (Stanley 1992) this idea is explored in depth, both theoretically and through discussion of a number of biographical or autobiographical researches of my own.
3. See particularly the introduction to Stanley 1990b, although it appears in other writings from 1983 on.
4. Various of these are discussed in Stanley 1992.
5. For an extended version of the following argument, including the forms of biography and autobiography that social science generates, see Stanley 1992:124–151.
6. One point here is that what is seen to be 'inner' is socially constructed and understood; another is that anyway the large majority of such autobiographies also contain a galaxy of others, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's account of his 'crackup', and Marie Bashkirtseff's preoccupations with her 'genius'.
7. I would place my auto/biographical work on Emily Wilding Davidson in the first category here, and that on Peter Sutcliffe in the second, for, above and beyond similar kinds of 'close familiarity' influences, there were features of Sutcliffe's behaviour as a serial sexual murderer that impacted on me in very different ways, as I discuss in Stanley 1992:124–51.
8. Clifford Geertz's (1973) Balinese cock-fight being a case in point here: 'thick description' is actually thin description and thick selection and interpretation.

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Weaving Stories: Personal Auto/Biographies in Feminist Research

Pamela Cotterill and Gayle Letherby

Introduction

Autobiography: (1809) The writing of one's own history; the story of one's life written by himself [sic].

Biography: 1. (1661) The history of the lives of individual men [sic] as a branch of literature. 2. (1791) A written record of the life of an individual (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Vol. I, 1973: 135 and 193 respectively).

Feminist epistemology indicates the need for a re-conceptualisation of autobiography and biography, recognising their intertextuality. The paper is autobiographical in that it draws upon the experiences of the writers. It is specifically concerned with our personal biographies regarding our academic development and experience of feminist qualitative research within sociology. Some feminists have written autobiographies, some biographies of others, whilst others include personal details in the traditional way in the preface to their academic works. We aim to include ourselves within the whole of this piece of writing as part of our assertion that all academic research and subsequent writing involves, whether acknowledged or not, the weaving of the biographies of all participants and their significant others. However, to begin in the traditional way, we would like to note something about each of us. Firstly, the formal conference presentation of this article fell on Gayle's thirty-third birthday. Secondly, throughout the written version one of us is referred to as Pamela because she chooses to use her full name for academic purposes; however, the 'real' person known to family and friends is Pam.

We start from support of Liz Stanley's (1990a) assertion that all feminist work should be fundamentally concerned with how people come to understand what they do. Thus:

Feminist theory would be directly derived from 'experience' whether this is experience of a survey or interview or an ethnographic research project, or whether it is experience of reading and analyzing historical or contemporary documents. Thus its analysis would centre on an explication of the 'intellectual autobiography' of the feminist researcher/theoretician: it would produce *accountable* knowledge, in which the reader would have access to details of the contextually-located reasoning processes which give rise to 'the findings', the outcomes (1990a:209).

Feminist research involves, as Hilary Graham (1984:104) notes, 'surveying through stories' of the researched. We would argue it also involves 'telling ourselves a story about ourselves' (Steier 1991:3). All research contains elements of autobiography and biography, both intellectual *and* personal. Auto-biographies and biographies not only record the life of one individual, they are in a very real sense documents of many lives. Moreover, they are relevant not just to one branch of literature but also to academic empirical research within the discipline of sociology.

Autobiographical Starting Point

If, as we argue, feminist research involves weaving the stories of both the researcher and her respondents, it may be helpful to relate some of the experiences which led us, individually, to the route we now share.

Gayle

In September 1986 I began an 'A' level course in sociology. This happened somewhat by accident. I had spent several months at home during and following a miscarriage and decided I needed to get out of the house more. Going to evening classes was partly motivated by a desired career change, as, feeling unable to return to nursery nursing (certainly for a while), I had decided to brush up on my typing skills. I also decided to pursue a longstanding wish to study psychology and signed on for an 'O' level. As this didn't run – due to lack of numbers – I was persuaded by the sociology tutor (after she had explained the term 'sociology') to transfer to an 'O' level in that subject. This also proved an unpopular option and thus by the third week of the term I was a member of the 'A' level sociology group.

Because I found sociology both stimulating and challenging, I did not want to give the subject up. Consequently, in September 1988 I became a first year student on a single honours sociology degree in the Sociology Department at

Staffordshire Polytechnic. I decided early on that throughout the three years I would concern myself with issues that took my interest rather than pursue a vocational route. Thus, I can only remember one piece of work that I really did not enjoy. Over the three years my enthusiasm grew and I really believe it was one of the best times of my life.

The practical and emotional problems I experienced throughout the period were more complex. Living thirty miles from college and being a non-driver meant that travelling was a continual problem. The British Rail timetable was clearly not on my side and each academic year my travelling time got longer. This was very tiring and lack of time put a strain on my relationships with friends and with my husband. Life became harder when, in February 1990, a week after I handed in my dissertation, in the middle of two essays and three months before my final examinations, I left home. Whilst it is unfair to say that the break up of our relationship was due solely to my experience of higher education, it would also be inaccurate to say that it didn't have an effect. My memories of February to June 1990 are full of little but tears, travelling and eating.

I have pursued throughout my academic career issues that interest and intrigue me. This is particularly relevant to areas of personal research. Beginning the degree, I knew that a personal dissertation was a course requirement in the third year. Individuals were able to choose whether to base this piece on their own empirical research or to conduct an archive or library-based piece of scholarship. From the first day of the course I knew what I wanted mine to be about and that I wanted it to be an empirical piece of work. Having personally experienced miscarriage, I felt that the experience was misunderstood and thus trivialised by many people (lay and academic) and that more research was necessary. The research did indeed reveal that the experience of miscarriage is complex. The values, aspirations and commitment that women have regarding motherhood, fertility and reproduction are multi-dimensional and relative. Pregnancy loss was experienced as both devastating and a stimulus for personal growth.

Having completed my undergraduate degree in June 1990, I obtained a research scholarship to study for a Ph.D. I am now interested in exploring some of the same theoretical and methodological issues within the context of 'involuntary childlessness' and 'infertility'. As with the dissertation, my personal history is certainly relevant. The complex range of academic and personal issues which both emerge from and inform my research, and the implications of personal involvement for feminist research generally, are what this article is 'about'.

Pamela

My introduction to sociology was an 'O' level evening class which a friend enrolled for in 1974 and then persuaded me to join for company and moral support. I enjoyed the course enough to venture out in the dark winter night

once a week, and I passed the examination at the end. But apparently I did not enjoy it enough to take the 'A' level, for I did not continue with my 'night-school education' and to this day I do not possess a sociology 'A' level or, indeed, one in any other subject.

In 1978 I joined a group of women who met regularly to discuss their ambivalent relationship towards food. The women had come together after all of them, individually, had read Susie Orbach's *Fat Is A Feminist Issue*, the first 'feminist' book I encountered and read from cover to cover. The group soon became a consciousness-raising group, for me and for other members, and whilst not all my memories of it are happy ones, it did enable me to reflect on and reassess my personal circumstances at that stage of my life.

In 1978 I had been married for five years and my mother, who had raised me on her own since the death of my father when I was six years old, had been dead for two years. My mother's death had been devastating; I had loved her dearly and we had been very close. In 1978 I was still grieving for my mother, disliking my job as a secretary at the local university, and wondering whether I should become pregnant. One day someone in the group asked me what subject I had taken my degree in and seemed surprised when I said that I had no degree. Much later someone else in the group mentioned that it was possible to obtain a place at the local polytechnic without 'A' levels as a mature entrant. In January 1981, I wrote a tentative letter inquiring about the sociology course and by the end of the same week, to my horror, received an invitation to an informal interview. Although I wrote back and accepted, privately I decided I would not go.

On the day of the interview I found myself hovering around the reception area of the polytechnic, making no attempt to announce myself and poised for flight. Suddenly someone called my name and, to cut a short story shorter, within twenty minutes I was back on the pavement outside, having been given a conditional offer to join the course the following September. The offer was subject to the submission of a satisfactory essay to be completed in four weeks. The title, forever engraved on my memory – '“A woman's place is in the home”: Discuss'.

Like Gayle, I found sociology stimulating and challenging. I also found education, at the age of thirty-three and having left school at fifteen, an immense privilege. I could hardly believe I was being paid via the student grant (albeit a pittance) actually to enjoy myself. Although it took me a while to adapt to academic life (my first year was haunted by my lack of 'A' levels) slowly I began to realise that not only could I 'do' sociology, I could do it reasonably well. As I progressed my confidence and enthusiasm grew. Thus, I can only echo Gayle when I say, not only were these the best years of my life, but that 'doing sociology' also changed my life for the better in numerous ways.

Embarking on the course, I had decided that when it was over and I had my degree I would then have a baby. At the age of thirty-three I was not specially